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Participation of Women in Holding Political Power in Poland Considering Experience of the EU Member States

1. Initial remarks

Parity between women and men has been one of the fundamental principles of the European Union. However, in spite of the fact that women have accounted for more than a half of Europe's population and that they are better educated and increasingly active professionally, their presence on top decision-making positions in politics has still been little more than exceptional. (see: Table 1.)

Table 1. Women on positions of Prime Ministers or heads of States in the EU/EC Member States (by 2003)

Presidents		
Country	First name, name	Date
Ireland	Mary Robinson	December 1990 - November 1997
	Mary McAleese	since November 1997
Finland	Tarja Halonen	since March 2000
Prime Ministers		
Portugal	Maria de Lourdes Ruivo da Silva Pintasilgo	August 1979 - January 1980
United Kingdom	Margaret Thatcher	May 1979 - November 1990
France	Edith Cresson	May 1991 - April 1992
Finland	Anneli Jäätteenmäki	April - June 2003

Source: the Author's own data composition basing on: *Politics: Women's Insight*, Series "Reports and Documents" no. 36, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Geneva 2000 and *Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership* (<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com./index.htm>), also: (http://www.europa.eu.int/abc/governments/index_en.html).

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This mainly results from the fact that, for centuries, women had been excluded from public sphere and their activities restricted to a sphere defined as private. This pattern began to change radically not earlier than in the 20th Century. This was when women gained access to education, entered the labour market, were awarded active and passive voting rights. Their participation in political circles, while steadily growing, hasn't risen over an insignificant level yet, proving that this area of life remains masculine-dominated. An example that testifies such a global trend can be found in women's representation on top political power positions in the European Union Member States, where their share in lower chambers of parliaments account for no more than c. ¼ of total number of deputies. Women's share in executive authorities has been at more or less the same level.¹

The EU Member States boast well-rooted democratic systems and constitutions of those countries define requirements their citizens have to meet to take advantage of their voting rights. No European country applies restrictions in the area of political involvement with respect to sex; the only restrictions imposed are those regarding a minimum age of candidates, having no criminal record, and, finally, citizenship. Therefore it can be argued that from a formal point of view there is nothing to hinder women's active participation in politics. However, they still face much resistance anyway and their opportunities to make political career are quite limited. It should also be underlined that establishing social institutions without a half of population participating is plainly contrary to the idea of modern democracy. Moreover, in effect it is also inconsistent the interests of the society as the whole.

2. Pre-conditions for women's political involvement in Poland

2.1. Historical, cultural and socio-economic factors

While Polish women gained electoral rights as early as in 1918, transformations taking place in our country following the World War 2 took a different course than in most Western European countries. Therefore, while presenting situation of women in Poland one should emphasise its specific nature resulting from historical and systemic experience. Due to dozens of years of political isolation and different political and economic system, patterns from the Western countries (which had undergone most of industrialisation and urbanisation processes at an earlier time) remained largely unknown in Poland. Non-existence of feminist movement in post-war Poland explains why there no

¹ See: *Women in Parliaments: World Classification*, Inter-Parliamentary Union, August 2003 (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>); European Database: Women in Decision-Making, June 2001 (<http://www.db-decision.de>).

voices protesting against or at least questioning persistence of family relationships domination in their traditional form. As a result of isolation from Western ideas of feminism broadly debated in the West, Polish society was unfamiliar with ideas that were proposed in many countries in the Sixties and Seventies and became an object of heated discussion in the West.

Before 1989 no debate over issues regarding parity between women and men took place in Poland. The government had no specific strategy in the field of sex parity. Since no citizens society existed at that time, also no feminine organisations independent from the State administration could exist and in consequence no relevant lobby could arise to develop strategies in the area of sex parity. Opportunities to overcome political and economic structures established after the war emerged only after decline of the communist system at the turn of Eighties/Nineties. It was then and thereafter that significant social transformations took place bringing modification of values and, in consequence, to changes in social attitudes. The year 1989 was the turning point.

Just in the wake of systemic reform the labour market became an arena of important changes. At present a share of women in total number of employed in Western Europe and in Poland is similar, however, both situations were reached by different roads. The latter fact also influenced the way attitudes towards women's presence in public life evolved. Early on, soon after 1989 situation of Polish women at the labour market deteriorated, affected by turbulence of general political and economic transformation. Although women are generally better educated, their position in the labour market is weaker than beforehand. They earn less than men do, they are dismissed more often and employed with less enthusiasm. The rate of unemployment among women rose significantly in the Nineties, so that late in 2001 it achieved 19.7% (while for men the ratio was 16.3%).² According to different estimations Polish women earn around 70 per cent of what men do. Nor is Poland free of the so-called glass ceiling phenomenon³ – for example, in 1994 four out of five persons filling high positions were men.⁴ Moreover, as revealed by international studies on poverty-related

² *Monitoring Rynku Pracy (Labour Market Monitoring)*, The Central Statistical Office, November 2001.

³ Phenomenon referred to as *glass ceiling* means much lower proportion of women in relation to men on top management positions and suggests barriers women encounter as they are willing to advance and in practice are forced to end their careers on lower positions. Despite revealing strong motivation and having appropriate skills, they often find it impossible to reach any higher in a hierarchy of positions: for them "higher floors of power" remain hardly or not at all accessible. See: *Szklany sufit. Bariery i ograniczenia karier kobiet (The Glass ceiling. Barriers and limitations of women's careers)*, ed. A. Titkow, The Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw 2003.

⁴ See: H.Domański, *Co wiadomo na temat nierówności płci? (What Is Known About Sex Inequalities?)*, "Res Publik Nowa", June 2002.

issues, carried out in the year 2000, Poland ranks at the top among post-communist societies in terms of feminine-factor in poverty. In other words, women are represented in the category of people affected with poverty twice as often as men.⁵

2.2. Political factors

The area of employment left aside, also politics have traditionally been regarded as a domain of masculine rather than feminine activity. An increase of a share of women in decision-making processes can not only contribute to progress in achieving equal opportunities between women and men but to positive changes in a number of social life areas as well, including, in particular, the way the State operates. In many agreements and international documents Poland has either been a signatory or a party, there are clauses calling to undertake appropriate measures and overcome an insufficient representation of women in political circles. As a result, mechanisms favouring an increase of women's share in authority structures have appeared in Poland as well.

Among instruments applied in this respect a quota-based system of guarantees for presence of one of sexes on electoral lists prepared by political parties should be mentioned as most important. Such a system was used while lists of candidates to both the Sejm and the Senate were prepared before parliamentary elections in 2001. Joint electoral lists of the Democratic Left Wing Alliance and the Labour Union guaranteed 36 per cent of places to women. That strategy undeniably contributed to a growing number of female deputies in the newly-elected Sejm. The example given by centrist and leftist parties was followed by right-wing parties which included more women in their lists than they had in the previous elections, however, with no official requirements introduced regarding that matter. This way, women's share in the parliament following the elections in September 2001, from one political party to another looked as follows:

- the League of Polish Families – 26.32%,
- the Democratic Left Wing Alliance - the Labour Union – 25.46%,
- Self-Defence – 16.98%,
- the Law and Justice – 13.64%,
- German Minority – 0%,
- Polish Peoples Party – 0%.

In total, the present share of female deputies in the lower chamber of Polish parliament (*i.e.* in the Sejm) accounts for 20.2%, while in the upper chamber (the Senate) it is 23%. And although women's participation is still unsatisfactory,

⁵ Ibidem.

much more women were elected in the recent elections than they had in all previous voting throughout the Nineties.⁶

Table 2. Political representation of women in the parliament after 1989

The year of parliamentary elections	Share of women [%]	
	Sejm (lower chamber)	Senate (upper chamber)
1989	13	6
1991	9	8
1993	13	13
1997	13	12
2001	20	23

Source: the Author's own data composition.

Compared to the previous composition of the parliament the number of women therein increased by 54% (see: table 2), while in the Senate the number grew up by over 100% as the women's share rose from 11% to 23%. This means that political representation of women after systemic transformation in Poland following the year 1989 has been growing up steadily. Generally, in a global ranking prepared by the Inter-Parliamentary Union with respect to political representation of women in central-level legislative authorities, Poland ranked 39th (whilst after the previous elections held in 1997 it was at 49 place).⁷

On the other hand, significant growth of a number of women in the Parliament failed to translate into their matching share in achieving parliamentary positions. There is not a single woman either in the Presidium or in the Convent of Seniors of the Sejm; while in the Presidium of the Senate, composed of four, a position of a Vice-President has been given to a woman.⁸ In

⁶ Such a growth of a number of women was a result of, among other things, an institutional solution. Elections in 2001 were held in line with electoral law that had been amended (according to z new administrative division). In 2001 electoral districts were larger (compared to those of 1997) and had more mandates (the former number of 52 electoral districts was reduced to 41). At the same time, total number of deputies (460) and senators (100) remained unchanged. This way, one of conditions favouring an increase of number of women on lists of candidates was met, as there has been a scientifically proven relation in which the more mandates in one electoral district, the bigger chances women have in elections.

⁷ *Women in Parliaments: World Classification*, Inter-Parliamentary Union, August 2003, (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>).

⁸ The government communication on the situation of women in Poland, The Sejm of the Republic of Poland, IV term, print No. 2591, Warsaw, 3 March 2004.

neither out of seven parliamentary clubs the position of president has been filled by a woman; just in four out of twenty-five standing commissions in the Sejm women have been presidents.⁹ Situation in the Senate is similar with just two female presidents out of thirteen Senate commissions.

Furthermore, marginal female representation in top positions in governmental structures should be observed. According to data from May 2003, in the Council of Ministers composed of a Prime Minister, 2 Deputy Prime Ministers and 13 Ministers only one woman fills position of a Minister; namely, in the Ministry of National Education and Sport.¹⁰

It seems evident as one reviews situation in Poland before the elections to be held in September 2001 that presence of the subject of equal rights between women and men and specific problems women face in political parties' programmes is still insufficient. Even as one looks no further than a level of rhetoric activity¹¹ the lack of vivid interest in increasing political participation of women is evident. Certainly, there are groups that take women's problems into account, yet there are others (which have been in majority and that should be emphasised) that haven't seen a need to address to female electorate in any particular way and haven't got even one woman among their deputies to the Parliament, the Polish Peoples Party being a notable example.

Another important thing is inclusion of the issue of equal rights for women and men in programmes of individual political parties. Parties may be divided into three following groups in terms of a degree to which women's issues are taken into consideration therein:

- the first group is formed by parties which do not even mention women in their programmes and haven't taken their problems into account at all (and such parties were in plain majority),
- the second one are parties that, while mentioning women and their situation, have seen them only in the context of family and of roles traditionally filled by women in family life,

⁹ *Kobiety w gremiach decyzyjnych (Women in decision-making bodies)*, The Office of Studies and Analyses, Division of Economic and Social Analyses, the Chancellery of the Sejm, Communication No. 967, May 2003.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Pippa Norris prepared a catalogue of activities of both political parties and governments, aiming at increasing women's participation in politics, with three categories distinguished: rhetorical activities, affirmative activities and positive discrimination. Each of those groups features a different level of effectiveness and each is obligatory for political parties to a different degree. More on this subject – see: P.Norris, *Breaking the Barriers: Positive Discrimination Policies for Woman* in: *Has Liberalism Failed Women? Assuring Equal Representation in Europe and the United States*, eds. J.Klausen, Ch.S.Maier, Palgrave, New York 2001 and J.Lovenduski, *Introduction: the Dynamics of Gender and Party* in: *Gender and Party Politics*, eds. J.Lovenduski, P.Norris, Sage, London 1993.

- the third group are parties that have paid special attention to women and underlined that proportion of women in public life should increase and their aspirations must not be restricted just to roles they've been traditionally attributed.

Announcements regarding an intent to undertake activities for an increased participation of women in political structures were included in electoral programmes of three parties: Democratic Left Wing Alliance (SLD), the Labour Union (UO) and the Liberty Union (UW).

Leszek Miller, the President of the Democratic Left Wing Alliance said during the SLD Congress in December 1999 that equal opportunities, parity of sexes and opposition to any discrimination were values held high by his party. The same Congress adopted a special resolution regarding promotion of women's opportunities to an equal level with those enjoyed by men. The Labour Union favours introduction of quota systems and adoption of an Act on equal status. Additionally, this is the party on whose electoral lists women accounted for 45% of candidates. Also the Liberty Union declared provision of an equal status and equal opportunities for women as one of its pivotal political goals. During the previous term of the Sejm this party put forth a proposal to include a provision in the electoral law to guarantee a 30% proportion of women on electoral lists. (Other political parties, namely the Polish Peoples Party, the League of Polish Families and Law and Justice have opposed any instruments increasing women's participation in public life, such as parities, quotas, a principle of alternative inclusion of names and so on).

Among political parties that took part in parliamentary elections in September 2001 only three SLD, the Labour Union and the Liberty Union¹² applied a quota instrument while preparing their electoral lists, obliging to include not less than 30% women on their lists of candidates to the Sejm. However, the way the provision was carried out could raise objections as, for example, on the SLD lists women accounted for just 17% of candidates placed in positions 1 to 5, while in the Liberty Union the same percentage was 21%. This way, in practice female candidates occupied rather bottom than top places on the lists.

An analysis of lists of candidates and an outcome of the elections suggest that persons given top positions on lists, especially from number one to three, usually have much bigger chance to be elected. This was confirmed by the fact that 48.3% of women were elected were those inscribed on one of the first three places on the lists.

¹² However, the Liberty Union failed to score a required number of votes in parliamentary elections (5%) so it did not enter the parliament.

It should also be underlined that lists of candidates of various parties differed significantly one from another, both in terms of a number of women thereon and of places they were inscribed in. This, as argued above, is of key importance from the point of view of a chance to achieve a sufficient number of votes and be elected to the parliament. The group of parties less interested in the women opportunities issue (*i.e.* those which admitted as little as 15-20% of women to their electoral lists) included the Law and Justice, Polish Peoples Party, the Citizen Platform and, in particular, “Solidarność” – the Right Wing Electoral Action (AWSP) and German Minority (each of them – even less than 15%).

One should not overlook methods of candidates selection. In most cases decentralised system prevailed and bodies recommending candidates were mainly masculine – the factor that certainly decreased chances of women, considering mostly informal and blurred selection criteria.

It has to be observed, nevertheless, that recent years brought an improvement in social acceptance for women in roles of politicians in Poland, although politics has still been seen as an area of masculine rather than feminine activity.

Among factors to have contributed to growing awareness on the part of political elite, of the need of better female representation in politics, growing activity of different kinds of feminine movements and groups operating within political parties and non-governmental organisations was most important. Acting against a lack of any positive impulse or even against resistance of a major part of Polish political elite regarding provision of equal opportunities for women and men in public life, activities of such movements have vastly contributed to initiation of different campaigns and actions for promotion of greater political activity of women. They have held a number of actions and initiatives such as the Pre-Electoral Coalition of Women organised on a considerable scale both before parliamentary elections in September 2001 and elections to local governments in October 2002, which disseminated ideas of equal status of sexes among politicians and society in general and monitored activities of political parties in terms of representation and satisfaction of women’s interests. It should be underlined that the Pre-Electoral Coalition of Women, acting as an open agreement of feminine organisations and circles, was joined by as many as 50 entities.

An important women’s initiative reaching over the level of particular parties took form of a joint action called “Women as candidates, women as voters” aiming at convincing the electorate to vote for female candidates and to increase electoral attendance of female voters. Female participants of the initiative proclaimed a declaration of ten reasons to vote for women and adopted the principle of not turning against each other during pre-electoral campaigns.

Thanks to involvement of female organisations the institution of the government representative for equal status of women and men¹³ was established in December 2001. The representative has operated directly at the Council of Ministers, enjoying the position of Secretary of State (although appointed basing on a regulation rather than of an Act). The scope of responsibilities of the representative includes, among other things, analysing and evaluating government documents in terms of respecting the principle of equal treatment of women and men therein, supporting non-governmental organisations active in this area and encouraging them to co-operate with the State administration. Additionally, the representative co-operates with persons on positions equivalent to hers in other countries. (However, she hasn't got the right of legislative initiative.)

Non less remarkable are efforts undertaken by the Parliamentary Group of Women (PGK) established in 1990 and forming a lobby of female deputies to the parliament acting over the parties' level. The fundamental objective behind the PGK's activity has been to initiate and monitor projects for achieving equal status of women and men, public education on subjects of rights of women and equal status for both sexes as well as co-operation with female organisations acting for the sake of women and equal opportunities for both sexes in Poland. The group, among its other achievements, initiated a Sejm debate about a draft Act on equal status of women and men several times and twice put forth a proposal to appoint, in the Sejm, a standing Commission for Equal Status of Women and Men. However, despite so much involvement, both attempts to pass a "parity" Act in Poland and to appoint the above-mentioned commission in the Sejm proved unsuccessful.

The first draft of such an Act was modelled upon Norwegian legislation and included, *inter alia*, a proposal to establish an independent, separate State body to take care for having the Act passes and implemented and for proper application of procedures of equal rights. The authors of the Act also proposed to provide for a 40% share of representatives of either sex in bodies established, appointed or elected by public authorities. At present a subsequent, third draft of the "parity" Act has been under debate in the Sejm. The Act is expected to ensure respecting equality of women and men in all aspects of social, economic and political life. The draft assumes, among other things, that by the end of 2003

¹³ The Office of a Representative for Women was established in Poland as early as second half of the Eighties. Since that time both its position within the government, and the scope of competence (as well as the name) underwent changes in which a trend could be observed to gradual limitation of institutional possibilities of defending women's rights. An intent to bring down an importance of problems of women was clearly revealed in changes of the office name. Subsequent names were as follows: The Office of a Representative for: "Women", "Women, Family and Youth", "Women and Family", "Family".

either sex is going to get no less than 30% places on electoral lists and that after 1 January 2004 the level will be raised to at least 40% and finally, after 1 January 2012, to 50%. In the case of direct elections names of candidates of different sexes should be placed on electoral lists in an alternative order. Monitoring over the Act implementation should be provided by an Office for Equal Status of Women and Men having its representations in provinces.

The idea to appoint the Sejm Commission for Equal Status of Women and Men was rejected twice, in 1999 and in 2000. Also an attempt to amend the electoral law proved unsuccessful – in 2001 the Sejm rejected a draft amendment that included a provision regarding introduction of 30% share of representatives of either sex on electoral lists.

3. Situation in Poland in the context of the accession to the EU

While studying the problems in consideration here one should take into account that there have been countries in the world in which participation of women in political authorities has been much more adequate to composition of their societies and Poland should aspire to match such best-practice examples. This mainly related to solutions adopted in the EU Member States in which a well-developed system of both legal and institutional mechanisms preventing discriminatory practices operates in all fields of life, including political life.

This is the more important for our country that, while seeking membership in the European Union, we have to adapt our legislation to its requirements, in any area including the one in question. Among the applicant countries Poland has been relatively often admonished by the EU party for insufficient efforts in the field of introduction of mechanisms equalling opportunities between women and men. For example, the European Commission stresses our obligation to provide appropriate administrative structures and to raise our ability to effectively discharge our obligations related to the requirement of ensuring sex parity.¹⁴

Poland has still fallen much behind most European Union Member States in terms of promotion of balanced participation of women and men in all areas of life. This situation persists despite international obligations Polish government has taken. One of the most important documents in this area is the so-called Peking Declaration and the Platform for Action adopted after the 4th Global United Nations Conference on Women' Affairs in Peking in 1995. Poland ratified both documents and on their basis National Programme for Government Action for Women was developed, whose 2nd implementing stage for the years

¹⁴ See: *Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in the European Union. Annual Report 2000*, European Commission 2001, COM(2001) 179 final, in particular p.23-30.

2003-2005 has been at present the principal strategy aiming at provision of sex parity in all areas of social life.¹⁵ The Programme provides, *inter alia*, for: appointment of Province Representatives for Equal Status of Women and Men as institutions implementing the Programme tasks on regional level. (In 2003 such Representatives were in fact appointed in four provinces: lubelskie, śląskie, dolnośląskie and opolskie.)

Before official accession to the European Union Poland has been obliged to adapt its law to the EU requirements also in the area of sex parity, out of which an urgent need arises of consolidation and improved co-ordination between efforts on the part of government and all initiatives from non-governmental organisations. Adoption of a new, amended labour code which has been in force since 1 January 2002, has been one of manifestations of efforts undertaken in that area. In that Act the whole chapter deals with equal treatment of women and men in labour market. This means that thanks to amendments in labour legislation the EU directives regarding equality of right of employees were effectively implemented to Polish legislation. While such efforts have contributed to improvement of situation of women in the area of public life, they mainly relate to the field of employment, so the field of political activity has still been underdeveloped in this respect.

Nor does comparison of women's representation in political decision-making structures in Poland with those in other applicant countries bound to join the European Union in May 2004 prompt one to much optimism (see: table 3). It may be observed while comparing compositions of delegations sent from the EU applicant countries to represent them in the European Convention that Poland (along with Slovakia and Cyprus) ranked at the same place, with identical percentage of 33.3% (that is one women in three persons) and in all those cases what was more than in national legislature.

¹⁵ See: *Krajowy Program Działań na Rzecz Kobiet – II etap wdrożeniowy na lata 2003-2005 (National Programme of Action for Women – 2nd Stage of Implementation for years 2003-2005)*, The Government Representative for an Equal Status of Women and Men, the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Warsaw 2003.

Table 3. Representation of women in the European Convention and their participation in central level legislative authorities in the EU applicant countries (2003, percentage)

Applicant country	Percentage of women in the European Convention**	Percentage of women in national parliament	
		Lower chamber	Upper chamber
Latvia	66.6	21.0	*
Poland	33.3	20.2	23.0
Slovakia	33.3	19.3	*
Estonia	0	18.8	*
Czech Republic	0	17.0	12.3
Slovenia	0	12.2	*
Cyprus	33.3	10.7	*
Lithuania	0	10.6	*
Hungary	0	9.8	*
Malta	0	7.7	*
Total	16.6	14.7	

* No upper chamber.

** Data regarding women's representation in the Convention (February 2003) relates to the chief composition, excluding deputy-members.

Source: the Author's own data composition basing on: M.León, M.Mateo Diaz, S.Millns, *Engendering the Convention: Women and the Future of the European Union*, European University Institute, Florence 2003 (data regarding women in the European Convention) and on: *Women in Parliaments: World Classification*, Inter-Parliamentary Union (data regarding women in parliaments).

In a similar way, in national parliaments of the EU applicant countries Polish percentage of female deputies has been remarkable and at such background our country ranks quite right. On the other hand, we have still been far behind Sweden where women account for 45.3% of the parliament deputies.¹⁶ Polish efforts should nevertheless be compared to achievements of the present EU Fifteen where the need to undertake intensive efforts to prevent unequal status of sexes in the applicant countries is announced.

¹⁶ *Women in Parliaments: World Classification*, Inter-Parliamentary Union, August 2003, (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>).

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