

MeTooEP: Rooting Out Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament

Article by Beatrice White

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In 2017, revelations of rampant sexual harassment and assault in the entertainment industry sparked an outpouring of testimonies from women and girls across the globe, who began to share their stories accompanied, on social media, by the hashtag #MeToo. It showed that, despite gains for equality in many parts of the world, sexist treatment and abuse remains a pervasive and universal problem. Unsurprisingly, the political sphere has also been a focal point of allegations, and in the European Parliament, a group of young feminists are determined to fight back. Journalist Beatrice White speaks to campaigners and MEPs about their experiences, the progress made so far, and where the struggle still needs to go.

The political arena, with its heightened power dynamics, provides fertile ground for abusive behaviour. Admissions of wrongdoing can be damaging for the reputations of both individuals and parties, and the adversarial nature of political work mean that sexist comments and treatment are often taken on the chin, as speaking out can have serious consequences for a budding career. A 2018 [study](#) looking at female members of parliament and parliamentary staff across Europe found that around 70 per cent had experienced sexist comments, over half had been the target of online sexist attacks, and almost a quarter had suffered some form of sexual violence.

The European Parliament is no exception. German Green Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Terry Reintke, who has been highly vocal on the issue, points to a wider lack of gender balance in the European Parliament which creates unfavourable conditions for tackling sexual harassment: “Although it’s better than it was, the number of women goes down when you look at higher positions in the parliament – presidents, group leaders, committee chairs...”. The European Parliament has had to face up to its failings after activists founded the MeTooEP movement, seeking to shed light on the situation and end the prevailing culture of silence.

The notebook

Jeanne Ponté, who would go on to co-found MeTooEP in 2018, began working as an assistant to an MEP in 2014. As a young woman working in a male-dominated policy area, she quickly realised how much she would have to fight to be taken seriously. The sexist assumptions and remarks she encountered were constant and unavoidable. “I was not surprised, but rather disappointed and exhausted by it,” she says. What disturbed her most was the level of resignation and apathy she observed from others in the face of this blatant sexism: “I was told so many times that I had to get used to it and be less sensitive because that’s just what politicians are like and it will never change.”

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Following an unwanted advance after just a few weeks on the job, Ponté resolved to do something about it: she decided to keep a notebook documenting incidents of ‘everyday sexism’ in the European Parliament recounted to her by colleagues or that she witnessed herself. “Writing was a way of not getting used to it and fighting back. It became a place of solidarity between workers, whereas the political world is a place of competition,” she says. Between 2014 and 2017, she gathered more than 80 testimonies from workers of all different backgrounds, nationalities, and positions in the parliament.

Ponté’s notebook came to public attention in late 2017 after her MEP mentioned it on local radio. The story was soon picked up by national and European media. As the attention snowballed, Ponté found herself at the centre of a media storm. As elsewhere, these revelations proved to be the tip of the iceberg. News of the notebook triggered an outpouring of testimonies, and dozens of parliamentary staff contacted Ponté to share their experiences. The MeToo movement had well and truly arrived at the European Parliament.

High hopes for change

The interest surrounding the notebook provided the impetus for an attempt to reform the parliament’s structures and procedures for dealing with sexual harassment and assault, and Greens in the European Parliament seized this opportunity to push for institutional change, explains Blanca De Riquer Gatell, Advisor on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality for the Greens/EFA Group in the parliament.

In October 2017, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on combatting sexual harassment and abuse in the European Institutions. “The resolution was a Greens/EFA proposal. We could see the momentum was there to start shedding light on the silent reality,” says De Riquer, who is also one of the founding members of the MeTooEP movement. The reason for the culture of silence and impunity in the European Parliament, according to De Riquer, is largely due to the ineffectiveness of the current complaints process, which the resolution sought to reform. Currently, there are two committees: an Advisory Committee dealing with harassment complaints between Accredited Parliamentary Assistants and MEPs, and a staff advisory committee for parliament staff on harassment prevention. The former was established in April 2014 and since then has dealt with 16 cases, all of which chiefly concerned allegations of psychological harassment. Until recently, it consisted of three MEPs, one representative on behalf of assistants, and one on behalf of the parliament’s administration.

As De Riquer points out, these committees “are completely politicised – so nobody dares to go to them.” That the committees consist mainly of MEPs poses clear difficulties when so many cases of harassment involve them, particularly in an environment such as the parliament where workers face high levels of competition and vulnerability. At that point, not a single case of sexual harassment had been reported, an indication of the lack of trust they elicited.

Although the resolution was adopted by a huge majority of MEPs amid significant media attention, then, “as so often happens with resolutions calling for many changes internally – nothing happened”, says De Riquer, “The resolution was published, but nothing was done to change any of the things we were denouncing.” Despite the outcry, there was little appetite within the parliament for far-reaching change, and the debate seemed destined to be swept under the carpet once more.

Time to organise

In response to this reluctance, what had been up until then a loose cross-party network of feminist workers decided they needed to build a united, lasting movement. To mark International Women’s Day on March 8 2018, they held a demonstration and launched a petition setting out their three main demands, all of which were contained in the 2017 resolution but had not been implemented: first, a taskforce of independent experts to deal with sexual

harassment cases through an external audit. Second, mandatory sexual harassment training for staff, MEPs, and senior positions in the parliament. Third, an anti-harassment committee with doctors as full members to provide appropriate medical support to the victims, as well as a reform of the composition of the committee to ensure that complainants can be heard in a safe and secure environment.

The petition was a great success, gathering more than 1000 signatures in a single day, from workers from every level of the parliament – from MEPs to bar staff and across the political spectrum. “It showed a clear need for a workers’ movement inside the parliament to follow what the resolution was asking for”, says De Riquer. Thus, the MeTooEP movement was created, bringing together a diverse group of workers – MEPs, assistants, interns, and advisors. The group launched an energetic internal campaign, meeting with officials and organising conferences and events to explain their objectives and raise awareness.

One of the key initiatives was the [blog](#), launched in October 2018, collecting anonymous testimonies of sexual harassment and assault in the parliament – a kind of digital version of Ponté’s notebook. “The goal was to provide a safe space to victims and provide a point of contact to access support,” explains Ponté, “but also to show what sexual harassment is, because perpetrators often exploit the lack of understanding and claim not to know that what they are doing is harassment.” To date, there have been 40 entries posted, ranging from inappropriate comments to attempted rape.

It showed a clear need for a workers’ movement inside the parliament

Ahead of the European elections in May 2019, the MeTooEP movement invited all candidates to sign an [election pledge](#). The pledge calls for the implementation of the 2017 resolution and for MEPs to commit to making the European Parliament a safe working environment for all, setting the standard in terms of combatting discrimination and sexual harassment. Over 110 MEPs among the current cohort have signed the pledge (over 350 counting candidates who were not elected), among them the former and current presidents of the parliament.

Taking stock of the movement’s achievements so far, De Riquer sees its main success in terms of the influence it has exerted and the real changes in policy that it has brought about. With the start of the 2019 mandate, there is now anti-harassment training (mandatory for staff, but voluntary for MEPs) and the structure of the Advisory Committee evaluating complaints has been reformed to include an additional assistant as well as a doctor and a psychologist among the panel. However, these last two are only observers and not full members of the panel, which still contains a majority of politicians (3 MEPs, 2 assistants).

Despite the gains, none of the key demands of the MeTooEP movement have been fully implemented, and some measures have met considerable resistance – notably, the proposal for mandatory training for MEPs, which some conservative members claim violates their freedom of mandate.

A model parliament?

Reintke lays responsibility for this failure with the parliament’s leading figures, particularly its president, David Sassoli. In office since July 2019, Sassoli supported the campaign while it was in the spotlight but, when it came to taking real steps, his strategy was to “postpone and delay, to take it off the agenda in the hope that people would forget.”

Another important factor for Reintke is the lack of gender balance in the parliament, which creates a disparity in terms of power and “explains why this issue has not been taken up as much as it should have been, despite the

strong majority in the parliament.”

With female representation at 41 per cent, there are more women in the European Parliament than in the average national parliament. Yet, in comparison to some others, Ponté feels the European Parliament is far from a role model. “I think the EP has much more to do,” she argues, adding: “We will defend the EP’s image when it really is a model.”

In the UK, a preliminary step has been taken towards tackling staff abuse in parliament. A report published in July 2019 found widespread bullying and (sexual) harassment in the House of Commons and set out strong proposals to combat it. Proposals included opening up the complaint process to previous employees, though, as UK Green MEP Alexandra Philipps points out, the likelihood of the advice being implemented under Boris Johnson as Prime Minister “seems unlikely”.

A problem in politics – left, right and centre

Despite the parliament dragging its feet when it comes to implementing binding rules, the Greens/EFA Group have tried to lead by example, De Riquer argues. “Ours is the only parliamentary group with a comprehensive strategy to combat harassment which includes mandatory training for both MEPs and staff,” she says. The Greens/EFA co-presidents instigated a letter sent on behalf of all the parliamentary group leaders in the wake of the 2017 resolution, calling for its full implementation. The Group has also taken steps to improve its internal practices, such as creating a network of confidential councillors to mediate cases and working to integrate systematic gender mainstreaming into its policy and communications.

Even with the best of intentions, no political party or family is immune to the risks of sexual harassment and sexist behaviour within its ranks. The trial of Denis Baupin, a Green MP in France, for the repeated sexual harassment and assault of numerous women, prompted some uncomfortable but much-needed soul searching among the party apparatus about why members and officials looked the other way for such a long time [more on the Baupin trail].

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Whatever their principles on paper, it is clear that if Greens are to show the way in changing the reality for women in politics, they must practice what they preach. But they can only achieve this through a constant and painstaking process of critical reflection. “Sexism and patriarchy are a part of the way we were raised, even as women,” De Riquer says, “so this is something you have to fight against constantly [...] I have perceived real willingness and commitment to advance and we are getting better, but we are not perfect. We need to continue working and do much more, especially as we are the ones speaking out the loudest.”

One of the ways to do this work is thanks to the training now offered by the parliament. According to De Riquer, this training contributes to changing mindsets by “helping some MEPs think about the way they behave and interact with others – to get them to put themselves in the shoes of an assistant or woman about whom they might make a joke or a comment.”

Towards a zero-tolerance policy

Reintke is determined that the parliament take concrete steps in the coming mandate, such as mandatory training and an external audit of the situation. “The fact that [an external audit] isn’t coming shows that some people don’t want to take a closer look because they are afraid of what would be found. It would be an important step and a

basis for further discussion about how to change the complaint mechanism, improve preventive measures, but also how we make this parliament fit for a zero-tolerance policy,” she says.

With the new legislature underway, MeTooEP is currently regrouping and devising its strategy – which primarily involves working out how to mobilise and increase the existing support among MEPs. Keeping up the pressure is crucial to make sure MEPs honour the commitments they signed up to.

Ponté, who has now left the parliament and will be passing on her role as MeTooEP coordinator, identifies three challenges going forward: “the movement is representative but there’s still work to be done. The majority of members are from Western Europe. Also, there is only one man involved, I don’t think we will ever change the structures, mentalities, and paradigms without having men on board. The last challenge is more political involvement from the Right – because the four political groups currently involved mainly come from the Left.”

Changing the environment in a lasting way, however, seems set to be an onerous task, especially in the prevailing political climate. Between the rise of populist governments and the problem of online hate speech against women, De Riquer is convinced that we are in the midst of a backlash against women’s rights. Yet this may strengthen their cause since it is “making people realise that the fight for equality isn’t over,” she says – something which is echoed by Ponté, who feels positive about the struggle ahead: “It’s when you have the most resistance that you have the most solidarity.”



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