

**WOMEN'S RIGHTS, THE EUROPEAN COURT  
AND SUPRANATIONAL CONSTITUTIONALISM**

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Rachel A. Cichowski  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Political Science  
University of Washington  
Box 353530  
Seattle, WA 98195  
rcichows@u.washington.edu

**ABSTRACT:** This analysis examines supranational constitutionalism in the European Union. In particular, the study focuses on the role of the European Court of Justice in the creation of women's rights. I examine the interaction between the Court and member state governments in legal integration, and also the integral role that women's advocates – both individual activists and groups – have played in the development of EU social provisions. The findings suggest that this litigation dynamic can have the effect of fueling the integration process by creating new rights that may empower social actors and EU organizations, with the ultimate effect of diminishing member state government control over the scope and direction of EU law. This study focuses specifically on gender equality law, yet provides a general framework for examining the case law in subsequent legal domains, with the purpose of providing a more nuanced understanding of supranational governance and constitutionalism.

## **WOMEN'S RIGHTS, THE EUROPEAN COURT AND SUPRANATIONAL CONSTITUTIONALISM**

In the last forty years, we have witnessed the evolution of an unprecedented form of supranational governance in Western Europe: the European Union (EU). The European Court of Justice (ECJ) has played a powerful role in this transformation. The Court's activism in the 1960s and 1970s is now widely accepted as having transformed the Treaty of Rome, an international treaty governing nation-state economic cooperation, into a 'supranational constitution' granting rights to individual citizens (Lenaerts 1990; Mancini 1989; Weiler 1981; 1991). The Treaty of Rome stands today as the backbone of a supranational legal regime governing not only transnational free trade issues, but also national women's rights provisions.

How did this remarkable transformation take place? How did the text of an international treaty that was mainly concerned with protecting businesses from unfair competition evolve into an elaborate set of policy arenas and procedures that today govern women's rights throughout Europe? And subsequently has this institutionalization of EU "constitutional" rights remained controlled by national governments? This is the puzzle my research attempts to explain. The answers are important for scholars concerned with understanding the evolving dynamic of European legal integration and a European rule of law system. And perhaps more importantly, it is also significant for those interested in the role of supranational constitutionalism in international and domestic policy processes. How are individuals and groups empowered by these new constitutional rights? How does the enforcement of supranational law change the balance of power between national governments, individuals and international organizations? And finally, how do these supranational rights enhance the role of national and supranational judges in judicial policymaking?

To answer these questions, the analysis examines the role of the ECJ in the expansion and institutionalization of European Union policy and how this dynamic process can empower

individuals *vis a vis* their own governments. In particular, this article examines the evolution of supranational constitutionalism in the area of EU women's rights.<sup>1</sup> I study the ECJ's social provisions case law pursuant to Article 234 Treaty of Rome (previously numbered Art 177) and explore how this procedure served both as an avenue to expand EU women's rights protection and also strengthen national compliance with these new constitutional rights. Article 234, also known as the preliminary ruling procedure, allows (and in some cases requires) national judges to ask the ECJ for a correct interpretation of EU law if it is material to the resolution of a dispute being heard in a national court. The national court then applies the ECJ decision (the preliminary ruling) to resolve the case. This procedure links the domestic and international legal orders through an ongoing dialogue between national judges and the ECJ. Scholars now recognize the importance of this procedure, as it was primarily through this case law that the Court began to develop and construct its expansive constitutional doctrine (e.g. Weiler 1981; 1991). Through the constitutional doctrines of supremacy and direct effect, the Court's rulings expanded supranational governance not only by strengthening the Court's own authority, but by empowering national judges and stimulating national legal action by individuals and groups (e.g. Alter 1998; 2001; Cichowski 1998, 2001; Mattli and Slaughter 1998; Slaughter, Stone Sweet and Weiler, eds. 1998).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this analysis, I focus on judicial decision-making. This necessarily leaves important questions unanswered. Others have studied the national level impact of ECJ rulings (Conant 2002) and other research has questioned whether ECJ decisions, and the EU equality laws they invoke, embody inherent limitations, rather than gains, for women (e.g. Cichowski 2002; Hoskyns 1983; Kenney 1992; Lovenduski 1997; Mazey 1988; Pillinger 1992; Prechal and Burrows 1990; Sohrab 1996). Rather than focusing on the implementation phase as the above studies do, I study decision-making to understand factors shaping the decisions and to examine whether these decisions expand EU law.

<sup>2</sup> The supremacy doctrine requires that national judges give precedence to EU rules over any national law or procedure that comes in conflict with these supranational rules and direct effect gives individuals directly enforceable rights under EU law. See the *Costa* decision (ECJ 1963) and *Van Gend en Loos* decision (ECJ 1964).

The article is organized as follows. I begin by introducing a set of theoretical expectations that guide the analysis. Then I present quantitative analyses of the ECJ's social provisions case law: in particular, the role of EU law, EU organizations and member state governments in impacting the Court's decision-making. The analysis is the first to offer a systematic and comprehensive policy level examination of the Court's social provisions case law over time. The majority of decisions in this legal domain involve EU gender equality laws, with other cases invoking specific areas of social protection and health and safety regulations. In the second part, I supplement this quantitative data with an in-depth case law analysis of a single sub-field of social provisions: pregnancy and maternity rights. This provides greater detail to the general patterns highlighted in the quantitative analyses. Through process tracing, I examine how the ECJ's judicial policymaking expanded the protection and rights available to women. National governments, EU organizations and individuals and groups are all participants in this process of institutionalization. Supranational constitutionalism in the European Union evolves as a dynamic process operating both above and below the state.

### **Conceptualizing Judicial Policymaking and Institutionalization**

The analysis adopts the assumption that through litigation, a court's resolution of societal questions or disputes can lead to the clarification and expansion of existing laws and to the construction of new rules (Shapiro 1981). Thus, in any system of governance with an independent judiciary, litigation provides a potential avenue for institutional change. While scholars illustrate that ECJ rulings can effectively expand the scope of EU rules, the dynamics of this process and subsequent effects of this judicial policymaking are less clear. I use the term "judicial policymaking" to refer to the Court's authoritative interpretation of the Treaty and secondary legislation, which results in the clarification of EU laws. It is well documented elsewhere (Alter

2001; de la Mare 1999; Mancini 1989; Cichowski 1998; 2001), that these interpretations can significantly alter the original measure in a way that changes what is lawful and unlawful behavior for individuals and public and private bodies operating under EU law.

Generally, institutionalization of a EU policy area evolves over time as a product of a dynamic relationship between institutions (Treaty provisions, secondary legislation), organizations (the ECJ) and actors (litigants and national governments). By institutionalization, I mean the process by which new arenas of supranational governance emerge and evolve (see Stone Sweet and Sandholtz 1998: 9). This study understands institutionalization as a process of rule construction that is endogenous to existing governance structures (March and Olsen 1989). That is, the Court's judicial policymaking capacity operates within the constitutional framework of the Treaty, yet the Court's jurisprudence can subsequently alter these institutions. This approach is not unfamiliar to scholars of judicial rulemaking (Shapiro 1988; Stone Sweet 2000).

How can one measure this change in institutions or rights? Institutionalization in any legal domain begins by looking at whether the Court's jurisprudence transformed or changed the EU institutions governing activity in this legal domain. First, I examine the impact of ECJ jurisprudence on EU institutions and ask whether these rules have changed in precision and if they've become more binding and enforceable. As European rules become more precise and non-compliance is met with greater enforceable penalties, we can expect this set of rights to become more institutionalized at the EU level. Second, institutionalization can be measured in terms of whether ECJ rulings have changed the scope of EU institutions. As the purview of EU rules expands, one can expect a greater number of actions to be formally governed by EU law. As we move across this continuum of precision, enforceability and scope, we find institutionalization at the EU level taking place.<sup>3</sup> This process of rule construction through litigation subsequently has

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<sup>3</sup> For an examination of institutionalization in other EU policy domains, see (See Stone Sweet and Sandholtz 1998).

significant consequences on the relative influence that EU organizations (such as the ECJ) and individuals exert on supranational policy outcomes. Scholars assert that through its jurisprudence the ECJ operates to expand its own competence and uphold EU interests with the effect of diminishing member government control over integration (e.g. Burley & Mattli 1993; Stone Sweet & Brunell 1998).

The ECJ's constitutional doctrine is an example of the Court enhancing its own power relative to member governments (see Mattli & Slaughter 1998). I examine whether this same dynamic influences the future development of EU policy – in particular, women's rights. Have the Court's rulings led to the construction of new rules and how do these judicial outcomes affect the relative influence of the Court *vis a vis* member state governments in shaping future policy developments? Simply, do ECJ decisions reflect the policy preference of powerful member states as some scholars argue (e.g. Garrett, Kelemen, & Schultz 1998; Garrett 1995) or does the ECJ operate to expand EU competence often in the face of member state opposition (e.g. Burley & Mattli 1993; Cichowski 1998)? Further, we would expect the relative clarity of EU law to matter in this judicial decision-making. Scholars have argued that the ECJ is more likely to issue adverse or expansive rulings the greater the clarity of the EU law in question (Garrett, Kelemen & Schultz 1998). Alternately, I argue that the Court's expansive decision-making will disproportionately involve vague EU norms that lack clarity. This legal uncertainty has resulted in a growing number of disputes which subsequently activates the EU legal system enabling the ECJ to fulfill its duty of clarifying EU law, irregardless of the potential impact on national legal practices (see Cichowski 1998).

Together, these expectations guide the following analyses.

## CONSTRUCTING SUPRANATIONAL RIGHTS IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION

In 1958, women's rights were not on the agenda for the newly forming European Economic Community. However, certain national governments were concerned with protecting business from unfair competition created by existing wage disparities, and thus provided that under the Treaty of Rome men and women would receive equal pay for equal work (Article 141, previously numbered Art 119). This provision was intended to bestow obligations on national governments and to prevent competition distortion. Today this same social provision bestows a positive right on individuals throughout the member states, a judicially enforceable right that remains the backbone of an expanding net of European gender equality rights. In this section, I turn our focus to the factors that shape ECJ decisions. I explore whether the ECJ acts to uphold EU interests and clarify EU law or whether it operates to preserve national government policy positions.

### Data Sources and Methodology

The data set includes all ECJ rulings pursuant to Article 234 preliminary references in the policy sector of social provisions from the first ruling in 1971 to 1993 (N = 88).<sup>4</sup> I compiled the decisions from the *European Court Reports*, a full text compendium of ECJ decisions. Integral to the Art 234 procedure are 'observations,' which are written briefs filed by the Commission and the member state governments stating how they believe the case should be decided (or more generally how the EU law should be interpreted in relation to the national practice). Governments can submit observations in any case even those not originating from their own legal system. Scholars note that member state governments and EU organizations submitting observations are interested in having

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<sup>4</sup> The quantitative analysis ends in 1993 as this is the last year the *European Court Reports* published the written observations in their entirety. The case law analysis extends the data set to 1998 in order to provide a comprehensive study of the Court's pregnancy rights case law and include important cases occurring in the post-1993 period. The trends in the Court's rulings are not appreciably different, other than increasing numbers of claims in the area of social provisions.



their policy position considered, in an attempt to affect the potential policy outcomes of the decisions (de la Mare 1999: 243-44). Thus, this is often the place where one might expect to see national resistance to supranational policy

I coded the data in the following manner. The rulings were all categorized by country of origin and EU law invoked in the case. Each ruling was coded into one of two categories:

- **Consistent ruling:** the Court accepted a national rule or practice as consistent with EU law.
- **Adverse ruling:** the national rule was declared to be in violation of EU law.

This measure gives us some idea whether ECJ rulings operate to preserve national legal practices in any systematic way or whether the rulings serve to uphold and expand EU competence. Formally, Article 234 does not enable the ECJ to directly rule on the compatibility of national rules with EU law. However, the practical reality of the ECJ's interpretation of EU law, in a context determined by national legislation, is often a determination of the validity of these national laws (see de la Mare 1999). The written observations were also coded into two categories:

- **Successful:** the observation was successful at predicting the ECJ's ruling
- **Unsuccessful:** the observation was unsuccessful at predicting the ECJ's ruling.

This enables us to measure the direct impact of both member states' and EU Commission's policy positions on ECJ rulings. Finally, by reading the case law, I am able to examine the impact of ECJ precedent on subsequent decision-making. Through process tracing, I trace the Court's case law examining whether these rulings change the precision and scope of EU law and how this may create new rights that are linked to subsequent action and litigation.

### **Expanding the European Rule of Law**

I begin by examining the preliminary rulings over time. Table 1 displays the percentage of annual rulings in which the ECJ found the national practice to be in violation of EU law (I refer to this as an adverse ruling) between 1971 and 1993. The findings are dramatic. The majority of these cases result in an adverse ruling (56 %). The first decade of social provisions litigation contains

few adverse rulings with only 5 rulings during this time period. Yet even when the ECJ found no violation, these rulings did often make bold moves to expand EU law through the Court's argumentation (notably the *Defrenne* decisions that will be discussed in greater detail below). Further, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the ECJ held in almost half or more of these cases that national practices were in violation of EU law. Remarkably this trend took place even during a time when there was a general slowing in integration processes in the 1980s, especially in the social policy sector, as member state governments returned their focus to domestic concerns. For example, the United Kingdom government continually dragged its heels on EU social legislation during the time period of this study, yet British legal practices were in question in over a quarter of these cases (24 cases) with the ECJ finding violations in almost half of these rulings (46 %). Overall, these data bring into question the assertion that the ECJ systematically acts to uphold national practices.

----- Table 1 about here -----

Table 1 also includes data on the EU rules invoked in the cases. This enables us to test how the clarity of EU rules may impact ECJ decision-making. ECJ decisions upholding national practices are disproportionately in those sub-fields invoking EU laws with more clearly defined norms: Health, Safety and Services and Transport/Social Protection. The ECJ finds national practices to be in violation of EU law in only 25 % of Health cases and 10 % of Transport disputes - a much lower rate than all other sub-fields whose violation rates are 70 % (Equality Legislation), 62% (Equality Treaty Provisions) and 46 % (Transfer Ownership/Social Protection).

This disparity is not surprising as EU legislation in the Health and Transport cases are mainly Council Regulations whose policy prescriptions are directly applicable and binding in all member states. The resulting consequence is greater specificity that ensures direct and uniform application in the legal systems of all member states and leads to fewer disputes. Alternatively,

Council Directives are binding only to the end to be achieved but leave open to member state governments the form and method of how this will be transposed into domestic law. In the social provisions domain, many Directives possess vague policy prescriptions that result from unanimity voting. These lowest common denominator positions illustrate an overall hesitation by member state governments to specify concrete EU rules in the area of equality between men and women (Hoskyns 1996). Subsequently, these varying national implementations are the basis of disputes eventually coming before the ECJ. As the data suggest, when legal questions arise from these vague policy prescriptions, the ECJ does not hesitate to expand both the meaning and scope of this equality legislation, often in the face of member state opposition.

Almost half of the social provisions preliminary rulings involved the Gender Equality Directives (40 out of 88 rulings). And in 70% of these cases (28 out of 40) the ECJ finds national practices to be in violation of EU law. This is an astonishing number for a policy area that was intended to remain governed mostly by national measures rather than EU law. Similarly, the ECJ does not hesitate to expand the scope of Article 141 when confronted with the possible rights implied by this treaty “constitutional” provision (see *Defrenne* decisions ECJ 1971; ECJ 1976; ECJ 1978). In 21 different rulings, the ECJ is asked to interpret the meaning of this right in relation to national practices: 62% of these rulings declare national laws in non-conformity with Article 141. We might expect more adverse rulings involving this Treaty provision as fundamental Community rights give the ECJ greater latitude to dismantle national practices and expand EU rules (Ellis 1998).

Table 2 provides a general picture of how the rulings evolved cross-nationally. Aggregating results from litigation involving “powerful member state governments” (France, Germany, Italy and the UK), the Court declared violations in over a half of these cases (57 %). These data also give some preliminary indication that national legal regimes enshrining least integrative rules are asked

to upgrade to conform with EU law. British laws are the subjects of over a quarter of all the rulings in this legal domain (27%). This is not surprising. The UK has continually taken the “opt-out” position to even the most flexible of EU social policy regulations (Pierson and Leibfried 1992). These data confirm the expectation that rulings disproportionately involve legal disputes arising from legal systems operating to downgrade EU laws.

----- Table 2 about here -----

Further, the findings suggest another explanation for cross-national variation. Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom possess a comparatively high degree of legal expertise in the area of gender equality law. Thus, while these legal systems may afford greater legal protection from sex discrimination (Germany and the Netherlands in particular), compared to other member states, they also possess a greater number of equality law experts who systematically test the scope of both EU law and their own national laws by providing real situations for previously vague EU equality laws (see cases such as *Kalanke*, ECJ 1995; *Bilka* ECJ 1986; *Dekker* 1990c; *Ten Oever* ECJ 1993; *Webb*, ECJ 1994b).<sup>5</sup> The rights argumentation of activist lawyers and the practical situation of the dispute provide the basis for the ECJ’s decision. In an attempt to bring greater clarity to the EU right in question, the Court often dismantles national practices, regardless of member state opposition. Dutch practices were the subject of preliminary rulings 20% of the time (18 out of 88 rulings). Further, the ECJ declared Dutch practices as inconsistent with EU law in 67% of these cases. Similarly, German practices are increasingly the subject of adverse rulings in the area of equality: 67% of German preliminary references in this area ended in the ECJ declaring that the national practice was in violation of EU law.

I further explore the impact of national factors on ECJ decision-making by examining the written observations in each case. Again, member state governments and EU organizations

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<sup>5</sup> In the United Kingdom case, scholars observe the importance of national equality agencies, such as the Equal Opportunities Commission, in supporting this discrimination litigation (see Kenney 1992; Alter and Vargas 2000).

(primarily the EU Commission) file these written briefs stating how the case should be decided. These legal arguments reveal the policy preferences of member state governments and EU organizations. The data in Table 2 include all the written observations submitted in preliminary rulings in the area of social provisions between 1971 and 1993. Generally, the findings are consistent with what we know about the Commission's self decided policy of intervening in preliminary ruling cases. The Commission submitted observations in all cases, as noted by the 100% intervention rate (total of 88 observations out of 88 cases): an act that reflects this organization's "desire for influence" in EU policy decisions (de la Mare 1999: 244). Further, the data display that whether a country's legal practice is in question does not necessarily determine its general level of participation in submitting observations. The Dutch government intervened in 11% of preliminary rulings that did not directly involve Dutch national practices, compared to less active member states, such as Belgium, which not only did not intervene beyond its own cases, also did not submit observations in 4 of its own cases. Germany and Ireland were also less likely to intervene beyond their own cases, with intervention rates of 3% and 2%. Beyond the Dutch participation rate, the UK government has been astonishingly active by intervening in 28 out of 64 cases (44%) that did not involve UK legal practices directly. This may suggest that the UK takes seriously the potential policy impact, in all member states, of these preliminary rulings. Thus, in the same way the British government has acted in the Council of Ministers to defend its position that social protection should be dealt with at the national level rather than EU level, the UK takes seriously the opportunity to participate in the policy discussions and decisions that transpire during the preliminary ruling procedure.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In the time period of this study, the UK government has exhibited hesitation towards a common EU social policy. The first real concrete sets of social rights were established through the Social Charter Action Program decided in Strasbourg in 1989. All member states except the UK signed the political declaration. Further, pressure to expand social protection in the negotiations leading up to the Treaty of European Union (TEU) was "met with stubborn resistance on the part of the UK" (Barnard 1999: 485). The EU developed the "Social Chapter" (the Social Policy

How do these member state interventions affect the ECJ's decision making? The most interesting finding is that the Commission's observations predict ECJ rulings far better than do observations filed by member state governments. The Commission's success rate is approximately 91%: 80 out of 88 observations are successful at predicting the final ECJ decision. The United Kingdom's rate of success is much lower in comparison at 56%. It is interesting to note that while Denmark's success rate is high (81%), in 1 of its observations the Danish Government actually files an observation stating it believes their national law is in violation with EU law (government preferences in all other cases take a stance to defend or preserve national law) and the ECJ concurs (see ECJ 1996b). In general, the findings presented in Table 2 suggest that some member states take seriously the policy making function of the ECJ preliminary ruling. Further, the findings bring into question claims that the ECJ decisions are systematically influenced by the policy positions of member states. Instead, as the ECJ acts to protect its legitimacy and uphold EU interests, it is not surprising that the Commission's position was much more likely to predict the final outcome of the case.

Figure 1 displays a test of the success rates of member state governments at predicting ECJ decision in major cases, or cases with higher political or financial costs. The figure displays the percentage of adverse rulings by four categories denoting the magnitude of the political and financial impact of the case: 1 denotes low impact and 4 is the highest. Generally, a greater number of member states file written observations in cases with potentially high political and financial costs (major cases) (de la Mare 1999). Thus, the number of member states filing observations in a case becomes a proxy for level of political and financial impact. These data begin to help us understand whether the ECJ is less likely to issue an adverse ruling in major cases. As most national governments submit observations to defend national practices, this also tells us whether member

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Agreement and the Social Policy Protocol) as treaty amendments, but they were relegated to an annex of the TEU to secure the UK's opt-out position.

states' observations are more or less successful at predicting the final decision in major cases. The findings are significant. In the social provisions domain, there is little evidence that the ECJ is less likely to make an adverse ruling when there is a greater potential financial impact associated with the ruling. In cases with a higher impact (magnitude of 4), the ECJ issues an adverse ruling finding the national practice in violation of EU law 100 % of the time. And out of those cases with little impact (a magnitude of 1), the ECJ is comparatively less likely to hand down an adverse ruling (52% of cases in category 1).

----- Figure 1 about here -----

### **SUPRANATIONAL CONSTITUTIONALISM AND GENDER EQUALITY RIGHTS: FROM PAY TO PREGNANCY**

These data reinforce predictions arguing that the preferences of powerful member state governments do not generally constrain the Court's judicial outcomes. To elaborate how this litigation dynamic develops and how this changes the balance of power between EU organizations, member state governments and ordinary citizens, I rely on the content of the case law. In the remaining part of the analysis, I examine the cases in a single area of social provisions: pregnancy and maternity rights. The analysis focuses on the expansion of constitutional rights. This emphasis is important as it elaborates how the ECJ, national courts and individual litigants shifted significant constitutional questions away from member state government control. While scholars highlight the inherent limitations that often exist for women in constitutional politics, especially in pregnancy and maternity litigation both in the EU (Kenney 1995, 1992; More 1992; Shaw 1999; Szyszczak 1993) and more generally (Chamallas 1999; Weisberg, ed. 1996), this case law analysis asks the question of how these rights emerged in the first place and how the Court expands them over time.

## **The Necessary Conditions for Legal Claims and Litigation**

Art 141 of the Treaty of Rome provides the legal basis for EU gender equality. Essential to the evolution of the litigation was, first, a decision by member state governments to include the provision in the Treaty of Rome. The origins of Art 141 are embedded in economic rather than social justice concerns. Inclusion of Art 141 in the Treaty was an attempt to protect French businesses from unfair competition created by less stringent or a lack of equal pay laws possessed by other member state governments. Yet, given this necessary rule, how did individuals come to utilize a treaty provision for their own protection against discriminatory national practices? This treaty provision was meant to place duties on member state governments, not to provide directly enforceable rights for individuals. Thus, the second necessary condition for this activism and litigation was an ECJ decision that transformed this treaty provision into an enforceable rights provision. Together these two factors activated a dynamic of litigation that ultimately led to a complex set of rules governing gender equality in Europe. Thus, our case law analysis begins with this important landmark decision, the *Defrenne II* decision (ECJ 1976).

Until the late 1960s, not one national government had undertaken domestic policy changes to implement Article 141. However, this equal pay provision was far from dead, as it was soon to gain life as a result of the strategic action and activism of a Belgian lawyer. Elaine Vogel-Polsky, who specialized in social and labor law, regarded Art 141 as a stepping-stone to expanding women's labor rights. Through a series of test cases involving Gabrielle Defrenne, a flight attendant with the Belgian national airline, Sabena, Vogel-Polsky was able to work with the ECJ to expand the scope of the provision and to begin to provide real situations in which Art 141 was applicable. The conditions behind these cases are as follows. Until 1966, Sabena's male flight stewards earned higher wages, were allowed to retire 15 years later, and were entitled to a special



pension plan, all benefits that their female counterparts failed to receive. Job responsibilities of stewards and stewardesses were identical. Vogel-Polsky challenged these inequalities and sought protection for her client under EU law. The Court's *Defrenne* judgments (ECJ 1971; ECJ 1976; ECJ 1978) (in particular the second case) were critical in transforming Art 141 by establishing its direct effect, and in doing so provided EU citizens with individual rights enforceable under EU law.

In the *Defrenne II* decision (ECJ 1976), the Court expanded the scope and purpose of Art 141 by stating that the principle was creative of both enforceable rights in national courts, regardless of national implementing legislation, and that the scope requires further clarification and development. In its reasoning, the Court emphasizes what it sees as the dual function of Art 141, as both economic and social (see ECJ 1976: 470). Not all parties participating in this case concurred with this expansive reading of the Treaty. The governments of both the United Kingdom and of the Irish Republic exercised their right to submit a written observation, stating how they believed the Court should decide the case. In their opinion, Art 141 did not confer rights on individuals, citing the potential 'cost of the operation' if the Court was to find the principle directly effective, especially retroactively. The Court did not concur.

### **The Path of Institutional Evolution**

Activated by the test case strategy of a Belgian social activist lawyer, the Court's judicial rulemaking in the *Defrenne II* decision enabled Article 141 to become the site for an expansive rights discourse. This treaty provision would become the driving force behind EU gender equality legislation in the 1970s and 1980s. Further, the transformation of Art 141 had consequences not only for legislative action, but also for the litigating environment. The institutional path was paved. Individuals were provided with new arsenal to demand rights under EU law before national courts. In this section I examine all of the cases involving pregnancy rights referred to the Court through 1998 and explore how this changed the rights available to women.

### Legal Basis for Pregnancy Rights

The litigation primarily grew out of rights claimed under Art 141 and the Equal Treatment Directive.<sup>7</sup> The majority of these cases focus on women who experience discrimination in terms of either access to or dismissal from employment on the basis of pregnancy. Even though the Equal Treatment Directive is more applicable to these cases, Art 141 continues to be important because the Court's *Defrenne* decisions found a general principle of equal treatment in Art 141. Litigants and their lawyers act strategically by invoking this constitutional right as they provide the Court with a powerful tool to decide the case. General principles, in theory, do not have the ability to override treaty provisions, yet they enable the ECJ to justify a 'liberal interpretation of what might otherwise seem to be a narrow rule' (Ellis 1998: 181). As for the equal treatment principle, the ECJ utilizes it to dismantle both discriminatory administrative decisions and to justify broad interpretations of EU secondary legislation.

### Pregnancy, Discrimination and Judicial Policymaking

The Court first considered the rights of pregnant workers under EU law in the *Dekker* case (ECJ 1990a). The case was brought before the ECJ by a Dutch court in 1988. Mrs. Dekker applied for a job with a Dutch company, VJV, and after an interview was found to be the most qualified for the job. She was three-months pregnant at the time and while the hiring committee recommended employment, VJV management decided not to employ Mrs. Dekker because its insurer would not cover the necessary maternity pay. Mrs. Dekker instigated legal proceedings against VJV, claiming that she had been discriminated against on the basis of her sex. The case was referred to the ECJ

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<sup>7</sup> Council Directive 76/207/EEC.

for a preliminary ruling on the protection of Mrs. Dekker under Art. 141 and the Equal Treatment Directive.

In this 1990 ruling, the Court finds that discrimination in employment opportunities on the ground of pregnancy constitutes direct sex discrimination, contrary to the Equal Treatment Directive. The ruling in effect created new European rules by providing explicit protection of pregnant workers under EU law and also created a new interpretation of sex equality for women, emphasizing disadvantage to women rather than comparable treatment with men. Later that same day, the Court makes a similar ruling in a case originating from Danish courts, the *Hertz* case (ECJ 1990b), concluding that the dismissal of a pregnant employee also amounts to discrimination under EU law.

This question of protection against dismissal is further raised in a case originating from Germany in 1992. *Habermann-Beltermann v. Arbeiterwohlfahrt* (ECJ 1994a) concerned the dismissal of a pregnant woman who had been employed on an indefinite contract to work at night, despite the national law that forbade night work by pregnant women. The Court decides the case by emphasizing that the national law affects only a limited duration, in contrast to the unlimited nature of the contract, and finds that dismissal under these circumstances is contrary to the Equal Treatment Directive.

However, a closer look at these ECJ rulings reveals many unanswered questions regarding pregnancy, maternity, and discrimination. In particular, when is pregnancy regarded as the determining factor in discriminatory treatment? In a now pivotal case in the development of EU equality law, the British House of Lords sent a reference in the *Webb* case (ECJ 1994b) asking the ECJ to bring clarity to this question. Mrs. Webb, a pregnant woman, had her indefinite employment contract terminated when her employer found out that she would be absent from work during the same period as another pregnant employee whom she was hired to replace. The House

of Lords decides that while Mrs. Webb has no rights under UK law, she may under EU law and so asked for a preliminary ruling.

The Court reaffirms its early ruling in *Dekker* and finds that ‘dismissal of a pregnant worker on account of pregnancy constitutes direct discrimination on grounds of sex’ (para.19). The Court continues by arguing that the need for special protection of pregnant workers is embodied in the Equal Treatment Directive and also in the Pregnancy Directive<sup>8</sup>, which had not come into force yet when the case arose. And therefore, concludes that ‘greater weight’ cannot be attached to the reasons for recruitment. The defendant’s argument of hardship is viewed not as the reason for dismissal, but as justification for the discriminatory treatment. Under EU law, once direct discrimination is established, it cannot be justified (Boch 1996). The Pregnancy Directive would later move beyond these earlier pieces of equality legislation by creating protection specifically for pregnant workers, although in reality not going much further than codifying many of the rights already extended by the Court.

Scholars both laud and criticize the Court’s decision in *Webb*. The ruling clearly emphasizes and expands the Community’s goal of protecting pregnant workers from discriminatory action, despite the harmful costs inflicted on employers and member state governments. Yet these rulings also highlight a significant area of equality law that needs further clarification. The relationship between Art. 5 of the Equal Treatment Directive and the Pregnancy Directive remain speculative. In both the *Webb* and *Hertz* decisions, the Court implies that the Equal Treatment Directive leaves unanswered the question whether pregnant women in fixed term employment are protected. While the Pregnancy Directive is not explicit about unlimited coverage, the Court in the *Larsson* decision (ECJ 1997) concludes that Art. 10 of the Directive in fact offers such blanket protection. Interestingly enough, in this case originating from Danish courts, the Court finds that

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<sup>8</sup> Council Directives 92/85/EEC.

the dismissal of a woman due to pregnancy-related illness is in fact lawful under the Equal Treatment Directive – again, the facts of the case were prior to implementation of the Pregnancy Directive – when the dismissal took place after the end of her maternity leave. The Court’s clarification of the Pregnancy Directive and the extension of protection came, as a side remark stating that if the Directive were in force the Court would have found the action unlawful.

This remark clearly foreshadows the Court’s *Brown* ruling (ECJ 1998a), a case referred from the British House of Lords. Mrs. Brown was absent from work for over six months during her pregnancy for pregnancy-related reasons. All employees at Rentokil Ltd, her employer, are governed by the policy that absences of six months due to sickness justify dismissal. Accordingly, Mrs. Brown was dismissed. The Court held, in an explicit reversal of the *Larsson* decision, that it was contrary to the Equal Treatment Directive to dismiss a woman for pregnancy-related illnesses during her pregnancy.<sup>9</sup> Scholars rightly argue that this reversal does little to clarify EU rules in this area, as it contradicted its earlier interpretation of the Equal Treatment Directive (Ellis 1999).<sup>10</sup>

The final set of cases demonstrates the Court’s further expansion of pregnancy rights in areas other than dismissal and refusal to hire. We also can observe an increasing occurrence of group litigation strategies: women joining together to bring these claims.

In the *Gillespie* case, the Court receives a set of questions regarding the applicability of Community law to levels of maternity pay (ECJ 1996). The referral came by way of a Northern Ireland appeals court after the lower industrial tribunal dismissed the case of 17 plaintiffs. This

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<sup>9</sup> As in the *Larsson* case, the facts of this case arose before the Pregnancy Directive came into force and so the Equal Treatment Directive was the only instrument available to the litigants.

<sup>10</sup> In particular, the Court’s adherence to the rule that where the discriminatory treatment is based on the fact of pregnancy, since only women can become pregnant, this must amount to discrimination based on sex. The *Brown* decision takes this a step further by arguing that pregnancy-related illness is inseparable from the fact of pregnancy and therefore similar treatment as a result of this condition is also discrimination on grounds of sex. Mainly, this is problematic because it again reduces pregnancy to the status of illness; as well, this reliance on illness rather than absence as the cause for dismissal removes the employer’s interests from the situation. This later logic could dilute the complexity of the situation and thus impede the Court from its job in balancing all the interests in the dispute at hand. See Ellis (1999) for further discussion.

type of organized litigation strategy, while not historically observed in Europe, is increasingly common in EU litigation (Cichowski 1998; 2001; Harlow & Rawlings 1992). The plaintiffs were all on maternity leave from their employment in various offices of the Northern Ireland Health Services during a period in which a proposed back-pay increase was planned. The maternity leave received by Health Service employees consists of a percentage of their given wage. The plaintiffs instigated proceedings on the grounds that they suffered sex discrimination because they did not receive the full benefit of the back-dated pay raise due to the fact that they were receiving a reduced amount of their wage while on maternity leave. The Court rules in favor of the plaintiffs and its judgment further clarifies how national maternity policies must be interpreted in light of Art 141 and the Equal Pay Directive.

The second case involves the protection of employee rights regarding assessment and evaluation while absent on maternity leave. It is worth mentioning that while the facts of the *Thibault* case (ECJ 1998b) took place after the implementation of the Pregnancy Directive, the only instrument, which can be relied upon where unfavorable treatment takes a form other than dismissal or refusal to employ, is still the Equal Treatment Directive. The case arose when Mrs. Thibault registered a complaint with the labor tribunal in Paris against her employer for failing to perform her annual performance evaluation, which is linked to a minimum 2 per cent pay raise and promotion, due to the fact she did not fulfill the requisite six months attendance within the evaluation year. Mrs. Thibault was on maternity and pregnancy-related leave for seven months of this time and she argued that her employer's failure to assess her performance based on absences related to maternity leave was discriminatory. Despite the observation submitted by the British government stating that the employer's action did not constitute sex discrimination under EU law, the Court expands the rights under the Equal Treatment Directive by concluding that it was

unlawfully discriminatory to deny a woman the right to possible promotion because of her absence on maternity leave.

The final two cases represent the Court's first opportunity to rule on the Pregnancy Directive. In the *Boyle* case (ECJ 1998c), six female employees of the British Equal Opportunities Commission applied to the industrial tribunal, Manchester, for a declaration that certain conditions of their maternity leave was unenforceable in so far as it discriminated against female employees and was thus contrary to Art. 141 of the Treaty and the Equal Pay and Equal Treatment Directives, as well as the Pregnancy Directive.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that this joint claim is both from and against a British government equality agency that continues to support a considerable amount of the EU gender equality litigation (Cichowski 2001; Alter and Vargas 2000; Kenney 1992). While the Court re-emphasizes the provisions in the Pregnancy Directive which affords national government discretion in determining when maternity leave commences, it found that a contract prohibiting a woman from taking sick leave during maternity leave without returning to work first was contrary to the Directive. Again, UK laws are the subjects of litigation.

In the month following the *Boyle* ruling, the Court gave its second decision involving the Pregnancy Directive in the *Pedersen* case (ECJ 1998d). By way of a Danish Commerce Court, the four plaintiffs challenged a national law which stated that women who were unfit for work for reasons connected with pregnancy before the three-month period preceding the birth date were not entitled to full pay. Three women were declared unfit to work while one was only partially unfit to work during this period, and thus their employer ceased to pay them. The four women claimed this law was contrary to the rights given pregnant workers under the same EU laws as invoked in the *Boyle* case. The Court rules in favor of the plaintiffs, finding that Danish legislation does not aim to protect women's conditions, but rather favors the interests of the employer. This case represents

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<sup>11</sup> Council Directives 75/117/EEC, 76/207/EEC, and 92/85/EEC.

the first time the Court is asked to interpret the rules governing the duties of employers regarding adjusting the workplace to the needs of pregnant workers. The Pregnancy Directive (Arts 4 and 5) requires an employer to introduce temporary adjustments to working conditions and hours in response to risk assessment of the pregnant workers' situation. The Danish employer failed to provide other opportunities to these women. The Court gave breadth to the Directive by defining the scope of this right. Scholars emphasize the importance of the Court's interpretation of Arts 4 and 5 of the Pregnancy Directive in that it imposes duties on the employers, and in doing so the Court recognizes that pregnancy and maternity may require re-organization of the work place (Caracciolo di Torella 1999).

## CONCLUSIONS

The EU today governs what is historically a protected national legal domain, social policy, of which pregnancy and maternity rights are an integral part. This expansion in EU competence was unimaginable in the 1950s when the Treaty was signed and member state governments did not all welcome the policy implications. The findings in this article illustrate that the European Court of Justice and women activists played a powerful role in this transformation.

The analysis explains how supranational constitutionalism can lead to the expansion of rights. Faced with little or no protection under domestic law, women experiencing discrimination utilize general EU gender equality laws to bring claims before their national courts. The findings illustrate that this litigation is often the result of test case strategies and groups of women mobilizing to bring a claim. Through the preliminary ruling system, these cases are referred to the European Court of Justice. Operating to uphold EU interests and bring greater clarity to EU law, the ECJ resolves the dispute, and in doing so is given the opportunity to expand the meaning and scope of EU social provisions, often in the face of member state opposition. This judicial



rulemaking can create the opportunity for subsequent legal action. In particular, we saw this constitutional rights expansion when the ECJ transformed Art. 141, a treaty provision governing equal pay and fair competition, into a positive right. This was a radical move as the EU legal system was suddenly opened up to disadvantaged women. The subsequent discrimination claims enabled the ECJ to further expand EU gender equality laws to areas as diverse as pensions and pregnancy rights. Supranational constitutionalism in the EU has meant a growing body of rights protecting women throughout Europe.

I would like to conclude by suggesting a set of broader lessons for scholars concerned with the effects of supranational constitutionalism on newly evolving political spaces. First, beyond substantive rights creation, court rulings can change the balance of power in and openness of international policy processes.<sup>12</sup> Social groups that are otherwise excluded from EU policymaking can utilize the ECJ to achieve significant policy reform and inclusion. The Court's jurisprudence can have the effect of shifting the distribution of gains away from dominant political interests, such as the business community, to less powerful individuals. The door is opened to those who historically may be excluded from EU decision-making. Women, as legal experts, group activists, and individual litigants, have become integral components in the process of European integration. This inclusion can also alter the balance of power between social groups and national governments in international politics. The European Union becomes less "intergovernmental," as national governments no longer remain the sole gatekeepers to EU policy reform (Moravcsik 1998). This supranational constitutionalism has led to both the expansion of EU law, and also the opportunity for social groups to bring claims against their own governments and dismantle discriminatory national practices. This dynamic process provides a way to drag national governments into an ever-greater union of the sort that the politically excluded are interested in creating.

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<sup>12</sup> From a domestic politics perspective, legal mobilization scholars have observed this possible effect of court rulings (see for example, McCann 1994).

Second, and related to the first point, the extent to which court rulings create new rights, they may have transformative effects on democracy (Cichowski and Stone Sweet 2003). Rather than engaging what American analysts would see as the counter-majoritarian difficulty of courts, the ECJ's role in integration can open up democratic possibilities within the European Union. The litigation process illustrates how citizens are directly engaged with the EU legal system and in effect narrow the distance that might otherwise exist between national and EU politics. The findings in this study also illustrate that despite the intentions of member state governments, EU policies, which disproportionately favor capital over labor, often had significant unintended consequences. Through the strategic activism of women's advocates and the subsequent judicial rulemaking of the ECJ, fair competition laws were given the effect of a social justice provision. Finally, the findings illustrate that increasingly women are joining together to make these discrimination claims – transnational mobilization that illustrates quite clearly that reform movements are effectively and directly becoming active participants in the expansion of EU politics.<sup>13</sup>

It is through the dynamic interaction of litigation and social mobilization that supranational constitutionalism can evolve. Certain rules are created and through the actions of individuals and groups these rules can be expanded in a direction that leads those governed by these rules down a path that becomes increasingly hard to change (Pierson 2000; North 1990). Powerful actors produce rules and organizations that embody their interests, yet these opportunities can be used in unintended ways. These outcomes can change who controls the trajectory of international politics. Supranational constitutionalism in the EU does not only hinge on a series of executive and legislative choices, but has evolved as the accumulation of strategic activism by courts and social activists, operating above and below the nation-state.

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<sup>13</sup> Reform movements in the EU have experienced less success with utilizing protest tactics as a transnational mobilizing strategy (see Imig and Tarrow 2001). However, reform activists are increasingly becoming common actors in both the EU and global politics (see Marks and McAdam 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998).

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**TABLE 1 ECJ RULINGS PURSUANT TO ARTICLE 234 IN THE AREA OF SOCIAL PROVISIONS BY POLICY SUB-FIELD, JUDICIAL OUTCOME AND YEAR, 1971-1993**

<b>Policy Sub-Field</b>	<b>Total Rulings</b>	<b>Adverse Rulings (%)</b>
Equality Legislation	40	70
Equality Treaty	21	62
Health & Safety	4	25
Social Protection in Transport	11	10
Social protection in Transfer Ownership	13	46
<b>Time Periods</b>		
1971-1979	5	40
1980-1989	42	43
1990-1993	46	55
<b>Totals</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>56</b>

Note: Total rulings column denotes the number of cases in each sub-field of social provisions and in each time period. The percentage of adverse rulings column denotes the percentage of rulings in which the ECJ declared a national practice to be in violation of EU law by sub-field and time period.

Source: Data compiled by the author from the *European Court Reports* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, various years).

**TABLE 2 ECJ RULINGS PURSUANT TO ART 234 REFERENCES IN THE AREA OF SOCIAL PROVISIONS BY COUNTRY, JUDICIAL OUTCOME, AND AS PREDICTED BY WRITTEN OBSERVATIONS, 1971-1993**

	<b>Total Rulings</b>	<b>Adverse Rulings (%)</b>	<b>Total Observations</b>	<b>Success Rate (%)</b>	<b>Intervention Rate (%)</b>
Belgium	11	36	7	57	0
Denmark	10	40	16	81	8
France	2	100	6	67	5
Germany	15	67	17	53	3
Ireland	4	100	6	33	2
Italy	3	67	9	55	7
Netherlands	18	67	26	35	11
Portugal	0	0	2	50	2
Spain	1	0	1	0	0
United Kingdom	24	46	52	56	44
Commission			88	91	100*

Note: N= 88

Success rate denotes the percentage of cases in which a member state government's written observation (written brief) successfully predicts the final ECJ ruling.

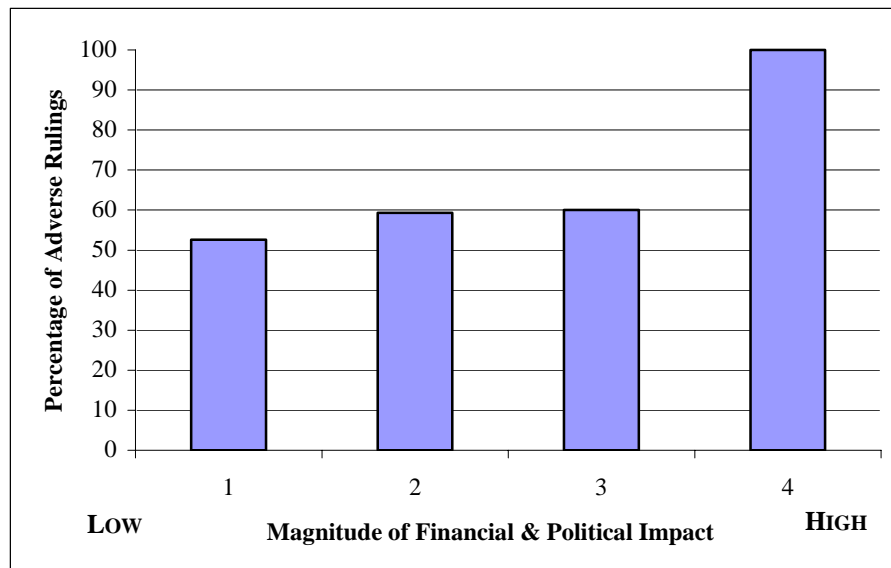
Intervention rate denotes the rate at which a given member state intervenes (by submitting an observation) in cases beyond those involving its own legal system.

\*Intervention rate for the Commission is calculated as the percentage of all cases in which the Commission submits observations.

Source: Data compiled by the author from the *European Court Reports* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, various years).



**FIGURE 1** *MAGNITUDE OF POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL IMPACT AS A PREDICTOR OF ADVERSE ECJ RULINGS PURSUANT TO ART 234 REFERENCES IN THE AREA OF SOCIAL PROVISIONS, 1971-1993*



Note: N= 88

Percentage of adverse rulings denotes the total number of rulings in which the ECJ finds the national law or practice to be in violation of EU law as a percentage of the total number of social provisions rulings. Each preliminary ruling is also categorized as having a low to high financial impact. The categories of magnitude denote the total number of member state governments filing observations in each case. These totals serve as a proxy for the magnitude of impact as cases with a larger impact elicit a greater number of member state governments participating in the case.

Source: Data compiled by the author from the *European Court Reports* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, various years).