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Zahra Runderkamp
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
z.a.runderkamp@uva.nl

Abstract
Women politicians drop out of politics more often and earlier than men, but we have not yet captured why. Building on feminist institutionalism and through interviews with local Dutch politicians that dropped out before the end of their term, this study aims to generate quality narratives to show why and how women local politicians drop out of politics. I take into account their other life spheres, beyond political work. The women politicians I interviewed resist the gendered nature of the local council on several dimensions. All these dimensions are gendered and come at an increased workload for women specifically. I demonstrate that women drop out when changes occur in any of their life spheres, no longer being able to 'play simultaneous chess'. I conclude that these women dropped out not for political reasons necessarily, but because they cannot continue to combine their deeply personal political lives.

Introduction
The Netherlands shows a considerable gender gap across politics. Despite improved women's participation rates, women politicians remain a minority, and their increasing resignations from politics are shrinking their political presence. Although they comprise half the national population, only around 30% of local politicians are women. As in other countries, women politicians are professionally active for shorter periods and drop out of politics more often than men. Turnover rates are high amongst local Dutch politicians, especially women (BZK, 2022; Castenmiller et al., 2002).

The low representation of women in politics is not confined to the Netherlands, and can be explained by many micro-, meso-, and macro- factors, such as gender-equality culture and party organization (Wängnerud, 2009). We may learn most about why women leave politics from those who have stepped down during their terms. However, empirical methods usually fail to reach such individuals (Vanlangenakker et al., 2013). To disrupt this pattern, for this study, I interviewed politicians who stepped down during their terms. Seeking to generate quality narratives to show why and how local-level women politicians resigned from politics, I investigated how women's lived experiences in local political institutions could explain their dropout. My definition of 'dropout' is politicians leaving politics for reasons other than retirement or non-election, or: 'non-electoral turnover', borrowing from Allen. Allen's research from the UK uncovers a multitude of gendered patterns in drop out, as well as the significance of the local level, where the lack of 'enough' women for the 'eligibility pool' upstream in politics is an important consideration to improve the leaky pipeline (2012, 2013a, 2013b, p. 208).

This study aims to offer better understanding into the gendered logics of political dropouts. At the same time, I hope that it can contribute to change – hence, a summary of the study is published in Dutch as an open-access report via Dutch government channels.[1] For the present paper, I begin with an overview of literature on gendered dropout and gendered workplaces. Next, I explain my theoretical lens of feminist institutionalism (FI) and its consequences for my study. I then elaborate on the case of the Netherlands, before detailing my methods. Finally in the results section, I scrutinize the municipality as a gendered workplace with significant barriers to equal participation that force women into combining their roles and responsibilities, akin to playing a game of simultaneous chess.

Who does *not* make it?
Zooming out from a focus on sitting politicians, I take the legislative recruitment process as a starting point (Norris, 1997). Concentrating on who persists in this process has been called 'survivorship bias', and indeed previous scholarship focuses on 'winners'. I therefore ask: who does *not* make it? Unlike previous work that assumes that the candidate pool gradually shrinks with every step in the recruitment process, my research analyses those already elected. I am also aware how dropout is a problem in earlier parts of the recruitment process, such as the gendered expression of political interest in the first place (Piscopo, 2019) and amongst aspirants deciding (not) to run (Runderkamp et al., 2023).

What we know about politicians who drop out, especially under gendered circumstances, is limited. The lacuna is partly explained by these politicians no longer figuring in the representative institutions, though these institutions have been studied with a gendered lens (Childs, 2016; Miller, 2021). We do know that to what extent they can actually influence policy post-election plays a role in women's decisions to stay (Lawless & Theriault, 2005). Plus, party context matters; in Belgium, for example, parties with a female leader have fewer women dropouts (Slegten & Heyndels, 2022). Dutch studies show that women councillors drop out more often (Castenmiller et al., 2002; Tjalma-den Oudsten, 2006), are replaced more often by men (Jansen et al., 2016) and less often serve more than one term

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[1] https://www.kennisopenbaarbestuur.nl/documenten/rapporten/2021/02/26/de-selectieve-uitval-van-raadsleden-en-wethouders-beter-begrijpen

than men (Jansen et al., 2019; Overheid in Nederland, 2020). This is notably the case for women under 40 and in larger municipalities (Jansen et al., 2016). Generally, local-level women politicians have shorter political careers (BZK, 2020, p. 50) and face a substantial gender gap in post-parliamentary career opportunities (Claessen et al., 2020). These findings suggest that women face different circumstances in their elected-representative work also after being elected.

Scholars have examined the conditions that enable representation through a Feminist Institutionalist (FI) lens, which scrutinizes how gender norms shape institutions and power (Celis & Childs, 2020; Kenny, 2007, 2013; Mackay et al., 2010). FI aims to generate insights to enable political change (Krook & Mackay, 2011, p. 4), such as creating gender-sensitive parliaments. As discursive institutions, parliaments themselves structure how their inhabitants work and act. FI is also critical of the political-personal dichotomy (Krook & Mackay, 2011), acknowledging that 'outside' factors may impact 'inside' political work. It stipulates attention be paid to how the legislative sphere interfaces with other social dimensions, including home life, as a source of tension for politicians. Informed by this FI perspective, I include all life spheres in my research, encompassing not just political work but also care tasks and/or non-political employment.

To empirically research all these spheres, I deployed the FI-inspired Gendered Workplace Approach (GWA) (Erikson & Josefsson, 2020). Previous scholarship considers how and to what degree a workplace may be gendered (Acker, 1990), while the GWA looks at parliamentary workplaces specifically. 'Gendering' the parliamentary workplace as such uncovers influences on women's representational opportunities. While the GWA focuses on women in office, I show how it may also facilitate studying gendered dropout decisions. Looking beyond sitting politicians offers new perspectives on how parliaments are gendered and how that drives dropout decisions. In turn, the GWA framework helped me structure the diverse reasons that might contribute to dropout decisions beyond the purely political.

The GWA distinguishes five dimensions, each of which my results section addresses with corresponding data. First, within the context of organization of work, I asked what the boundaries of the political and the private were, as well as how work was regulated, such as through parental leave or working hours. For example, women more often work part-time than men because they performed more care tasks at the home. This 'second shift' – or, as termed for politics, 'triple duty' (Hibbs, 2022) and 'juggling of three life spheres' (Emery et al., 2018) – has serious implications for the time and energy that women, as my interviewees put it, 'have left' to spend on political careers and, specifically, local political functions.

Second, I examined how tasks and assignments were determined and allocated, for instance, through portfolio divisions. Here, I referenced research examining 'female' versus 'male' topics (Ballington & Karam, 2005; Coffé et al., 2019). Although this scholarship shows that such gendered divisions are slowly declining, health, emancipation policy, and family affairs remained major electoral campaign topics for women politicians and were reflected in portfolio divisions (Wängnerud, 2000). Both 'female' and 'male' topics were substantively important, including at the local level, and affected the everyday life of citizens, perhaps impacting women even more so. At the Dutch local level, this division translated to 'soft' versus 'hard' topics.

Third, I considered how leadership was appointed and performed. I drew from earlier scholarship on women as leaders, revealing significant role incongruity. Systemic sexism has led to women being deemed less favourable or 'natural' occupants of leadership ranks, as well as invited harsher evaluations by voters and citizens. As a result, women have had to do 'extra' work to maintain their leadership and perform leadership in specific ways, while having less freedom than men to articulate it (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Fourth, I explored the distinction between hard and soft infrastructure and how both types impacted politicians. For hard infrastructure, I analysed buildings and other physical spaces in terms of how they did or did not cater to women. Under soft infrastructure, I looked

at human support functions and how this support was allocated and reflected resources and access.

Fifth, within the dimension of interaction between politicians, I analysed how political colleagues interacted along different avenues and what norms dictated how one was supposed to behave. This concerned, for example, the separation between formal and informal labour venues, such as working over drinks. The main question here was: what is deemed appropriate?

The Dutch context
The Netherlands is a parliamentary democracy, politically organized at local, provincial, and national levels. Majorities are formed by coalition, necessitating negotiation and compromise. The Netherlands makes for an interesting case study because its system of proportional representation is conducive to diverse representation through a multitude of political parties (Vermeulen et al., 2020).

Since the 1970s, women have slowly made inroads into politics but are still a minority (Mügge & Runderkamp, 2019). Women constitute about 30% of local-level politicians and closer to 40% of national-level politicians. On a scale from 0 to 1, the Netherlands scores only 0.460 for political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2023), and in April 2024, was 30th in the monthly ranking of women in national parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). These numbers show that gender equality still needs ample attention.

Local Dutch politics provides fertile ground for studying gendered dropout patterns. With local-level governance comprising the most politicians worldwide, studying dropout at this level provides insights at scale (Sumner et al., 2020). The Netherlands has over 300 municipalities, wherein over 8000 councillors and over 1000 alderpersons are active. Since 2015, substantial power has been decentralized from the national to the local levels, increasing the load of substantive topics decided by local politicians, such as youth services. What's more, local politics is a springboard for a 'political career' (BZK, 2020, p. 50), with many national-level politicians having first gained local experience (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Van den Braak, 2022). Thus, understanding dynamics at the local level can yield insights into the influx of politicians at other levels.

Methods
This study focuses on Dutch councillors and alderpersons during the period 2018-2022. The article is based on a unique set of 15 semi-structured interviews in Dutch, conducted online because of the COVID-19 pandemic in fall 2020. I employed interviews because the population of former politicians under study were an extremely articulate group, yielding interviewees characterized as elite (Littig, 2009). I sought to investigate my interviewees' lived experiences, their perception of dropout causality, and how they self-reported resignation. This method proved suitable to disentangle the layered nature of dropout and capture the complexity of more than the political dimensions of their lives.

To find respondents, I used purposive stratified sampling, selecting on the dependent variable: those who dropped out. I obtained detailed narratives to help advance understanding (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of my interviewees. They were selected on the basis of descriptive characteristics (e.g. gender, age, province, municipality size, political party), thereby ensuring variation. The interview data are not necessarily generalizable to the whole population of local-level politicians nor local-level women politicians. However, my aim was to situate the women I spoke to within their local council as their workplace, which is, ultimately, the workplace of all local politicians. In total, I interviewed 10 women and five men politicians, though my results focus on the interviews with women.

I addressed the following general topics (see also Appendix 2): why they dropped out; culture in the council; their other occupations/professions; and division of time during the week. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in NVivo. I used inductive

and flexible coding to explore common themes for better understanding the material and, specifically, the interviewees' different life spheres (Appendix 3). Afterwards, I conducted a deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Deterding & Waters, 2018) of the gendered workplace. The data were thus first analysed inductively and later deductively. I anonymized interviewees by identifying them only with initials and numbers: F indicates female; M male; A alderperson; C councillor; the number reflects the order in which I interviewed them.

Results: A game of simultaneous chess

My results revealed the gendered logics of political resignations by demonstrating how political spheres – 'inside' – became intertwined with other life spheres – 'outside'. 'Gendering' the workplace brought to bear resistance strategies among local-level women politicians. Nevertheless, bringing the 'outside' in revealed that juggling these different life spheres led to dropout for all kinds of non-political reasons.

Organization of work: Carefree or free of care?

In the interviews, the pressure to combine three life spheres clearly transpired. 'I am married, I am a mother of two grown-up children, and grandmother of four, as well as an employee, and a politician. That's a lot of balls to keep in the air,' said FC1. FC5 echoed: 'I am non-stop busy with three things. Politics, my family and the household, as my husband works fulltime and most care tasks fall on my shoulders.' Of her multiple roles, FA1 stated: 'It means I have everything on my plate.' According to FC3: 'You can try to do it all in the weekend, but then there's laundry, the children have to go to their sport clubs, and the house needs to be cleaned.' Such reported experiences aligned with a gendered division of care in which women take up the majority of tasks. These women politicians also painted a picture of men working and women doing care labour while also working.

Some cases, however, reflected resistance through implementation of a non-traditional gender division of labour at home. FC6, who was her party leader, had her own business, worked in politics, and parented two babies. She described this combination of responsibilities as 'playing simultaneous chess', implying that making a move in one life realm had implications for all the others. FC6's partner was a stay-at-home dad, about whom she said:

> Otherwise none of this would be possible. He is an important factor. And he has accepted a lot in that, too… It's thanks to him that I was able to do that. If he had his job, too, it wouldn't have been fun. It wouldn't have gone well.

FC2 similarly emphasized how after having their first child, she and her partner specifically addressed how to equitably divide care tasks at home.

> I could only do that [be in politics] because it's appreciated at home… My day looks very different from the average woman in that regard.… The roles are reversed for us. Certainly, if you look at others in my area, yes, I have to explain it.

Further, FC2 argued that everyone could be a politician – provided they had time, could listen and talk to people, and possess a willingness to learn – but this potential was often quashed by the gendered division of care tasks. When encouraging other women to join politics, FC2 would ask them to imagine that which she saw as the most pressing deciding factor – time – was not an issue because she felt that what ultimately mattered was whether someone *wanted* to be in politics. And if they did, she urged them to get help solving the puzzle of how to divide home care tasks, which she believed was paramount to getting women involved as politicians.

Having to care for her sick father is what forced FC3 to drop out of politics. As she explained, she had no option to take leave for this purpose.

> I was told it's possible to take a sick leave. They also said it barely happens but it's possible. But that made me think: *I* wasn't sick, my father was sick. But I did have to ensure I would not get sick because I was too busy. I wanted to prioritize things differently.

FC6 echoed the lack of leave flexibility when it came to her pregnancy. 'You don't have a choice as a politician… it was four months. It's a mandatory period,' she stated.

Being a local politician was far from a 9-to-5-job. Several women spoke about continuously being approached in public. FA1 said she could not go to the supermarket without being spoken to even though it was in the midst of 'rush hour' to get dinner on the table for her three children to then go to their sport clubs. She acknowledged that saying 'no' to those who approached her would be bad for her future electoral chances. FC5 cited her children's swim practice as an opportunity that people often took to ask her questions. At the same time, she added that she used her children's facilities to better understand a civic situation, such as by talking to their primary school director when the topic of school locations came on the municipality agenda. She contextualized this push-pull by pointing to the small size of her municipality, saying: 'You are never anonymous here, if you are in the council or not. It's a village, you always run into people.' For her part, FC7 valued being approached at the weekly market because it fulfilled her desire to bring politics closer to the people. Yet, she acknowledged how much time it took to 'talk every five minutes for 15 minutes with someone else' and understood why her children no longer wanted to accompany her to the market. Still, FC7 felt successful at making politics more accessible, as she would answer questions of people coming to her door 'even when the Dutch national football team is playing.'

Another issue interviewees often discussed was salary/compensation, especially in the context of their long and late hours, which they felt were incommensurate to their earnings. FC3 called local politics 'only a nice extra earning on top of a pension', thereby attracting a certain type of politician; however, for many others, she felt that the 'extra' was not enough, explaining that politics was not financially viable for women in her circumstances. If she wanted to spend more time on politics, she would have to do less non-political work, though also argued that politics was so volatile because elections decide if you can keep your job or not. Along these lines, FA1 was upset by the low compensation she received in her smaller municipality, as compensation was calculated based on number of inhabitants. As she put it: 'There are no fewer or shorter meetings… If it's 170 million or 1.7 million Euro, it doesn't matter.'

Timing was another source of concern. Political meetings would be scheduled several evenings per week or on Wednesday afternoons when children were off from school, while readings needed to be done on the weekend, for example. These commitments drew women away from care their children needed during those times, laying bare the inherently male-oriented schedule of this work for politicians, assumed to be without children or care tasks. This assumption was explicitly resisted by my interviewees. At a recurring Wednesday afternoon meeting, FA1 asked how many fellow attendees, most of whom were men, had children. Having established she was not the only parent present, she proposed moving the meeting to another day, which was approved. FC1 made changes to facilitate the participation of young parents within her party by holding short meetings between 17:00 and 18:30 so as to be able to subsequently eat dinner at home.

Having young children was a significant factor for determining the difficulties women faced when combining their political work with other responsibilities. FC3 explained:

> Most politicians are grey-haired men.… You want to be a reflection of society. If you are a young family with kids, the kids have to go to bed at seven – those are always the meeting times. It shouldn't be the case that if your child can't sleep for a while, they should still go to sleep because you have to do something – you can't force them to sleep.

So while some challenges arose specifically for all parents, the majority of care tasks fell specifically to women. Thus, analysing their other life spheres was productive for understanding the role that organization of work played in dropout. Home life majorly impacted how much time women could spend on politics. For my interviewees, arranging their life differently was practically impossible. Some resisted through a non-traditional gender division of care at home. Still, it seemed that their work never stopped and, whether they wanted to or not, they always had to be 'on'.

Portfolio allocation: 'You? Finance?'

In tandem with discussions about compensation were those on the enormous time spent on political work. This commitment was driven in part by the ambitions of the women I spoke with, seeking to change politics from within and, in FC2's words, to 'bring politicians closer to people.' FA3, who was a party leader before becoming an alderperson, wanted to ensure she 'had knowledge of all subjects.' FC4 felt this concern but believed she needed enough time to do her political work well, noting: 'The mayor emphasizes we [as council] should not go into too much detail, but in spending time reading the appendices you find the critical points. I know that because I had been councillor for several years already.'

Alongside regular working visits and meetings, the sheer amount of documentation to get through created heavy loads in their political work. Proving especially problematic was their unmet expectations: women were recruited to work the officially stipulated hours, but none reported being able to stick within them. According to FC5:

> It is unknown territory. My predecessor, he said: 'They say it takes 16 hours a week but I do it in 12.' So that is what I assumed. That would be fine, especially in the evenings. It wouldn't have a big impact on my family, because that's when my children sleep. But in practice it turned out very differently.

FC5, who reported spending around 24 hours on the work, blamed her personality, saying: 'I always want to take a lot of responsibility on myself. At the same time, I'm sensitive, have difficulty letting go and setting boundaries.'

My interviews suggested that compensatory behaviours were also gendered. Several women were explicit about selecting a 'hard' portfolio topic for reasons of prestige as well as wanting to actively push against gender stereotypes even though these were topics less familiar to them. Together, the interviews revealed that compensatory behaviour was an important factor contributing to dropout. FC7 explained how during her previous term as alderperson, she had the 'hard' portfolio of spatial planning. FA2 recounted her experience of receiving the finance portfolio, recalling: 'I really had no idea. My stepfather laughed really hard at me and said: "You? Finance? You dropped math. You didn't even pass math."' FA2 did not want the finance portfolio, but received it because it is traditionally awarded to the largest party, which she represented. This kind of logic of appropriateness reflected the status quo, with limited attention for the individual politician or their skillset. FA2 then observed that saying 'yes' to everything and feeling great responsibility might be a 'feminine attribute'.

> As the alderwoman for finance, I was also a board member of X^2 and Y and the shareholder of Z. It was a man's world.… I never had the idea that they thought 'You are a woman, you don't understand.' Because I just got it, and I participated just fine… I always found that much more interesting than youth services, or the softer portfolios. But it was a lot... I always had a certain toughness, which didn't let me say I couldn't do it.

However, the amount of work combined with the compensatory behaviour demanded for the finance portfolio caused FA2 stress-related health issues, compelling her to step down.

> You lose touch with people. When I was at birthdays parties, all I could think of was: you all have no idea how busy I am. And I was too tired to participate. I was hungover from tiredness… the continuous stress, continuously being 'on', emails, phone calls. In the weekend you have to show up somewhere for something ceremonial. Readings. It never ended.

FC3, FC4, FC5, and FA3 all stepped down directly due to health reasons. Even topics deemed 'soft', such as youth services, were still very complex. FC6 said: 'It was so frustrating, because I'm smart enough, I should understand it. I couldn't stand that it was so difficult.' Following government decentralization moves, several respondents found local politics to have gotten more or too demanding. 'With all due respect, you can't have people read 180 pages in difficult language about the social domain, that's just not going to work,' said FA1.

Gendered leadership: Wise gentlemen
Staying in their positions proved difficult especially for women in leadership, such as alderpersons and party leaders. FC5, for example, found that the points she said during meetings with the other party leaders were left out of the meeting minutes – a literal form of silencing. She said that generally she did not feel taken seriously or listened to by other party leaders. Being a party leader, moreover, added to the responsibilities and hours needed to spend on political work, which was time few women could keep up as described under organization of work.

Furthermore, in some municipalities, the most senior councillor would chair council meetings in absence of the mayor. If more than one qualified, the eldest was selected, thus not favouring newcomers in terms of seniority or age. This logic of seniority was acutely felt by party leader FC6, describing how some individuals got a 'safe seat': in office for many years, they were 'automatically' deemed most capable. She identified those who held office the longest as those who dominated in debates. Gender and seniority classically intersected in her citation of the 'wise gentlemen's meeting', the colloquial name for her council's gathering of party leaders. 'That already says enough,' she said, observing that other leaders were 'older, some very old' and among them, she added, 'They found themselves the most important.' To combat gendered assumptions about who could lead, FC6 tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to overturn the rule of who takes over in the mayor's absence. 'This was one of the issues that took a hundred years to change,' FC6 said. Although she experienced gender-role incongruity rather positively in leading her own business as a young woman, in the council, it compelled her to drop out of politics.

Hard and soft infrastructure: Participation for anyone?
The hard infrastructure of many municipalities failed to facilitate an inclusive workplace. My interviews showed that the male, able body remained the norm. FC1, who was hearing impaired, said: 'We say everyone should participate… but in these town halls… they are beautiful architecturally but so old I could barely hear anything.' FC6 spoke about the

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^{2} For anonymity, business names are omitted.

difficulties of lactating in a town hall with no designated space. She found an empty room herself, but because it had no lock, she had to hang a sign on the door and inform everyone that when the sign was up, she was expressing. But lactating there proved more complicated, especially when there was voting. Standardly, leaving the council chamber was prohibited, so if FC6 wanted to express milk, she had to organize it with the municipal clerk. This example showed not only that she was the first politician to regularly lactate in this town hall, but also that the responsibility to enable it fell on her shoulders. She thus resisted the gendered nature of the hard infrastructure by organizing against it.

Local parties additionally struggled to provide sufficient soft infrastructure due to less funding and the inability to rely on national party networks. First active in a national party before joining a local one, FA3 compared how a national party context offered a wide array of training options, which she happily took part in. In her local party however, she found that soft infrastructure was non-existent or, if any such initiative were set up, it would get dropped because the party prioritized getting people on the electoral list and municipal work, such as readings for meetings. FA3 called this 'discrimination'. FC7 also mentioned time constraints, as she already spent all weekday evenings on work for her local party and did not want to devote a weekend day to training on top of that. Many interviewees cited the need for training or coaching but did not know how to make time for it. They identified this as a problem that they themselves were responsible for, rather than expecting to have an advisor who could help determine points for improvement or arrange for necessary support. According to FC5:

> There was a lack in training and coaching.… In the beginning, you don't really know where your development points lie. I was responsible for my own development. I think it would have helped me a lot if I could talk through things every month with an independent person who could help me a bit, [saying]: 'Try this training, or try this'.… I actually wanted to set that up myself, but you already have so much on your mind so you don't get around to it.… It is very difficult to determine what I need, and then you have to arrange it all and then you also have to arrange a budget.

The topic of training persisted as a chicken-and-egg situation: dropout often occurred due to a lack of guidance or coaching, but resigning was sure to preclude women from getting access to it. Traditional last-in-first-out patterns were reinforced by the lack of infrastructure, which operated on an assumption that politicians require no development assistance. The current-day infrastructure thus continuously gave preference to those politicians already present and trained, adding yet another hurdle for newcomers.

Interaction between politicians: A stab in the back?
Working in relatively small teams characterized by unsmooth interactions added another significant layer of tension to the work. FA1 eventually quit her job as alderwoman, remembering how:

> You need to be able to trust each other blindly. If that is not the case, you have to watch your step continuously. You have to continuously look behind you to make sure someone isn't stabbing you in the back. And you have to respect the way someone does things. And it [being stabbed in the back] did happen, in my case it did. And that sucks the energy out of you at some point.

FC5 similarly highlighted finding cooperation difficult within her fraction of two. 'I was unlucky with my colleague… I couldn't build on him. He was very busy outside of politics,' she said, explaining how she compensated for his insufficiencies by absorbing his tasks.

Many informal rules ascribed gendered logics of appropriateness. For instance, one informal rule stipulated that all councillors within one party always vote the same, which was

a behaviour women councillors regularly received comments about. FC7 said she thought the rule made very little sense in general and especially for local parties, which often comprise an eclectic mix of ideologies. She thus fought against the norm of voting along party lines. FC5 took a comparable stance, explaining: 'We didn't always have the same opinion, and yes, then we also voted differently. Well, that is a mortal sin in politics!' She described it as 'the game of politics'.

For several women, wanting to change norms from within was a very reason to enter politics and became a deployed resistance strategy. More diversity in the municipality generally seemed to have a positive effect on changing norms. As FC1 recounted:

> When I started, I was the only woman party leader in the council. But that's 20 years ago. In the meantime, things are getting better. But parties still need to think about how they can deal with the 'female touch', for example, rather than that hard debating style, and working towards cooperation.

At the same time, FC6 said she was the first to openly state during a plenary session that was still deciding between options. This was 'not done', she heard several times, but maintained that the exchange of opinions, real conversations, and debate led to the best solutions. Dislike of the day-to-day reality of politics was one reason she resigned.

Some interviewees spoke about being told off by other politicians for the way they organized their own party meetings. FC7 wanted to make politics less elitist by gathering, for instance, in bars and on café terraces. Others spoke about her practice 'with shame', she said, and dismissed her as a 'bar fly' while her party was called 'the drinking party' or 'the party party'. Nevertheless, she continued the practice, acknowledging her persistence was itself a successful strategy. 'They pretend people at the bar don't have voting rights. If you are not there, you can't convince people of your point of view,' she stated.

Several interviewees cited everyday sexism. FC2 gave a textbook example.

> Isn't it idiotic that when you have a council meeting [and] someone says: where are your kids? No man is asked that, but a woman is.… I respond to that with: 'Well, I'm quite curious what *your* children are doing at the moment.'

These informal rules of what was appropriate contributed to a feeling of non-belonging. Several women shared that they did not feel accepted for who they were. Of her political role, FC5 said:

> I've had my doubts from the start whether it would suit me.… I had the feeling that I could not really be myself. At some point you get an internal conflict from that. And that also costs energy. I think it mainly had to do with the dynamics.… I didn't feel safe. And that just really has to do with the experiences I've had that if I pointed out something that didn't go well, then they just reacted harshly and they said that I don't understand, and what I was doing there.

The same went for FC1, who said: 'When I started, I was sure I was completely unfit for it. But I came to realize that this is fine; it is adding to the diversity.'

Conclusion: Personal institutions, political lives
There is growing attention to the gendered working conditions under which women politicians do their work, but their potential impact on dropout has received less attention. I studied Dutch local politics to understand empirically why local-level women politicians are resigning. My analysis revealed that all five dimensions of the GWA were relevant and led to gendered logics of dropouts. Selecting on the dependent variable had consequences for generalizability to the whole population of women politicians. Still, all women politicians

inhabit gendered institutions. The Netherlands' 300+ councils vary greatly – such as in size, urbanity, and presence of women – so I expected differences. Nevertheless, the women I interviewed exemplified how 'gendering' the workplace has harsh consequences for women even though some women thrive in that same environment. Future research would do well to 'gender' more Dutch political institutions, examining those who drop out and those who do not. For instance, only recently has the issue of social safety in parliament (Heres et al., 2023) received attention, but dropout elsewhere in the Dutch political trajectory, such as among aspirants and candidates, is under-researched.

The threat of dropout requires an act of triple resistance for women. First, they must endure the gendered nature of the political arena. Second, they must contend with the gendered nature of their other roles as caregivers and/or non-political employees, which often clash with the amateurish circumstances of local politics. Third, they must resist the gendered nature of politics, often by practising compensatory behaviours for gendered roles within politics and trying to bring about change. Central to my analysis was the impact that 'outside' the workplace could have on the 'inside' of it. Underscoring what FI established, when 'gendering' political representation, we should take into account all life spheres of women politicians because they prove decisive in enabling their political work. Contributing a more fine-grained understanding of dropout motives, this study showed how dropout was rarely due to political conflict or substantive topics, as we might commonly expect of politicians, but rather by having to combine care tasks and life spheres.

While gendered dropout persists, representational opportunities in parliaments and spillover effects along the political pipeline diverge significantly for women and men. As such, a truly gender-equal politics remains out of reach. This is relevant not only because a politicians' lived experiences majorly impact their political work, but also because neglecting other life spheres stems from assumptions of who politicians are – people without care tasks – reifying the inherent male bias of parliaments. This study showed that we cannot separate the political from the personal because the two spheres are intertwined. When it comes to women dropping out of politics, the adage applies that the personal is political – and the political is personal.

Acknowledgments

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