

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# ARE WOMEN WANTED IN POLITICS AT ALL?

WOMEN AND POLITICS IN HUNGARY

(Research ideas)

**Lídia Balogh – Borbála Juhász**  
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The purpose of this paper is, firstly, to give an overview of recent research results, and secondly to point out the blank spots, providing guidance to all those who are planning research or conducting an analysis on the topic of “women and politics in Hungary”.



The publication proposes that the interests and objectives of both science and evidence-based public policymaking are to consider the hypothesis that men and women have different interests, perspectives, and preferences in various areas of social life.



This paper identifies two perspectives while examining the participation of women in decision-making and political representation: one focuses on female decision-makers, the other on female voters.



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## WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

On behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Budapest, the authors of this paper seek to outline a research proposal on the topic of “women and politics in Hungary”. This will begin with a review of the relevant literature, then point out the remaining blank spots in this area that could hinder effective public policy decision-making.

The authors bear in mind the most recent FES initiative in this research area in Hungary, within the framework of which a research report was published, entitled *Women’s Affairs 2018: Social Problems and Solution Strategies*, authored by Anikó Gregor and Eszter Kováts.<sup>1</sup> This research project was related to the parliamentary elections that took place in Hungary in the spring of 2018. Five years have passed since then, and the time has come (once again) to ask a series of questions: What are the preferences of women in Hungary as voters? Which parties and individuals do they vote for, and why? What topics mobilize women politically? How do women think about certain policy areas? What interests do they have, and what matters to them when it comes to, for example, healthcare, social services, environmental sustainability, and economic or security policies? Can female politicians expect trust from voters and respect from society? What is the perception of female politicians in society? Can a female politician be a role model?

The purpose of this paper is, firstly, to give an overview of recent research results, and secondly to point out the blank spots, providing guidance to all those who are planning research or conducting an analysis on the topic of “women and politics in Hungary”.

To begin with, we propose that researchers should seriously consider the hypothesis that men and women have different interests, perspectives, and preferences in various areas of social life. The interests and objectives of both science and evidence-based public policymaking are served by having studies that confront this question, while remaining open to the possibility that there are no perceptible (substantive) differences between men and women in one or another area. The role of comparison in research and analysis is also essential. In the spirit of this proposal, we also present the results of studies and surveys which were not designed or implemented with a specific focus on women, but which provide research data that can be analyzed in terms of gender. In other words, their analysis can be used to increase our knowledge in the field of “women and politics”. We also stress at the outset that when examining the participation of women in decision-making and political representation, two perspectives can be identified, although the boundary between them cannot be sharply delineated: one focuses on female decision-makers, the other on female voters.

## 1.

# WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING ROLES IN HUNGARY

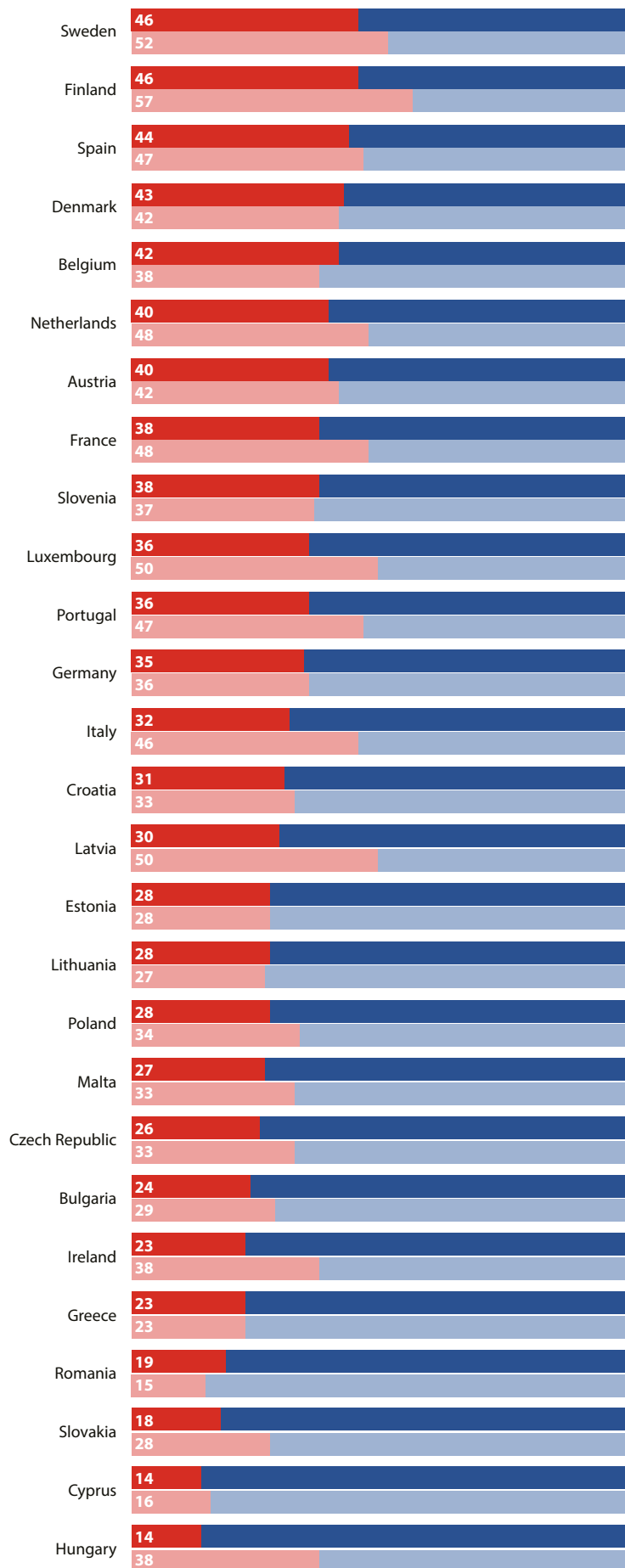
## 1.1. SITUATIONAL OVERVIEW: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

In the case of Hungary, when it comes to the topic of “women and politics”, it is typical to discuss percentages, and in particular the percentage of female parliamentarians. Hungary is particularly interesting in this regard, as such figures are straightforward to compare, and with women making up 14% of legislators (28 out of a 199-member National Assembly)<sup>2</sup> the proportion in Hungary is low even by the standards of neighbouring countries with, in many respects, similar histories. In addition, it is worth bearing in mind that in terms of women’s political rights, Hungary kept pace with Western and Northern European countries well into the twentieth century: the first female Hungarian parliamentarian, Margit Schlachta, was elected in 1920, just one year after the first woman was elected to the UK House of Commons, and one year earlier than the first woman was elected to the Swedish Parliament. (It should be noted that Hungary also kept pace in terms of extending the franchise to women: the enactment of universal suffrage meant that women were first able to exercise full voting rights in Hungary in 1945, the same year as French women, and a year earlier than women in Italy.) However, after the communist seizure of power, Hungary took a different direction in terms of women’s participation in the legislature: the proportion of women in the non-democratically elected parliament, operating within in a *de facto* one-party system, increased significantly, as a result of the ruling party’s implementation of a gender quota during party-member recruitment. Hungary’s highest percentage of female parliamentarians – 30.1% – was reached in 1980, while in the Soviet Union, which was the cultural hegemon in the region at the time, the proportion of women in the Supreme Soviet, which functioned as the legislative assembly, also exceeded 30 percent. In Sweden, meanwhile, the proportion of women was 27.8%, and in the UK House of Commons it was only 3%. However, in the first democratic elections after the fall of communism (1990), only 7.3% of the seats in the Hungarian Parliament went to women.<sup>3</sup> Twenty years later, in 2010, when Fidesz won a governing majority for the second time, this proportion had only increased to 9.1%.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that the proportion of women among the members of the European Parliament is significantly higher: at the time of writing, eight of the 21 Hungarian MEPs (more than a third) are women.<sup>5</sup> There are no research reports or studies dedicated to investigating this discrepancy; in the context of the broader topic of Hungarian women’s political participation, only the question of why women seem to have more extensive opportunities in this area (and what this says about Hungary’s political preferences in the international arena) is given attention.

At the time of writing, the Hungarian government is led by a man, and among the 14 government ministers, there is no single woman.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that in the more than three decades that have elapsed since 1989, there have been several periods – during government coalitions of differing political orientations – during which there was not a single woman in the government, which is a rare occurrence in Europe. Though it is difficult to say which government positions are considered key in terms of the executive power – the importance of individual portfolios may differ, while the influence of state secretary positions may increase or decrease due to the merging or division of ministries, for example – it seems clear that women are given disproportionately few roles with significant executive power. We can read about this in discussions concerning the participation of women in the political elite, and the activities of individual politicians.

When it comes to the third branch of power, the judiciary, it is worth noting that this too is of relevance to women’s participation in executive decision-making, since according to the principle of the separation of powers, the judiciary – at least in certain areas and on certain levels – operates in the political space, almost always and everywhere. For instance, we may cite Hungary’s Constitutional Court, where just five of the 15 seats,<sup>7</sup> or one third, are held by women. Incidentally, this body was established in Hungary in 1990, as part of the democratic transition, but for almost a decade, until 1999, it had no female members.<sup>8</sup> As for the lower courts, the fact that women were overrepresented in the judiciary had become well known by the end of the 2010s. Several factors may be presumed to underly this phenomenon, and it can be presumed that “one of



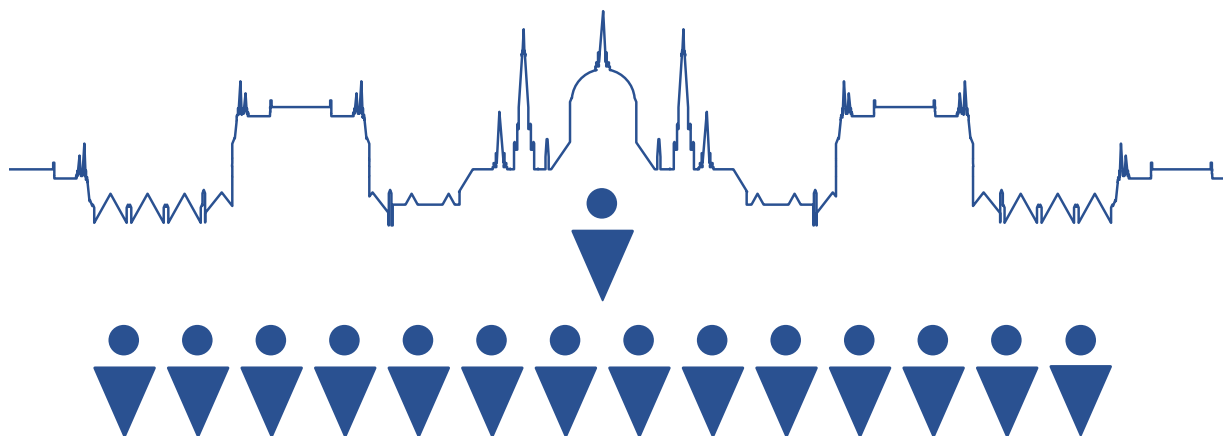
Infographic 1

● ● Women in the 27 National Parliaments (either lower house or unicameral legislature) (%)  
▲ ▼  
● ● Women in the European Parliament (%)  
▲ ▼

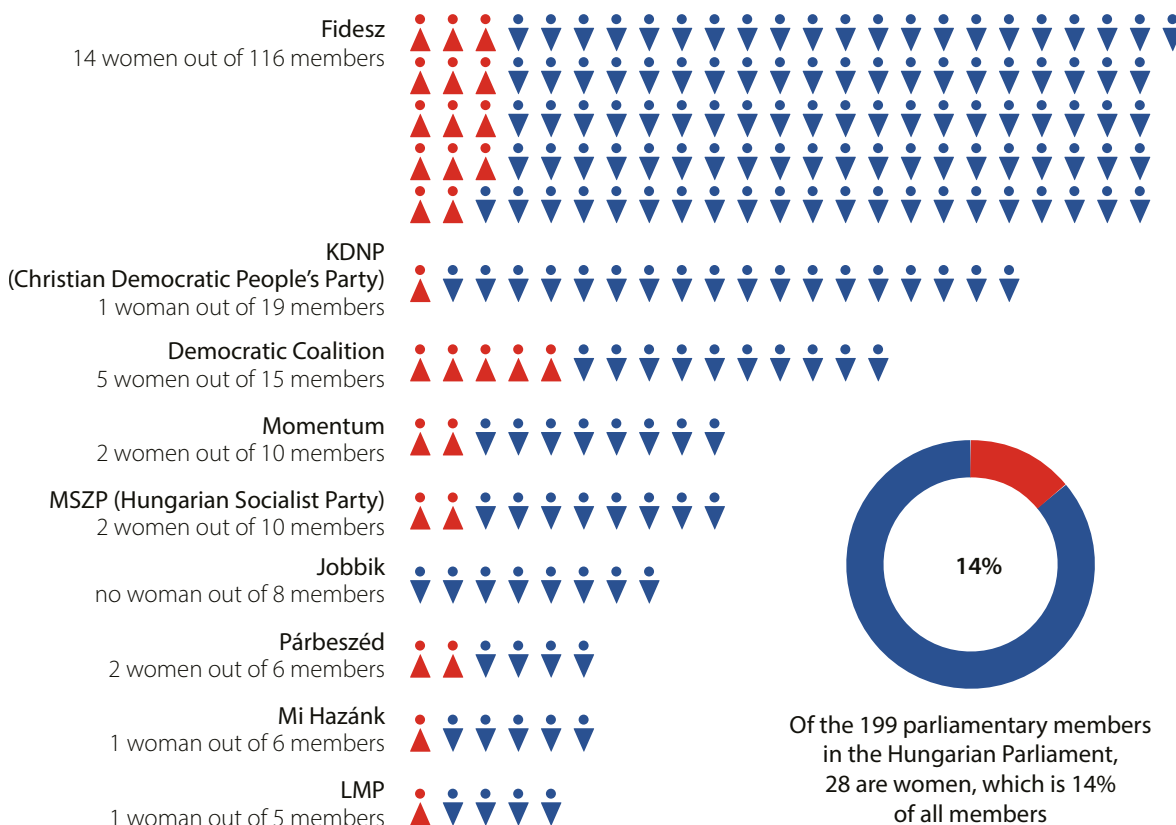
Source: Robert Schuman Foundation (13 October 2023)

Infographic 2

The Hungarian government is led by a man, and among the 14 government ministers, there is no single woman (October 2023)



The proportion of women within the different political groups of the Hungarian Parliament (2023)



the reasons for the overrepresentation of women in the judiciary is the low salary of court secretaries and drafters compared to other career paths in the legal profession".<sup>9</sup> In any case, the female majority also exists at the level of the Hungarian Supreme Court, now known as the Curia of Hungary: at the time of writing, there are 58 women members of this 97-member body.<sup>10</sup> This means that the percentage of women in the Curia is currently almost 60%, so the composition of the assembly still meets the international guideline for "gender balance", according to

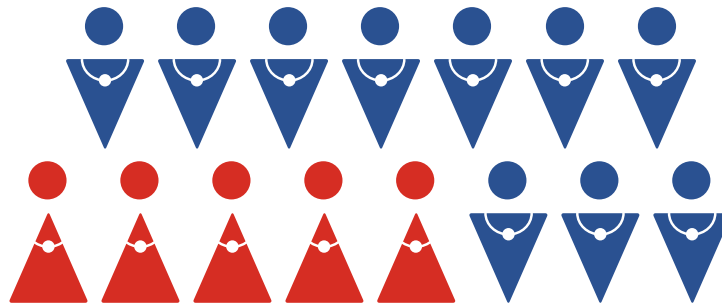
which no gender should be represented at a proportion lower than 40%.

1.2. RELATED STUDIES

The issue of women's active participation in political life – in relation to the larger, more abstract question of women's political representation – is self-evidently and traditionally of interest as a social science research topic in Hungary.

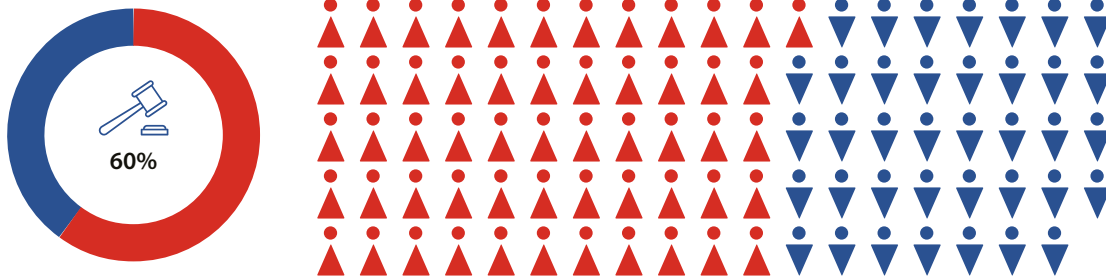
Infographic 3

In Hungary's Constitutional Court, five of the 15 seats are held by women (October 2023)



Infographic 4

The Hungarian Supreme Court (now known as the Curia of Hungary) has 94 members, of whom 56 are women (October 2023)



This statement is supported by a study examining which “social issues” received the most attention in the period between 2010 and 2018, by examining publications related to the Centre for Social Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The authors identified 17 problem areas – one of which was “political representation” – and a total of 57 problems, one of which was the “political representation of women”.<sup>11</sup> Among the related studies, there was one that dealt with the limitation of women’s advancement (the “glass ceiling” effect) at both the national and local levels of politics,<sup>12</sup> another focusing on the parliamentary activity of female representatives,<sup>13</sup> which examined the chances of female candidates running for parliamentary election in individual constituencies,<sup>14</sup> and one that analyzed changes in the ratio of male to female representatives at the local (municipal) political level.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, research was also conducted on women’s political participation and representation outside of the above-mentioned research areas. One example of this is a study published in 2013 on the underrepresentation of women in the Hungarian Parliament, commissioned by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Budapest and the Central European University’s Public Policy Department.<sup>16</sup> A 2019 PhD dissertation

written at the political science doctoral program of Budapest’s Corvinus University – while considering the underrepresentation of women in Parliament – examines the visibility of issues related to women in the work of the Hungarian Parliament in the 1998–2014 period.<sup>17</sup>

Elections – primarily Hungarian parliamentary elections, but also elections to the European Parliament – are an opportunity for researchers dealing with the topic to put the political role of women on the agenda, and to discuss the factors preventing women from increasing their political role, including in forums accessible to the general public.<sup>18</sup> International Women’s Day, 8 March, provides another good opportunity to raise the issue; in 2021, for example, ‘21 Kutatóközpont’ (Research Centre 21), a social science research company, published a summary of the available data and research results.<sup>19</sup>

Data and conclusions regarding the political role of women can also be found in research examining more general matters related to political life. These include a 2015 study analysing the evolution of the composition of the Hungarian political elite, and exploring the issue of male dominance from a historical perspective.<sup>20</sup> Another study, which examined the social media presence of several candidates as part of the campaign for the 2014 parliamentary elections, concluded, among other things,



that being a woman did not necessarily harm the chances of candidates running in individual constituencies, and could in fact improve them.<sup>21</sup>

Analyses of individual (especially visible, highly influential) female politicians form a separate category. One example from the past decade is Judit Varga, who was the Minister of Justice between 2019 and 2023. When she entered the government, opposition-affiliated analysts used her to illustrate the claim that the presence of women in prominent political roles does not necessarily mean a change in social policy, in terms of the social position of women.<sup>22</sup> Katalin Novák, who previously held high positions in the government in the field of family policy, and was sworn in as President of the Republic in 2022, is also spoken of in a similar manner by the opposition, though analysts close to the government paint a completely different picture of her; an example of the latter can be found in the publications of the Nézőpont Institute, which evaluate Katalin Novák's mandate as President of the Republic.<sup>23</sup>

### 1.3. INTERNATIONAL RANKINGS/ INDICES

When discussing the social position of women and men (relative to each other), it is common to refer to international rankings and indices created specifically in order to raise awareness. Hungary usually performs very poorly in these, especially in terms of the division of political power. As regards these indices, the first concern that may arise is whether they really measure what they should, as well as the extent to which data forced into uniform categories for the sake of comparability really provides an accurate picture of the situation. (In addition, it is not always entirely clear what data the indices are based on.)

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), operated by the EU, has been publishing a "Gender Equality Index" for Member States of the European Union since 2013; in the 2023 report, Hungary scored only 26.2% in the "power" category.<sup>24</sup> This result is made up of several elements,

essentially a range of indicators of economic, social and political power. The index determines the degree of women's share of political power based on the following: the proportion of women in the government (at the ministerial level), the proportion of female representatives in the national Parliament, and the proportion of female representatives in regional legislative bodies. Concerning the latter, in countries – such as Hungary – where no such regional elected assemblies exist, the figures for "politics at the local level" are used as a basis for comparison. It is not clear what kind of ambit EIGE interprets this as covering in the case of Hungary, only that the proportion of women in this circle is 15% (which is very low compared to the – equally unclearly delineated – EU average).

The other frequently referenced international ranking, the Global Gender Gap Index, is issued by the World Economic Forum, a lobby organization: this (given its economic focus) focuses primarily on the role of women in the labour market, but also takes into account the prevailing gender ratios in the field of "political representation", particularly in relation to the following: the proportion of women ministers, the proportion of women members of parliament, and the gender of the head of state. According to the 2023 report,<sup>25</sup> Hungary is ranked 99<sup>th</sup> out of the 146 countries based on its overall index (in 2022, Hungary was ranked as low as 114<sup>th</sup>, but in 2023 it probably moved up due to the inauguration of a female head of state). To better illustrate the question around the accuracy of the data that forms the basis of the comparison, as well as the problem of comparability itself, here are two figures from this report regarding when women won the right to vote. The year given for Hungary is 1919. (This is not quite correct: legislation did indeed pass in that year giving women the right to vote, but not under conditions of universal suffrage, nor on the same terms as men). Meanwhile, in the case of Armenia the report indicates 1991 as the year women were first given the vote. This is of course the year when independent Armenian statehood was first established after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, though Armenian women had actually been granted the vote (in a context of universal suffrage) as early as 1919, before the Soviet era even began.

## 2.

## WOMEN VOTERS IN HUNGARY

As regards the current situation in Hungary, the data provided by the National Electoral Office in connection with the 2022 parliamentary elections did not reveal the gender composition of the electorate, only the total number of eligible voters, which stands at 8,215,304.<sup>26</sup> According to the data of the Central Statistical Office (CSO), the total population of Hungary on 1 January 2022 comprised 9,689,010 people, including 7,981,992 people over the age of 18, and among the latter, the distribution between males and females was 47.2–52.8% (3,768,052 – 4,213,940 people).<sup>27</sup> The population over 18 does not completely overlap with eligible voters – the 16–18 age group includes those who have been granted active voting rights due to majority acquired through marriage; and among those who have reached the age of 18, there are those who have been excluded from the right to vote because of a criminal record or because of limited mental capacity to appreciate. However, even after taking these factors into account, it is reasonable to assume that slightly more women than men are entitled to voting rights in Hungary today.

### 2.1. RESEARCH FOCUSING ON VOTERS' PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER EQUALITY

Among studies of voters, research focusing on issues related to women and equality between women and men is relatively rare, but not unprecedented. One such study is the online (non-representative) survey from 2015, related to an 'election orientation' initiative of the Andrásy University of Budapest and the Political Communication Network Vokskabin,<sup>28</sup> which asked respondents for their opinions on issues related to equal opportunities for women and men. According to the workshop study which presented the results, one of the most interesting findings was that men were in the majority among those filling out the questionnaire. Within the framework of the given research, one can only speculate as to why men showed significantly more interest in the issue of the social positions of the sexes; twice as many men as women completed the questionnaire via an article published on an online news portal. According to the researchers: *"This can probably be traced back to the effect on men of the photo advertising the article, which depicts two women kissing each other."*<sup>29</sup>

In 2020, the Republikon Institute published an analysis which, among other things, examined gender divisions in terms of respondents' ideological value choices, party preferences, and intentions to participate in the election – no measurable difference was found between men and women – and also examined respondents' opinions on issues linked to the social situation of women and men (such as child rearing and women's participation in the labour market).<sup>30</sup> One of the studies in a volume on gender equality, published in 2022, examined the acceptance/acceptability of sexism in public life from a social and psychological perspective.<sup>31</sup> As part of the information campaign related to the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, financed by the American NGO National Democratic Institute (NDI), the survey conducted by Research Center 21 examined Hungarian women's relationship to politics, and concluded, among other things, that *"most women in Hungarian society do not feel particularly discriminated against compared to men. It is only in terms of political representation, that a higher average value appears, showing that it is here Hungarian women feel a disadvantage stemming primarily from their gender"*.<sup>32</sup>

### 2.2. GENERAL SURVEYS OF VOTERS

A study<sup>33</sup> published in 2014 concluded, among other things, that women are less receptive to radical right-wing ideas (represented by Jobbik at the time), but sympathize with Fidesz to a greater extent than men.<sup>34</sup> The authors of a study published in 2015 found that *"radicalism in Hungary is more characteristic of men, and moderate political thinking is more typical of women"*.<sup>35</sup> One of the studies in a volume published in 2018 (related to the parliamentary elections) examined the social embeddedness and ideological division of the Hungarian electorate and stated *"the 2018 results – which showed a 10% increase in female support for Fidesz – mainly point to the existence of a conservative 'gender gap', while in the case of Jobbik, the party continued to be supported overwhelmingly by men."*<sup>36</sup> The most relevant statement in a monograph published in 2019, which deals with the political thinking, political integration, and political participation of Hungarian society, is the following: *"Although previous research showed that public and*

*political participation is more common among men, according to the data from 2018, this difference – at least in 2018 – disappeared.”<sup>37</sup> According to one of the relevant findings of a monograph on the political values and identity patterns in Hungarian society, published in 2020, “politics is closer to men’s way of thinking, while religion is closer to women’s way of thinking.”<sup>38</sup> A public opinion poll conducted in February 2022 on behalf of the online newspaper 24.hu revealed, among other things, that a higher proportion of women than men would like to keep the Orbán government in power.<sup>39</sup> The Republikon Institute’s 2023 analysis “20 years of Fidesz core voters: The social background and policy opinions of Fidesz’s committed voters between 2002 and 2021” shows that although Fidesz’s voter turnout was gender-balanced in 2002, by the early 2020s, in terms of its core voter base, Fidesz had become a distinctly female party.<sup>40</sup>*

### **2.3. SURVEYS FOR A NARROWER TARGET GROUP, WITH RELEVANT RESULTS**

Gender differences that may likewise appear when it comes to political orientation, and attitudes can also be

examined in the results of surveys aimed at narrower target groups. Among research projects carried out in recent years, surveys conducted among young people can provide (some) opportunity for this.

According to the report, a 2017 conference on the issue of political socialization of high-school students touched on the noticeable differences between girls and boys in this area: the latter show more interest in political parties.<sup>41</sup> In 2016, Policy Solutions, a political research and consultancy institute published a study revealing that among young Generation Y or Millennial Hungarians (that is, those born between 1980 and 2000), men and boys are more likely to vote than their female peers.<sup>42</sup> A 2019 study published by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung (a political foundation linked to the German Green Party), examines the political integration of Hungarian university students and makes some comments regarding gender differences in support for particular parties.<sup>43</sup> The publication entitled *Youth Study Hungary 2021 – Discontent, Polarisation, Pro-Europeanism*, commissioned by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and authored by András Bíró-Nagy and Andrea Szabó, also covers the attitudes and values of the 15-29 age group towards politics and presents the results in a gender breakdown on several topics.<sup>44</sup>

## 3.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH PLANNING

*Women's political participation*

- Considering primarily the low proportion of women among members of parliament, a more thorough examination of the functioning of the gender quotas applied in Hungary in recent decades – voluntarily, at the level of some parties – should be considered; taking into account which measures have proven effective in this field based on international experience.<sup>45</sup>
- In the spirit of investigating the factors that may complicate women's political participation, the ability of female (and male) politicians to combine work and private life ought to be examined. It may be worth investigating, for instance, the extent to which they are able to take advantage of opportunities that are available (at least in principle) such as maternity and childcare leave. Is the situation of female politicians in this regard comparable to that of highly educated women in general?<sup>46</sup>
- In order to better understand obstacles and difficulties, it is important to learn more – beyond anecdotal reports – about the phenomenon of harassment of female politicians (including online harassment and hate speech).
- A great deal of research in Hungary has already dealt with the kinds of organizations that women and men participate in, and the difference (to the disadvantage of women) has been most clearly evident in terms of (party) political activity, narrowly considered. The question is whether this has changed in recent times, and how the role of women and girls is evolving in the field of activism involving open political expression (e.g. organizing demonstrations).

*Women voters*

- Given the presumably different party preferences of women and men, one exciting research topic could involve investigating the political communication of each party: do they address female (or male) voters separately, and if so, is this done openly or covertly? What messages are being sent specifically to women (or men)?

- It may be important to know more about the political views of certain groups of women – beyond the young age group. Considering the composition of the Hungarian population, it would be particularly relevant to conduct research on this topic among elderly<sup>47</sup> or Roma women.

*Approaches*

As regards the topic of “women and politics”, it may first be necessary to put theoretical and political-philosophical questions on the agenda, and to re-examine them, especially in terms of ideas about representation and social justice. An examination of the history of political thought can also provide relevant lessons.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, thematic research covering particular historical periods would be welcome. One such example was a research program of the Institute of Political History entitled “Women in Public Life” (led by Mária Palasik), which primarily examined post-1989 processes.<sup>49</sup> The issue of “women and politics” (all its aspects) can also be examined in light of particular political trends; we can find examples of this approach from the recent past (e.g. in relation to conservative politics<sup>50</sup> or the extreme right<sup>51</sup>). Another possible goal involves examining the institutional frameworks for “women's politics” – that is, public policy relating to women – an example of which is one of the studies in the volume entitled “The Price of Those Years Without Women” published by the Hungarian Women's Lobby, an umbrella of women's NGOs.<sup>52</sup>

When examining the political and social policy measures concerning women, one approach which cannot be ignored in Hungary's case (and which is increasingly popular in English-language scholarship) examines the “backlash” against expanding women's rights.<sup>53</sup> This position has been made official by the European Parliament in its resolution of 13 February 2019 on the decline in the enforcement of women's rights and gender equality in the European Union. Proponents of this approach sometimes trace perceived problems to the lack of “substantive representation of women”, that is, to the fact that the multitude of female perspectives are not meaningfully represented (even if certain executive roles are occupied by women).<sup>54</sup>

*Possible data sources for analyses*

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there is probably more data available for analysis and research preparation than is at first apparent. The use of international data collection, especially at the European level (European Social Survey, European Values Study) is considered a common practice, and data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office can also be used by social science researchers (it should be noted that the latest volume of the Central Statistical Office's pocketbook series 'Women and Men in Hungary'

was published in 2021, with data from 2019).<sup>55</sup> The use of research repositories is less straightforward, although there have long been initiatives to do so in Hungary, including in the field of social sciences, such as the TÁRKI Data Bank.<sup>56</sup> As a member of the Eötvös Loránd Research Network, materials stored in the repository of the Centre for Social Sciences (formerly affiliated with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences),<sup>57</sup> including collections related to research projects and individual research documents, are available free of charge to researchers, university students, and the wider public.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Lídia Balogh** obtained her Ph.D. from the ELTE University in Budapest, Doctoral School of Philosophy. She is working as a research fellow for the Institute for Legal Studies at the Centre for Social Sciences (Department of Legal Theory, the Sociology of Law, and the History of Law). Her research interests include anti-discrimination, equal opportunities (for women and men), minority rights, and protection of ethnic minorities. She is a visiting lecturer at the ELTE University Faculty of Social Sciences (Institute of Political and International Studies). She contributes to the work of the European Network of Legal Experts in Gender Equality and Non-discrimination, funded by the European Commission. Since the mid-2000s, she has worked for human rights NGOs, women's organizations, and Roma rights organizations.

**Borbála Juhász** obtained her MA in History and English from ELTE University in Budapest in 1992 and in Comparative History from CEU, Budapest in 1998. She has worked as a teacher at grammar schools and colleges, as a leading civil servant responsible for equal opportunities policies at the Secretariat of Equal Opportunities, and as a gender expert at the Hungarian Women's Lobby. She was the vice president of the European Women's Lobby and the chair of the Hungarian Women's Lobby. Her research areas include women's history, women in politics, anti-gender backlash, prostitution and anti-trafficking. She is member of the NGO Roundtable Against Anti-trafficking at the European Commission and at the Ministry of Interior in Hungary. She currently works as a teacher in children's protection.

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[budapest@fes.de](mailto:budapest@fes.de)

<https://budapest.fes.de/>

### Project coordinator:

Csilla Malomvölgyi

### Translator:

Thomas Sneddon

### Infographics:

Réka Elekes

### Layout:

Wellcom Graphic Studio

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## ARE WOMEN WANTED IN POLITICS AT ALL? WOMEN AND POLITICS IN HUNGARY (RESEARCH IDEAS)



Considering the low proportion of women among members of parliament in Hungary, it would be worthwhile to take a look at the gender quota used by political parties, and at political activism of women. It would be important to investigate the factors that may complicate women's political participation, for instance, the compability of work and private life or the phenomenon of harassment of female politicians.



In the context of women as voters, one exciting research topic could involve investigating the political communication of each political party, but knowing more about the political views of certain groups of women would also be important.



There is probably more data available for analysis and research preparation than is at first apparent. The use of international data collection, especially at the European level (European Social Survey, European Values Study) is considered a common practice, and data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) can also be used by social science researchers. It is worth looking at the TÁRKI Data Bank and at materials stored in the repository of the Centre for Social Sciences (formerly affiliated with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences).

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