

Sonia Rojeska

sonia.rojeska@gmail.com

Akademia Humanistyczno-Ekonomiczna w Łodzi

Gender imbalance in the political landscape and mainstream media discourse in Poland¹

The issues addressed in the dissertation *Gender imbalance in the political landscape and mainstream media discourse in Poland* are summarised in this paper. In order to discuss the problem of gender inequality, attention was focused on communities dealing with the issue. The dissertation also considered the history of Poland. The writing of the dissertation coincided with several events that were significant for Polish citizens. On 21 October 2018 (and 4 November 2018 (the 2nd round)), Polish local self-government elections were held. The relatively young Polish democracy, which introduced local self-governments, can be dated to the political changes after 1989. Since then, political participation in Poland has been increasing very slowly to slightly over 50% in the local elections in 2018.

On 26 May 2019 people of member states of the European Union voted in the European Parliament elections. It was the fourth time Polish citizens had voted in this election since Poland became a member of the European Union in 2004. A woman was ranked first on the list of candidates who accumulated the most votes in those elections. Former PiS (Law and Justice) government prime minister Beata Szydło gained over half a million votes.

On 11 November 2018 Poles celebrated the 100th anniversary of Poland regaining independence. Along with reclaiming independence, Poles obtained electoral votes. For the first time both Polish men and women could vote. The Second Polish Republic was one of the first countries in the world that granted women electoral rights. In the elections to the Legislative Sejm, whose 100th anniversary was celebrated last year, seven women were elected deputies: Gabriela Balicka-Iwanowska, Jadwiga Dziubińska, Irena

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Kosmowska, Maria Moczydłowska, Zofia Moraczewska, Zofia Sokolnicka and Franciszka Wilczkowiakowa. Officially, the history of women in politics in Poland begins with the regaining of independence and Poland appearing again on the map of Europe. In fact, women's activism in the field of politics arose earlier with the female press and multiple female self-organisations. The names of women, their ideals, attitudes and aspirations, which contributed to shaping Polish realities at the beginning of the 20th century, are almost forgotten today, which is undeniably symptomatic of current gender biases.

The dissertation reviews the situation of women in politics 100 years after gaining the franchise in Poland in 1918. The theoretical problem addressed in the dissertation is how the portrayal of female representation in popular news media impacts on the contemporary political landscape in Poland in relation to gender balance and power distribution. Critical analysis of media discourse has been performed on sample texts which appeared on four most influential online news platforms in Poland. Special focus is paid to how media discourse may reinforce the power imbalance.

The aim of the thesis is not only to investigate the current Polish political scene, but also to propose how political institutions and social practices could possibly be rearranged in order to give women more space in the political arena. The dissertation:

- presents some influential but almost forgotten Polish female politicians (herstory)
- examines the current state of the political landscape in Poland as well as globally
- investigates media discourse in Poland.

The dissertation shows how women lead differently than their male counterparts as politicians, educators and social activists, and highlights challenges they face because of their gender. The main assumption of the dissertation is that bridging the gender gap in political leadership would add new values to politics in general and to the politics in Poland in particular. To put it simply: more women in politics means that the varied interests of voters are represented more evenly.

Feminist political theory

Feminist political theory covers a wide range of approaches. It overlaps with related areas, including legislation, philosophy, empirical research in political science and feminist research methods applied in political science.

As stated by Watson², what distinguishes feminist political theory from *feminism* in general terms is the specific examination of the state and its role in reproducing or correcting gender inequality. As most feminist theories, feminist political theory demonstrates relations of power present in our daily lives. Thereupon feminist theory taken as a whole can be described as a political philosophy. The field of feminist political theory is not only broad and multidisciplinary, it is also relatively new. The terms *feminist political theory* and *feminist political philosophy* correspond and can be used interchangeably. *The Stanford*

² L. Watson, *Feminist Political Theory*, [in:] *International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford 2013.

Encyclopedia of Philosophy uses the term *feminist political philosophy* and explains it as a field for the development of new ideals and practices in political and social institutions.

Feminist political philosophy is an area of philosophy that focuses on understanding and criticising common political philosophy and how it is systematically constructed. It unveils the deficiency and inadequacy of the traditional approach, which overlooks women. Feminist political philosophy draws attention to feminist concerns and articulates how political theory may be reconstructed in a way that advances them. Feminist political philosophy can be described as a branch of both feminist philosophy and political philosophy. As a branch of feminist philosophy, it serves as a form of critique. It investigates the political world and uncovers the ways in which women and women's current and historical concerns are poorly depicted, represented and addressed. As a branch of political philosophy, feminist political philosophy creates ground for developing new ideals and practices for how political institutions and tools should be reconstructed and reorganised. Feminist political philosophy can be described as the paradigmatic branch of feminist philosophy. It best illustrates the meaning of feminist theory, which is, to change the existent order. While feminist philosophy has already criticised and reconstructed many areas of philosophy, from aesthetics to the philosophy of science, feminist political philosophy focuses broadly on understanding ways in which collective life can be improved. First, it has to be understood how power emerges and how it is used or misused in public life.³

Reality shaping power of the media

In the introduction to *Medien-Welten Wirklichkeiten* Gianni Vattimo and Wolfgang Iser⁴ argue that 'In the last century, the role of the media has been transformed from an element delivering reality (*Wirklichkeitsvermittlung*) into a factor imprinting its mark on this reality (*Wirklichkeitsprägung*)'. The main goal of the dissertation's chapter on the media is to show that the media are a powerful tool that influences opinions and attitudes, and shapes society. In the literature on the subject one can find divergent views: exaggerating the impact of mass media on the recipient, as well as completely denying them such powers. The author acknowledges the potential of the message delivered by the media, the message which is present despite or because of being unspoken (*das Unsagbare*) and which can, and does, shape the understanding of the modern world. The activity of media, understood as an information transporting network of a vast range, certainly constitutes an element that co-creates how we understand the world.

Most people are convinced of their absolute freedom of making decisions in everyday life. They live convinced of the independence of their opinions, knowledge and beliefs. While refusing to admit that they may be affected by mass media (news, advertisements), they tend to think that the media may have more influence on others than on themselves.⁵

³ N. McAfee, K.B. Howard, *Feminist Political Philosophy*, [in:] E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/feminism-political>.

⁴ G. Vattimo, W. Iser (Hg.), *Medien-Welten, Wirklichkeiten*, Fink, München 1998.

⁵ D. Doliński, *Psychologiczne mechanizmy reklamy*, GWP, Gdańsk 2003, p. 13.

Meanwhile, the issue of the impact of mass communication media on the recipient, or more precisely – the effects they induce, has begun to gain more and more space in the field of communication research. Almost all research on knowledge about mass communication concerns the issue of the impact of mass media on the recipient. This issue stays in focus not only to media researchers, but also to those who *create* these media. Knowledge in the field of mass communication serves practitioners in many spheres of social life, such as political, social or advertising communication.

Information and communication technologies play an increasing role in the modern world, facilitating the transmission of information on a gigantic scale. The Internet, carrying a vast range of information resources and services, electronic mail, telephony, etc., has become an inherent part of the everyday life of billions of people around the world. Portable devices such as smartphones allow people to dive into the information network anywhere, anytime. Paying attention to dynamic changes in people's needs and behaviour, the press and television industry is gradually moving to the Internet. The media's ability to shape views and, for instance, political choices is expanding thanks to the medium that allows people to be 'constantly informed'. In the modern world, online media are there shaping opinions, attitudes, ideas, decisions, co-creating the human beings of the 21st century. Given the growing role that the online press and social media play in everyday life, they should be acknowledged as powerful tools to induce social changes.

Women in media

According to the Council of Europe, women in the EU represent only about 25% of the people visible in the news – read about, heard or seen in the media. Women's low visibility, both qualitative and quantitative, manifests itself in sexist media content, rare use of women as experts and the relative absence of women's viewpoints and opinions in the media. Globally, women journalists and media professionals are often being excluded from more prestigious topics, they are five times less rewarded for their work achievements, and their occupation of senior positions within media organisations is minimal. Women, as media professionals, often encounter pay inequalities and precarious conditions of employment. According to the Global Media Monitoring Report in 2015, women made up only one in four media decision-makers, one in three reporters and one in five experts interviewed. Under-representation of women in decision making in this sector contributes to the choice of topics and the way they are presented. Inequalities in society are reproduced in the media. Media content very often reinforces stereotypes and attitudes contributing to discrimination and violence against women.

Conclusion

The main questions of the dissertation were: Is gender inequality present in politics in contemporary Poland? Is the media discourse to some extent responsible for preventing women from entering the world of politics? Finally, should modern society aim to introduce more women into politics?

The purpose of the research was to identify gender inequality in the political landscape in Poland. It revealed the gendered imbalance of power in popular Polish news media. By analysing the factual presence of women in politics in Poland 100 years ago and today, as well as their presence in the news media at the turn of 2017/2018, the dissertation showed that women do not benefit from quantitatively equal representation either in politics or in the media. Those outcomes were interrelated, since lower representation in politics translates to lower visibility in news media. Nevertheless, the results of critical analysis of the media discourse delivered in the dissertation indicated this relation can be reverted. The assumption, which arose from the research, is that qualitatively lower presentation of women in the media may indirectly influence women's decisions regarding the choice of career path. Despite the prevailing recognition of the central role of media in shaping society's perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, this assumption has not been sufficiently justified within this research.

In the qualitative analysis of the news media discourse in Poland carried out for the purpose of the dissertation, the following social problems were stated:

- media content overwhelmingly focuses on soft news, which includes information about female politicians' personal characteristics or private life instead of their political positions;
- women's appearance is the subject of public discussion;
- women holding public office are very often compared to somebody, first and foremost – to Margaret Thatcher;
- great focus is laid on women being mistaken in their public communication e.g. in social media
- a popular topic of news content is conflict between women, their reactions to that conflict and its outcome.

The findings confirm that gender inequality is reflected in the way women are presented in the news. This research clearly illustrates gender bias being transported by language and reproduced by the media, but it also raises the question of the impact of this phenomenon on women in Poland.

To answer the latter question regarding justification for greater inclusion of women in politics in Poland: gender balance in politics is not only needed but also constitutes an inevitable element of modern democracy. Since society and legislation (seen as powers) agreed to guarantee all citizens electoral rights – both active and passive – women, just as men, are allowed to participate in political life as much by choosing their delegates as by representing their voters. It is credible to assume that women in politics broaden the representation of the diverse interests of voters by addressing issues and needs they can relate to. Moreover, according to the research, women are often equipped with a different *voice* (Gilligan, 1982). Women introduce a different approach to problem-solving, decision-making, prioritisation of issues, to name only a few aspects, if they dare to speak up. Some believe it was much more difficult a hundred years ago than it is now. Nothing could be more wrong. The process of cultural shift takes much more time than does a legislative change. The gender equality women aim for today means equal visibility, acknowledgement, participation and responsibility of both women and men in all spheres of public life. Gender balance is one of the indicators of gender equality, prerequisite for

achievement of social justice. Aiming for diversity in media content is essential for fostering the instruments of democracy, such as public debate and political pluralism. Bridging the gender gap is not of interest to women only, but it concerns society as a whole. Democratic governance and sound decision-making requires the equal participation of women and men in society. This is an essential condition if politics are to reflect the reality of citizens in all their diversity.

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