



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**Women in political
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Women's political representation in Poland

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1. Introduction and relevant country context

1.1. Electoral system in Poland

The electoral system in Poland differs across different types of elections. Elections to the Sejm, i.e. the lower chamber of the parliament, are universal, equal, direct and proportional (Article 96(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland). Elections to the Senate, which was re-established in Poland after the fall of communism in 1989, are universal and direct (Article 97(2)). There are 41 constituencies (electoral districts) in the Sejm elections, with each constituency electing between 7 and 20 representatives. The minimum thresholds are quite high: 5% for political parties and 8% for electoral coalitions. The D'Hont method is used to convert the number of votes into the number of seats in the Sejm. Before the Constitution was adopted in 1997, the choice between a proportional system and a majority system was subject to much debate. In result, the elections to the Sejm and to the European Parliament are based on a proportional system, and to the Senate – on a majority system. After 2007, the majority approach gained popularity among politicians and its application was extended to other elections too. Local elections, with the exception of the tiniest communes with fewer than 20 00 residents, followed a proportional approach until 2014, when single-seat constituencies and the majority principle were introduced across the lowest levels (commune councils), with the proportional system still being used for the higher-level councils.

2. Women's participation in power

2.1. Women's participation in the Sejm and Senate

Women's suffrage in Poland dates back to 1918. However, women's participation in the parliament before World War II was minimal, approx. 2% in total. Women MPs at the time were highly educated; with the exception of one female MP representing the worker's party, they were all university graduates, and a majority of them held doctorates. Their political background varied, but they worked together despite their political differences on selected issues such as removing the legal inequalities between genders and combating alcoholism.

After World War II, the Senate was abolished in Poland, leaving only the lower parliamentary chamber, the Sejm. Despite the official rhetoric of equality, the participation of women in the Sejm was never high. No quota system was ever established. The ruling party and its satellite parties named only as many candidates as there were seats to fill. Thus it was the decision of the political parties how many women would sit in the Sejm, and the voters had no impact at all.

Table 1. Participation of women in the Sejm after World War II

Term of office	Percentage of women among MPs
1952 - 1956	17
1956 - 1961	4
1961 - 1965	13
1965 - 1969	12
1969 - 1972	13
1972 - 1976	16
1976 - 1980	21
1980 - 1985	23
1985 - 1989	20

In this period, the female MPs in Poland – in contrast to the pre-war period – were less well educated than their male counterparts. They were more likely, compared to the male MPs, to hold no political party membership. Typically, their background was in the more feminized sectors of the economy, which were considered of lesser importance (e.g. light industry, education).

In a turn of events that was typical for all post-communist countries, the proportion of women in the Sejm after the transformation decreased. This trend had been observable in Poland in the earlier periods as well: whenever it appeared that the parliament might regain real power, the proportion of women went down. In 1956, during the so-called 'political thaw', the proportion of women fell to 4%. In late 1970s, there was slow but continued rise, but after the political transformation, when the parliament became the actual legislator, its membership took a strong turn towards the prevalence of men.

Table 2. Participation of women in the Sejm after 1989

Term of office	Percentage of women among MPs
1989 - 1991	13
1991 - 1993	10
1993 - 1997	13
1997 - 2001	13
2001 - 2005	20
2005 - 2007	20

2007 - 2011	20
2011 - 2015	24
2015 -	27

Whenever the proportion of women rose, it was caused by the introduction of a specific measure designed to promote this effect. The quota system for instance was introduced in 2011 as a generally binding principle. In consequence, the proportion of women on candidate lists rose by more than 200%. In the last election, the proportion of women on candidate lists was almost equal to that of men. At the same time, the proportion of women MPs has also been rising steadily, although the pace of this change is much slower.

In 1989, the Senate was re-established in Poland. The proportion of women in the Senate is lower than in the Sejm. The electoral system for the Senate is different and follows the majority approach. In many constituencies, the political parties enter no women at all on their candidate lists. In the last election, this occurred in 57 out of 100 constituencies. Thus the senators from those constituencies are male, because there are no female contenders. Only in one constituency was the situation reversed, i.e. all candidates were female. Overall in the last election, the proportion of men on the candidate lists was very high at 86%. In consequence, the prevalence of men among senators persists.

Table 3. Participation of women in the Senate

Term of office	Percentage of women among senators
1989 - 1991	6
1991 - 1993	8
1993 - 1997	13
1997 - 2001	12
2001 - 2005	23
2005 - 2007	14
2007 - 2011	8
2011 - 2015	13
2015 -	13

Clearly, Poland is yet another example of a country where a proportional electoral system and an introduction of candidate quotas prove conducive to an increase in the proportion of women in the legislature.

2.2. Women's participation in local authorities

Women's participation in local authorities is lower than their participation in the Sejm. Nonetheless, it increased from 16% in 1998 to 23% in 2014. The introduction of quotas on candidate lists led to a rapid rise in the number of female candidates to the local authorities (from 31% in 2010 to 45% in 2014). Yet this number failed to translate into an increase in the proportion of women holding local council seats, which holds steady at 23%. This absence of an increase has been contributed to that fact that the parties which were most successful in the election (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) are not friendly to women. Female candidates of these parties are placed at positions far down their lists, and other tactics are also employed to ensure that the seats go to male candidates. However, the number of administrative districts (voivodeships) with very few women serving on the elected bodies is on the decrease. In 2010 there were 3 local voivodeship parliaments with fewer than 15% of women. After the 2014 election, there is only one voivodeship where the proportion is this low. Like in many other countries, few mayors are women; out of 107 mayors of large cities, only 10 are female.

2.3. Women's participation in the government

For many years, Polish governments included either no woman at all, or one woman at the position of minister. For instance, in 1995 – even though the government had been formed by a left wing party with a strong rhetoric of equality – only one woman was a minister. The same situation occurred in 2004. The proportion rose in later years. In 2013, there were 4 female ministers (20%). Before the elections in 2015, when the Prime Minister was a woman, there were 6 female ministers (32%), each of whom headed her own department. Women's presence in politics became a politically significant issue when the debate on quotas was launched and grassroots women's movement gained momentum. In consequence, in the electoral campaign in 2015, almost all previously existing important political organizations were headed by women. Prime Minister (pre-election) Ewa Kopacz was the leader of Platforma Obywatelska, Prime Minister (post-election) Beata Szydło – of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Barbara Nowacka – of Zjednoczona Lewica. The campaign manager of Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe was Andżelika Możdżanowska. The support for women in the election was very high, with Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz gaining the greatest support overall. The position of Prime Minister was held by a woman (Ewa Kopacz) before the election and went to a woman (Beata Szydło) after the election. Currently the Council of Ministers includes 6 women. Beside the Prime Minister, there are 5 other women holding ministerial positions (25% of the government), but only 4 of them head their own departments.

3. Barriers to equal participation of women and men in power

In Poland, like in many other countries, it has been argued that the key reason for women's lower participation in power compared to men is that women carry a greater burden of work at home. This is noted by respondents in public opinion polls and also openly admitted by politicians of both genders. However, the proportion of respondents indicating this reason is on the decline: in 1997 it was 71% while at present it is 59%. Also on the decline is the proportion of respondents

indicating psychological reasons, such as women's alleged lesser interest in politics or smaller self-confidence. On the other hand, today the respondents (female respondents in particular) tend to indicate other reasons, such as the domination of men in the political sphere and therefore, women's smaller chances of a career in politics. While women point to this reason quite often (47%), men do so less frequently (39%).

4. The role of women's movement in securing suffrage and implementing quotas

Women's movement was of paramount importance in Poland in securing suffrage for women and in ensuring that quotas on candidate lists are implemented. At the turn of the 19th century, women organized women's conventions to work towards achieving equal electoral rights. The wording articulated at these conventions (electoral rights for everyone "regardless of their gender", in Polish: „bez różnicy płci”) was included in the electoral statute of 1918 and then repeated in the constitutions of 1921 and 1936. Without the lobbying and pressure from women, suffrage would remain a male right only after Poland regained its independence in 1918.

Women's movement was also the driving force behind the introduction of quotas. In 2009, the first Women's Congress was held. It was (and continues to be) a grassroots initiative of women from a very broad range of backgrounds, operating in the formula of a new social movement. It brings together businesswomen, academics, artists, activists, journalists, as well as stay-at-home women. The movement is active. Every year, it develops a set of proposals and demands for the government. The key demand of the first Women's Congress in 2009 was the introduction of quotas on candidate lists. While a full gender parity requirement (50%/50%) proved impossible to achieve, a minimum requirement of 35% of candidates of each gender was introduced. Proposals to also introduce the zipper mechanism on candidate lists were also drafted, but the efforts to have them implemented were unsuccessful.

5. Transferability aspects. Conclusions and recommendations

In the debate on the introduction of quotas, examples were used very often of other countries where this mechanism had been implemented successfully to ensure equal opportunities for men and women. While quotas have been implemented in Poland, the zipper principle has not, which has a dampening effect on the electability of women whose names are often placed far down the list. Thus the zipper principle would be a welcome mechanism. However, there is a strong resistance to this option within political parties.

Research also suggests that a lot of inequality occurs during electoral campaigns, including what is presented on television and how television air time is divided. It would therefore be necessary to start monitoring the situation and to introduce an obligation to offer men and women the same amount of time (within the band of time offered to candidates overall free of charge). Moreover, political parties themselves

should be more actively involved in the efforts to offer men and women equal opportunities during elections. This can be ensured by having men and women participate equally in campaigns, dividing campaign funds equally, and placing the names of female and male candidates in equal proportion on the electable positions on the lists. Analyses also suggest that a proportional electoral system is more conducive to promoting equal opportunity. Therefore, a re-introduction of the proportional system in local elections, and its introduction in the Senate elections, would likely contribute to ensuring that the opportunities for men and women in politics are more equal.

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