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Gender differences in attitudes towards social activities in college students

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In Hungary it is an overt phenomenon that women play only a very small part in public life. In local government, their proportion is somewhat higher, but there is still a dominance of men. This has historical reasons.

Secret and almost general suffrage, including women, has been present in Hungary since 1919. This suffrage was in 1922 limited so that only 29% of the population, compared to the former 44%, was involved. But still, it can be stated that since 1919, most of the women that can read and write and are over 24 years of age can exercise their rights and can elect and can be elected.

In the 20th century history of Hungary being elected was mainly only a possibility, and hardly ever occurred. It is very typical that 97.6% of the *Interim National Assembly*, which was of historical importance between December 1944 and September 1945, were men, and the number of women amounted only to 2.4%.

Because of the limited possibilities of women, it is no wonder that in the era between the two World Wars only one prominent politician woman is mentioned in the Hungarian political life, the social democrat Anna Kéthly (1889-1976). She was internationally acknowledged and was an elected member of the International Women's Committee of the 2nd International. There was no doubt about her moral and political integrity and because of her principles she spent years in prison, and while Hungary was occupied by the Germans, she went underground. During the 1956 uprising, she tried to re-organize the Social Democrats Party, which was formerly merged into and by the Communist party. She was abroad when she learned that the 1956 revolution fell and she never returned to Hungary, spending the rest of her life as an emigrant. However, no recognition of her personality occurred in Hungary after the political changes in 1989. The main reason of this was that the party that declared to be the successor of the historical Social Democrats Party had no members in the Parliament after the democratic elections.

During the forty years of socialism, the equal opportunities of men and women were only implemented at the level of statements. As far as the composition of the Parliament was concerned, the number of the representatives was divided between the 'ruling' worker's class, the 'allied' peasants, and the intellectuals that supported them. It also needs noting that the figures were manipulated in a hypocritical way so that János Kádár, the leader of the Communist party was considered as a 'worker', while the Minister of Education and Culture, Valeria Benke, also the only female member of the Political Committee of the Communist party, was mentioned as a 'teacher'. During the years of socialism, in one period, the Parliament had a female Chair (Istvánné Vass between 1963 and 1967), but, because the Parliament did not work as it does in democracies, it was of no particular significance.

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The political changes in 1989 resulted in the first Parliament, elected after democratic elections. In 1990, the division mentioned above was not applied at all. Of the 358 members, 28 were women, representing 7.8% of the parliament. In 1994, there were 42 women in the Parliament, that is, 11.7% of all MPs. In 1998, 32 women were elected, 8.9%, and in 2002, 33 (9.2%), while in 2006, 40, which is 10.32% of all MPs. The figures look nicer if we look at the fact that since May 2002, the Chair of the Hungarian Parliament is a woman, Katalin Szili. Of the four parties that have members in the Parliament, one has a female leader, and the Governments have had female Ministers, not only leading the traditionally 'femalish' ministries, but also directing the ministries of internal affairs or that of justice, usually considered as men's domain.

To make a comparison, the data from Estonia for the same period are as follows. The two countries can be compared because Estonia, like Hungary, is a post-socialist country. It is quite possible that this difference is because of the Scandinavian environment, which represents a different political culture.

Of the members of the Estonian parliament (2003-2007), 20% are women (20 of 101), their proportion being 13% between 1992 and 1995 and 11% between 1995 and 1999, and 16% between 1999 and 2003. It is therefore quite obvious that while women constitute some more than the half of the 10 million Hungarians (according to the 2003 data, there are about half a million more women than men), they are however very weakly represented in the Parliament, constituting less than one tenth of all MPs. (<http://www.riigikogu.ee/?id=34675>)

The gender ratios found in the political system seem to be reflected in the other large societal subsystems. Similar ratios of men and women can be found among the scientific institutes (universities, research institutes). The 2004 data says that of the 236 regular members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 7 were women (3%), and of the 90 correspondent members, there were 4 women (4%). There are 2404 of those holding the 'Doctor of the Academy' degree (the highest degree in Hungary, the members of the Academy are selected from those holding it), with 266 women (13%). 9990 Hungarians have PhD degrees, 2170 of them are women, which equals to 22%. This disproportion results in the fact that also within the societal subsystem of science, there is a so-called '*glass ceiling*'. Only a very few women can get to a situation in which they could apply for a leader's position. Thus, women are seldom elected to be leaders of universities or research institutes.

One reason that explains the low proportion of women in the Parliament is that women in general take a less active role in public life than men. As far as the general elections are concerned, less women's names can be found on party lists and in the individual districts, so in their case, less of them has a chance to be elected. Although some parties, mainly the left-wing ones, are consciously involving more and more women, their efforts have not yet resulted in a breakthrough.

It is a relatively conservative ideal of women in Hungary that could explain the low motivation of women. A part of the press, mainly conservative, suggests a role expectation for women which can hardly match with a politician's role to represent

interests (Sándor 2006). In short: the pervasive (gender related) repertoire of roles harmonize with a politician's professional role repertoire only in case of men, and it does not do so with women. Part of the press conveys this conflict by judging male and female politicians in a different way.

In our research, we started from the fact that student representation, both at secondary and higher level, can be a socialisation scene for taking roles in public life.

It is our own experience that in these fields, considerably more male students can be found than females. In this research, we wanted to learn more about the female students' motivation for their involvement in public activities, in the Engineering faculty of a Hungarian university.

The questions we posed included ones referring to the nature and intensity (time spent) of their activities for the community, and also, there were questions about their motivation. We also tried to get them think about how their environments respond if a male or a female student takes part in the student union.

Because of the nature of this Faculty – they train engineers –, there was a certain distinction between male and female students. Although when they were asked if they can feel this in the course of education, many answered 'no', some provided more refined opinions. A negative discrimination is suggested by answers such as 'A girl should know four times as much as a boy in the field of engineering to be acknowledged', according to one male student. Some females quoted some of their teachers who said 'you could have chosen a more 'femalish' profession'. Some students mentioned 'rumours' that some male teachers are 'alleged' to have offered better grades hoping for sexual services.

Concerning motivation for taking roles in the students' union, strong differences were found in male and female students' answers.

It was mostly in the male students responses that working in the Students' Union is part of their consciously planned career. Some have already started doing such tasks in primary or secondary school and several different types of tasks were included. On a regular basis, they spend a lot of time working, – even two or three days a week or more – especially before larger events, and they tend to neglect their studies, focusing only on their job that they have taken in the Students' Union. When they were asked why they decided to take this extra burden, many said that 'most of the students are passive', and 'if I don't do it, it won't be done'. The responses of those who consider 'if I'll get enough votes next year' suggest even deeper motivation.

It is quite possible that for them, taking such a role is an inner motivation rooted in their personal value system. Some of the answers lead us to the conclusion that in their case the preference for the value of *freedom, (legal) equality and solidarity* was more conscious. Their motivation was formulated in a more sophisticated way, e.g. 'I'm interested in how the community works, I would like to help others.' This attitude foretells that after they graduate they will be happy to take other roles in public life, representing others, that is, the political elite of the future, both at regional and national

level, will be selected from them. Some male students do consciously use their work in the Students' Union to develop competences (negotiation skills, techniques to represent interests), which they could very well use in their career as an engineer-manager. They do not only think of local issues, they are also able to make comparisons at a national level.

Three female students showed such a conscious motivation to build a career. They have successfully organised many different kinds of tasks in the university. They have spent many hours of their free time for this. They said that their motivation was 'to try out myself... I was interested in the theme of the conference, this is why I organised it.' They said it was one aim of theirs to develop their personality and to increase their social capital (Bourdieu): 'I wanted to talk to the teachers.'

The answers reflect that most of the female students were motivated by their environment (friends, other students); they were selected more or less at random from a relatively small group. The time they mostly spend with their activities varies between two hours and two or three days a week and included only one particular task. Their involvement was mostly by chance and were motivated by another person: 'My friend, who is also my room-mate, also a member of the Student's Union, said that I would be an appropriate person for that.' In this group, no firm relation between the motivation and the value preferences was found. They were mainly attracted by the possibility of being popular, making new friends, to be part of 'a great fun'. One girl said that she (as a girl) was elected for a particular task because 'girls are more patient and accurate.' (Her task included calculating scholarships.) Another female student said that 'girls are much better at organising things because are more sensitive to details, while the boys tend to be more warlike.'

When answering the question if they would consider the candidate's being male or female when one has to be elected, either at local or national level, many responded, as expected, that it is only '*skills, aptitude, charisma that counts*'. They have, however, also mentioned their experience that much fewer girls take part in the students' representation than could be expected by their proportion, even at places, such as the faculties of humanities, where most of the students are female. Somebody said that at middle level, a female leader would be nice to have, but not at higher level, because 'girls are easy to be influenced, and are emotionally unstable.' (A male student's opinion.) Another opinion suggested that at local level a female leader is quite possible, but in national level politics, men would be better to be seen. (A female student's opinion.)

All in all, the political attitudes of the students asked does not differ significantly from what is commonly believed and realised in the general elections these days. It is, however, quite possible that the female students' energies are mostly utilised by preparing for a 'male-dominated' profession, and when they study they do not have the extra energies to take a role in a student union where males are more common.

A similar research in a faculty where females are in the majority would be of interesting to see the conclusions. That would help us formulate further assumptions of whether role taking of the university students of our days simply reflect the adults' patterns, as seen with the students of engineering, or whether there are also differences.

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