

## 'A Job in Politics Is Not for Women': Analysing Barriers to Women's Political Representation in CEE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article discusses women's political representation in Central and Eastern Europe in the fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the adoption of liberal democratic political systems in the region. It highlights the deep-seated gender stereotypes that define women primarily as wives and mothers, with electoral politics seen as an appropriate activity for men, but less so for women. The article explores the ways in which conservative attitudes on gender roles hinders the supply of, and demand for, women in the politics of Central and Eastern Europe. It also discusses the manner in which the internalisation of traditional gender norms affects women's parliamentary behaviour, as few champion women's rights in the legislatures of the region. The article also finds that links between women MPs and women's organisations are weak and fragmented, making coalition-building around agendas for women's rights problematic.

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### Introduction

The entry of eight countries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) into the European Union (EU) on 1 May 2004, and the anticipated membership of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, has placed a focus on the adoption, interpretation, and application of Western-style liberal democratic norms and practices in former Iron Curtain states [Dryzek and Holmes 2002; Grabbe 2001; Smith 2004]. One aspect of the 're-visiting' of Central and Eastern Europe in the context of Europeanisation and de-

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mocratisation is the growing attention to women's political representation as a measure of how 'democratic' these states have become [Kaponyi 2005; Novosel 2005; Montgomery and Ilonszki 2003; Matland and Montgomery 2003; NEWR 2003]. Indeed, these studies are contributing new cases and analyses to the well-established literature on women's political representation. This article highlights the importance of attitudes and perceptions of women's social roles in shaping the context for women's political representation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Based on a 42-month comparative study on gender and governance in this region of Europe, the study explores the extent to which the norms and practices of Western liberal democratic traditions can be transposed into political and social systems shaped by a half-century of totalitarianism. Women's political representation is one discrete aspect of this larger study.

The study of women's political representation has resulted in rich insights into expectations of modern democracy and democratic practice. From the relatively straightforward standpoint of counting women, [Dahlerup 1988; Norris 1987], the field has evolved to scrutinising elected women's political behaviour, with a focus on seeking evidence for a gender awareness in the parliamentary agenda commensurate with the increasing presence of women [Leyenaar 2003; Mackay et al. 2003; Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Childs 2002; Sawer 2002; Tremblay and Pelletier 2000; Reuschmeyer 1998]. These studies, generally presented as single country cases, draw on normative analyses of political representation such as Pitkin's [1967] distinction between descriptive and substantive representation, Phillips [1995] elaboration on this theme through the concept of the politics of presence, and general justice-based arguments focusing on democratic legitimacy and women's inclusion [Sawer 2000]. Complementing this intensive focus on the gendering of parliamentary priorities are analyses of large comparative social attitudes and values studies, to which Norris and Inglehart [2000, 2003] and Hayes, McAllister and Studlar [2000] have made significant contributions. More recently, the revisiting of institutional politics wherein gender norms are embedded, constructed, and contested has shifted the focus from the individual to institutional patterns of gendered political practices [Chappell 2001; Hawkesworth et al. 2001; Reingold 2000; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995; Thomas 1994].

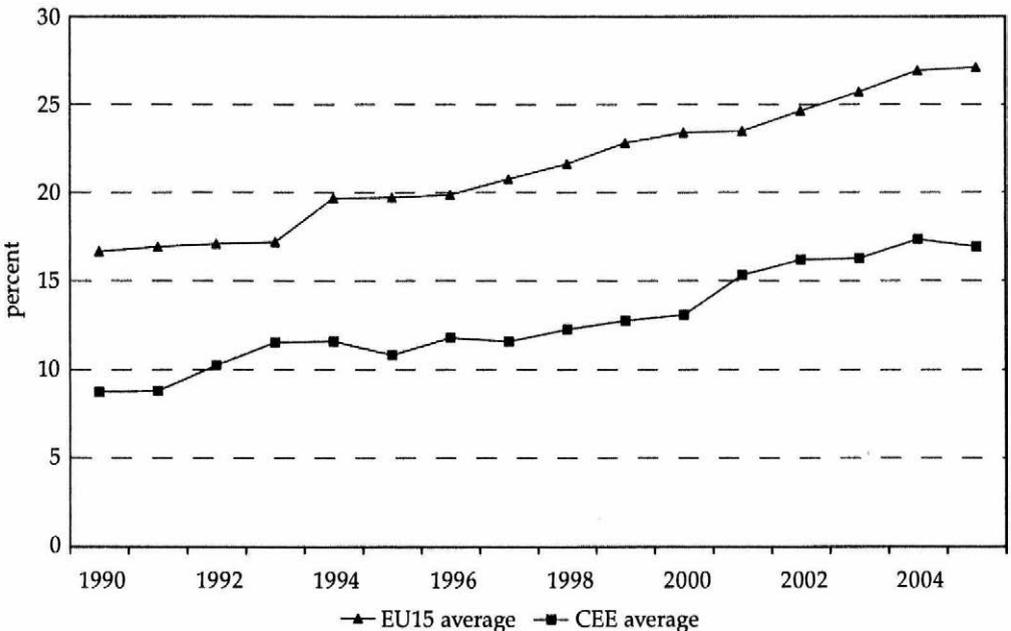
Within this broad range of literature, the first part of this article focuses on political recruitment in party systems of CEE, and in particular addresses women's efforts to secure selection and to hold political office. The framework of supply and demand, as popularised by Norris [1996, 1997] and Norris and Lovenduski [1995], is used to elicit the determinants of political engagement among female politicians across Central and Eastern Europe. In the second part of the article, attention is turned to the literature on descriptive and substantive representation of women to determine whether being a woman in political life in Central and Eastern Europe enables one to 'make a difference', to represent women's interests, and to shape the nature of political interaction in CEE parliaments. The diversity of the literature on women's political participation, then, offers a wide framework for consideration of

the findings of ten-country study. Specifically, the literature offers particular insights that lend themselves to analysis of the significance of social attitudes towards women's political engagement, the internalisation of traditional gender norms by female representatives, and the restricted 'opportunity structure' for women within aggressively masculine fledgling democracies.

### Women's political representation in CEE

Before 1989 women's formal political representation, particularly in national parliaments, was high when compared to EU levels. In the 1970s communist leaders in many CEE countries introduced quotas for the representation of all aspects of political and economic life in the party-controlled national assemblies. The proposed proportion of women on candidate lists was 30%, with the majority of women representing industrial and agricultural sectors and a smaller symbolic number representing the 'working intelligentsia'. Parliamentary institutions, however, were distinct from those of Western Europe in being subordinate to the ruling communist parties which chose all candidates and whose elections simply confirmed their candidature. Despite a relatively high number of women in parliament, women were

Figure 1. Women MPs in the EU-15 and CEE, 1990-2005



Source: IPU 1995 and [www.ipu.org/parline](http://www.ipu.org/parline) accessed on 28 October 2005

sparsely represented in the upper echelons of the party and thus remained at a distance from the real locus of political power.

After 1989, there was a dramatic decrease in the number of women politicians elected to national parliaments across Central and Eastern Europe. The proportion of women in these parliaments fell from an average of 26% to 9%.<sup>2</sup> By 2005, women's average seat-holding in CEE parliaments had recovered to 17%, though remaining below the European average of 22%, and below the 27% average for the EU-15 countries.<sup>3</sup>

These dramatic changes are clearly connected with the removal of quotas and the introduction of competitive elections and multi-party democracy, although this does not explain why such historical events should have had such an impact on women's representation in CEE – especially given the fact that this decline happened after a long period of state socialism in which the 'emancipation of women' was actively supported through their participation in all aspects of economic and political life. The decline in the representation of women in political life across the CEE region prompts a number of interesting questions: First, there are questions concerning the process of change and the decline in women's political representation, and second, there are questions concerning the outcomes witnessed in CEE under liberal-democratic conditions as compared to those of Western Europe in comparable institutional environments.

The literature on women in CEE countries offers several analyses of the actual situation of women, which can also be used as answers to these questions. In particular two forces that are frequently cited in the literature as responsible for this decline is the introduction of 'masculine' values in the new political context and the revival of conservative gender stereotypes. Writing about post-Soviet society, Kerig et al. [1993] identified three trends: the prevalence of communal values, patriarchal structures and gender stereotyping. This is expressed in a renewed emphasis on family values and a rhetoric calling for a return to 'better times' when women worked in the home, not in the labour force.

Although the existing literature deals with the set of questions raised above, this research on women's political representation in CEE countries casts new light on these issues and throws up some interesting questions. What is novel in this research are both its wide scope and its comparative dimension, enabling us to test the generalisations from the wider literature on gender and political representation.

### **Barriers to women's representation**

This section explores barriers to women's representation as perceived by key actors in ten CEE countries. In this analysis, the aim is to explain women's political under-representation using the framework of supply and demand to elicit the determi-

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<sup>2</sup> Calculated from figures in IPU [1995] *Women in Parliaments 1945–1995*.

<sup>3</sup> The EU-15 refers to the 15 EU member states prior to the 2004 enlargement.

nants of political engagement among female politicians across Central and Eastern Europe [Norris and Lovenduski 1995: 115–118]. Although, for analytical purposes, supply and demand factors are considered here separately, it is nonetheless acknowledged that supply factors can affect the demand for women politicians and vice versa. On the one hand, party selectors may discriminate against women political hopefuls because of prevailing gender-role norms, because of perceptions that women politicians are not as capable of doing the job as men, or because they simply believe that women will lose votes for the party. Thus, the demand from party gatekeepers for female candidacies may not be strong. On the supply side, the nomination rate for women aspirants is influenced by the culturally accepted divisions of family labour, a lack of self-belief among potential women hopefuls, their perceived chances of success, and prevailing attitudes towards the public role of women.

While Norris and Lovenduski have explored the gender perspective of political recruitment in the United Kingdom and generalise their insights to the issue in liberal democracies, Matland and Montgomery seek to apply the supply-demand model to the processes that take place in post-communist Europe. They observe a number of crucial differences for gender-balanced representation in the post-communist context that do not apply in established democracies. They note [2003: 38–39] that women's political representation began to increase in established liberal democracies when second-wave feminism began to organise around this issue: post-communist states have not yet experienced a similar development and parties do not experience pressure to put women forward, although there are individual initiatives across Central and Eastern Europe that bring a spotlight to bear on women's political representation. Along with many other observers of the situation of women in post-communist societies, Matland and Montgomery [2003: 36–37] perceive that the 'emancipation' of women rhetorically flagged by communist regimes was more symbolic than real, with women assuming the primary responsibility for the home combined with their duties as workers.

This unacknowledged 'dual burden' and the unchallenged patriarchal values underpinning communism was laid bare in the move to a market economy and democratic politics, leading Bretherton [2001: 65] to the view that the decline in women's political representation 'reflects the enhanced status of parliaments and parliamentarians in circumstances where quotas no longer operate and where renewed emphasis upon traditional gender stereotypes has encouraged or legitimated women's relative absence from the public sphere of politics'. Yet, women emerged from communism with the political capital necessary to take elected office: highly educated, extensively networked, and many with the experience of the transition to democracy, a sizeable pool of potential female candidates was available for parties to draw upon in shaping these new democracies. Why so few have succeeded in breaking into political office is explored in this article.

Data for the study of barriers to women's representation in each country were collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with women politicians, civil

servants and women in NGOs. A total of 117 interviews were conducted between September 2004 and February 2005, 70 (60%) of which were with serving or former politicians, 27 (23%) with administrators in gender units, 14 (10%) with women's NGO activists and the remaining 6 (5%) were feminist academics and journalists (see Appendix 1 for number and country distribution). Most interviews lasted just over one hour, though a small number exceeded 90 minutes. In one case (Estonia) the interviews were supplemented by the findings of a study of party selectors and politicians [Biin 2004]. In four cases (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland), the qualitative research was supplemented by quantitative studies of public attitudes to women's political participation. In other instances, parliamentary debates and media reports were used to supplement the analysis. However, the dominant focus of the research in each case was a qualitative exploration of the barriers to women's political representation. Respondents were asked to i) provide explanations for women's political under-representation and ii) identify the institutional barriers to women's political representation. With two exceptions, researchers did not record undue difficulties in obtaining access to interviewees. In Lithuania, the study was under way at a time of considerable political crisis resulting in an unexpected election, making access to politicians difficult. The Lithuanian team compensated for politicians' unavailability by interviewing former prime ministerial advisors in addition to gender equality officials and others, and by drawing on secondary source material. Slovak researchers found female MPs and MEPs considerably resistant to being interviewed. Although a sample was drawn from this group (Appendix 1), the researchers observed that respondents were not always alert to the gendered nature of political activity, and could not always relate to sex-based discrimination in political life. Nonetheless, the Slovak researchers gleaned a wealth of observations on women's political representation from their interviews.

The analysis of barriers to women's representation in the ten countries reveals a significant degree of concurrence in relation to perceptions regarding this issue. Generally, respondents across all countries coincide in identifying the key barriers as lack of confidence and interest in politics; a lack of time due to family obligations; and political parties' practices regarding candidate selection. Moreover, when prompted to spell out those barriers further, a common theme emerging from the interviews is a tendency to view barriers as a personal rather than as a cultural or social problem, and thus overcoming them is considered to be a matter of individual effort. Such a perception of barriers to women's political representation as articulated by key actors is illuminating. A key finding from our analysis is the prevalence of gender stereotyping as a common source of obstruction to women's representation, both on the supply and on the demand side.

### **Supply-side barriers**

The main barriers identified by respondents affecting the supply of women wishing to pursue a career in politics are: i) lack of confidence, interest and motivation;

ii) family responsibilities and iii) chauvinistic treatment of women politicians. What follows is an analysis of each type of barrier as perceived by respondents.

#### *Lack of confidence, interest and motivation*

Two barriers that were widely identified by respondents were lack of confidence and lack of interest/motivation in pursuing a career in politics.

Lack of confidence is described by some of the people interviewed as 'a fear, on the part of women, of being exposed' or 'being afraid of making themselves look stupid'. However, it is interesting that a number of women politicians interviewed, while citing lack of confidence as a barrier, were keen to stress that in their personal experience this was not a problem for them. Respondents also tended to qualify the claim that lack of confidence constitutes a barrier to the supply and not the demand of women politicians, pointing out that this problem does not affect women who succeed in entering the world of politics. In the words of a Slovak respondent<sup>4</sup> '*... some women have individual barriers (like lack of self-confidence) but not those who enter the world of politics*'. Such a gap between the assessment of objective reality and subjective situations is interesting and lends itself to two different readings. It can be interpreted as indicating a level of self-confidence on the part of women politicians, or else a reluctance to admit discrimination or abuse. Indeed, such reluctance to admit or recognise discrimination constitutes an emerging pattern in most respondents' articulations of both supply- and demand-side barriers.

Lack of interest in pursuing a career in politics, or in aspiring to high levels of office, is also a barrier frequently mentioned by respondents. Usually, this barrier is described in terms of a perception that the world of politics 'is not something for women'. In other words, an apparent lack of interest or motivation is explained in terms of a perception of politics as a 'male' world, a world in which success requires attributes such as competitiveness, aggressiveness and self-assertiveness – which are typically assigned to men. As one Slovak respondent<sup>5</sup> stated: '*Political participation is perceived by men and by many women as a battlefield, as a free arena where the better, the stronger wins*'. In a similar vein, a number of interviewees expressed how politics is widely perceived in their respective countries as a 'dirty' business.

Since politics is perceived as a masculine world, that is, a world where there is no space for women and feminine values, the problem of lack of interest or motivation is characterised by several respondents in terms of 'defeatism' or 'political apathy'. As one respondent<sup>6</sup> in Hungary states, the main barrier standing in the way of women's political success '*is to be found in their own defeatism: in their belief that it (i.e. politics) is not meant to be about or for them*'. Indeed the problem of political apa-

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<sup>4</sup> Woman MEP, Socialist Party, Slovakia.

<sup>5</sup> Former vice-chairperson of a centre-left party

<sup>6</sup> Socialist MEP

thy on the part of women politicians may well be exacerbated by a general distrust in politics and political activities in CEE countries, and by a lack of belief that people can make a difference through political activity, an outlook that has its origins in the historical legacy of state socialism.

It is interesting to note that a significant number of respondents provided an interpretation of this type of barrier to women's representation as a personal problem. Indeed, the general perception is that lack of confidence, interest or motivation is a problem that can be overcome through personal effort. This indicates a failure to take into account a deeper explanation, where this type of barrier is seen as a social problem rather than as a 'woman's own fault'.

### *Family responsibilities*

Our interviews show unanimity in identifying family responsibilities as a key barrier to the supply of women in politics. In describing this barrier, respondents referred to a lack of time, feelings of guilt, and the unavailability of domestic help, and complained about the significant sacrifices that women have to overcome if they want to pursue a career in politics. Moreover, in talking about their own personal experiences, they depicted a picture of an existence dominated by constant time pressures, stress and guilt. The following words from a socialist mayor in a Slovak village are indicative of this:

*Every woman who takes this position, sacrifices her family, her privacy, everything, if she wants to do it well and effectively [...] Simply, family duties are much more time consuming for women than for men.... For me, I just do not have time, do not have time. I come home at about six, now it's dark. I can do some work at home, but not in the garden. I have not even had time to dig the ground. My husband also has a responsible job. So I have to do everything during the weekend. But then the children and grandchildren come... so I just hurry, hurry to give them what they need. I think the main problem is that women have to look after the family.*

Much of this stress was seen as connected to a battle of priorities between career and family, although respondents tended to view the time dedicated to politics as time 'stolen' from their families more than the other way around. In fact, some of them made clear (either implicitly or explicitly) that their priorities rested with their families and children, and thus that they would abandon their political career if they were to be put in a position in which they had to choose. As one Czech politician stated:

*...let's say I come back home between nine and ten in the evening three days in a row, and if my husband told me in such a situation 'what did you do all day and why are you coming home so late', then that would be the last straw, I guess I would have to give priority to my family then, I mean, I am not going to get divorced because of politics, right.*

Once again, a common theme emerging from the interviews is a failure to view those barriers in connection with deeper structural inequalities. Instead, respondents tended to analyse these barriers merely as a problem of reconciling work and family life – a problem that is regarded as a personal or family issue and a sacrifice that all women entering politics have to undertake. It is worth mentioning that, in the respondents' accounts of barriers, there is never any consideration that they actually have a choice, or that their partners are also responsible for family/domestic matters. Rather, there is a tendency to take for granted that they, as women, are the ones who have to carry the burden of family obligations. This could be taken a sign of the extent to which they have internalised the gendered norms prevalent in their societies.

Other respondents, however, dismissed the importance of the problems of reconciling work and family life that tend to be associated with a career in politics, claiming that they are personally 'managing well'. Such claims imply that if other women politicians 'cannot cope' then it is 'their own fault'. It is interesting to note how this type of claim has much in common with the ones just quoted above, as they are both different expressions of the same problem, that is, rendering the problem of reconciling work and family life a purely personal matter. In this regard, the following quotation from a respondent<sup>7</sup> in Hungary is particularly revealing:

*I want to induce other women to do politics through my own example: I can do it well, even with three children.*

It is interesting to note that no significant differences were found with respect to respondents' interpretations of these barriers to the supply of women politicians according to political affiliation. Thus, as the above quotations clearly indicate, the personalisation of barriers seems to be made by women from across the whole political spectrum.

### *Treatment of women politicians*

Another barrier to the supply of women in politics that was mentioned by respondents relates to the treatment of women politicians by other politicians, the media and society at large. This includes practices such as the following:

a) From (male) colleagues: Respondents complained of being targets of dismissive remarks from male colleagues; of being wilfully ignored when they want to speak in meetings; of being the subject of patronising and disrespectful behaviour. The following quotation<sup>8</sup> illustrates this kind of experience:

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<sup>7</sup> Socialist MEP

<sup>8</sup> Female deputy, Law and Justice Party, Poland.

*During various discussions everyone spoke up and I stood up and raised my hand [...] and I continued to be unnoticed. In the end I stamped my feet [...] But with a weaker personality, one can feel so [...] less important [...] They [women politicians] see they are not noticed and prefer to resign...*

b) From the media: Respondents referred to how women politicians are portrayed in the media according to stereotypical norms: for example, a portrayal that concentrates on their looks and dress code, and on feminine attributes such as being 'gentle', 'modest' or 'caring'. As one respondent<sup>9</sup> in Slovenia claims:

*The importance that is ascribed to the appearance of women is much greater than in the case of men (...) I have to say that when I entered my first mandate, women MPs managed to organised themselves quite well and refused [to partake in] these kinds of 'beauty contests' proposed by the media. However, in this mandate (starting in autumn 2004) things have exceeded the limits of good taste. One of the most important factors now is the search for superlatives: the youngest, the most beautiful... but the attention is never focused on the 'most effective'.*

Conversely, when women politicians contravene those expected 'feminine' norms they are heavily criticised, becoming targets of mockery. In such cases their conduct is labelled as 'aggressive', while the same type of behaviour is interpreted as 'firm', 'determined' or 'unrelenting' in the case of male politicians.

c) From society: Respondents maintained that society tends to hold them responsible for any family problem such as a separation or divorce, their children failing at school, and so on, while their partners are exempt from any such criticisms. In other words, women who do not conform to accepted social norms regarding gender roles (such as in the case of women politicians) are punished and, in many cases, chastised. The following interview extracts<sup>10</sup> illustrate such perceptions:

*Often women in important positions are held responsible for the eventual personal breakdown of her partnership because it is then so clear that had she been a good wife, a real wife, she would have helped her husband. But of course it is never the other way around.*

*...if anything does not function in the household, if anything happens, if there are children in the household and anything happens, a child brings a note from a teacher, no one will say 'Mr. Novak failed' but 'Mrs. Novakova failed' because she's in politics, if she did not do that and stayed at home, that would not have happened*

Our analyses of the supply factors hindering the representation of women in politics reveal the persistence of deep-seated gender stereotypes. Such stereotypes

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<sup>9</sup> Counsellor of the Bureau for Equal Opportunities of Women and Men, Government of the Republic of Slovenia

<sup>10</sup> The former is from a Slovenian MP, while the latter comes from a Czech politician.

involve particular notions of the feminine and the masculine and the values associated with each, and allocate women to the private sphere and men to the public sphere. Furthermore, the prevalence of such stereotypes embedded in social and institutional norms and practices may provide a key to understanding respondents' perceptions of barriers as 'personal' rather than 'cultural or structural' problems.

### **Demand-side barriers**

On the issue of barriers affecting the demand of women politicians, a large majority of respondents coincided in identifying political parties, in particular the procedures of candidate selection, as constituting a central factor hindering women's representation. Only in two countries, namely Hungary and Slovenia, did respondents cite certain aspects of their electoral system as factors hindering the political representation of women.<sup>11</sup> Another barrier that respondents discussed in considerable detail is the lack of solidarity among women politicians. Though not strictly a demand-side barrier, lack of solidarity is put forward as an additional obstacle, which further hampers the possibilities for women politicians to get selected as candidates. Finally, a few respondents also mentioned the fact that women do not vote for women.

In the view of respondents, political parties hinder women's representation in two different ways: First, respondents were keen to emphasise that there are significantly fewer women than men on the parties' electoral lists, and, more importantly, that these women tend to occupy non-eligible positions at the bottom of those lists. In relation to this fact, a number of different explanations were put forward. These include: organisational culture, inaccessibility of women politicians to (male) informal networks, and a more pervasive problem of gendered patterns of distribution of power in the wider society. In relation to organisational culture, respondents noted how there is significant variation with respect to the way in which political parties choose their candidates. Therefore, political parties should be regarded not only as obstacles to, but also as facilitators of, women's political representation. In parties where candidate lists are decided by democratic vote, women have (in principle) more opportunities for inclusion in the list than in parties where such lists are

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<sup>11</sup> In Hungary, as in other countries in this study, the electoral system benefits large political parties while excluding small parties from political representation. This is because the system operates with a 5% threshold, which parties must achieve in order to form a parliamentary grouping. There is also the opportunity for multiple candidacies, limiting women's access to party lists as male candidates are given multiple opportunities for election, reducing political opportunities for women. Women candidates are seldom given multiple candidacies. In Slovenia, the system operates a single mandate constituency. Thus, each constituency is divided into voting units, where parties are represented by just an individual candidate rather than a list. Given that parties can put up just one candidate in each unit, this system does not benefit women candidates, because in such circumstances parties will be more inclined to nominate a man.

decided authoritatively by a party chairperson or top level committee. An interesting question is whether such variation in organisational culture is dependent on party political orientation. Although there is no clear evidence that this is the case, a number of respondents took note that in conservative parties male candidates tend to outnumber women to a significant extent, while in parties on the left the proportion of candidates of both sexes tends to be more balanced.<sup>12</sup> Such differences in the support of women candidates by party orientation are particularly evident in the case of Latvia, where parties with a leftist orientation have established 'women's groups', while parties with an orientation to the right have 'ladies' committees' – the task of which is to serve coffee and to offer 'relaxation'.

The inaccessibility of men's informal networks is another explanation provided by a number of respondents. According to them<sup>13</sup> male politicians rely on exclusive 'old boys' networks. These networks are key to accessing power and information and are also the site where important decisions are made (often in the informal setting of a bar). Moreover, these networks are also the sites of socialisation to political life where ties of solidarity are formed. Given the importance of these networks in facilitating career advancement, women's exclusion from them represents a significant obstacle. As we will see below, this is reinforced by the fact that women politicians have not succeeded in forming similar supportive networks.

A third, and more general, explanation given by respondents for the low proportion of women at the top of electoral lists argues that this is just one more manifestation of the deeper problem of the unequal distribution of power in society at large. One respondent<sup>14</sup> in Romania expressed this point as follows:

*Men are leading the main social and political organisations. They decide the perpetuation of this situation in their own interest. Parties are masculine organisations. Women are forced to act in second rank, in the men's shadow.*

The second way in which political parties act to hinder the political representation of women is, in the view of respondents, the fact that once a woman manages to occupy an eligible position on the list, men tend to be reluctant to support her

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<sup>12</sup> Interesting exceptions to this rule, however, are found in: Poland (where the conservative party associated with the Catholic Church has brought the largest percentage of women into parliament; Slovakia (where the Communist Party shares in common with conservative parties the failure to give any woman an important party post); Romania (where the biggest parties, regardless of political orientation, are the most prohibitive to women's participation on candidate lists) and Bulgaria (where the willingness of political parties to invest in women is more opportunistic than ideological, as women are promoted in times of crisis or uncertainty, irrespective of the party's ideology).

<sup>13</sup> This is especially noted by respondents in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

<sup>14</sup> Union leader, vice-president of the women's organisation in an important union confederation.

candidacy. Such lack of support is evident during the electoral campaign period, as parties promote their male candidates much more than female ones. In relation to this, Polish research found a significant disproportion in the use by women and men of unpaid TV election campaign programmes, in particular when one takes into consideration the duration of women's and men's broadcasts. In addition, the research found that when parties presented their programmes in TV broadcasts they generally used a male voice-over [Fuszara 1994]. In sum, TV electoral campaigns tend to be 'male' campaigns: political parties promote men and devote almost all of the air-time to their statements.

Lack of party support for women politicians is also reflected in the lack of preparation and training they provide to their female candidates in comparison to their male counterparts, as a respondent<sup>15</sup> in Slovenia was eager to point out:

*Were the campaign for women properly prepared, women would be electable [...] It is a decision made by a political party: will they invest in a woman or not. So far no party has decided to invest in an intellectually and politically strong woman.*

In addition to political parties, respondents also mentioned a lack of solidarity and support among women as another important factor acting as a barrier to women's political representation. In their view, this barrier has different manifestations, such as the fact that women politicians have not been successful in establishing women's networks and also the fact that women do not appear to vote for female candidates. Respondents in different countries provided a variety of explanations for this, ranging from lack of time to socialise (Slovakia), high competition among women politicians (Slovenia), and the fact that feminism has a bad reputation (Estonia). In any case, it is interesting to note that here, once again, respondents tended to give a personal or biological interpretation, explaining this barrier in terms of an essentialist view of 'women's nature'. The following extracts from interviews reveal the multiplicity of interpretations:

*Women's solidarity does not work as well as men's solidarity. Maybe we, women, really do not have enough space and time to meet and prepare systematically... we do not go for a beer together. Sometimes at voting we take the side of men instead of women... I always had good cooperation with male colleagues; way of communication, a bit of women's diplomacy, a smile made a difference. It was more difficult with women, I had a feeling that we could understand each other better...<sup>16</sup>*

*Women's solidarity is only intuitive or spontaneous, but not ambitious and conscious. More women's movements and groups are needed to support women and to build conscious-*

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<sup>15</sup> Member of Parliament, President of the Parliamentary Commission for Petitions, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities

<sup>16</sup> Former Minister, centre-left, Slovakia.

*ness of common goals – to help successful women to enter politics. Every woman in our country fights just for herself. They are more like rivals, without realising any common mission.*<sup>17</sup>

*...women are put in a situation where there is competition between them; by the fact that they are rare the competition is somehow imposed on them. [...] But apart from that I could simply say that yes, women are more insolent to women and don't stand each other.*<sup>18</sup>

## Women MPs making a difference

Campaigns for an increase in women's political representation rest on the premise that women can make a difference. There are a number of arguments supporting this premise – for example, that women's experiences and interests are different to those of men and that these will have an impact on political agendas and on the way of doing politics. In any case, the actual impact women parliamentarians can make will depend on a number of variables that vary from country to country. These include the political context in which the assembly functions, the type and number of women who are in parliament, and the rules of the parliamentary game [Lovenduski and Karam 2002].

Drawing on personal experiences and perceptions of women MPs, representatives from women NGOs and civil servants in the ten countries under study, this section considers the question of whether women in parliament are making a difference in CEE countries and analyses the different strategies that these women are using to maximise their impact upon both the political agenda and upon the way politics is made. In particular their impact is examined on legislation, public policies, and political culture (such as political discourse, awareness and sensitivity to gender issues), and the strategies that women are adopting to maximise that impact. In this regard the section looks at whether women are forging ties of solidarity with women in other political parties and with women's NGOs.

Data from the interviews reveal very similar trends to those shown in the analysis of barriers to women's political representation. These consist in a widespread perception of the differences between female and male politicians based on ontological distinctions of the masculine and the feminine – for example, women are perceived as 'naturally' more caring, more reconciliatory, less aggressive and more sensitive to certain issues. Such perceptions are very revealing, insofar as they uncover a general lack of acknowledgement of how gender roles are constructed. The analysis also reveals interesting self-perceptions in accordance with gender stereotypes which are instilled during the socialisation process and which clearly affect the potential of women in effecting real change. Another important factor hindering the possibility of real change is the fact that feminism has fallen into disre-

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<sup>17</sup> Former Minister, centre-left, Slovakia.

<sup>18</sup> Member of Parliament, President of the Parliamentary Commission for Petitions, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities, Parliament of the Republic of Slovenia

pute and any initiative in favour of women and women's rights is associated with feminism. In addition, there is also a widespread perception that there are more pressing problems which have come about, or have been exacerbated, as a result of the fall of state socialism. Lack of solidarity among women is another factor hindering change. A combination of these factors acts to make women MPs quite reluctant to focus on 'women's issues', as these pose serious electoral risks for them. Instead, they prefer to see themselves as representing the party rather than representing women.

### *Impact on legislation*

The analysis of the interviews shows that the extent of women's engagement in the introduction of legislation regarding the protection of women's rights varies among CEE countries. However, when asked to provide an assessment of their involvement in women's issues, respondents in the various countries concurred that the level of such involvement is low and, in the case of specific countries such as Latvia, nil.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in those countries where women have been actively engaged in the introduction of new legislation, their involvement is considered to be fragmented and confined to specific areas such as the social protection of specific groups of women (e.g. single mothers, the elderly, ethnic minorities); family/parental rights; violence against women and, more exceptionally, reproductive rights.

It needs to be noted that the most significant equal opportunities legislation to have been recently introduced in CEE countries comes as the result of outside pressure (i.e. in relation to EU accession requirements) rather than being the result of internal pressure from women MPs.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, respondents in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia called attention to the role played by women in supporting, debating and amending such legislation. Indeed, a number of respondents were keen to emphasise how the introduction of new equal opportunities legislation in their countries involved a long process (sometimes lasting years) in which women played a significant role in initiating a debate, influencing public opinion, drafting different versions of the legislation, and so on. Poland provides an interesting example of a failed attempt on the part of women to introduce new equal opportunities legislation. Women in this country have played a key role in the drafting of a law on equal status for women and men, yet after nine years of lobbying (and after different versions of the draft law having been submitted to parliament in

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<sup>19</sup> In Latvia women MPs to date have not brought issues of gender equality into the foreground, nor have they ever made proposals in this area.

<sup>20</sup> Specifically, the following pieces of legislation are mentioned in this context: Anti-discrimination Act 2003 (Bulgaria); Gender Equality Act 2004 (Estonia); Equal Treatment Legislation (Hungary); Equal Opportunities Act 1999 (Lithuania); Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2002 (Romania); Anti-discrimination Act 2004 (Slovakia); Act on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2002 (Slovenia).

1996, 1997, 1998 and 2004) all their attempts to introduce it have failed so far. The main reasons mentioned by respondents for such successive rejections of the law include a widely shared belief by MPs that gender equality has already been achieved; a belief that gender equality should be achieved by social practice rather than being enforced by law, and a rejection of the fundamental principle enshrined in the law that women and men should be equal, due to a conceptual confusion between notions of 'equality' and 'sameness'.

In addition to the role played by women MPs in the adoption of equal opportunities legislation as part of accession requirements, respondents<sup>21</sup> emphasised the importance of women's involvement in the introduction of new legislation on violence against women (especially domestic violence). According to respondents this is something that constitutes a 'success story' regarding women's active involvement in the introduction of new legislation. In the opinion of respondents, such a success is explained as having been facilitated by the following factors:

a) Strong collaboration between women MPs from different parties and NGOs: In almost all the countries where new legislation on domestic violence has been enacted, this legislation has been introduced from the bottom-up, as women NGOs have been responsible for initiating a debate on the issue and putting it on the public agenda, as well as initiating a draft proposal through women MPs. In this sense, the passing of new legislation on domestic violence represents a joint success of women NGOs and women MPs. This kind of 'success story' is described by a Slovak respondent<sup>22</sup> as follows:

*It was an initiative of NGOs. E.R. [female], my colleague from the party, she forced it through the Committee, but I was working on these laws from the beginning. We, female politicians, Eva, me and some others, also E.C. who was not a member of the Parliament at that time, we tried to minimise arguments among NGOs about the 'copyrights' of these laws, we devoted a lot of energy to this. We succeeded in the end. It was the success of women's NGOs. It was not done by the government, ministries or MPs. It was the pressure from bottom up and from outside... We are proud of that.*

Apart from effective co-operation between MPs and NGOs, respondents also highlighted the importance of cross-party alliances among women MPs for the introduction of domestic violence legislation in the country.

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<sup>21</sup> This is particularly highlighted by respondents in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. In Poland a law on violence against women was proposed in 2005 by different political actors, although the most active in putting it forward has been the Government Office ('plenipotentiary') for Gender Equality. This Office works in close co-operation with women's NGOs. It is significant that this law was proposed after the establishment of the office in 2002. Before that there was a lack of co-operation between government and women's groups following the closure of the government Plenipotentiary of Women and Family Affairs in 1997 and its replacement by the more conservative Plenipotentiary for Family Affairs.

<sup>22</sup> Slovenian MP, leader of a political party, centre-right.

b) Institutional structures: As indicated above, the introduction of new legislation on domestic violence was initiated by NGOs in most countries and supported and carried forward by women MPs. But such close collaboration was made possible because of the existence of certain structures in the parliament or government, such as parliamentary commissions on women's rights, which afforded political women an important parliamentary space in which to develop woman-friendly legislative initiatives.

c) Popular appeal: The proposal to introduce a Domestic Violence Bill by Hungarian women's organisations was an exceptional move, as civil society groups rarely initiate legislation. However, the bill enjoyed great popular appeal and garnered wide consensus across different parties. This was probably because the issue was generally viewed as a matter concerning human, rather than women's, rights. Similarly, Romanian activists construct domestic violence as a human rights issue and a problem for society as a whole: this view enjoys widespread acceptance.

Apart from the domestic violence 'success' story, respondents coincided in pointing out that legislative initiatives coming from women MPs mainly concern the traditional 'feminine' policy areas such as the family, education and social security (the latter mainly concerning the social disadvantage of certain categories of women). Thus, women MPs across the political spectrum concur in their prioritisation of social and family issues, such as the social disadvantage of lone mothers, poverty among older women, the provision of child support, maternity and parental rights, amongst others.

### *Impact on culture*

In relation to the question about how the presence of women MPs is changing culture, the majority of respondents concentrated on political/parliamentary culture, although some of them referred to a wider sense of the term as the 'general customs and beliefs of a society'.<sup>23</sup> On the whole, respondents' arguments regarding the impact of women MPs in a political culture were based on essentialist notions of women. This indicates a wide acceptance of women's roles independently of gender and political affinity. In their arguments, women MPs are viewed as being more tolerant, better communicators, more gentle and polite than their male colleagues:

*Women are more careful, more circumspect, and less corrupt than men. They are able to focus on several things simultaneously.*<sup>24</sup>

*There is a certain difference between men and women MPs [...] in their approach to work. The manner of dealing with a particular subject is different in women; it is a lot more thorough, constructive and tolerant.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> As defined by the Cambridge Learner's Dictionary.

<sup>24</sup> Socialist MEP, Hungary.

<sup>25</sup> MP, Republic of Slovenia.

*In every political debate across the whole political spectrum women use a different language from men. I have never seen, in any other space, such differences between men and women and between their mutual relations. I have never felt it in communication in private sphere. In politics, men get together and destroy you without any problems.<sup>26</sup>*

In addition, it was claimed that women are more sensitive towards certain issues such as social, educational and health matters, largely as a result of those 'feminine' attributes. Such attributes were generally evaluated positively by respondents, many of whom support women's participation for the beneficial impact that they can make to both the style and the substance of politics. In sum, women's representation can make a difference, according to respondents, in 1) the atmosphere of parliamentary debate, and 2) the kind of issues that are given priority for political action. With regard to 1), the role of women MPs is regarded mainly as 'compensatory', that is, as off-setting male, more 'aggressive' attributes, by moderating conflict and more generally by introducing a different 'style' of doing politics and exercising power. Regarding 2), women MPs are said to be 'naturally' drawn to social issues in the fields of education, social protection and health, as a result of these distinct attributes. As a respondent<sup>27</sup> from Slovenia argues:

*The analyses we have done among the Slovene women MPs have shown that women have a little different way of functioning. Though this is probably a consequence of socialisation and education and all that and this is why women have different priorities. Maybe they are a bit more sensitive for social politics than neo-liberal economy. Probably women would put more emphasis on social security than profitable companies. This is a fact.*

Moreover, in the views of respondents, such differences in the way women function in politics render their presence necessary insofar as certain issues must be given due attention. According to a Polish respondent:<sup>28</sup>

*Women place greater importance on social, educational matters and to the health service [...] men place greater importance on public investments such as roads. But I believe that women are needed in government at least for work on commissions that deal with these social matters.*

It is interesting to note that these arguments regarding differences and the benefits they bring to society are based on essentialist arguments, while little mention is made of women's distinct experiences, interests and perspectives (other than those connected to their role as mothers and carers) and the potential impact that

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<sup>26</sup> Liberal Party MP, Slovakia.

<sup>27</sup> Counsellor of the Bureau for Equal Opportunities of Women and Men, Government of the Republic of Slovenia.

<sup>28</sup> Male respondent in a survey conducted on a representative random sample of Polish society (1002) in 2004 for this EGG research.

these can have on established cultural norms by drawing attention, and channelling action, to, for example, gender stereotypes and gender biases in organisational culture. Differently put, these arguments overlook the benefits that women's presence can bring to issues of gender equality in society. Besides, there is little mention of the benefits that women's presence in politics can bring to other women. When mentioned, respondents were by and large rather sceptical, claiming that women MPs do not, as a rule, engage in women-specific issues for a variety of reasons:<sup>29</sup> a scarcity of women MPs; fear among women MPs that if they focus on women's issues, they will be associated with feminism and the women's movement; a lack of solidarity among women MPs; the wide acceptance of a conservative ideology which allocates different roles to women and men according to deeply entrenched gender stereotypes; a conflict between women's interests and party interests; and, finally, denial that any problem exists.

### *Women MPs and women's NGOs*

Interviews in the majority of countries reveal a weak relationship between women MPs and women's NGOs. Co-operation is at best sporadic and short-term, and focused on some specific issues, such as domestic violence, the social protection of disadvantaged women,<sup>30</sup> or the introduction of a quota system.

Regarding the kind of collaboration between them, it needs to be noted that a large number of NGOs are generally concerned with social rather than gender equality issues. Put differently, they are mainly service providers rather than lobbying organisations, and as such they are responsible for tasks previously undertaken by the state.<sup>31</sup> The following extract from a Slovenian respondent illustrates the role of NGOs in her own country but it could as well serve to describe the situation in other countries such as Czech Republic and Hungary:

*There are no political women NGOs. Most of the existing NGOs are engaged with some quite special fields and topics, especially so-called social ones. Those have actually taken over the functioning of state institutions at offering help to some social groups, and this way it has been possible for the state to abandon, without any bad conscience, some actions which it has a duty to carry out. But politically engaged NGOs with women-connected topics, strengthening their power and influence, or otherwise engaged in gender equality, we don't have.*

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<sup>29</sup> The majority of these factors are the same as those already mentioned in the section on barriers above.

<sup>30</sup> These have already been discussed in section 4.1 above.

<sup>31</sup> A notable exception is represented by Estonia and Lithuania where women's NGOs claim to be mainly concerned with lobbying on gender equality issues and where, in the case of Lithuania at least, co-operation seems to be rather strong.

Furthermore, in becoming a surrogate state agency and receiving state funding for the provision of services, they have lost not only their economic, but also their political independence. This point of view, however, is qualified by other respondents, who are eager to stress the fact that co-operation between women MPs and women's NGOs is quite recent and still in the process of developing. Furthermore, they cite several instances of successful co-operative work as providing a good example of what women can achieve together when they unite. The example of domestic violence legislation, described above, constitutes a case in hand.

While some interviews highlighted a few successes, others revealed that not all cases of collaboration between women MPs and NGOs have run as smoothly as it may appear. Quite the contrary, this relationship has been often conflictual. For example, respondents from NGOs in both the Czech Republic and Slovenia complained of how they are always regarded as the 'weak' partners in the decision-making process, and of how they feel that they are 'abused' by politicians, who use the services of NGOs whenever they are needed and then 'dispose of' them when they are no longer necessary. The following quotation from a representative of a Czech women's NGO expresses this view as follows:

*[Domestic violence] is being discussed a lot, it's got into people's consciousness, into the government priorities, into round table discussions. But the government priorities give the Ministry the credit for it all [...] They do not even mention the NGOs in the document [...] I cannot take that they do not give NGOs credit at least for their initiative. I am really disgusted by this – this kind of disrespect is simply beyond any acceptable degree.*

In other interviews, however, the blame is directed in the opposite direction. Yet, on the whole (and again, with some notable exceptions), interviews show a tendency in both politicians and NGOs to blame each other for the lack of more vigorous and sustained co-operation between them. Another reason mentioned for the lack of co-operation is the absence of institutional mechanisms allowing such co-operation to take place on a formal basis. As a result, contacts and exchanges are usually at a personal level and are oftentimes informal (again, with the exception of countries where institutions facilitating social dialogue on gender equality are well established, such as, for example, parliamentary committees on women's rights).

### **Conclusion: assessing the state of women's political representation in CEE**

This study of women's political representation in CEE countries reveals the prevalence of deep-seated gender stereotypes that define women primarily as mothers and wives, assigning their role as primarily concentrated in the private sphere. We have seen how those gender stereotypes have a significant impact upon both the supply of, and the demand for, women in politics in the region. On the one hand, the wide social acceptance of those stereotypes work to discourage women from

pursuing a career in politics, as they perceive such a career to be in conflict with their role as women, wives and mothers. On the other hand, gender stereotypes also work to block women with political aspirations from prominent political positions, to the extent that such advancement is regarded as incompatible with the prevailing norms and practices of major political institutions such as political parties.

Gender stereotypes not only affect the supply and demand of women in politics, but they also affect the kind of strategies that women politicians pursue to 'make a difference' in the field of gender equality, including women's representation. This is because many women MPs deny the existence of a gender problem in the first place. In many of the interviews with women politicians conducted in the study, there is recognition that women are under-represented in politics, and this is not viewed benignly. Nevertheless, there remains a reluctance to see this as the result of discriminatory practices or institutionalised bias. Women's under-representation in politics is often regarded as being the result of biologically based differences between the sexes (e.g. the 'natural' propensity for women to act as nurturers and to care for children) rather than being the result of socially constructed gender roles that are discriminatory towards women. As a result, the problem with women's political under-representation is typically regarded as a problem of reconciling work and family responsibilities.

Such a conceptualisation of the gender issue (including the problem of women's under-representation) determines the kind of interests and initiatives that women politicians are likely to pursue. Thus women MPs are reluctant to focus on gender equality issues. Instead, they tend to focus their attention on more global social and human rights issues, some of which may bring important benefits to women. Such is the case of the successful political achievements related to taking action against domestic violence (conceptualised as a human rights issue), which was engineered by women MPs together with women NGOs in a number of CEE countries.

The prevalence of gender stereotypes in CEE countries lends support to arguments about the limitations of formal equality in bringing about substantive change. Although such arguments generally draw on experiences in the West, where formal equality initiatives have amounted to little more than the implementation of equal treatment legislation, the findings drawn from experiences in the CEE region lend support to a more robust argument, that in order to bring about gender equality in society, strategies consisting of the implementation of equal treatment legislation, coupled with specific actions to ensure the participation of women in all aspects of political and economic life, such as the establishment of formal quotas and the provision of generous services for mothers, may be necessary but are not sufficient.

This takes us to the strategy that is currently promoted by the EU to achieve the goal of gender equality – gender mainstreaming. The advantage of this strategy is that it draws on structural analyses of gender inequality as a problem that is located in, and reproduced by, public and social institutions and their practices. Gender mainstreaming is about changing institutional norms and practices, and as such

it is viewed as a 'transformative strategy'. Defenders of gender mainstreaming claim that this is the best strategy to tackle gender stereotyping in society – one of the key barriers to women's political representation, as revealed in this study. If this is true, gender mainstreaming may be key to the achievement of an equal representation of women in political life, and therefore key to the process of democratisation in the EU zone.

However, some researchers remain sceptical about the potential of the strategy. They caution that gender mainstreaming is still quite undefined, as it is currently quite an abstract (and therefore confusing and indeterminate) concept. They also caution that it is not clear how the strategy is to be implemented. Thus, while in some places the implementation of gender mainstreaming is a political process that has actively engaged all key players in society (political parties across the spectrum, NGOs, trade unions, policy makers, academic experts, and so on), in other places it is simply a bureaucratic process involving the introduction of new policy tools and techniques by experts and bureaucrats.

The recent creation of women's organisations in CEE countries and their successful engagement in political processes (illustrated by the case of domestic violence) provide a clear example of the potential that women have to effect change once they form cross-party and cross-sector alliances. It could be hypothesised that the implementation of gender mainstreaming in CEE, if it is to be successful, will require the same kind of joint action of sympathetic legislators, knowledgeable bureaucrats, and civil society feminists.

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**Appendix 1. Distribution of interviews**

Country	Female Politicians	Gender equality administrators	NGO representatives	Others	Total
Bulgaria	3	4	2	2	11
Czech Republic	20	0	1	0	21
Estonia	2	2	2	0	6
Hungary	9	0	0	0	9
Latvia	1	2	1	1	5
Lithuania	1 (male)	5	0	1	7
Poland	18	6	0	0	24
Romania	3	3	2	2	10
Slovakia	10	3	5	0	18
Slovenia	3	2	1	0	6
Total	70	27	14	6	117

**Appendix 2. Women in the national parliaments of the EU, 2005**

Country	Women	Men	% Women	Rank
Sweden	158	191	45	1
Finland	75	125	38	2
Denmark	66	113	37	3
The Netherlands	55	95	37	4
Spain	126	224	36	5
Belgium	52	98	35	6
Austria	62	121	34	7
Germany	195	419	32	8
Luxembourg	14	46	23	9
Bulgaria*	53	187	22	10
Lithuania	31	110	22	11
Portugal	49	181	21	12
Latvia	21	89	21	13
Poland	94	366	20	14
United Kingdom	127	519	20	15
Estonia	19	82	19	16
Czech Republic	34	166	17	17
Slovakia	25	125	17	18
Cyprus	9	47	16	19
Ireland	22	144	13	20
Greece	39	261	13	21
Slovenia	11	79	12	22
France	70	504	12	23
Italy	71	545	12	24
Romania*	37	294	11	25
Malta	6	59	9	26
Hungary	35	350	9	27

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, [www.ipu.org/parline](http://www.ipu.org/parline). Data collected on 29 October 2005.

\*Bulgaria and Romania are included as EU accession states.