

**The European Parliament, Irish female MEPs and Feminist Activism in
Ireland**

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This research

- explores the **relevance of the EP** as a context for **advancing gender equality in Ireland**
- Timely 2014 marks **the first time since** Irish accession **in 1973** that Irish women MEPs have achieved **a majority status** in their national representation in the EP (hold 6 of 11 seats / national level constitute 16 .5% of the Irish parliament). Feb 29th **2016 set to rise to 22% (25-33 seats)**

Research Questions :

- **Does this greater presence of female politicians provide specific opportunities for advancing women's interests and addressing issues of gender inequality in Irish society**
- **Do do Irish female MEPs understand their role in the EP as one of opening up political agendas to women's issues?**

Descriptive and substantive representation

Weak base in political parties and unions – feminists dependent on **transnational lobbies**

‘leverage politics not power resource politics’

Drawing from

- assessments of the EP as a context for feminist mobilization;
- work that has **examined the broader relationship between the EU** and Ireland

EU membership and Ireland (EP and political parties/system) Irish female MEPs

Method

- Interviews with sitting and past female MEPs 2015
(Social desirability effect)
- Documents: speeches, events **on gendered issues**
- Interviews with **State Feminist Organisation National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI)** 2014 and 2015
- in **small case qualitative terms the experiences and attitudes of a national delegation of female politicians to drill down** into the micro level practice **of doing politics and pursuing women's interests at the transnational level.**
- This method carries with it the contingencies of a small **sample single case approach in terms of limits on the explanatory range**

Irish female MEPs ≡ consistency and contradiction:

- Irish MEPs **diverse group --traditional and implicitly feminist on what constitutes women's interests and gender equality .**
- Other studies on women politicians affiliated with **the same political traditions ≡ deep ideological differences**. Notably these differences do not **always follow the traditional left right divide** (Kantola and Saari,2014) with individual female representatives holding **left leaning and more conservative views simultaneously**.
- Irish female MEPs consist primarily of **centrist political representatives, some of whom hold socially conservative views while others that are left leaning having moved beyond class based analysis to include a feminist lens**.
- As such, this work **affords a reflection on the role of a diverse range of women with different levels or none of feminist identification, in advancing women's interests at the transnational level**.

Erzeel (2015)

- **What seems to matter for legislators actions on behalf of women at national level?**
- Feminist awareness
- Contacts with women's movements
- Gender committee membership
- Party ideology
- Presence of a critical mass of women
- Disincentives for legislators to advance women's interests

Cultural and political institutional context in Ireland



- gender policy logic ***strong male breadwinner model/ gender differentiated dual earner model***
- Constitutional protections for women in the home/ **natalism in tension with neo-liberal activation of women in labour market**
- Patriarchal dividend – **restrictive reproductive rights; high cost childcare; care work not recognised/childcare**
- **male-gendered institutional norms in legislatures and parties in Ireland, North and South/ reluctance to recognise women as a political grouping**

Political opportunity context / state-civil society relations

Women's political agency shaped by:

- **localism (PR/STV) encourage politicians to focus local issues and constituent service**
- **Irish electorate (clientalism)- demands local service, politicians acts as brokers between electorate and the state (viewed as distant/suspicion)**
- **Local experience [≡] and or EP (where politicians gain credibility and skills) all favours men (only 20% of local offices held by women)**
- **Party political identification/morality politics**

What is rewarded:

- **Insider tactics , maternal framing on single issue populist campaigns aimed at local and national level**
- **offloading of service provision** to women's organizations rather than advocacy based input.

State feminism and civil society

- **Women's groups - vulnerable (cuts backs/suppression)**
- **Equality mainstreaming**

EU membership --Differential Europeanization-

- State – EU membership (avoidance of social investment/competition state)Revenue source/rather than policy learning . EU funds let Irish state “ off the hook” for sustainable development strategy
- De-parliamentarisation –Centralisation and incremental pragmatism
- clause Maastricht (support for **integration/abortion**)
- State usages of EU -**threat of isolation fiscal compact treaty**
- Feminists **critical actors** in forcing compliance- foot dragging equal pay and parental leave directiveAlternative frame to male breadwinner model /leverage politics for body rights educated and professional women benefitted -equal treatment/pensions-
- Social partnership-(corporatism) helped smooth **Europeanization**
- State- EU **GE resistance/benign neglect**
- Austerity pragmatism – **gendered outcomes**

What current research on the EP tells us

- **Abels (2015)** critical mass, **with 10 out of 24** committees now led by women, BUT gender bias still shapes access to power and influence in this space;
- **Kantola and Agustín,(2015)**MEPs from **left wing groupings** defined gender equality **as achieved** whereas **more conservative female MEPs responsibility on individual women politicians to assume power and status in the EP**
- gender equality is understood by female MEPs in **largely descriptive or numerical terms**
- **abortion, prostitution and homosexuality** considered to **be controversial** and where decisions are not easily made (An increase in MEPs with conservative views on gender relations)
- **Mushaben (2015)** room for femocratic manoeuvring in the EP becomes reduced inter-institutional arrangements (co-decision/trialogues)
- women's presence in the EP is recognised, but their participation in real decision making remains limited, especially as executive actors return **to the intergovernmental paradigm** during periods of economic crisis.

Irish MEPs 1979-2019

EP Legislature	Irish MEP Delegation	Males	Females
1979-84	22	20	2
1984-89	17	15	2
1989-94	17	15	2
1994-99	15	12	3
1999-04	15	10	5
2004-09	13	8	3
2009-14	12	9	3
2014-19	11	5	6

The EP and Irish MEPs

2014 first time since 1973 majority female MEPs 2014

- Irish 16% (22%) compared to 37% EP (selectorate in Irish context, Irish Parliament as a gendered institution)
- Mix of **long serving MEPs career at EU level** - VP --Committees Econ/Emp.
- **First time - leverage for national career gain experience**
- NO HARD LEFT or HARD RIGHT include two representatives from the opposition **centre left nationalist party**, Sinn Fein (traditionally a Euro sceptical force), two members including a vice president of the EP from the **incumbent centre right party Fine Gael** and two independent representatives one originating from a **centre left and one from a centre right political affiliation.**

	Political Party	Term	Committee
Lynn Boylan	Sinn Fein (centre left- nationalist) GUE/NGL	1st term 2014-19	ENVI: (Full Member) EMPL: Employment and Social Affairs (Substitute Member)
Liadh O Riada	Sinn Fein (centre left -nationalist) GUE/NGL	1 st term 2014-2019	BUDG: Budgets (Full Member) PECH: Fisheries (Full Member) CULT: Culture and Education (Substitute Member)
Nessa Childers	Independent S and D Group	2 nd term 2009-2019	ENVI: (Full) ECON: (Substitute) FEMM: Women's Rights and Gender Equality (Substitute)
Mairead McGuinness	Fine Gael(centre-right) EPP VP of the EP	3 rd term 2004-2019	AGRI: (Full Member) ENVI: (Substitute Member)
Deirdre Clune	Fine Gael (centre right) EPP	1 st term 2004-2009	TRAN: Transport and Tourism (Full Member) EMPL: Emp and Social Affairs (Substitute Member)
Marian Harkin	Independent Group Alliance of	3 rd term 2004-2019	EMPL: Employment and Social Affairs (Full) ECON: (Substitute

Profile of Irish MEPs

- **four of the six** women have served **previously as elected officials**, in **Parliament, or at local or mayoral level.**
- qualifications in **journalism, media and cultural management.** **One MEP is a former civil engineer, another an agricultural economist.**
- **None feminist identification before politics** – but **all now support gender quotas (Irish legislation).**
- **Two of six identified as feminist .**
- A typical response from the centre right MEPs when asked if they identified as feminist, included, “ No I don’t use that label, I avoid blaming men, I am more interested in pushing for a balance and quality of life for men and women . Another stated. “ not a label I take on or reject it is just that I think it is better to normalise the issue of gender equality .”

EP compared to national Parliament

- “ There is such a difference going into meetings and not being the only woman in the room, **also it is not as adversarial**, it is more about consensus and you also realise there are a lot of women in very important positions. The EP is so different from national politics in that you don't need to actively seek out other women to create an alliance, sometimes depending on the issue women may be the majority in a room.” **Source of political agency absent at national level**

BUT careful to underplay **gender deficits** at national level.

- Instead, detailed their **own leadership achievements**, suggesting they had **not personally been held back** by **gender bias**, but that at the same time they were **aware that it did exist**.

Sub-national and transnational political opportunity context

- Subnational: multi-seat constituencies- permanent local campaigning

“ what can you bring back to your local constituents”

- Reinforces populism/clientalism- undermines structural shifts on GE
As one centre right MEP suggested, “ Regardless of the issues we raise in the EP we always need to be aware of what our local and regional constituents need.”

- Weakness of European Affairs committee. 17 members compared to 31 that sit on the committee for Foreign Affairs.

“ low political capital, poorly resourced”

Foreign Affairs/Finance/Prime minister

“ a light weight committee, where nothing is debated until too late.”

EP and DRW

- **VP of the EP and CR** , EPP needed to **address its low levels of female representation** presented her with an opportunity. In 2005 she secured the chair of a committee of inquiry where as a first term MEP she made her 'mark' .
 - **“ I am not conscious of gender bias at all, it is just about the work.”**
 - **“The EPP is full of strong women that can rise through the ranks.”**
- “Brussels is not about friendships more about business we don't get to engage on a purely female level.”**
- “ The EP is not about friendship it is about the work.”**

The EP and SRW

A first term centre left MEP asserted. **“ of course the EP has been beneficial for gender equality in Ireland, but I think the way the EP works with co-decision you need change to come from National Parliaments.”**
“ the EP is a place where we legislate for citizens for men and women not for women explicitly.”

Advice : **the need to fix individual women, and for female politicians “to seek opportunities to make themselves visible.”**

“This is not about sexism. This is about inspiring and equipping women to succeed in politics.”

Gendered mobilizations on women's interests

Frequent

- Farming women, Fisheries and women,
- **development issues, including the rights of Palestinian women** and *development aid* more generally **safe claims** (Celis et al 2009;221) sex trafficking, gender quotas for decision making, **no substantial state intervention** (Childs et al. 2010 cites in Celis)

Episodic

Child Health/poverty, Child abduction, deinstitutionalisation of children in Eastern/central Europe. Political Representation (**ethnic minority women**)

- **Left leaning MEPs**

Gender Equality and Public procurement (TTIP)- evolved her thinking of food security as a gendered issue.

Irish MEPs and Intersectionality

- Specific issue – Roma, Traveller, Migrant women, VAW – reflects EU framing
- Continuity from domestic level (populism and issue specific campaigns on gendered interests rather than broad campaigns aimed at structural features of gender inequality)

What are women's interests? Maternity leave Directive -

CR Human capital/demographic /familial frame

“Populations needs to be replaced and if people stop having children because their careers cannot bear a few months absence then the cost to us all would be much greater in the long run. Overall it is also the cost to business of not retaining their female staff that is at stake.”

CL fairness and justice

“Fathers have the right also to experience and contribute to the earliest stages of development of their children. It is interesting to see how conservative forces harp on about family values when they see fit, yet show little enthusiasm for a modest and fair improvement in the conditions of

Irish female MEPs and the FEMM committee

- domestic policy concerns provide **a source of agreement** across political party lines that bind the majority of female Irish MEPs yet works to **limit them as critical actors on gender equality.**
- 3 women since 1973 full or substitute membership (Dana 2000 retrograde) 1 in last 10 years
- “ Abortion, all the political parties instruct their MEPs not to become members of the FEMM committee for this reason.” “ until we get it sorted out at home”

FEMM not where the action

is

- “The FEMM committee **is not relevant** as I am an engineer by training the transport committee is a better fit.”
- “The FEMM committee does some good work but is **has no legislative power**. There are other ways to secure gender equality, such as gender mainstreaming, gender proofing, or funding through the ESF and ERDF etc. Gender equality is integral to my work a normal part of my work not an extra or an add on.”
- “Sometimes the FEMM **makes gender an issue in a way that inhibits legislation, they are not willing to compromise enough. Their position was inflexible the result was that everybody's time wasted.**”
- “I came to the EP to legislate **to be where the influence is and that is not** in the FEMM committee.” EP VP Irish MEP stated that “I have never attended a FEMM committee meeting, it is too left leaning, there are too many divisive voices and it is too adversarial.”, “ **When we look at the EU, what are the major legislative priorities?, not on the FEMM committee, where are Ireland's national interests? not there .**”
- “committees **that are ‘womanised’ are marginal** , instead there needs to be more women who are visible in other contexts

Party whip and class politics

- Agustin (2012) SRHR – more contested
- Morality politics reflect deep conflicts over public and private moralities, gender relations, and the role of the state

CL – most sympathetic – BUT

- “ I am not sure that the issues that the FEMM committee takes up are that relevant to working class women it seems like a very middle class space to me and I see I can maybe raise issues for poorer women in other contexts in the EP.”

Tarbella report March 2014

morality politics and subsidiarity

- “It is very frustrating **when you cannot vote** in favour of something like that, it is a pity that abortion was in there, as it would have gotten much broader support because there are so many other really important things in that report.”
- “ I am prolife that is on the record but also in this context subsidiarity is the reality. This insistence **on trying to federalise the issue of abortion is futile.**”
- “However, it is my view that the formulation and implementation of policies on abortion are a matter for each individual Member State and not the European Parliament. Parliament must not overstep its competence and must recognise the principle of subsidiarity, which is a founding principle of the EU. Therefore I voted to take out any reference to abortion from the report on equality. “

Weakness as strength FEMM committee

Ahrens (2013) Networked integration/overlapping issues across committees.

““ I do try to keep an eye to the committee and if it runs events on equality issues I try to attend particularly because my Green colleague in the FEMM committee and I are member of the same political grouping and we have a good relationship where we share information as part of our membership on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee.”

EWL – breakfast training sessions

“not members of the FEMM Committee from across different political groupings. These sessions were to provide participants with the tools to become spokespersons for equality between men and women in their everyday work.”

MEP/CSO interface

Emer Costello MEP - DWAG - ILO convention 2013
DWR conference and hearings.

Mother and Baby Homes/Magadelane Laundries

“issues that have stagnated at national level or upon which there is significant contest in the domestic arena.”

“ we have a facility to bring delegations over to address the EP, you get a hundred places a year, sometimes in the past MEPs have used these as kind of a kickback to either party members or loyal supporters, but for me it is about civil society groups.”

Boomerang effect – pressure on permanent representation

- “ they were getting nowhere with the Irish government and they wanted to have a hearing with DG Justice, they needed to get their issues on the record and it was coming up the setting of the terms of reference on an inquiry at the national level.”
- “ It represents an opportunity to allow groups to make their case to the Commission, and the FEMM committee and get their feedback. You invite all of the Irish MEPs into the room to hear the testimonies of these families and women, the evidence they have and how their campaigns for justice have been frustrated at the national level, they can also connect to other similar groups in different countries, there is loads of potential there if MEPs use it wisely.”

CSOs direct to EP

- Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC), used the 2014 EP elections to highlight their work to repeal an amendment in the Irish constitution that equates the life of the foetus with that of the woman.
- 50/50 – gender quotas in politics
(also a function of domestic level factors-
opportunism – State)
Response to populist backlash call for political
reform
the ***Better Europe Alliance*** in which Irish
women’s organisations hold a central position.



NWCI - State Feminist Organization



- Irish observatory on VAW (EU funds)
- Strategic Plan (2013-2015) “A number of policies at EU level underpin the strategic plan” EU as referent (source of comparative data)
- 2008-2013 outside of OMC processes (Bailout)

2014 NWCI invited to consult on GM in CSR

Women Shaping Europe – membership (EP- toolkits for members for MEPs – maternity and parental leave)

Better Boards

Woman Friendly Oireachtas (Irish Parliament)

Gender bias training kit (EU funds)

Assessment of EU context

- “the frameworks that helped us in the 1990s, seem far away now”
- “good overarching commitments but don’t filter down to CSR’s”
- Femm Committee EP – good “pity little interest from Irish MEP’s”
- DG Just Equality Unit – less responsive (little contact between EP/DG Just)
- FEMM Committee pressure on the Irish state to ratify the COE Stockholm Convention on VAW.

Conclusions

- Differential Europeanisation (marginal role of the EU for Irish politicians and policy makers)
- Gender Regime and Developmental model – approach to GE (constrains agency at national level).
- EP source of political agency female politicians

- Irish female MEPs – gendered interests outside FEMM committee at best ‘implicitly liberal feminist’ but evidence of gendered focus \square

- but primarily **on ‘safe’ issues** related to economic equality, decision making, VAW and matters that affect women often outside of the EU.

- National Party politics, morality politics- shape version SRW (agreement but ideology shapes argumentation)
- MEPs offer material and discursive support to CSOs – women’s interests – single issue
- NWCI – EWL and FEMM committee (MEPs indirect resource- support on issues)

does this form of acting for women demonstrate responsiveness to women's interests?

- **good representation?** Recent public opinion data suggests growing support for a repeal of a constitutional ban on abortion in Ireland.
- A broad coalition of feminist, trade union and other interests including the NWCI have tied their support for electoral candidates in the upcoming general election (February 26th 2016) to a commitment to repeal the ban.
- However, the **majority of political parties** while asserting a commitment to revisit the ban **have not guaranteed its repeal.**