How political groups frame gender equality and human rights in the European Parliament

The European Parliament has passed a number of resolutions that support gender equality and LGBTQI rights. Yet among MEPs, there remain sharp differences in opinion over these issues. Drawing on a new study, **Petra Ahrens, Barbara Gaweda** *and* **Johanna Kantola** *identify how these debates are structured between political groups in the Parliament.*

The EU presents itself as a stronghold of gender equality and LGBTQI rights, as well as a 'Community of Values'. Yet, within Europe, these principles are frequently contested by actors such as the religious right. One of the main forms of opposition that is expressed by these actors is a challenge to the notion that women's rights are 'human rights'. The religious right has often articulated this perspective by replacing the language of human rights with religious statements.

The European Parliament plays a prominent role in these debates as MEPs have called for 'rule of law conditionality' in relation to the EU budget. This means that states which are judged to have fallen short of specified standards would be denied payments from the budget. The European Parliament has also adopted a number of resolutions on gender equality and LGBTQI rights, most recently the 'Resolution on the first anniversary of the de facto abortion ban in Poland'.

Although the European Parliament often takes a united position vis-à-vis the Council, the Commission or individual member states, it is characterised by struggles between and within its political groups. The political groups play an important role in positioning human rights (including women's and LGBTQI rights) as a core democratic value in the EU.

In a recent study, we found the political groups divided into three distinct clusters within the Parliament as regards to their approach to women's rights as human rights. These can be roughly approximated as a set of *defenders*, who stress that women's rights and LGBTQI rights are fundamental EU values and universal human rights; *reframers*, who challenge the defenders' discourses and aim to reframe human rights by intertwining them with a religious sexual order; and *fence sitters*, who oscillate between *defenders* and *reframers*.

Defenders

Political groups at the Greens-Alternatives-Libertarian end of the political spectrum are the main actors that frame women's rights and LGBTQI rights as integral, universal, and indivisible human rights. MEPs from these groups not only make this case in relation to non-EU states, but are also willing to recognise and tackle problems within the EU's member states.

Support for the principle is most apparent among the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) and the Left (GUE/NGL) groups in the European Parliament. The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and Renew Europe groups also frame the promotion of women's rights and LGBTQI rights as a question of European identity, but the extent to which these issues are key components of the identity of the political group itself is less pronounced for these two groups. In their framing, gender and sexuality rights are nevertheless presented as a litmus test of progress and civilisation, with the issue politicised as being 'inherently European'.

When MEPs position themselves as promoters and defenders of human rights, they establish a clear dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', with the targets of their interventions portrayed as being 'backward' and 'other' to Europe. These performative proclamations by MEPs thus help to establish a narrative about the identity of political groups, the European Parliament, and Europe more broadly.

Reframers

The *reframers* correspond to those at the [Traditionalists-Authoritarians-Nationalists](#) end of the political spectrum. This includes representatives from the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) groups in the current European Parliament, as well as the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group in the previous European Parliament. While these groups are primarily associated with Euroscepticism, they often frame human rights with reference to both religious principles and the question of 'sovereignty'. MEPs from these political groups have also [used direct and indirect opposition strategies](#) when it comes to the strengthening of gender equality in human rights debates.

The rhetorical use of religion by these actors is both strategic and instrumental. They consistently bend the meaning of equality within the context of human rights and direct it toward other political goals. A notable example is the attempt to compare 'Christian Europe' with Islam, where Islamic culture is presented as homophobic. Such arguments are especially prominent among members of the Identity and Democracy group. There is a clear paradox in the way that members of this cluster frequently oppose women's rights and LGBTQI rights on the one hand, yet cite these principles when expressing opposition to Islam.

Sitting on the fence

The final cluster of political groups effectively 'sit on the fence'. The European People's Party (EPP) group, as well as the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group in the 2014-19 European Parliament, have neither pushed for an expansion of the definition of human rights to include more rights groups, nor actively sought to reframe the issue. There has been a general lack of cohesion in their overall positioning, with groups in this cluster expressing a combination of the arguments used by *defenders* and *reframers*. MEPs in these groups have therefore fluctuated between the first two clusters.

A significant finding in our research is that within these groups, the arguments put forward by MEPs who saw women's rights and LGBTQI rights as 'human rights' were similar to the arguments of the MEPs in the *defenders* cluster. The main difference centred on the degree to which these MEPs were willing to publicly present these issues as core identity values for their political group. For instance, tensions were publicly visible within the EPP group in relation to the issue of [Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights](#).

Those groups that 'sat on the fence' also illustrated the important differences that exist between national delegations in the European Parliament. Overall, the EPP and EFDD groups emphasised the status quo, but their ambiguous and heterogenous framings led to a lack of consistency in their approach, which prevented them from establishing themselves as cohesive pro-human rights or pro-equality actors. National and geographical divisions within the EPP and EFDD were particularly important in this context as they had the potential to tip the scales between the *defenders* and *reframers* within the European Parliament.

The fragility of the European Parliament's stance on human rights

As a self-purported promoter of human rights 'at home and abroad', the European Parliament has become a deliberative space for framing and reframing human rights as fundamental EU values. The Parliament exhibits strong tensions between its members when it comes to the relationship between human rights, gender equality, LGBTQI rights, and religion. Indeed, these tensions are also apparent within the political groups.

The principle that women's rights and LGBTQI rights are 'human rights' is therefore a fundamentally fragile one. Political groups are far from uniform blocs and when these issues are debated, there are often clear conflicts that become visible. These conflicts provide an informative example of the way that opposition to gender equality and LGBTQI rights are articulated in a transnational context.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying article in the [Journal of European Integration](#)