



**PhD Program in  
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**Women MP's – women's representation?**

Abstract

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## **1. Research background and preamble**

This paper examines the activity of women MPs within the Hungarian Parliament during the periods 1998-2002 and 2002-2006. In the first half of the 20th century suffrage and eligibility were granted for women in the majority of countries across Europe. Extending active and passive suffrage to women, however, did not automatically result in the increase of women's proportion in parliaments. The problem of creating a gender-balanced parliamentary representation system is still unsolved at the beginning of the 21st century. In the literature about women's involvement in politics and in international statements of intention, it is widely stated that women's proportional involvement in political decision-making is not merely a standard of women's equality but it is also a guarantee for it.

The present analysis of women's proportion and the expected effects of their presence within the Hungarian Parliament are based on the following statements of foreign literature: besides human rights aspects, women's proportionate parliamentary representation has practical benefits as well. Women should not only be granted equal opportunities because they have the right to them, but also because increasing their number in the parliament allows for taking their specific experience and viewpoints into account in the legislation process, which eventually serves the whole society (Mateo Diaz [2005]). Women's interests, however, cannot be properly represented without their presence and proper proportion in parliament (Phillips [1995]). The connection between headcount and representation is best described with the term 'critical mass'. According to this concept, a minimum of about 30% minority representation offers realistic chances for the representation of special interests and qualities. If women's parliamentary proportion is close to 'critical mass level', reactions to women politicians will be different; resistance to women's public role-taking diminishes; women politicians' performance and efficiency change; political culture (style) and discourse (themes) likewise. All this affects women's social situation positively (Dahlerup [1988]).

Departure points for the analysis of the Hungarian Parliament – given that women's parliamentary proportion in Hungary is constantly low – were statements regarding the roles and position of women within male majority organisations. Within organisations where the proportion of the minority group is lower than 20%, the dominant group prevails in the organisation culture. With such low proportions, minorities are only considered symbols or tokens; they do not have an actual effect on the organisation culture (Kanter [1993]). Tokenism (low proportion of minority representation) leads to increased visibility of the minority group, contrast (polarisation and magnification of differences) and assimilation.

Minority position may lead to a number of possible attitudes: the token either „puts on the gloves” and tries to meet the requirements; or enjoys attention (the role of the ‘only woman’); or becomes invisible by adopting the characteristics of the dominant group. None of these attitudes, however, enable tokens to considerably affect the dominant culture.

Based on the above, the main directions of the research this paper were defined in line with the criteria of descriptive and substantive representation. The descriptive approach examines how many people the female gender is represented by in the parliament symbolically, who they are and what reasons there are for their constant low proportion. The substantive approach, on the other hand, investigates how political decisions are influenced by the gender of an MP. According to the above, it has been analysed through what actions and in what way women’s issues are represented, and what changes are brought about by women regarding the style and the themes of parliamentary work. American (Thomas [1994], Dodson [2006]), and European comparative (Mateo Diaz [2005]), country-specific analyses and case studies of women’s parliamentary activity served as methodological-comparative bases for the research (especially: Childs – Withey [2006], Karam [1998], Lovenduski [2002]).

Several monographs and studies have been published on Hungarian women’s social and economic situation, all of which comment some aspects of women’s parliamentary representation and their involvement in politics. (see for instance: Lévai – Tóth [1997]; Pongrácz – Tóth [1999, 2002, 2005]; Lévai [2000]; Koncz [2006]; Palasik [2007]). Key aspects and data regarding women’s parliamentary participation – especially with regard to election results – are included in the studies of Gabriella Ilonszki ([2002, 2007]) and Katalin Koncz ([2002 a-b, 2003, 2006 a-c]). Regarding women’s parliamentary participation, the study is exceptional due to both its complexity (simultaneous analysis of descriptive and substantive representation) and the number of analysed factors and applied methods.

The study is based on a research carried out in Slovenian-Hungarian cooperation between 2001 and 2003, and it is aimed at providing a complex comparative analysis of women’s position and role in parliamentary politics. The authors’ findings were published both as separate publications (B. Kelemen Ida [2003a]), and as chapters of a summary of Hungarian research results (Ilonszki et al [2003]). Research results regarding the period 1998-2002 have been supplemented and followed-up by the author by an extension of the research period to cycle 2002-2006. As far as socio-demographic data are concerned, the investigated period ranges from 1990 until the present day.

## 2. Methodology

The criteria of descriptive and substantive representation assume a merge of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The fact that female features can only be meaningfully defined against male features (or a gender-independent average) makes it necessary to continuously compare data regarding men and women MPs. The selected subject requires an emphasis on the idiosyncrasies of both men and women MPs, however, the collected data provide valuable information on all MPs as well as the operation of the whole parliament as well.

The scope of this research (especially regarding substantive representation) is to investigate the periods 1998-2002 and 2002-2006. Although women's share did not change significantly during these periods, there were some changes in the person of the MPs and in parliamentary power relations (considered the most important aspect of the logic of parliamentary life) as well. In 1998-2002, conservative parties, while during the period 2002-2006, the socialist-liberal coalition had parliamentary majority. Therefore, if these two periods are compared, certain non-gender factors – which otherwise influence representation – will affect research results to a diminished extent.

For this research, the criteria of descriptive representation served as a point of departure, with a focus on the following factors: female headcount in parliament, women's election results (their nomination and success in the various forms of the mixed election system), the socio-demographic characteristics of MPs as well as their positions filled within the parliament. Data on women's parliamentary headcount were gained from the Parliamentary Information System of the Hungarian Parliament, (PAIR). Printed and electronic candidate lists of the National Election Office as well as data and analyses of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) have been gathered and analysed for the purpose of identifying the reasons for women's constantly low parliamentary proportion, taking into account all parliamentary election data from 1990 to the present day. The fulfilment of the requirements of both the election system and party politics is referred in the literature as 'probable candidate' and a number of approaches are used to capture this term. Based on the 2006 elections, a new (individual) definition has been created and tested as part of the research. Results and consequences are included in the corresponding chapter.

In addition to headcount, the following question is of great significance for the descriptive approach, too: *'Who are those individuals who represent their gender - beside their party - in the parliamentary benches?'* The investigation is based on the "MP Database 1990-2006" created by the Elite Research Center of the Institute for Political Science at the

Corvinus University of Budapest. The database contains the most important data of all MPs who have won a mandate since 1990. Data regarding MPs' highest level and type of education, age, marital status, number of children, previous experience in parliament and public life are analysed with the help of a programme called SPSS.

The significance of parliamentary presence and the possibility of representation are both strongly influenced by the functions filled in the various parliamentary bodies. Leading parliamentary positions (president, vice-president, notary), similarly to functions filled in the management of party groups (floor leader) and in the committees - a particularly important area of parliamentary work - have also been analysed according to PAIR.

As far as the effects of women on political processes and results (substantive representation) are concerned, the research includes the investigation of integration, political style, as well as themes and perspectives represented by women in the legislation process.

The pre-requisite of substantive representation is MPs' integration and adjustment to the rules of parliament, or - in a wider sense - political life. Although integration and acceptance of women MPs is reflected by their parliamentary functions, a research perspective providing data on the integration of all women MPs in parliamentary life is required as well. One of the most important – and most visible – part of parliamentary work is MPs' activity during plenary sessions, which provides us with a picture of the complete activity range: pre-agenda speeches reflect the function filled within the fraction, speeches on behalf of committees tell us about the MP's duties within the given body and the respect achieved there, speeches related to disputes and supervision of bills mirror individual political competence and ambitions. The data coming from PAIR do not only represent a mathematically definable activity indicator, but – by examining them - one can also draw conclusions on the directions of an MP's activity as well as the acknowledgement achieved during his or her parliamentary work within the corresponding political (fraction) and professional (committee) groups.

The investigation of differences between political styles is based on the content analysis of some interpellations of cycle 1998-2002. The analysis covers all women interpellations (96) as well as interpellations of a male control group (103). In order to minimize non-gender related differences between the individual interpellations, the following criteria were considered for the creation of the control group: fraction membership, interpellation activity, committee membership, the number of parliamentary cycles, level and type of education, and finally, age. Interpellations were selected for analysis due to their significance in parliamentary supervision and their role in reflecting individual political styles. The criteria considered for the content-based analysis of interpellations were interactions (cooperation

between MPs of different gender and political membership), content-related features (policy - area), political embeddedment of interpellations (question of representation) and lastly, statistical parameters.

The existing literature differentiates between 'women's issue' – issues that interest women for biological or social reasons (breast cancer, fertility, gender equality, children's right, etc) and 'women's perspective', which refers to specific viewpoints and interests occurring in all political areas (Lovenduski [2002] p.745). This differentiation indicates two directions of substantive representation. On the one hand, it refers to the investigation of how women stand for women's issues; on the other hand, it indicates how women's perspectives are specifically represented in the discussion of concrete bills.

Women's issues were researched by analysing the interpellations and the themes of speeches made during the discussion of certain bills. The data related to bills (cycle 2002-2006) came from the Parliamentary Diary, while the information on interpellations was gathered based on content analyses: from the period 1998-2002, 199 interpellations, from 2002-2006, all interpellations were analysed.

The enforcement of women's perspectives in the legislation process is demonstrated by two case studies. Due to women's token-level representation, proper enforcement of women's perspectives is principally doubtful. Therefore, bills which particularly interest women due to their subject matter have been selected for analysis. Following from the above, parliamentary discussions of 'Amendment to Law on the protection of foetal life' (1992/LXXIX) from the parliamentary cycle 1998-2002, and of the so called quota acts - the bill submitted by Klára Sándor and Bálint Magyar during the period 2006-2010 on 'Amendment to the law on the constitution of the Hungarian Republic' (1949/XX) and the bill called 'Amendment to some laws to provide real equality between women and men' (T/3066) - have been analysed. The applied method involved content analyses of the speeches made during committee and plenary discussions, analyses of the submitted amendment proposals and the evaluation of voting behaviour. Besides the data gained from PAIR, research sources included printed and electronic minutes of the Hungarian Parliament.

When formulating the research hypothesis regarding women's representation, the question of low headcount should not be left out of consideration. According to 'descriptive representation', women, few in number within the parliament, represent a smaller segment of society. In addition to that, certain characteristics (age, marital status, type of education) are likely to highlight the difficulties women have in becoming politicians. According to the criteria of substantive representation, low headcount does not allow for the enforcement of



specific women perspectives and styles. Constant token-level presence forces MPs of minority groups to adjust to the majority culture rather than consider their own specific perspectives or change the 'rules of the game'. Based on the low proportion of women in the parliament, the following hypotheses have been made after considering several research perspectives:

1. Low proportion of women within the parliament is primarily due to parties' nomination practice.
2. Women's socio-demographic characteristics differ from men's, especially type of education, original profession, age and family background.
3. As far as parliamentary positions and activity are concerned, women are expected to be lowly represented.
4. Women's political impact can hardly be demonstrated from the perspective of substantive representation.

### **3. Results**

#### **Descriptive representation - presence**

##### **3.1. Headcount**

Since the change of regime, women's percentage in the Hungarian Parliament has remained at a low level (around 10%). Based on international comparisons and corresponding international agreements, it can be stated that this figure is not only lower than the level across Europe and countries of the region, but it also fails to meet equal opportunity requirements and international standards. The review of a number of European examples also highlighted the fact that in the majority of European countries, a higher parliamentary share is ensured by quotas either voluntarily assumed by the parties or prescribed by law. Although their efficiency varies from country to country, quotas represent a possible way of enhancing women's number in the parliament.

##### **3.2. Chances during elections**

The review of nomination policies verified the hypothesis that the reason for women's low proportion primarily lies in parties' nomination practices. Based on the analysis of election system components and nomination practices applied by parties since 1990, it can be stated that there is no conscious effort on part of the parties to provide equality for women during elections. On the one hand, the number of women MPs does not even come close to equal opportunity requirements (it ranges from 11,4 to 18 per cent throughout various election years), on the other hand, the positions of women on party lists lower their chances of obtaining a mandate. The above is true of all parties with a realistic chance of winning parliamentary mandates, independently of either their ideological views on social responsibility of women and men, or their determined quota<sup>1</sup>. The research has also found that there is a slow, though not linear, increase in women candidate share with a setback during the 2006 elections. So far, however, this has not been reflected by women's election success. Based on the analysis of the impacts of voters' behaviour it can be assumed that, in general, voters do not have prejudices against women candidates or nominees. This has been proven by public survey results<sup>2</sup> and women's growing success in constituencies.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the quota system of MSZP, a minimum of 20% positions should be provided for women and young people in the leading bodies and among the candidates of the party

<sup>2</sup> According to the survey conducted by Eurobarometer in July 2006, 71% of Hungarian respondents support the election of women MPs.

### **3.3. Political and socio-demographic background**

The social and political characteristics of elected MPs may tell us a lot not only about the individual and his/her know-how, but also about the conditions required for individual MPs to get into the parliament. Gender similarities and differences may provide an answer on whether career requirements are identical for men and women candidates, and on how and at what expense they manage to meet these requirements. From 1990 up to the 2008 spring session period, data of all 2022 individuals in possession of a parliamentary mandate have been compared as part of the analysis.

As for politicians' past life, there are no significant gender differences: the percentage of those with local government experience is about the same, but women usually have less experience in government and party politics, however, they usually have a wider range of general political experience. As opposed to expectations, women's average age does not differ significantly from men's, although the dynamics of change indicates the following differences between the sexes: since 1990 men's average age has increased by fewer than four years, while women's average age has grown by almost ten years. 2002 seems to be a turning point: since then women's average age has been higher than men's. At the same time, there are considerable differences between women and men MPs' family background: apparently, marital status significantly correlates with gender. Compared to men, a lower proportion of women MPs are married, more are divorced, fewer have at least two children, and more of them come from the capital or a city. Level of education does not differ significantly, however, there are differences regarding type of education: law, economics and humanities are frequent in both gender groups. As for women, the number of those with a degree in humanities is high, while only a few of them can be found with technical or agricultural education. The fact that differences between women and men regarding their original jobs or professions are more significant than differences in their level of education indicates that gender differences observed in tertiary education are intensified on the labour market.

The hypothesis regarding MPs' socio-demographic background has been verified: there are several different characteristics of women and men MPs, which are related to both their social background and the way of their becoming politicians. Based on data regarding political experience and level of education, it can be stated that women need to meet the same or even higher requirements than men. Social background - modelled by differences in type of education and original jobs or professions - can be characterised by a significant degree of professional segregation even at the turn of the millennium. Data related to age and marital status also reflect a conservative society, in which the conservation of traditional gender roles

prevents women from taking on public roles. In addition to the same or even higher level of requirements, women are also faced with a social environment, in which it is not only more difficult for them to meet the requirements of becoming politicians, but they are also less supported by their families in their public activities than men. The continuity of parliamentary activity as well as age change dynamics clearly show that the conditions of becoming a politician are not improving, on the contrary, they worsened during the 2002 and 2006 elections. By considering nomination data, it can be stated that the movement towards a two-party system and the strengthening of political competition impair women's - otherwise quite limited - opportunities to take on public roles.

### **3.4. Positions and activity**

However, the hypothesis about women's underrepresentation in parliamentary positions and activities has not been verified. Women are represented above the level of their parliamentary proportion in leading committees of the parliament (although there was a setback during 2006), whereas their committee membership is strongly differentiated based on committee type. Healthcare, social welfare and employment committees traditionally have a high proportion of female members, however, women are not represented in several (especially economic) committees at all. Research data indicate that women's level of activity during parliamentary sessions is generally higher than men's, independently of whether they are in a government or opposition fraction. Women's high level of activity is demonstrated by the fact that more of them make a speech within the parliament, whereas men's consolidated activity indicator shows a smaller, but active group of frequent speakers. Women are most active in making speeches based on individual initiatives, although their actions are usually not followed by an adequate assignment on part of a group. Based on data analysis of political and parliamentary past life, women's high proportion within leading parliamentary bodies and their enhanced activity during plenary sessions prove the presence of professional political women elite, who – in possession of parliamentary rules and skills – actively participate in parliamentary work showing the same or even higher level of activity as their average male counterparts.

## **Substantive representation – components of parliamentary activity**

### **3.5. Political style**

Studies on women's political involve the assumption that women have different approaches and solutions to problems: they are more cooperative and more willing to make compromises. The world of politics, however, is traditionally ruled by men, its rules and values are defined by them, too. Analyses have shown that women's token-level representation does not enable them to transform the dominant political style or – due to the constant attention paid to them - express their characteristic style or interests (Kanter [1993]). As a result of constant low proportion, women's characteristic political style is not expected to be meaningfully detectable in the Hungarian Parliament. The above assumption is strengthened by the political opposition between the parties observed during the analysed periods and the enhanced requirements of parties towards individual MPs (e.g. expecting increased fraction discipline from members). Nevertheless the research direction has been defined: it is to be investigated whether women represent a characteristic style and whether they show a greater tendency to cooperate regarding general and/or specific women issues.

Differences in political style are examined based on the content analysis of interpellations. Interpellations have been selected for this analysis due to the fact that they are of the greatest significance of all speeches not related to the agenda (in the case of a negative answer given by the interpellating MP, the plenary session votes about the acceptance of the minister's response). On the other hand, they are thematically less restricted than speeches related to the agenda, thus they provide more opportunities both for MPs to demonstrate and for researchers to identify characteristic styles.

Based on the content analysis of almost 200 interpellations, only a few aspects of differences regarding the political style of MPs of different genders can be found. Gender showed a – usually limited – correlation with the following categories: *duration of the interpellation*, *style* (grammatical mode and 'gender' of vocabulary), *content* (focus of representation – 'on whose behalf MPs are speaking' - and subject of criticism – 'who/what is being criticised') and finally, *policy area*.

### **3.6. Political themes**

Previous research results have shown that women are not only present in the parliament, but they also participate – even above the level of their parliamentary proportion - in plenary work. Therefore, it can be concluded that an analysis of the themes of MP's speeches indeed provides a relevant answer as to what issues are represented by women in the parliament.

Based on the content analyses of interpellations during the periods 1998 and 2002, and of women's speeches during the discussion of the bills in 2002-2006, it can be stated that men's and women's themes are principally different. While men's attention is shared among several issues, women tend to deal with only a limited number of well-defined areas. Their three prioritised themes are identical regarding both the interpellations and the bills. Preferred women's themes (social welfare, health care and employment) can actually be regarded as typical women's issues due to their close connection with *women's traditional roles* and - resulting from women's special living conditions - *interests, qualifications* and - to a great extent - their *work*. As far as the focus of representation is concerned, it can be confirmed that women primarily represent women's issues. This is particularly true of speeches where the subject is chosen by the MPs themselves (interpellations). These priorities, however, do not mean the exclusivity of women's issues. Women MPs participate in the discussions of important bills on law or economics as equal partners of men.

### **3.7. Political perspectives – case studies**

Case studies clearly refer to several opportunities to express specific interests and personal opinions during the discussion of bills. However, besides the increased activity shown by women during the discussion of the two bills in question, it can be observed that specific women perspectives are not widely represented in the parliament. With few exceptions, women rather represent their party's position or rely on political argumentation in their speeches. Even those committed to a particular issue rarely use the opportunity to emphasise or base their argumentation upon specific women perspectives.

Similarly to interpellations, on part of women, no cooperation can be seen during the parliamentary discussions of the acts investigated as part of the research. When the quota system was discussed in the parliament, there was no previous agreement on the arguments within the group of supporters, thus at a certain stage of the discussion, those in favour of immediate and those supporting gradual introduction have argued against one another, weakening the overall effect of supporting arguments. When submitting an individual proposal (bills, resolution and amendment proposals), women representing the issue more often cooperated with their male than female colleagues.

Manifestations of women's cooperation and solidarity during voting procedures are not obvious either (women unequivocally voted according to party attachment on the act on the protection of foetal life, whereas there is a gender-based division of votes on the quota

proposal). Party attachment and voting discipline seem to be more important to women than representing women's issues.

According to the investigation of various components of parliamentary work, the hypothesis that - in terms of substantive representation – the impacts of female politics can hardly be manifested in the Hungarian Parliament, proved to be true.

### **3.8. Conclusions**

Corresponding literature identifies three phases of women's parliamentary integration according to their possible political impact, their attitude to parliamentary rules and finally, their integration in the parliament. The phase of rule learning is followed by a period of rule application. Women's parliamentary role is completely fulfilled only if they are able to change the rules (Lovenduski – Karam [1998]). Research findings indicate that the function of women MPs in the Hungarian Parliament can best be described with characteristics specific to the second phase, which is manifested by their active and professional participation in the enactment process, and by their presence in key positions of parliamentary committees.

The third phase entails women's ability to change the existing rules. More precisely, it refers to women's impact on parliamentary procedures and the tone of parliamentary disputes on the one hand, and their ability to change women's social and political role as a result of their influence on the themes and perspectives of the legislation process on the other hand. Based on the research it can be concluded that the current proportion does not enable women to sufficiently fulfil this role. According to substantive representation, there is a two-level differentiation of women's issues and women's perspectives. The act of including women's issues in the parliamentary agenda spotlights the importance and successful representation of only a number of particular issues. The significance and usefulness of this cannot be denied, nevertheless, it must be emphasised that a consistent consideration of women's perspectives and interests during the decision making process entails the involvement of the impacts on women and women's issues (family, social welfare, education) in the discussions and decisions about certain bills. Results of the research indicate that the professionalism and active participation of 10% women MPs allows for only a certain number of women's issues to be discussed as part of the parliamentary agenda. Cooperation required for a successful representation of issues is hindered by the confrontative atmosphere of the Hungarian Parliament, while the consistent enforcement of women's perspectives is hampered by women's low number. A total women headcount close to "critical mass" level is a precondition for the consistent representation of women's issues and for the achievement of a

tangible impact on political processes. This way gender-proportionate representation would be ensured in all committees, enabling women to express and represent their views regardless of party attachment.

Findings regarding the investigation of how women become politicians show that neither the parties, nor the social environment is supportive of women's public roles. The relative stability or slight increase in women's number results from the fact that a dozen women achieving publicity and acknowledgment in their parliamentary work gradually win respect among members of their party and their constituents, which sooner or later might positively influence public views not only on their person(ality) but also their gender. It must be admitted, however, that this kind of organic development generates (and may generate) only minor results. It can also be stated that an improving tendency cannot be guaranteed either, as the movement towards a two-party system and the strengthening of political competition negatively affect women's – otherwise quite limited – opportunities to take public roles. This suggests that without any further measures women's number in the Hungarian Parliament is not expected to grow in the near future. Even so, the requirements concerning women's equal opportunities and participation in decision-making (pointed out in international and – especially – European agreements) will sooner or later force the government to take action. Although the Hungarian Parliament rejected the quota act as a result of the 2007 discussion, by comparing foreign quota regulations with the Hungarian situation it can be confirmed that a legally regulated party list quota system would be an ideal short-term solution. Based on the research results, concerns regarding the introduction of the quota can be refuted. As their current proportion forces women to meet higher requirements, the increase in women's number could first result in the balancing of requirements – so the concern that the increase in the proportion of women candidates would result in lower requirements is unfounded. Some are also worried that the introduction of quota would result in a depreciation of women's mandates, that is, women winning a quota-based mandate would only be regarded as 'quota-women' in the parliament. Regarding the assumption that the increase in women's number would result in diminishing activity, it should be noted that the investigation of women's parliamentary activity only show a decrease to men's level of activity first. The introduction of the quota – besides ensuring an increase in women's proportion in the short term – could also move politicians and society towards accepting women's equal opportunities. Women's preferences manifested in their parliamentary work support the assumption that their strengthening political impact would primarily bring about changes in areas women are most directly affected by.



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