



GENDERED ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE PARLIAMENT OF SERBIA²

Rodna etnografija parlamenta Srbije³

ABSTRACT: *Ethnographic analysis is aimed to present the Parliament of Serbia as institutional, political, spatial and cultural ambience in which (un)written rules, rituals and regulations are designed to facilitate or inhibit bridging of the gender gap between female and male MPs. This paper explores the different micro-strategies of women MPs of their initiation, accommodation, mitigation and challenging of established parliamentary gender binary hierarchical settings and in/formal rules and norms. At all levels of the analysis, an interpretive dialogue was introduced to present the testimonies of women who served as MPs in the Serbian parliament with the aim to present the comparative genesis of their gender and political emancipation. Ethnographic analysis shows that the main focal points of the power of women MPs in parliamentary hierarchy settings are evaluated as inadequate in comparison to high level of their descriptive representation. Electoral engineering of increasing women quotas results, paradoxically, in greater exposure and vulnerability of women parliamentarians to various gender-related forms of verbal, psychological, sexual harassment and violence. The affirmative model of women's empowerment is limited by strong gravitation field of loyalty to their political parties.*

KEY WORDS: *gender, gendered parliament, parliamentary ethnography, gendered violence in politics, women MPs*

APSTRAKT: *Etnografska analiza ima za cilj da predstavi parlament Srbije kao institucionalni, politički, prostorni i kulturni ambijent u kojem su (ne)pisana pravila, rituali i propisi osmišljeni da pospeše ili zapreče premošćivanje rodnog jaza*

1 dvukomanovic@idn.org.rs; ORCID: 0000-0002-3686-448X

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između poslanica i poslanika. Ovaj rad istražuje različite mikro-strategije žena poslanica u toku njihove inicijacije, prilagođavanja, ublažavanja i osporavanja uspostavljenih parlamentarnih rodno binarnih hijerarhijskih struktura i ne/formalnih pravila i normi. Na svim nivoima analize uveden je interpretativni dijalog kojim su predstavljena svedočenja žena koje su vršile funkcije poslanica u Skupštini Srbije da bi se predočila komparativna geneza njihove rodne i političke emancipacije. Etnografska analiza pokazuje da su ključne tačke moći žena poslanica u parlamentarnim hijerarhijskim strukturama ocenjene kao neadekvatne u odnosu na visok nivo njihove deskriptivne zastupljenosti. Izborni inženjering povećanja ženskih kvota rezultira, paradoksalno, u većoj izloženosti i ranjivosti žena parlamentarki različitim rodno povezanim oblicima verbalnog, psihološkog, seksualnog uznemiravanja i nasilja. Afirmativni model osnaživanja žena ograničen je snažnim gravitacionim poljem lojalnosti njihovim političkim strankama.

KLJUČNE REČI: *rod, rodno senzitivnan parlament, parlamentarna etnografija, rodno nasilje u politici, žene poslanice*

1. Introduction and methodological framework

The modern concept of gendered parliament is still perceived, in various political systems, as an unexpected, novel invention in politics. The traditional concept of parliamentarism was established three centuries ago, the struggle of women activists for greater representation of women within the parliament began a little more than a century ago, while the modern concept of gendered parliamentarism, as gender-sensitive, 'feminized' institutions has not been comprehended in practice before the last two decades (Palmieri, 2011; Crewe, 2014; Erikson and Verge, 2022; Childs and Palmieri, 2023). The concept of gendered parliamentarism is misunderstood if it is interpreted as exclusively designed for women. A gender-sensitive parliament is a political institution that responds to the concerns, needs and interests of both women and men, since they have the equal range of rights and duties to perform in their daily representative work.

Over the past ten years, progress has indeed been made on gender equality in parliaments around the world. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which today brings together parliamentarians from 179 countries around the world, the proportion of women's participation in parliaments has increased from 20 to 26 percent globally by 2022 (IPU Kigali Declaration, 2022). However, in 2023, there were only six countries that had 50% or more of women in parliaments, and Serbia was in 46th place in terms of the number of female MPs (IPU Parline, 2023). Currently, in the XIV legislature of the Serbian parliament there are 38% of women MPs (94 out of total 250), which is a percentage slightly below the guaranteed electoral quotas for women (which from 2020 implies number of 40%).

So far, the Serbian parliament has not conducted an official self-assessment of gender sensitivity, although it has the tools at its disposal to do so, such as the

IPU manual “Assessment of Gender Sensitivity – Self-Assessment Manual” (IPU, 2016a) which has been translated into Serbian language. It is indicative that the assessments of gender sensitivity of the Serbian parliament have so far been initiated by international organizations, such as IPU, OSCE and ODIHR (The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights), but these activities have so far not resulted in the publication of an integral report or action plan on the gender sensitivity of the Serbian parliament.⁴

A recent expert analytical efforts aimed at mapping the power of women MPs within the Serbian parliamentary system, showed that their power resulted from an increase in election quotas has been in great extent successfully integrated within the horizontal structure of the parliament, but that the level of substantial gender sensitivity of the Serbian parliament is still at an unsatisfactory level (Čičkarić, 2020; Vukomanović, 2021; Đorđević, 2023; Petrušić, 2023). This paper is also aimed to contribute to the much-needed systematic evaluation of the gender sensitivity of parliament in Serbia, but from a different analytical approach. Namely, quantified conceptualization of women’s roles in politics gives a distorted perception of their political roles that should be contextualized within an autochthonous institutional and political environment.

That is why the ambition of this paper is to explore gender-oriented patterns of parliamentary political culture within the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia (NARS). Methodologically, it could be classified into a research approach that is labelled as ‘parliamentary ethnography’, since various authors highlight advantages of this approach to gender-oriented analysis of institutions: as a deeper analysis of the link between descriptive and substantive representativeness (Mackay, 2008); understanding of parliaments as gender-sensitive works (Crewe, 2015; Erikson and Josefsson, 2019); or for exploring ‘riffs, rhythms and rituals’ of researching parliaments (Crewe, 2021). By applying the concept of parliamentary ethnography, the aim is to explore various cultural, spatial, communicative, normative, legislative aspects that affect the subject of research – gendered parliamentary culture in Serbia.

An ethnographically grounded approach to analysis implies both research knowledge and *prima facie* insight gained in the experiencing process of observing parliament ‘from within’. This concept focuses methodology of research on the secondary analysis of available documentary sources to create a deeper understanding of parliament as a workplace. The methodology of observational research includes interviews, or so-called ‘shadowing’ as tools in political elite studies (McDonald, 2005; Bussell, 2020). Interpretative methods are very suitable for researching normative and value-oriented topics in parliament, such as gender equality, because actors often negotiate them through formal rules and procedures, on the one hand, and through informal rules, personal positions and power relations, on the other hand (Ahrens and Elomäki, 2022).

4 The last in the series was the participatory gender audit workshop „Changing Policy, Transforming Institutions: Towards a Gender-Sensitive Parliament,“ which was held at the end of September 2024 in cooperation with OSCE/ODIHR.

By adopting this approach, the NARS is analysed as a 'workplace' with the aim to explore how the gender perspective of representative work of women MPs is accommodated within the internal space of parliament. Different parliamentary rules, norms and practices are observed, not only as they are written, stipulated, but in a 'hermeneutic' manner – through literal, ethic, allegorical and analogical interpretations of relations and interactions of key actors – female *vis-à-vis* male MPs, keeping in mind that what is visible is interpretable.

The work is structured in several segments. First, the Parliament of Serbia is analysed as a working space in which *sui generis* (un)written rules and norms of political culture are valid and the ritual of initiating women MPs takes place in the given political and cultural environment. Secondly, the trends of mainstreaming gender equality in the Parliament of Serbia are detected through the mapping of the power of women MPs in parliamentary hierarchical settings – their distribution on the main official positions. Thirdly, positive model of women's empowerment in the form of parliamentary caucus of women MPs is explored and the results of this partnership and cooperation are questioned. Fourth, gender sensitivity of parliamentarians is also observed through the issue of gender-based violence against women members of parliament. Fifth, at all levels of analysis, an interpretive dialogue is generated in which testimonies of women MPs of the Serbian parliament are introduced through a secondary analysis of their interviews and polls.⁵ These five levels of analysis will shape and reflect the major visible contour lines on the portrait of gender sensitiveness of the Serbian parliament.

2. Parliamentary ethnography of the National Assembly of Serbia

As Goodsell notes, parliaments are not only monuments, but also 'environments, inhabited spaces', in which not only 'cultural content' is expressed, but also 'contemporary attitudes and behaviours'. Thus, the interior of parliament reflects 'the imprint of current behaviour. Hence... architecture acts as a record or index of current political life' (Goodsell, 1988: 288).

The Parliamentary buildings are 'a nexus of architecture and politics' (Psarra *et al.*, 2023). The Parliamentary building reflects the dialectical interaction of the eternal nature of the state and the transient, ephemeral nature of the MPs parliamentary mandate. The external and interior construction of the parliament is designed for the purpose of an endless repetition of daily political rituals by countless past, present and future MPs, regardless of their personal, professional or gender identity.

5 For this purpose, the following sources of both quantitative and qualitative researches of representative samples of MPs of the Serbian parliament will be used: a poll of both women and men MPs conducted in 2007 (Vuković, 2008); in-depth semi-structured interviews with women MPs conducted in 2011/2012 (Vuković, 2014); a poll and structured interviews with both women and men MPs conducted in 2013 (Otvoreni parlament, 2014); and two series of in-depth interviews with women MPs conducted in 2020, one by Pajvančić-Cizelj (2020), and second by a group of researchers (Babović *et al.*, 2021).

The conceptualization of parliament through the notion of distinctive ‘space’ is particularly suitable for analysing the gendered patterns of parliamentary political culture, because space represents a nexus – a link between ‘physical, mental and social’ (Fuchs, 2019: 134). Political and cultural patterns are in dialectical interaction by (re)constituting each other, and this analysis is, at the first place, aimed to explore the spatial-cultural context, the environment in which parliamentary work takes place.

As Patzelt (2023) notes, there is a great diversity of ‘parliamentarisms’ and different ‘institutional morphologies’ of parliaments that go through different historical and cultural periods. The Serbian parliament is a complex political and administrative institution that consists of numerous workplaces, each of which has its own (un)written code of work culture, which is especially true for different parliamentary (party) groups. Therefore, it is difficult to talk about a unified parliamentary culture. More precisely, it can be said that each of the most important rooms in the National Assembly of Serbia: the Grand and Minor plenary chambers, the large entrance hall, together with the four rooms where meetings of the parliamentary committees are held, the presidential (speaker’s) and vice-presidential (deputy speakers) cabinets, the offices of various parliamentary groups have their own specific, *sui generis* political micro-culture.

Parliament, as the highest legislative body is perceived as the ‘house of power’. By entering parliament, members of parliament are expected to adapt to the institution’s rules and norms, both written and unwritten. They create ‘a space where members feel comfortable (or somehow different) while doing their job’ (Palmieri, 2011: 83). Walking through this house of power can be puzzling, almost the same as wandering inside a labyrinth, where there are many visible and invisible obstacles and dead ends.

The first entry into parliament is a kind of ceremony of initiating MPs into the existing space, into the parliamentary house and its domestic culture. Interviews with parliamentarians around the world, conducted by the IPU, confirmed that women ‘feel uncomfortable in a parliamentary environment, as though they were outsiders to this culture’ (*ibid.*: 84). Miller is presenting experience of a woman MP from the British Parliament, who described her immersion in the chamber as ‘other-worldly’ because of the ‘physical enclosure, (un)contactability, and ornamental surroundings’ (Miller, 2022). Woman MP from Serbia explains what this mean: ‘*The first shock was that I appeared in the Serbian parliament. Nothing was expected of me except to be a ficus*’, i.e. ornamental plant (Babović *et al.*, 2021: 5). The following is an analysis of the gender sensitivity of the parliamentary ambience – the building of the Serbian parliament.

2.1. Gendered allegory of the parliamentary ambience

Due to its political, historical and state-building significance, architectural and artistic values, the National Assembly building that was built with interruptions, due to unfavourable historical circumstances, for almost thirty years, from 1907 to 1936, fifty years later, in 1984 was declared with the status of a national cultural monument. The most famous symbol of the Serbian parliament

are two dynamic sculptural compositions titled “Playful black horses and giant heroes with them”, in the front of the parliamentary building, at both sides of the entrance stairs, which show a very energetic interaction of horses and male giants (the work of sculptor Tomo Rosandić). Alongside that it is masculinized, this sculpture simultaneously carries a message about the continuous struggle between the raw force (of the plebs) and the reason (of the state), thus illustrating the mission of the members of parliament who are expected to confront and tame the crude strength of the people, the rulers and the state.

The House of the National Assembly is characterized by an exceptional exterior and interior that is stylistically diverse, but at first glance the masculinized monumentality as the main characteristic is noticeable. In the lobby of the Assembly, the so-called vestibule, in the niches were placed four dominant male figures of national rulers carved in marble, symbolizing the historical development of all three constituent peoples of the then Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. These are Serbian Tzar Dušan, Croatian King Tomislav, Slovenian Prince Kocelj and Serbian leader of rebellion against the Ottoman Turks – Karađorđe. These sculptural achievements with their symbolic characterization establish the impression of archetypical *patres familias* model of ‘progenitor of nations’.

These sculptures are striking symbols of male authoritarianism, and already at the entrance to the parliament is a clear sign that one is entering a zone of undeniable male domination and rule. The forefathers of nations are portrayed both as great warriors and as prodigious national enlighteners. The symbiosis of weapons and the code that are main requisites in the hands of these male statues are illustrations of the division of power between the executive and the legislative branch of government.

Unlike the male, female characters and figures in the Serbian parliament building are not notable personalities, they are anonymous, nameless, although beautiful, depersonalized artistic allegories. Female characters in the interior of the parliament are in the function of presenting the idea of the organization of the state. To date, nine sculptures have been preserved, whose figures through the expressive medium of the female or male body visualize the most important realms or occupations in the foundations and structure of the state.

Located in the large, central hall of the parliament, the female figures, made in marble, symbolically represent: Crafts and Maritime Affairs, Agriculture and Industry. They are related to two another bronze figures of women, representing the personification of Education and Justice. If we look at the criterion of ‘division of labour’ between female and male statues, we can see that women are presented as hardworking labourers, teachers and justifiable personalities, whilst men are warriors, builders and leaders. This division between men and women is illustrated also on the monumental fresco “The Great Allegory of Labour” located in the Minor Chamber where women are depicted surrounded by children, occupied with their daily jobs as housewives, while men are on a boat holding oars, gathered as uniformed soldiers and skillful masons.

In the same Minor Chamber of the parliament, where public hearings are held, there are fresco paintings of six men and women pairs, dressed in the folklore costumes of the six constituent peoples of Yugoslavia. Although the emphasis is on their ethno-national identity, this is the only example of equality and partnership between men and women in the entire ethnographic interior of the parliament.

Sculptural works that represent male figures, within the parliamentary building, personify Defence, Politician, Builder and Miner. Such gender-selective personifications of different domains of social activities are certainly a reflection of the archetypal perception of the difference between men and women, deeply rooted in the traditional heritage and consciousness of not only the Balkan, but also European peoples, their deistic traditions, myths and legends.

The modern period has also brought more practical, but artistically less valuable, presentations of politicians and political power in the Serbian National Assembly – parliament. In the hallway that separates the lobby from the large hall where press conferences are held, a portrait gallery of 37 former Chairmen and Chairwomen, i.e. Speakers – Presidents of the Serbian parliament has been set up, from 1920 until today. Among the portraits of majority of the male parliament Speakers, there are pictures of four women who served as Speakers of the Serbian parliament including recently elected.⁶

Common to these four female Presidents, i.e. Speakers is the so-called ‘paradox of empowerment’ of women in prominent positions – they are perceived not as powerful but as ‘queens without crowns’. Illustrative example is the paradoxical fact that during the mandate of the second female Speaker a controversial inauguration ceremony was introduced, which, on the one hand, represents the retraditionalization of parliamentary culture, while at the same time emphasize its already predominant masculinization. Namely, before the start of the regular spring session of the Serbian parliament, in March 2010, a new protocol was introduced: in front of the entrance of the parliament, a red carpet was spread and soldiers – guardsmen in ceremonial uniforms were lined up, so that the newly elected MPs were entering the parliament through the guard’s echelon. Two guardsmen were also present in the Grand Plenary Chamber, holding the flag of Serbia, while the choir from the gallery intoned the national anthem of Serbia ‘God of Justice’. This became a regular parliamentary ceremony since then, both at the beginning and at the end of regular spring/winter parliamentary sessions (in March and October). Although it cannot be concluded that this ceremony represents the ‘militarization’ of the legislative house, it is certainly a reflex of the persistence of the masculinized pattern of political culture. Gendered roles in politics, therefore, are embedded in the foundations, walls and rituals of the Serbian parliament, and persistently survive to this day.

6 Currently the President of the parliament is Ana Brnabić (previously she was the Prime Minister of Serbia in three terms 2017–2024, as first women PM in the history of Serbia and first politician to be openly declared member of the LGBT community).

3. Challenging the gender binary hierarchy structures

Having in mind highly masculinized parliamentary ethnography, gender mainstreaming of parliamentary culture in Serbia could be perceived as a project of gender redressing – reshuffling of binary hierarchical relations between male and female MPs. As Miller explains ‘gender redress refers to how transformation has been constructed, laboured and resisted’ (Miller, 2022). Any reform, as well as gender-oriented reform, in order to succeed should be ‘nested’ in broader institutional environment (Mackay, 2014).

Institutional environment is settled that way that women MPs were perceived as ‘newcomers’ in the parliamentary context, in a very dynamized, hectic political arena of the Serbian parliament, which is numerically dominated by male politicians who are established ‘insiders’ – ‘gatekeepers’. Women are consequently labelled as ‘outsiders’ who are yet to be initiated into the parliament, provided they learn first the masculinized (non)formal ‘rules of the game’. Woman MP in Serbian parliament makes comment on her female counterparts:

When they first encounter the fact that they are not required to be responsible, but loyal, they are in consternation, it halts them, some give up, and some continue playing this game. (Vuković, 2014: 410)

These rules implicate two strategies: either women politicians will work in close cooperation with fellow male MPs, or they will be perceived, and potentially degraded as a kind of outcast. The sublimation of these two strategies is that women MPs also choose to behave like ‘party soldiers’ in parliament, to be loyal exclusively to their parliamentary group and its head (whip) (Cowley and Childs, 2003). The women MPs in the Serbian parliament agree to a greater extent with the claim that ‘women respect the party hierarchy more often than men’ – as many as 73.3 percent of female and 48.7 percent of male MPs men fully and partially agree with this statement (Vuković, 2008: 345).

This ‘militaristic’ perception requires women MPs to suppress individual capacities of their education, occupation and expertise, their local or social connections and to highlight, in the first place, their party and parliamentary group affiliation. A woman member of the Serbian parliament reflects on the perception of women in Serbian politics: ‘A woman is not allowed to be independent, authentic ... this is not forgiven in politics’ (Babović et al., 2021: 18).

Especially woman MP is constantly reminded that she does not know how the parliament really ‘works’. Her legitimacy – the parliamentary mandate is perceived as the ‘property’ of the party, although the Serbian Constitution and the electoral law guarantee a free mandate – the MP is the ‘owner’ of the mandate, not the party. The former woman member of the Serbian parliament concludes: ‘They traded with my mandate because they realized that there was no one strong and big behind me’ (ibid.: 5).

A woman MP is in constant need to suppress her individuality, her ‘self’, ultimately – both her sex and her gender, and to continuously justify the initial act of accepting her presence in politics together with men. This process of difficult initiation of women into the ‘gentlemen’s club’ was reflected in the

fact that a significant increase in the number of female MPs (due to increase in electoral quotas from 30 to 40 percent) was not reflected in a similar proportion in the increase in the number of women heads of parliamentary groups.

It is indicative that in the last decade of significant increase of women MPs (from 2012–2024) in six parliamentary legislatures, only 11 women were the Heads of different parliamentary groups – the majority of the Heads were men (in total 69 men were holding this position during the same period).⁷ The percentage of women in leading positions in parliamentary groups (13.7 percent of women Heads comparing to 86.2 percent of men Heads) is therefore almost three times lower than their percentage of representation in the total number of MPs (ranging from 30 to 40 percent). Although, the nomination and selection procedure for these positions originated exclusively from the cadre selection policies of their political parties and cannot be interpreted as an indication of the gender non-sensitivity of the Serbian parliament. Nevertheless, it can be observed that women MPs have not managed to challenge the petrified hierarchical structure of male leadership within their parliamentary groups.

However, more positive are findings of detailed analysis of the data on the gender structure of committees in the Serbian parliament, during the last six legislatures in the period 2012–2024, which indicate that a significant shift of power of women MPs is noticeable in the structure of these working bodies. This analysis is presented in Table 1. and it is obvious that women MPs are persistently expanding their level of representation in increased number of parliamentary committees. In overall, for the period of six consecutive terms (legislatures IX–XIV) it could be seen that the top seven committees with clear dominance of women MPs are within the socio-cultural domain (family/health, human/minority/gender rights, labour/social affairs, culture, health) and in two realms of international politics: European integration and foreign affairs. The cumulative, average percentage of membership of women MPs in these committees is even higher than the level of electoral quotas (40 percent) – and it ranges from 66% (in the Committee on the Rights of the Child) to 45 percentages (in the Health and Family Committee). In five more committees, women MPs made up more than one third of the members – in the areas of environmental protection, constitutional and legislative issues, education/science/technology, as well as in judiciary, trade and economy (31 to 37 percent of the total members of these committees are women). As data presented in Table 1. shows, women MPs are less represented in the infrastructure/transport area (28 percent), agriculture/forestry (24 percent), finance and budgeting (23 percent) and in the area which could be labelled as a policy of Serbian national interest (Committee on Serbian Diaspora – 22 percent, and Committee on Kosovo – 18 percent). It is very significant to emphasize that defence and interior affairs remains area of limited access for women MPs (cumulative, average level of women representation in this committee is 17 percent for six consecutive parliamentary terms). Although the Security Services Control Committee has slightly opened its door (in the last two terms, from 2022–2024), this committee could be still described as “forbidden zone” for women MPs.

7 Source for collecting of data: National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, accessed at <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/national-assembly/composition/parliamentary-groups/parliamentary-groups.5007.html> on 5 June 2024

Table 1. *Representation of women MPs in Serbian Parliament`s Committees (IX – XIV legislatures, 2012–2024, percentage of women MPs out of the total number of Committee`s members)*

Committee / Legislatures	IX 2012–2014	X 2014–2016	XI 2016–2020	XII 2020–2022	XIII 2022–2024	XIV 2024 ...	Cumulative %
1. Committee on the Rights of the Child	60%	70%	75%	61%	59%	72%	66%
2. Committee on Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality	65%	76%	82%	53%	53%	47%	63%
3. Labour, Social Issues, Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Committee	69%	53%	53%	59%	65%	59%	60%
4. European Integration Committee	59%	59%	41%	59%	71%	62%	59%
5. Culture and Information Committee	71%	53%	71%	53%	59%	41%	58%
6. Foreign Affairs Committee	59%	59%	53%	41%	41%	41%	49%
7. Health and Family Committee	25%	35%	41%	71%	53%	47%	45%
8. Committee on Constitutional and Legislative Issues	25%	35%	41%	41%	29%	53%	37%
9. Environmental Protection Committee	53%	47%	47%	41%	6%	29%	37%
10. Education, Science, Technology Development and Information Society Committee	29%	41%	42%	35%	29%	29%	34%
11. Judiciary, Public Administration and Local Self-Government Committee	47%	35%	23%	23%	35%	41%	34%
12. Economy, Regional Development, Trade, Tourism and Energy Committee	23%	18%	41%	59%	18%	29%	31%
13. Spatial Planning, Transport, Infrastructure and Telecommunication Committee	19%	18%	35%	29%	35%	29%	28%
14. Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management Committee	25%	18%	29%	35%	18%	18%	24%
15. Finance, State Budget and Public Spending Control Committee	12%	18%	18%	35%	35%	23%	23%
16. Administrative-Budgetary and Mandate-Immunity Issues Committee	13%	35%	18%	29%	23%	23%	23%
17. Committee on the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region	44%	18%	23%	19%	19%	12%	22%
18. Committee on Kosovo and Metohija	0%	24%	12%	19%	44%	12%	18%
19. Defence and Interior Affairs Committee	0%	18%	18%	23%	18%	23%	17%
20. Security Services Control Committee	11%	0 %	11%	0%	22%	22%	11%

Note. The data in Table 1. refer to the full members of the listed Committees (deputy members are excluded). All Committees have 17 full members, except for the Security Services Control Committee (9 full members) and the Committee on the Rights of the Child that includes representatives of all parliamentary groups.

Data are collected and calculated from official web-site of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, available at: <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/national-assembly/composition/working-bodies/committees.492.html> Accessed: 15.1.2025.

What we can see, based on the detailed data presented in Table 1. is that there is no clear-cut division into feminized soft-liner and masculinized hard-

liner committees (except for the last two mentioned: defense/interior affairs and secret security control committees). That is somehow in contrast to the country-case studies that has documented that gender gaps exist in committee assignments (Funk *et al.*, 2017) and that women are more likely to be assigned to feminine and less prestigious committees (Pansardi and Vercesi, 2017).

3.1. Women`s parliamentary caucus

As a logical consequence of accelerated process of feminization of the structure of the parliament in the last decade, the gender-oriented consciousness of women MPs expanded and the idea of a joint, closer cooperation and networking of women MPs within the Serbian parliament has emerged – which Childs refers to as the ‘gendered opportunity’ (Childs, 2023: 526). This window of gendered opportunity was used by women MPs in 2013 when the first Women`s Parliamentary Network (WPN) was established within the Serbian National Assembly. It is important to note that all female MPs, from all parliamentary groups, for the first time in the history of parliamentarism in Serbia, joined together in this format.

Although it was conceived as an informal group of women MPs, the WPN has established an organizational structure from the beginning – a collegium of 15 coordinators (one female representative from each parliamentary group), who equally and actively participated in the discussion and decision-making of the WPN. The WPN collegium was chaired by one women coordinator for a period of three months. Thus, the primacy of party logic remained prevalent within the WPN, since the criteria for the nomination of the WPN chairwoman – coordinator were based on the size of the parliamentary group, so the first coordinator was a representative of the largest ruling parliamentary group. Nevertheless, the establishment of WPN was certainly an example of a ‘small feminist revolution’ – women showed that they developed an awareness of women’s solidarity, they set an example of affirmative action and encouraged women in Serbia to become more active and to take participation in political and public life.

Soon, WPN members began attending workshops and lectures on strategies for strengthening the role of women in politics, and study visits of women politicians to their counterparts abroad were organized. Same-sex trainings and gatherings of women politicians has been shown to be more beneficial in building their self-confidence, as they provide a safe learning environment in which women are more likely to be actively engaged (Markham, 2012). The most important activity of WPN was certainly directed towards domestic politics, and soon round tables and field visits were organized, which were aimed at discussing the problem of gender equality, as well as the economic empowerment of women in Serbia. Cooperation and consultations with various associations of women entrepreneurs and businesswomen of Serbia was established. The WPN also contributed to the opening of the doors of the Serbian parliament for women – citizens and representatives of civil society organizations. At the end of 2013, the first and then a series of National Conferences were organized annually in the

National Assembly by WPN, which brought together women MPs from national and local parliaments from all 29 districts of Serbia, with the aim of including women at the local level in politics and forming of Women's Networks in local parliaments also.

At the beginning, the enthusiasm, self-confidence and perception of the power of the Women Parliamentary Network in Serbia was very pronounced in its operation. But, with the widening gap between the ruling majority and the opposition, over time, the attitudes of female MPs – members of the WPN were again returned under the auspices of loyalty to their political parties, which became key obstacle to their constructive cooperation and unified action. Former woman MP concludes:

As for the Women's Parliamentary Network, I have to say that women have two kinds of loyalty, one to their party, the other to gender. When the party and gender loyalties collide, this gender loyalty always comes out soggy. The party loyalty is always dominant (Babović et al., 2021: 16).

Recently, the MPs themselves express the opinion that the quality of the work of the WPN has declined, and one of them gives the reasons: 'Previously, WPN meetings were what we couldn't wait for, and we would come all in and talk sincerely, and then it turned into a place for political bickering' (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2023: 132). In the last three terms of the parliament, the joint action of the WPN has been completely suspended, due to deteriorating relationships between the government majority and the opposition MPs. The gathering and the activities of the WPN have been frozen, until further notice, for an indefinite period.

This weakness of the WPN also shows how difficult is for women parliamentarians/politicians to make an exit from their archetypical 'weaker' gender roles in society and politics. That is why the following part of the analysis is intended to explore mechanisms of depicting and labeling women MPs as fragile and vulnerable.

4. Morphology of 'benevolent' gender-based violence

Parliaments are supposed to be 'safe spaces' for all men and women, but in practice, sexism, misogyny, harassment and various forms of violence against women members of parliament are widespread, as it is shown by the IPU study from 2016 "Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians". This survey shows a high level of prevalence of violence against women in politics, with 81.8 percent of respondents saying they had been subjected to psychological violence, 32.7 percent to economic violence, 25.5 percent to physical violence, and 21.8 percent to sexual violence (IPU, 2016b). Researchers are noticing a growing trend of sexist language and contestation of gender equality norms in the European Parliament plenary also (Kantola and Lombardo, 2021). Violence against parliamentarians is only the part of the stories of violence against women in politics (Krook, 2020).

Women politicians in Serbia are no exception, and their experiences confirm the 'rule'. According to their personal testimonies, female politicians in Serbia, mostly female MPs, cite a list of extremely pejorative expressions, sexist and misogynistic 'labels', which they were called out by 'gallery of perpetrators', which, in addition to gender determinants, carry other meanings in a negative connotation, such as appearance, age, ethnicity, etc. Based on a survey conducted in 2020, women politicians reports that these are male party colleagues or leaders, superiors in party structures or in state offices, political opponents, editors, journalists 'who use the media as a tool for violence against female politicians' – women reports that sometimes the perpetrators are individuals, sometimes groups or even political parties (Babović *et al.*, 2021: 6,11).

With the digitalization of the entire society, new forms of violence over the internet have emerged – discriminatory, degrading, misogynistic sub/culture on social networks and in electronic media contaminates the entire public space in which women politicians operate. A former member of the Serbian parliament testifies that she was exposed to internet violence: *'If stalking is considered to be stalking on social networks by trolls, which implies organized stalking, then yes ... depending on the phase of my political activity ...'* (*ibid.*: 11).

Question arises – how to understand sexism and sexual harassment in politics (Collier and Raney, 2018)? As a form of struggle for political power, as rivalry or as a form of misogyny? Childs vividly describes such a situation as a kind of threat to the preferences and interests of male MPs who 'hear gender, see women, think discrimination against men and special treatment for women' (Childs, 2024: 3). As Mršević notes, 'attacks on professional women who are in public and state positions are always fiercer than on men on the same places, because their "guilt" is twofold' – they are 'implicitly' guilty of having dared to occupy a high position, until recently exclusively intended for men. This sends a message, not only to the specifically attacked woman, but to all women that public life 'is not the right place for women' (Mršević, 2013: 74). Woman member of the Serbian parliament is of the same opinion: *'I think it's all about the fear felt by a certain man of strong, powerful women. The fear that we, women, will take those positions away from them'* (Babović *et al.*, 2021: 18).

Women in politics are developing various micro-strategies to counter misogyny, harassment and sexism. Women parliamentarians around the world testify that an assertive response to disturbing remarks usually deters men from repeating such behaviour. It is interesting that both women and men MPs in the Serbian parliament reject assertiveness as a welcome strategy for greater success of women in politics. Only 20 percent of women MPs and 25.6 percent of men MPs agree with the statement that 'women are not aggressive enough to engage in politics' (Vuković, 2008: 348). On the other hand, three quarters of MPs believe that this is not an adequate explanation for women's weak performance in politics.

In contrast to the strategy of assertiveness, there is also a strategy of 'if you can't beat them, join the club'. Women MPs themselves expressed opinion that they possess a greater inclination to political compromise – twice as many women

MPs in the Serbian parliament believe that this is true (80 percent confirmed this attitude) compared to 43.6 percent of male MPs (*ibid.*: 345). On the one hand, this attitude can be interpreted as an advantage for women in politics, but on the other hand, it can also be interpreted as a kind of relativization and acceptance of the domination of men that is reflected in the remark of one woman MP in the Serbian parliament: *'I mean, in all areas where power, decision-making and money are concerned, men are mostly more represented'* (Vuković, 2014: 409).

Which ultimately leads to the danger of stereotypical perceptions of weak, 'spineless' women in politics, who as such will not rebel (Cowley and Childs, 2003). This type of stereotypical perception is also circulating among members of the Serbian parliament – as many as 76.9 percent of male MPs and 66.7 percent of women MPs agree with the statement that 'women use informal influence better than men in politics'. Vuković also interprets this prevailing attitude as a prejudice about 'women's cunning', or a strategy by which women try to compensate their 'systemic handicap' in politics (Vuković, 2008: 347).

Sexist prejudices are often manifested in various forms of social mimicry, pretending to be humorous, benevolent, soft. As Todorović points out, research has shown that: 'Benevolent sexism has a negative impact on gender equality, because it affects women's perception of their own competence, has a negative impact on women's ambition and desire for success, encourages women to conform to traditional gender roles and increases their self-objectification' (Todorović, 2013: 17).

Examples of this kind of sexism in Serbian parliament are a common syntagm by which women MPs *en général* are referred to as 'members of the more beautiful/weaker sex' or publicly addressed only by their personal name, not by surname, or without their academic title, unlike male MPs. Both male and female MPs in the Serbian parliament noted an example during the plenary session, when a male MP belittled a female MP colleague by saying that *'she is beautiful and should not discuss like that'* (Otvoreni parliament, 2014: 13).

That is exactly what Chappell (2006) has called a 'gendered logic of appropriateness'. Especially women in parliament are expected to be careful how they talk, look or behave – to behave well (Ilie, 2018). This continuous repetition of 'dos and don'ts' acts is exactly what brings gender into being. As Butler argued 'gender performativity' is not a singular act, but 'a repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization' and which is partially understood 'as culturally sustained temporal duration' (2006: xv). Very often this naturalization means repetition of oppressive and hurtful gendered norms.

4.1. Harassment mitigation and processing mechanisms

Therefore, the new question arises: what kind of defence mechanisms can women engaged in politics/parliament develop – apply against oppressive gendered norms? In the long run, the best strategy is certainly to develop self-confidence, self-esteem and self-protection mechanisms, so that women become more combative and do not accept the role of victims. The Burkina Faso MP

noted that it's good that women '*often end up developing thick skin*' (Palmieri, 2011: 85). The former woman member of the Serbian parliament states *post festum* on the violence against her: '*It has not wavered in what I was saying, on the contrary, it has strengthened all my views*' (Babović *et al.*, 2021: 17). But individual mechanisms are not sufficient, and clearly defined institutional mechanisms are required.

In parliamentary practice, there are various mechanisms and procedures for 'processing' of harassment within the institutional framework of the parliament. The IPU specifies the following varieties of harassment prevention policies and complaint procedures: some parliaments use internal grievance bodies, such as Indonesia's Honorary Council and Conduct Committee, and Jordan's Administrative Affairs Committee, or a Mediation committee in Columbia, or the Ethics Committee in Peruvian Congress. In Kuwait and Malaysia, the speaker of parliament is responsible for considering and adjudicating on issues of this kind. In Canada, there is a Senate policy on the prevention and resolution of harassment in the workplace that applies to the conduct of all persons in the workplace in the Senate, including Senators, their staff, employees of the Senate administration, contractors or services and their staff, as well as volunteers. In Costa Rica, women parliamentarians introduced a bill in 2007 to ensure that elected public officials are not protected by parliamentary immunity from criminal prosecution in cases of sexual harassment, and that they are sanctioned if they are found guilty of the charges (Palmieri, 2011: 69,70).

Apparently, the situation in Serbia is ambivalent, because there is no law *per se* for cases of sexual harassment, but such cases are incorporated into the Criminal Code in 2017 as a criminal offense (Art. 182a, Para. 3). The provision on the prohibition of harassment, sexual harassment and sexual extortion is included in Art. 32 of the Law on Gender Equality (that was passed in 2021), but these provisions of these two laws cannot be automatically applied to MPs, precisely because of the institute of parliamentary immunity that protects MPs, until the parliament revokes it.

In Serbian parliamentary practice, in the last ten years, there have been cases of revoking the parliamentary immunity of MPs (both were men, one was even the former Speaker of the parliament) to enable the prosecution of accusations of abuse of their official position for personal lucrative purposes. Thus, by this analogy, it is not impossible to suspend parliamentary immunity due to serious indications that some of the MPs have presumably committed an act of sexual harassment. Time will tell if this happens soon, as there are already various insinuations in the public that some MPs are violating the law in this regard.

Problem is also that both the Rules of Procedure of the Serbian parliament (revised and adopted in 2012) and the Code of Conduct for MPs (adopted in 2020) remain completely ignorant of the gender-based culture of violence in parliament. The Code of Conduct does not contain a single sentence prohibiting sexual harassment or any other misconduct based on gender. In general, in Art. 4, Para. 2 of the Code it is stated that:

An MP in the performance of his parliamentary function is obliged to treat all citizens equally, without discrimination or privilege based on kinship, age, nationality ... sex, sexual orientation ... or on other grounds.

In practice, the President – i.e. the Speaker act as ‘solitary arbiter’ in assessing the behaviour of MPs and the decency of the debate in the Parliament of Serbia. From time to time, oral warnings and fines are declared against some MPs, as it is stipulated by the Rules of Procedure. The reasons for issuing a warning to a MP include, among other reasons, the use of profanity and offensive expressions, and the presentation of facts and assessments relating to the private life of other persons (Art. 109, Para. 1, Items 6 and 7. of the Rules of Procedure). However, these oral warnings and fines remain ineffective, since verbal sexist and misogynistic outbursts by men, and lately by some female MPs also, continue indefinitely at plenary sessions, term after term.

One thing is certain – that silence and the lack of clear standards leads to confusion about standards of politically and socially acceptable gender-responsive behaviour of man and woman MPs. To improve the ‘toxic’ parliamentary culture, it is necessary for parliamentarians to take responsibility, change strategies and take leadership in this area across the parliamentary horizontal and vertical institutional structure, and this responsibility applies equally to female and male MPs.

5. Conclusion

This analysis was aimed to present complexity of various aspects of gender related parliamentary culture that is performed not only in normative but also in symbolic level, in ethnography – spatial, artistic, traditional, ritual, language expressions, as well as in the real-political gendered power relations amongst female and male MPs. There are three-fold primary contributions of this analysis: inclusion of the qualitative and quantitative empirical gender-related evidence on Serbian parliament to the comparative literature on parliamentary culture, to evaluations of gender sensitiveness of parliaments and to the comparative studies of the gender-related violence against women in politics.

In all layers of analysis, juxtaposition of the processes of masculinization and feminization was aimed to highlight the patterns of challenging of binary structural hierarchy within the Serbian parliament. The analysis of the parliamentary ethnography of the Serbian parliament has shown that spatial ambience, (un)written house rules, ceremonies and rituals were designed rather to inhibit than to facilitate easier bridging of the gender gap between female and male MPs – masculinized parliamentary culture is still persistent.

Even the extraordinary format of close cooperation and empowerment of women MPs within the Women’s Parliamentary Network has not, in the long run, increased political and social capital of female parliamentarians. The strong gravitation field of loyalty to their native parties continuously limits the political and gender emancipation of the women MPs. This ultimately means that the increasing of women’s quotas cannot lead straightforwardly to the

adoption of gender-sensitive practices within parliament, if women politicians are still segregated within their parent political parties. Which indicates the conclusion that political parties should be internally gendered to enable gender mainstreaming of parliament. An increasing number of women politicians and MPs, especially those who are specialized in gender-sensitive areas of politics, can more actively promote and transfer gender awareness to their party colleagues, especially those who are entering parliament for the first time.

The analysis showed a paradoxical trend: that the process of electoral engineering aimed at ‘feminizing’ formal political institution, such as the parliament, by introducing binding electoral quotas for women resulted in even greater exposure, sensitivity and vulnerability of women parliamentarians to various forms of verbal, psychological, sexual harassment and violence. When their political representation is in expansion, women are not perceived as partners, but as rivals in politics. Which means that introduction of gender-sensitive norms into parliament could induce both progressive and regressive trends that continue to shape and limit the extent to which international norms of gendering can be integrated into autochthonous cultural, political and institutional settings. Gender sensitivity of parliamentary culture is contingency, but it can be improved gradually as progressive, emancipation project – if designed and sustained by political elites. That is why comparative research and participatory audits of gender sensitivity of political elites in political parties, parliaments and governments should be conducted in parallel.

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