



## **“Advancement of Women’s Issues through Political Mobilization in Hungary: Impact of the Hungarian Socialist Party Quota”**

Zita Gurmai and Marta Bonifert  
CEE Network for Gender Issues

A paper presented at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance  
(IDEA)/CEE Network for Gender Issues Conference

### **The Implementation of Quotas: European Experiences**

Budapest, Hungary, 22–23 October 2004

The countries within the former Austro-Hungarian Empire are long-time traditionalists when it comes to the role of women in society. Hungarian society is no exception with regard to the position of women in public life, particularly in decision-making positions. However, this case study<sup>1</sup> briefly reviews the past 120 years, and illustrates that it is possible to identify the major steps that led to the emergence and acceptance of women in public life.

#### **The Origins of Women’s Political Participation**

The first women’s associations, involving aristocratic women, were established in Hungary in the Reform Age (1825-49), and lacked a distinctive political profile. The first women’s association was called Pesti Jotekony Noegylet (Charity Women’s Association of Pest), set up in 1887. By the end of the 19th century, participation in women’s associations had become a prestigious activity. Real change occurred when social-democratic women formed a revolutionary women’s organization in trade unions in the final years of the 19th century.

These women engaged in highly politicized action, such as the fight for universal suffrage prior to the First World War—Rozsika Bedi-Schwimmer, the leader of the feminist and pacifist movement, had to leave the country. Following the war, in 1920, the first woman deputy, Margit Slachta, the leader of the Social Mission Association, was appointed to parliament. Anna Kethly of the Social Democratic Party followed her in 1922.

Two national women’s associations were founded post-1945 during a period of reconstruction and the re-emergence of networks. The democratization of the country and the introduction of universal women’s suffrage in 1945 accorded feminists no social space, however. The 1951 decision of the Hungarian Workers’ Party (MDP) regarding women’s political participation marked the beginning of the period of state feminism. The number of women deputies in the provisional assembly rose to 12, compared with between one and two in the past. In the first MDP congress only four of 66 deputies were women.

## Women in Parliament

Although women received the right to vote in 1919 and a few women members of parliament (MPs) were elected before the Second World War, women did not enjoy a strong political role in society before 1945. In socialist times, despite the proclamations of the communist regime that gender equality was one of its main values and political goals, and numerous improvements in the economic and social position of women, the percentage of women in parliament never exceeded 35 percent. Furthermore, women were not adequately represented in the executive structures of the only existing political party Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party

Unfortunately, the change to a multi-party system in Hungary in 1989 - did not lead to equality for women. They became the group that lost the most, achieving less in the realms of healthcare, education, employment, social security and childcare, to name but a few. Women's representation in the 386-seat General Assembly fell to 7.3 percent after the first democratic elections in 1990. In 1994, it stood at just 11 percent (the highest level since 1979). In 1998, it fell to 8.3 percent. In 2002, it hovered around ten percent—with three women ministers in government. After the 2004 European Parliament elections it declined again slightly to 9.1 percent.<sup>2</sup> The decline occurred because three incumbent women MPs successfully competed for seats in the European Parliament and none of their replacements in the Hungarian General Assembly were women.

Key factors behind this situation were the following:

- not one of the large political parties that made it into parliament had a strong interest in, and thus programme on, gender equality;
- conservative parties from their establishment/re-establishment promoted the traditional role of women; and
- gender-focused non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and independent women's civil society groups, were numerous, but they could not attract any real attention from any of the decision-makers in government or parliament, not even from opposition parties.<sup>3</sup>

It became a great challenge for Hungarian progressive parties, civil groups and activists to work on gender issues in this environment.

### The Hungarian Socialist Party

Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP) women were among the first to persuade their party to change its attitude towards gender equality. However, the transformation of the HSP into a women-friendly party was slow and very gradual. The shift was helped by the moral backing received from the Socialist International Women (SIW) and its sister organizations and support networks, including the CEE Network for Gender Issues, during the HSP's accession to the Socialist International.<sup>4</sup> The supportive national and international network of politically active women and men also facilitated the process.

The first women's organization within the HSP was established in 1992. The HSP women's organization drew on the examples of British, German and Swedish parties, including their gender-related laws. Among the issues raised was the request, in 1993, to include a quota in the party statute.

The HSP, in coalition with the SZDSZ liberal party (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége: Alliance of Free Democrats) won the second free elections in 1994. The results seemed positive: 11.1 percent of women MPs and one minister. It was obvious, though, that gender equality was not one of the party's priorities, as the gender equality department in the Ministry of Labour was given to the smaller coalition partner, the SZDSZ.

This was also the time when the government had to introduce radical transitional measures to reduce the outstandingly high debt of the country. The austerity programme, while allowing the country to recover, also led to a decline in some important social achievements for women (for instance, paid maternity leave was shortened and many crèches and kindergartens were closed).

Although the country stabilized economically and politically, voters did not forget the austerity programme and hence the HSP lost the election of 1998. The conservative coalition government took office and- restructured its operations, including the introduction of newly developed gender equality mechanisms in the country.<sup>5</sup>

Different steps were taken compared to previous governments, such as the participation of Hungary in the multi-stakeholder 12 country Stability Pact Gender Task Force (SP GTF).<sup>6</sup> HSP and HSDP (Hungarian Social Democratic Party) party leaders signed the appeal to establish the SP GTF, but the new government decided not to take advantage of the opportunity to ensure Hungary's inclusion in regional gender equality projects after 1999.

### ***Lobbying within the Party***

From 1998, the HSP women's organization and its partners started to mobilize in a more structured and determined way, resulting in the HSP 'engendering' its party values, programmes and policies. With the direct moral support of the SIW, material backing from the CEE Network for Gender Issues and in close cooperation with social-democratic foundations and women's organizations from Austria, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, as well as with women from different political backgrounds connected through the SP GTF's regional training programmes, these women activists started to strengthen their party organization. Their work spanned the entire country. There were increasing calls for including a quota in the party statute. Greater emphasis was put on the argument that the party badly needed the support of women and young voters. To be taken seriously by supporters, it is important for the party to highlight these issues, and give prominence to people representing these issues to the decision making structure of the party. Lobbying together with the party's youth organization, HSP women succeeded in getting a 20 percent quota for women and a 20 percent quota for youth integrated into the party statute at the 1999 Congress.<sup>7</sup>

### **Election Results**

The first real breakthrough came with the party leadership that was selected in the internal party elections of 2001, chaired by Laszlo Kovacs. Even though the quota was only 20 percent, all women who ran for positions were elected. Suddenly, the party leadership had 30 percent of capable, visible women, bringing to the electoral race all of their knowledge and strength. This was the moment when people like Katalin Szili and Zita Gurmai led the HSP women's organization, all multilingual, brilliant politicians, dynamic and sensitive to gender issues, with a decade of campaigning experience. Not only did they facilitate the establishment of the best possible tool to invigorate the party electoral campaign, but they also forged a strong relationship with major international support networks.

### ***2002 National Election***

Even if the HSP saw the need to target women voters, very few of its women activists got the chance to run on eligible places on the party lists. The women's organization had two priorities: to change the government; and to introduce the women's quota.<sup>8</sup> HSP women decided to create a progressive tool to ensure that their issues were taken seriously, to underscore their determination and passion for change and to better society.<sup>9</sup>

The establishment of the national Yellow Scarf Movement in 2002 was their most important innovation. In all of Hungary's main cities (more than 50), the HSP women's organization invited all women to back their silent public demand for a change of government policy on gender issues. Every Friday, for two hours, they stood in the main squares of their cities, wearing long yellow scarves, in silent demonstration. They had just one slogan: **governments change, we stay!** As the electoral campaign progressed, an increasing number of women participated in the weekly protests. A few days before the election, 2,500 representatives of the Yellow Scarf Movement from all over the country gathered in a Budapest sport's hall where the HSP's prime ministerial candidate outlined his electoral promises:

- one-week paternity leave following the birth of a baby;
- higher pensions for widows;
- reintegration of women into the labour market; and
- the establishment of a ministerial post in the national government focused on equality matters<sup>10</sup>

The 2002 elections were very tight. The HSP and its coalition partners won by two percent—a couple of thousand people made the difference. A significant proportion of people believe, even among the losing parties, that the Yellow Scarf Movement was the decisive factor.<sup>11</sup>

The movement's success immediately opened a window of opportunity for all women looking to acquire real power in Hungary's public and political spheres. While ten percent is not a high percentage of MPs, women were given many important positions in parliament and government (president of the parliament and three ministerial portfolios). Furthermore, all of the parties started to show more interest in gender equality issues and in having women candidates in the forthcoming council and mayoral elections. On comparing figures for the local elections of 1994 and 1998, one sees that the percentage of women councillors rose from 20 percent to 23 percent and the number of women mayors from ten percent to 13 percent. In 2002, the statistics slightly increased. Women were successful not only in small, poor, rural communities, but also in important cities like Nyiregyháza and Szolnok.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The European Parliament***

It seems that the HSP really understood the power of women voters and the importance of its gender equality policy in getting them on-board. The new government kept the promise that it had made to women during the pre-electoral campaign, and started to work seriously on gender equality issues in the context of Hungary's accession to the European Union (EU). A gender equality minister was appointed for the first time, the gender equality mechanism was re-established and given a much stronger mandate than was the case between 1994 and 1998, legislation in some fields (labour, violence against women and trafficking) was reshaped in accordance with EU best practice, and the first anti-discrimination law was passed in 2004.<sup>13</sup>

HSP women's next battle for full gender equality in politics came in June 2004, during the first EU elections in Hungary. This time, the CEE Network for Gender Issues worked closely with campaigning women across the region, among others, introducing a specific sandwich strategy. The HSP women's organization applied bottom-up pressure, while social-democratic women within the Party of European Socialist (PES) applied top-down pressure. The leader of the PES, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, sent a letter to all social-democratic party heads, including EU newcomers, asking them to target women voters in their campaigns and to give their women candidates a real chance of election. In Hungary, this strategy worked very well. The results of women's campaigns in the last national and local elections offer the best proof yet that a gender equality approach really matters.

### ***Election 2004***

The European parliamentary election of 2004 revealed a very positive result. Of the first 18 candidates on the conservative's list, six were women. The liberals had eight women among their 18 candidates, while the socialists placed five women among their 24 candidates (although they were all in winning positions). The HSP makes up the second biggest Hungarian faction within the European Parliament. The total number of Hungarian women in the European Parliament is 9, out of a total of 24 Hungarian Members of the European Parliament.

### ***European Parliament Party Delegations***

The HSP brought to the Party of European Socialist a delegation of European parliamentarians consisting of five women (55 percent) and only four men. A so-called contagion effect—when a serious approach to gender equality in one party forces competing parties also to move in the right direction—was also visible with regard to the group of European parliamentarians elected to the group of the European People's Party. This right-wing party, which won the European Parliament elections in Hungary, has 23 percent of women, one even coming from the Roma community.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Results of the HSP Quota**

What impact has the use of the quota by HSP women had on the political empowerment of women in Hungary? What lessons can be learnt?

1. The quota can serve as a positive measure to counter structural gender inequality within a large party only if there is enough systematic external support (from the PES and SIW, and from sister parties and their women's organizations). Additionally, women must be organized regionally (CEE Network for Gender Issues and SP GTF), so that they can help each other with the exchange of best practice, and a strong and determined women's organization must exist that is capable of attracting important allies within the party. In this case, these allies were the youth organization and new party leaders.
2. The quota will be well respected only if the women's party organization can ensure its public visibility and prove that campaigning produces tangible results. In this case, the Yellow Scarf Movement ensured the visibility of HSP women and the result of the general election in 2002 persuaded the HSP to take gender equality seriously.
3. To sustain the process and to trigger a contagion effect, the most important thing is that the first big party with a respected quota, leading to a larger number of women being elected on all levels, keeps its promises to voters and that its women's organization does not forget to take advantage of an ensuing window of opportunity. In this case, the window of opportunity took the form of the first European Parliament election in Hungary.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Women have come to acquire political power through political parties. The quota is an important tool to enhance their participation in decision-making, helping women to assume an active and visible role in public life.

In summary, from 1990–2002, the number of women candidates grew continuously—actually, the figure doubled. In 2002, 614 women participated in the parliamentary elections (17.8 percent of all candidates). Of the running female candidates, 5.7 percent entered the General Assembly. Of the running male candidates, 12.4 percent entered the General Assembly.

Strategies that bolster women's participation in politics are the application of the parity principle and the employment of the quota system in the election of the political

structure. According to the parity principle, the representation of women and men in governing structures should be 50:50. The Hungarian Constitution ensures this, stipulating that: **'The Republic of Hungary shall ensure the equality of men and women in all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights'**.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> This case study is largely based on Gurmai, Zita and Marta Bonifert. 2005. "The Yellow Scarf Success: The impact of the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP) Quota". In Sonja Lokar, ed. *From Quota to Parity: Social Democratic Women in Action. Novi Sad, Serbia and Montenegro*, CEE Network for Gender Issues.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13. See also Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2005. 'Women in National Parliaments,' available at <http://www.ipu.org>

<sup>3</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>6</sup> The Gender Task Force is the working body of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and is working under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>9</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>12</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>13</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.