



**Political Science  
Doctoral Program**

## **SUMMARY**

**Adrienn Vajda**

**Is it possible to represent women without women?**

**The appearance of women's issues in the Hungarian National Assembly  
(1998–2014)**

Ph.D. dissertation

**Supervisor:**

**Réka Várnagy, Ph.D.**

Budapest, 2019



**Institute of Political Science  
Corvinus University of Budapest**

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## Table of contents

I.	The subject of the dissertation .....	4
II.	Method .....	7
III.	Main findings .....	12
III.1.	Bills related to women's issues .....	12
III.2.	Women's interests in interpellations and parliamentary questions .....	13
III.3.	Conclusions .....	15
IV.	Reference list.....	18
V.	The author's publications related to the subject.....	20

## List of tables and figures

1. Table:	Number of bills debated in the parliament (1998–2014) .....	7
2. Table:	Number of examined interpellations and parliamentary questions (1998–2014) ...	8
1. Figure:	Distribution of subjects of women-related interpellations and parliamentary questions (1998–2014) .....	14
2. Figure:	Parliamentary parties' position on the post-materialist – traditional scale (2002, 2006, 2010) .....	16

## **I. The subject of the dissertation**

Nowadays studying women's representation is very widespread because women are in most cases underrepresented in decision-making positions although more than half of the population is made up of women. For the majority of public policy, gender perspectives may be relevant to the content. That is the reason why gender equality and women's empowerment are relevant today. Various international organizations attempt to address women's underrepresentation by gender mainstreaming (whose goal is to involve gender perspective into the whole decision-making process and to promote equality between women and men) and by formulating directives aimed at increasing women's parliamentary representation. The main argument against male dominated parliaments is the lack of gendered perspectives in the decision-making process which results in representation deficit in the parliaments because women are not present (Ayata and Tütüncü 2008, 461; Lindgren et al. 2009, 33; Phillips 1995). The core questions in recent gender literature is what the reason behind women's underrepresentation is and how is it possible to change this. The other focus of researches related to women's representation is the study of effects of women's presence in parliament which is usually studied in case there is an increase in the number of women elected. Studies on women's current representation beyond the number of female representatives are quite rare, so there are hardly any studies which focus on the women's substantive representation when the share of women in the parliament is low. Although the question can be asked as: does the lack of the presence of women mean the lack of the representation of women's interests? This question was the basis of my dissertation in which I examined the appearance of women's interests and issues in the Hungarian National Assembly where women's share in the parliament is notoriously low since the democratic transition (approximately 10 percent). Even in the case of Hungary it is relevant to observe women's substantive representation as a democratic parliament has to deal with policies (mostly) related to women. The focus is shifted from women's presence (descriptive/numerical representation) to the content i.e. when the representatives act for and in the interests of women (substantive representation).

In gender literature a critical question is how the presence of women shapes the decision-making process (does the presence of women in elected political bodies cause any change in politics?) and how are women' descriptive and substantive representation connected to each other. Reviewing the literature, the link between these two types of representation is not clear as shown by the two relating theories: critical mass theory and the theory of critical actor.

According to the theory of critical mass women's descriptive representation is a precondition of women's substantive representation. – This theory stems from Kanter (1977) who examined women's minority positions in large American corporations. Dahlerup (1988) extends this approach to politics. – The relevant studies identified 15–30 percent share of women as a crucial cut-off point which may induce change in politics where women may have effect on decision-making processes. However, this proportion of women is only a necessary but not sufficient condition for the change in politics. The critical mass theory was not verified by many cases studies. Generally, the main reason behind the lack of critical act is that the increasing number of women in parliament takes effect not toward collective action but individualisation (Studlar and McAllister 2002). According to the theory of critical actor the presence of women is not a precondition of women's substantive representation as political entrepreneurs committed to women's issues with high levels of identification are more important actors and interestingly are not exclusively female politicians (Childs and Krook 2006; 2008; 2009; Celis et al. 2008). Representatives of women's interest can be both female and male politicians or both left-wing and right-wing parties – recent studies proved that not only women, feminist and left-wing parties declare to promote women's interests in parliament, but also right-wing parties make the claim to represent women's interests (Erzeel and Celis 2016, 576). In case of this latter approach the focus is on the individual representatives instead of the group of women because the emphasis is not on how women (as a group) act in the parliament but rather on how individual woman/man as a critical actor act for women. In my dissertation my main assumption was based on this latter theory, so I did not limit the circle of potential critical actors to female and left-wing parties' representatives. Furthermore, the theory of critical actor would suit more the Hungarian case because of the low level of representation of women in the parliament.

My dissertation about women's substantive representation is novel in the Hungarian case because previous studies focused mostly on women's descriptive representation and the reasons behind their underrepresentation. So, there are quite few researches about substantive representation. I examined four parliamentary terms between 1998–2014 with the focus on appearance of women's issues in the Hungarian parliament. The main research question was *how and by whom are women's issues represented in the Hungarian National Assembly?* To answer the question, it is important to clear what “women's issues” are. The problem is about the meaning of “women's issues” and/or “women's interests” because the literature has not provided exact definition for none of them. Although there are certain life experiences that are partly shared by most of women (e.g. child rearing, education, employment, gender pay-gap,

etc.), attitudes of each women towards these can be different, so it is unrealistic to assume that all women or even the majority of them hold the same issue position. As women create a heterogenous group, we cannot assume that they have common interests which makes it nearly impossible to create a homogenous definition for women's interests. In the literature there is a wide range of definition for women's interest depending on its emphasized element, for example the women's traditional role (in the family), the change of women's role or the guidelines of feminist movements. Some researchers define women's issues as policies having a more immediate and direct impact mostly on women than men (Carroll 1994, 15); or policies which mainly effect women for biological reasons (e.g. breast cancer screening and reproductive rights) or for social reasons (e.g. child rearing) (Lovenduski 2001, 745). When certain issues (for example child rearing, education, reproductive rights) are determined as sole women's issues, the assumption is that women (because they are women) have the same position on these questions. But it means that some groups of women are excluded from these spheres of representation while this assumption also ignores the fact that the sex of the representatives not an exclusive category (Bjarngård and Murray 2015, 3). As women are present in all politically relevant demographic group, in case of women's interests there are some cross-cutting cleavages (Beckwith 2014, 25). Therefore, studying substantive representation, a core question is: which group of women or rather which set of perceived women's interests representatives act for? It is important to note that women's interests are partly socially constructed, changing from time to time and as well as from space to space thus they are rather bound in time and space. Hence, in my dissertation I tried to provide a country specific definition of women's issues.

In the framework of my empirical research I focused on four parliamentary terms and I analysed bills debated by the parliament, interpellations and parliamentary (written and oral) questions to observe the representational claim of the governing and of the opposition parties with special attention to their claims to represent women. The dissertation also builds on a qualitative research including four case studies (one of them being a comparative study), which analyse policy debates in and outside of parliaments focusing on bills that are often related to gendered interests in the literature. Based on these quantitative and qualitative findings, I aimed at answering the dissertation's question whether it is possible to represent women without women.



## II. Method

In the dissertation I applied quantitative and qualitative research approaches as well. First, I analysed bills, interpellations and parliamentary questions with statistical methods. Due to the high number of submitted bills I focused only on bills that were on the parliamentary agenda and thus were debated on the parliamentary floor. I analysed the arguments of these bills to get to know the representational claim of the initiator, which were in most cases the governing parties (most of the bills debated by the parliament is submitted by the government or representatives from the governing parties). In case of interpellations and parliamentary questions especially but not exclusively the oppositional parties' claim can be identified. The analysis included all the bills debated by the parliament and oral questions in every examined parliamentary term and I used a sample of interpellations and written questions because of their big amount. In both cases the sample contains submissions from the second year of the given parliamentary term.

*1. Table: Number of bills debated in the parliament (1998–2014)*

<b>Parliamentary term</b>	<b>Number of all submitted bill</b>	<b>Number of bills debated in the parliament</b>
1998–2002	858	478
2002–2006	968	588
2006–2010	967	616
2010–2014	1 521	860

*Source of data: [www.parliament.hu](http://www.parliament.hu)*

2. Table: Number of examined interpellations and parliamentary questions (1998–2014)

Parliamentary term*	Number of oral parliamentary questions		Number of interpellations		Number of written parliamentary questions	
	All	Examined**	All	Examined**	All	Answered**
1998–2002 (1999)	508	404	346	243	252	250
2002–2006 (2003)	1653	807	883	236	4180	4148
2006–2010 (2007)	1057	729	523	224	1196	1187
2010–2014 (2011)	1307	869	446	263	1694	1681

\* The examined year in case of interpellations and written parliamentary questions are shown in brackets.

\*\* Without withdrawn and refused interpellations and parliamentary questions.

Source of data: [www.parliament.hu](http://www.parliament.hu)

Considering the characteristics of Hungary (e.g. culture, history) I provided a possible list of women's issues which I used in the research such as issues connecting to women's traditional role in the family and women's equality:

- family policy, measures promoting child birth, for example prenatal care, subsidies for families (birth grant, child care fee, child care allowance etc. because mostly women utilize these supports), family planning, recognising mothers raising children as a full-time job;
- women's right to self-determination, abortion, promotion of contraceptives;
- measures supporting work-life balance (for example family-friendly workplaces, promoting part-time jobs and atypical forms of employment for increasing the number of child birth);
- Hungarian District Nurse Service;
- old-age pension for women with 40 years of eligibility period;
- gynaecological issues (for example routine gynaecological examination, breast screening for cancer, HPV vaccine, etc.);

- women's equality (political, economic equality, gender pay-gap, gender quota, etc.);
- domestic violence, violence against women;
- prostitution.

Apart from these issues I examined whether MPs attempt to define other issues as women-related issues and interest in the arguments of bills, in parliamentary questions or in interpellations. So, I focused on cases when an MP says a given proposal is in the interests of women (or of any subgroups of women, e.g. mothers) or the MP says, "this is important for women".

I classified the relevant (i.e. women-related) topics of the interpellations and parliamentary questions into four groups. According to Celis and Childs (2012) typology I defined feminist issues as women's equality, domestic violence, right to self-determination etc. The second category was issues related to women's traditional role in the family. The following is an intermediate category between the feminist issues and family-centred issues, that is work-life balance, motherhood and work. Every other issue was listed in the fourth "other" category (for example women-related health issues or pension).

To identify women's issues, I used additional sources: political parties' electoral program, database of the Hungarian Comparative Agendas Project (CAP, Boda and Sebök 2018), database of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey.

- I analysed the political parties' electoral program in each parliamentary term to decide whether they have programme related especially to women. The electoral programs may predict the government's representational claim. On the other hand, we know more about the opposition parties' claims as well: what kind of women-related issues do the opposition raise?
- I relied on databases (laws and interpellations) created within the framework of CAP research. In this research law and interpellations were classified according to their content. Although in these databases there was no "women-related public policy" category, I could check my classification according to the major- and subtopics and the descriptions. (Datasets of oral and written parliamentary questions has not finished yet.)

- As some studies have proved political parties' position on traditional – post-materialist scale gives more information about the party's willingness to substantive representation of women than the position on the basic left-right scale (Erzeel and Celis 2016). The higher is the party's post-materialist position the higher level of the substantive representation of women is expected. Therefore, I used the dataset of Chapel Hill Expert Survey which contains findings about the relevant political parties (Bakker et al. 2015) to define each party's political position. (In case of Hungary data are available from the year 2002.)

The dissertation contains four case studies examining whether those issues, which are women's issues according to the literature, are women-related issues in Hungary and the MPs deal with them as women's issues and tend to represent women's interest in the parliamentary debate. All the case studies are selected from the 2010–2014 parliamentary term, the method of the selection was the four most relevant aspects based on the literature:

- Most of the empirical studies about the substantive representation of women focuses on feminist issues which aim to improve women's status. The subject of the first case study is the proposal to classify domestic violence as a specific criminal offence (which has a gendered effect due to the fact that many of the victims are woman).
- In order to gain insight into the representation claim related to women's traditional role in the family, the second case focused on the debate of a bill related to child care allowance (in this case its extension to 3 years).
- In the third case the assumption was if the major disputants are women in a debate, the issue probably involves women's interest (Beckwith 2014, 26). So, I selected a bill based on the number of women participating in its parliamentary debate. Hence, the case study is about bill of the protection of family.
- The last case study is a comparative study which connects to feminist issues. The selected momentums are the amendment of Act LXXIX of 1992 on the Protection of Foetal Life (also known as abortion law) in 2000, and II. Article of the new constitution (Fundamental Law) of Hungary in 2011. (As II. Article

declares that *the foetus shall be protected from the moment of conception* this meant a potential threat to open the abortion issue again.) Both momentums represent an issue that belongs to the private sphere of women. Despite this similarity the cases differ in contents as one is a concrete amendment of a bill while the other is an article in the new constitution. The aim of this study is a diachronic comparison which makes the concept of substantive representation dynamic, connects it to the changing political environment, and thus possibly can identify the main causes that constrain democratic representation. The co-author of this study is Gabriella Ilonszki, Prof., in my dissertation I publish a modified version with her approval.

The case studies contain the proposal's parliamentary debate and its extra-parliamentary context as well. Reading through the debates I have classified the speeches of the participants into four categories identifying them as feminist claims, gender conscious claims, gender neutral claims and anti-feminist claims. This classification was created in cooperation with Prof. Ilonszki (Ilonszki and Vajda 2018, 2019). The feminist claims and gender conscious claims qualify for the substantive representation of women as they recognise women's special interests in this issue. The difference between these two types of representational claims is that gender conscious claims are aware of the importance of the given issues for women and the difficulties women have to face but they do not demand or put forward immediate solution or action, as feminist claims do. It means that arguments emphasizing women's traditional role are not anti-feminist but rather gender conscious argumentations (in most of the cases). The opposite of feminist and gender conscious claims is the antifeminist claim which openly reject the relevance of women's interests. Finally, gender neutral claims do not at all refer to gender aspects of the issue. Clearly, anti-feminist and gender-neutral claims cannot be regarded as ones that aim the representation of women.

### **III. Main findings**

#### *III.1. Bills related to women's issues*

The analysis of the bills makes it possible to know more about the government's "women-policy" because most of the proposal was submitted (in general and connecting to women's issues as well) by the government and by MPs from the governing parties. Based on the content analyses it can be stated that:

- although the parliament dealt with women-related issues in every parliamentary term, their share among proposals was low, around 2–3 percent (with no significant variation according to terms).
- The electoral programs of the governing parties predicted the content of the upcoming government's claim to represent women well enough: which group of women will support, the context of women's issues, etc.
- When right-wing parties were in power the government and MPs of the governing parties submitted bills related mostly to motherhood. When left-wing parties had majority in the parliament, their MPs (and the government) submitted women-related bills in connection with varied policies and there was no emphasis on certain policy fields or supported groups of women.
- Bills related to feminist issues were submitted mainly when left-wing parties were in majority in the parliament – but mainly because of the variety of subjects raised in these terms.

To sum up, there was no significant difference in the proportion of the debated bills between the parliamentary terms, but the women-related issues diverged. Although based on the literature left-wing parties are more likely to represent women's interest due to their egalitarian ideologies and to their connection to women's movements (Caul 1999; Celis and Erzeel 2015), the Hungarian case did not verify this assumption. Contrast with the literature (Grey 2006) gender equality policies did not appear more when left-wing parties had majority in the parliament and were in power. Submission of bills related to feminist issues (e.g. gender equality, domestic violence) was not consistent. As I expected the right-wing parties had

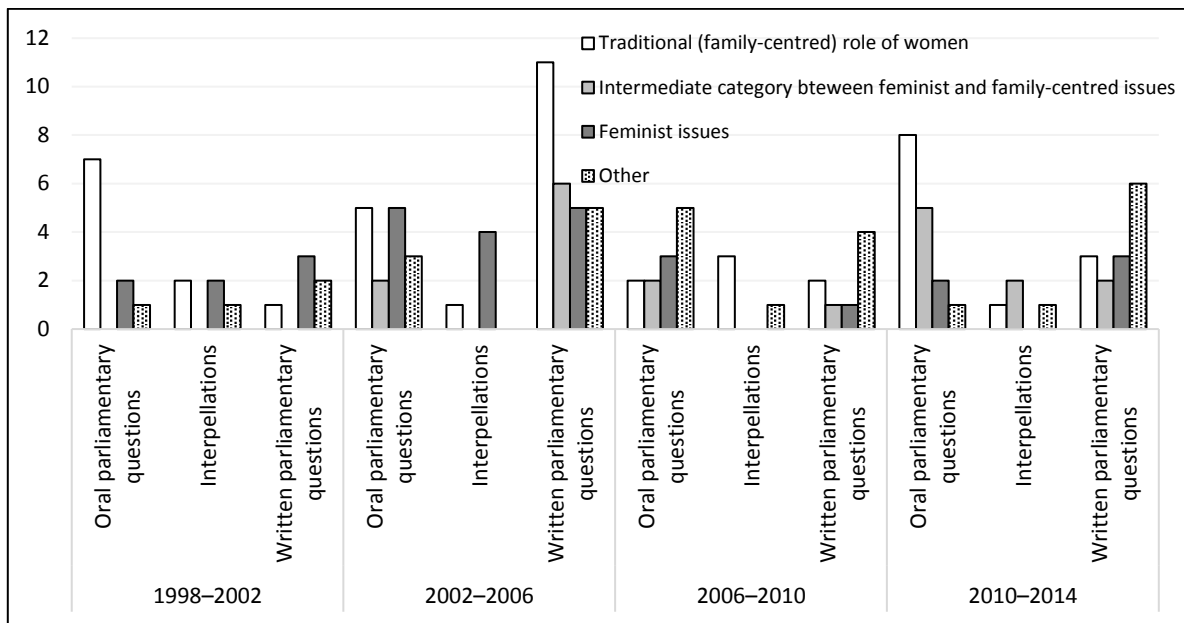
claimed to represent women, but the content of this claim was not a feminist one. Bills submitted by right-wing government (or MPs) rather related to women's traditional role.

### *III.2. Women's interests in interpellations and parliamentary questions*

Although interpellations and parliamentary questions would provide the opportunity to represent women's interests or to raise women-related questions for the opposition parties, Hungarian MPs did not follow this path, and only raised a few numbers of related questions. If problems relating to women are not on the table for external reasons (as for example there is no condemning opinion or report about women's inequality from any national organizations), the MPs are not inclined to deal with women's interests. Findings about women's substantive representation are the following:

- the parties' women-related programs did not affect the content of their parliamentary questions, so the opposite parties claim to represent women could not predicted on the basis of electoral programs.
- MPs put questions mainly in connection with mothers and motherhood. Questions about the employment of women were usually connected to employment after childbirth and not to the gender inequality at work.
- Other topics related to women (apart from motherhood) appeared only when a new (inter)national statistics or report were published about gender inequalities and discrimination. So, this type of women's representation was ad hoc.
- The dominant subject of the interpellations and parliamentary questions was related to women's traditional role in every parliamentary term. Figure 1 shows the distribution of topics into the four categories.

1. Figure: Distribution of subjects of women-related interpellations and parliamentary questions (1998–2014)



The assumption that women’s interests are more likely to be represented by women and left-wing parties, was partly confirmed. In the Hungarian case the MPs’ party affiliation was not relevant because both representatives of left-wing and of right-wing parties put questions related to women when their party was in opposition. But the distribution of sex was relevant because female politicians would rather put questions about the status of women than male MPs. Female representatives submitted more questions than their share in the parliament. This statement is valid in each examined parliamentary term.



### *III.3. Conclusions*

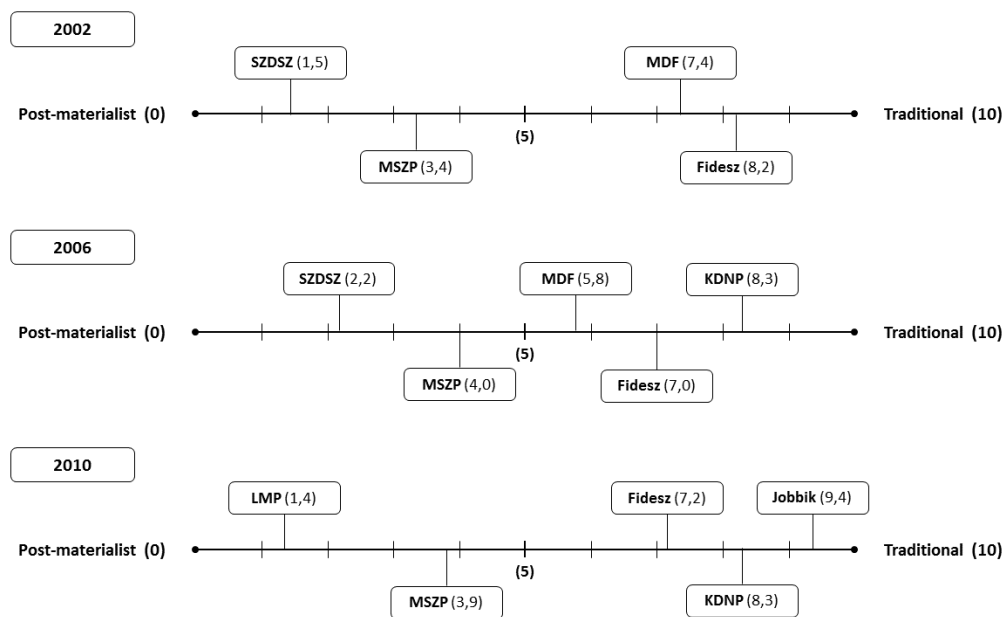
The analysis showed that although most of the Hungarian parliamentary parties (both left-wing and right-wing parties) claimed to represent women's issues, the substantive representation of women was not significant because only 1–2 percent of the bills and questions explicitly referred to women. The dissertation empirically proved the assumption that women-related issues and arguments are fairly rare in the Hungarian National Assembly. This phenomenon is combined with the low share of women in the parliament therefore the question arises whether male member of parliaments highlight issues related to women or not. The analysis showed that the MPs do not use gendered frames to talk about problems as women-related issues but rather use demographic, labour or criminal frames. Even though more report and studies proved that gender inequality and discrimination exist in Hungary, these problems as women's issues are subsequently ignored in the parliament. The appearance of these issues is ad hoc. Usually the representatives deal with women almost exclusively in connection with child birth and they do not consider women's perspectives relevant in connection with other policies. The research also highlighted the lack of critical actors who would provide consistent gender-sensitive criticism of policies. Because the representatives focus on women mostly as mothers or potential mothers and they refer to women only in connection with the family, women's equality usually means balancing family and work life, especially when right-wing government is in power.

The electoral program of parties further supported this finding. The parties dealt with women only as mothers (if the party had women-related promises). The only exceptions were electoral programs of the Alliance of Free Democrats–Hungarian Liberal Party (SZDSZ), which party dealt with women not only as mother, but it emphasized women's equality as well. The focus of the other parties' "women program" was on the support of women's role in the family and on reconciling work and family life. Furthermore, the main arguments were the improvement of demographic situation and the increase in the number of child birth instead of increasing women's employment.

How women's issues are framed is often related to the traditional left-right scale in politics. Political parties' position on post-materialist – traditional scale has significant effect on the representation of women's issues (Erzeel and Celis 2016). The Hungarian case verified this assumption because the parties' positions on the post-materialist - traditional scale predicted how important is for the parties the representation of women's interest and how they

approach women’s issues. Right-wing parties<sup>1</sup> with traditional positions (although to differing degrees) emphasized women’s traditional role in the family. Two left-wing parties post-materialist positions (SZDSZ and LMP) tended to represent not only mothers but also the “feminist issues” such as women’s equality, women’s right to self-determination, the prevention of domestic violence, etc. The left-wing Socialist party (MSZP) had rather a centre position and accordingly this party did not have clearly defined women’s policy.

2. Figure: Parliamentary parties’ position on the post-materialist – traditional scale (2002, 2006, 2010)



Source of data: Bakker et al. (2015)

Based on the case studies it can be stated that the MP’s stance on women’s issues was more defined when the debate centered around solidarity and was about women as a disadvantaged group – and the interests was greater as well. The realization of the substantive representation of women was more visible and the arguments related to women’s interests were more easily identified in case of feminist issues than in case of family-centred issues. But on the other hand, MPs presented mostly gender-neutral arguments in the debates – irrespective of the subject.

<sup>1</sup> Fidesz, KDNP, MDF, Jobbik

To sum up, the lack of women's presence has not resulted in a total representational deficit because questions and bills related to women were submitted in every parliamentary term. But it was rather a one-sided representation in which women's equality means only the reconciliation of work and family and not more. Although there was one party in every parliamentary term (SZDSZ and LMP) whose position was more towards post-materialist, they did not influence the political agenda in this question. In fact, there was no real substantive representation of women. The small amount of related questions and interpellations makes probable that the parties' claim to represent women is missing. Furthermore, there was not an actor who would represent women's interest and perspectives consequently in any parliamentary term. The majority of gender-neutral argumentations indicates that parties are careful and avoid taking sides in women-related questions.

Due to the absence of gendered representational claims we cannot predict whether politics or women's substantive representation in Hungary would be better or not if there were more women in parliament. This question remains open because the literature provides no evident answer. The increase of the number of women does not always translate to effective substantive representation (Childs and Krook 2008) because not all women want to act for women (Childs and Krook 2006). Furthermore, the MP's party is a relevant factor as well whether the improvement of women's representation is an important goal for the party or not. The politics won't change, not even with more women in the parliament unless parties pay more attention to the representation of women's interests. Thus, the presence of female representatives does not in itself necessarily ameliorate women's substantive representation, only if the increase of the number of elected women is a sign that parties and politicians pay more attention to this question.

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## **V. The author's publications related to the subject**

### **Hungarian publications**

#### **Book chapters**

Vajda (Tóth), Adrienn, and Ilonszki Gabriella. 2015. „Új választási rendszer – Új jelöltállítási és képviseleti feltételek a nők számára?” In *Pártok, jelöltek, képviselők*, edited by Ilonszki Gabriella, 138–160. Budapest: Szabad Kéz Kiadó.

#### **Journal articles**

Ilonszki, Gabriella, and Vajda Adrienn. 2018. „A képviselet újrafogalmazása és alkalmazása a női képviseletre. Az abortuszkérdés (2000, 2011).” *Politikatudományi Szemle* 27 (1): 17–40.

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### **English publications**

#### **Journal articles**

Ilonszki, Gabriella, and Vajda Adrienn. 2019. „Women's Substantive Representation in Decline. The Case of Democratic Failure in Hungary.” *Politics & Gender* Manuscript submitted for publication.