

From the Margins to the Forefront: Investigating Gender Dynamics in Sustainability Lobbying

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Abstract: How does gender shape the landscape of lobbying activities in the context of corporate sustainability standards within the European Union? This question lies at the heart of our investigation, as we delve into the interplay of gender dynamics amid the EU's quest to combat environmental and societal challenges through standardized corporate sustainability reporting. While organizations pivot towards these new standards, a surge of lobbying activities has emerged, shaping the contours of these standards. Yet, an often-overlooked facet in this advocacy arena is the role of gender, traditionally skewed towards male dominance at higher echelons. Drawing upon the ethics of care and gender social role theories, this study posits that women, typically associated with more caregiving roles, may exhibit a stronger inclination towards altruistic objectives such as social justice and equitable opportunities, transcending mere organizational benefits. The research utilizes all (N=604) publicly available feedback files submitted to the European Commission (EC) on the initial set of European Sustainability Reporting Standards. Advanced analytical tools, including Azure's machine learning, Python's pysentiment2 library, ChatGPT-4 and WordSmith, were employed to comprehensively measure the Polarity, Tone, and Subjectivity of the lobbying content. The analytical models, informed by OLS, robust and two-stage GLS regressions, control for variations in lobbyists' size, type, nationality, language, and submission timing. The findings present a near-equal representation of female lobbyists in sustainability standard settings, challenging historical norms. Compared to their male counterparts, women are discernibly more supportive of the lightened sustainability standards offered by the EC. While equally critical about the standards' implementation timeline and the need for higher consistency and coherence with parallelly existing regulations, women tend to be more supportive of the lightened extent and depth of mandatory disclosures, subject to materiality assessment. This study's distinctive contribution is in being situated at the intersection of gender studies, political advocacy and sustainability domain, providing a unique perspective on how gender can profoundly affect perceptions, participation, and advocacy approaches within the evolving context of sustainability.