(How) Does Feminisation Change a Parliament? Rainbow Murray

Thanks largely to gender quotas, parliaments around the world have feminised significantly in the past twenty years. One of the many expected consequences of this feminisation is that it will transform parliaments as institutions. As women become more numerous, they are better able to work together, mentor each other, access positions of power, rise through the ranks, and improve the culture and organisation of parliaments to make them more "women-friendly". While this argument has some legitimacy, it overlooks the extent to which institutional norms are deeply entrenched and difficult to shift. Prior political trajectories, insider knowledge and networks all serve to reinforce male power. Women may find themselves bound by existing norms and expectations, and pushed into traditionally "feminine" roles and away from the foci of power.

This paper summarises the core findings of a major study of the French parliament following its feminisation in the wake of parity legislation. It notes the formal differences that emerge between women and men, such as gender gaps in committee membership and parliamentary questions. It also notes how informal institutions contribute to these gaps, steering women towards certain roles and policy areas and away from others. It illuminates the many subtle differences that permeate parliamentary life and result in less illustrious careers for female politicians than their male counterparts. The findings cast light on the broader question of how to effect institutional change, arguing that feminisation is a necessary but not sufficient condition.