ABSTRACT. Although statutory quotas have significantly expanded worldwide over the last two decades, the bulk of electoral gender quotas in place are party quotas. This paper aims at examining gender power dynamics in political parties after quota adoption. While scholarship research on women’s descriptive representation has tended to focus on the distributive logic of gender quotas (how are offices allocated), we are interested in the institutional (party) setting in which specific patterns of distribution are realized. Applying a feminist institutionalist perspective, we explore whether and how gender quotas have empowered women, as both party members and officeholders. We do so by paying attention to the conflicting patterns of formal and real power embedded in intra-party formal and informal institutions. The empirical analysis is based on primary sources for the Spanish case, particularly from Catalan political parties. Our findings show that, whereas formal power can be altered through gender quotas, subverting how real power operates is contingent upon deep institutional reforms that face a strong resistance. As change and continuity coexist, quota reforms are hardly critical junctures for women’s effective empowerment but rather layering processes in which some elements are renegotiated while others persist.
Introduction

Although statutory quotas have significantly expanded worldwide over the last two decades (Krook 2009), the bulk of electoral gender quotas in place are party quotas (Quota Project 2013). In essence of voluntary nature, they may be used in the selection of candidates for party organs and/or public office. Actually, if effectively enforced, party quotas shall produce extremely positive results in the absence of statutory quotas (Verge 2012). While women’s representation in public office might be conceived of as “the most symbolic indicator of political equality” (Lovenduski and Norris 1993: 310), the latter deals with much more than patterns of candidate recruitment. Actually, the decision to run for office is linked to an individual’s previous decision, that to participate in a political party as well as to comfort with her participation – especially where party careers rank high in the selection of would-be candidates. Hitherto, the broader party organizational setting not directly related to candidate selection is fundamentally absent from studies of women’s political participation and representation. Indeed, political parties are the “missing variable” (cf. Baer 1993).

Following the burgeoning feminist institutionalist literature, this paper aims at examining gender power dynamics in political parties after quota adoption. Specifically, we will look beyond numbers, that is beyond the distributive logic of gender quotas (how offices are allocated), and focus instead on the institutional party context in which specific patterns of distribution are realized. This implies paying attention to the conflicting patterns of gender power dynamics, namely the tension between formal power (who holds party office) and real power (who has an effective agency capacity within the party) embedded in formal and informal institutions, as suggested by feminist institutionalism (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 2010). Gender quotas target formal power and have largely contributed to feminize party boards. Yet, the extent to which quotas have transformed a traditionally masculinized organization and expanded women’s agency capacity (real power), as either party members or officeholders, remains vastly unexplored. Since gender quotas are “nested” in parties’ institutional environment (Kenny and Mackay 2009), that is they coexist with “old” institutions, they might not necessarily be “critical junctures” for women’s effective empowerment but rather “layering processes” wherein increased women’s presence gets some elements renegotiated while others persist.

In evaluating intra-party institutionalized gender power relations we will concentrate on Spanish political parties, particularly on those competing in the region of
Catalonia. The Catalan case is intriguing for various reasons. First, since women’s presence in party and public office has tremendously increased in the last decades thanks to the adoption of party quotas and the introduction of a statewide statutory quota in 2007, we can assess whether feminized change beyond numbers is observed in the broader party institutional setting. Second, its moderately fragmented party system allows examining the role that different party attributes might play in the operation of gender power relations, mainly ideology and the existence of party quotas before 2007. Face-to-face interviews with the leaders of the women’s sections and focus groups with women middle-level cadres will help us extend existing literature by setting the stage for empirical inquiring into women’s (em)power(ment). Our research focuses on the local level for its importance on the daily operation of parties. Local party branches are the site of members’ participation where party officers are better suited to report both the expectations of women affiliates and the constraints affecting their capacities (Mackay 2001: 14-5; Meier and Verlet 2011: 116).

The paper shows that pervasive gendered interactions sustain male dominance, which disempowers women both individually and, more dramatically, as a group, preventing political equality and women’s agency from being truly effective. In a nutshell, gender quotas have not been capable of subverting how real power operates since the latter is not only contingent upon the gender composition of party boards but also upon deep institutional reforms that face strong resistance. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The first section discusses our theoretical approach. The second section presents the data and methods used in the empirical analysis. The third section explores gendered interactions in the daily functioning of political parties and their impact on women’s (em)power(ment). The last section reflects on the main findings and suggests avenues for further research.

Analyzing intra-party gender power relations

While several gender biases in the party institutions of political recruitment have been documented (see, for example, Lovenduski 2005; Kenny 2011; Murray 2010; Verge and Troupel 2011), the effects of party politics on women’s political participation remain largely unexplored. To illustrate the operation of a particular gender regime, we must survey the procedures and culture surrounding decision-making as well as actors’ interests and (ideas about) environment (Lovenduski 2011: x). Parties undoubtedly meet Acker’s (1990: 146) characteristics for a gendered organization since interactions,
structural (dis)advantages, meaning and identity “are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female”. The historical relative exclusion of women in party politics has made parties “institutionally sexist” organizations that host male-centered practices insensitive to gender differences where, nonetheless, to act effectively, women are expected to conform to the “rules of the game” (Lovenduski 2005: 48-53). For this reason, gender needs being considered a central dimension to understanding “the operation and effect of political institutions” (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 2011: 574), paying attention to both formal and informal party rules, routines, conventions, norms, practices and historical legacies that privilege certain groups – men– over others –women (Moe 2005; Kenny 2007).

This approach implies considering gender both as a (socially constructed) category and as a process through which the differential effect institutions have on men and women, asymmetrical relations, and the production of favorable gendered outcomes can be researched (Beckwith 2005: 131). As Uhde argues (2010: 153) gender power relations are “not simply a case of the unjust distribution of opportunities, rights, resources or recognition, but also a case of the institutionalized processes in which some people are not able to exercise and develop their capabilities, express their own opinion and experience and participate in defining conditions for actions”. Holding an office or sitting in a party organ (formal power) might not necessarily translate into real power, that is, into having the capacity to effectively develop agency. Whereas formal power basically has a straight correspondence with written rules (composition of party boards, selection methods, or clear regulations about sanctions), informal institutions establish the loci and determine the dynamics of real power (informal networks, expected behavior, or informal sanctions like marginalization). As we will argue in the paper, women’s subordination is essentially entrenched in informalized party politics.

Feminist institutionalism also calls attention to how institutions can be challenged, negotiated, subverted and resisted by gender equality activists, and on which ongoing dynamics reform efforts must contend with (Kenney 1996: 445; Waylen 2009: 245; Chappell 2006: 223). An increasing presence of women facilitated by the adoption of gender quotas might challenge existing gender norms (Childs and Krook 2008). But, the parallel existence or even contradiction between the “rules-in-form” and the “rules-in-use” may actually leave “power relationships intact” (Leach and Lowndes 2007: 186). While gender quotas can address the “rules-in-form” (such as composition of party organs) their impact on the parties’ gender regime might be much more limited
due to resistances to change. Women are usually seen as “space invaders” (Puwar 2004: 67) and several “rules-in-use” explain the prevalence of power inequalities, that is, the fact that formal power is not automatically coupled with real power more often in the case of women than men. Thus, gender quotas might act as opportunities but “old” informal institutions constrain women’s agency.

As will be seen, party daily business shares many of the informal institutions identified by studies of political recruitment and parliamentary settings. To shed light on the “black box” of intra-party gender power dynamics, it is crucial to identify both the informal repertoires and to disentangle how the latter discourage women from being more active in terms of access, presence and agency in the party organization, as well as whether and how women are able to challenge their subordination. In doing so, we will apply Allen’s (1999) three-sided feminist account of power. Power over addresses the “particular kinds of power that men are able to exercise over women” (Allen 1998: 33). Principally, we will look at how masculinized party structures, practices and norms have the ability to constrain the choices available to women in a nontrivial way, be it intentionally or in routine ways. Power to describes the “power women have to act” (p. 34). In this case, we will center on how party women might resist male dominance and thus be empowered individually to subvert domination. Finally, power has a collective dimension, power with, “the power that women exercise with each other” (p. 35), leading us to examine how party women seek to instill more egalitarian ways of functioning through alliances among party women and with other groups.

**Data and methods**

The empirical analysis focuses on the main Catalan political parties. In Catalonia, the intersection of the ideological and territorial axes has generated multiparty competition. The Party of the Catalan Socialists/Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC, social-democratic), Republican Left of Catalonia/Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC, social-democratic too) and Initiative for Catalonia greens/Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (ICV, eco-socialists) integrate the left block. Democratic Convergence of Catalonia/Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC)\(^1\) occupies the center-right (predominantly liberal) and the Popular Party/Partido Popular (PP) is located on the right. Regarding the territorial axis, CDC and ERC advocate for Catalonia’s secession.\(^1\) CDC and ICV coalesce in elections with smaller parties which will not be examined here.
Regarding membership levels, the PSC is the largest party, followed successively by CDC, the PP, ERC and ICV. Women are expected to be more empowered in left-wing parties due to the incorporation of feminism into their normative background and their relationship with the women’s movement (Caul Kittilson 2006: 45). Other party attributes do not entail clear expectations. Although it has been posited that nationalist parties are less women-friendly because the national cause overshadows other forms of self-identity (Vickers 2002: 248), this claim fails short of empirical evidence. Party size yields no clear expectation either. While women might potentially have more opportunities to challenge and subvert gendered practices in small parties, peer pressure to follow predominant rules might well be stronger. Thus, the analysis will solely consider ideology and commitment with parity embodied in party quota reforms.

The PSC introduced the first quota in 1982 guaranteeing women 12 per cent of seats in party boards and candidate tickets (matching its levels of female membership at the time). It was successively enlarged until reaching a gender-neutral formulation in 2000 (no sex shall obtain less than 40 per cent nor more than 60 per cent of positions). In 1991, shortly after its foundation, ICV granted women 30 per cent of party and elected positions. In 2002 it also adopted the gender-neutral parity quota. ERC followed suit in 2004, one year after the introduction of a female-membership related quota. Also in the mid-2000s, CDC assumed a target for women’s representation. Last, the PP fiercely opposes quotas but since the mid-1990s has followed the vague goal of progressing towards gender balance in political representation (Verge 2010: 170-1). The introduction of a statutory electoral gender quota in 2007 has produced a rather balanced distribution of public offices across parties. Still, parties with long-standing quotas (PSC and ICV) outperform the rest, also in levels of women in national party boards. It should be noted, though, that at the local level, where parties’ functioning is more decentralized, differences are not very significant. No large variations are found on women’s membership either, with a mean of 36 per cent, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Women’s descriptive representation in Catalan parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ICV</th>
<th>ERC</th>
<th>PSC</th>
<th>CDC</th>
<th>PP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Women in parl. group</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Women in nat. party board</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Women in party mem.</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration. The first two variables report data for 2012. Membership data (including both paying members and sympathizers) is available for 2009 (Verge 2009). * These parties reach or almost reach parity in the elected component of the national party board. Yet, as seen, when ex officio members are added, women’s representation dramatically decreases.
The empirical data builds on various sources: party constitutions, face-to-face interviews with the leaders of the women’s sections, and five focus groups (one per party) with women middle-level cadres –based at the local level.\textsuperscript{2} Party written rules help us identify the formal situation while the other sources provide fruitful insights on the real situation. The same questions were posited to all groups. Although we did not explicitly ask in any form about power or about how women might be dominated, resist and subvert domination, a large amount of interpretations and experiences dealing with power clearly arose, as we will illustrate with several anonymized quotations – holding onto our guarantee of confidentiality. We then proceeded to identify the informal institutions underlying gendered interactions and their impact on power relations. The translation of quotations from their original language (Catalan and Spanish) to English has respected both the maximum literality and linguistic tone employed by participants.

**Gendered rules of the game in party politics**

Gendering institutionalism places at the core of the research the differential effect institutions have on men and women, the gender-biased access to resources and social recognition that creates power and the mechanisms that sustain its reproduction (see Krook and Mackay 2011). As noted by a focus group participant, the “rules of the game” are different for women and men, that is, “even if women have many aces, the game is being played with different cards” (PSC, P7). This section surveys the “rules-in-use” making for a gendered organization from the perspective of power over, that is how the party institutional setting constrains the choices’ and strategies available to women in a nontrivial way.

**Gendered norms, access to resources and recognition**

Among Spanish and Catalan parties, gender quotas have increased the demand for women officers to field party boards or stimulated an increased presence in parties that do not use positive action (Verge 2012: 399). Nonetheless, the feminization of party structures coexists with a broad array of gendered norms and practices. This leads to an

\textsuperscript{2} Interview and focus groups took place in Barcelona along 2011 as the elections held that year at different layers of government forced us to adjust to parties’ tempos. The average number of participants per focus group was 10. A non intentional sampling was applied following certain criteria to obtain variation in participants’ age and town size where party position was held. Both interviewees and focus groups participants received a coversheet introducing the researchers and the study so that they could make an informed decision to participate. Discussions were videotaped with participants’ explicit consent to ensure an accurate transcription.
unequal access to resources and recognition which are crucial elements to modify real power dynamics once decision-making bodies (are close to) attain parity. Gender quotas have not been coupled with rules establishing the definition of the valuable merits and skills to hold a party (or public) office nor the tasks associated to these positions. In fact, these requisites fall under the informal domain of non written norms and conventions and are decisive to maintaining asymmetrical power relations. Focus group participants highlighted men are considered the norm group, as found by previous research (see, for example, Lovenduski and Norris 1989; Kenny 2011): “If you don’t show the ‘valuable’ skills, your leadership is not recognized at all” (PSC, P5). Institutional biases embody beliefs about the male experience regarding instrumentality, authority, competitiveness, and certain forms of rationality as the norm, routinizing the relationship between masculinity and power thereby blurring it: “There’s an excessive need of the masculine forms. Men peers suggest you: ‘If you don’t give orders by thumping the table with your fist, you don’t show you’re in command’” (PSC, P8).

Simultaneously, women face trouble when negotiating or deploying alternative leadership skills and are characterized as “weak, fragile and vulnerable” (PSC, P9). “If you start a sentence with ‘I think’ you are not granted credibility” (ICV, P7). These are conceived of as “mechanisms to show who holds the power” (PSC, P5). Men not making up to the traditional masculinity in their performance are also discredited; “When depicted as ‘good guys’ it means they’re considered to be weak” (PSC, P2). As discussed by focus group participants, undervaluing gender diversity and stereotyping reinforces gender hierarchies and yields two main consequences. On the one hand, women who access certain positions are likely to have adopted (or to have been forced to adopt) masculine traits (“Men selectors prioritize sexist women, they don’t choose feminist women”, PSC, P7; as found in Mackay 2004: 119). On the other hand, this severely affects women’s self-esteem and confidence on their capacities. “Fear” (CDC, P2; ERC, P2) “permanent insecurity” (ERC, P3) and the “feeling of being out of place” (ICV, P2, P7) are mentioned as constraints to women’s agency. Many women refrain from more active participation in party organs out of fear of not being able to express themselves properly, according to the prevailing male standards.

Gender quotas have not addressed either issues related to sex segregation of tasks, also found in public office (see, among others, Bird 2003; Galligan and Tremblay 2005). The application of “gender appropriateness” criteria in the distribution of political responsibilities starts in the allocation of party positions. All Catalan political
parties present a similar structure: at each territorial level an executive committee runs party activity by assigning areas of responsibility to a reduced group of people. As one participant put it, “Some positions are de facto for men and others for women; it is like the allocation of the ‘kitchen and the sofa’” (ERC, P2). Both high level positions (vertical segregation) and the most valued portfolios (horizontal segregation) tend to be predominantly fielded with men. Especially after quota adoption, many positions are not competitive across gender, it is either two men or two women competing for them (ICV, P7). The gendered distribution of party positions is conducive to relative marginalization and powerlessness. Although the discussions held by all groups downplayed the traditional value attached to the different responsibilities –thus challenging male normativity– its practical implications on real power clearly raised. This not only entails an asymmetric disposition of resources (such as financial resources, support of the party structure, or office accumulation) but “masculine” portfolios (like organization or finances) also have more visibility and influence, and can be the springboard to other relevant positions. “Feminine” portfolios (such as welfare policies or social movements) are less likely to have these qualities, especially the one devoted to gender equality, as participants noted (CDC, P2; ERC, P3). While many male ministers had previously occupied similar responsibilities in the parties’ shadow cabinets, the successive leaders of the women’s sections have rarely occupied top offices in government and none of them has been assigned to gender equality policies.

Focus group participants also highlighted that the conception of doing politics based on the “full-time dedication norm” that prevails in political parties leads to women’s frustration as they face the dilemma of having to choose between their personal and political lives. Underlying this painful choice we find the “feeling of guilt” for devoting hours to party politics at the expense of family time, an experience totally unparalleled for male subjects (CDC, P1, P2; PSC, P7). This choice is perceived to be painful and absolutely absurd, since both personal and political responsibilities are forms of commitment to the others: “Why do we have to choose between our political engagement and motherhood?” (ERC, P2). There was also a general agreement that the typical adversarial politics found in parties (such as infighting or brutal competition to get selected) makes women feel uncomfortable and discourages their engagement: “It goes beyond exclusion. We don’t feel represented by these practices. […] We feel

3 In some parties the executive committee is voted by party conference delegates while in others its composition is solely decided by the party leader.
uncomfortable, so we step aside” (ERC, P23). Therefore, the operation of informal institutions accounts for women’s apparently voluntary resignation. Not meeting both norms –adversarialism and dedication requisites– also makes women give up on demanding more resources and recognition for the positions they hold thereby renouncing to key assets to exert real power within the party organization.

Informal institutions sustaining women’s subordination

The participants of all focus groups colluded in identifying three main types of informal institutions through which men continue to exert power over women, namely various sexist organizational practices in the functioning of party organs, informal networks and boys’ clubs, and time uses. All of them unfold a significant reluctance or an obvious hostility towards granting women access to real power, that is, towards letting women develop an effective agency capacity. As stated by one participant: “Men think we’re usurping the power they’ve long held, and that [sharing power with women] is an imposition (via gender quotas), it is not a voluntary act” (PSC, E2). Let us now examine the operation of the informal institutions that sustain the reproduction of men’s hegemony and women’s subordination.

The first set of informal institutions deals with a broad array of sexist practices functioning of political parties. Regarding executive or plenary meetings, women’s contributions are frequently glossed over and not recognized as valuable inputs by their male peers thereby undermining women’s agency capacity, which is experienced with bewilderment: “We’re not considered political agents […] I can’t believe parties still overlook the inputs of half the population” (PSC, P2). In the same vein, several male ritual behaviors and practices do not adjust to the goals of the meetings and are mainly aimed at “showing power off as men are in need of external recognition” (PSC, P6; also in ERC, P2). These rituals include participating regardless of not having a substantive point to made, repeating others’ comments, and referencing previous contributions of male participants as a means to add legitimacy to one’s point –even if the author of the point was a woman and it was initially disregarded (ICV, P9; CDC, P7; PSC, P8). These rituals make meetings much longer in a totally unnecessary fashion. Likewise, the tasks carried out by women party officers, especially those holding “feminine” portfolios, and above all gender equality portfolios, usually receive scarce attention in the meetings of the party boards, leaving women with the feeling that their responsibilities are basically redundant: “You can take for granted that any meeting will deal about organization,
finances…but no one will care about your work with social organizations” (ERC P4; also in CDC, P2; ICV, P7). Similarly, women often perform subordinate roles in party organs, such as convoking the meetings, taking the minutes, and monitoring the implementation of decisions in-between meetings: “They [men] want us to get the work ahead…we do count for this, but it is difficult to be part of more relevant decisions” (ERC, P3; also in ERC P2; ICV P3; CDC, P7; PSC, P5). All these factors are identified as mechanisms that make women “feel tired and bored” and induce them to resign at higher rates than men (ICV, P6, P8; also in PP, P2; ERC P2).

The fact that women’s performance is generally evaluated through more critical lenses can be regarded as a sexist practice too. Women carry the “burden of doubt” on their competency and are often subject to “super-surveillance” (PSC, P8), as previously found by Puwar (2004) in parliamentary arenas. The following quotations are very illustrative: “A man hesitates and he’s thought to be thinking; a woman hesitates and she’s lame” (CDC, P8); or “When two men have a bitter argument, no doubt the topic deserves hot discussion; when two women do so, they’re seen as two hysterics” (CDC, P5, P8, P1). The scrutiny of women’s capacity is perceived to be tougher after the adoption of gender quotas (see also Diz and Lois 2012: 179). Many women have been qualified as tokens while men’s competency is out of question (PP, P9; CDC, P2, P7; PSC, P2, P7; ERC, P2). On other occasions, to meet the quota provisions, women are assigned to areas they are not experts in, aggravating their insecurities and exposing them more to criticism (ERC, P4).

Gendered informal sanctions are another expression of party sexist practices. Ambition is not welcomed when found in women whereas it is presumed to be a positive characteristic when found in men. The most frequent sanctions these women suffer are removal from high-ranking offices or marginalization in the form of “a subtle weakening of their competences” (PSC, P5), which leads again to women’s higher turnover. Whereas one participant noted that: “In my town, two men competed to head the party list: Eventually, one of them became the head of the list and the other occupied the second position” (ICV, P7), another participant stated: “I competed to head the party list, and I lost. I was displaced to an unwinnable position” (ICV, P2). Women who access high-level positions are also sometimes dishonored with rumors about sexual favors to their male selector (ERC, P4; PSC, P4).

The second type of informal institution through which women’s agency capacity is hindered consists of a myriad of informal networks that circumvent formal decision-
making rules and bodies. The fact that men rely more on their peers reveals, according
to the group discussions, an unequal allocation of power within party organizations
expressed through the asymmetrical density of informal networks among women and
men, again an area where gender quotas are absent—and could neither be enforced. As
several authors have noted, in any domain of public life where power lays, informal
networks of male peers who provide each other with information and contacts for career
progression preserve male dominance (Bochel and Bochel 2000; Niven 1998). Informal
networks are pervasive in the daily functioning of political parties and go well beyond
candidate selection processes. Informal networking is the paramount characteristic of
the traditional masculine way of doing politics. As noted by one focus group participant:
“When we claim that party structures are very masculine, we mean that decision-
making very frequently takes place outside the formal channels (in bars, restaurants...)”
(PSC, P2; also found in ICV, P7, P2, P4; PP, P2, P4, P9; ERC, P2, P4; CDC, P2, P7;
PSC, P4, P7). In addition, “Even if women share the table with men, many topics never
arise, and if they do, we are not included at all in the conversation” (PSC, P8). While all
groups emphasized that the existence of these informal channels explain the fact that
formal power and real power are dramatically disconnected, especially for women, only
in the PP focus group were they seen as unavoidable in parties’ functioning.

Finally, time uses within parties were recurrently emphasized by as one of the
major constraining mechanisms for women’s political participation and as key to
understanding gender power relations. Supply-side factors (prevailing social roles)
might explain women’s time scarcity but demand-side factors in the form of requisites
of 24/7 availability (as mentioned above), deficient planning of activities and late-hour
meetings are regarded as a means to subordinate women. The time informal networks
and activities (“the beer decisions”, PSC, P7) usually take place (late evenings, after the
formal meeting has been held) is considered to be entrenched in male power and, as
such, this dynamic presents a strong resistance to change. There is also a perceived
“excessive need of in-person meetings” while much of the work could be advanced
through online communication (ERC, P2), and too many surplus events to attend (PP,
P1). Excessively demanding face-to-face interactions along with the sexist
organizational liturgies already examined are perceived by women middle-level cadres
as “a complete loss of time” (PSC, P6). Time mismanagement strongly demotivates
women’s engagement because their time availability is much more limited, since they
still carry out the lion’s share of housework and caring responsibilities.
Challenging subordination? Women’s agency at stake

As it has been shown in the previous section, party ideology and party quotas do not make a difference with regards to the informal institutions accounting for subordination within the party organization, although left-wing party women make a more profound analysis of the political consequences. What about the actions party women might have undertaken to resist male dominance and thus seek individual and collective empowerment? In the following pages we will evaluate the exercise and effectiveness of power to (individual agency) and power with (collective action) and assess whether the willingness and ability to mobilize the resources of the organization to improve women’s situation are counteracted by gendered practices.

One way party women identify to challenge their subordination is to strengthen the party decision-making organs in order to equate formal power with real power. Rising up the value of these arenas is undertaken through different actions. Women refuse to follow the male ritual behaviors and practices that undermine the quality of democratic deliberation. Participation in informal networks is also rejected in terms of both respect for formal arenas and time constraints (“To build these networks you need to have time”, CDC, P2).⁴ There is a pragmatic reason too: Women seek to avoid political activities totally absorbing their free time. Participating in parties is aimed at advancing policy goals (ERC, P1). Having dinner out is not an activity women want to associate to political participation; this would be a leisure activity to be enjoyed with one’s partner, family or friends (ICV, P7) As one participant noted, “Women separate their political engagement from their personal life, whereas men’s perception of leadership and power is continuous across time and space” (PSC, P5). Indeed, party women espouse an alternative political engagement. In the various focus groups women defined it as a communitarian duty or as an enriching personal experience to be performed for a limited period of time and only as far as it does not conflict too much with their personal life: “Women are more nomadic and men more sedentary” (ERC, P4; also in PP, P2). Yet, the fact that women keep “the exit door at hand” (ERC, P1; PP, P1) partially explains too their higher turnover and men’s perpetuation in office. As quotas’ provisions must be respected, then “It seems that women substitute other women while the same men stay and accumulate more power and influence” (CDC, P3; also in PSC, P1).

⁴ Similarly, Meier and Verlet (2011: 121) found that both local party executives and local general meetings meet more frequently the higher the presence of women is.
This notwithstanding, an alternative approach to political engagement is considered to contain fruitful possibilities regarding the quality of politics. On the one hand, women seek to include the daily life logic in their political activities. This might be transformative as it reshapes the political agenda and the ways of doing politics as usual by including both “normal” women’s and men’s experiences and the private sphere in political life (ICV, P8; PP, P3). On the other hand, women’s resistance to the perceived time mismanagement entrenched in the party organization is time efficiency: “I don’t need to take my colleague to a restaurant and have a three-course lunch and a bottle of wine; we just meet and decide. We [women] take into account time utility and when we have decision-making power we don’t need to do all the ‘show’” (PSC, P6; also in ERC, P4). This might be an empowering act since it questions the prevailing conception of politics as saturating all other aspects of personal life and un masks the ritualization of predominant male practices, thus clearly exposing power relations. Nonetheless, time efficiency will only be a successful empowering mechanism when mainstreamed in the organizational culture thereby displacing traditional practices that only suit the hegemonic male roles in both the public and private spheres.

Women’s presence in party organs has increased in the past few years and focus group participants acknowledged the efforts made by the women who have reached the top of the party organization and act as role models for women party members. The recognition of other women is believed to be an empowering symbolic device. For example, one group discussed how empowering had it been to see a young women party spokesperson overcome her fears and insecurities to speak in public “making young women party activists feel they can also do it” (ICV, P7). Another group highlighted the change brought about by having a women party leader: “If you need to leave a meeting because your child is ill, she knows what you are talking about” (PP, P3). Without establishing essentialist categories, focus group participants suggested that women in high-ranking positions act as symbols enlarging the array of accepted political practices and repertoires, politicizing unacknowledged norms and practices and challenging the prevailing “logic of appropriateness”. This symbolic expansion is a basic requisite for women’s political inclusion and acts against marginalization. Yet, as women suffer higher turnover rates and rotation the “role model” effect is short-lived.

Do gender quotas succeed as collective empowerment mechanisms? The leaders of the women’s sections pinpointed several distortions between the formal guarantees and access to real power. The introduction of quotas was initially coupled with the
creation of new layers of decision-making within parties (i.e. a smaller executive committee), not explicitly foreseen by party rules and, as such, exempted from parity criteria, and with the expansion of the number of members sitting in party boards. With these strategic maneuvers, real power was not relocated in a more egalitarian way but “shifted away” from women, as found in other studies (Holli 2011: 151; see also Hellsten et al. 2005). A practice still currently in place is using gender quotas to make two criteria coincide. Women tend to fulfill a double quota, that of gender and youth, which parties use to project “an image of freshness –and even beauty” (CDC, P7; also in PSC, P2; ICV, P2, P10). While diversity is formally assured, it minimizes the challenge on the in-group’s power as men remain in their positions. Women selectors have tried to advance women’s presence by “letting the ladder down” to other women, as found in studies of women’s representation in public office (Caul Kittilson 2006: 157; Verge 2010: 181). Nonetheless, the interviewees did not attribute this action to a gender consciousness but rather to the plurality of women’s networks. Getting more women in, though, is not easy. Focus group participants agreed on pointing that supply-side factors such as gender socialization on the perception of men’s and women’s skills as well as demand-side factors such as the organizational sexist practices already presented limit women’s will to accept party (and elective) positions. While men’s responses tend to be “I was waiting for your call!” or “In what position am I listed?” (ICV, P1), common answers among women are “I’m not prepared enough” (PP, P8; PSC, P5), “What can my contribution be?” (ERC, P3) or “I won’t be able to” (ICV, P1; also in CDC, P2), thereby reproducing the relationship between masculinity and power.

With a view to feminizing party politics, women also seek to build coalitions of support. In the parties where quotas have been introduced women’s sections sought and won the support of men leaders in fighting intra-party resistances to affirmative action, especially by male middle-level cadres. Party women also established a women’s section where equality issues can be discussed and actions planned. This strategy varies with party ideology. Left-wing parties have traditionally reserved these caucuses for women’s participation and thus excluded men. In these parties, the women’s sections rank high in the party structure and their leader sits in the highest party organs, although it should be noted that she is normally appointed by the party leader –with the exception of ICV. Women’s sections in left-wing parties have also built alliances with the women’s movement in order to advance common goals and lobby for equality policies. Liberal and conservative parties present a different approach. CDC has a common
sectoral branch for all discriminated groups (women, disabled, gays…) wherein participation is open to both men and women. The PP also has a sort of catch-all sectoral branch opened to all members’ punctual participation for the drafting of electoral manifestoes. These do not equate, though, to intersectional coalitions and they might well contribute to diffuse and weaken women’s interests and demands. It is quite common in all parties that the leaders of the women’s section combine party responsibilities with a full-time job outside the party thus constraining their time to build a strong women’s lobby (ERC, P3).

Although the existing collective arenas for women’s participation in left-wing parties seem to be more conducive to empowerment, both the interviewees and focus-group participants emphasized that women’s collective action is rather deficient. The explanation provided is twofold. Firstly, women’s collective action faces strong hostility by men (and by some women too) (ICV, P9). Indeed, it is often considered as “a pain in the neck” and completely unnecessary after quota adoption (PSC, P5) whereas men’s complicity is never put into question and, most importantly, not even identified as political (ICV, P5). Left-wing focus group participants pinpointed men’s lack of truly commitment with equality and “self-indulgence with gender quotas, which seems to preclude further action” (PSC, P5) – even if women are still to be watchful on their correct implementation (ERC, P4). For example, the measures designed to transform how parties operate are far from producing the desired effects. Left-wing parties (PSC, ICV and ERC) developed during the 2000s internal equality plans in order to identify the organizational dynamics constraining women’s participation and defined several measures to change the daily operation of parties, including time uses (see Verge 2009). The leaders of the women’s sections deplored that, although these equality plans have risen to some extent awareness on gender inequalities within their respective parties, the actions remain highly underdeveloped in some key areas. Parties have advanced the most in monitoring women’s representation across party levels and institutions but the way of doing politics “as usual” clearly prevails. Ultimately, time uses in the organization of party activities are the cornerstone of the untouchable domains: “Making men think of time in a different way would erode their power; precisely, they use late hours to keep power” (PSC, P1; also in ERC, P2; ICV, P11).

Secondly, despite increases in women’s presence as party and public officers exposes conflict and triggers demands that favor conscious awareness on gender inequalities, women members remain largely unaware of institutionalized gender
discrimination and feminist discourses are still seen with suspicion (ICV, P8; ERC, P4; PSC, P1). In the case of conservative women, gender consciousness is the weakest of all as they sustain that their party does not treat individuals differently on the grounds of sex. For example, in their assessment of the sex segregation of tasks or the gender bias in valuing merits, most conservative participants agreed that “If you behave like a ‘candy women’ you don’t get respect from men” (PP, P9), or “If you provide a strong reaction when treated as a token you are not marginalized” (PP, P1). So, for conservative women middle-level cadres, it is all about women’s personal attitude. We contest though the empowering effect of this strategy as gender discrimination can hardly be fought on an individual basis. Besides, intra-party gender power interactions go unnoticed and, as such, they are not only unchallenged but reproduced.

Conclusions
Although the substantive content of the empirical analysis is grounded on the composition of our five focus groups, the large similarities found in the participants’ experiences and interpretations vividly expose that political parties are inhospitable spaces for women that dramatically discriminate against them. As channels of participation, parties remain dominated by men. The dissociation between formal and real power is critical in intra-party gender power relations. Formal power follows a distributive pattern and can be analyzed by means of counting officeholders. Conversely, real power (actually, just power) is much more complex as it involves structural, institutional and relational factors deeply entrenched in the informal operation of parties. Whereas it is easier for men to find a straight correspondence between formal and real power, women struggle to have their formal power matched with real power. As captured in this quote: “We [women] have fought and won the formal ‘battle’ but not the informal one” (PSC, P4).

While formal power can be altered through measures such as gender quotas, subverting how real power operates is contingent upon deep institutional reforms that face a strong resistance. Men and women have more or less access to party resources (even when holding equivalent formal positions) and enjoy longer or shorter tenures in party office (irrespective of their individual merits) according to their adaptation to gender(ed) norms. Even in post-quota party settings, men control the lion’s share of party resources (financial and administrative support, office accumulation, social recognition, etc.). Discriminatory factors are quite similarly identified across focus
groups though party ideology turns out to be a crucial factor for the interpretation of some gender power relations and of the (dis)empowering effects for women – conservative women perceiving lower discrimination based on gender.

Power over is mainly deployed through institutionalized gender biases in the definition of merits and leadership skills, vertical and horizontal sex segregation of political responsibilities, a broad array of sexist organizational dynamics, and through informal networking and time uses highly disadvantageous to women. The acts performed individually by party women (power to) or as a group (power with) have not sufficed to subvert male domination. Respect for party rules, recognition of other women, an alternative political engagement, and time efficiency might well improve the quality of both party deliberation and functioning, though these acts shall only be effective when adopted by dominant and non-dominant groups, that is, when mainstreamed by the whole organization.

Overall, the gender regime in political parties proves extremely resistant to change. Office distribution, predominantly through gender quotas, although considered a step forward and a necessary condition by almost all focus group participants, is shown to be insufficient to subvert the main institutional sources of male power. In addition, when women organize to challenge the institutionalized domination, as in left-wing parties, they meet strong hostility, particularly when the core informal “rules of the game” are challenged, like time uses. As change and continuity coexist, quota reforms are hardly critical junctures but rather layering processes in which some elements are renegotiated while others remain.

Last but not least, the significant amount of public funding parties receive should make them more accountable for their functioning, raising the need to establish specific dispositions on party regulation regarding gender equality on their daily operation. Given that parties matter for women’s political participation and representation, further research is needed at least in two main avenues. Feminist institutionalism is extremely well equipped to unveil how the gendered power configuration of parties prevents political equality from being truly effective –through a variety of institutionalized informal dynamics, norms and practices. It also enables us to visualize resistance by identifying how, where and when women’s agency can find the most advantageous settings to pursue its claims, including how critical acts might change across space –i.e. different political parties– as well as across women’s groups –i.e. ethnicity and age. All
in all, parties, as any other institutional setting, might well be path-dependent but they are still subject to change through political conflict.

References


