



# Sexual division of labour in the French Parliament

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► **To cite this version:**

| Quentin Lippmann. Sexual division of labour in the French Parliament. 2019. halshs-02520766

**HAL Id: halshs-02520766**

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Submitted on 26 Mar 2020

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# SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR IN THE FRENCH PARLIAMENT

IPP Policy Briefs

No. 38

March 2019

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Women are increasingly present in politics. In 2018, they held nearly 39% of the seats in France's lower house ("l'Assemblée Nationale" or "the National Assembly") and 32% in its upper house ("le Sénat" or "the Senate"). However, do they do the same work as the men? This policy brief answers that question by studying sexual division of labour in the French Parliament for the period from 2002 to 2017 using an original method consisting in analysing the lexical content of the amendments filed and of the amendments passed. We show that the topic in which the gender-based differences in parliamentary work are the most marked is very specifically the topic of gender equality. On average, during one term of office, the probability of a female French Member of Parliament (MP) initiating at least one amendment on topics related to gender equality is 75% higher than that of a male French MP doing so. Female French MPs are also 25% more likely to initiate amendments on topics related to childhood and about 10% more likely to do so on topics related to immigration and health. Conversely, male French MPs are, for example, 25% more likely to initiate amendments on topics related to defence. Further statistical analysis shows that these differences cannot be explained by the female and male MPs coming from constituencies that are not comparable and that represent different electors in different parties. This implies that the division of parliamentary work probably results from objectives being intrinsically different between female and male MPs and, also from that fact that women entering politics has led to a change in the topics addressed by the French Parliament. For example, from 2002 to 2017, out of all of the amendments, the proportion of those relating to gender equality increased by nearly 70% in the National Assembly.

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- There is a gender-based division of labour in the parliamentary work done in France's National Assembly.
- The probability of a female MP initiating at least one amendment on topics related to gender equality is 75% higher than that of a male MP doing so (40% likelihood for women as against 23% for men). Female MPs are also 25% more likely to initiate at least one amendment on topics related to childhood and about 10% more likely to do so on topics related to immigration and health.
- The probability of a French male MP initiating at least one amendment on defence-related topics is 25% higher than that of a French female MP doing so.
- This division would appear to reflect the differences in objectives between female and male parliamentarians. It is not due to the fact that the men and women were elected in different constituencies or in different parties. It is not entirely due to political party strategies either.
- The increase in the number of women in the French Parliament has been accompanied by a higher prevalence of topics related to gender equality. In the French National Assembly, the prevalence of these subjects among the initiated amendments increased by nearly 70% from 2002 to 2017.



The Institut des Politiques Publiques (IPP) has been developed through a scientific partnership between the Paris School of Economics (PSE) and the Centre for Research in Economics and Statistics (CREST). IPP's aim is to promote quantitative analysis and evaluation of public policy using cutting-edge research methods in economics

In France, for a long time, women were largely absent from the political sphere. To reduce this inequality, the French Parity Law that came into force in 2001, incited political parties to make 50% of their candidates women for general elections ("élections législatives") by withholding funding if they did not. The proportion of French MPs who are female has thus increased considerably, with it going from 10% in 2000 to nearly 39% in 2017.

But while women are to be found in increasing numbers in French politics, **do female MPs do the same work as their male colleagues?** In theory, there are **two opposing views** on the role of politicians' gender in the work they do. Elected in 577 different constituencies, **French MPs should represent the interests of all of the electors in their constituency in Parliament.** Their gender should not therefore have an influence on their legislative work. However, another set of arguments maintains that politicians' gender could play a decisive part, arguing that **MPs listen more attentively to or share the priorities of the electors of the same sex as them.**

These two visions have different implications in terms of public policy. If, instead of representing solely the interests of the electors in their constituencies, MPs also represent the interests specific to their gender, then putting in place parity obligations in politics would ensure that the interests of women are better represented in Parliament.

This policy brief aims to answer these questions by studying gender-based division of labour in the parliamentary work of the National Assembly and of the Senate during the period from 2002 to 2017 in France.

## How can sexual division of labour in parliament be measured?

Since parliamentary work is multi-dimensional, we chose to focus on the production of amendments for two reasons. Firstly, because **the right to amendment currently constitutes "the main form of expression for MPs' right to initiative"**<sup>1</sup>. It consists in deleting from, drafting, changing, or adding to the bills examined in Parliament. Secondly, because, since the right to amendment is free and unlimited, it constitutes one of the main activities of parliamentarians. By way of illustration, over the period studied from 2002 to 2017, over 200,000 amendments were initiated at the National Assembly, i.e. nearly 30 amendments per MP every year.

The topics of the amendments are not indicated. Therefore, in order to identify them, we used a **text analysis method based on construction of dictionaries.** This method consisted in manually grouping together sets of

words related to a topic and in classifying an amendment as being on that topic if it contained one of those words. For example, for the topic related to gender equality, the dictionary contained the words "woman", "gender", and "sex". If an amendment contained any one of those words, it was classified as concerning the topic related to gender equality. This simple method operated very well in practice. For the example of the topic related to gender equality, it was observed that nearly 90% of the amendments classified as being on that topic were indeed aimed at reducing gender inequality or more generally at improving living conditions for women.

## Findings on the entire set of amendments

Firstly, we studied the gender-based differences in all of the amendments debated during the period from 2002 to 2017. For each topic, **Graph 1** represents the relative difference between the women's share and the men's share of MPs having initiated at least one amendment.

### *Gender equality, childhood, immigration and health among the topics that were the most feminine*

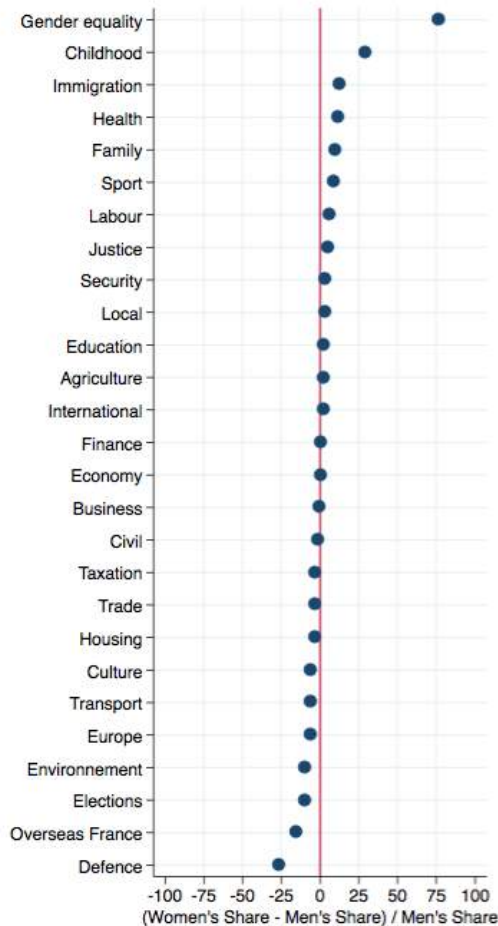
**The topic in which the gender-based differences were the most marked was the topic of gender equality.** On average, during one term of office, the women's share of MPs initiating at least one amendment on those topics was about 40% while the men's share was less than 23%. Thus, the first line of **Graph 1** shows that, **during one term of office, the probability of a female MP initiating at least one amendment on topics related to gender equality is 75% higher than that of a male MP doing so**<sup>2</sup>.

The second topic on which the gender differences were the most marked was childhood. On this topic, women were 25% more likely than men to initiate at least one amendment. For the topics related to immigration and to health, female MPs were about 10% more likely than men to initiate at least one amendment. These topics came above the topic of family, for which the gender-based differences were relatively small.

2. This difference cannot be explained by greater investment from women in the work of the Parliament since, during their terms of office, they initiated a number of amendments equivalent to the number initiated by men (namely about 125 amendments per term, see Lippmann, 2019, for more details).

1. For a detailed description of the parliamentary work, see <http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/decouvrir-l-assemblee>.

Graph 1 – Sexual division over all of the amendments



Interpretation : During one term of office, a female MP is 75% more likely than a male MP to initiate at least one amendment on the topics related to gender equality.  
Source : Amendments of the French National Assembly from 2002 to 2017.

### Defence, Overseas France, and elections among the topics that were the most masculine

Men were more active on defence-related topics, i.e. military-related and armed-forces-related topics. On average, during one term of office, **the probability of a man initiating at least one amendment on those topics was 25% higher than that of a woman doing so.** In second position came topics related to Overseas France, and, on those topics, men were about 10% more likely to initiate at least one amendment. Finally, for topics related to elections and to the environment, men were in the range 5% to 10% more likely than women to initiate at least one amendment. The differences on the latter two topics are, however, not statistically significant.

### No difference on many topics

For the other topics, there are only very small or no differences in the involvement of female and of male MPs. The absence of difference is interesting here because it sometimes goes against certain stereotypes. For example,

education is often supposed to be a field that is associated more with women, in particular because of women being very much in the majority in the teaching profession, and yet there would appear to be no gender-based difference on this topic. In the same way, agriculture, sometimes considered to be a topic associated more with men, does not show any gender-based differences.

## Sexual division depending on the outcome for the amendment

Initiated amendments have real impacts on society only if they are accepted and incorporated into the laws. We therefore continued the analysis by examining the acceptance rates and the sexual division among the accepted amendments.

### Female MPs have better acceptance rates

Graph 2 proposes a comparison of the acceptance rates of the amendments initiated by women and of those initiated by men for each topic (odds ratio)..

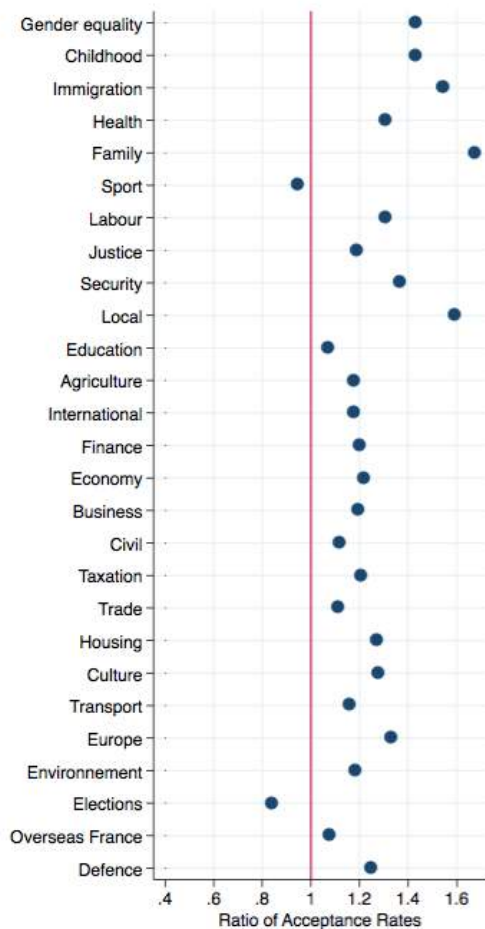
It can be observed that **for almost all of the topics, the acceptance rates of the amendments initiated by women are higher than those for the amendments initiated by men.** For topics related to gender equality, the amendments initiated by women were thus accepted 1.4 times more often than those initiated by men. These differences were particularly large for topics on which women are more active than their male counterparts, such as, for example, immigration or gender equality. It would appear that it is only for the topics related to sport and elections that men have acceptance rates higher than those of women.

### A higher sexual division among the amendments that were accepted

The differences in parliamentary work between female and male MPs were amplified by women obtaining better acceptance rates on the topics on which they are the most active. Graph 3 confirms this by representing the gender-based differences among the accepted amendments (rather than among the initiated amendments)..

Whereas over all of the amendments, the probability of a woman initiating at least one amendment was 75% higher than that of a man doing so, that difference was doubled to reach 150% when we focused on accepted amendments. We observed similar phenomena for the topics related to childhood, immigration, and health.

Graph 2 - Ratio of acceptance rates for the amendments initiated by female and by male MPs for each topic



Interpretation : The amendments initiated by women on topics related to gender equality were accepted and therefore incorporated into laws 1.4 times more often than those initiated by men.  
Source : Amendments of the French National Assembly from 2002 to 2017.

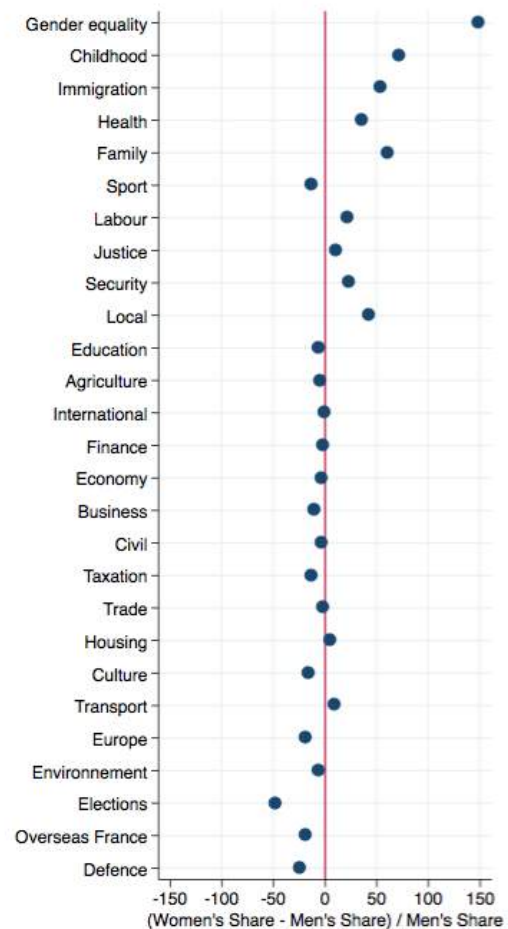
Significant differences also appeared on certain subjects that did not stand out earlier. This applied to family-related topics, and, to a lesser extent, to topics related to local, security, and labour issues. Conversely, as regards the topics for which male MPs were more active than female MPs, we did not observe any big differences between initiated and accepted amendments. This can be explained by the fact that the acceptance rates of the amendments initiated by women and by men on these topics were close.

### How can sexual division of labour in parliament be explained?

The existence of sexual division of labour in the work of the French Parliament is undeniable. But what does this division reflect? Several mechanisms are possible.

A first explanation would be that, since the women were not elected in the same constituencies as the men, they did not defend the same policies as the men. For example,

Graph 3 - Sexual division among the amendments accepted and incorporated into laws



Interpretation : During one term of office, a female MP is 150% more likely than a male MP to initiate at least one amendment that is accepted and incorporated into the laws on the topics related to gender equality.  
Source : Amendments of the French National Assembly from 2002 to 2017.

the women might have been elected in constituencies that were more egalitarian and more inclined to press for measures in favour of gender equality. That could explain the higher involvement of women in certain topics. This explanation did not stand up to further empirical analysis. In particular, when we looked at constituencies in which a woman had replaced a man, we found a very similar division. In the same way, when we limited the analysis to elections won closely by a woman against a man, and for which it could be considered that the outcome could have gone either way, we observed a similar division of labour in the work done by Parliament. These two points suggest that our findings did not capture how female and male MPs belonged to different constituencies (see Lippmann, 2019, for more details).

The second explanation could be that the political parties position women strategically on certain topics. For example, they might anticipate that amendments on women-related topics are more likely to be accepted when they are defended by a woman rather than by a man. However, when the study was restricted to the



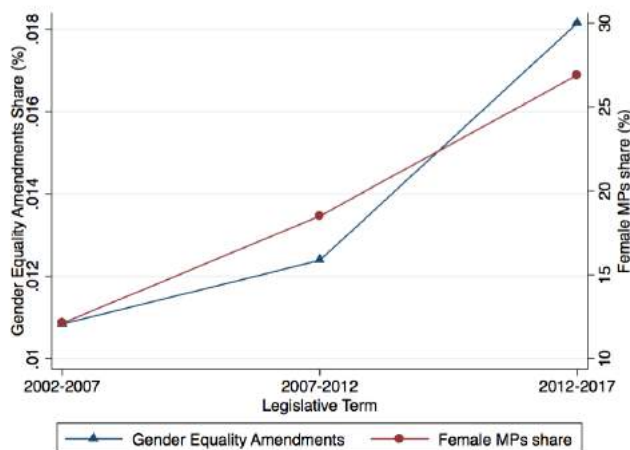
amendments that were more likely to reflect the individual preferences of the MPs and less those of the political party, we observed a sexual division that was even more marked. For example, when we limited our focus to the amendments initiated by an MP from the governing majority and rejected by the same majority, we observed gender-based differences that were even larger on the topic of gender equality, and that could not be explained by strategies by the political parties.

The third explanation is **the difference in personal objectives between the women and the men**. Such a difference could be motivated by desires to act on different topics. Female MPs might have intrinsic motivations that differ from those of the men, and that could be reflected in their parliamentary work. That difference could also be due to anticipations of success in passing certain policies. For example, the women might have taken on board the idea that they are more credible on certain topics and thus might have specialised in them. These two explanations are probable but it is difficult to distinguish between them.

## Towards different public policies?

Since the women's share in the National Assembly grew from 12% to 26% between the 2002 election and the 2012 election, we might expect that that growth has led to a higher prevalence of certain topics. To study this question, [Graph 4](#) describes the change in the share represented by gender equality amendments and the share held by women in the National Assembly for the three legislative terms from 2002 to 2017.

**Graph 4 - Growth in the prevalence of amendments related to gender equality and in the share represented by female MPs in the National Assembly**

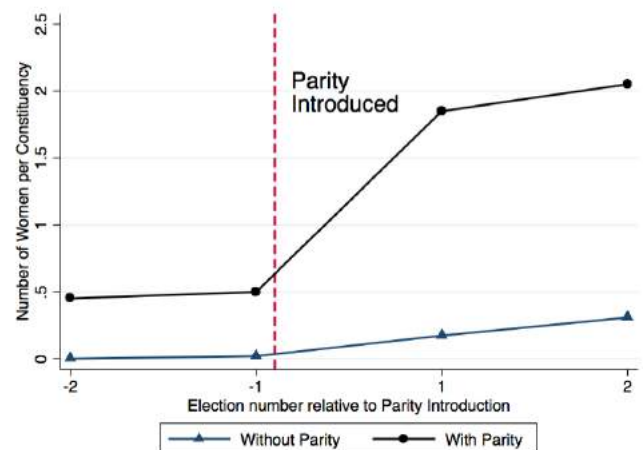


Interpretation : During the legislative term from 2002 to 2007, about 1.1% of the amendments related to gender equality (left axis) and 12% of the MPs were women (right axis).  
Source : Amendments of the French National Assembly from 2002 to 2017.

Over the period, the share represented by gender equality amendments grew by nearly 70% going from 1.08% of the amendments over the legislative term from 2002 to 2007, to nearly 1.85% during the legislative term from 2012 to 2017. In the same way, the share held by female MPs doubled, going from 12% to over 26%.

To go further in studying the relationship between the number of female parliamentarians and the prevalence of amendments on gender equality, it is interesting to analyse the case of the French Senate. Since 2001, the lists of candidates have been required to include at least 50% women in constituencies returning more than 4 senators. That law has therefore led to a large increase in the number of women elected in the constituencies where parity applies, as shown in [Graph 5](#). We observe that, in those constituencies, the number of women elected grew from 0.5 to nearly 2 while in the constituencies in which parity was not an obligation, the increase has been much smaller.

**Graph 5 - Growth in the number of women per type of constituency in the Senate**

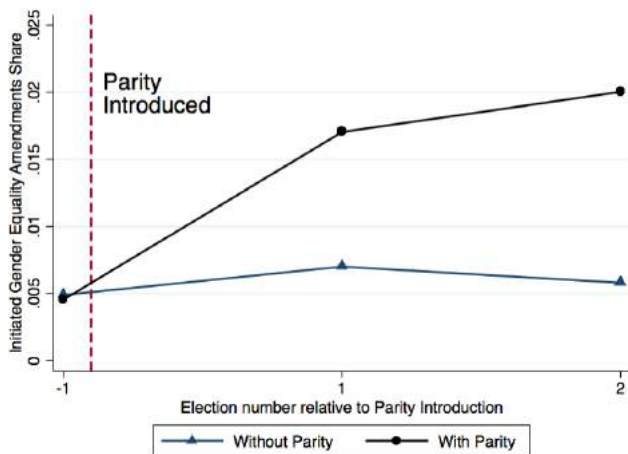


Interpretation : The number of women per constituency after the first election after parity was introduced was 2 in the constituencies to which the parity obligation of the Parity Law applied.  
Source : Results of the French Senatorial Elections from 1985 to 2014.

This increase in the number of women was accompanied by a greater prevalence in the number of amendments initiated on gender equality. In [Graph 6](#), it can be seen that a stable proportion of about 0.5% of the amendments initiated every year (one amendment out of every 200) related to gender equality during the period from 2001 to 2017 in the constituencies to which the parity obligation of the French Parity Law did not apply. Conversely, that proportion quadrupled, going from 0.5% to 2% after parity was introduced in the constituencies to which it applied. This result shows directly that laws on parity in Parliament change the content of the parliamentary work, and ultimately the content of the laws enacted by Parliament.

For the other topics for which gender-based differences existed, the findings were less clear cut. At the Natio-

Graph 6 – Growth in the prevalence of amendments related to gender equality per type of constituency in the Senate



Interpretation : The share represented by the initiated amendments per constituency that related to gender equality was 1.9% in the constituencies to which the parity obligation of the Parity Law applied during the first legislative term after that law came into force.

Source : Results of the French Senatorial Elections from 1985 to 2014.

nal Assembly, over the period from 2002 to 2017, an increase of nearly 30% can be observed in the prevalence of childhood-related topics, which grew from 2.6% of all amendments during the legislative term from 2002 to 2007 to nearly 3.3% during the legislative term from 2012 to 2017.

## Conclusion

**Analysis of the amendments initiated at France's National Assembly reveals a sexual division of labour in the parliamentary work.** Women initiate more amendments on topics related to women, childhood, immigration, and health. Men are more active on topics related to defence, Overseas France, and elections. This division was found both among the amendments accepted and incorporated into laws and also among those that were rejected. An analysis of the underlying mechanisms would suggest that this division appears to be due, to a large extent, to differences in personal objectives between female and male parliamentarians.

These results would suggest that **the presence of women in politics has enabled a change to be made in the contents of the public policies passed by Parliament.** The prevalence of the topics related to gender equality among the initiated amendments thus grew by nearly 70% at the National Assembly over the period from 2002 to 2017. It also increased at the Senate in the constituencies in which the French Parity Law required a larger proportion of female Senators.

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## Reference of the study

This policy brief is based on the following working document : "Gender and Lawmaking in Times of Quotas. Evidence from the French Parliament", Quentin Lippmann.