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# Equal playing field? On the intersection between gender and being young in the Swedish Parliament

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## ABSTRACT

Women and young constitute two underrepresented groups in most legislatures worldwide. The aim of this paper is to theorize and empirically analyze how the hitherto overlooked intersection between gender and young age condition legislators' opportunities to carry out their representative tasks on equal grounds. Using original survey data from the Swedish Parliament (response rate 82%,  $n = 287$ ) in combination with 40 in-depth interviews with young male and female MPs, we ask whether being young in parliament have different implications for men and women legislators. We find that young women experience higher demands and anxiety, and are more subject to negative treatment compared to other groups. Young men, on the other hand, stand out as the least exposed group. Together our results demonstrate that a young age reinforces negative gendered patterns for women in parliament, while age appears irrelevant or even, at times, a beneficial factor for young men.

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Gender; legislature; parliament; members of parliament; age; Sweden; intersectionality

## Introduction

Although women have made significant inroads into national legislatures during the past two decades, research has shown that they often face greater obstacles in politics than their male counterparts. Gender has an impact on the possibilities candidates have not only for entering politics (Bjarnegård 2013; Kenny 2013), but also for performing as MPs once elected (Anzia and Berry 2011). But although scholars have highlighted problems with marginalization and discrimination within legislatures associated with gender (Childs 2004; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Kathlene 1994), it is not the only significant identity in politics. A number of studies have shown that the relationship between gender and the opportunities MPs have to carry out their duties and influence policy is more complex than is sometimes assumed, with such factors as seniority (e.g. Beckwith 2007; Cowley and Childs 2003; Jeydel and Taylor 2003) as well as race and ethnicity (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Hawkesworth 2003) conditioning legislative work in intersection with gender. Organizational research has also directed attention to how

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“ageism,” or discrimination on the basis of age, interacts with gender (Duncan and Loretto 2004; Jyrkinen and McKie 2012). To the best of our knowledge, however, there are no studies of how gender and age intersect in ways that either constrain or empower MPs.

We nevertheless have good reason to suspect that age matters in legislatures since they are often permeated by strong hierarchies based upon seniority. Moreover, while there are both young incumbents and newly elected older MPs in most parliamentary bodies, youth is readily interpreted as a lack of experience. The Inter-parliamentary Union’s (IPU) report on young parliamentarians concludes that not only are young people an underrepresented group in legislatures worldwide, women below the age of 45 are the most underrepresented group of all, which indicates that women face a double disadvantage consisting of both age and gender (IPU 2016).

While gender and age can potentially be related to each other in many different ways, the present study comprises the first theoretical and empirical exploration of the interaction between gender and being young on the basis of unique data concerning the Swedish Parliament. The aim is to investigate whether there are indications that obstacles exist in parliamentary work that are related to gender and age. We will seek answers to such questions as: Does being young have different implications for men and women legislators, and if so, How does being young mediate legislators’ experiences of their work? While obstacles associated with gendered norms and ageism may take various forms and have a number of differing implications for how legislators work and perform, we here focus on two specific aspects in this regard. First, we explore how MPs experience the expectations associated with their legislative roles by addressing how they perceive the demands placed upon them and the extent to which they worry about making mistakes. Second, we examine the interaction between legislators by focusing on their experiences of negative treatment in the Parliament. Although these issues do not capture the performance or influence of individual legislators, they cast light on their experiences of parliamentary work. Not only are MPs’ perceptions of their working conditions important in their own right to the extent that they influence their performance, they are also the only means for assessing negative treatment that occurs non-publicly.

The Swedish Parliament provides an ideal case for exploring the interaction between gender and being young. Women have held over 40% of the seats for more than two decades and the Swedish legislature has one of the largest proportions of young MPs in the world, with 70 elected MPs (20% of seats) who are 35 years of age or younger in the 2014–2018 parliament. This makes it possible to explore in a unique way how the interaction between gender and age conditions legislators’ experiences of parliamentary work. On the basis of original survey data from the Swedish Parliament (response rate 82%,  $n = 287$ ) and in-depth interviews with 40 young Swedish legislators (20 men and 20 women), we investigate how gender and age intersect in either constraining or enabling MPs in their work.

Our findings demonstrate the importance of introducing age into the analysis of gender and parliaments. We find that while being young reinforces the obstacles women legislators’ face, it is regarded as irrelevant or even a beneficial factor for men. In addition, not only are young female legislators the most exposed age-gender group in terms of pressure, anxiety, and negative treatment, young male legislators are those least exposed in relation to most of these issues. While some of these differences may result from gendered structures in society at large, the interviews indicate that working conditions in the

Swedish Parliament disadvantage young women. For such reasons, this article contributes new theoretical and empirical knowledge concerning a factor – age – that has seldom been explored in a parliamentary setting.

## Gender in the Parliament

Obstacles hindering the establishment of a gender-equal parliament reside to a great extent upon the historical male dominance of politics (Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013; Lovenduski 2005). National legislatures may indeed be described as a male domain pervaded by a culture of masculinity (Lovenduski 2005, 48) that dates from a time when politics was an all-male affair. This can be observed in formal rules created by men that suit a male-dominated parliament, as well as in norms regarding how a (male) politician should behave and act (cf. Acker 1990). Women are confronted by this pre-existent culture, which may operate as institutional constraints that obstruct their political work, when they enter politics (Lovenduski 2005, 47). Since institutional configurations change slowly, women MPs remain marginalized in spite of their large numbers.

Several empirical studies have found evidence that the marginalization of women legislators can be linked to a masculine parliamentary culture (Childs 2004; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Kathlene 1994). Scholars have documented how women thus lack access to leadership positions (O'Brien 2015), are assigned to less important committee positions (Barnes 2014; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Schwindt-Bayer 2010), and are ignored by their male colleagues in plenary debates (Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2014). Moreover, research has indicated that other factors can also negatively influence women's parliamentary effectiveness and room for maneuver, such as race/ethnicity (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Hawkesworth 2003) and being elected through gender quotas (e.g. Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2014; Zetterberg 2008). Findings are mixed in respect to seniority, but several studies support the argument that women's marginalization can be explained to a great extent by their being newly elected, not only by their gender (Jeydel and Taylor 2003; Kerevel and Atkeson 2013). For example, Jeydel and Taylor show that although there is a gender gap in legislative effectiveness in the United States House of Representatives, it results from seniority, preferences, and institutional position rather than gender itself (2003).

Certain groups of women thus tend to face greater obstacles than others because of structures and norms in both legislatures and society, including members of minority groups, those who have been elected through gender quotas, and women who are new MPs. From an intersectional perspective, scholars have pointed to the need to account for more than one power relation at a time insofar as social divisions intersect with each other in complex patterns (Crenshaw 1989; McCall 2005; Yuval-Davis 2006). Nevertheless, research concerning women's representation has been primarily focused to date on gender and ethnicity or race (Hawkesworth 2003; Hughes 2011), and we consequently know little about how gender and age intersect in politics.

Although the impact of age or ageism is at times included as a control in empirical analysis, it is a factor that has seldom been analyzed thoroughly, neither in the general literature on political representation, nor in the literature concerning women's political representation. The small number of studies that have explored the descriptive representation

of being young have found that young adults are descriptively underrepresented in the European Parliament (Stockemer and Sundström 2018) and in Asian parliaments (Joshi 2013, 2015; Joshi and Och 2014). Joshi (2015), who investigates the descriptive representation of “excluded majorities” and their intersection with each other in Asian parliaments, has identified multiple burdens that have been placed upon young women with a working-class background in that they simultaneously belong to three excluded majorities regarding age, class, and gender. In much the same vein, a recent IPU survey of over 100 parliamentary chambers reveals that although women MPs tend to be younger than their male counterparts, they remain underrepresented in every age group. Being both young and a woman thus entails a double disadvantage when it comes to being elected to Parliament (IPU 2016).

### **The intersection of gender and age in parliament**

Introducing age into an analysis of gendered conditions in legislatures is important for several reasons. First, it may further our knowledge of how women of certain age groups are subject to greater discrimination than others. Second, differentiating between different ways in which gender may intersect with age can provide new insights concerning the mechanisms at play in gendered discrimination. Finally, targeted measures for combatting gender inequalities can be more easily developed if we have a better understanding of the situation at hand. We draw upon research from other fields, mainly organizational research, in order to theorize gender and age in legislatures, and three possible relations emerge in this regard.

Before addressing these three sets of relations, we should note that the concept of “ageism,” or discrimination based on age, has been of great interest in social psychology, sociology, and organizational research (e.g. Nelson 2004; Palmore 1999; Posthuma and Campion 2009). In contrast to gender, age discrimination is highly context-dependent, with no clear hierarchy between differing age groups. Research has in fact revealed the existence of both “positive” and “negative” ageism insofar as being older can comprise an advantage in certain contexts while being a source of discrimination in others (Palmore 1999). Although the interaction between gender and age has been markedly less investigated than age discrimination itself, there are a limited number of studies on the topic in the field of organizational research. Such research indicates that age implies different things for women and men, who experience age, ageing, and ageism in different ways within organizations and in management (Itzin and Phillipson 1995). The patterns involved are complex and dependent on the sector being studied, but women generally appear to be more exposed to age discrimination than men. Duncan and Loretto’s (2004) study of the financial sector in the United Kingdom found that women were more likely to be exposed to age discrimination in all age groups – women seemed “never to have the right age” (Duncan and Loretto 2004). Granleese and Sayer conclude that women working in higher education experience a triple jeopardy of discrimination in respect to age, gender, and “lookism” (2006). Similarly, Jyrkinen and McKie (2012) have identified both overt and covert gender discrimination as well as gendered ageism that present career obstacles in the field of management for women of various ages in Scotland and Finland. They point to the roles of both knowledge norms, whereby older men are “naturally” associated with experience and knowledge, and

caring norms, which render younger women's potential family aspirations as a threat (Jyrkinen and McKie 2012). Such studies find that age is important from a gender perspective, but they also suggest that the relationship between gender and age is complex. While gender at times overrides the importance of age, there are also situations in which gender discrimination is more pronounced in certain age groups than in others.

The parliament is an organization with unique features, but it also shares characteristics with other historically male-dominated organizations. A number of different scenarios are plausible in respect to the interaction between gender and age in the legislature based on what we know from previous research.

The first possible scenario is that gender trumps age, such that gender is more important than age for how a legislator perceives his or her work. An extensive literature has documented how women, regardless of other intersecting identities, face greater hurdles than men in politics (Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2014; Lovenduski 2005; Schwindt-Bayer 2010), which in the present context would imply that women, regardless of their age, have more negative experiences concerning their legislative roles, and are more exposed to negative treatment, than both younger and older men.

A second scenario, which is based on the literature concerning ageism (Nelson 2004; Palmore 1999; Posthuma and Campion 2009), attributes an independent effect to age such that age would override gender. The differences between younger and older legislators would then be more significant for parliamentary work than gender differences. As noted above, different ages may have differing connotations, whereby it is difficult to predict both the character of and conditions for the presumed effect of age (Palmore 1999). Being young could thus be either an advantage or a disadvantage for MPs.

In negative terms, the inner life of legislative bodies is often characterized by hierarchies of seniority in respect to which youth may be interpreted as indicating a lack of political experience. This could imply, in turn, that young legislators, be they newly elected or incumbents, face greater obstacles than their older colleagues. Young MPs could then be ignored, with their competence undervalued and exposed to negative treatment, and forced to prove themselves as fit for the job. In positive terms, being young would constitute an advantage in parliament. Political parties could place young people in electable slots on the ballot as a way in which to signal modernization and breaking with old structures. For instance, the Swedish Social Democratic Party announced in 2012 that every fourth person on their electoral lists would be a person below 35 years of age in order to indicate renewal, change, and a future-oriented politics (Löfven et al. 2012). In this respect, young MPs may both have a greater mandate for introducing new perspectives, and be less hindered by traditional ways of doing business in the legislature.

A third scenario resides upon age having different implications for men and women insofar as previous research indicates that women are more exposed to age discrimination than men (Granleese and Sayer 2006; Jyrkinen and McKie 2012). Moreover, if age has a negative impact upon women and not upon men, then we might expect that gender differences increase in certain age groups. Age could thus imply a double burden for women of certain ages, while being irrelevant, or even an advantage, for men of the same age. We would thus expect that young women MPs face greater obstacles – higher demands, more anxiety, and more negative treatment – than men of the same age.<sup>1</sup>

While these three scenarios constitute a first attempt to theorize this scarcely investigated intersection of gender and age, the empirical focus of this article takes gender as its starting point and explores whether and how it interacts with being young.

### **Exploring obstacles: demands, anxiety, and negative treatment**

There are many ways in which to investigate the obstacles that condition the opportunities MPs have to conduct their legislative duties on equal terms. Previous research has engaged with candidate selection processes (Bjarnegård 2013; Kenny 2013), performance (Anzia and Berry 2011), as well as conditions and interactions within parliaments (Childs 2004; Erikson and Josefsson 2018; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005), and has found gendered obstacles in all these areas. In this study, we employ unique survey data and interviews to assess MPs' own perceptions of their working conditions in the Swedish Parliament. We have been able to capture whether gender and age influence not only how MPs experience their legislative roles, but also their experiences of negative treatment in terms of micro-aggressions and micro-inequalities. Self-reported perceptions and experiences are not only important in their own right, but also provide the only means for uncovering subtle forms of negative treatment that occur non-publicly. Taken together, they provide important insights into how obstacles related to gender and age may condition parliamentary work.

We first examine how legislators perceive their legislative roles in terms of the demands associated with being an MP, and secondly, whether and to what extent they suffer from anxiety concerning making mistakes. These two issues give an indication of the level of emotional stress legislators with differing backgrounds experience in their work. Previous research has shown that MPs in general display higher levels of stress than people in comparable occupational groups, such as senior managers (Weinberg and Cooper 1999). Gender gaps in perceived demands and mistake anxiety are likely a combination of gender-based discrimination within the legislature and gendered socialization processes in society. Hypothetically, women may perceive the demands placed upon them in parliament to be greater than those for men both because they are indeed greater, and/or because women are socialized to place greater pressure upon themselves (Eccles 1987; Harter 1999). Similarly, women may be more anxious about making mistakes because doing so has greater consequences for women legislators and/or because they are socialized to have lower levels of self-confidence in certain respects (Eccles, Jacobs, and Harold 1990). The survey data enable us to evaluate gender and age gaps concerning perceived demands and mistake anxiety, while the interview data make it possible to further explore the question of discrimination versus socialization.

Second, we investigate MPs' experiences of negative treatment or micro-aggressions on the part of their colleagues. They include common and subtle verbal or behavioral indignities that may be intentional or unintentional, such as being ignored, denigrated, or devalued on the basis of gender and/or age, race, or sexual orientation (Sue 2010). Previous research has indicated that many women legislators experience overt discrimination, sexual harassment (Lovenduski 2005), ridicule, and excessive scrutiny (Childs 2004), and that men legislators tend to become more verbally aggressive as the number of women increases (Kathlene 1994). However, we know close to nothing about how age matters in this regard. Jyrkinen and McKie (2012) maintain that a combination of



different norms associated with experience, knowledge and parenting are likely to result in gendered age discrimination. Examining how MPs experience their legislative roles in the light of how other MPs treat them provides a good indication of the ways in which their gender and age taken together influence their individual working conditions from the point of view of MPs themselves. The interview data help us better understand the impact of age and how it interacts with gender.

## **Method and material**

### ***Case selection***

Sweden is one of the few countries in the world with a large number of both women and young MPs in the Parliament. Because of its tradition of relative gender equality, as well as its level of youth representation the Swedish Parliament comprises an excellent case for exploring how gender and age interact for methodological as well as theoretical reasons.

In terms of gender, women have for more than two decades held more than 40% of the 349 seats (44% in the 2014–2018 Parliament) in the unicameral Parliament (IPU 2016), with research also having documented their substantial impact upon politics in general (e.g. Erikson 2017; Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996; Freidenvall 2006). In respect to age, the Parliament includes one of the highest percentages of young MPs in the more than 100 parliamentary chambers surveyed by the IPU (2016) in 2015, with 70 legislators (20% of seats) being 35 years of age or younger. This group includes both men and women from all eight political parties represented in the Parliament. This unique combination of stable women's representation and a high proportion of young legislators enables us to methodologically differentiate between different background traits. Stated otherwise, there is a variation that includes male and female legislators with differing backgrounds, including newly elected older MPs and young incumbents of both sexes.

In theoretical terms, Sweden is often discussed internationally in parliamentary research concerning gender because of its well-established high level of women's representation. If young women MPs experience gendered obstacles in their work in the fairly gender-equal Swedish Parliament, they are likely to do so in other legislatures as well.

### ***Methodological approach***

This study applies a mixed-methods approach that includes both survey data and in-depth interviews with Swedish MPs in order to analyze how their gender and age mediate their experiences of legislative work.

The survey included over 40 questions addressing MPs' personal experiences of their working conditions, their role as legislators, and the interaction between legislators. We distributed the survey at the weekly meetings of the Parliamentary party groups at the end of January 2016, when the 2014–2018 Swedish Parliament had already served one and a half years of its four-year term. This gave even newly elected MPs considerable experience of legislative work. The majority of the surveys were filled out during the weekly party group meetings and collected directly afterwards, and a total of 287 out of the 349 legislators responded – a response rate of over 82%. The respondents are



largely representative of all legislators in terms of sex (81% of female MPs and 83% of male MPs responded to the survey) and party affiliation (response rates for the eight parliamentary parties range from 78% to 96%). In respect to the 20% of MPs (70 in total) who are 35 years of age or younger, 55 responded to the survey (79%). This group in our sample is also distributed fairly equally in terms of gender, comprising 24 young women (80.0%) and 31 young men (77.5%).

Upon the basis of the survey findings, we conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with young MPs (20 men and 20 women) in November and December 2016. The selection of respondents ensured that we interviewed at least one man and one woman from all eight of the parties in parliament. The interviews, which were approximately one hour in duration, were aimed at contextualizing and exploring the survey findings in greater depth, with a particular focus on how being young matters in parliament.<sup>2</sup> In order to avoid bias, we began with open questions so that the respondents would describe in their own words their work and the general working environment. We posed more specific questions, such as whether the respondents had experienced negative treatment, towards the end of the interviews.

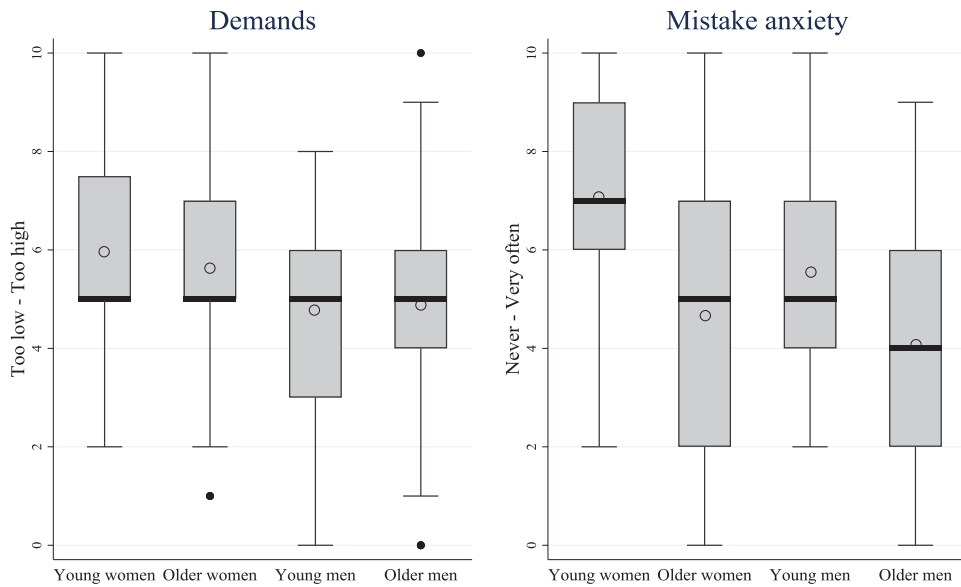
## Results

Before discussing the empirical analysis, we will briefly examine whether the groups of young male and female legislators are descriptively similar in terms of experience and positions. Concerning tenure in parliament, 70% of the young women and 80% of the young men in our sample are newly elected, which indicates that there is a fair share of experienced young legislators as well. In respect to positions, 63% of the young women and 73% of the young men are full members of a parliamentary committee,<sup>3</sup> while young women legislators are overrepresented in leadership positions, with 13% of the women having a formal leadership position in comparison to 2.5% of the men. Such positions include being one of the speakers, a committee chair, a vice-committee chair, a party bench leader, a vice-party bench leader, or a party leader.<sup>4</sup> Young women are thus not at a disadvantage in respect to formal positions.

### *The legislative role: demands and mistake anxiety*

How do legislators experience the demands and pressure associated with their work in parliament, and do gender and being young influence legislators in this regard? We first asked MPs how they experienced the demands associated with their parliamentary positions on a scale from 0 (too low) to 10 (too high),<sup>5</sup> and the female respondents indicated that they perceived them to be greater than their male colleagues did (5.69 vs. 4.89;  $p < .001$ ).<sup>6</sup> The gender gap is even more pronounced in the group of young MPs. Young women experience such demands as greater (5.96 on average) than do other groups, while young men experience them to be lower (4.77 on average) ( $p = .011$ ). These observations align with both the first and third scenarios noted above. Being a woman is thus more significant for how MPs perceive demands than being young, which appears to have different implications for men and women.

Secondly, we asked MPs how often they worried about making mistakes as legislators.<sup>7</sup> Female respondents generally displayed higher levels of anxiety than men (5.10 vs. 4.38;  $p = .012$ ), with the gender gap being more pronounced among young MPs. While young



**Figure 1.** Demands and mistake anxiety.

Notes: Boxplot with marked means showing the distribution of answers on the two survey items “Demands” and “Mistake anxiety.” Circles mark the mean; fat line the median. Boxes include 50% of all observations.

women on average answered 7.04 on a scale from 0 (never) to 10 (always), young men answered 5.52 ( $p = .007$ ). Young MPs also displayed greater anxiety than older MPs (6.18 vs. 4.32,  $p = .000$ ). This accords with our second scenario, namely, being young is more important for how one perceives mistake anxiety than one’s gender. Gender is not irrelevant, however, and the gender gap is more pronounced among young legislators than among those older. Young women are again the most exposed group (Figure 1).

**Table 1.** Demands and mistake anxiety.

	Demands		Mistake anxiety	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Women	0.87*** (0.23)	0.77*** (0.25)	0.76** (0.31)	0.59* (0.34)
Young ( $\leq 35$ years)	0.27 (0.30)	0.04 (0.39)	1.59*** (0.41)	1.20** (0.54)
Women * Young		0.52 (0.56)		0.88 (0.77)
Years in office	0.06** (0.03)	0.06** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)
Front bench	-0.58* (0.33)	-0.62* (0.33)	0.03 (0.45)	-0.03 (0.46)
Committee seat	-0.16 (0.27)	-0.17 (0.27)	-0.33 (0.38)	-0.34 (0.38)
Party controls	$\checkmark$	$\checkmark$	$\checkmark$	$\checkmark$
Constant	4.81*** (0.35)	4.85*** (0.35)	4.93*** (0.48)	5.00*** (0.48)
Observations	273	273	275	275
R-squared	0.12	0.12	0.16	0.16

Notes: OLS regression results. Standard errors in parentheses: \*\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .1$ .

We utilized multivariate analysis in order to further explore the correlation between MPs' gender and the two survey items of demands and mistake anxiety (Table 1). First, women are more likely to perceive the demands associated with being an MP as higher than men do. More experienced legislators also perceive such demands to be higher than their younger colleagues, perhaps because new legislators have fewer responsibilities. Model 2 indicates that young women on average perceive these demands to be 0.6 scale steps higher than older women do, and 1.3 scale steps higher than both younger and older men. Women and young legislators also display higher levels of anxiety concerning making mistakes in their roles as MPs. Young women again appear to be particularly worried about making mistakes, being on average 1.5 scale steps more anxious than young men, 2.1 scale steps more anxious than older women, and 2.7 scale steps more worried than older men. Regardless of whether or not gender trumps age, young women are the group that perceives their legislative roles in the most negative terms.

The general picture that emerges from the interviews in respect to gendered demands and pressure confirms the survey findings. A majority of the female respondents from nearly all eight political parties experience the demands placed upon them, regardless of their positions or their tenure in parliament, as higher than those placed upon male legislators insofar as women must be more prepared and better informed to be taken seriously (2, 10, 11, 12, 5, 16, 14, 8, 7, 3, 13, 32). The interview narratives indicate that these demands are derived from the expectations of other legislators and are not only related to the expectations women have of themselves as a consequence of socialization. One female respondent describes the demands and expectations placed upon MPs as follows:

[as a man] you are probably expected to do the right thing and to know everything at once, or, I'm not sure how to express myself, but you definitely have to work harder as a young woman than as a young man. (12)

Another woman legislator with the same experience stated that:

Men my age are treated in a totally different way, and sometimes I feel that one needs to over-compensate with a lot of facts and be very well-informed and kind of nerdy. (13)

Another woman remarks that she builds all her arguments upon hard facts and research in order to be taken seriously. She often brings research reports and documents with her to prove that she is trustworthy since she feels that otherwise her arguments are questioned and she is dismissed as not being serious (14). It should be noted that although a few male respondents also underscore the need to be well-prepared (33, 15, 38), no respondent (male or female) felt that more was required from young men than from young women. On the contrary, several of the male respondents felt that more was required from women in this regard (4, 15, 6, 19, 18). As one male respondent stated,

I definitely think that young women have to work harder than young men to receive the same encouragement if I look at my circle of acquaintances in the party. (6)

The gender gaps in perceived demands and mistake anxiety that we find in the survey data thus seem to be related, at least to some degree, to actual gender-based discrimination such that women are treated differently than men, rather than to gendered socialization processes in which women have simply been socialized to be more insecure and anxious. It should also be noted that being young is the factor that MPs mentioned as relevant, not being newly elected.

Although we find that there is a gender–age gap in this regard, an important question is whether young women in fact spend a greater amount of time in research and preparation than what is necessary for doing a good job, or whether young men in fact make too few preparations concerning what is expected from an MP. The narratives in the interviews clearly indicate the former – male legislators also appear to adequately prepare themselves, but with less over-preparation.

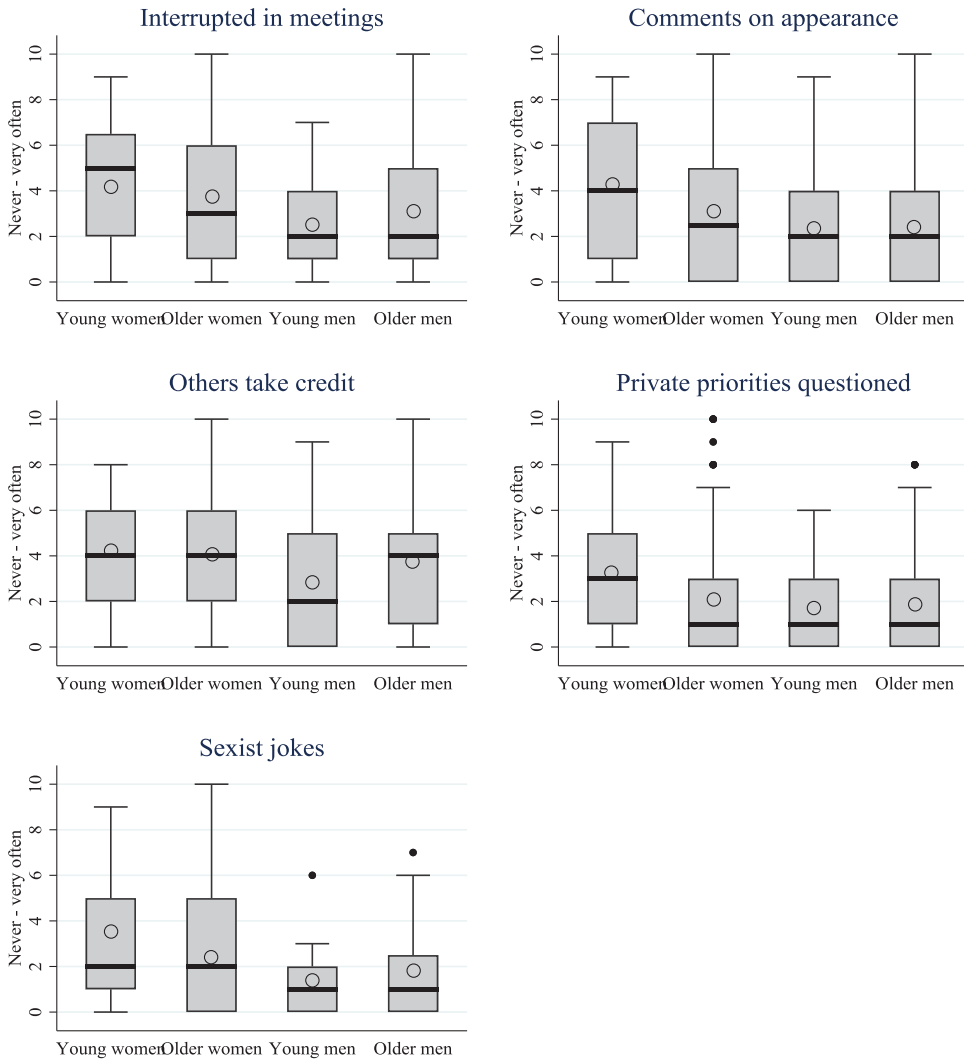
The reason young women apparently spend more time on preparation is most likely associated with a masculine parliamentary culture in which the competence and legitimacy of women, and especially young women, are questioned to a greater degree. Several women in fact reported that the obstacles they face in the Swedish Parliament are particularly obvious in masculine sectors and policy areas (2, 7, 8, 9, 10). It is evident that young women are subject on a regular basis to treatment that undermines them as politicians.

### **Negative treatment**

Respectful interaction between legislators is an important aspect of internal parliamentary life that has implications for the possibilities legislators have to conduct their work. We first examined MPs' experiences of micro-aggressions or micro-inequalities in respect to their perceptions of being interrupted in meetings; comments on their appearance; others receiving credit for their ideas and/or work; others questioning their private priorities; and others telling sexist jokes.<sup>8</sup> The descriptive statistics in [Figure 2](#) indicate that women MPs experience all these negative situations more often than men. Furthermore, young women comprise the most exposed group, while young men are those least exposed in respect to all five items. All this confirms both our first and third scenarios – gender trumps age, and being young apparently implies different things for men and women.

In order to further understand the relationship between gender and personal treatment, we modeled each of the five survey items as a function of both gender and other potential explanatory variables. After controlling for other possible background characteristics, we see from [Table 2](#) that women MPs are significantly more likely to report experiencing four of the five negative situations (Models 1). Young women appear to be a particularly exposed group (Models 2), even though the interaction term “young women” only reaches statistical significance for sexist jokes, presumably in part because of the small number of young women MPs in parliament. Also striking is the fact that young men appear to be either the least exposed group, or on the same level as experienced men, in relation to many of the survey items.

The interviews indicate that many of the young female MPs have experienced micro-aggressions or micro-inequalities that can be directly linked to situations in which the credibility and legitimacy of women are questioned or undermined. A majority of the young women interviewed have experienced situations in which they have been marginalized (3, 5, 21, 11, 29, 17, 28, 22, 12, 9, 24, 7, 13, 8). For example, several female legislators have been mistaken for secretaries or assistants, while others have been passed over in the order of speaking, their names have been forgotten, or someone else has taken credit for their ideas. There have also been a number of occasions upon which young women experience being mocked in ways that undermine their competence and credibility (25, 16, 2, 14,



**Figure 2.** Negative treatment within the Parliament.

Notes: Boxplots with marked means showing the distribution of answers on the five survey items “Interrupted in meetings,” “Comments on appearance,” “Others take credit,” “Priorities questioned” and “Sexist jokes.” Circles mark the mean; fat line the median. Boxes include 50% of all observations.

21, 13, 24, 12, 7, 5, 22, 8, 25, 10), with relevant examples including patronizing comments, misgivings, and sighs. Although a smaller number of male respondents also report similar experiences (1, 35, 4, 18, 37, 15), several of them they maintain that this does not happen frequently, and explicitly note that women in general are more exposed to such behavior than men (15, 35, 37).

Being young rather than being a new MP once again appears most relevant. As one young woman who experiences recurrent negative treatment in her parliamentary committee states,

I began using glasses to look more serious . . . I’m waiting for wrinkles, too, because that’s also good. (14)

**Table 2.** Negative treatment.

	Interrupted in meetings		Comments on appearance		Others take credit		Private priorities questioned		Sexist jokes	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Women	0.90*** (0.34)	0.78** (0.38)	0.86*** (0.33)	0.69* (0.37)	0.57* (0.33)	0.41 (0.37)	0.40 (0.30)	0.18 (0.34)	0.91*** (0.27)	0.67** (0.29)
Young ( $\leq 35$ years)	-0.01 (0.45)	-0.29 (0.58)	0.80* (0.44)	0.41 (0.57)	-0.19 (0.44)	-0.55 (0.57)	0.72* (0.40)	0.22 (0.52)	0.64* (0.36)	0.08 (0.47)
Women * Young		0.63 (0.84)		0.89 (0.82)		0.81 (0.82)		1.13 (0.75)		1.25* (0.66)
Years in office	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Front bench	-0.00 (0.49)	-0.04 (0.50)	0.99** (0.48)	0.93* (0.48)	0.02 (0.48)	-0.04 (0.48)	0.00 (0.44)	-0.08 (0.44)	0.43 (0.39)	0.34 (0.39)
Committee seat	-0.31 (0.41)	-0.32 (0.41)	0.67* (0.40)	0.66 (0.40)	0.43 (0.40)	0.42 (0.40)	0.23 (0.37)	0.22 (0.37)	0.42 (0.32)	0.40 (0.32)
Party controls	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Constant	3.25*** (0.52)	3.30*** (0.52)	1.14** (0.51)	1.21** (0.51)	2.80*** (0.51)	2.86*** (0.51)	1.35*** (0.46)	1.45*** (0.47)	1.03** (0.41)	1.14*** (0.41)
Observations	274	274	275	275	273	273	274	274	274	274
R-squared	0.07	0.08	0.12	0.12	0.05	0.06	0.03	0.04	0.11	0.12

Note: Standard errors in parentheses: \*\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .1$ .

### **The intersection of gender and age: implications for young women**

The results reveal the persistence of gender inequalities concerning how legislators experience their roles as MPs, including how they are treated by their colleagues. Age also appears to be an important factor for gaining an understanding of the gendered opportunities and obstacles individual legislators experience in their work – being young apparently implies different things for men and women. While young women comprise the group most exposed to the issues we have studied, young men are those least exposed, which implies that gender differences are greater within the group of young legislators.

Regardless of their positions or party affiliations, many of the female respondents who discuss gendered demands and expectations relate the difficulties they experience to their being young (12, 25, 28, 12, 14, 5, 13, 5, 32, 11, 16). A common view is that a young female legislator is in a more difficult situation than her male counterparts insofar as the combination of *being a woman and being young* makes it particularly difficult to be respected as competent and taken seriously. One female respondent explicitly states that

You have to work harder to be taken seriously and to prove that you know something. (28)

Another young female legislator who is a member of a traditionally male-dominated committee describes her experiences as a young woman working within a male issue area in the following way:

Especially being both young and a woman is not that easy. I don't find it as bad in the committee, but it's not easy in the world where I work, in this [traditionally male] issue area. Many people kind of think that you are not relevant, they prefer to talk to your older [male] colleague. (7)

When asked to reflect upon whether being young is an advantage or disadvantage in politics, a female respondent working within a traditionally male issue area stated that

I think it is an obvious disadvantage. I work a lot in [a traditionally male area] and being kind of young, and particularly a woman, is extremely negative . . . It's a journey to become credible. (13)

The same woman also related an incident when she went to a political negotiation as her party's representative and a male minister contacted her party afterwards and asked them to send the "real delegation" (13). She maintains that young male representatives are not treated in such a way.

Although a few young men have experienced not been taken seriously because of their age (30, 23, 35, 20, 15), there is a notable difference between men and women respondents in respect to the advantages and disadvantages they associate with being young. Not only do female respondents have more negative experiences in this regard, there is also a group of male respondents who describe their being young as mainly an advantage (27, 19, 33, 40, 38, 26). Several men also find age to be "irrelevant" for politics (4, 34, 1, 39, 31, 36, 18). Among the women interviewed, no one described their being young as mainly beneficial, although a few saw both its advantages and disadvantages, and only two maintained that age is irrelevant (3, 24).



The following examples from three different male respondents who experience being young as an advantage in politics are strikingly different from the female narratives:

Personally, I see no disadvantages. My view is that a [young legislator] is often more interesting and gets more for free. (27)

It depends on context, but I would generally say it is an advantage . . . . Many older legislators have been elected in my constituency, and I think that many people appreciate someone who is younger and appears more vigorous. (19)

The advantage [of being young] is that you have greater leeway for making mistakes and for eccentricities. (26)

Being a young legislator clearly appears to have a quite different meaning for men in comparison with women.

The interviews provide a more comprehensive understanding of the survey results and the enhanced gender gap that we find among young legislators, and these findings comprise the basis for two initial conclusions regarding how gender and age condition the opportunities legislators have for conducting their parliamentary work. First, men and women legislators have different experiences of the demands and expectations associated with their roles as MPs, including how being young influences the ways in which they are treated in parliament. Second, being young is a factor that reinforces the obstacles that many women encounter on the basis of gender. The combination of being a woman and being young is particularly problematic insofar as women experience that their competence is questioned because of both these factors, and that they consequently have to overcompensate in terms of being (excessively?) well-prepared and well-informed. Not only do male respondents regard being young as less problematic, they often deem it irrelevant if not in fact a beneficial. Our results thus indicate that being young is a factor of relevance regardless of an MP's tenure in parliament. While it is beyond the scope of this article to further explore the relation between being young and newly elected, it appears likely that a newly elected young woman legislator bears a triple burden.

In addition, the mechanisms we find in respect to the character of the gender/age gap appear relevant to women in general, but more significant for young women. Women experience many of the situations described in the interviews, such as being questioned, delegitimized, or marginalized, in other masculine contexts as well. We therefore suggest that being young reinforces gendered patterns for women insofar as young women are questioned and marginalized to an even greater extent than older women. Age does not have the same consequences for young male legislators, however. The survey and the interviews both appear to indicate that being young is primarily a positive rather than a negative factor for men, although the specifics of how this relation works require further exploration.

The issues we have examined in this article indicate that working conditions are not equal for all MPs, and these findings have important implications for young women's opportunities in politics. If young women perceive being an MP to be overly demanding and stressful, including being subjected to greater negative treatment, they may leave politics at a higher rate than others, which may have a significant impact upon women being able to build political careers and gain access to seniority benefits. Moreover, young women outside parliament may hesitate to climb the political ladder when they see how other young women experience working as MPs.

In the Swedish case, it appears that many young women who managed to attain the highest elected political office are particularly thick-skinned, and are not more likely to have considered leaving parliament in spite of their greater negative treatment, anxiety, and increased job demands.<sup>9</sup> A number of young women MPs stated in the interviews that they refuse to let negative treatment affect their job performance and referred to situations in which they spoke up because of inappropriate treatment by their colleagues (22, 21, 17, 21, 29, 13, 12). Many young women have also developed counterstrategies for avoiding negative treatment and handling such situations when they occur (17, 16, 22), even describing themselves as persons who manage to do their job in spite of the unequal conditions they face (21, 17, 3, 8). For example, one respondent maintains that

I am the kind of person who climbs the steps available. I might not see whether the conditions for men and women are different. (21)

Although these young women in the Swedish Parliament face great obstacles associated with both their gender and their age, they apparently do not let such impediments stop them from carrying out their legislative duties.

## Conclusion

Extending scholarship on gender and legislatures to include the intersection of gender and age constitutes a new and unexplored field. The empirical analysis we have presented suggests that gender gaps in parliamentary work are more pronounced among young MPs. While young women experience more pressure and anxiety, and are more often subject to negative treatment, young men are less exposed, also in comparison to older men and women in the Parliament. Moreover, the effects of being young are not simply additive insofar as while women are negatively influenced, men appear to be positively affected.

Our findings imply that norms and structures continue to exist in the Swedish Parliament that are both gendered and possess the component of ageism, at least for women. One possible explanation based upon previous research is that a knowledge norm ascribes competence primarily to older men while devaluing and questioning that of young women, with other gender/age norms also being at play. We conclude that while gendered patterns generally trump age in the legislature, they are reinforced and mediated by age. This finding points to the need to advance theory and empirical research concerning the complex relations between gender and age. Future research should also engage with other sources of data, such as those concerning performance, to validate our findings. The indication that young men are a particularly privileged group also requires further investigation.

The fact that women feel the need to prepare very carefully, relying upon abundant information, in order to be perceived as legitimate is consistent with previous research concerning women legislators which demonstrates that women who make it into parliament are more competent, work harder, and are more efficient lawmakers (Anzia and Berry 2011; Besley et al. 2017; Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013). We add to such findings by suggesting that these dynamics may be particularly pertinent for young women, who thus appear to face a double bias. Previous research also shows that women legislators display a greater tendency than men to collaborate and seek alliances

across party divisions (see e.g. Barnes 2016; Johnson and Josefsson 2016; Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013). The results presented here suggest that collaboration may be a strategy among women for meeting the higher demands placed upon them, acquiring more information, and ensuring that their political proposals are passed.

Sweden is unique in the sense that women have enjoyed almost equal numerical representation in parliament for over two decades. This period of time should have been sufficient, at least theoretically, for norms and institutions that privilege men and masculine behavior to change. Nonetheless, our results show that women, and particularly young women, still face greater obstacles and pay a higher price for their political engagement than their male colleagues. Insofar as there is an age-gender gap in the Swedish case, which is often regarded as a model of gender equality, such differences are also likely found in legislatures in other parts of the world, where women have only recently made inroads into politics, the surrounding society has not developed strong norms concerning gender equality, and there are fewer women MPs, particularly young women. Our findings are also likely generalizable to other high competence/high performance fields that historically have been dominated by men, such as academia.

Engaging young people in politics is crucial for strengthening democracy, and the underrepresentation of young people in formal politics should be regarded as a challenge to democracy itself. Young women are a particularly underrepresented group in legislatures worldwide, and it is potentially detrimental to their political ambitions and access to power if they face greater obstacles in their daily parliamentary work than men do. Future research should direct greater attention to the intersection of gender and age in efforts to map the frequency and nature of the marginalization and discrimination young women MPs encounter.

## Notes

1. Although the first and second scenarios are mutually exclusive, the first and the third can potentially be combined. We would then picture a situation in which gender trumps age, with both younger and older women perceiving higher demands being placed upon them than younger and older men, while being young is a negative factor for women and a positive factor for men.
2. Since we have only conducted interviews with young legislators, we can unfortunately not make comparisons across age groups.
3. 72% of all women legislators and 78% of all men are full members of a committee in the 2014-2018 Parliament.
4. In respect to the total number of MPs, 15% of the women and 16% of the men hold leadership positions in the 2014-2018 Parliament.
5. Survey question: How do you perceive the demands associated with your duties as an MP (0 – too low; 10 – too high)?
6. One-sided *t*-test.
7. Survey question: How often are you worried about committing mistakes in your job as an MP (0 – never; 10 – very often)?
8. Survey questions: How often do you experience the following situations in your job as an MP (0 – never; 10 – very often)? (a) Interrupted in meetings; (b) comments on your appearance; (c) other MPs receiving credit for your ideas and/or work; (d) other MPs questioning your private priorities; (e) other MPs telling sexist jokes.
9. When we asked MPs whether they had considered leaving parliament on a scale from 0 (never considered leaving) to 10 (think about leaving very often), there is no statistically

significant difference between young men and young women (women answered 3.38 on average and men 2.97 on average,  $p = .305$ ).

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