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## The Congress of Polish Women as an example of the struggle for women's rights

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**Summary:** When considering the issues related to the fight for women's political it is not possible to disregard some of the most important factors determining the level of women's participation in political life. As regards scientific discussion on the presence of women in government roles, the most frequently cited reason contributing to lesser representation of women are biological, social, ideological, structural, cultural, religious and economic factors.

100 years have passed and women, who account for slightly more than a half of the Polish society, still have too low representation in the parliament, in many cases their salaries are lower than those of men at similar positions, they play specific social and professional roles assigned on the grounds of sex, and still some people try to marginalize them professionally and deprive of their freedoms. The aim of this text is to analyze premises for the establishing of the Association of Congress of Women and results achieved over the past ten years. The main objectives adopted for purpose of the text include the verification of demands set by the Association and their implementation, and the analysis of its activity in terms of socio-political changes. Content analysis was used as the method.

**Keywords:** Congress of Polish Women, women's rights, women in politics

## Introduction

The role of women in public space has been a relatively frequent subject discussed by researchers all over the world. In Poland, since 1989, we have witnessed a growing role of women in politics, as illustrated by a larger number of women on electoral lists and more women in the Polish Parliament. Additionally, we have noted the presence of women in EU institutions. However, it is worth noting that despite some positive changes in favor of women, in Poland, there are still visibly fewer women than men in politics. It seems that this state of affairs is the consequence of still many barriers restricting women's public activity, in particular in politics.

When considering the issues related to the fight for women's political it is not possible to disregard some of the most important factors determining the level of women's participation in political life. As regards scientific discussion on the presence of women in government roles, the most frequently cited reason contributing to lesser representation of women are biological, social, ideological, structural, cultural, religious and economic factors. Below listed are the most important factors determining women's participation in political life<sup>1</sup>. Some of the most noticeable barriers encountered by women include cultural factors. Traditionally, politics is understood to be the "male realm" in which there is no place for women. A specific nature of politics, as some emphasize it, includes special qualities, which by nature are available to men<sup>2</sup>. The reason for the absence of women in political life is the socialization process, during which girls and boys prepare themselves to play different roles in the society. The main task for women is to pursue the role of mothers, wives, and housewives, whereas men are to take care of living conditions for themselves and their families. Additionally, societies themselves do not perceive women as predestined to political positions, and often

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<sup>1</sup> M. Musiał-Karg, *Kobiety w organach władzy ustawodawczej i wykonawczej*, [in:] *Kobiety we współczesnej Europie. Rola i miejsce kobiet na rynku pracy, w polityce i w społeczeństwie*, ed. M. Musiał-Karg, Toruń 2009.

<sup>2</sup> O. Barburska, *Czynniki determinujące udział kobiet w sprawowaniu władzy politycznej w krajach Europy Zachodniej*, „*Studia Polityczne*” 2002, no 2, p. 73.

women do not recognize their virtues, capabilities and suitability for performing such roles<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, societies support socio-cultural stereotypes that involve, for instance, the idea of the patriarchy where the traditional system of values stresses gender-oriented division of roles with no or limited consent to political commitment of women<sup>4</sup>. In such a system, the sole privilege that women have is the possibility to participate in elections. Yet another important factor is Religion, and according to Olga Barburska, women in Protestant countries show a higher political activity than women in catholic countries<sup>5</sup>. Other cultural facts also include the outreach of feminist movements; the more active the feminist community is, the more feminism is widespread and the more women occupy high ranking public positions<sup>6</sup>.

**Table.** Factors affecting participation of women in public life

Cultural factors	Socio-economic factors	Political factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– perception of politics as a field which is not women friendly</li> <li>– socialization process (preparation to perform other roles)</li> <li>– religion that prevails in the country</li> <li>– feminist movements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– economic and social status</li> <li>– access to education</li> <li>– lack of sufficient financial resources</li> <li>– difficulties on the labor market and unemployment</li> <li>– double load: professional work and home</li> <li>– general level of economic development of the country</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– political system</li> <li>– election system</li> <li>– activities of political parties</li> <li>– ideology of a party</li> </ul>

Source: M. Musiał-Karg, *Kobiety w organach władzy ustawodawczej i wykonawczej*, [in:] *Kobiety we współczesnej Europie. Rola i miejsce kobiet na rynku pracy, w polityce i w społeczeństwie*, ed. M. Musiał-Karg, Toruń 2009; O. Barburska, *Czynniki determinujące udział kobiet w sprawowaniu władzy politycznej w krajach Europy Zachodniej*, "Studia Polityczne" 2002, no. 2, p. 73; M. Fuszara, *Kobiety w polityce*, Warsaw 2007, pp. 263–284.

<sup>3</sup> M. Fuszara, *Kobiety w polityce*, Warszawa 2007, p. 264.

<sup>4</sup> O. Barburska, op.cit., p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, pp. 45–75.

<sup>6</sup> M. Musiał-Karg, op.cit.

As regards the perception of women in public life, socio-economic factors play a tremendously important role. These include social and economic status, access to education, financial resources and access to the labor market, unemployment, and double duties at work and at home.

Among socio-economic factors an important role seems to play a general level of economic development of a given country. The high level of development may contribute to the empowerment of women, inter alia, through increased urbanization, higher level of education, and consequently enhanced interest among women to be active beyond their homes, which translates into their greater participation in the labor market<sup>7</sup>.

The most important category determining women's participation includes political factors. These factors influence the creation of political elites, or the selection of candidates to be put in election lists and the election process itself. Therefore, we may conclude that the participation of women in the government depends on political, party and election systems. The ideology of political parties also has its impact on the representation of women in a given political party, and thus in political life. Right wing parties usually have fewer female members than left-wing ones. An important role in this context is played by mechanisms designed to increase the participation of women in politics<sup>8</sup>.

All the above mentioned factors have influence on the number of women present on the political arena in a country and the number of them occupying high-ranking public functions. In the opinion of Christine Ockrent, "Regardless culture or political system in which women pursue their talents and powers, it can be concluded that their ambitions, methods of gaining and exercising power are very similar as in men". But for women everything was and still is more difficult<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, pp. 79–82.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> C. Ockrent, *Kobiety u władzy*, Warszawa 2007, p. 174.

## **Female Poles in political life. From election rights to the Congress of Women**

Celebrated in 2018, the centennial anniversary of regaining independence by Poland connects to the hundredth anniversary of obtaining electoral rights by Polish women. In 1918, together with the establishment of the Second Republic, women in Poland, as some of the first in Europe, were granted active and passive suffrage. In 1921, women's civil rights have been included in the Constitution. This was to prove the strengthening role of women and recognition of their contribution to the liberation of Poland after partitions. From that moment on, female Poles could vote and stand as for elections<sup>10</sup>. This fact was a major step on the way to gender equality. However, it was a "drop in the ocean" of what was needed in political, social and economic terms.

100 years have passed and women, who account for slightly more than a half of the Polish society, still have too low representation in the parliament, in many cases their salaries are lower than those of men at similar positions, they play specific social and professional roles assigned on the grounds of sex, and still some people try to marginalize them professionally and deprive of their freedoms. The aim of this text is to analyze premises for the establishing of the Association of Congress of Women and results achieved over the past ten years. The main objectives adopted for purpose of the text include the verification of demands set by the Association and their implementation, and the analysis of its activity in terms of socio-political changes. Content analysis was used as the method. The author wishes to indicate that considering a limited number of studies on the Congress of Women, most information about its functioning has been taken from the official website of the organization.

The system transformation did not lead to any dramatic changes in women's participation in politics. As Małgorzata Kamola-Cieślik put it, until 1997 the level of ministerial positions occupied by women

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<sup>10</sup> W. Malendowski, *Kobiety w polityce Wybrane problemy*, red. W. Malendowski, Poznań 1995, s. 12.

was very similar to that of 1987. On the one hand, it should be noted that only “in Jerzy Buzek’s government five women were appointed ministers”<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand,

after 1989 (...) many different feminist organizations were established, which showed the diversity of the then Polish women’s movements. These were non-governmental organizations which supported women and tried to establish gender equality<sup>12</sup>.

In the early nineties of the 20th c., the participation of women in the legislative branch significantly dropped. Despite the fact, female members of the Sejm created a Parliamentary Circle of Women, which was later converted into a Parliamentary Group of Women. In December 1990, the Democratic Union of Women was formed. The declared program of the association focused on such values as equality before the law, the freedom of choice, comprehensive promotion of women, educating the public on women’s rights<sup>13</sup>. It is worth noting that in 2007, the Party of Women was established in Poland, program of which called for medical care for women, equal salaries to those of men, and care for single mothers<sup>14</sup>. In the parliamentary election, this political grouping failed, getting only slightly more than 45 thousand votes<sup>15</sup>.

While comparing the duration of various women’s groups/organizations, it can be seen that the majority of them did not survive for too long and had not much impact on the public debate regarding the rights of Polish women as the Congress of Women. Previously only raised and in 2009 vividly debated in the public space the issue

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<sup>11</sup> M. Kamola-Cieślak, *Działalność kobiet w Radzie Ministrów w Polsce w latach 1989–2008*, [in:] *Kobiety we współczesnej Europie. Rola i miejsce kobiet na rynku pracy, w polityce i w społeczeństwie*, red. M. Musiał-Karg, Toruń 2009, p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> K.L. Kuklińska, *Polskie singielki*, Warszawa 2012, p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> M. Kamola-Cieślak, op.cit., p. 96.

<sup>14</sup> M. Drzonek, *Partia Kobiet, nowa partia „swojska”*, [in:] *Kobiety we współczesnej Europie. Rola i miejsce kobiet na rynku pracy, w polityce i w społeczeństwie*, red. M. Musiał-Karg, Toruń 2009, p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, pp. 149–150

parities at election lists was followed by specific actions against the patriarchal social system<sup>16</sup>. This challenge was met by the Congress of Women which, with the motto of “Women for Poland. Poland for Women. 20 years of transformation 1989–2009”, was convened for the first time in Warsaw in 2009. The Congress was meant to be the response to the expropriation of the idea of transformation and its achievements by men, and the exclusion of women from the process of emerging from communism. Although the Congress stressed its independence from other initiatives, its founding members were involved in the public activity, including gender equality. The Congress called for creating mechanisms that promote equal opportunities for women in public life, in particular the introduction of quotas and parities in the electoral process. It demanded the prevention of violence against women, balancing the home and work roles for both women and men, building institutions that secure equal rights and opportunities for women, support for women’s political, local, civic, professional and social activity. Members stressed the need to improve women’s health and strengthen their rights to reproduction, education in a spirit of equality, combating stereotypes (both in education and mass culture). The Congress also called for the promotion of cultural and creative activity, and care about the status and rights of women in rural regions. However, overriding goal of the Congress was to build ties and solidarity among women based on the awareness of their economic, cultural and educational status and on the memory of their historical achievements. The important postulate appeared in a situation when all other women organizations were involved in disputes over their particular interests, ideology, and priority of some objectives over the other. The main objective of the Congress was to consolidate Polish women of different background, professional positions and opinions and establish a joint action for their own good<sup>17</sup>.

On 28th January 2010, the social movement was officially registered as the Association Congress of Women, whose main objectives

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<sup>16</sup> I. Desperak, *Płeć zmiany*, Łódź 2013, pp. 217–227.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 228–229.

were to promote the idea of the Congress, support women's activity and seek funding to meet these objectives. As stated in the by-laws, the Association is an entity having its legal personality. It is a voluntary self-governed organization acting on the basis of the Association Law of 7th April 1989 (...) and implements tasks in public interest while acting for equal rights of women and men<sup>18</sup>.

### **Program Council of Congress of Women**

The Council was created in 2009 on the initiative of a group of women. The working of the Council involved people representing politics, government, science, business, culture and press of different views, professions, background, place of residence but united under the common goal that was the organization of the 1st Congress of Women. The formula of cooperation proved very efficient and initiated a huge social movement that has been in operation for 10 years already. Now, the Council consists of over 300 women who work for the Congress and make important decisions regarding crucial issues. The Council acts as an advisory body and is chaired by Henryka Bochniarz. Members of the Council include Elżbieta Bieńkowska, the European Commissioner for Internal Market and Services, Zuzanna Celmer, a psychotherapist, Sylwia Chutnik, a specialist in culture and a writer, Izabella Cywińska, a film and theater director, Renata Dancewicz, an actress, Małgorzata Fuszara, former Plenipotentiary of Government for Equal Opportunities, Manuela Gretkowska, a writer, Agnieszka Holland, a film director, Joanna Kluzik-Rostkowska, Member of the Sejm, Joanna Klimas, a fashion designer, Grażyna Kulczyk, a businesswoman, Wanda Nowicka, a former deputy speaker of the Sejm, Kazimiera Szczuka, a journalist, Róża Thun, a Member of European Parliament, Alicja Węgorzewska, an opera singer<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Kongres Kobiet, <https://www.kongreskobiet.pl>, 14.09.2018.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.



## Shadow Cabinet

The Shadow Cabinet of the Congress of Women was created on 7th March 2011. By monitoring actions taken by politicians and drawing their attention to areas important for women, it constituted an alternative to the activity of the government. The cabinet included: Prime Minister Danuta Hubner, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Enterprise Development and Innovation Małgorzata Okońska-Zaremba, Minister of Regional Development and Home Affairs Teresa Kamińska, Minister for Gender Equality and Prevention of Discrimination Małgorzata Fuszara, Finance Minister Maria Pasło-Wiśniewska, Treasury Minister Małgorzata Starczewska-Krzysztozek, Minister of Foreign Affairs Beata Stelmach, Minister for Energy and Environment Bogusława Matuszewska, Minister of Education and Science and Sport Magdalena Środa, Minister of Labor Anna Karaszewska, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Katarzyna Duczkowska-Małysz, Minister of Health Olga Budzisz-Krzyżanowska, and Minister of Infrastructure Solange Olszewska, Minister of Justice Eleonora Zielińska, Minister of Culture Kazimiera Szczuka, Minister of Secularity of State and Multiculturalism Barbara Labuda. The position to spokeswomen went to Dorota Warakomska<sup>20</sup>.

## 1st Congress of Women

The First Congress of Women was held in the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw on 21–22 June 2009. The Congress discussed the contribution of women to the history of the former twenty years, and the point of view of minorities and women from rural areas were the innovation in public discourse. A reference was also made to the issue the feminization of poverty<sup>21</sup> The Congress of Women formulated 135 postulates regarding policy, local government, labor market,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> I. Desperak, *op.cit.*, p. 229.

entrepreneurship, trade unions, health, education, science, media, violence, alimonies, pensions, national minorities, people 50+, trafficking of women and the protection of their rights, and two of the most important of these was the introduction of gender parities on election lists and the establishment of an independent ombudsman/ombudswoman for equality<sup>22</sup> (Congress of Women). It seems that the most important result of the Congress was the civil bill increasing the presence of women in election lists. It also included a proposal to change the election law to the Sejm, the European Parliament and of commune councils (with population above 20 thousand), county and regional parliaments. The draft bill was signed by 150 thousand citizens. The action won support of different communities and social groups, as well as known and respected people, such as Barbara Labuda, Krystyna Janda, Andrzej Wajda, Olga Jackowska, Henryk Wujec, Radosław Sikorski, Michał Boni, Maciej Płażyński, Tomasz Lis, Dorota Warakomska, Urszula Dudziak and Zbigniew Hołdys. In January 2011, the President of Poland Bronisław Komorowski signed the law which guaranteed that women can occupy 35% positions on election lists<sup>23</sup>.

This initiative of the Congress of Women triggered a nation-wide discussion about the participation of women in politics and deficits related to it. Supporters of quotas provided many positive examples of countries, such as Sweden, Norway and Belgium, where the participation of women in politics is large and proportions between the participation of men and women in political life are similar. It has been often forgotten, however, that the effect we observe today is the result of long-term changes that Poland has just started. It is worth reminding that also special guests were invited to the Congress of Women. In the first event involved: Maria Kaczyńska (wife of Poland's President), professor Maria Janion (researcher of Polish culture of 19th and 20th c.), Melonne Verveer (Ambassador for Women in US Department of State). The 1st Congress of Women awarded the title of the "Female Pole of the Two Decades" to Hen-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 232.

<sup>23</sup> Kongres Kobiet, <https://www.kongreskobiet.pl>, 14.09.2018.

ryka Krzywonos-Strycharska, an anti-communist activist (Congress of Women).

The Congress attracted many female Poles, caused quite a stir in the society, and promoted the issue of equality and introduced it to the public discourse. Thus, it kindled hope for intensive development of the women's movement in Poland. It also generated some criticism. The event was referred to as

promoted by a group of women claiming to be spokespersons for a vague category of "Polish women". Interestingly enough, the Congress of Polish Women was a tremendous success, since it pushed through the Sejm one of its key demands, the so-called the Parity Law<sup>24</sup>.

The major advantage of the Congress was the fact that it attracted women from all over Poland from a variety of backgrounds and representing different views. (...) We may assume that (...) it contributed enormously to counteracting the myth that women are a homogeneous group (...). Instead of creating a political party, the main goal of the Congress was to fight for the implementation of the Parity Law, which would allow women to represent their voice in politics, although this does not mean that they would speak with one voice. (...) The Congress opened the category "Women" to differences, but this did not mean only possible inclusion previously marginalized voices to the main discourse. Such a mechanism, however, more maintains the existing power than questions it, since it is still the authority who decides whose voices are to be included and whose not<sup>25</sup>.

The 2nd Congress of Women was held in Warsaw on 18 and 19 June 2010. The lead theme of the agenda was "Time for election!

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<sup>24</sup> K. Gębarowska, *Kobiety jako zbiorowy podmiot ruchu feministycznego w Polsce. Polemika z Partią Kobiet i Kongresem Kobiet Polskich*, [in:] F. Pierzchalski, K. Smyczyńska, M.E. Szatlach, K. Gębarowska, *Feminizm po polsku*, Warszawa 2011, p. 187.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 214.

Time for women! Time for solidarity!”. The event was attended by 4 thousand people who participated in 14 theme panels, workshops and sessions. The Congress organized a presidential debate involving candidates for the post of head of state: Andrzej Olechowski, Grzegorz Napieralski and Waldemar Pawlak. The primary presidential election was held. Special guests of the Congress included: The Speaker of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland and the presidential candidate Bronislaw Komorowski with his wife Anna, Małgorzata Tusk and Małgorzata Napieralska. In his speech, President Komorowski promised to sign the Parity Law immediately after it passes through the Parliament<sup>26</sup>.

The 2nd Congress of Women focused on strengthening the participation of women in politics. The most important demand was once again on the table, namely the parity on election lists, which was then converted into a civic draft law and after collecting 150 thousand signatures from citizens who supported it, it was sent to the parliament. As the *Law on election list quota*, it was adopted on 5th January 2011 and was already effective during the parliamentary election the same year. The Congress proposed the parity of 50% of women and men in election lists and a “zipper system.” Although finally the law ensured minimum 35% positions for women on election lists and did not include the requirement of an alternating placement in the lists, it was an unquestionable success of the Congress and the evidence of its political significance<sup>27</sup>. A special award of the Congress went to Maria Janion<sup>28</sup>. A series of training preparing women to participate in elections was a manifestation of the consistent approach of the Congress<sup>29</sup>.

The 2nd Congress of Women also attracted some criticism. The Congress suffered defeat as a social movement because it failed to create mechanisms of authentic participation. It squandered a significant potential of female enthusiasm and readiness to act.

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<sup>26</sup> Kongres Kobiet, <https://www.kongreskobiet.pl>, 14.09.2018.

<sup>27</sup> I. Desperak, op.cit., pp. 231–232.

<sup>28</sup> A. Niewińska, *Raport o gender w Polsce*, Fronda PL (2014), Warszawa Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, pp. 357–358, <http://strajkkobiet.eu/>, 14.09.2018.

<sup>29</sup> Kongres Kobiet, <https://www.kongreskobiet.pl>, 14.09.2018.

On 17th and 18th September 2011, the European Congress of Women was organized attracting over 7 thousand attendees. During the proceeding, discussions focused on priority challenges in the area concerned faced by Poland and the world.

It should be noted that on the second day of the Congress an important event took place – the Round Table of European Ministers for Gender Equality under the motto of: “Europe is a Woman”, a panel which perfectly coincided with the then Presidency of Poland in the European Union. Olga Krzyżanowska<sup>30</sup>, the laureate of an award of the 3rd Congress of Women, received an honorable mention from Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Demands formulated during the Congress called for 3 priority for issues: equality, freedom and solidarity<sup>31</sup>. Women concerned also referred to the situation of adult women and their integration on the labor market<sup>32</sup>.

The motto of the 4th Congress of Women was “Activity Entrepreneurship Independence” and it was held on 14th and 15th September 2012. It attracted the record high number of 7.5 thousand participants. The 4th Congress largely focused on providing tools supporting female entrepreneurship in rural region and small towns. Special guests included: Anna Komorowska, Donald Tusk, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, Beata Szydłowska (head of Parliamentary Group of Women), female representative of 32 countries, including Saudi Arabia, United States, France, Germany, Czech Republic, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Georgia and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Meetings held resulted in numerous invitations to share experience outside the country.

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<sup>30</sup> The awarded person was a Polish female politician, social activist, doctor, MP to the Sejm and its deputy speaker, member of the Senate, member of the Programming Council of the Congress of Women, and the Minister of Health in the Shadow Cabinet.

<sup>31</sup> Expressed in the zipper system in election lists, 40% seats for women on management boards and supervisory boards, equalizing wages of women and men in the same positions, combating violence against women, state support in the care of dependent persons, situation of women on the labor market (particularly group of 50+ and women entering the market where there is still a lack of solidarity between generations).

<sup>32</sup> Kongres Kobiet, <https://www.kongreskobiet.pl>, 14.09.2018.

The 5th Congress of Women was held under the motto of “Partnership – Solidarity – Diversity” on 14–15 June 2013, and gathered 8.5 thousand participants. The Congress of Women ended with a speech by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who presented the activity of the government since the previous congress as a response to the demands and proposals of the shadow cabinet. The President of the Council of Ministers drew attention to the need for a speedy adoption of the Convention counteracting violence, *ex officio* prosecution rape, need for higher standards of hearings and care of victims, elimination of gender discrimination in school handbooks and equal salaries for women and men. The specific nature of the 6th Congress held on 9 and 10 May 2014 was determined by two important anniversaries: The 10th anniversary of Poland’s accession to the European Union and the 25th anniversary of the system transformation. It was probably the reason of abundant presence of female and male participants (approximately 9 thousand). The Congress hosted delegations from Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Czech Republic, Germany, France, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Bulgaria, US, Tunisia and India with a group of feminists. The 6th Congress was held under the motto of: “Community, Equality, Responsibility”. During the Congress, the President of the Council of Ministers was handed over a letter with the proposal of a “zipper system”, speedy ratification of the Convention against violence, alignment of salaries for women and men, increase in the recovery of alimonies, adoption of the law on civil partnerships, introduction of parental leave for fathers, and the ratification of the European *Charter of fundamental rights* and the revised *European Social Charter*, restoration of women right to control reproduction, including the right to sexual education from primary school and the implementation of the EU directive on the rights of the patient in cross-border health care<sup>33</sup>.

The National Congress of Women was held 11 and 12 September 2015 under the following motto: “If not us, then who? If not now, then when?”. Female participants summarized the situation of women,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

previous actions, failures and successes, and indicated how to operate more effectively, how to fight for their rights, and what needed to be done to ensure that the voice of women was heard.

An important topic of the Congress was the issue of refugees.

The next Congress, which attracted 5 thousand people, was held on 13 and 14 May 2016 under the motto: “On the bright side power. Equality, Activity, Democracy”. The Congress also attracted representatives of Austria, Belgium, Great Britain, Sweden, Hungary, Belarus and Ukraine. The events discussed different social problems, international issues, themes of entrepreneurship, innovation, education and new technologies, health, ecology, personal development, culture, gender equality and solidarity with sexual minorities. Discussions also focused on reconciling the woman’s roles with professional career, career opportunities, pension poverty and feminine lobby in politics, hate, occupational burn out and transsexuality. Speakers included among others: Barbara Dolniak, Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska, Olga Budzisz-Krzyżanowska, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, Adam Bodnar, Mateusz Kijowski, and Wojciech Kaczmarczyk, the Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Opportunities.

The Congress was summarized by a symbolic statement indicating that the aim of the Congress had always been to strengthen democracy, increase awareness of inequalities and discrimination and problems faced by women.

One of the important topics of the 7th Congress of Women was the threats to the centrality of Polish women exposed to consequences of the stringent abortion law. Activity of the government and pro-life organization were heavily criticized and the Congress demanded the abortion law to be liberalized. They also called for public involvement to support the draft bill termed “Saving women”, which liberalized regulations and need for sexual education in schools, and easy access to contraceptives.

The 9th Congress of Women held in Poznań on 9–10 September 2017 gathered 4 thousand people. It was the first congress organized outside Warsaw. The event attracted representatives of 12 states, including: Afghanistan, Australia, Austria, Denmark, Finland, Israel, Germany, Norway, Serbia, Sweden, Hungary, representative

of the European Commission, female members of national parliaments, members of the European Parliament, local self-government activists, and representatives of business, science, art and culture. Additionally, social movements and organizations, including those which supported women for a number of years and new ones, were also represented (e.g. National Women's Strike, <http://strajkkobiet.eu/>; Girls for Girls, <https://www.dziewuchydziewuchom.pl/>).

The meeting in Poznan was held under the motto of "Alert to the rights of women", the prevailing topic in the agenda was the depriving of women of their rights and shifting of Poland to the periphery of Europe. Important messages sent to attendees, which included two former first ladies: Jolanta Kwaśniewska and Anna Komorowska, encouraged the audience to fight for the rights of women within the framework of constitutional civic rights. During the Congress, a letter from Danuta Walesa was read<sup>34</sup>.

Women gathered at the Congress declared to oppose to restricting of their rights and fight for the implementation of equality postulates. Women requested respect for their autonomy and recognition of their reproductive rights, application of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, real social policy which does not exclude women from the labor market, reasonable pensions, parities in politics and economy, modern and free from discrimination education. As in the past, the Congress postulated to equalize salaries of women and men and to recognize LGBT rights, support for women raising disabled children and single mothers, and to improve the collection of alimonies. More importantly, the Congress expressed conviction that the above proposals could not be fulfilled in a state which failed to comply with democratic standards. In this context, they requested free judiciary and the media, and compliance with the Constitution and the principles of the rule of law. The declaration ended with

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<sup>34</sup> M. Kaźmierska, *Kongres Kobiet. Danuta Wałęsa napisała list do uczestniczek. „Bądźmy aktywne i solidarne!”*, 10.09.2017, <http://poznan.wyborcza.pl/poznan/7,36001,22352440,kongres-kobiet-danuta-walesa-napisala-list-do-uczestniczek.html>, 12.09.2018.



desire for freedom and equality in democratic Poland being a part of the common Europe based on solidarity principles.

Another National Congress of Women was held in Łódź on 16th and 17th June 2018 under the motto of: “All rights! The entire life!”. The event was of particular importance not only because of its jubilee, but also because of the 100 anniversary for electoral rights being granted to Polish women. During the Congress, the founder members summarized the ten-year activity while highlighting successes and numerous problems that required urgent attention. They also listed emerging new problem, such as the creation of friendly conditions for the growing number of Ukraine citizens coming to Poland. Yet another issue noted was the demographic problem in Europe and the migration crisis.

The organizers of the 2018 Congress proposed discussion on *herstory*, that is the history of women and their contribution to regaining independence, women’s fight for their rights and freedom and equality of all male and female citizens. Traditionally, the Congress discussed politics, with particular regard to the civic and local government activity in the context of the forthcoming elections. During the proceeding, attendees were confronted with the Polish experience in freedom-related struggle of women from other countries. Participants of the jubilee Congress decided to engage actively in the upcoming local elections and to support female candidates to ensure compliance with the law and the application of democratic standards. During the Congress, attendees were encouraged to cast their votes on women. The Congress also declared professional counseling for women who wish to run for election.

The Congress of Women formulated some of key objectives in the context of local election. Those included: seeking to achieve genuine equality in all decision-making forums, supporting women implementing demands set by the Congress and all those who intended to implement equality programs in political practice.

It must be added that the association officially supported Rafał Trzaskowski, the candidate for the office of the Mayor of Warsaw,

who, together with the Congress, developed an equality program for the capital city based on his postulates<sup>35</sup>.

Agnieszka Holland, the Polish film and theater director, was the laureate of the 10th Congress of Women. The press commented:

It's been a long time since we saw such energy during the Congress of Women. The enthusiasm can be compared only with the first Congress ten years ago when the idea of universal feminism was at its fledgling stage. Today, Łódź welcomed female Poles reinforced with the sense of unity and combat spirit growing during the "Black Protests". These women need no longer wonder what their rights are. They know perfectly well what they want and what they should be given<sup>36</sup>.

## **Achievements of the Congress of Women**

Although the Congress formulated more than 200 demands, the most important demand of the Congress focused on the parity. As claimed by Professor M. Środa, everything depended on this one. Following the initiative of 2009, the new law was adopted and guaranteed at least 35% participation for each gender on election lists of candidates to the Sejm, European Parliament, local councils, and county and regional assemblies. During the ten years, the Congress of Women had the following achievements:

- signing of the Council of Europe Convention on the prevention and control of violence against women and domestic violence,
- introduction of *ex officio* prosecution of rape and a convenient form of interrogation of victims of sexual violence,
- introduction of the annual parental leave,

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<sup>35</sup> *Kongres Kobiet idzie na wybory samorządowe*, 16.09.2018, [https://www.kongreskobiet.pl/pl-PL/news/show/kongres\\_kobiet\\_idzie\\_na\\_wybory\\_samorzadowe](https://www.kongreskobiet.pl/pl-PL/news/show/kongres_kobiet_idzie_na_wybory_samorzadowe), 25.09.2018.

<sup>36</sup> B. Rogowska, „*Mam nadzieję, że patriarchalne dziady pozwolą Zdanowskiej startować*”. *X Kongres Kobiet w Łodzi*, 16.06.2018, <http://lodz.wyborcza.pl/lodz/7,35136,23547511,x-kongres-kobiet-oficjalnie-rozpoczety.html>, 15.09.2018.

- amendment of the nursery law,
- implementation of the Preschool for a Penny Program,
- adoption of the Large Family Card,
- refund of in vitro procedures from state budget,
- adoption by the government a goal to promote content concerning equal treatment in school curricula and educational materials under the National Action Program for Equal Opportunities,
- increased care benefit,
- implementation of special labor integration programs for persons below 30 and above 50 years of age and parents of children up to 6 years, which should improve the effectiveness of employment agencies, and
- training for women intending to stand as a candidate at the 2018 local government election.

Adam Bodnar, the Ombudsman, subscribed to the postulates of the Congress. In his interventions during the 7th and 8th Congresses of Women, he considered the action for gender equality as a priority. The Ombudsman assured that his office monitored the underrepresentation of women in public life and made efforts to introduce the zipper system, the amendment of the law on equal opportunities (law in force did not provide effective legal protection against discrimination on grounds of sex), and cases of non-compliance with the provisions of the law governing the possibility to terminate pregnancy. The Ombudsman assured attendees about his efforts to establish a hotline for victims of violence (Ombudsman). It is worth mentioning that after A. Bodnar's intervention the minister Antoni Macierewicz declared a change of the military law regarding cases of firing pregnant military women. During the Poznan Congress, Adam Bodnar supported the fight against domestic violence as a priority in his work.

Certainly, more active role played by women in political space would help to achieve that goal. There is still much to be done, as we can see not only during our daily practice. This effort is followed by numerous studies and analysis developed by representatives of the Polish science. The weaker position of women in public life calls

for much more concentrated effort. The Congress has shown how to change the law so democratic women are no longer represented by the male majority, a majority which decides on the family, education, and social policy without listening to women<sup>37</sup>.

In recent decades, women earn much better education than before. In the second half of the 20th c., women entered the labor market in large numbers. However, this seemingly optimistic direction failed to produce expected changes in the position of women. High qualifications and experience at work have not translated into further changes in their status. Women are still under-represented at higher levels of public life - in business and politics<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, the Congress of Women should continue different types of initiatives for improving equal opportunities for women and men in the various areas.

For equality to become a fact and recognized good available to everyone rather than only some we need to make certain effort. We need to take care of equality, fight for it and protect it. We should always seek ideal solutions. It is worth to go towards equality<sup>39</sup>.

The Congress of Women has been trying to meet the challenge  
for the past decade.

For many years, public opinion polls have shown that the Polish society is aware of inequality of women and men and women occupying less privileged positions. This applies in particular to the occupational situation and participation in politics. Both women and men (although more women) are convinced that it is more difficult for women than for men to find job, get high salaries, be promoted, whereas it is easier for women to lose their jobs (...). Similar views apply to equality – or rather inequality – in political life – the vast majority of the surveyed (...) considers that women

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<sup>37</sup> *Kobiety w polityce*, red. J. Marszałek-Kawa, Toruń 2010, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Aktorzy życia publicznego Płeć jako czynnik różnicujący*, red. R. Siemieńska, Warszawa 2003, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> M. Środa, *Kobiety i władza*, Warszawa 2010, p. 427.

stand less chances than men to advance in their political career. Mainly women are convinced about the above (...). Considering the problem of political inequalities and opportunities of different groups to govern, it is worth referring to (...) the term of “critical mass” denoting a minimum representation of a given group (e.g. women) in the government to influence decision-making process. Therefore, the goal is to have a certain number of women in the government (...) to have their voice heard<sup>40</sup>.

For this reason, women must continue to demand larger representation in election lists and in management boards of companies.

For 10 years, the Association has been implementing an awareness raising action, motivation, unification above divisions and effective promotion of women in public space. The effectiveness in formulating specific actions and demands that stem from the discussion makes the project so unique. Its mere size and supra-local nature, media gap and reaching out to a wide audience clearly differs from other women’s initiatives. Probably, previous women’s movements lacked what the Congress managed to achieve through its actions<sup>41</sup>. The decade of the activity of the Congress was the time of difficult compromises, but also engagement of new groups and young female activists. Considering the growing influence of the right wing and conservative center parties, the strategy has guaranteed not only survival but also growing power. Since the Congress attracted new communities at the expense of mutual concessions it went from strength to strength; growing differences and the escalation of conflicts breaks of what may become one of the most successful initiatives of women’s movement in Poland. We want to see the powerful Congress of Women rather than the female Convent of St. Catherine<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> M. Fuszara, *Polityka jako obszar nierówności kobiet i mężczyzn w Polsce*, [in:] *Czarna księga kobiet*, ed. C. Ockrent, Warszawa 2010, pp .680–681.

<sup>41</sup> I. Desperak, op.cit., p. 235.

<sup>42</sup> M. Sutowski, A. Wiśniewska, *Po pierwsze: nie pozabijać się. Parę słów po Kongresie Kobiet*, 7.07.2018, „Krytyka Polityczna”, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/kongres-kobiet-sutowski-wisniewska/>, 15.09.2018.

For a decade, the Congress of Women has provided a strong impulse shaping the Polish policy supporting women. It responds to emerging challenges, monitors the current situation of women, and its activity is also noticeable at the local level, which further integrates female communities. Regional Congresses are the response to the initial allegations of the exclusive nature of the Congress and representation of a narrow group of women. The wide spectrum of issues discussed and fast response to current issues demonstrate openness to all subjects and different social groups. It seems that after a decade of activity, the Congress of Women has increased its presence in the Polish socio-political sphere and expressed interests of a significant part of the Polish society.

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## Kongres Kobiet Polskich jako przykład działalności na rzecz walki o prawa kobiet

**Streszczenie:** Rozważając kwestie związane z walką o prawa polityczne dla kobiet, nie można lekceważyć niektórych najważniejszych czynników, decydujących o poziomie uczestnictwa kobiet w życiu politycznym. Jeśli chodzi o dyskusję naukową na temat obecności kobiet w szeroko rozumianej polityce, najczęściej przywoływanymi czynnikami wpływającymi na ten stan rzeczy są czynniki biologiczne, społeczne, ideologiczne, strukturalne, kulturowe, religijne czy ekonomiczne. Minęło 100 lat, a Polki, mimo iż stanowią nieco ponad połowę polskiego społeczeństwa, nadal mają niezbyt wielką reprezentację w parlamencie, w biznesie w wielu przypadkach ich pensje są niższe niż mężczyzn na podobnych stanowiskach, a rola kobiety w przestrzeni publicznej – ze szczególnym naciskiem na sferę polityczną – jest nadal niższa niż rola mężczyzny. Celem niniejszego tekstu jest analiza przesłanek utworzenia i funkcjonowania Kongresu Kobiet Polskich w ciągu ostatnich dziesięciu lat.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Kongres Kobiet Polskich, prawa kobiet, kobiety w polityce