

A Chamber of One's Own: Institutional Claim-Making on Gender Equality and the Symbolic Role of Parliaments

Tània Verge 

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

This article investigates how legislatures may re-present themselves through claim-making on behalf of the institution. Focusing on claims about gender equality, attention is paid to the Women's Parliament organized by the Parliament of Catalonia, an all-women event through which female members of Parliament and social activists came together to put forth a feminist political agenda. Drawing on a constructivist approach, I disentangle the intentions of the institution, examine the discursive construction and performative enactment of the representative claim, and assess its reception by different audiences. I also reflect on how the symbolic activity undertaken within and by parliaments can recast ideas and practices of representation to promote more radical and inclusive politics. Overall, the article evinces that symbolic representation can be studied as a dimension in its own right and that, rather than being a mere by-product, it does co-constitute descriptive and substantive representation.

Keywords: Symbolic representation, representative claim-making, parliaments, feminism, gender equality, women's movement

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Symbolic representation has tended to be conceptualized and empirically examined as a by-product of women's increased political presence (descriptive representation) or the adoption of women-friendly legislation (substantive representation), which may have an impact on citizens' political engagement and affection toward institutions (see, e.g., Espírito-Santo and Verge 2017; Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). Despite the significant inroads made so far in the study of symbolic representation, extant research presents three main shortcomings. First, the characterization of symbolic representation as a subordinate dimension has led to a narrow understanding of what it is and neglected the identification of the (gendered) power dynamics underlying the construction, recognition, and interpretation of symbols (Franceschet, Annesley, and Beckwith 2017, 492; Lombardo and Meier 2014, 36; Rai 2010, 284). Second, such a conceptualization has obscured the possibility that all dimensions of political representation impact one another — that is, they may “mutually enable each other” and thus be co-constitutive (Lombardo and Meier 2019, 241; see also Verge and Pastor 2018). Third, exclusive focus on individual members of Parliament (MPs) as symbol makers leaves parliaments' role in the provision of symbolic representation unaccounted for (Leston-Bandeira 2016).

This article seeks to alleviate these deficits by adopting a critical shift in focus from the question “how do *women* in parliament symbolically represent women?” to “how do *parliaments* symbolically represent women?” This shift builds on recent legislative studies that conceive of the parliament as a channel of representation in itself beyond the activity of individual MPs, paying attention to how legislatures seek to *re-present* themselves as an institution through claim-making — that is, claims of representation conveying ideas and meanings about what the institution “stands for” (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018; Leston-Bandeira 2012). This approach allows further studying symbolic representation as a dimension in its own right.

Symbolic representation was depicted by Pitkin (1967) more than 50 years ago as a stand-alone dimension in her seminal work *The Concept of Representation*, although she characterized it as a passive dimension. This perspective has been disputed by scholars who argue that “there is activity in symbolic representation” (Lombardo and Meier 2019, 234), that is, the activity through which an object, an image, or a claim — the symbol — evokes meanings (feelings, values, or beliefs) that present a given principal or constituency in a particular way. In this light, “the

active making (creating, offering) of symbols” is a crucial aspect of the representative process (Saward 2006, 301).

Specifically, this article investigates the representative claims about gender equality made on behalf of legislative assemblies, focusing on the experience of the Women’s Parliament (the symbol), an all-women plenary session organized by the Parliament of Catalonia (the claim-maker) in which all sitting female MPs, parliamentary assistants, and social activists came together to put forth a feminist political agenda. This event has been recognized by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), an autonomous agency entrusted with the promotion of gender equality in European Union policies and initiatives, as an example of a best practice in its Gender-Sensitive Parliaments Toolkit (EIGE 2018).

Drawing on the burgeoning “constructivist turn” in representation studies (Disch 2015; Lombardo and Meier 2014; Saward 2010), the empirical analysis disentangles the intentions of the institution, explores the discursive construction and performative enactment of the representative claim, and assesses its reception by different audiences, namely, the women’s movement and the media. In line with Lombardo and Meier’s (2014, 2019) work, this research evinces that, rather than being a mere by-product and a passive dimension, symbolic representation enables descriptive and substantive representation in several ways. Furthermore, this study contributes to theorizing feminist political representation by reflecting on the normative implications of the symbolic role of parliaments, which may recast ideas and practices of representation to promote more radical and inclusive politics.

SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION BY PARLIAMENTS

Symbolic representation matters because it produces a sense of identification, of being represented (Pitkin 1967, 99). Scholars moving past the conceptualization of symbolic representation as a passive dimension or as a mere by-product of either descriptive or substantive representation have drawn on aesthetic, ethnographic, and interpretive approaches. They emphasize that symbolic representation is enacted by a symbol maker in a dynamic, dialectal relationship with an audience (Rai 2017, 507; see also Franceschet, Annesley, and Beckwith 2017). As Saward (2006, 302) puts it, “a maker of representations (M) puts forward a subject (S) which stands for an object (O) which is related to a referent (R) and is offered to an audience (A).” In this sense, symbols must —

explicitly or implicitly — resonate to evoke a meaning. Ultimately, “what makes a symbol a symbol [is] the fact that at least one social group identifies it as such” (Lombardo and Meier 2017, 485).

Representative claims or claims about a constituency — that is, a principal — “need to be made, acted out, and packaged” (Saward 2010, 67), requiring verbal or nonverbal performative work that communicates meaning making (Rai 2015, 1186). While political performance — such as ceremonies and rituals — can reinforce extant norms and identities, it can also entail creative moments that “challenge the dominant modes of power” (cf. Rai 2010, 292). Moreover, performance brings to the fore the role played by emotions in politics (Rai 2017, 507), especially when the audience is part of the performance (Rai 2015, 1182). Symbolic representation is also a figurative production. The symbol — the agent — does not just “stand for” the principal passively but affects it through particular vocabularies and discursive constructions, which are continuously being contested (Lombardo and Meier 2017, 484). Simultaneously, the voices that “occupy” spaces “mark appropriateness of political claim-making” (Rai 2015, 1184). Thus, discourses may transform the meaning of political spaces and disrupt traditional interpretations of the political process. As Figure 1 shows, performative and discursive work very often intertwine, as “the performing body brings the stage into being by occupying it, speaking from it and creating an aesthetic marking it” (Rai 2015, 1183).

Legislative chambers can be symbol makers as institutions beyond the actions of individual MPs (Leston-Bandeira 2016, 499). Such symbolic representation activity may unfold through the physical form of parliamentary buildings (Waylen 2014), decorative schemes (paintings, sculptures, etc.), political objects (Puwar 2004), and ceremonies and rituals (Rai 2010), as well as through claim-making on behalf of the chamber as a whole (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018). Concerning the latter, the construction of representative claims enables parliaments to “reinforce the *presence* of the actual institution” (Leston-Bandeira 2016, 506) by building “an institutional identity” for itself (Kelso 2007, 372–73). For example, through public engagement activities such as participatory spaces, educational projects, or the promotion of their historical memory, representative assemblies may elicit a sense of ownership of the institution among the public (Leston-Bandeira 2016; Prior 2018). Similarly, the organization of exhibitions (e.g., women’s suffrage history), workshops, and the celebration of international days (e.g., International Women’s Day) allow parliaments to give higher visibility and political relevance to the institution’s work on certain policy areas.

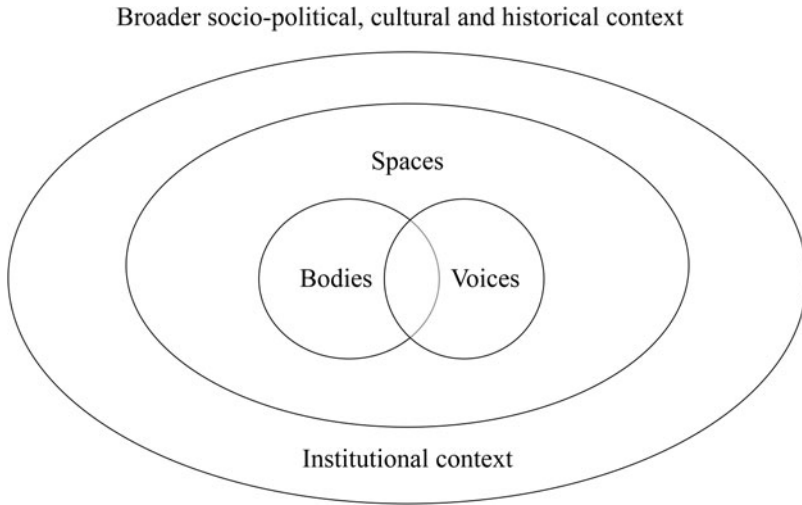


FIGURE 1. Staging symbolic representation. *Note:* Author's elaboration based on Rai (2015).

While the core of representation is claim-making (Saward 2006, 298), doing so on behalf of parliaments remains the most understudied of the symbol-making registries outlined here in both mainstream parliamentary studies and gender and politics works, which limits our understanding of “the representation of what parliaments ‘are,’ what claims are made on their behalf and who are the makers of these claims” (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018, 157). Focusing on the symbolic role of parliaments is crucial for investigating the ways in which this institution may open up new perspectives about who, what, and how may be represented. Likewise, the study of this symbolic activity allows exploring how, in the process of making claims, the claim-maker — in this case, parliaments — might also construct a new view of itself (Saward 2010, 305).

Through their symbolic role, parliaments can mobilize affect and build connections and interactions with citizens (Leston-Bandeira 2016, 513; Rai 2017, 508). It is through this “symbolic responsiveness” that parliaments can produce a sense of trust among the represented (Eulau and Karps 1977, 246), principally among traditionally excluded groups, as is the case for women. Therefore, “the institutional claims made about, and on behalf of, parliaments are first-order legitimation claims” (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018, 168). Symbolic representation also plays a crucial role in the construction of social identities, and therefore

it has a legitimizing function of either practices, institutions, or subjects (Lombardo and Meier 2014, 164). In this vein, the symbolic representation carried out by parliaments may qualify and amplify the politics of presence, the representation of interests, and the scope of deliberation (Torres Quintão 2018), which has significant normative implications.

As a matter of fact, the three dimensions of political representation are bound together; what is more, they are “mutually constitutive” (Lombardo and Meier 2014, 30). As argued by Lombardo and Meier (2019, 232), both “representative’s position and action takes place within a context imbued with symbolic representation that may constrain or enable the representative.” While descriptive and substantive representation may thus be hampered by dominant power relations sedimented through the ideas conveyed by the symbols (Verge and Pastor 2018, 43), the latter might well allow for the circulation of new meanings about both the constituency and the legitimacy of its claims through productive re-presentations (Saward 2006, 144). Accordingly, symbolic representation “is integral to descriptive and substantive representation” (Rai 2017, 506). Symbolic re-presentations can be, nonetheless, “as partial, and thus selective and exclusive” as the other dimensions of political representation, producing simultaneous dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Lombardo and Meier 2019, 241).

Lastly, the extent to which the symbol is acknowledged and perceived as authentic by the targeted audience(s) will afford it legitimacy and authority (cf. Rai 2015, 1185; Saward 2010, 66). Yet the context in which claims are made influences how constituencies will take them up (Disch 2015, 496) — that is, the array of resources, styles, and content deployed by parliaments when making representative claims, as well as the reception of the claims by the targeted audiences, are bounded by historical, sociopolitical, and cultural resonances (Leston-Bandeira 2012, 516; Rai 2015, 1195; Saward 2010, 75), as Figure 1 illustrates. This symbolic subtext is crucial, as “what is considered illegitimate, too ‘radical,’ or even unthinkable in a given context” may be “seen as mainstream or ‘common sense’ in another” (Lombardo and Meier 2019, 239).

CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

This research combines a “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of both the institutional context in which the representative claim on gender

equality took place and its symbolic subtext with an in-depth interpretation of the meanings pursued in and attributed to the Women's Parliament held by the Parliament of Catalonia. This section starts by outlining the triangulation of data and methods employed in the empirical analysis and then provides detailed background information on the case study.

Data and Methods

The empirical analysis follows a threefold strategy. First, through a documentary analysis of key texts about the organization of the event and interviews with two staffers of the Speaker's Office who were in charge of its preparation (conducted in September 2019), I scrutinize the official narrative underpinning the institutional claim. Next, I examine how the Women's Parliament was acted out discursively and performatively. I look at the spaces used in the event, the bodies present, and participants' voices in light of their speeches and declaration approved that day, paying attention to the patterns of inclusion and exclusion. The video of the event and my own participant-experience help me further assess the "evocative style of staging events" through which institutions seek "to produce a sense of belonging" (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, 8; cited in Rai 2010, 288).

Second, drawing on contemporary political theory, I discuss how the symbolic representation carried out by the Catalan legislature through the Women's Parliament circulated new meanings about parliamentary politics and the representative process. Particularly, reflecting on how the making and acting out of institutional claims within and by parliaments as an institution can carve out a space for more radical and more inclusive ideas and practices of politics, I contribute to theorizing feminist political representation. Moreover, I trace the effects that the Women's Parliament has had on the legislative chamber's institutional performance and on the way in which it views itself, covering the period between September 2019 and March 2020.

Third, I assess how the institutional claim was received by the targeted audiences, namely, the women's movement and the media. A few caveats are in order here. While audiences outside the parliamentary space are "assumed to be witnessing the performance as much as those who are present" (Rai 2010, 294), there is no public opinion data available to measure how Catalan women, or Catalan citizens more generally, felt about the Women's Parliament. With regard to the

women's movement, given its decentralized character and high capillarity, it is virtually impossible to examine the reception of the institutional claim by all its affiliated organizations. For this reason, I concentrate on the activists who participated in the three stages of the event, a strategy that has the advantage of relying on their experiential understanding of the claim. These activists stood for feminist organizations that belong to the main representative body of the Catalan women's movement, namely, the Women's National Council of Catalonia (Consell Nacional de les Dones de Catalunya, CNDC). In September 2019, I conducted nine interviews, some of them face-to-face and others by phone or email. The quotes used in the article have been anonymized as the interviews were carried out in confidence.¹

Considering the media, I collected news stories published about the event by the major printed and digital newspapers in Catalonia. These include the Spanish outlets *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *Público* (digital), and *Diario.es* (digital), and the Catalan outlets *El Periódico*, *Ara*, *El Punt Avui*, *Vilaweb* (digital), *Nació Digital* (digital), *El Nacional* (digital), and *El Món* (digital). I ran a deductive thematic analysis to identify how the media reported the event and the outcomes expected by the institutional claim. The themes were coded as present or absent in each individual news story, with prevalence being counted at the level of the data item — that is, whether a theme appeared anywhere in an article.

The Institutional Claim in Context

Understanding why the event was organized and which factors enabled the representative claim requires a thick description of the institutional setting that hosted the Women's Parliament and of the broader sociopolitical context shaping the symbolic subtext. With regard to the institutional setting, women's presence in the Parliament of Catalonia has experienced an incremental increase. From 5% of seats in 1980, when self-government was recovered after the 40-year Francoist regime in Spain, women's representation jumped to 24% in 1999 and to 44% in 2019. This gradual increase is explained by the use of voluntary gender quotas by left-wing parties since the early 1980s and the application of

1. Although I was at the time leading the team of consultants hired by the Parliament of Catalonia to conduct a gender audit of the institution, I was not involved in the planning of the Women's Parliament. I was invited to participate in one of the thematic working groups as a feminist academic with expertise on women's political participation by the CNDC, and I also attended the plenary session of the event.

statutory quotas since 2010.² The Parliament of Catalonia has maintained a (nonlegislative) committee on equality since 1988 and an intergroup on sexual and reproductive rights since 2006. It has passed its own Gender-Based Violence Law (Act 5/2008), LGBTI Rights Law (Act 11/2014), and Equality Law (Act 17/2015), which have expanded in scope and breadth the Spanish legislation in these fields.

The legislative chamber has had two female Speakers, Núria de Gispert Català (2010–15) and Carme Forcadell Lluís (2015–17).³ During their tenures, work-family measures were expanded, making available proxy voting in parental leave situations to male MPs (female MPs had this right since 2006) and adjusting the time of plenary sessions to favor work-life balance for both MPs and parliamentary staff. The institution also enhanced its symbolic activity on gender equality. Workshops have been held regularly since then on gender equality issues, and the number of institutional statements in support of women's rights and in rejection of violence against women has increased (Verge, de la Fuente, and Duran 2019).

Lending continuity to the institution's commitment to gender equality, and partially in response to the public outcry provoked by the election of a Bureau of Parliament in January 2018 made up of one woman and six men (compared with 43% women in the preceding term), the current Speaker, Roger Torrent Ramió (2018), defined the elaboration of a gender audit of the institution — commissioned to external gender consultants — and the adoption of a gender action plan as priorities of the legislative term. This initiative, also demanded by women MPs from left-wing parties, was supported by all parliamentary party groups in a Bureau decision of July 2018. To steer the drafting of this plan, the Speaker set up the Gender Equity Working Group, which includes representatives of each parliamentary party group, the institution's staff, the Human Resources Department, and the Speaker's Office.

To keep gender equality present in the institution's agenda while the equality plan was being drafted, the Speaker's Office held two events (interview no. 1, Speaker's Office staff member). The first was an international conference on gender-sensitive parliaments hosted in

2. The Spanish Equality Law as well as the Catalan Equality Law establish, for all types of elections, that party lists must include a minimum of 40% candidates of either sex, a proportion to be applied as well to every five positions on the list.

3. The former was affiliated with the center-right coalition Convergence and Union/*Convergència i Unió* and the latter belongs to the center-left party Republican Left of Catalonia/*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, as does the current Speaker.

September 2018, which gathered MPs and clerks from other European legislative chambers, feminist political scientists, and officers from EIGE and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE-ODIHR). The second was the Women's Parliament, which was inspired by similar events organized by the lower houses of Montenegro and South Africa.⁴ The Women's Parliament was not a public engagement activity run by the parliamentary service. Rather, it was a high-level event embedded in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's (2016) and the EIGE's (2018) "gender-sensitive parliaments" frameworks, which devote a specific area to the symbolic function — that is, to the symbolic meanings conveyed within and by the institution. The proposal drafted by the Speaker's Office was unanimously approved by the Bureau (Parlament de Catalunya 2019a). Engaging all parliamentary groups is extraordinary in a fragmented legislature (seven parliamentary groups) polarized around the issue of Catalonia's independence. It should also be noted that, despite the increasing electoral gains of the extreme right in Spain, to date it has no seats in the Catalan legislature, and the conservative right is rather marginal.⁵

The Bureau also supported the Speaker's invitation to the CNDC to codesign the Women's Parliament. The CNDC comprises more than 420 women's organizations, including organizations of the women's movement and the women's sections of parties, trade unions, businesses, and professional associations. Created in 1989, it was the first entity of this sort established in Spain as a gender-mainstreaming instrument to facilitate women's participation in policy making. It is accredited with consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council and the Commission on the Status of Women. To accept the invitation, the CNDC demanded that the event "was not a rhetorical empty gesture" and asked for "a tangible result" that concretized the institution's support for the feminist political agenda (interview no. 2, CNDC vice chair).

Affording the CNDC a leading role in the design of the Women's Parliament fits into a specific sociohistorical context. In the last few

4. These experiences were identified in the gender audit of the Parliament elaborated by the external gender consultants.

5. The extreme-right party VOX obtained 24 seats in the Spanish lower house in the April 2019 elections and 52 seats in the November 2019 elections. Also, while the right-wing Popular Party is one of the two parties with the most votes nationally, in the 2017 elections to the Catalan legislature, it received the least votes, obtaining only four seats.

years, the women's movement has staged massive mobilizations across the country. More than 200,000 protesters marched on the streets of Barcelona, and several thousands more did so across Catalonia and the rest of Spain on March 8, 2019, under the motto "We stop to change everything. No step backwards." Mobilizations were coupled with a 24-hour women's strike (*El País* 2019a). The women's movement has also taken to the streets on several occasions to protest court rulings that have revictimized the survivors in gang rape cases.

SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION THROUGH THE WOMEN'S PARLIAMENT

As stated in the Bureau agreement, the Women's Parliament sought "to evoke that the Parliament of Catalonia is firmly committed to gender equality." Specifically, the institution expected the event (1) to strengthen the Parliament's commitment to women's empowerment, (2) to heighten the linkage between female MPs and women's associations, and (3) to facilitate the participation of women's organizations in the agenda-setting process (Parlament de Catalunya 2019a). Using Saward's (2010, 36) constitutive elements of a representative claim, it can be posited that the Parliament of Catalonia (the claim-maker) offered itself in the form of the Women's Parliament (the symbol) as the embodiment of the institution's commitment to gender equality (the referent) to the women's movement (the main audience). As discussed throughout the analysis, the institution conflated gender equality with feminism.

The Women's Parliament was staged in three parts: (1) during May 2019, CNDC member organizations prepared draft documents to feed the discussion; (2) during the first half of June, women MPs worked on these drafts, and the second fortnight was devoted to produce a declaration through face-to-face meetings with CNDC activists; (3) on July 1, 2019, an all-women plenary session was held. The remainder of this section analyzes how the symbol was acted out through performative and discursive work in these three stages in different spaces.

In the first part, the CNDC coordinating team chose six critical areas of concern from the Beijing Platform for Action (United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995) to structure the discussion: human rights of women; education and culture; women and the economy; social and political participation; health, sexual, and reproductive rights; and violence against women. The women's

movement was thus afforded the possibility to deliver its vindications directly to the institution, performing an epistemic function — that of mediating the knowledge of the institution on gender (in)equality through feminism. Indeed, the Bureau agreement discursively constructed both women MPs and feminist activists as “all of them representatives of Catalan society” (Parlament de Catalunya 2019a). About 60 CNDC member organizations participated in the elaboration of the draft documents, applying feminist experiential and academic knowledge in their diagnoses (deficits and gaps of extant policies) and prognoses (calls for furthering public action).

These thematic areas structured the six working groups that convened activists and MPs on the Parliament’s premises in the second part of the event, with the main goal being the elaboration of an agenda-setting declaration. Such collaborative work disrupted the regular performance of parliamentary politics and challenged the meaning of political spaces. First, once MPs had worked on the draft documents produced by the CNDC, the working groups met in the rooms where parliamentary committees develop their legislative and oversight functions. Second, each working group session was co-chaired by an MP and a social activist, establishing a horizontal relationship between elected and nonelected participants. Working groups included two or three people per parliamentary group (current and former MPs along with parliamentary group assistants), the two coordinators of the CNDC for each thematic area, and about 10 social activists. They were assisted by female staff (legal counselors, committee clerks, and linguists) of the Parliament of Catalonia. Male MPs could participate indirectly in the working groups through the definition of their parties’ positions on the declaration (interview no. 3, Speaker’s Office staff member). Third, consensus was chosen as the decision-making mode to avoid the partisan, adversarial confrontation that tends to characterize parliamentary politics, as is the case in the highly polarized Catalan legislature. Not weighting votes according to parliamentary groups’ share of seats also granted equal voice to nonelected members (interview no. 1, Speaker’s Office staff member; interview no. 2, CNDC vice chair).

As anticipated in the Bureau agreement, the third part of the event, the all-women plenary session, yielded “an unprecedented picture of the hemicycle full of women” (Parlament de Catalunya 2019a). This was probably the most powerful political performance of the event “of and through the body” (Rai 2015, 1191). In addition to the 60 sitting women MPs and the five female ministers of the Catalan government, the

remaining 75 seats of the 135-seat hemicycle were filled with working group participants. The chamber ushers were all female that day, and the guests' gallery was occupied by activists, trade unionists, high-ranking public officers of the Catalan government, and a few mayors, all of them invited by the Speaker's Office and the parliamentary party groups. The invasion of the space by female bodies was also exposed when one activist breastfed her child in the guests' gallery, an unprecedented experience in the chamber. "Access and space were facilitated for me and my child, and I found the arms of improvised 'aunties' when needed," as narrated by this activist in an op-ed (Alfageme 2019).

Bringing together women MPs and activists in the most noble chamber of the institution entailed a renegotiation of the conventional performance of representative assemblies in several ways. Both types of participants shared prominence during the event. Sitting MPs and ministers sat in their regular seats, and the CNDC's chair, vice chair, and coordinators of the thematic working groups sat in the cabinet bench (the first row of seats). The presiding body of the Women's Parliament was composed of nine women — one representative per parliamentary party group and the two female MPs who currently serve in the Bureau of the Parliament.⁶ This exceptional composition aimed at evoking the nonpartisan character of the event while simultaneously providing an image of plural political leadership (interview no. 3, Speaker's Office staff member). To preserve the all-women character of the session, the Speaker of the Parliament handed over his role to a female MP from his political party, the fourth secretary of the Bureau of the Parliament and chair of the Gender Equity Working Group.

As acting Speaker of the session, Adriana Delgado Herreros delivered the opening speech. After appraising the feminist struggle against women's subordination, exploitation, and lack of recognition imposed by patriarchy, she voiced the institutional claim: "The importance of the Women's Parliament is that today we are putting gender equality policy at the center of the political agenda." She added that the event was just "a point of departure to keep strengthening the synergies between women MPs and women's organizations in order to produce tangible feminist policies" (Adriana Delgado Herreros, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b).

Next, the nonelected participants took the stand. In their speeches, they reclaimed the symbol. Núria Balada Cardona, president of the Catalan

6. The Bureau of the Parliament of Catalonia is made up of seven MPs: the Speaker, two deputy speakers, and four secretaries.

government's women's policy agency and CNDC chair, compared the chamber with Virginia Woolf's vindication of "a room of one's own,"⁷ emphasizing that "[T]oday, the Parliament is ours, women's, of women's organizations" (Núria Balada Cardona, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b). For her part, CNDC vice chair and feminist activist Montse Pineda Lorenzo went one step further and reclaimed the institution itself. She compellingly claimed, "Sisters, here we are at last!" stirring applause and chants from participants such as "long live the feminist struggle." She continued, "'Where are the women?,' we often wonder. We are here to stay. Have a look at us because we will take no step backwards. We are here to move forward, to make history with our legacy, a feminist legacy that shall render patriarchy once and for all an out-of-date word" (Montse Pineda Lorenzo, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b).

Thereupon, the coordinators of the six working groups explained the content of the discussions held in the previous weeks and voiced the main vindications of the women's movement for the different policy areas. Several of them wore T-shirts with mottos of feminist campaigns — for example, "my body, my choice." Feminist activists reminded the MPs of "the empowerment that working together brings about" (Mercè Otero-Vidal, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b) and were unanimous in urging them to uphold the mandate underpinning the declaration: undertaking legislative reforms to further gender equality policy. "You who can, legislate," urged the coordinator of the working group on health, sexual, and reproductive rights (Sílvia Aldavert Garcia, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b). Sufficient financial resources for the implementation of the policy measures outlined in the declaration were also demanded in their speeches, especially resources to prevent gender-based violence and to afford adequate care and reparation to survivors (Laia Rosich Solé, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b). The activists' speeches were welcomed with long applause by participants, who also raised their hands in the form of a triangle to symbolize the feminist struggle, illustrating the role of emotions in symbolic representation. In this vein, the session was a literal reproduction and a figurative production of and by the women's movement.

The MPs sitting in the presiding body of the Women's Parliament then gave short speeches. While all of them emphasized the importance of the event and the need for a feminist political agenda, the issues and

7. She used the expression "a chamber of one's own," as Woolf's book was translated in Catalan using the word *cambra* (chamber), which means both "room" and "parliament."

perspectives underlined showcased significant differences in the policy positions on gender equality held by the parliamentary party groups. Conservative and liberal MPs centered their discourse on “equality of opportunity” (MP Esperanza García González, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b) and avoided references to patriarchy, highlighting that attention should be put on “what unites us, rather than what divides us” (MP Noemí de la Calle Sifré, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b), whereas MPs from left-wing parties focused their speeches on radical, socialist, or ecofeminist positions. The latter praised the women’s movement for its relentless struggle and brought to the forefront feminist global campaigns such as institutional violence against women in rape cases, voicing the feminist cry “Sister, I believe you” (MPs Jenn Díaz Ruiz and Susana Segovia Sánchez, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b) or “We want us alive,” in condemnation of violence against women, including the assassination of human rights defenders (MP Natàlia Sànchez Dipp, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b).⁸

The degree of closeness of political parties to the women’s movement was also felt through the varying intensity of applause that the MPs’ speeches received from participants. While all the political parties represented in the Parliament of Catalonia have attended the massive marches held on Women’s International Day in the past two years, the claim made by some parties that “feminism has no ideology” (MP Noemí de la Calle Sifré, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b) raises suspicion within the women’s movement. Yet the fact that all MPs’ speeches were applauded was an exceptional gesture in a highly polarized chamber, a performance aimed at eliciting the nonpartisan character of the Women’s Parliament. Indeed, applauding was in itself a disruptive performance, as the interventions of Bureau members are not usually acclaimed in ordinary plenary sessions.

The plenary session concluded with the Speaker reading the declaration, which urged the legislature and the executive to meet the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action with further public action (*Parlament de Catalunya* 2019c). Although declarations are usually passed by assent in the Catalan legislature, as they are premised on unanimity, on this occasion, the declaration was put to a vote, specifically by a show of hands. This voting mode is not used regularly in the Parliament of Catalonia either. Electronic voting, though, was not logistically feasible

8. Reference was made, for example, to the environmental activist Berta Cáceres and to the local councilor Marielle Franco, who were murdered in Honduras in 2016 and Brazil in 2018, respectively.

since participants in the plenary hall outnumbered the seats with voting panels. In addition, the fact that most of them were not familiar with this voting device might have led to a failed vote. As [Figure 2](#) shows, the vote by a show of hands was a performance aimed at evoking an assembly resonance, allowing participants in the guests' gallery to take part in the vote and eliciting closeness with the general public. It also sought to symbolically reinforce the endorsement of the feminist political agenda by the institution (interview no. 2, Speaker's Office staff member).

The representative claim was thus enacted through an array of discursive and performative repertoires staged by the institution and by feminist activists in various spaces within and outside the parliamentary premises. As [Figure 3](#) summarizes, the Women's Parliament symbolically represented the commitment of the institution to gender equality, and particularly to feminism, through bodies, voices, and spaces, which aimed at contributing to women's empowerment, including women's organizations in the agenda-setting process, and heightening their linkage with MPs.

Regardless of how inclusive the symbol was intended to be, the Women's Parliament was no exception to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion underpinning symbolic representation processes. As the CNDC vice chair admitted in her speech, "It is obvious that the Women's Parliament is imperfect. It does not represent us all, and it falls short in the vindications we put forth today as a political agenda" (Montse Pineda Lorenzo, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b). On the one hand, as Rai (2015, 1171) reminds us, "the body speaks class, religion and gender hierarchies." Whereas the Catalan legislature saw for the first time a disabled woman speaking from the stand of the hemicycle in her wheelchair (Carme Riu Pascual, coordinator of the working group on human rights of women),⁹ nonwhite women were underrepresented in the plenary session, as were young women. Several racialized and migrant feminist activists as well as representatives from the Youth National Council of Catalonia participated in the thematic working groups and the declaration adopted an intersectionality approach, but the bodies occupying the hemicycle were not sufficiently diverse, which raised critical concerns (Roqueta 2019).

As voiced by Afro-feminist activist Desirée Bela-Lobedde in the radio program broadcast live from the Parliament on that day, "As a black woman, I don't feel represented. We don't want to be a touch of color."

9. To date, the Parliament of Catalonia has had two disabled male MPs (a blind MP and a paraplegic MP using a wheelchair) but no disabled female MP.



FIGURE 2. Vote by show of hands at the Women's Parliament. *Source:* Parliament of Catalonia (photographer Ramon Boadella).

Her discomfort exposes how intersectional power dynamics can produce patterns of within-group privilege and marginalization. The diversity gap among participants reflects the same composition of the Parliament of Catalonia. Hitherto, it has had no (male or female) Black, Asian, or Roma MP, and only a few Latin American or Moroccan descendants have obtained a seat (Verge, de la Fuente, and Duran 2019). This diversity gap affects the Spanish lower house, too (Espírito-Santo, Verge, and Morales 2019). The CNDC also struggles to represent women's groups that are more skeptical about formal politics or that have a looser organization (working group coordinators, interview no. 4 and interview no. 5). In addition, the relatively short time between the announcement of the event and its celebration — about two months — was detrimental to securing a broader diversity of participants, not just in terms of race or age but also in terms of territorial coverage of the women's organizations involved (interview no. 2, CNDC vice chair).

On the other hand, the consensus guiding the elaboration of the declaration came at the cost of excluding or nuancing those CNDC vindications that were not unanimously supported by all parliamentary party groups. For example, the call for withdrawing public funding for gender-segregated schools was eliminated. The adoption of intersectional

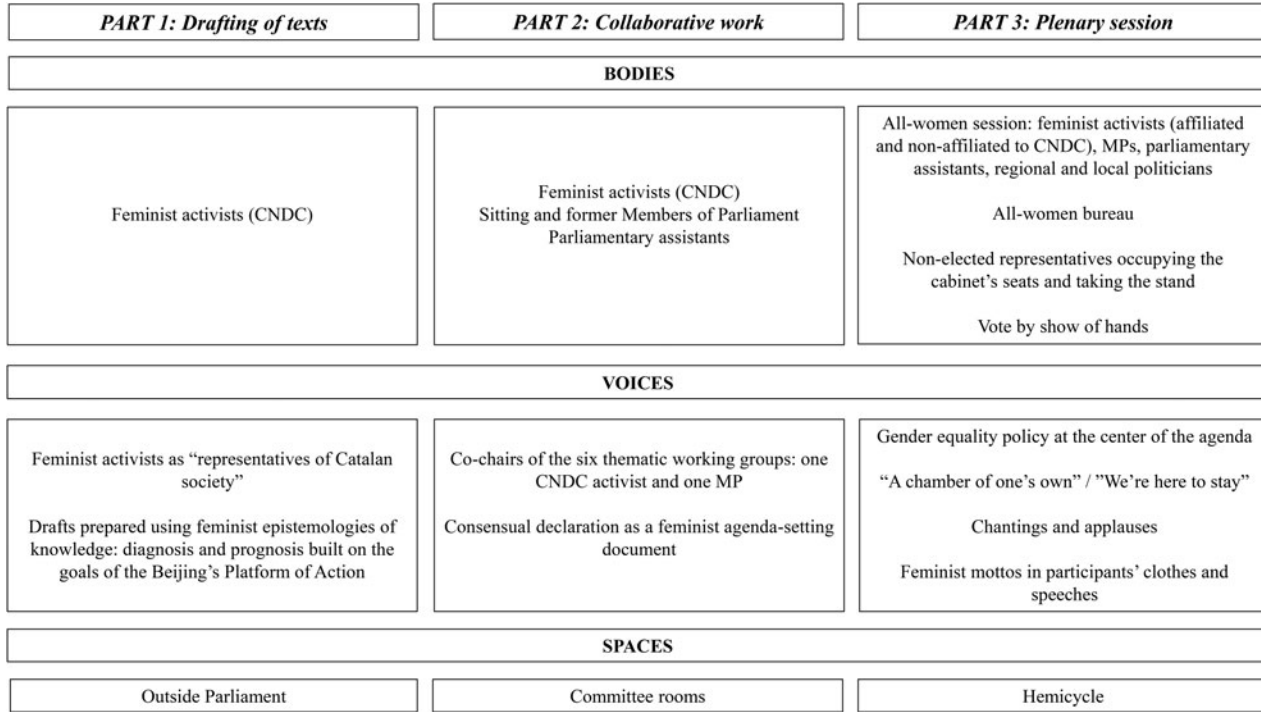


FIGURE 3. Claim-making through bodies, voices, and spaces at the Women’s Parliament.

quotas for the composition of decision-making bodies in political institutions and public administration was substituted for a more general call to take diversity into account. While the declaration made explicit the need to fight against the traffic of women for sexual exploitation, no prostitution policy was mentioned, as this issue divides both the feminist movement and political parties. Likewise, reference to matters falling under the purview of the statewide level (the Spanish lower house or government) were watered down. For instance, the original call for urging the central government to grant migrants the right to vote or the derogation of the public safety law (the so-called gag law) became in the declaration “the need to eradicate all forms of discrimination in the exercise of the right to political participation, such as the limitations faced by migrant women; [and] legal restrictions on the free exercise of the right of assembly and demonstration” (Parlament de Catalunya 2019c). Nonetheless, as agreed, feminist activists exposed their original vindications during the all-women plenary session, which were also echoed by left-wing MPs.

Also, the declaration was silent on the women politicians imprisoned or in exile for their role in the organization of the self-determination referendum held on October 1, 2017. Yet several references to them were made at the plenary session, especially to former Speaker of the Parliament, Carme Forcadell Lluís, who by then had been in prison for 446 days awaiting trial for having authorized the floor debate on the law convoking the referendum and who received a standing ovation — except from unionist MPs (Parlament de Catalunya 2019b). In a letter written from prison, Forcadell Lluís (2019) affirmed that “feminism is the most important revolution of the 21st century” and urged participants to continue working together. Political prisoners and exiles were also made present in other ways. The wives and sisters of some of them, as well as some of the prosecuted women awaiting trial, sat in the guests’ gallery, and some MPs read brief excerpts from feminist discourses made by female exiles: “What is to surrender? We do not know. We are women” (MP Natàlia Sánchez Dipp, quoting former MP Anna Gabriel Sabaté, Parlament de Catalunya 2019b).

NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF PARLIAMENTS’ SYMBOLIC ACTIVITY

Drawing on the experience of the Women’s Parliament, this section reflects on the new meanings of ideas and practices of representation that

legislative assemblies can circulate through the performative and figurative production of representative claims. Ultimately, the value of symbols lies in their meaning-creation power. As discussed here, the symbolic *re-presentation* of institutions can contribute to transforming the imaginaries underpinning political spaces, challenge hegemonic modes of parliamentary politics, and disrupt traditional interpretations of the political process. I also reflect on how parliaments' symbolic activity, particularly through claim-making, exposes the mutually constitutive relationship between descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation. As Saward (2010, 72) argues, while "the performance of symbolism is required to convey a *sense* of representing substance," ... "invoking a sense of likeness may be a key component in conveying a sense of substantive representation." This is precisely what the polysemic expression (in Catalan) *ple de dones* captures, with *dones* meaning "women" and *ple* evoking both a hemicycle *full* of women and a *plenary session* about women. In this vein, the Women's Parliament embodied — that is, symbolically produced — new meanings of how legislative assemblies can stand for women (descriptive representation) and act for gender equality (substantive representation) as institutions beyond the activity of individual MPs.

First, standing for the single largest social constituency through its all-women composition, the Women's Parliament qualified the "politics of presence" (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995). Such a gendered symbol contested the way in which parliaments have been codified as masculine, with their typical occupants being men. People's bodies symbolize and co-constitute political norms and spaces, so the "space invasion" (Puar 2004) of female bodies in a historically male-dominated arena disputed the "somatic norm" of which bodies belong to parliament. The Women's Parliament also challenged ideas about who can occupy and speak from within the hemicycle, with social activists (i.e., nonelected representatives) sitting side by side with MPs and taking the stand to voice their vindications. Ultimately, the participation of both social activists and MPs embodied new ideas about what representation is and by whom it can be done.

Second, the women's movement was afforded enhanced legitimacy as a political actor vis-à-vis the Catalan society, as "the presentation of a constituency in symbolic representation contributes to shaping social identities" (Lombardo and Meier 2019, 236). By allocating discursive power to the women's movement (drafting of documents, discussing policy proposals with MPs, pronouncing speeches in the hemicycle, etc.), elected and nonelected participants were given similar levels of

voice in the enactment of the representative claim. This type of responsive institutional arrangement to sociopolitical campaigns that take place outside parliaments highlights “the potential for participatory innovation within a traditional institution of representative democracy” (Hendriks and Kay 2019, 27). Bringing additional perspectives into view also helps legislators “see things” from the point of view of those previously excluded (Goodin 2004, 464; see also Hendriks and Kay 2019, 35), as is the case of women and, notably, of feminist epistemologies of knowledge, which are usually ignored in parliamentary work.

Third, the institution amplified the vindications of the women’s movement. The Women’s Parliament served a pedagogic function for the need of all-women spaces, resonating with the “all-affected-interests principle of participatory entitlement,” wherein marginalized voices are overrepresented in agenda-setting processes to guarantee equity (cf. Moscrop and Warren 2016, 12). Most crucially, the adoption of a feminist agenda-setting declaration conveyed the importance that the institution sought to afford to feminism for policy making. With this alignment, the Catalan legislature reshaped the boundaries of women’s substantive representation, which includes both feminist and nonfeminist interests (Celis and Childs 2014). As a matter of fact, the strive for gender equality was equated with feminism in the performative and figurative construction of the claim.

Fourth, while promoting the political inclusion of different discourses expanded the public deliberation (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008), the main output of the institutional claim — the declaration — heightened deliberative accountability (Young 2000). The collaborative work between MPs and activists leading to this agenda-setting document entailed a form of collective, consensual construction that is commonly used by social movements but not by political institutions. Furthermore, the extent to which the declaration stirs policy change (or does not) in the upcoming years may help the women’s movement render the Parliament of Catalonia accountable. Although an evaluation of institutional performance can only be tentative at this moment, some actions developed in the six months following the celebration of the Women’s Parliament are worth mentioning.

The Women’s Parliament declaration was transferred to an ordinary session of the legislative assembly, and it was unanimously endorsed with no changes, becoming the Statement by the Parliament of Catalonia on the Recognition and Guarantee of the Rights of Women (July 24, 2019). This substantive claim of feminist policy has already started to inform

parliamentary work. A bill to reform the Gender-Based Violence Law is currently under preparation, and a single-issue plenary session on women's rights was celebrated for the first time in the Parliament's history on December 17 and 19, 2019, with several resolutions urging the Catalan government to implement the policy measures contained in the declaration. The most comprehensive resolution was jointly prepared by all parliamentary party groups in coordination with the CNDC (Parlament de Catalunya 2019d). Exceptionally, the CNDC vice chair was invited to give the opening speech — the only nonelected representatives allowed to take the stand in an ordinary session of the Parliament have been those presenting popular legislative initiatives. She claimed, “A few months ago I said ‘We’re here to stay.’ Today I say we never left” (Montse Pineda Lorenzo, Parlament de Catalunya 2019e).

Last but not least, the Women's Parliament shaped how the institution views itself, contributing to its embracement of a feminist institutional identity, as some recent examples suggest. The aforementioned cross-partisan resolution passed at the single-issue women's rights plenary session (December 2019) refers on several occasions to “the implementation of the feminist perspective” to all public action and renames the Equality Committee the “Equality and Feminisms Committee” (Parlament de Catalunya 2019d) — with the plural “feminisms” recognizing the internal diversity of feminism. The gender action plan of the Parliament of Catalonia (passed January 14, 2020) was presented by the Speaker as an instrument for the Parliament to become “a feminist institution” that acts as a “role model in the field of gender equality” (*El Punt Avui* 2020). Moreover, this four-year action plan (2020–23) establishes that the Women's Parliament shall be held once per legislative term (Parlament de Catalunya 2020). Finally, on the occasion of International Women's Day in 2020, all sitting women MPs unprecedentedly came together at the end of the plenary session and chanted “long live the feminist struggle” (*El Nacional* 2020).

THE RECEPTION OF THE INSTITUTIONAL CLAIM

The Parliament of Catalonia (2019a) explicitly defined “feminist organizations” as the prime “target audience” of its claim, and media outlets can be considered an “intended audience” due to their importance in the dissemination and appraisal of institutional claims in

their symbol-handler role (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018, 167). How did these two audiences take up the claim?

The Women's Movement

Although the CNDC was invited to co-design the symbol — the Women's Parliament — through which the claim — the legislature's commitment to gender equality — would be acted out, the institution was the claim-maker — that is, it is the institution that offered the symbol to the women's movement. To what extent did the claim and its symbol convey a sense of representing substance and authenticity for the women's movement? I start this evaluation by looking at how the CNDC received the institution's invitation. In her speech at the all-women plenary session, the CNDC vice chair openly admitted that “initially, the institution's invitation raised doubts and contradictions, probably similar to those experienced by the women who went to Beijing in 1995” (Montse Pineda Lorenzo, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019b). Such contradictions stemmed from “fears of being instrumentalized” and from the sharp contrast between “the practices of the women's movement and the operation of political institutions” (interview no. 7, working group coordinator).

Some months later, feminist activists made a positive evaluation of both the claim and the institution. As stated by the CNDC vice chair in her opening speech at the single-issue plenary session on women's rights held in December 2019, “[In] the Women's Parliament we were dozens of subversive bodies in a space that we did not feel we belonged to, but we have gradually come to see it as ours” (Montse Pineda Lorenzo, *Parlament de Catalunya* 2019d). Thus, the Women's Parliament produced a sense of belonging, even a sense of ownership of the institution. The recognition of the women's movement by the Parliament of Catalonia is regarded as having “elicited that feminism must concern all political parties and the country as a whole” (interviews no. 9 and no. 11, working group coordinators), which is particularly appreciated in a context of global backlash against gender equality policy and the threat of a rising extreme right (interview no. 6, working group coordinator).

Yet the assessment of the outcomes expected by the institution from the representative claim yields a mixed picture. With regard to women's empowerment, activists highlight that the all-women session produced a

“historical image to be long remembered” (interview no. 7, working group coordinator) that “symbolized society occupying the Parliament, with our own voice” (interview no. 8, working group coordinator). The fact that several women’s organizations had not engaged directly with the Parliament before is also regarded as having afforded “an extremely valuable experience” that empowered them (interview no. 8, working group coordinator). Activists also underline that the Women’s Parliament exposed “the strength of sorority” (interview no. 10, working group coordinator) and that chanting “long live the feminist struggle” in the plenary hall of the legislature was very “vibrant” (interview no. 5, working group coordinator).

Concerning the participation of women’s organizations in the agenda-setting process, activists see it as “a first step” (interview no. 9, working group coordinator), and the declaration is conceived of as a “feminist road map” for public action (interview no. 6, working group coordinator). Activists value highly the fact that parliamentary party groups’ positions built on CNDC drafts, recognizing the experiential knowledge of women’s organizations (interviews no. 4 and no. 5, working group coordinators). While emphasis is placed on the need to follow up the concretization of the claim through specific public policies (interviews no. 5 and no. 11, working group coordinators), the event is considered to “have risen awareness of existing gender inequalities” (interview no. 6, working group coordinator) and made the issue more prominent “not only in the political agenda but also in the social agenda” (interview no. 8, working group coordinator).

As for the establishment of ties between female MPs and women’s organizations, activists are more critical. They point out that “the time span of the collaborative work was too short” to fulfill this goal (interview no. 11, working group coordinator). The packed electoral calendar preceding the Women’s Parliament was detrimental to this collaborative work, with the first half of 2019 seeing early elections to the Spanish parliament in April and local elections in May (interview no. 1, Speaker’s Office staff member). Activists also point out that such linkage “is always complex due to the different logics underlying partisan, parliamentary and associational dynamics” (interview no. 2, CNDC vice chair). Nonetheless, they evaluate very positively the fact that elected and nonelected women, despite ideological differences, “came together in a new form of collective deliberation to put women’s rights at the center of the political agenda” (interview no. 4, working group coordinator). While the “effort put to reach a consensual declaration” is appreciated

(interviews no. 5 and no. 9, working group coordinator), some activists note that future editions of the event “should find ways for expressing dissent” (interview no. 4, working group coordinator).

Further proof of the appreciation of the Women’s Parliament by the women’s movement is illustrated by the number of requests to attend the all-women session, which outnumbered the capacity of the plenary hall by far. To cope with such demand, the institution live streamed the event in the largest of the parliamentary committee rooms, accommodating about 150 attendees, mainly feminist activists and female local councilors. Livestreaming the event through the institution’s official channel (*Canal Parlament*) also facilitated the engagement of the women’s movement in social media, with the Twitter hashtag #ParlamentDeLesDones going viral on July 1, 2019.

The Media

The Women’s Parliament got significant prominence in news coverage. The all-women session featured in the prime-time newscasts of the Catalan (TV3) and Spanish public (TVE1 and Canal 24h) television stations and the main Catalan radio stations (Catalunya Ràdio and RAC1). Furthermore, TV3 live broadcast it on its website and the evening magazine of the public Catalan radio station (Catalunya Ràdio) was conducted that day from within the parliamentary premises, featuring as invited guests the Speaker of the Parliament, the president of the Catalan women’s policy agency, and several feminist activists. In the case of the printed press, a total of 30 news stories were published. About 40% of them (12) were published between April 30, 2019, when the Bureau of the Parliament gave a green light to the organization of the event, and June 27, 2019, when the acting Speaker of the event and the vice chair of the CNDC held a press conference. These news stories fundamentally reproduced the institution’s press release, describing when and how the Women’s Parliament would take place.

With the remaining 18 journalistic pieces published on the day of the event and the following days (July 1–5), I have carried out a deductive thematic analysis to identify whether the expected outcomes of the institutional claim were acknowledged by the media. As [Table 1](#) shows, the feminist political agenda is the most mentioned theme, appearing in almost all news stories (16), with expressions such as “the Women’s Parliament puts equality at the center of the political agenda” (*La*

Table 1. Themes of the claim reported by the media (number of appearances)

News Outlet (no. of pieces)	Women's Empowerment	Feminist Policy	Linkage MPs-Activists
<i>Ara</i> (1)	X	X	
<i>Diario.es</i> (1)	X	X	X
<i>El Món</i> (1)		X	
<i>El Nacional</i> (2)	X	X	
<i>El País</i> (1)	X	X	
<i>El Periódico</i> (1)	X	X	
<i>El Punt Avui</i> (3)	X	X X X	X
<i>La Vanguardia</i> (2)	X	X X	
<i>Nació Digital</i> (1)	X	X	X
<i>Público</i> (1)		X	X
<i>Vilaweb</i> (4)	X X	X X X	X
Total (18)	10	16	5

Vanguardia 2019, July 1), “a feminist plenary session demands equality” (*El Punt Avui* 2019, July 1), “women raise their voice in Parliament to stir a feminist agenda” (*Nació Digital* 2019, July 1), and “the Women’s Parliament sets out a feminist agenda for Catalonia” (*El Món* 2019, July 1).

Women’s empowerment was mentioned in 10 news stories, with interpretations such as “the Parliament is women’s” (*El Periódico* 2019, July 1), “feminism obtains a historic picture in Parliament” (*El País* 2019b, July 2), “women reclaim their place in Parliament” (*Diario.es* 2019, July 1), and “the feminist struggle takes ownership of the Parliament’s hemicycle” (*Vilaweb* 2019, July 1). While explicit reference to linkage between MPs and social activists was only made in five news stories, almost all pieces stressed the consensual style used by participants, underscoring that the willingness to find common ground for a feminist political agenda put discrepancies aside. The only moment of polarization that the news outlets drew attention to was the one stemming from references to political prisoners and exiles.

None of the newspapers ran first-page coverage of the all-women plenary session, but all news stories included a picture capturing the moment in which participants voted on the declaration (Figure 2) or when they formed the feminist triangle symbol with their hands. Generally, news stories included excerpts from both MPs’ and activists’ speeches, and the share of interviews was also balanced. Most news stories uploaded the text of the declaration, and some of them provided a link to the live broadcast of the event, thereby disseminating both the symbol and the

institutional claim. No trace of mockery of the all-women character of the event or the participation of nonelected representatives was found, which can be explained by the favorable symbolic subtext, namely, the strength of the women's movement in Catalonia and the engagement of all parliamentary groups, along with the pedagogic explanations provided by the institution in media appearances. For example, as emphasized in a radio interview by the Speaker of the Parliament of Catalonia, the need for the all-women event resided in "the enduring gap between parity in seats share and gender equity in influence" and in "the insufficient incorporation of a gender equality perspective across all policy areas."¹⁰

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the ways in which parliaments can produce symbolic representation through claim-making on behalf of the institution. Examining symbolic representation as a dimension in its own right allows for reflection on the role that legislatures can play as institutions in sociopolitical debates and in the connection with and legitimization of social groups, circulating new meanings about who, what, and how may be represented, which has significant normative implications. It is also through their symbolic activity that parliaments may construct a new view of themselves and potentially shape popular affect toward the institution. Symbolic representation is thus not a passive but an active dimension, as symbols need to be created to resonate with the targeted audience(s). The article also exposes that in claim-making processes descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation intrinsically build onto each other.

Women's Parliaments act as vehicles for women's symbolic representation produced by the institution as a whole. They constitute a prime example of representative claim-making through which legislative assemblies may evoke their commitment to gender equality, as this gendered symbol challenges all at once parliaments' skewed composition, their masculinized inner workings, and their gendered outcomes. This is why the occupation of parliamentary spaces with female bodies and voices is so powerful, with the symbolic —

10. Interview with the Speaker on Radio4, June 23, 2019, <http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/audios/parlament/parlament-roger-torrent-ens-explica-com-sera-parlament-les-dones/5290054/> (accessed June 22, 2020).

performative and discursive — construction of representative claims inherently eliciting descriptive and substantive representation meanings.

When are parliaments more likely to engage in this type of symbolic activity? To answer this question, we need to look at the institutional setting and the broader societal context whose specific symbolic subtext will allow for more or less radical representative claims. In the Catalan case, the claim was articulated within a symbolic subtext that facilitated its internal and external acceptance, such as the drafting of the institution's gender action plan in light of the “gender-sensitive parliaments” framework and a strong women's movement. The empirical analysis shows that the institutional claim conveyed a sense of representing substance and authenticity for the women's movement and that the media widely disseminated and amplified the event.

To conclude, substituting the question “how do *women* in parliament represent women?” with the question “how do *parliaments* represent women?” — which can also be posited for other constituencies such as ethnic or racial minority groups — is critical for furthering the theorization of feminist political representation. This shift in focus is also needed for expanding empirical investigations on how parliaments can become more equitable institutions, not just in terms of recruitment, legislative production or organizational cultures but also regarding the creation of new meanings about what constitutes fair and equal representation.

Tània Verge is Associate Professor of Political Science at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain. Her research focuses on the gendered informal institutions underpinning party politics and parliaments and on the resistance to the adoption and implementation of gender equality policy: tania.verge@upf.edu

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