

Full Speed ahead, in reverse gear
10 Years of Polish female MEPs in the European Parliament (2004-2014) in the context
of women's and LGBTQ rights

Anna Dryjańska

In 2004 Poland's first European Parliament elections took place. Polish accession to the European Union, the election of female representatives, and existing European legislation raised high hopes for the possibility of legislative improvements for women and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) people. How, then, did the first decade of Polish female representatives in the European Parliament look? Has the presence of Polish women influenced the agenda of the institution? Have there been any issues with legislation concerning equal rights, equal opportunities, and anti-discrimination? Before we answer these questions, let's take a look at the bare facts.

Between 2004 and 2014 (during the 6th and 7th terms of office of the European Parliament) twenty female Polish representatives sat in the parliament. During this time, the female share in the Polish delegation rose from 12.9% (in 2004), through 22% (in 2009) to 23.5% (in 2014).

Małgorzata Handzlik (Civic Platform) served as an MEP for two consecutive terms, while Lidia de Geringer de Oedenberg (Democratic Left Alliance - Labour Union) is the only female Polish representative to serve continuously since 2004.

2004

The first Polish elections for the European Parliament were held on the 13th of June 2004. 54 representatives were elected: 47 male and 7 female. That meant that women constituted 12.9% of the Polish delegation. 2 out of 8 electoral committees that managed to cross the electoral threshold contained only male representatives. These were the Polish People's Party [Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL)] and Self Defence of the Republic of Poland [Samoobrona RP (SRP)].

Two women were elected from the Civic Platform [Platforma Obywatelska - PO] electoral list: Małgorzata Handzlik and Barbara Kudrycka. Both joined the ranks of the European People's Party - European Democrats (EPP-ED). The following committees had one female representative each:

League of Polish Families (Urszula Krupa – Independence/Democracy),
Law and Justice (Anna Fotyga – Union for Europe of the Nations),
Social Democracy of Poland (Genowefa Grabowska – Party of European Socialists),
Democratic Left Alliance - Labour Union (Lidia de Geringer de Oedenberg – Party of European Socialists)
Freedom Union (Grażyna Staniszevska – Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe).

During the term, the mandates of Barbara Kudrycka and Anna Fotyga ended, and Hanna Foltyn-Kubicka (PiS, 06.12.2005), Ewa Tomaszewska (PiS, 30.08.2007) and Urszula Gacek (PO, 06.12.2007) were sworn in.

Near the end of the 7th term of European Parliament, due to new female representatives being sworn in, there was one additional woman in the Polish delegation, thus the female share in the delegation rose to 14.8%.

Activity of Polish female MEPs during the 6th term of office of the European Parliament (2004-2009) in regards to women's rights and LGBT rights

As expected, the activity of Polish female representatives in regard to women's and LGBT rights was heavily determined by their party of origin. The representative of the League of Polish Families [Liga Polskich Rodzin (LPR)] unsuccessfully sought to completely ban abortion in Europe and even world-wide). The representatives of Civic Platform (PO) remained fairly reserved, avoiding motioning for any resolutions concerning the aforementioned issues. Barbara Kudrycka was an exception though – in 2006, on her initiative, the European Parliament adopted a recommendation for the Council of Europe on combating human trafficking. Interestingly, the two female representatives of Law and Justice [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS)] were more active than those from Civic Platform - they demanded the upholding of women's rights in Afghanistan, Japan, Liberia and Haiti. However, they, voted against a report on equality, arguing, that the document included "crypto-abortionist" entries, was propitious for paedophiles and discriminatory against the Church and its longstanding traditions. Genowefa Grabowska, the representative of Polish Social Democracy [Socjaldemokracja Polska (SDPL)], supported gender equality both in plenary debates and by voting (though she did not motion for any resolutions on the subject). Grażyna Staniszewska, the representative of Freedom Union [Unia Wolności (UW)], never addressed these issues, however she did emphasise the rights of people with disabilities.

Detailed activity of female Polish MEPs in the European Parliament (2004-2009)

League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin -LPR)| attempt to ban abortion and euthanasia, legislation concerning trading in human oocytes

Urszula Krupa

Member of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. In March 2005 Krupa motioned for a resolution on trading in human oocytes. The resolution was passed, but greatly changed, and took a much less restrictive form. In 2008, together with Polish MEP Witold Tomczak, she submitted a formal declaration concerning a complete ban on abortion in the European Union and the whole world. The declaration, whose authors adduced the Vatican, was signed by only 25 MEPs, and thus did not gain the support of the majority of European Parliament members and lapsed 3 months after its submission.

Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska - PO) | careful reserve towards women's and LGBT rights.

Urszula Gacek

During her plenary speeches she raised the issues of freedom on the internet, as well as the combating of the sexual abuse of children and child pornography. During a debate in 2008 she addressed the issue of attacks on human rights activists in Russia, in the context of the murder of Anna Politkowska. In May 2009 she issued a query to the European Parliament concerning the legal possibilities of a ban on keeping dogs on chains within the European Union.

Małgorzata Handzlik

During her first two terms MEP Handzlik did not motion for any resolutions concerning the issues of women's and LGBT rights. She did, however, motion for a symbolic resolution concerning the status of women in science in her third term.

Barbara Kudrycka

She focussed great attention on the situation in Belarus and civil rights violations of the opposition there. In 2005, on behalf of the PPE-DE, she motioned for a Council of Europe recommendation on combating human trafficking. The recommendation was passed the following year.

Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość - PiS) | Defending women's rights in Afghanistan and Japan**Hanna Foltyn-Kubicka**

In 2008, during a plenary debate concerning the rights of children, she addressed the issue of contact between children and divorced parents in multinational families. She also addressed issues of human rights in Belarus, Russia and China.

Anna Fotyga

Fotyga never referred to any issues concerning gender or sexual orientation equality. She did, however, motion for a resolution on the upholding of human rights in Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, Russia and Uzbekistan. All these resolutions, after amendments, were passed by the European Parliament.

Ewa Tomaszewska

In 2007 she motioned for a resolution on the subject of so called "comfort women" - women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese imperial army during World War II. The resolution was passed. In 2009 she motioned for another resolution, this time concerning women's rights in Afghanistan. This resolution was also passed. Tomaszewska also motioned for resolutions on human rights violations in Russia, Venezuela, Burma, China, Vietnam and Egypt. The European Parliament also passed a resolution she authored concerning the humanitarian crisis in Congo and rape as a war crime. In plenary debates she spoke for child support remuneration for women who from employment in order to take full care of their children; the enforcement of laws forbidding a gender pay-gap; legally limiting discriminating marketing – focused on gender or otherwise; equal opportunities for women in science (excluding positive discrimination measures); and the rights of imprisoned women to take care of their children. She backed a report on gender non-discrimination and intergenerational solidarity, though while she did praise the document for noting the importance of women's unpaid work, she also claimed that in Polish language the term "family" is not applicable to same-sex couples, because it implies a relationship "that is able to procreate". In 2008 she voted against a report on male and female equality, because, in her opinion, it contained "crypto-abortionist elements". In 2009 she voted against a report on the EU Roadmap against homophobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity because, in her opinion, passing this legislation would allow paedophiles to work with children, give "religious sects" additional opportunities, and at the same time greatly limit churches with longstanding traditions.

Social Democracy of Poland (Socjaldemokracja Polska - SDPL) |Support through voting and participation in debates

Genowefa Grabowska

Although Grabowska never motioned for any resolutions concerning gender and sexual orientation equality, she did back projects, and reports, on these issues. Among these, there were the Report on Women and Science (2008); Gender Equality in Development Policy (she even used –significantly- the term “gender mainstreaming”); and the Report on the Role of Women in Industry (2007).

Democratic Left Alliance - Labour Union - (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej-Unia Pracy - SLD-UP) | Support for the rights of women and LGBT people through voting

Lidia Geringer de Oedenberg

Geringer de Oedenberg made the rights of women and LGBTQ people an important part of her activities, but only in the 7th term. Between 2004 and 2009 she mainly showed support for these issues through voting.

Freedom Union –(Unia Wolności - UW) | Emphasis on the rights of people with disabilities

Grażyna Staniszevska

Staniszevska never engaged with the issues of women’s and LGBTQ rights. At a plenary sitting in 2007 she appealed for more intensive action towards the integration of people with disabilities, though she did not motion for any resolutions on this matter.

2009

The second Polish elections for the European Parliament took place on June the 7th 2009. Poland brought 50 representatives to the Parliament: 39 male and 11 female, thus bringing the female share of the delegation up to 22%. This placed the country somewhere around the European average for the 1989 and 1994 elections. Two out of four committees had solely male representatives: once again, the Polish People’s Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – PSL) and Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS).

Nine women were elected to the European Parliament from the electoral list of Civic Platform (PO): Małgorzata Handzlik, Jolanta Hibner, Danuta Hübner, Danuta Jazłowiecka, Sidonia Jędrzejewska, Lena Kolarska-Bobińska, Elżbieta Łukacijewska, Joanna Skrzydlewska and Róża Thun. They all joined the European People’s Party (EPP) group. The two remaining women – Lidia de Geringer de Oedenberg and Joanna Senyszyn – were elected from the electoral list of the Democratic Left Alliance - Labour Union (SLD-UP), and they both joined the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group in the European Parliament.

Near the end of the 7th term of the European Parliament, due to Lena Kolarska-Bobinska’s mandate ending (on 02.12.2013), the number of women in the Polish delegation dropped by one, leaving 10 (20%).

Activity of Polish female MEPs during the 7th term of office of the European Parliament (2009-2014) in regards to women’s and LGBT rights

The European elections in 2009 brought Polish female representation consisting only of representatives of Civic Platform (PO) and the Democratic Left Alliance - Labour Union (SLD-UP). The larger group, from Civic Platform, was much more ideologically varied than in the previous term, and there were notable differences between MEPs, when it came to support of women’s and LGBT rights. Female representatives of the Democratic Left Alliance

- Labour Union consistently supported gender and sexual orientation equality. Lidia Geringer de Oedenberg was an unquestionable leader in this regard - in terms of the number of motions for resolutions on these issues, she authored (or co-authored) five documents concerning women's rights and - notably – LGBT rights.

Detailed activity of female Polish MEPs in the European Parliament (2009-2014)

Civic Platform –(Platforma Obywatelska - PO) | “Soft” solutions, two factions: guarded and progressive.

Małgorzata Handzlik

In 2011 (along with MEPs Jolanta Hibner, Danuta Jazłowiecka and Lidia Geringer de Oedenberg) Handzlik submitted a motion for a resolution on the marking of the centenary of the award of the Nobel Prize to Marie Skłodowska-Curie. The resolution was not passed, but it was mentioned in a resolution on European Union financing of research and innovation, in which the European Parliament asked the European Commission to prepare a plan for achieving gender equality in science. In 2013 she spoke during a debate on women in non-executive managerial positions, and voiced her support for an improvement in recruitment practices, as well as her scepticism towards the enforcement of gender quotas, which she called “preferential treatment just because of gender”. In her explanation for her voting, she backed projects for combatting unemployment among women over 50, and those for the regulation of the legal status of women working illegally as caregivers.

Jolanta Hibner

Hibner did not submit interpellations nor did she speak in plenary debates regarding the issues of women's and LGBT rights. In 2011 she voted for the establishment of a legal method of combatting gender-based violence. She then voted multiple times against resolutions concerning women's and LGBTQ rights. She co-authored the aforementioned resolution motion on marking the centenary of the award of the Nobel Prize to Marie Skłodowska-Curie.

Danuta Hübner

Hübner did not submit motions for resolutions concerning women's and LGBT rights, but in 2009 she did speak at a plenary debate postulating action aimed towards gender equality in the economy. Notably, she said that equal opportunities exist only on paper. She voted for resolutions concerning the issues of women's and LGBT rights more often than other MEPs from Civic Platform (PO).

Danuta Jazłowiecka

Jazłowiecka was co-author of the resolution motion on marking the centenary of the award of the Nobel Prize to Marie Skłodowska-Curie. She voted for legislation on gender equality in management and also on anti-violence. She voted against resolutions intended to combat homophobia, and against a resolution on reproductive rights. During plenary debates she spoke on women's health, and supported an increase in women's occupational mobility and men taking on more household chores. During a debate in 2012 concerning obligatory gender quotas on boards of listed companies, she stated that in her opinion such solutions would not be effective. Instead she proposed investment in infrastructure to support a better work-life balance for women.

Sidonia Jędrzejewska

Jędrzejewska voted for anti-violence legislation, gender quotas on boards of listed companies, and a gender equality perspective. She voted against resolutions on help for single mothers, combating homophobia, and on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Lena Kolarska-Bobińska

In October 2013, with a couple of other MEPs, Kolarska-Bobińska submitted a formal statement on the dangers of nationalism, anti-Semitism and other forms of nationality-based intolerance. The statement did not gather the necessary amount of signatures, and lapsed 3 months after its submission. She co-authored motions for resolutions on the situation of women in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2011), and on combating violence against women in India (2013). In 2012, together with Joanna Skrzydlewska, she signed a motion for a resolution on discriminating (nationality-based) websites and the reaction of governments to them. She voted for women's and LGBT rights more often than most of the other representatives from Civic Platform (PO). During plenary debates she repeatedly spoke about violence against women, poverty among women, and equal job opportunities for women.

Elżbieta Łukacijewska

MEP Elżbieta Łukacijewska, when commenting on the 2009 report on gender equality, said the following: *I voted against the report, because some entries in it pertain to the propagation of abortion in the European Union. Firstly, these matters fall under the exclusive competence of Member States. Secondly, the issue of unwanted pregnancies is an important problem, but we cannot pass legislation that treats abortion like a free of charge contraceptive. I cannot agree for abortion to be exempt from the consideration of the consequences and responsibilities related to the start of any sexual life. Human life deserves more.* The authors of the report postulated an increase in accessibility of education and knowledge about fertility, contraception and abortion for women.

Joanna Skrzydlewska

Member of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. In 2012, together with Lena Kolarska-Bobińska, she signed a motion for a resolution on discriminating (nationality-based) websites and the reaction of governments towards them. She voted for anti-violence legislation and for a resolution on gender quotas on boards of listed companies. She opposed resolutions on sexual and reproductive health and related rights, and also on combating homophobia. In 2012 she was co-author of a motion for a resolution on ending female genital mutilation. The same year she co-authored a motion for a resolution on combating discrimination against women and girls in Pakistan.

Róża Thun

Fairly often, when compared to other female representatives of Civic Platform (PO), Thun exercised her right to abstain when it came to women's and LGBT rights. She co-authored a motion for a resolution on the situation of women in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2011).

Democratic Left Alliance - Labour Union (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej-Unia Pracy - SLD-UP) | Full speed ahead

Lidia Geringer de Oedenberg

Among Polish female MEPs, Geringer de Oedenberg was not only most involved in women's rights, but was also the most active with regard to LGBT rights. She co-authored a motion for a resolution (submitted together with Joanna Senyszyn) on a reaction to the criminalisation of homosexuality (the resolution was passed in 2014, and it concerned, among other states, Nigeria, Uganda, Russia and India). She also co-authored a motion for a resolution imposing sanctions on Uganda and Nigeria for the criminalisation of homosexuality (2014). She consistently voted for resolutions and reports supporting women's and LGBT rights.

Joanna Senyszyn

Member of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. Joanna Senyszyn, like Lidia Geringer de Oedenberg, consistently supported solutions for gender and sexual orientation equality. She co-authored a motion for a resolution on women's rights in India and also a motion for a resolution urging states with criminalised homosexuality to repeal their laws. During plenary debates she expressed her support for the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating both violence against women and domestic violence, she stood for the equalisation of access to goods and services for women, the increase in the involvement of women in public and social life, and for women's rights around the world. She also took the floor to speak about LGBT rights in Lithuania and discrimination against civil partnerships and same-sex marriages.

Votes of Polish female MEPs in the European Parliament in selected cases involving women's and LGBTQ rights (1)

	Gender Equality During Recession	Anti-violence Legislation	Help for Single Mothers	Gender Equality in the Work of the EP
Handzlik	Abstained	For	Against	Not Present
Hibner J.	Abstained	For	Against	Against
Huebner D.	Abstained	For	For	For
Jazłowiecka D.	Not Present	For	Against	Against
Jędrzejewska S.	Abstained	For	Against	For
Kolarska-Bobińska L.	For	Not Present	For	For
Łukacijewska E.	Not Present	For	Against	Against
Skrzydłewska J.	Abstained	For	Against	Against
Thun R.	Abstained	For	Abstained	Abstained
Geringer de Oedenberg L.	For	For	For	For
Senyszyn J.	For	For	For	For

Votes of Polish female MEPs in the European Parliament in selected cases involving women's and LGBT rights (2)

	Combatting Homophobia	Health and Reproductive Rights	Gender Quotas on Boards	Protection against Homophobia and Discrimination
Handzlik M.	Against	Against	For	Against
Hibner J.	Against	Against	Against	Against
Huebner D.	For	Against	For	Not Present
Jazłowiecka D.	Against	Against	For	Not Present
Jędrzejewska S.	Against	Against	For	Not Present
Kolarska-Bobińska L.	For	Against	Not Present	N/A (Mandate lapsed)
Łukacijewska E.	For	Against	For	Against
Skrzydłewska J.	Not Present	Against	For	Against
Thun R.	Abstained	Not Present	For	Not Present

Geringer de Oedenberg L.	For	For	For	For
Senyszyn J.	For	For	For	For

2014

The third Polish elections for the European Parliament took place on the 25th of May 2014. 51 MEPs were chosen: 39 male and 12 female. This means that women constituted 23.5% of the Polish delegation. This is still less than the average in the European Parliament after the elections of 1994 (26%). Two out of five committees that managed to place their representatives in the EP have purely male delegations: the Congress of the New Right (Kongres Nowej Prawicy - KNP) and, for the third time in a row, the Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe - PSL).

Civic Platform (PO) brought 7 women to the European Parliament, and, as before, they joined the European People's Party (EPP) group. The seven women are: Danuta Hübner, Danuta Jazłowiecka, Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz, Barbara Kudrycka, Elżbieta Łukacijewska, Julia Pitera and Róża Thun. Three women were elected from the lists of Law and Justice (PiS): Anna Fotyga, Beata Gosiewska and Jadwiga Wiśniewska. The Democratic Left Alliance - Labour Union (SLD-UP) has two women: Lidia Geringer de Oedenberg and Krystyna Łybacka.

Two female MEPs from Poland entered the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality: Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz (Civic Platform - PO) and Jadwiga Wiśniewska (Law and Justice - PiS).

Summary / Full speed ahead, in reverse gear

In 2004, when women obtained 12.9% of the Polish mandate to the European Parliament, this number was smaller than the average for the European Union 25 years previously (in 1979 it was 16%). The next elections raised female participation to 22%, and the 2014 elections raised it to 23.5%. However, this still puts Poland behind the 1994 average for the Union. This backwardness relates not only to the quota of women, but also to the quality of equality policies.

The activities of female Polish MEPs are a peculiar mix of a human rights narrative, postulates of the first wave of feminism, and moral conservatism - or even traditionalism. This results in motions, or support, for resolutions concerning the brutal discrimination of women in remote parts of the world, while at the same time opposition to projects granting women in the EU access to sexual education, contraception and abortion. Dozens of speeches can be heard on how human rights activists are persecuted in Russia and other post-Soviet states, while simultaneously any family ties between non-heterosexuals are denied. Ultimately, a human rights narrative can be used in order to defend discrimination that is sanctified by tradition.

Another element of such an interpretation of equality policies is a quite literal escape from "inconvenient" issues. A good example of this was provided in early 2014 when most MEPs from Civic Platform (PO) abandoned the plenary session during a vote on a resolution on the protection against homophobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation.

The division of the “convenient” and “inconvenient” in equality policies refers both to issues and their solutions. It is convenient to talk about equal opportunities for men and women on the labour market, but inconvenient to support quotas and parities. Care for women’s health is convenient – as long as one does not approach the issues of reproductive health and related rights. It is convenient to talk about the rights of women bound by motherhood – as long as we only talk about heterosexual, married women.

Those few MEPs who actually vote progressively – mostly from the Democratic Left Alliance - Labour Union (SLD-UP), and a few from Civic Platform (PO)- are exceptions to the rule. The former work actively against discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexual orientation by submitting motions for resolutions and speaking in the plenary debates; the latter lean more towards more passive support of progressive initiatives.

This understanding of equality policy for Polish female MEPs in the European Parliament is the result of local determinants and home-party lines. MEPs from different parties work together only on symbolic matters (like the motion for the resolution concerning the centenary of the Nobel Prize for Marie Skłodowska-Curie) or matters concerning more realities remote (for Poland, and Europe in general), like the situation of women in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan etc. A seat on the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality is often used not for the advancement of those rights, but for preventing this advancement, or even for reversing it. The most recent example here is the fact that in 2014 two MEPs joined the committee: the relatively progressive Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz (former government plenipotentiary for equal treatment) and Jadwiga Wiśniewska, known for her extreme traditionalism based on the catechism of the Catholic Church.

In summary, it is hard to resist the obvious conclusion that, in order to shape equality policy in the European Parliament, we need to start by clearly defining the criteria we use for the very act of voting. Otherwise, Poland will continue to present itself as a state where the catechism of the Catholic Church is more important than the state’s constitution, where cunctation is more pressing than human rights, and where female and male MEPs differ only in the cut of their suits. This has become even more important now, with the growing popularity of far-right movements who want to turn back time and push women into the kitchen. So, can we bring more equality and diversity into the Polish delegation of MEPs and their activities? Of course. And, as a matter of fact, this process has already started. What’s more - we have to, there is no other way.

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