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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

November 13, 2017

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20.11.2017

## *The European Parliament's Sexual Harassment Problem*

*Sexual harassment has long been a fact of life in the European Parliament in Brussels. Recently, some women have begun speaking up. But the law-making body has been slow to address the problem.*





REUTERS

***European Parliament member Terry Reintke in Strasbourg.***

When Jeanne Ponté wanted to go home, she found a man blocking her way to the exit. The Frenchwoman was coming from a meeting with lobbyists, and in the conference room she had already noticed an older man who kept staring at her. Now, with the meeting over, he caught the woman like a predator captures its prey. His hand grabbed the door jamb and he placed his arm like a gate just below her breasts. The lawmaker said: "You seem to be new here. Shouldn't we grab a drink?"

Ponté was a self-confident young woman who studied law and has a degree from the elite College of Europe in Bruges. But she didn't know how to react. She had only been working in the European Parliament for a few weeks and didn't want to cause a ruckus at one of her first official meetings. "I didn't want to make a drama out of it," she now says. Ultimately, she summoned up her courage and pushed the arm to the side. The man, a German delegate, is still a member of the European Parliament.

The nightmarish encounter, which took place in July 2014, became the first entry in a diary that Ponté has been keeping ever since. In the small book with a floral cover, she has been documenting the harassment faced by her and her colleagues at the European Parliament in Brussels. "I don't want to accept that this kind of behavior is normal," she says. "I want to create solidarity among those affected. " She has collected over 50 cases, the most recent entry is just two weeks old.

The European Parliament likes to be at the forefront of supporting women's rights in the developing world, but when it comes to protecting women in its own ranks, it is less eager. The institution has apparently neglected a sexism problem that has been rampant for years. Ever since a growing number of women began revealing experiences of sexual assault as part of the #MeToo campaign in the U.S., women in Brussels have also been speaking up. Now the parliament has passed a resolution calling for its leaders to bring in independent experts. "We cannot clear this up internally," says French Socialist Edouard Martin. "Anyone who wants to clear the subject up internally is minimizing it." Yet even though the resolution had the support of a clear majority of the parliament, it isn't legally binding.