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**Women in political
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Women's representation in politics in Finland

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1. Introduction and relevant country context

1.1. Current situation

Women's representation in political decision-making in Finland is fairly established. Being a woman is not considered an obstacle for political career, and young women in particular have recently gained many significant positions of power in politics (Niemi, 2014). In the past few years, however, Finland has witnessed a re-masculinisation of politics.

Women's share in the parliament has been over 40 % since 2007 and over 30 % since 1983 (Nordic Council of Ministers 2009: 76). In the 2011 parliamentary elections women's representation reached a new record, 42.5 %. However, in the parliamentary elections of 2015, women's representation decreased to 41.5 %. Women's representation among candidates in parliamentary elections has increased slowly but consistently, and in 2015 it reached 39.4 %. (Statistics Finland 2016, 106.) Geography and political party matter for women's representation: left wing parties and the greens have higher shares of women among candidates and representatives, and women are more likely to be elected in Southern Finland and in cities.

The steady progress toward gender balance in local elections stopped in 2012, when 38.3 % of candidates and 36.2 % of the elected were women, both less than in 2008 (Statistics Finland 2016, 113). The reforms in the municipality structure and the move towards bigger municipalities have been identified as one factor behind women's decreased representations (Pikkala 2011).

Despite relatively high representation in elected bodies, women have had difficulties to ensure the most powerful political positions, and the gains made have not been permanent.

At the local level, the 40% gender quota for public administration bodies, included in the Act on Equality between Women and Men in 1995, has led to gender balance in municipal governments and committees. However, women are still under-represented in the highest positions of local decision-making, where the quota provision does not apply, for example, among the chairs of municipal councils (28 %) and governments (26,3 %) and among mayors (17,6 %) (Statistics Finland 2016, 114).

Although gender balance in the government has been an unwritten tradition since late 1990s and many recent governments have reached or been close to the 50/50 target, in the current right-wing government only 36 % of ministers are women.

During the first decade of the 2000s, women gained access to party leadership. In 2011 four main political parties had a female leader, but the situation worsened to

the point that in 2015 only one parliament party had a woman as its leader and one had a woman as the party secretary. Women have been elected as party leaders in particular in times of crisis, hinting that women are seen to symbolise change and improve the image of parties (Niemi, 2014).

Horizontal segregation between “hard” male fields and “soft” female fields remains a problem, even if there has been progress in the past years (Kuusipalo 2011). Although most important ministerial portfolios as well as the post of the Prime Minister are at the moment in the hands of men, a new milestone was achieved in 2012-2014, when a woman held the position of the finance minister for the first time. The post of Prime Minister was held by a woman for the second time in 2011-2012. Horizontal segregation is visible also in parliamentary committees. Committees of social affairs and health, education and culture have female majority, whereas among others in the committees of agriculture, economy and future women’s representation was less than 25 % (Statistics Finland 2016, 109.)

1.2. Contextual factors and policies

In Finland, women’s relatively high representation in elected bodies has been achieved without electoral gender quotas. Women’s high representation has been explained through structural factors (e.g. women’s high education and employment rate), cultural feature (e.g. social justice and equality as an important value), trust in the state, and features of political culture (e.g. the tradition of group representation) (Kuusipalo 2011, 30). Women’s section of political parties have played an important role in increasing women’s representation and breaking the masculine norms through setting up candidates, training women candidates and influencing political parties from within (Hart et al 2009, 72-73).

As for the recruitment of candidates, the threshold for being nominated is relatively low, and the recruitment system is open for new faces than for example in Germany or the UK (Kuusipalo 2011, 31). Most parties aim at gender-balanced electoral lists, and some have recommendations for at least 40 of women (Hart & al 2009, 73.) However some parties report having difficulties to recruit women, due to women’s time pressure related to reconciliation of work and family and women’s hesitancy to run for an office (TANE 2012).

The Finnish electoral system (proportional representation with mandatory preferential voting) means that voter behaviour is a key factor for achieving gender balance in elected bodies. Although men’s likelihood to vote for a male candidate has fallen considerably since the 1970s, it is still high (72 % in 2007) and higher than women’s likelihood to vote for a female candidate (53 %). Women’s voting turnout that has since the early 1990s been higher than that of men has balanced the situation (Holli & Wass 2009).

Since 1995 Finland has gender quota (at least 40 % of under-represented sex) for public administration preparatory and planning bodies. The law is applied to the committees and working groups of government administration and to municipal committees and municipal governments. The law has significantly increased women’s representation in decision-making bodies at the municipal level, but there are still problems in its implementation.

One policy that has contributed to women’s political representation is public financial support for women’s sections of political parties. All political parties represented in the parliament receive a public subsidy the amount of which is determined by the

number of seats the party holds in the parliament. According to the current law, 5 % of party subsidy has to be used for women-specific activities.

2. Policy debates

2.1. Re-masculinisation of politics

The decreasing representation of women in the latest parliament and municipal election as well as the disappearance of women from key positions in political parties has been seen as re-masculinisation of politics. The absence of women was particularly visible during and after the parliamentary elections of 2015: televised political debates between party leaders were in practices debates between men. Despite their balanced representation in the parliament, women were under-represented in the government negotiations, for example, the most important working group on fiscal and economic policy only three female members (out of 16). The leaders of the three government parties are all men.

The lack of women in government negotiations and at other key moments of political decision-making has been critically discussed in traditional media and visible in social media as well. The all-male-panel-phenomenon (the original tumblr-blog was developed by Finnish researcher Saara Särmä) has helped to bring the masculinisation of politics under public scrutiny, to the extent that it has become commonplace to speak – in social media, political commentary as well as in mainstream media – about the “all-male-panel of Finnish politics.”

2.2. Rise of right-wing populism and conservatism

The impact on the rise of populism on women’s slightly declining representation has not yet been properly researched, but statistics give some reason for concern. The populist party True Finns that gained in 2011 parliamentary elections 19.1 % of the vote (39 seats) and in 2015 17.7 % of the vote (38 seats) has lower representation of women among candidates (35.3 % in 2015) and the elected (32 %) than main political parties in average. The conservative Central Party that won the parliamentary elections in 2015 has an even low representation of women (29 %).

The rise of right-wing populism and conservatism has led to a political climate that is hostile to gender equality. Misogyny and anti-feminism are increasing in general but also in politics. For example, the Foreign Minister (the Finns) has publicly spoken about “straightjacket feminism” and the party secretary of the Finns has declared herself as chauvinist. At the same time, the current right-conservative government’s austerity policies and family policies are turning back progress on gender equality.

Although women’s representation among the parliamentarians of the right-wing and conservative parties is close to the critical mass of 30 % or even over, women’s representation has not made the policies of these parties more friendly to gender equality. On the one hand, in the current political climate progressive female politicians are not able to bring gender issues on the political agenda. On the other hand, many women in the right-wing and conservative political parties share their non-progressive views.

2.3. New regional elected bodies

In 2019 new regional elected bodies will be established. There will be 18 regions with their own elected bodies. The regional governing bodies have significant responsibilities, because regions will be responsible over organising social and health care services, which until now have been the responsibility of municipalities. The regions will have more power and tasks than regions in most Nordic or European non-federal countries. The first elections will take place in January 2018. Securing women's representation / gender balance in the new elected bodies has not yet been discussed.

2.4. Debate on closed lists

In Finland there has regularly been debate about the introduction of closed party lists, where party determines the order of candidates and citizens vote for the party. The latest debate took place early 2016, when the government asked party secretaries to review the electoral system. The reason for the review was the creation of the above mentioned regional bodies. One of the issues party secretaries were asked to discuss was the possibility to introduce closed lists for the new regional elections as well as for other elections. Party secretaries rejected the idea of closed lists. Also MPs have regularly opposed closed lists.

3. Transferability aspects

Legislative gender quotas are often seen as a fast track option for countries with a low representation of women, and this was the case with both Slovenia and France when quotas were introduced. In contrast, in Finland women's representation is among the highest in Europe (41.5 % in the parliament and almost 38 % in municipal councils). As a fair gender balance has already been achieved, introducing electoral gender quotas is not needed to the same extent, and it is unlikely that electoral quotas would catch wind.

A key obstacle for implementing electoral gender quotas in Finland is that the electoral system based on preferential voting. In this system it would not be possible to implement quotas in an effective manner. Even if electoral lists would have equal numbers of women and men, voters would still determine who gets elected.

As women already constitute almost 40 % of candidates in municipal and parliamentary elections, gender quotas for electoral lists would not significantly improve the situation. However, as the number of women elected in Finland has until now grown hand in hand with the number of women candidates, quotas that require that the sexes are equally represented among the candidates (50/50) might push the number of elected women up slightly. Quotas could also be a means to ensure that each political party recruits women candidates, as at the moment the number of women candidates in some parties is lower than in others. One should consider, however, that in some political parties women already constitute the majority of candidates and that a 50/50 rule would in these cases decrease, not increase women's representation on electoral lists.

The main problems in women's political representation in Finland lay elsewhere than in their representation in elected bodies (e.g. horizontal segregation, women not gaining power positions in government, within parties and in parliamentary

committees). Other policies and practices than electoral quotas are needed to tackle these problems.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The Finnish situation shows that it is possible to achieve gender balance without gender quotas. However, the specific conditions that in Finland helped to achieve women's high representation in elected bodies cannot easily be replicated, and quotas remain the best fast-track option for countries wishing to increase women's political representation.

The situation in Finland also reveals that even after women's representation has increased to 40 %, political decision-making may remain masculinised, and that setbacks are always possible. Achieving the "critical mass" of women has not been enough to change the masculinised culture and practices of politics.

It is therefore important to complement efforts to increase women's representation in elected bodies with policies and initiatives that aim at changing the culture and practices of political institutions such as parliaments and political parties. Quotas for parliamentary committees, similar to those that in Finland have been used for state and municipal committees, could be considered. Gender equality planning in parliaments and political parties could be used as a means to undo masculine norms that curtail women's opportunities to influence.

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