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Exploring Sustainability in Parliamentary Gender Equality Work. Insights from the Swedish Riksdag

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has pointed to the need for addressing gender equality in parliaments in a broader perspective, focusing on “gender sensitivity” in parliaments in relation to structures, operations, methods and work. Up to now, however, the question of what it takes for this work to be long-lasting and sustainable has received limited attention. This article seeks to address this gap through a case study assessing the sustainability of the internal work of the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament) with regard to gender equality, focusing on the *durability* and *renewal* of early initiatives and reforms. On the basis of Riksdag documents and interviews with MPs during the period 1994–2022, we ask: How sustainable is the internal gender equality work of the Riksdag with respect to the three key areas of representation, infrastructure and culture? We find that the Riksdag has managed to conduct sustainable gender equality work over the course of three decades. Major factors in this success are the institutionalization of a Gender Equality Group, the adoption of Action Plans for Gender Equality every parliamentary term and the legitimacy provided by the support of the Speaker of the Riksdag and the Riksdag Board.

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Introduction

The question of how to achieve gender equal parliaments is a topic that has engaged scholars and practitioners in a number of different ways. Through this body of research, it has been well established that most parliaments feature a masculine culture that entails a number of obstacles for women (Childs, 2016; Crawford & Pini, 2010; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019; Miller, 2021; Rai & Spary, 2019) and that favourable factors can promote gender equal changes (Celis et al., 2016; Holli & Harder, 2016; Sawyer & Turner, 2016). Moreover, international organizations, such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), have worked to establish best practices for “gender sensitivity” in parliaments by mapping and assessing internal gender equality work across countries (Palmieri, 2011). While these efforts contribute with vital knowledge for making parliaments gender equal, the question of whether this work is merely symbolic politics or, to the contrary, long-lasting and sustainable has to date received limited attention on the part of both scholars and practitioners. In the face of increasing resistance to gender equality (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018), this question is more urgent than ever—previous gains and improvements can no longer be taken for granted.

Diversity initiatives within organizations, including those involving gender equality, are often hampered by such problems as being slow-paced, superficial or dependent upon individual agents of change (van den Brink, 2020). Furthermore, since it is difficult to change norms and daily

practices within organizations, initiatives to increase equality rarely lead to sustainable change in the long term (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2016).

This article builds upon existing knowledge to explore the sustainability of the internal gender equality work of the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament). While sustainable organizational change is a complex and multifaceted concept (Buchanan et al., 2005), we regard two issues as essential for the purposes of the present study: *durability* and *renewal*. While the former captures the idea of maintenance and reinforcement of earlier gender equality initiatives and reforms (most typically regulatory or institutional changes), the latter captures the idea of the extent to which singular key activities (for example, seminars and research projects) are re-introduced and repeated and thus become a more regular part of the gender equality work.

The Riksdag is often presented internationally as exemplary with respect to gender sensitivity in its internal workings (Palmieri, 2011), making it a particularly interesting case for the present study. The number of women representatives reached the 40% threshold in 1994, and a number of gender equality reforms have subsequently been adopted (Freidenvall & Erikson, 2020). Previous research has established that gender sensitivity in the Riksdag is indeed high and is progressing over time—particularly when it comes to internal parliamentary working procedures (Wängnerud, 2015, p. 135). Previous research has studied gender sensitivity in the Riksdag (Wängnerud, 2015), gendered working conditions (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019) as well as the Gender Equality Group (Freidenvall & Erikson, 2020). However, to date there is no systematic study of the level and character of the Riksdag's own internal gender equality reforms and initiatives over time. We draw on Riksdag documents and interviews with MPs conducted between 1994–2022 in order to answer the following research question: *How sustainable is the internal gender equality work of the Riksdag with regard to the three key areas of representation, infrastructure and culture?* On the basis of the findings, we will also discuss which factors can be identified as fostering sustainability.

We find that although the level of ambition and focus has varied, the Riksdag has managed to conduct equality work—targeting representation, infrastructure and culture—over the course of three decades. We maintain that this work has been sustainable in the sense that early gender equality reforms and initiatives are durable, and there is also a re-introduction and renewal of activities for improved gender equality. While the introduction of fixed meeting hours and child care facilities are examples of early reforms that have been durable over time, recurring seminars and interview studies across the parliamentary terms constitute activities characterized by renewal. Our findings indicate that major factors behind this achievement are the institutionalization of the Riksdag's Gender Equality Group and the adoption every parliamentary term of an Action Plan for Gender Equality. Also of importance is the legitimacy provided by the support of the Speaker of the Riksdag and the Riksdag Board, along with the broad representation of men and women among all of the parties in the Gender Equality Group.

Previous Research on Gender Equality Work within Parliaments

Parliaments have historically been male dominated and characterized by a culture of masculinity (Lovenduski, 2005) and may be described as gendered organizations (Crawford & Pini, 2010) or gendered workplaces (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019). Indeed, parliaments share many challenges with other masculine organizations, and research on gender and parliaments has revealed the difficulties in achieving gender equality in this context. Rai and Spary (2019) point to the disruption of existing (masculine) traditions as an obstacle to change in the direction of gender equality in parliaments. Mackay (2014), similarly, highlights not only how difficult it is to adopt gender equality changes even in new parliaments, such as the Scottish Parliament, but also how difficult it is to uphold and to maintain such changes. The difficulties in promoting progressive reforms have been explained by the fact that policies or rules that challenge gender relations and that aim at

redistributing power and resources in society are difficult to implement. Legacies from the past tend to pose obstacles through institutional mechanisms of “forgetting the new” and “remembering the old” (Mackay, 2014, p. 554). In addition, parliaments display distinct features that render them inherently difficult to change, for instance that their composition changes from term to term, including not only MPs but also the Speaker, other leadership positions and working groups (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022, p. 5). A high level of mobility of personnel constitutes an obstacle to sustainable equality work in organizations to the extent that it complicates the establishment of “organizational memory”, through which knowledge about gender would become “embedded in day-to-day organizational practices and routines” (van den Brink, 2020). Lacking such memory can lead to gender equality gains being forgotten at the expense of previously established (masculine) traditions, and thus the wheel has to be reinvented “over and over again” (van den Brink, 2020).

Previous research has also identified several factors that foster gender equality change in parliaments. In particular, studies point to the existence of a women’s caucus (Johnson & Josefsson, 2016) and gender-focused parliamentary bodies as favourable for advancing women’s interests in parliament (Celis et al., 2016; Holli & Harder, 2016; Sawyer & Turner, 2016). Other studies—although not explicitly discussing parliaments—have revealed that a range of factors are necessary in order to implement gender mainstreaming in organizations. These factors include the political will to take action against gender hierarchies (Charlesworth, 2005; González Díaz, 2001; Mazey, 2000), the problematizing of the existence of gender equality gaps within a given organization and the development of plausible action plans to counter them (Daly, 2005; Derbyshire, 2002; McGauran, 2009). Also important are capacity building—the provisioning of the skills, abilities, processes and resources needed by the organization in question—and oversight of implementation (Squires, 2005; Verloo, 2005; Walby, 2005).

Another important strand of knowledge with respect to gender equality work of parliaments is the work of international organizations concerning gender sensitivity in parliaments. The IPU toolkit for gender sensitive parliaments serves to clarify how well a given parliament responds to “the needs and interests of both men and women in its structures, operations, methods, and in its work” (Palmieri, 2011), the aim being to benchmark parliamentary gender equality work as well as to improve it. This includes such varied aspects of parliamentary work as numerical representation, culture, procedures, infrastructure and policy output (Palmieri, 2011). Similar toolkits and guides have also been developed by the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

While there is an abundance of research on gender equality initiatives, steps have also been taken to include social identities in addition to gender, for example in “diversity mainstreaming” (Squires, 2007) as well as the “diversity sensitive approach to parliaments” (Childs, 2016). With respect to the latter, we agree with Childs that “[f]or a parliament to be truly inclusive, attention to diverse exclusions and to intersectionality and within-group differences is necessary” (p. 7).

Previous research has been important in describing the obstacles to gender equality changes in parliaments as well as factors fostering change. In addition to that, the “best practices” and “score scales” provided by international organizations are important for promoting continued work in this area. Until now, however, limited attention has been given to the *sustainability* of gender equality work within parliaments—whether and how gender sensitivity work is long-lasting and maintained over time. We argue that it is time to take the next step by gaining knowledge regarding the possibilities and conditions for sustainable gender equality work in parliaments. Sustainability is, indeed, an imperative for actual and effective gender equality work. In the present article, we present a systematic analysis of the internal gender equality work of the Riksdag over time. This study will not only provide empirical insights into how sustainable change can be achieved in a parliamentary context but will also cast light on factors favourable to such change.

Theoretical Approach: Sustainable Organizational Change

What does sustainability mean with respect to organizational change in general and gender equality change in particular? Sustainability has been described within the field of organizational research as an ambiguous concept (Buchanan et al., 2005) that can be interpreted in multiple ways (Lankoski, 2016). There is, thus, a need to operationalize the concept of sustainability in order to clarify its meaning within given organizational contexts (Sroufe, 2017).

In spite of its complexity, a number of characteristics commonly appear in discussions of sustainability. The extensive literature review of previous research by Buchanan and colleagues notes in this regard that sustainability in organizational change in general terms may be defined as “when new ways of working and improved outcomes become the norm” (NHS Modernisation Agency, 2002; as referenced in Buchanan et al., 2005, p. 190).

Inherent in this view—and in line with most definitions of sustainability—is a certain degree of continuity, insofar as new ways of working have become incorporated into the daily work of the organization and changes are maintained over time:

As a result, when you look at the process or outcome one year from now or longer, you can see that at a minimum it has not reverted to the old way or old level of performance. Further, it has been able to withstand challenge and variation; it has evolved alongside other changes in the context, and perhaps has actually continued to improve over time (NHS Modernisation Agency, 2002; as referenced in Buchanan et al., 2005, p. 190).

For the study of sustainability, this definition implies a need for long-term perspectives when assessing organizational changes. What is more, organizational change when it comes to gender equality in parliaments should encompass both regulatory institutional changes as well as activities to raise awareness and build capacity. In order for the internal gender equality work of a parliament to be sustainable, it is necessary that early reforms of the former kind are maintained over time and not undermined or replaced. It is also necessary that activities for improved gender equality of the latter kind become a recurring part of daily parliamentary work. On this basis, we suggest that two aspects are particularly useful in assessing the sustainability of gender equality work of parliament over time: *durability* of early reforms and initiatives as well as the *renewal* of activities for increased gender equality.

Durability means that early reforms and initiatives aimed at improving gender equality are, in fact, implemented and maintained, and perhaps even reinforced. The risk that the implementation of progressive gender equality reforms and initiatives is forgotten and that the internal workings reverts to the old traditional (masculine) way of doing things has been highlighted when it comes to gender equality changes (Mackay, 2014). Durability, thus, captures whether gender equality initiatives have resulted in more permanent changes in the internal workings and is mostly applicable to organizational changes of a more regulatory or institutional kind.

However, sustainable gender equality changes are not only about maintaining early reforms and initiatives; some gender equality activities are of a type that rather require constant renewal. *Renewal* thus captures the extent to which the gender equality work of a parliament is characterized by recurring and repeated activities over time. Renewal of activities would indicate that gender equality work has become a norm, having been integrated and incorporated into the ordinary work and function of the organization rather than being merely temporary in nature or project-based (so-called one-offs). In addition, renewal acknowledges the fact that gender equality cannot be fixed once and for all but rather needs constant reinvention and adjustment in order to adapt to a changing context. In particular, seminars for awareness raising and studies are examples of types of activities for which renewal rather than durability become relevant.

Finally, an assessment of sustainability must also take into consideration the substance of change (Buchanan et al., 2005, p. 191). For instance, changes may be shallow, deep or paradigmatic in type (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004), and they may also be characterized by different degrees of centrality (Dawson, 1994). While we are unable to assess all content-related aspects within this

Table 1. Framework for analysing sustainable gender equality work in parliaments.

	Representation	Infrastructure	Culture
Durability	Earlier reforms/initiatives/measures are maintained and reinforced in later periods, with no reversal or backlash		
Renewal	Recurring adoption of activities/initiatives/measures over time		

study, in line with Childs (2016) we include three central areas of the Gender Sensitive Parliaments framework to capture the internal gender equality work of parliaments: representation, infrastructure and culture. In contrast to, for example, work within political parties and policy outcomes, these are aspects of the internal workings and proceedings that are broad enough to capture most initiatives for which a parliament has a mandate to initiate changes.

Analytical Framework for The Study of Sustainable Gender Equality Work

We draw upon the Gender Sensitive Parliaments framework and, more specifically, Childs (2016) as we focus on three areas that are essential for gender equality work within parliaments (as well as for diversity work), namely representation, infrastructure and culture. *Representation* concerns measures addressing the numerical presence of men and women in different venues and in leadership positions. *Infrastructure* consists of measures that target the regulatory frameworks for organizing work and the adoption of gender-focused parliamentary bodies. *Culture* involves initiatives that target the “masculine culture” in parliaments, such as identifying gender inequalities and ways in which a given organization is gendered, awareness raising activities and capacity building.

Our analytical approach presented in Table 1 is applied in two steps. First, we describe the most central initiatives and activities in the internal work of the Riksdag that are aimed at improving its gender sensitivity. Here we note which of the three areas that is prioritized and whether there are any innovations for further improvement or not. Second, we assess the extent to which the work conducted is sustainable with regard to: 1) durability—whether earlier reforms and initiatives for gender equality have been maintained and reinforced over parliamentary terms or whether reversal has occurred; and 2) renewal—whether activities for improved gender equality are recurrently adopted and reinitiated over time.

Durability and renewal are two aspects of sustainability aimed at capturing continuity in different ways. Insofar as gender equality changes include a wide range of different types of initiatives, we argue that both concepts are needed in order to assess the sustainability of the work of parliaments in this regard. For example, while a decision to include a seminar on gender equality in the introduction program for new MPs is a regulative change that can be assessed with respect to its durability over parliamentary terms, a seminar on a very current gender equality topic cannot. The latter can, however, be assessed in terms of the concept of renewal, i.e. whether there is a similar initiative during the following parliamentary term. We argue that both of these instances are indications of sustainable work on gender equality within the organization, but of different kinds. We must note, however, that these dimensions should be viewed as comprising a guide for analysis and that they need to be qualitatively assessed and discussed, for instance in terms of their potential overlap.

Methodology

Insofar as we consider the time frame of initiatives and activities to be essential for evaluating both durability and renewal, the present study traces the process of internal gender equality work in the Riksdag from the early 1990s up to 2022. The analytical focus involves identifying gender equality measures that have been adopted by the Riksdag with respect to its internal workings in terms of the three dimensions of representation, infrastructure and culture. We do not intend to conduct a strict process tracing in terms of explaining final outcomes or identifying the mechanisms of causal

relationships (cf. Bennett & Checkel, 2014) but rather wish to assess changes over time and to reveal how prior decisions can be decisive for later measures and actions. A key actor in the Riksdag's internal gender work is the Speaker's Gender Equality Group, as the analysis will show. However, in contrast to gender-focused parliamentary bodies in other parliaments, this group is not responsible for applying a gender lens to proposed legislation or overseeing processes of gender mainstreaming in government.

Our focus is on gender, although we acknowledge the importance of a broader intersectional approach that includes other social identities as well. The reason for this is simply that the work of the Riksdag has been strongly focused on the gender aspect, which in itself is a limitation that we bring up in the conclusion.

Our analysis is based on various written sources, including country reports on Sweden from the IPU, internal Parliamentary reports and the Riksdag archives. The authors also have access to four sets of interviews with MPs (120 in total) across gender and parties that were conducted in 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020 (described in Erikson & Freidenvall, 2021; Freidenvall & Erikson, 2020). Interviews have been conducted with MPs from all of the political parties in office, an equal number of women and men and a diversity of ages (a majority between 40 and 60 years in the first sets and below 40 in the last set). Although these interviews provide us with in-depth knowledge, we use them here primarily as a complement to the written sources in order to illustrate the perceptions and views of MPs. This means that sustainability analysis could be conducted without a longitudinal interview dataset of this kind.

Given that the internal work of the Riksdag on gender equality has been led since its inception by the Speaker, we have based the analysis on the terms of the Speaker of the Riksdag. With one exception (in 2002 a Social Democratic speaker was replaced by another representative of the same party) this temporal demarcation follows the shifts in Government. While the three aspects of representation, infrastructure and culture are addressed within each period, we have allowed the analysis to be context sensitive, and the order, thus, varies according to the time and importance of the measures taken during the particular period.

Analysis

Setting The Stage: 1994–2002

The internal work of the Riksdag on gender equality began in the 1990s. As a result of the decrease in women's descriptive representation in the 1991 parliamentary elections, from 38 to 34% women, women's mobilization for equal political representation was reignited. Some party women lobbied for gender quotas to be adopted, and the feminist network the Support Stockings threatened to form a women's party if party selectors did not include more women on party electoral lists (Freidenvall, 2021). When the 40% threshold was reached in 1994, thanks to their efforts, the qualitative content of representation also attracted increased attention. The development in Sweden did not take place in a vacuum, however. The endeavour to achieve a gender balance in access to decision-making assemblies had been placed on the agenda of the Nordic Council of Ministers as early as the 1980s, when it published books and interview studies on the matter (see for example Dahlerup, 1985, 1988; Haavio-Mannila et al., 1983). The gross under-representation of women in parliaments worldwide—often defined as a democratic deficit—was also part of the agenda of the United Nations, leading up to the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 (see Dahlerup 2018, for example).

The starting point for the internal work of the Parliament on gender equality was the establishment of infrastructure necessary for gender equality work. More specifically, a gender-focused parliamentary body was founded through the initiative of the female Speaker Birgitta Dahl (Social Democratic Party). Dahl saw the need for a venue where women from different parties could share experiences and work together for improved working conditions, particularly for women MPs, and she consequently formed the *Speaker's Women's Network* by inviting one female MP from each

party in the Riksdag (Freidenvall & Erikson, 2020). The Speaker is an important authority in the Riksdag who is considered to be politically neutral and who leads the formation of the Government as well as the work in the Chamber as the head of the Riksdag Board. The support of the Speaker was, therefore, significant for the legitimacy of the Network.

In contrast to many other national parliaments, there is no standing committee in the Riksdag focused specifically on women's rights and/or gender equality (Palmieri, 2011) that was capable of supporting the Women's Network with gender expertise. Instead, a practice developed whereby the Parliamentary Committee on the Labour Market became responsible for gender equality issues (Swedish Parliament, 2005b, p. 10). The staff of this committee possessed expertise in gender equality matters, as the committee was responsible for the scrutiny of government bills and party proposals on gender equality as well as for dealing with expenditures in the field of gender equality in the annual budget cycle. As a consequence, the Network often relied upon committee staff experts, either formally or informally.

With respect to infrastructure, a *childcare centre* for the children of MPs was established in the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament, 1994, 1995). The Speaker herself was a single mother, and her own experience was an important motivation for this initiative. The aim was to assist MPs when childcare in their home municipality was closed during breaks or when temporary childcare was needed for some other reason (Interview 3, 2015). Another measure was the introduction of *fixed meeting times* for plenary and committee sessions, which facilitated combining political activities with the private sphere. Fixed Chamber hours were introduced during a test period in 1999 and later made permanent (Swedish Parliament, 2005b, pp. 148ff), with committee working hours being regulated accordingly. As a result of these changes, there are no late-night votes, and the Riksdag normally meets from Tuesday to Thursday, leaving Mondays and Fridays free for work in home constituencies. When becoming a parent, MPs normally make use of their right to parental leave (13 months as any other Swedish citizen), transferring their place in the Riksdag to their substitute (the next person on the party list for the electoral district), until they decide to return.

With regard to culture, a more encompassing stance towards gender equality gradually developed, with five of the eight political parties declaring that they were feminist parties (Social Democratic Party, Left Party, Green Party, Liberal Party and Centre Party). The increased interest in gender equality and feminism was, in turn, sparked by a revitalization and generational renewal of the women's movement, in which the strand of radical feminism and a discourse on women's subordination grew stronger and a wider strategic repertoire developed (Sainsbury & Bergqvist, 2009; Teigen & Wängnerud, 2009). The Speaker's Network included a number of critical feminist actors who were engaged in the women's sections of the various parties, and an important element of the Network's purpose, as mentioned above, was to cast light on the gendered conditions governing parliamentary work in a broader perspective. A major undertaking was to engage in women's capacity building by organizing breakfast meetings and workshops on gender equality. This not only created appropriate space for discussion, it also provided legitimacy to women-centred deliberations (Freidenvall & Erikson, 2020). However, although gender equality in general was on the political agenda at the time, few measures were implemented that directly addressed the overall culture within the Riksdag.

In terms of representation, all of the political parties at that time had adopted party quotas and voluntary measures such as "zipper lists" in order to promote gender-balanced party lists (Freidenvall, 2021). At the government level, a national action program on gender equality had been adopted as well as targets on the representation of women and men on the boards of government agencies and in expert bodies of government inquiries (prop. 1987/88:105; prop. 1993/1994:147). Also, since the 1980s government agencies were obliged to nominate a man and a woman, so-called double nominations, to government assignments (Förordning 1984:803). These measures had spill-over effects as well. Not only did the number of female MPs increase, they also led to an awareness within the Riksdag to promote gender balance in various leadership positions. The proportion of women in the standing committees during this period, 40%, reflected the

proportion of women in the Chamber. Although the proportion of women chairpersons in the standing committees was only between 27% and 30%, a practice of gender balance with respect to nominations and appointments to leadership positions in the Riksdag seems to have emerged among the parties, even though no formal decision on gender balance was taken.

Briefly stated, the foundation of the internal gender equality work of the Riksdag was laid during this period. Many reforms and initiatives were taken and activities conducted on a regular basis in all three areas. While it is too early to fully assess the degree of durability and renewal at this point, the results indicate that work was at least characterized by renewal insofar as initiatives, seminars and workshops were conducted on a recurring, regular basis at least during this period.

Proactive Promotion of Gender Equality Measures: 2002–2006

In 2002, the Riksdag began working more proactively with gender equality in its internal proceedings. The new male Speaker of the Riksdag, Björn von Sydow (Social Democratic Party), initiated a set of actions to promote the internal work of the Riksdag on gender equality together with the Speaker's Women's Network. Although the Network was not yet formally regulated, it was bolstered during this period through financial and administrative support from the Parliamentary Committee on the Labour Market. Outside of Parliament, the resurgence of the women's movement and the increased focus on feminism continued, including also the formation of a new political party, the Feminist Initiative (Sainsbury & Bergqvist, 2009).

The Network's initiatives were important in furthering knowledge concerning gender equality in parliamentary culture through seminars and workshops and by promoting research and conducting studies. For instance, an overview of research concerning the Swedish Riksdag and gender equality was commissioned as well as studies on the extent to which MPs decided to leave their positions and their reasons for doing so (Swedish Parliament, 2004a, 2005a, 2005b). In addition, the Riksdag Board appointed a working group for the purpose of surveying and interviewing MPs with respect to the culture and working conditions in the Riksdag. The working group's report, *15 Proposals for a Gender Equal Parliament* (Swedish Parliament, 2004b), addressed long and short-term measures, which included aspects such as method and responsibility, visibility and capacity building, activities directed towards individual MPs, cooperation between political parties and reconciling work with parenthood and family responsibilities. The importance of equal representation of men and women in governing bodies was discussed, but no concrete measures were suggested on this matter.

The Network also worked more broadly during this period to reorient the culture within the Riksdag in a more gender-sensitive direction. For example, a specific *policy against sexual harassment* that pertained to interactions between Riksdag employees was adopted (Swedish Parliament, 2002). This policy involved zero tolerance of harassment on the basis of existing legislation (which prohibits discrimination and reprisals in working life, i.a.) and provided information concerning whom to contact and the procedures to follow in the event of harassment. While this policy was important in placing the issue on the agenda and in clarifying the responsibilities of the Riksdag (as an employer) to investigate and take measures against harassment, it only applied to staff members (as employees of the Riksdag). As MPs are elected representatives, and not employees in the legal sense, they were not formally covered by the policy.

With respect to infrastructure, an *Action Plan for Gender Equality* was adopted by the Riksdag Board (Swedish Parliament, 2005c). The content of the plan was limited to a small number of activities, since it only addressed the months remaining until the next parliamentary election. However, the Riksdag Board made the formal decision that the Riksdag would conduct "continuous and systematic gender equality work", with a new Action Plan to be adopted each parliamentary term (Swedish Parliament, 2005c). As will be noted later on, this decision clearly fostered renewal as well as durability over time. The fact that the Riksdag Board—comprised of the party group leaders and chaired by the Speaker—sanctioned the decision meant that all of the political parties stood behind it. This served to create joint ownership.

Another measure with respect to infrastructure to which the Women's Network contributed was the decision of the Riksdag Board (Swedish Parliament, 2003) to *schedule parliamentary activities in accordance with the school calendar*, which improved possibilities for combining parliamentary work with family responsibilities. In particular, “plenary-free weeks” were introduced so that there would be no committee or plenary meetings during such major school holidays as the fall, winter and spring breaks.

Although representation was discussed during this period, no concrete measures were suggested.

Gender equality work was quite ambitious during this period, and the focus was mainly on improving infrastructure and culture. The work undertaken was characterized by durability. In the area of infrastructure, advancements were made, which reinforced previously adopted gender equality measures, for example by increasing support to the Women's Network and adjusting the working time for MPs. In addition, we found no indications of reversal regarding measures that had already been implemented. Furthermore, the period was also marked by renewal insofar as a number of activities and initiatives were (re)adopted in order to improve gender equality, such as the initiation of literature reviews on parliaments and gender and interview studies on MPs working conditions. Especially important for durability as well as renewal moving forward was the formal decision taken on Gender Equality Action plans.

Consolidating Gender Equality Principles: 2006–2014

The proportion of women in the Riksdag reached a record level of 47.3% after the 2006 elections. At that time, a new government was formed, which was comprised of a coalition of four right/centre parties and which marked a shift in political dominance in the Riksdag. This led to the election of a new male conservative Speaker, Per Westerberg (Moderate Party).

With respect to infrastructure, Speaker Westerberg continued the tradition of chairing an internal gender equality group, which was renamed the *Reference Group for Gender Equality Issues*. As was the case previously, the Reference Group consisted of one female member from each of the parties represented in the Riksdag. Administrative support for the group was also maintained during the period, initially comprised of two staff members with gender expertise from the Committee on the Labour Market which was later expanded to include a communication officer in the Speaker's Office (Interview 5, 2020).

Also important with respect to infrastructure was the realization of the 2005 Riksdag decision to pursue continuous work on gender equality—a new Action Plan for the 2006–2010 parliamentary term was adopted (Swedish Parliament, 2006a). The objective of the Plan was to promote gender equality in the Riksdag primarily in terms of the qualitative aspects of gender equality — “female and male MPs should have the same opportunities to work in the Riksdag” (Swedish Parliament, 2006a, p. 2). It was further stated that “work on gender equality must be followed-up and evaluated” (Swedish Parliament, 2006a, p. 2). In addition, key activities were specified and divided into short-term initiatives and long-term permanent measures. In general, the content of the Action Plan resembled the proposals discussed during the previous period, but it was the first complete Action Plan in the sense that it was the first to cover an entire parliamentary term.

Culture was the focus of a number of the activities and initiatives specified in the Action Plan, with several being of a recurrent nature. This included awareness raising and capacity building activities, such as regular breakfast meetings and other seminars on gender equality for MPs and Riksdag staff members. The Plan also mentioned the need to conduct regular studies of the views of MPs regarding their situation in Parliament in terms of such issues as gender equality and discrimination. In addition, statistics concerning the gender composition of standing committees and the Riksdag Board, along with the results of internal studies, were to be published on the Riksdag webpage (see Swedish Parliament, 2011b regarding one such study from 2010). Short-term activities involved organizing special conferences on gender related topics, including an EU conference on gender equality in parliaments (Swedish Parliament, 2006a).

No new measures were taken with respect to representation.

The 2010 election neither changed the dominance of the right wing/centre parties in the Riksdag nor led to a change in the Government. Per Westerberg was re-elected Speaker, and the work of the Speaker's Reference Group for Gender Equality Issues proceeded as it had in 2006–2010. The Riksdag Board approved an Action Plan for Gender Equality for 2010–2014 that was almost a carbon copy of the previous Plan (Swedish Parliament, 2011a), but there were no further advances during the second parliamentary term.

Again, no further improvements occurred in the area of representation. While a few new and important initiatives were taken in the area of infrastructure and culture, the level of ambition was lower in comparison to the earlier periods (especially during the last parliamentary term), and it was rather “more of the same” than advances or innovations. However, we found renewal and/or durability in the areas studied. First, the Speaker continued to form and chair a Gender Equality Group, which was becoming more formalized, and action plans were established for both terms, which demonstrate the durability of earlier initiatives. Secondly, there was renewal in the sense that a number of activities were organized and measures were taken with regard to culture.

Renewing Proactive Work towards Gender Equality: 2014–2022

The 2014 election resulted in a change of Government—the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party formed a new coalition and a new male Speaker was elected, Urban Ahlin (Social Democratic Party). Women's representation remained well above 40%, even if it had decreased somewhat.

Concerning infrastructure, the Gender Equality Group continued to be important. In contrast to the previous Speaker's Reference Group for Gender Equality Issues, the activities of the new Group were conducted in closer cooperation with the Riksdag Board. The new female 3rd Deputy Speaker, Esabelle Dingizian (Green Party), was appointed Chairperson of the Reference Group. It was also decided that the Group should be gender-balanced, consisting of an equal number of women and men MPs from all of the political parties, and that the Riksdag administration would provide the budget and administrative support. Although the Speaker had delegated the duties of Chairperson to their Deputy for the first time, the level of ambition was high and the close connection to the Speaker's Office was maintained.

There was also a renewal of proactive work for improved gender equality during this period. In the words of the Chairperson,

It does not suffice to react when someone is exposed to discrimination or harassment. The Riksdag must work more proactively to increase knowledge and awareness of the significance of gender when it comes to power and influence (Interview 3, 2015).

The group formulated an Action Plan for Gender Equality 2014–2018 that was approved by the Board (Swedish Parliament, 2015a). It is noteworthy that for the first time there was a systematic follow-up of the Action Plan, entailing a report issued at the end of the parliamentary term with new proposed measures (Swedish Parliament, 2015b). We have found no official reports summarizing and evaluating the work conducted by the end of the term for any previous period.

There were also other initiatives related to infrastructure. With respect to the regulation of working hours, it was recommended that an investigation of additional measures be conducted regarding how to facilitate a balance between working life and private life and that a feasibility study explore whether a whistle-blower function should be instituted in order to assist in addressing harassment (Swedish Parliament, 2015b).

Work during this period was primarily centred on parliamentary culture. The Reference Group initiated an ambitious charting of gender and the internal working conditions in the Riksdag. Two external researchers were engaged to conduct a survey, along with 40 in-depth interviews with MPs, in order to provide neutral, objective and research-based studies (Erikson & Josefsson, 2016; Erikson, 2017). These studies were well received by the MPs, which is evidenced by the fact that

82% responded to the survey. The results indicated that although both women and men felt that they could influence politics to the same extent and enjoyed more or less the same conditions and opportunities in the Riksdag, women MPs—particularly younger women—believed that they faced stronger pressure and demands than men and were more often exposed to negative treatment. Although there is no full-fledged intersectional analysis in this report, it is worth noting that gender is, in fact, discussed in relation to other social characteristics, such as being young.

On the basis of these studies, the follow-up Action Plan Report at the end of the term (Swedish Parliament, 2015b) suggested a number of measures to make the culture in the Riksdag more gender sensitive, such as the decision to include gender equality issues in the introductory program for new MPs in a more systematic way. This would explicitly involve a joint statement regarding a gender equality norm, which emphasized that

the Riksdag should be a gender equal working place, that a respectful tone is the basis in all Parliamentary work, and that it is the responsibility of everyone to maintain such a level (Swedish Parliament, 2015b).

The introductory program was also to include activities intended to raise gender awareness among new MPs and to build capacity. Furthermore, new Speakers were to be urged to regularly address how one should behave in the Chamber.

In addition to these proposals, several seminars were held with the aim of changing the culture in the Riksdag. These seminars examined, for instance, the research reports mentioned above, gender equality communication and threats MPs had come to face on social media (Swedish Parliament, 2015b). The follow-up Action Plan Report also recommended studies to be conducted on the interaction between legislators in the Chamber.

The issue of a gender equal representation in parliament's different bodies was mentioned as a prioritized area, but no further initiatives were taken in this regard.

During the 2018–2022 parliamentary term, the new male Speaker, Andreas Norlén (Moderate Party), and his female Deputy Speakers, Åsa Lindestam (Social Democratic Party) and Lotta Johnsson Fornarve (Left Party), who together headed the Reference Group for Gender Equality Issues, continued to pursue an ambitious level of gender equality work in a fashion similar to the previous Group (see Swedish Parliament, 2019a). For instance, they engaged external researchers to further investigate conditions for gender equal leadership and working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the 2002 policy against sexual harassment was updated in accordance with legislative revisions (Swedish Parliament, 2019b). Also noteworthy is the initiative regarding infrastructure that changed working hours in the Chamber in line with the proposals of the previous Reference Group for Gender Equality. This includes holding Thursday voting earlier in the afternoon in order to facilitate more convenient schedules for MPs who must travel long distances to their places of residence (Swedish Parliament, 2020).

Gender equality work in the Riksdag since 2014 has been marked by a heightened level of ambition after the previous period of stagnation. However, while there are innovations in the areas of infrastructure and culture, representation is still an area in which no new initiatives have been taken. During this period, there has been renewal insofar as there are recurring activities and measures, particularly with respect to culture. Furthermore, there is durability with (almost all of) the earlier initiatives with respect to infrastructure being maintained and, in some cases, even advanced, such as the working hours in the chamber.

Discussion: Gender Equality in The Riksdag, Sustainability and Favourable Factors

Our analysis demonstrates that the Swedish Riksdag, from 1994 until today (2022), has been active in improving its internal gender equality work. The most important activities and initiatives are summarized in Table 2 below.

Some interesting trends and changes over time can be noted with regard to the work conducted in these three areas. First of all, many of the important regulatory and institutional reforms were

Table 2. Summarizing the gender equality work of the Riksdag.

	Representation	Infrastructure	Culture
1994–2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of zipper lists and other measures to attain gender balance on party lists • Adoption of national targets on the equal representation of women and men in public agency boards, expert groups and government inquires 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of the Speaker's Women's Network • Responsibility for gender equality assigned to the Committee on the Labour Market • Establishment of childcare facilities • Introduction of fixed meeting hours in the Chamber and committees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender equality placed on the political agenda • Seminars and workshops on gender equality topics arranged
Durability	Durability of regulatory and institutional changes too early to assess.		
Renewal	There is renewal in the sense that there are a number of recurring gender equality initiatives and activities, such as seminars and workshops		
2002–2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued discussions of gender-balanced leadership practices in standing committees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaker's Women's Network strengthened with budgetary and administrative support • Parliamentary activities scheduled in accordance with the school calendar • Decision to adopt Gender Equality Action Plans for each term • Policy against sexual harassment adopted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seminars and workshops arranged • Overview of research on gender and the Swedish Riksdag conducted • Interview study with MPs concerning gender equality conducted • Policy document adopted: <i>15 Proposals for a Gender Equal Parliament</i>
Durability	Durability with regard to, the Women's network, childcare facilities and meeting hours		
Renewal	Recurring seminars and workshops to raise awareness and build capacity		
2006–2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued discussions on gender balanced representation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaker's Women's Network transformed into the Reference Group for Gender Equality Issues and given a more permanent structure • Implementation of Gender Equality Action Plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seminars and workshops arranged • Encouragement of recurring studies of gender equality in Parliament • Interview study with MPs conducted on gender equality in parliament (in-house studies)
Durability	Durability with regard to the Speaker's Reference Group for Gender Equality Issues, childcare facilities, meeting hours, Gender Equality Action Plans		
Renewal	Recurring seminars and workshops to raise awareness and to build capacity, recurring in-house studies (literature reviews and interview studies)		
2014–2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued discussions on gender balanced leadership practices in standing committees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaker's Working Group for Gender Equality Issues strengthened and gender-balanced, more closely linked to the Riksdag Board, and assigned an increased budget • Implementation and follow-up of Gender Equality Action Plans • Updated policy against sexual harassment • New policy adopted to facilitate balance between working life and private life • Whistle-blower function announced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seminars and workshops arranged • Extensive studies of gender equality in the Riksdag conducted by scholars • Explicit norm on gender equality • Speakers urged to direct attention to gender equality
Durability	Durability with regard to the Speaker's Reference Group for Gender Equality Issues, childcare facilities, meeting hours, Gender Equality Action Plans		
Renewal	Recurring seminars and workshops to raise awareness and to build capacity, recurring studies by external researchers (surveys and interview studies)		

adopted as early as the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. We cannot determine within the context of the present article whether the most obvious shortcomings were remedied at that time, leaving fewer aspects of the internal work of the Riksdag in these areas to be addressed during later periods, or whether it has become more difficult to bring about those types of changes. We, nevertheless, find it noteworthy that only minor gender equality measures with respect to infrastructure have been adopted in recent years, regardless of the introduction of an ambitious agenda concerning gender equality. For instance, no formal decision regarding gender-balanced leadership has been taken, and the whistle-blower function remains under discussion. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully evaluate the content and character of all of the gender equality work conducted, but our analysis demonstrates that the focus over time has shifted towards initiatives and activities within the area of culture.

On the basis of our analysis, we argue that the Riksdag has indeed conducted *sustainable* gender equality work with the aim of improving the “gender sensitivity” of its internal workings and advancing the integration of gender equality into its ordinary internal work and functions. It is clear from our analysis that the work has displayed both *durability* and *renewal*. Early reforms and initiatives have been continuously implemented during later periods, as is evidenced by, among other factors, the formation of a Gender Equality Group and the implementation of Action Plans. Furthermore, many of the early initiatives—such as gender-sensitive meeting hours—have been further strengthened and reinforced during later periods. We found no example of measures that were reversed, replaced or eliminated. With respect to renewal, it is remarkable that the Riksdag has managed to carry out gender equality work on a regular basis, conducting recurring activities and initiatives over such a long period of time—and with different Speakers representing diverse political parties and gender equality groups.

Certain factors stand out as particularly important for the sustainability of the gender equality work of the Riksdag, namely the infrastructure provided by the Speaker’s Gender Equality Group and the decision to adopt recurring Action Plans. These two initiatives have together served to lock-in and safeguard continued work at a minimum level, even though the ambition of the internal work of the Riksdag on gender equality has varied over time. Taken together, they show how political arenas, such as parliaments, may be re-gendered in a positive direction. This finding is in line with previous research pointing to the need to focus on the micro-shifts that occur within an institutional arena (see Chappell, 2016) and the “small wins” that may add up over time to a compelling transformation (Chappell, 2016).

With respect to the Speaker’s Gender Equality Group, not only has it placed gender equality on the agenda, it has also provided a means for continuously monitoring and regularly evaluating the initiatives taken and improving gender equality on the basis of these assessments. Even though the political composition of the Riksdag changes each parliamentary term, there has, in fact, been a group with explicit and designated responsibility for the internal work of the Riksdag on gender equality every term. A vast majority of the measures on gender equality taken over time are the result of initiatives of this Group. Our findings regarding the influence that this Group has exerted are consistent with previous research concerning the importance of the women’s caucus (Johnson & Josefsson, 2016) and gender-focused parliamentary bodies (Sawer & Turner, 2016).

There has been less discussion in the literature concerning the function of action plans/programs for gender equality in parliaments, although they have been found to foster the implementation of gender mainstreaming in organizations (Daly, 2005; Derbyshire, 2002). Our findings reveal that working in accordance with action plans has been important in that it has compelled the Riksdag to address issues in terms of gender equality and conduct systematic and continuous work on relevant issues, even if the level of ambition has varied. Many of the initiatives that have been introduced over time are, in fact, specified in these plans. In addition, circulating, enforcing and monitoring action plans demonstrates commitment and contributes to creating ownership across party lines. Both the Gender Equality Group and the Action Plans are highly institutionalized and enjoy legitimacy, which we believe is of great relevance for their success.

The final point we would like to address, which is likely a reason why informal practices and norms can be successfully upheld. For example, in order for internal gender equality work to have an impact and to be successful, it needs to receive broad support and be perceived as legitimate by MPs as well as by the political parties. In the Swedish case, support from the Speaker and the Riksdag Board serves to create and anchor legitimacy insofar as the Speaker and the party group leaders on the Board function as allies who support gender equality (cf. Eriksson-zetterquist & Renemark, 2016). It is also central that every party is represented in the Gender Equality Group and that both men and women are included. This inclusive approach constitutes a solid foundation for legitimizing internal gender equality work within the various political parties, making it more overarching than “women’s issues” or a “left-party issue only.”

Having this said, the lack of formal rules on the representation of women and men in committees is remarkable. Despite ample of discussions over the years on the importance of equal representation of women and men in decision-making bodies, no attempt to regulate this has been made by the Parliament. This neglect can most likely be understood as a result of the relatively high representation of women in these bodies, without any measures having been adopted—in line with the idea—why fix what ain’t broken.

What is more, the absence of an intersectional approach in the Riksdag’s internal gender equality work—or rather the prioritization of gender at the expense of other social identities such as age, ethnicity, disability and sexuality—is noteworthy. This limitation can most likely be understood as a consequence of a layered institutionalization process in Sweden, where gender has paved the way for the recognition of other inequalities, in a path-dependent but slow way (Borchorst et al., 2012; Freidenvall, 2019). For example, the Ombudsman for gender equality was created in 1980, to be followed by the creation of the Ombudsman for disability in 1994 and the Ombudsman for sexuality in 1999. It was not until 2009 that an Ombudsman for all discrimination grounds was created, hence addressing the interplay of multiple intersectional structures. It remains to be seen if and when an intersectional approach will be applied by the Riksdag in its internal work on gender equality.

Concluding Remarks

Building on previous research on gender sensitive parliaments, we see the need for a new research agenda that assesses the sustainability of the work of parliaments in this area but that also theorizes about factors conducive to such change.

In the present study, we contribute to this endeavour through an in-depth study of the sustainability of the gender equality work of the Swedish Riksdag over time. The empirical findings strengthen the image of the Riksdag as a forerunner with respect to gender equality work. We show that a gender-focused infrastructure has been in place for almost 30 years. During this period of time, not only have a number of improvements been made, but initiatives have been renewed and the work is indeed remarkably durable, despite changes in political leadership. On a methodological level, we find that the analytical concepts of *durability* and *renewal* contribute meaningful tools for assessing and discussing the sustainability of the gender equality work of parliaments.

It is also worth noting that regulative, institutional changes have taken place primarily in the beginning of the period studied, while the later work (with some exceptions) has been characterized rather by capacity-building and awareness-raising activities. We find it particularly remarkable that no hard measures to secure a gender equal representation in parliament’s committees, or leading positions, have been adopted during this period. Here, future research should explore whether this shift of focus is need-based, i.e. take (new) gender inequalities as its starting point, or whether it has become more difficult to pursue institutional and regulative changes over time, perhaps due to increasing resistance from some political parties.

We have identified two factors that are favourable for sustainable gender equality work: a permanent Gender Equality Group and recurring Gender Equality Action Plans. Nearly all

of the gender equality initiatives adopted by the Riksdag can be related to one or the other of these. In particular, the combination of these two factors is key, insofar as actors (such as the Gender Equality Group) are needed for rules to be complied with, not least given the complex interplay between formal and informal rules, as we have seen in the analysis. In the Swedish parliamentary context, the institutional configuration of formal and informal rules, together with actors promoting change, have worked in a mutually reinforcing way, serving as a safeguard against potential institutional reversals or backlash. Thus, it seems possible to counteract the risk of “forgetting the new” and “remembering the old” pointed out by Mackay (2014). In some instances, legacies from the (recent) past may even have a positive impact on the sustainability of gender equality. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, the broader contextual and exogenous factors of relevance for a successful and sustainable gender equality work in parliament is an area worth exploring further.

Another key area to address is sustainability from an intersectional perspective. In spite of the progress discussed so far, further studies on the Swedish Riksdag should engage with the relationship between gender equality initiatives and other forms of diversity. It is apparent that an intersectional perspective is largely lacking in the internal work of the Riksdag, and that this is a worrying limitation. The Riksdag’s own report from 2017 reveals how gender intersects with a young age to reinforce obstacles for young women MPs, and on the basis of previous research from other contexts we have reason to believe that there may very well be mechanisms at play that produce other intersectional inequalities as well (e.g. Hawkesworth, 2003; Kantola et al., 2022). We agree with Childs (2016) that a truly inclusive parliament should account for a broader range of inequalities. As long as work on gender equality includes certain groups only, such as majority women and men, the sustainability of reforms is incomplete.

Further studies are needed to elaborate theories on conditions for sustainability of gender equality and diversity and to explore the relevance of our findings for other parliaments.

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