

EUROPE'S UNIFINISHED INTEGRATION

The 2004 EU enlargement and women in Cyprus, Czechia, Latvia, and Poland



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INTRODUCTION

The 2004 EU enlargement, popularly known as the Big Bang, marked a transformative period in the history of the European political and economic union. For countries such as Cyprus, Czechia, Latvia, and Poland, EU membership promised economic modernization, political stability, and the alignment of national laws with EU legislation. Among the areas impacted by the integration process, gender equality emerged as an issue where democratic European values confronted some deeply rooted socio-cultural barriers and conservative traditions; be it the Catholic church, the heritage of the Soviet system or the dominating patriarchal family model.

This report offers a comparative analysis of the relationship between EU integration and gender equality across four case studies: Cyprus, Czechia, Latvia, and Poland. Each country embarked on the path of the European integration with its own unique socio-political context, yet all were compelled to adapt their legal systems, policy frameworks, and institutional mechanisms to implement the *acquis communautaire*. The harmonization process catalyzed important legislative changes, especially in the areas of non-discrimination, equal pay, workplace protections, and rights against gender-based violence.

However, the authors of the report go beyond legal reforms to examine the broader societal impacts of EU integration. They explore the gendered dimensions of public perceptions of the EU, the role of women in accession negotiations, and the degree to which legal gains have translated into substantive equality. Across the case studies, a complex picture emerges: while the EU served as a powerful driver of gender-related reforms, significant disparities persist in political representation, labour market outcomes, and societal attitudes toward gender roles.

By analyzing these trends two decades since the 2004 accession, the report shows both the transformative potential and the limitations of EU-driven gender equality reforms. It highlights the crucial role of women's organizations, civil society actors, and institutional mechanisms in advancing gender rights, while also drawing attention to the continued challenges posed by socio-cultural norms and institutional shortcomings.

Ultimately, the findings offer critical insights into the unfinished agenda of gender equality in the EU member states and the need for a greater commitment to gender justice. The latter is of crucial importance today as with the continued rise of illiberal movements that openly criticize accomplishments in the area of women's rights, the risk of further backsliding with women paying a high price, is not to be ignored.

Executive Summary

This report assesses the impact of European Union integration on gender equality in Cyprus, Czechia, Latvia, and Poland. The key findings reveal that while EU membership prompted significant advancements in formal gender equality, the translation of these legal reforms into substantive equality remains incomplete.

Key Findings:

- **Legal and institutional reforms:** EU accession served as a catalyst for important legislative reforms in all four countries. Laws addressing equal pay, workplace discrimination, maternity rights, and gender-based violence were introduced or strengthened, aligning national frameworks with EU norms. Institutional mechanisms, including equality bodies, gender focal points, and commissioners, were established or expanded. However, the effectiveness of these bodies has varied, with several countries showing signs of underfunding, limited authority, or symbolic functioning.
- **Public perceptions and gender-based differences in support of the EU:** In each country, pre- and post-accession public opinion surveys revealed differences between men and women in attitudes toward EU integration. Women were often less informed and more cautious, although in Poland women showed a bit more enthusiasm towards membership than men. These perceptions reflected broader socio-economic vulnerabilities and limited access to decision-making processes.
- **Women and women issues in national politics:** Achievements in women's representation across the examined countries showed inconsistency. While some countries saw progress in public administration roles, political representation remained strikingly low, especially in Cyprus and Czechia. Latvia demonstrated relatively higher female participation in public service, with Latvian women playing an important role both in the regaining of the country's independence and joining the EU. Poland exhibited contradictory trends, with labour market gains but serious setbacks in reproductive rights.
- **The role of women's organizations:** Civil society, particularly women's NGOs, played an important role in preparing the societies for the EU accession process and advocated for gender equality. These organizations acted as watchdogs and policy contributors, although their influence was frequently constrained by limited resources and political resistance.
- **Persistent challenges:** Despite legal progress, structural inequalities endure. Gender pay gaps, underrepresentation in leadership and high-level positions, as well as gender-based violence remain a serious concern. Also, deep-seated gender stereotypes and socio-cultural norms remain serious obstacles on the path towards gender equality.

CYPRUS'S EU ACCESSION AND THE PATH TO GENDER EQUALITY

Ipek Borman

Cyprus's accession to the European Union in 2004 prompted sweeping legislative reforms in support of gender equality, transforming legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms. Women's organizations and civil society played a key role in influencing policy during the accession process, even as gender gaps in EU perceptions persisted. While women made significant gains in public administration and legal rights, political representation and labour market equality remain limited. Gender stereotypes and socio-cultural norms continue to hinder substantive progress. As Cyprus joined the EU as a de facto divided island, women in the northern part of the island have not experienced the direct legislative changes or the effects of EU programmes in the same manner as those in the South.

Although there is no specific gender-disaggregated data for Cyprus from the immediate pre-accession period, broader trends from the other candidate countries at the time provide some context. Generally speaking, Cypriot men were more inclined than women to view EU membership positively. Specifically, 64% of men supported the country's integration with the EU, compared to 58% of women.[1] Women showed more uncertainty in this regard. In the spring of 2004, at the time of Cyprus' accession, the Eurobarometer published a survey which provides further insight into the views of men and women in Cyprus, albeit limited. From this source we can read that Cypriot men were slightly more familiar with European matters than women.[2] At the same time, men were relatively better informed than women, particularly with regard to the functioning of the European Union. Similarly, a higher percentage of women than men stated that they were not interested in information about the EU, as did people aged 55 and over and those with only primary education. Women were also more likely to support each country's right of veto to protect its essential national interests. Men were more likely to believe in the EU (49%).

This trend continued in the immediate post-accession period, with men viewing Cyprus' participation in the EU more positively. The Eurobarometer published in the autumn of 2004 indicated that men knew more about the European Union, had more confidence in its institutions, and recognized its role more than women did.[3] Men also felt more secure as a result of Cyprus's membership and believed that Cyprus would have a greater influence as a member of the European Union. While men were more supportive than women of the development of the EU's common policies and its enlargement, women were more concerned about the creation of Europe.

According to data from the European Parliament's "Socio-Demographic Trends" report, which covers the period from 2007 to 2024, there have been significant fluctuations among Cypriots, particularly during the 2013-14 period which was caused by Cypriot financial crisis.[4] However, the trend in gender breakdown has persisted. While Cypriot men tend to view the EU and membership more positively, there has been no significant difference in their perceptions, with parity consistently maintained at 5-10%. Both groups simultaneously exhibited a sharp decline in their perception of the EU's positive image, with men dropping from 60% to 36%, and women from 46% to 27%. Similarly, a greater proportion of men (54%) than women (48%) continued to view EU membership as 'a good thing'.

Although the percentage of Cypriots who feel that their country has benefited from EU membership has varied significantly over the years, the gender gap has remained consistent throughout these fluctuations. In 2024, a slightly higher percentage of men (70%) than women (66%) felt that the country had benefited from EU membership. The main reasons for this feeling are: 1) the EU's contribution to maintaining peace and strengthening security; 2) the EU's role in giving Cypriots a stronger say in the world; and 3) the EU's contribution to economic growth in Cyprus. Both men and women prioritized the EU's role in maintaining peace and strengthening security as their main reason for support. However, while men prioritized the EU's role in giving Cypriots a stronger say in the world, women tended to highlight the economic growth.

Changes in the legislation and public life

Even though Cyprus had already ratified key international human rights instruments, it was the EU accession process that compelled the country to adopt the entire *acquis communautaire*, aligning its national legislative framework with established EU directives and principles. This process served as a powerful catalyst for legal reform concerning women's rights and equality in Cyprus. Prior to EU accession, Cyprus' legal framework lacked robust, specific measures. Therefore, EU harmonization was the primary impetus for rapid and substantial change, which would otherwise have taken considerably longer.

The key legislative changes included, among others:

- The Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Employment and Vocational Training Law (2002);
- The Equal Pay Between Men and Women for the Same Work or for Work of Equal Value Law (2002);
- The Parental Leave and Leave on Grounds of Force Majeure Law (2002);
- The Maternity Protection (Amendment) Law (2004);
- The Combating of Racism and Other Forms of Discrimination (Commissioner) Law (2004);
- The Violence in the Family (Prevention and Protection of Victims) Law (2004);

- The Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Professional Social Insurance Schemes Law (2004);
- The Combating Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Beings and Protection of Victims Law (2007);
- The Equal Treatment of Men and Women (Access to and Supply of Goods and Services) Law (2007).

These laws, combined with the overall accession process, accelerated the establishment and development of important mechanisms and bodies for promoting gender equality including:

- **The National Machinery for Women's Rights (NMWR):** established by the Council of Ministers under the Ministry of Justice and Public Order in 1994, the NMWR's role as the main governmental body for promoting women's rights was significantly amplified by the EU accession process, particularly with regards to gender mainstreaming and managing EU Structural Funds around and after 2004.
- **Ombudsman/Anti-Discrimination Body and Equal Treatment Authority:** the Commissioner for Administration (Ombudsman)'s mandate, originally established in 1991, was significantly expanded in May 2004 by the Combating Racism and Other Forms of Discrimination (Commissioner) Law of 2004, designating the Commissioner as the Equality Body. This created two distinct authorities under the Ombudsman: the Cyprus Anti-Discrimination Body and the Equal Treatment Authority, which deals with sex-based discrimination in employment. The Equal Treatment Authority's remit was further expanded in 2008 to include the Equal Treatment of Men and Women (Access to Goods and Services) Law of 2008.
- **Gender Equality Committee in Employment and Vocational Training:** established in 2003 under the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, as set out in the Equal Treatment of Women and Men in Employment and Vocational Training Law of 2002. In 2009, the committee's powers were expanded to include independent assistance to victims of discrimination.
- **Multidisciplinary Coordinating Group against Trafficking in Human Beings (MCG):** This group was first established in 2007 by the Law on Combating the Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Beings and the Protection of Victims. The Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings within the Cyprus Police was set up in 2004. All government agencies involved, either directly or indirectly, in combatting human trafficking are members of the group, including the Attorney General's Office, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Police Anti-Trafficking Unit, the National Machinery for Women's Rights and two NGOs.

In 2024, the House of Representatives enacted the Gender Equality Commissioner and Related Matters Law. This law established the role of the Commissioner for Gender Equality, defining their responsibilities, which include formulating, coordinating and evaluating the implementation of the National Strategy for Gender Equality in cooperation with ministries and deputy ministries. The new law also regulated the role of gender equality officers in ministries and deputy ministries in mainstreaming gender horizontally in public policy. At the same time, the law formalized the NMWR and set out how it should operate and collaborate with the Office of the Commissioner for Gender Equality.

The impact of the EU membership on gender equality

Cyprus' accession to the European Union in 2004 triggered a series of changes that have impacted gender equality differently in various areas of life. While legislative harmonization established a new basis for women's rights, achieving de facto equality from these de jure changes has been a complex and ongoing process characterized by both progress and challenges.

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality's (EIGE) Gender Equality Index for 2024, Cyprus ranks 20th, which is below the EU average.[5] While Cyprus is recognized as "catching up" overall and advancing more quickly than other countries, it continues to perform poorly in the "power" domain, consistently ranking second to last, just ahead of Hungary. In the 2023 Index, Cyprus scored only 29.2 points in this area, ranking 26th among EU member states. The "political decision-making" sub-domain was particularly weak, with a score of 34.5 (25th rank), 26.9 points below the EU average. This trend continued into the 2024 Index, where the "power" domain score decreased slightly to 28.8 points.

As of May 2025 the representation of women in parliament is only 14.3%. This indicates a worrying decrease from the 21.4% reported in 2020, placing Cyprus well below the EU average and far from achieving gender parity.[6] In terms of government representation, the Council of Ministers included seven women out of 20; however, only two hold full ministerial portfolios. Although the parliament is headed by a woman – the first female Speaker – the executive leadership remains predominantly male.

In stark contrast to the political sphere, women have made substantial advances in public administration. The proportion of women employed in this sector rose from 32.4% in 2004 to 46.1% in 2023. Even more strikingly, the proportion of women in decision-making roles within public administration increased from 18.6% in 2003 to 50% by 2023.[7] This suggests that EU-driven reforms and opportunities are more easily absorbed and implemented in structured, rule-based environments such as the civil service than in the more contested political domain.

EU-mandated legislative changes in areas such as equal pay and equal treatment have improved women's status in the labour market. Prior to the accession, the employment rate gap between genders in Cyprus was higher than the EU15 average, with a 20% gender gap in activity rates still evident in 2004.[8] Post-accession data indicates a positive trend, reducing the employment rate gap to around 10%.[9] However, the gender pay gap remains a major challenge. Although it saw a significant reduction from 36.2% in 1998, before the accession process had begun, to 25% in 2004, at the time of accession, and then further down to 13.7% in 2017, more recent Eurostat data for 2023 painted a troubling picture. It recorded the highest gender pay gap in the business economy (22.4%) and in the private sector (21.6%) among EU countries.[10]

Violence against women, including domestic violence, also remains a serious issue. Data from EIGE indicate that 76% of domestic violence victims recorded by police in Cyprus in 2022 were women, with a notable increase in reported cases between 2019 and 2022. [11] Online violence against women and girls has also emerged as a significant concern.

Nevertheless, two decades after accession, EU membership has provided Cyprus with indispensable tools for advancing gender equality. Significant formal progress has been made. However, substantive equality – equal rights, opportunities, and outcomes in all areas – remains far from complete. While women have advanced in public administration, they remain underrepresented in high-level political positions. Despite high female educational attainment, the labour market shows disparities in pay and occupational segregation. While EU financial support has created opportunities, its effectiveness continues to depend on political commitment.

In 2024, a special Eurobarometer “Gender Stereotypes” report revealed that traditional gender roles and stereotypes are more widely accepted in Cyprus.[12] Not only are conservative beliefs about “a man as breadwinner” and “a woman as caregiver” are more prevalent than the EU average, they are also increasing, particularly among young women. Therefore, the promise of EU-driven equality is only partially fulfilled due to enduring socio-cultural norms, structural economic barriers, and inconsistent policy implementation. The Cypriot experience is therefore instrumental in highlighting that, while the EU can catalyse legal change, realizing gender equality requires sustained political will, effective institutions, and societal commitment to transforming deeply rooted attitudes.

The role of women in the integration process and negotiations

Cyprus' journey towards EU membership was influenced not only by governmental actions but also by the active engagement of the civil society, including women and their organizations, who played a crucial, albeit often indirect, role in shaping the discourse and practices related to gender equality.



Stella Kyriakides is a Cypriot clinical psychologist and politician who served as European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety from 2019 to 2024. Photo: Shutterstock

In the years leading up to 2004, various entities worked to advance women's rights and political participation in the context of impending EU membership. The NMWR was a key state actor, whose budget significantly increased, enabling it to fund projects by non-governmental organizations aimed at advancing women's status. Within the established social partner structures, women's departments within major trade unions had been raising concerns about issues such as equal treatment and the need for parental leave even before the formal push for EU harmonization. The EU accession process provided a new impetus; women representatives from these unions participated in the tripartite technical committees established during the legislative harmonization phase, offering them a platform to voice their concerns and contribute to the drafting of new laws.

The pre-accession period also witnessed the emergence and strengthening of independent women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This movement, distinct from women's wings of political parties or trade unions, largely developed from 2000 onwards. A prominent example is the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS), founded in 2000. MIGS quickly established itself as a significant actor, focusing on research, training and advocacy. Its work was often aligned with EU priorities and supported by European funding opportunities, and it became a recognized specialist on EU policies and laws concerning violence against women.

Despite the limited visibility of women in the formal negotiating team, women and their organizations exerted influence more broadly on the accession process. This occurred primarily through their engagement in the legislative harmonization phase, where they provided expert input, lobbied for specific changes and worked to raise awareness about EU directives pertaining to gender equality.

The process itself proved to be a significant catalyst for the further development, professionalization and increased influence of women's NGOs. The availability of EU funding and networking opportunities played a crucial role in this evolution. A key development was the establishment of the Cyprus Women's Lobby (CWL) in 2008. As an umbrella network for women's organizations, the CWL provided a more unified and amplified voice for advocating women's rights and fostered stronger connections with European-level women's networks, including the European Women's Lobby.

A divided island

The accession of Cyprus into the EU as a full member on 1 May 2004 was unique as it joined the EU as a de facto divided island. As the government of the Republic of Cyprus does not exercise effective control, the *acquis* is suspended and not applicable in the northern part. This means that the legal and socio-economic impacts on women discussed in the context of EU accession primarily pertain to women residing in the areas under the control of the Republic of Cyprus.

Consequently, women in the northern part of the island would not have experienced the same direct legislative changes or the effects of EU programmes in the same manner as those in the South. This situation has led to divergent paths concerning women's rights and socio-economic conditions in the two parts of the island during and after the accession process.

THE UNFINISHED AGENDA: GENDER EQUALITY IN CZECHIA

Jana Faktor Juzová

Gender equality in the Czech Republic has evolved unevenly, particularly during the country's accession to the European Union. Public opinion revealed notable gender differences in attitudes toward EU membership, and women continued to face ant underrepresentation in politics. Although institutional frameworks for gender equality were established, they often lacked genuine commitment and practical impact, leaving much of the progress to be driven by women's NGOs.

During the Czech Republic's EU accession process, public opinion surveys revealed a significant gender gap in attitudes towards EU membership. Women were generally more undecided than men and less likely to express strong opinions, either positive or negative, about EU integration. For example, a 1996 survey indicated that 46% of men supported EU accession compared to 41% of women.[13] In the spring of 2004, right before the accession, 44% of men viewed EU membership positively, compared to 39% of women. Notably, 31% of women expressed ambivalence, stating that membership would be neither good nor bad, compared to 25% of men.[14]

This disparity can be partially attributed to differences in self-assessed knowledge about the EU. Men more frequently reported being well-informed about EU matters, which correlated with fewer concerns about potential risks associated with the accession, such as loss of social security or national identity. Women, feeling less informed, were more cautious and ambivalent in their views.[15]

The Czech government thus selected women, together with pensioners, as the primary target groups for the pre-referendum campaign in 2003. These groups were identified as more undecided or more ambivalent in their views, with the potential to swing their opinion towards supporting EU membership.[16] The results of the referendum, with 77% of men and 78% of women voting in favour, indicate that the campaign was successful.[17]

Women in politics: underrepresentation and obstacles

During the Czech Republic's transition to democracy and EU integration path, the representation of women in politics did not improve. Instead, it regressed. In the 1980s the representation of women in the Federal Assembly of Czechoslovakia and the Czech National Council reached 20-30%; yet it dropped below 10% after the fall of communism and the division of Czechoslovakia.[18] Existing research identified two key factors influencing the low presence of women in high-level politics in the post-1989 Czech Republic.

First, the male-dominant party leadership has acted as a “gatekeeper”, preventing women from entering high-level positions within the party. This was true also for left-wing political parties, such as the social democrats or the communist party, which had significant numbers of female members, but where their presence did not translate into decision-making positions. On the other hand, women in influential positions (in party leadership or as MPs) in the right-wing parties refrained from promoting gender equality, viewing this issue as ideologically “leftist” and as a reminder of the socialist past. Instead, they opted for emphasizing that individual skills primarily should decide about a person’s success in life.[19]

The deeply entrenched gender norms and a patriarchal family model further discouraged women's political participation. Female politicians reported being discouraged or obstructed by male colleagues and social expectations which in combination with personal responsibilities created individual-level barriers to political engagement.[20] Nevertheless, there were also some initiatives launched by women in political parties themselves. Worth of mentioning is, for example, the all-female shadow government initiated by the social-democrat MP Jana Volfová. Though symbolic, this initiative helped to draw attention to the underrepresentation of women and challenge prevailing narratives about gender and politics.[21]

The lack of women in political representation was perhaps surprisingly in contrast with the popular demand for increased presence of women in politics. In 1998, a survey found that 81% of respondents supported more women in Czech politics – a view expressed by 86% of women and 76% of men. However, while 44% of women responded “definitely yes”, only 29% of men gave the same response.[22] It is important to note also that there were still some 16% of men (and 6% of women) who thought participation of women in public life was not beneficial at all.[23]

Institutional framework and government’s hesitant commitment

Under the EU accession process, the Czech government was obligated to align its legislation with the EU *acquis communautaire* and set up appropriate institutional structures to advance gender equality. In 1998, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs was tasked with the coordination of the gender equality agenda where a dedicated department was created. The decision to situate this agenda under the ministry instead of the Office of the Government suggests the government’s view that the inequality of women was primarily an economic issue and related to labour rights.

The government instructed the ministry to draw up the national action plan for the advancement of equality between men and women, resulting in a programme document titled “Government Priorities and Procedures in Enforcement of the Equality of Men and Women (Priorities)”. The document was evaluated and updated annually. In the same year, the government established the Human Rights Council as an expert body which brings together representatives of government departments, agencies and representatives of

NGOs and the professional public. One of the committees under the council was the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.[24]

More substantial steps were taken in 2001 when all ministries were tasked with developing their sectoral plans for the enforcement of equality between men and women and setting up gender focal points at each ministry. These designated officials within ministries were responsible for integrating gender perspectives into policies and programmes. The government also established the Council for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men as a permanent advisory body tasked with drafting proposals and coordinating policies to promote gender equality. Apart from governmental representatives, the council also included women NGOs, experts, and representatives of trade unions and employers.[25]

However, these efforts were oftentimes only formal and did not function well in practice, serving rather as a "box-ticking exercise" aimed at aligning with the EU's requirements. Experts warned about the lack of genuine commitment to advancing gender equality among the political elite, insufficient financial resources and authority, as well as lacking expertise among civil servants responsible for its implementation.[26] Furthermore, although the reports of the European Commission were regularly critical of the Czech Republic's insufficient progress in alignment with the *acquis* in the area of gender equality, this issue was still treated as one of "secondary" importance for EU accession, both by the Czech side and the EU officials.

Women's organisations as drivers of change

While the state's efforts were largely formal, the work of women's NGOs, combined with the requirements of the EU integration process, became crucial for advancing gender equality in the Czech Republic. In the early 1990s, there was a relatively high number of women's movements. However, their professionalization and impact on policymaking were limited. The movements and NGOs were established and developed typically with Western expertise – either through individuals with experience in the West or as part of larger international women's organizations – and supported by funding from Western donors.

The obligations in the area of women's rights stemming from the Czech Republic's membership in international organizations and application for EU accession created the space for Czech women's NGOs to monitor the government's measures and policies in this area, to professionalize and engage in more substantial advocacy activities. In effect, the demands of the EU accession process forced the government to address issues that the NGOs had warned about already in the early 1990s.

The success of NGOs varied greatly depending on the size, funding, and international and domestic connections. With the EU accession process underway, women's NGOs were faced with an important change in available funds, with donors shifting from developmental support to project-based funding. This change disadvantaged smaller NGOs as project proposal writing and implementation created additional demands on human and financial capacities, favouring larger organisations.

However, even for the ones with robust expertise and successful advocacy, the relationship with the government was often exploitative. The NGOs were consulted for expertise which was seriously lacking in the state apparatus but this work was frequently unpaid and sometimes had to be conducted under unrealistic deadlines.[27]

Czech women's NGOs did not have any significant unifying agenda and remained active across a broad spectrum of issues. Several initiatives emerged in the area of the promotion of women's political representation, intensified with the EU accession process and prior to European Parliament elections. In 2004, Czech women's NGOs supported by the Open Society Foundation published the first shadow report assessing the government's implementation of its gender equality "Priorities", as a reaction to their dissatisfaction with how the plan was being assessed and updated by the government. Nevertheless, the most visible legislative achievements of the women's NGOs' advocacy were in the area of anti-discrimination and labour laws.

Although a comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation was not passed until 2009, progress had already been made in labour laws between 2000 and 2004, introducing legal definitions of sexual harassment and workplace discrimination and emphasizing equal representation of men and women at work. In 2001, the Labour Code was extensively revised to include provisions on equal pay for equal work, parental leave, and compensation for victims of discrimination or sexual harassment.[28] An amendment to the Employment Act, which was approved in April 2002, redefined the definitions of direct and indirect discrimination in access to employment. It empowered labour offices to implement affirmative measures to eliminate inequalities in the labour market.[29]



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Persisting challenges

Despite formal institutional frameworks and women organisations' efforts, the Czech Republic continues to face significant challenges in achieving gender equality. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality's 2023 Gender Equality Index, the Czech Republic ranked 25th out of 27 EU member states, with a score of 57.9 out of 100, well below the EU average of 70.2. The most pronounced disparities were observed in the "power" domain, reflecting low levels of female representation in political and economic decision-making.[30]

A pivotal development in addressing gender-based violence was the legislative redefinition of rape. In June 2024, a new law was passed which provides a new definition of rape, classifying it as any non-consensual intercourse ("no means no" principle). This marks a significant shift from the previous legal framework, which required proof of violence or threats for an act to be considered rape. The law also states that sexual intercourse with a minor under 12 years of age must always be treated as rape or sexual assault, and never as the less serious crime of sexual abuse.[31]

This legislative change was influenced by high-profile cases, notably the conviction of the former MP Dominik Feri for rape. Feri's case, involving multiple allegations of sexual violence, highlighted systemic issues in addressing sexual violence and the need for legislative reforms. The public discourse surrounding the case underscored the importance of redefining rape laws to focus on consent.[32]

While the redefinition of rape represents progress, challenges remain. The Czech Republic has yet to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, popularly known as the Istanbul Convention, an international treaty aimed at preventing violence against women. In a 2023 vote, the Czech Senate rejected its ratification, citing concerns over traditional gender roles and the treaty's effectiveness, despite appeals from the president and civil society organizations. [33]

WOMEN BEHIND THE TRANSITION: LATVIA'S PATH TO EUROPE

Sara Vinberga

Latvia's accession to the European Union in 2004 marked a turning point for democratic consolidation and legislative reform, including in the field of gender equality. While EU membership spurred legal and institutional advances, particularly in anti-discrimination and equality law, implementation has often lagged behind formal commitments. Women remain underrepresented in political leadership but are well represented in public service and management. Persistent challenges include gender pay gaps, unequal caregiving burdens, and high rates of gender-based violence.

Latvia formally joined the European Union on 1 May 2004, concluding a demanding and multifaceted accession process. The country's trajectory toward membership was shaped by its restoration of independence in 1991 and the consequent need to undertake profound reforms across political, economic, and social domains. These reforms were essential not only to dismantle the structures inherited from the Soviet era, but also to meet the EU accession criteria, popularly known as the Copenhagen criteria. Despite this opportunity, public discourse in Latvia reflected deep-seated concerns regarding potential economic exploitation and the erosion of national sovereignty. Such anxieties were particularly pronounced among ethnic minority populations living in Latvia.[34]

Polling data from the pre-accession period revealed significant fluctuations in public opinion. In September 2002, approximately 46.2% of respondents expressed willingness to support EU membership, while 35% opposed it and 17.9% remained undecided. By July 2003, support had increased to 57.1%, only to decline sharply to 49.6% in August.[35] This volatility prompted Latvian authorities to schedule the referendum later than in most other candidate countries, allowing additional time for public debate and potential stabilization of attitudes. Ultimately, the referendum held on 20 September 2003 yielded a favourable outcome, with 67% voting in support of the EU accession and a voter turnout of 72.5%.[36]

Following the accession, public trust in the European Union remained relatively low. The 2004 autumn Eurobarometer survey reported that only 47% of Latvian respondents expressed trust and support for the EU, the lowest proportion among member states at the time.[37] Nevertheless, this figure was still significantly higher than trust in national institutions, being approximately twice that of the national parliament and eight times that of political parties.

This suggests that, despite their scepticism, Latvian citizens viewed the EU as a more credible and effective actor in addressing key economic and political issues.[38] Furthermore, the 2024 Standard Eurobarometer survey indicated a marked increase in general satisfaction among the Latvian population, with 82% reporting overall contentment with their quality of life.[39]

Gendered perceptions of EU membership benefits emerged as a salient issue in the early post-accession period. According to the 2005 spring Eurobarometer, 61% of men believed that Latvia had gained from joining the EU, compared to only 53% of women.[40] In other words, a higher percentage of women indicated that the country had not benefited from EU membership or expressed no clear opinion. These findings reflect broader social and economic inequalities, as women were more likely to occupy vulnerable positions during the transition period and were therefore more exposed to the potential negative consequences of economic restructuring.[41] Issues related to gender equality and women's rights, while present in the public sphere, remained largely marginal in the context of EU accession.[42] The primary advocates for these concerns were women's organizations, academic institutions, and international agencies.[43]

However, the dissemination of related information was limited, often confined to urban centres. Latvian media seldom foregrounded gender equality as a central theme, and when it did, the discourse was typically framed in legalistic terms, which constrained wider public engagement and understanding.

A key factor inhibiting the mainstreaming of gender equality was the prevailing cultural model rooted in the Soviet legacy. This legacy influenced public attitudes and institutional behaviour, often reinforcing traditional gender roles and undermining efforts to advance more progressive social policies. The EU's influence on Latvia's formal institutions and policies related to equality was evident but uneven, as domestic political actors selectively engaged with or resisted EU agendas, particularly in the realm of social policy.[44] Areas of persistent resistance included the rights of ethnic minorities, the protection of sexual minorities, the political representation of women, and the implementation of measures to prevent violence against women.[45] While Latvia's accession to the European Union represents a significant achievement in terms of democratic consolidation and integration into the European political and economic space, the process also revealed, and reproduced, important social tensions.

Changes in the legislation and public life

Latvia's accession to the European Union necessitated extensive legislative reform to align its national legal framework with the *acquis communautaire*. Central to these reforms was the entrenchment of the principles of equality and non-discrimination, already articulated in the Latvian Constitution, which affirms that "all human beings [...] are equal before the law and the courts." [46] According to the interpretation advanced by the Latvian government, this constitutional provision encompasses the principle of gender equality.

Among the most substantive legal amendments were those aimed at ensuring protection against discrimination on multiple grounds, including gender, race, sexual orientation, age, disability, and religion. These reforms were undertaken to harmonize Latvian law with key EU directives, particularly Directive 2000/43/EC (the Racial Equality Directive)[47], Directive 2000/78/EC (the Employment Equality Directive)[48], and Directive 2006/54/EC (concerning equal treatment between men and women in matters of employment and occupation)[49]. These directives mandated the introduction of anti-discrimination mechanisms and equal treatment provisions across a range of social, economic, and political domains. An important institutional development during this period was the establishment of the Office of the Ombudsman (Tiesībsargs) in 2007, which replaced the former National Human Rights Office. The Ombudsman's mandate includes the supervision of compliance with human rights standards, with a particular focus on equality and non-discrimination, thereby fulfilling EU conditionalities for institutional oversight.[50]

In the area of gender equality, Latvia implemented a series of national action plans and legislative adjustments aimed at improving women's participation in both the labour market and political life, thereby aligning national objectives with broader EU strategic priorities. Although Latvia lacks a specific legislative mandate assigning gender equality responsibilities to a single public authority, since 1999 the Ministry of Welfare has served as the coordinating body for gender equality policy.[51] In December 2009, gender equality was subsumed under the remit of the Equal Opportunities Division, alongside responsibilities for the rights of persons with disabilities and social inclusion. Since 2012, this function has been institutionalized within the Ministry of Welfare's Department of Social Policy Planning and Development.[52]

During this period, legal measures were introduced to ensure equal pay and to enhance maternity and parental leave policies. While Latvia has formally complied with EU legal standards, the implementation of these norms has often been inconsistent.[53] Legal harmonization prioritized formal or procedural equality, while substantive equality, necessary for redressing entrenched gender hierarchies and economic disparities, received comparatively less institutional and political attention. Moreover, despite a well-developed legal framework, practical enforcement mechanisms have faced systemic challenges.[54] These include disparities in access to justice, limited institutional capacity, and variable levels of public support. Such obstacles have hampered the full realization of equality and anti-discrimination objectives in everyday practice.[55]

It is important to stress that EU accession has functioned as a critical driver of normative and institutional change in Latvia.[56] By embedding equality principles within national law and providing an external referent for domestic advocacy, EU membership has significantly enhanced the legal and political infrastructure available to proponents of gender equality and anti-discrimination. In other words, Latvia's transposition of the *acquis communautaire* into its national legal order has resulted in extensive legislative and

institutional reforms, particularly in the fields of equality and human rights. These changes reflect a high degree of formal convergence with EU standards, although their societal reception and practical enforcement have varied. The enduring challenge lies not in the articulation of equality principles, but in their translation into meaningful social and structural transformation – an endeavour that remains contingent upon both domestic political will and the continuing influence of European norms.

Impact of the EU membership on gender equality

The impact of EU membership on gender equality in Latvia has been notable. As of 2024, Latvia ranked 19th among EU member states on the European Gender Equality Index, with a score of 62.6 out of 100. Since 2010, Latvia's score has increased by 7.4 percentage points, primarily due to substantial progress in the domains of “power” (an increase of 15.7 points) and “money” (an increase of 10.7 points).[57] Latvia has the most room for improvement in the domain of “knowledge”, which scores 52.1 points and has ranked last in the EU since 2015.[58]

In terms of employment and income equality, notable gender disparities persist. In 2024, the employment rate among men stood at 66.4%, compared to 61.7% among women – a gap of 4.7 percentage points.[59] Latvian women are disproportionately employed in lower-paying sectors of the economy and are underrepresented in higher-paying professions. Even within the same occupational categories, a wage gap remains evident. The average gross hourly earnings of women were 13.9% lower than those of men, equating to women earning 84 eurocents for every one euro earned by men. This represents the narrowest gender pay gap observed in recent years. To combat wage disparities, the European Parliament and the European Council adopted Directive 2023/970 on 10 May 2023, aiming to enhance the enforcement of equal pay through transparency and regulatory mechanisms. This directive came into force in Latvia on 6 June 2023.[60]

Additional gender-related challenges are evident in family structures. According to data from the Central Statistical Bureau (CSB), in households where children are raised by a single parent, 83.6% of these parents are women. Moreover, the state currently provides maintenance for 35,000 children due to the absence of one parent, and in 90% of these cases, the non-paying parent is male. Women remain underrepresented in decision-making roles, although Latvia performs relatively well compared to other EU states. In 2023, women accounted for 53.5% of managerial positions, the highest share in the EU. Despite this, women comprised only 23.9% of board members in the largest Latvian companies. [61]

In response, the Cabinet of Ministers adopted amendments to the Law on Gender Balance in the Management Bodies of Capital Companies, aiming to ensure a more equitable gender distribution on boards and supervisory bodies. However, due to the law's narrow scope, it currently applies to only two companies in Latvia.

In terms of women health Data CSB of Latvia shows that in Latvia in 2024, 53.3% of men and 45.9% of women assessed their health as good or very good. The relatively low self-assessment of health status of women in the total number of women is associated with the large proportion of women in the older generation – the higher the proportion of seniors, the lower the self-assessment of health status. An additional explanatory factor is that a smaller proportion of women engage in physical activities.[62]

In terms of gender-based violence in Latvia it remains a significant issue, though its prevalence is slightly below the EU average. Approximately 25.1% of women aged 18 to 74 have experienced physical or sexual violence in adulthood, compared to the EU average of 31%.[63] Intimate partner violence is particularly widespread, with 30.1% of Latvian women reporting some form of it. Psychological abuse is the most reported, affecting 28.8% of women, followed by physical violence, including threats, reported by 15.4%, and sexual violence, experienced by 4.4%.[64]

Latvia also stands out in terms of non-partner violence. Although 2.4% of women report having been raped by a non-partner since the age of 15, Latvia is one of the few EU countries where more than half of non-partner violence is committed by strangers rather than acquaintances or relatives.[65] Domestic violence remains prevalent, with police recording 356 female victims of domestic abuse in 2022. Women represented 40% of victims of physical domestic violence and 42% of psychological domestic violence cases. Alarmingly, 82% of sexual domestic violence victims were women, while women also accounted for half of those suffering economic domestic violence.[66]

Despite these concerning figures, Latvia reports the lowest rate in the EU for workplace sexual harassment, with only 11% of working women reporting such experiences.[67] However, the country also had the highest rate of gender-based homicides in the EU in 2020, with 16 women murdered by family members and six by their intimate partners. These figures underscore the ongoing challenges Latvia faces in addressing and preventing gender-based violence across various contexts.

Latvian women in EU integration process

The role of women in Latvia's accession to the European Union has been not only symbolic, but also strongly influential. In this regard, the main woman on Latvia's path to the European Union and NATO was the President of Latvia (1999-2007) Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga who represented Latvia's interests internationally, convincing EU member states and institutions of Latvia's strong commitment and course towards the implementation of European values and norms.[68]

Another influential female figure in Latvian foreign policy has been Sandra Kalniete. She was one of the most active women in the Latvian Awakening movement which played the crucial role in the country's regaining of independence. In addition, she represented Latvia

abroad as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and is currently a Member of the European Parliament where she has served for several terms. Another Member of the European Parliament since 2004 is Inese Vaidere. Both women have been strong figures in representing and promoting Latvia's interests internationally.



Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga is the former president of Latvia (1999–2007) known for leading Latvia's successful NATO and EU accessions. Photo: Shutterstock

The activities of non-governmental organizations in Latvia's integration into the European Union should also be mentioned. The Women's NGOs Cooperation Network, established in 2003 by Inete Ielīte and Edīte Edīte Kalniņa, advocated for gender equality and inclusion of women's rights into the national agenda, influencing the adaptation of EU regulations related to social policy and anti-discrimination measures.[69] Women in public service played an important role in drafting legal reforms, particularly in areas such as gender equality, anti-discrimination, and social protections. Ize Brands Kehris, a human rights expert, has been one of the prominent women in Latvia who was actively ensuring that human rights and minority issues were addressed in line with EU standards.

In conclusion, women's representation on Latvia's path to the European Union, in the implementation, maintenance and improvement of Latvian standards, has been highly significant and appreciated by the Latvian society. The influence of the above mentioned and many other women in the formation of the Latvian state within the European Union has contributed to what Latvia – a member state of the European Union, NATO and many other international organizations and a defender of its own and their interests – is today.

THE GAINS AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES OF POLAND'S EU ACCESSION

Małgorzata Kopka-Piątek, Iwona Reichardt

After the fall of communism in 1989, Poland embarked on a path toward democracy and European integration. Public support for EU membership grew gradually throughout the 1990s, culminating in a decisive 2003 referendum. EU accession brought promises of economic growth, political stability, and improved living standards. However, while the integration with the EU led to positive legal reforms and greater labour market opportunities also for women, progress on women's rights, particularly reproductive freedoms, has remained limited and contested.

In 1989, after 45 years of communist rule, Poland began a transition to democracy. Soon after the first semi-free elections, the new non-communist government started to explore how the democratizing Polish state could establish closer ties with the European Union (then the European Economic Community). Available research data show that early in the 1990s, amidst the political and economic transformation, which was a difficult experience for the Polish society, public opinion on the country's integration with the West was mixed.[70]

However, with time, as Poles began to receive more information on what benefits a closer integration with the West would bring, and the integration process advanced, support towards EU membership also started to grow.[71] Opinions on the EU became more supportive. What changed the society's attitude was Poland's signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in 1994. Since that moment on, and especially right before the official start of accession negotiations in 1998, various opinion polls showed that support towards EU integration was at a high 60% to 70%.[72]

Overall, the expectations that were expressed in Poland in relation to the EU accession could be summarized as follows:

- **Economic benefits:** the society anticipated that the EU would bring economic growth, better living standards, increased foreign investments, and access to the common single market, which – in turn – would stimulate business development and job creation.
- **Improved living standards:** EU funds were expected to improve Poland's healthcare system, education institutions, infrastructure, and overall social conditions.
- **Political stability and democracy:** EU accession was associated with strengthening of democratic institutions, the rule of law, civil rights, and greater political and social stability.
- **Infrastructure development:** EU funds were meant to be spent on the modernization of roads, railways, while urban and rural infrastructure improvements were expected to contribute to people's higher standards of living and support regional development.

- **Freedom of movement and access to markets:** the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital was seen as an opportunity for easier travel, work, education, and business activity.
- **Legal and environmental standards:** alignment with EU legislation was expected to improve consumer protections and enhance environmental standards.
- **International influence:** joining the EU was seen as a way to strengthen Poland's position on the international stage and increase its influence in shaping the EU's policies and security.

The downward trend started in 1998 and continued until early 2000s. Among the many factors explaining the fall of support, or even unwillingness to participate in the EU referendum, was the dominating feeling that there would be no quick benefits from the integration.[73] The most sceptical towards integration were rural and elderly voters who expressed more conservative views. To convince them, the government realised that it needed the assistance of the Catholic clergy which enjoys large political influence in Poland until today. The involvement of the priests in convincing the society to vote for the EU had, nonetheless, a certain price. It came in a form of continued restrictions of women reproductive rights which took the form of restrictive abortion regulations.



In reaction to highly restrictive abortion regulations, Polish women protested in the streets en masse from 2016-2023. Photo: Shutterstock.

Namely, during the pre-accession period an important change was introduced to Polish legislation, which continues to profoundly affect women's lives until today. This was the 1993 the Act on Family Planning, Protection of the Human Fetus, and Conditions for Permitting Abortion, which severely restricted women's access to legal abortion. Under this law, the termination of a pregnancy became available only in a few exceptional cases, which turned Poland into a country with one of the most restrictive abortion regulations in Europe. Almost since the beginning, the new legislation sparked widespread controversy, which shaped the Polish public debate on the topic of women's rights for the years to come.

Over 20 years later, despite continued protests, demonstrations and other forms of political pressure, the emergence of new generations of feminist activists, and the growing presence of women in political and social life in Poland, the 1993 highly restrictive abortion law continues to negatively affect the health and lives of Polish women. In 2020, when Poland was governed by the conservative United Right government, this legislation was further restricted by the Polish Constitutional Tribunal. As a result, Poland now has one of the most restrictive regulations of access to legal abortion in the world. The inability to change this law, which has been the case even after 2023 when a coalition of democratic parties formed a government on the promise of bringing back the rule of law and providing Polish women with wider access to legal abortions, overshadows other advancements that Poland has made, as an EU state, in the area of in gender equality.

The accession process culminated in a national referendum which was held on 7-8 June 2003. Its results showed that Poles opted for joining the European community: 77% of voters supported Poland's membership, while 23% voted against it. With a turnout exceeding 58%, the referendum was both valid and decisive. Poland's formal entry into the European Union took place on 1 May 2004.

Support for EU membership slightly differed between men and women. Overall, women were more in favour of EU accession than men were. Specifically, 80% of female voters voted for the EU, compared to 75% of male voters. This shows that in Poland from the beginning support for the EU among women was higher than the national average, while among men it was slightly lower. Though the difference was not very large, it was consistently reflected in opinion polls. [74]

Access to education and training programmes that could improve women's opportunities in the labour market and social life was seen as of great social importance. As was an increase in women's participation in politics and democratic institutions. Thus, hopes were put in women's greater representation at various levels of government. Demands were also articulated to create instruments to protect women, particularly in areas such as healthcare, education and social security. Equally importantly, there was an identified need to combat violence, including domestic violence, against women and reduce their social exclusion.

While adopting the EU's legal norms and regulations as part of the accession process Poland introduced a number of changes in its national legislation which had a positive effect on the situation of Polish women. Their summary is presented below:

- **Integration with EU regulations:** upon joining the EU, Poland committed to aligning its laws with EU standards and directives on gender equality, which led to the introduction of new provisions protecting women's rights.
- **Equal Treatment Act:** in 2010, the Equal Treatment Act was introduced, prohibiting discrimination against women and men in various aspects of life, including employment, education and access to services.
- **Protection against violence:** in the context of EU accession, Poland adopted various documents and measures to protect women against violence, such as the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women, which was ratified by Poland in 2015.
- **Support for families:** EU regulations have influenced Polish family policy legislation, leading to strengthened maternal rights and increased support for families, particularly benefiting women.
- **Alignment with European standards:** as a result, the Polish legal system has begun to take greater account of gender equality principles, with the aim of increasing women's participation in public and political life, including through quotas in elections.
- **Education and access to information:** EU access has provided Polish women with better access to information on rights which led to their increasing awareness in various areas.

EU membership and gender equality

One of the most significant legislative changes affecting the situation of women which took place as a result of Poland's EU membership were the amendments to the Polish Labour Code. Introduced multiple times between 2002 and 2010, they aimed to align Polish legislation with the requirements of EU equality directives. As a result, the Polish legal system adopted and clarified definitions of direct and indirect discrimination, as well as the definition of sexual harassment. The revised Labour Code also introduced new provisions that strengthen protections against workplace discrimination. They include a ban on retaliatory actions against employees who file complaints of harassment or sexual harassment, legal safeguards for those exercising their right to lodge a complaint, and protections for employees who support or assist colleagues in submitting such complaints.

The second key piece of anti-discrimination legislation introduced after 2004 was the Act on the Implementation of Certain Provisions of the European Union on Equal Treatment. Proposed by the Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment, it was passed on 3 December 2010 and came into force on 1 January 2011. The law outlines measures to prevent discrimination based on gender, race, ethnic origin, nationality, religion, belief,

worldview, disability, age, and sexual orientation.

Even though adopted under pressure from the European Union – which threatened financial penalties for Poland’s failure to align its legislation with EU standards – the law received support from government representatives. It was yet criticized by representatives of non-governmental organisations who pointed out its limited scope, stating that it incorporates only the minimum of EU directives into Polish legal practice. This criticism mainly stressed:

- The narrow remit of grounds for discrimination recognized by the act;
- The narrow scope of social life that has become a domain for protection against discrimination under the new law;
- The lack of a clear division of competence among the governmental bodies that deal with discrimination, and the lack of a separate budget for counteracting discrimination.

[75]

Due to weak institutional foundations, limited financial resources, and a narrow interpretation of gender equality – often restricted to topics related to the labour market – the EU’s influence on gender equality in Poland has been less substantial than many had expected. The changes that were introduced as a result of membership in the EU have not brought a radical or systemic transformation in the area of women’s rights. Instead, they have led to what can be called a “soft change”, that is a gradual shift which is slowly reshaping public discourse and reframing women’s and gender equality issues by introducing new themes and policy directions. Thus over time, various topics debated at the EU level have indeed been adapted in Poland. They have influenced public dialogue and, to some extent, government decisions, although the outcomes of these changes have been inconsistent and often limited.

Unquestionably, Poland's accession to the European Union has had a significant impact on the situation of women on the labour market. First of all, integration with the EU market led to creation of many new jobs, which also increased employment opportunities for women. Many began to work in the service sector, manufacturing and new industries such as the IT. EU-funded programmes also supported initiatives focused on gender equality and women's professional activation.

EU funds were used to implement training and counselling projects that helped women acquire professional skills and improve qualifications. This, in turn, helped increase their competitiveness on the labour market. Significantly, the EU accession brought higher standards on equal treatment in employment, improved organisational cultures and increased the importance of equality policies in private companies and the public sector. The introduction of EU regulations has also contributed to the popularity of flexible forms of employment, which enabled some women to balance their work and family life. After participating in EU programmes, many Polish women decided to start their own businesses and overall entrepreneurial initiatives have gained popularity.

Poland has comprehensive equal pay legislation that safeguards against gender-based wage discrimination. Compared to its neighbouring countries, including those which are EU members, Poland stands out with a relatively low gender pay gap of 7.8%. [76]

Despite these positive changes, especially in the labour market, serious challenges remain and there is still much work that needs to be done in Poland in the area of women's situation in the labour force. Gender-based stereotypes remain an issue of serious concern. There is still a lack of institutional support towards women who need to balance their professional roles with those of caregivers. Despite speedy modernization and technological changes in Poland, it is still women who take the primary responsibility over other family members in need; children, aging parents or family members with disabilities.

The role of women in the EU integration process and negotiations

One of the women who has had the largest contribution to Poland's integration process was Danuta Hübner. At the time of the integration process, Hübner was the chairwoman of the Office of the Committee for European Integration by the Polish Government (2001 to 2003), and in 2004, after Poland's accession, served first as the EU Commissioner for Trade, and from November 2004 to July 2009 she was the EU Commissioner for Regional Policy. She was elected to the European Parliament for three times.

At the time of Poland's integration many women leaders and organisations voiced their concerns related to the country's social policy, Polish labour rights, and lack of gender equality. Their involvement in the integration process was thus crucial in ensuring that social dimensions of the EU accession, especially those changes that were affecting women and most vulnerable groups, remained prominent. Women's organizations actively engaged in informing the public about the benefits and challenges of EU integration. They promoted gender equality and social justice, working to ensure that women's interests were taken into account during harmonization processes. Many women's NGOs participated in consultations, policy discussions, and were included in advisory bodies working on social policies and legal alignment. They influenced the drafting and adoption of laws and regulations, making sure to incorporate gender perspectives aligned with the EU norms.

With the onset of Poland's political transformation, numerous new women's organizations emerged. Despite operating with limited experience and financial resources, they demonstrated remarkable enthusiasm, improvisation, and adaptability to the rapidly changing socio-political landscape. During this formative period, several key organizations became prominent players in the women's movement. Among them were the Democratic Union of Women, eFKa Foundation, the Centre for the Promotion of Women, and the Federation for Women and Family Planning.

These women organizations played a crucial role in raising awareness of gender equality issues at both national and local levels. They actively advocated for the integration of EU standards on anti-discrimination, labour rights, and social protection. Through persistent lobbying, they contributed to incorporating gender equality considerations into Poland's adoption of EU regulations, promoting policies aimed at combating discrimination and ensuring equal opportunities. At the societal level, they helped foster public debate on gender issues and supported the mainstreaming of gender perspectives into broader social and economic reforms.

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About the project

The project (Re)uniting the East and West: Reflections on the 2004 EU enlargement (REWEU) The project is focused on the commemoration of the 2004 “big bang” EU enlargement on the occasion of its 20th anniversary in May 2024. Through the combination of local, national and international public events, collection of historical memories and narratives, studies on impacts of 2004 enlargement, costs of non-enlargement and role of women in the process, as well as exhibitions and media articles, the project contributes to wider contemporary efforts of EU memory politics. The project focuses on eight selected EU countries, four from the older EU Member States which were part of the Union’s decision-making processes leading up to the big enlargement (Belgium, Finland, Greece and Italy) and four newly acceding countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland). The project is funded by the European Union through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) under the European Remembrance strand.

