



## Not only a Seat but also a Say at the Political Table: Enhancing Women's Leadership in the Polish and Slovak Parliaments

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*Poland and Slovakia are holding parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2023. This presents an opportunity to assess the state of gender parity within their parliaments, country-specific barriers and their commitment to inclusive electoral lists. In both parliaments, women remain underrepresented due to a combination of socio-cultural factors. This means lost potential, as gender-balanced representation and inclusion would lead to more vigorous policymaking and informed debates, allowing different perspectives to be heard. This, in turn, translates into better opportunities and protection for citizens.*

### State of play

Even though women comprise approximately half the population, gender parity in national parliaments remains rare, with only 26.5% representation in 2022 (IPU) worldwide, and 33% in the EU (EIGE). This limits the opportunities for women to be considered for high-level positions, often making their voices in decision-making unheard.

In **Poland**, post-1989, women have remained underrepresented in both houses of the parliament, with the lowest representation in the years 1991–1993 (10% in the Sejm, 8% in the Senate). In 2011, a gender quota system was reinstated, mandating a minimum of 35% representation for both genders on Sejm candidate lists. Nevertheless, as of September 2023, women still accounted for only 28.3% of the Sejm, 24% of the Senate and 17.9% of ministers. Poland has had three female prime ministers but never a female president. Currently, no woman leads a party, though some parties maintain gender balance among vice-chairpersons.

In **Slovakia**, before the 2023 parliamentary elections, female MPs made up 21.3%, which makes it the fifth lowest representation in the EU. Slovakia does not use gender quotas as they hold a negative connotation from the communist period. Historical data shows limited progress, with the lowest female MP count at 17 out of 150 in 1998 and the highest at 32 out of 150 in 2020.

Furthermore, women have rarely held high-ranking positions. There has only been one female prime minister and one female president – the currently serving Zuzana Čaputová, who chose not to seek re-election despite strong support. In the previous regular government (until May 2023), only two out of 16 ministers were women. In the current interim government, there are two female ministers and one female deputy prime minister. Political parties are not promoting women as leaders, as there are no female party chairs, and women in vice-chair positions are a minority.

### Party chairpersons

(as of September 2023, authors' own calculations, based on data available on the websites of respective parties)

\* Selected political parties, currently in the parliament

\*\* Selected political parties, based on real chances to enter parliament (10/23)

Poland*			Slovakia**		
Party	Chair	Vice-chair	Party	Chair	Vice-chair
Law and Justice, PiS	0	1/6	Progresívne Slovensko	0	2/6
Civic Platform, PO	0	5/10	OL'ANO a Prijatelia	0	ND
Poland 2050	0	3/6	Sloboda a Solidarita	0	1/5
Polish People's Party, PSL	0	1/6	Sme Rodina	0	1/6
New Left, NL	0/2	7/14	Smer-SD	0	0/6
Confederation	0/2	0/7	Hlas-SD	0	2/5
German minority	0/1	0/2	Demokrati	0	1 /4
			Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie	0	0/4
			Republika	0	0/4
			Slovenská národná strana	0	2/9

## Persistent glass ceiling: identifying barriers

One of the main reasons for women's absence in the parliaments of Poland and Slovakia is their **decision not to enter politics**. It is influenced by well-entrenched factors like traditional gender roles and **societal expectations**. Both countries have strong Catholic influences, and the church still shapes values. Adult women are often viewed as mothers, wives and caregivers, with pressure to balance careers and household duties, resulting in **additional unpaid work**. In Poland, a 2017 CBOS (Center for Public Opinion Research) study found that 22% of men and 19% of women believed women in high-level positions cannot be good mothers and wives, and 51% of women and 48% of men believed that for women marriage, is more important than a career. **Balancing these various roles under public scrutiny** is challenging and discourages young women in particular from taking further steps in political life. In Slovakia, female candidates were not spared from being 'sent to the kitchen to cook and bake' (Monika Podhorány Masariková).

**Unconscious biases** persist: in Poland, 24% of men and 21% of women (CBOS, 2017) view women as too emotional to lead and often judge them on appearance over competence. In both countries, women in exposed positions face sexist narratives, especially online. A 2023 GLOBSEC study found that 88% of negative online comments targeted women's intellectual abilities, while 66% targeted men's skills, experience and competencies. **Men's dominance in politics** and the lack of female role models reinforce the perception of politics as a male domain. Some (20% of men and 12% of women in Poland, CBOS, 2017) still believe women should avoid politics. Female politicians may hesitate to encourage others due to their own hardships or fear of being labelled as 'feminists' disrupting the status quo.

Despite a higher number of female news presenters and reporters, **media bias** persists, favouring men in debates due to perceptions of them as "reliable" experts. Female politicians are invited less often, and their expertise tends to be confined to "typical" women's issues. To counter this, Veronika Cifrová Ostrihoňová hosts the women-only talk show "Silná zostava" (Strong Lineup) in Slovakia, covering issues from foreign policy to security, mental health and the economy. In Poland, the media portal Wirtualna Polska organised a pre-electoral "Debate of Women" to amplify their perspectives.

In Slovakia, party leaders often appear in the media alongside female party members when discussing current issues or legislation. This visual representation often highlights the token inclusion of female MPs, with only one or two women compared to four or more men. Some parties in parliament do not even make an effort to include women. This practice extends to pre-election campaigns. Only one party, Progresívne Slovensko (PS), assured parity in appearance (and on the party list).

## Parties as gatekeepers? Elections 2023

Polish parties have faced criticism for placing women in lower positions on electoral lists or in leading positions in constituencies with limited chances of winning. The practice of offering women lower positions is also still predominant in Slovakia. The election law allows for preferential voting, which female voters use more frequently. The “Zakrúžkuj ženu” (Circle a Woman) initiative aims to promote preferential voting for female candidate/s in these elections. However, in the last Slovak elections, no female candidate/s surpassed male candidates through preferential voting.

While in Poland, parties can have up to 41 regional electoral lists, Slovakia uses a single national electoral list with up to 150 candidates, leaving political parties with little space to place candidates. This is an additional, but not the only reason why there have been few women in top positions in Slovakia.

Poland	Women on the electoral lists		1 <sup>st</sup> place	2 <sup>nd</sup> place	3 <sup>rd</sup> place
All candidates, all parties*	2950/6658	44.31%	83/320 (25.9%)	121/320 (37.8%)	125/320 (39%)
New Left, NL	452/912	49.6%	14/41 (34%)	23/41 (56%)	15/41 (36.6%)
Civic Coalition, KO	438/919	47.7%	17/41 (41.4%)	25/41 (61%)	16/41 (39%)
Nonpartisan Local Government Activists, BS	422/904	46.7%	8/41 (19.5%)	14/41 (34.1%)	20/41 (48.8%)
The Third Way (PSL+Poland 2050)	378/918	41.2%	9/41 (22%)	8/41 (19.5%)	21/41 (51.2%)
Law and Justice, PiS	370/918	40.3%	10/41 (24.4%)	11/41 (26.8%)	15/41 (36.59%)
Confederation	364/914	39.8%	1/41 (2.4%)	7/41 (17%)	4/41 (9.8%)
German minority	12/24	50%	0%	0%	100%
Slovakia	Women on the electoral lists		1 <sup>st</sup> place	2 <sup>nd</sup> place	3 <sup>rd</sup> place
All candidates**	341/1500	22.7%	2/150	3/150	5/150
Progresívne Slovensko	76/150	51%	0/1	1/1	0/1
OL'ANO a Prijatelia	34/150	23%	1/1	0/1	0/1
Sloboda a Solidarita	27/150	18%	0/1	0/1	1/1
Sme Rodina	45/150	30%	0/1	0/1	1/1
Smer-SD	19/150	13%	0/1	0/1	0/1
Hlas-SD	29/150	19%	0/1	1/1	0/1
Demokrati	32/150	21%	1/1	1/1	1/1
Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie	27/150	18%	0/1	0/1	1/1
Republika	18/150	12%	0/1	1/1	0/1
Slovenská národná strana	34/150	23%	0/1	0/1	1/1

### Women candidates in 2023 general election

(Authors' own calculation, as of 22 September 2023, based on electoral lists in both countries)

\*Sejm (Lower House)

\*\* Parties listed represent those with the highest chance for parliamentary seats (10/23)

In the Polish election, a record 44.31% of candidates running for Sejm seats are women, reflecting the increased awareness of decision-makers and efforts to mobilise female voters. Left-wing (NL) and centre-right parties (KO, led by Donald Tusk, and BS) have over 46% women candidates. Women also make up nearly 40% of candidates in the openly misogynistic Confederation party, although in lower positions. Additionally, there is a higher-than-usual number of women in the top three positions, increasing their chances of winning. However, only 19.1% of senatorial candidates (69/361) are women due to the absence of a quota system and the compromise-based multi-party democratic opposition list strategy.

In Slovakia, the two leading parties show a stark contrast. SMER-SD, led by former Prime Minister Robert Fico, only includes a woman in 33rd place on their list and has a total of 13% female candidates. On the other hand, Progresívne Slovensko (PS), which supported Zuzana Čaputová but did not secure enough votes in the previous parliament, has the highest representation of women at 51% and uses the zipper system, alternating male and female candidates on their electoral lists. The nationalist party Republika has the lowest number of female candidates at 12%, while most other parties vying for parliamentary seats have female candidates around 20%.

Some political actors are pushing for diversity, including different professions, education levels, and regional representation. Just as geography matters, so does gender. Moreover, 71% of women and 56% of men in Poland (CBOS, 2017) as well as 52% of respondents in Slovakia (Agentura AKO) agree that more women are needed in politics.

### PS: Recommendations

1. **Promote female participation in politics across all age groups** through grassroots involvement, campaigns, mentoring programmes, and the provision of role models.
2. **Enhance women's visibility within the party** through inclusive electoral lists and support their progression into leadership positions. Foster a culture of active support for female colleagues and zero tolerance for sexism or degrading language. Implement ongoing internal processes dedicated to increasing female representation in the party and on election lists.
3. **Increase female politicians' visibility in public space** so they can show their expertise and act as **role models** (nominate them for media interviews, panel discussions and conferences on all issues; offer them coaching or workshops on media competence and debate).
4. **Invest in the campaigns of female candidates and MPs.** Female candidates struggle to gather funds, with donors more often being men who support other men. Set aside funding specifically for female candidates. Showcase their expertise and added value for the party to donors.
5. **Translate good practices from other sectors and regions**, such as northern European countries and Spain, known for gender parity in the public sphere. The combination of practices and existing regulations should be carefully studied in governmental institutions (aided by current research) and appropriately applied.

### PPS: Further reading and links

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE): <https://eige.europa.eu>  
 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU): <https://www.ipu.org>  
 GLOBSEC report: Rodovo podmienená nenávisť v predvolebnom období: <https://bit.ly/46jgtVA>  
 CEE Her, GLOBSEC <https://www.ceeher.org>  
 CBOS report: Stosunek do równouprawnienia płci: <https://bit.ly/45iJsYV>

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