Jagiellonian University in Kraków
Faculty of International and Political Studies
Institute of European Studies

Kamilla Begebayeva

student ID number: 2786526

Field of study: European Studies

# *Beyond the Numbers: Party, Institution, and Agency in Women Legislators' Social-Welfare and Family Policy Advocacy after Poland's 2011 Quota*

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Professor Clare McManus (Glasgow University)
Dr Marta Warat (Jagiellonian University)

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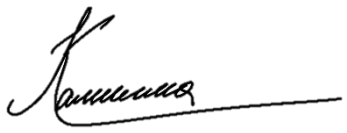

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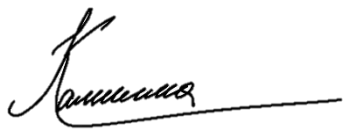

## Abstract

This thesis examines how the post-2011 rise in women's descriptive representation in the Polish Sejm is experienced and enacted in female politicians' social welfare and family policy work. The 2011 gender quota rule is treated as an important context: it expanded the pool of women on party lists, but the analysis focuses on the mechanisms that either convert presence into influence or blunt it. Using a qualitative, thematic design, this study analyses three confidential elite interviews alongside eleven publicly available long-form statements from former and current female MPs (2011-2025). The framework combines Pitkin's (1967) dimensions of representation with feminist institutionalism and the critical mass/critical actors debate. Materials were coded using NVivo, with deductive categories from theory and inductive frames from MP's own language.

Findings show that formal gateways are largely gender-neutral on paper, yet list placements and committee allocation, leadership backing, and access to informal arenas (late-night networking, male-coded venues) shape who gains agenda time and coordination posts. Sexist language and media tone-policing raise the costs of visible leadership for women. Individual pathways vary: many women prioritise welfare and family policy through socialised experience and prior activism; others strategically pursue traditionally masculine spheres to widen what counts as women's expertise. Numbers help, but critical mass alone is insufficient.



Keywords: critical actors, critical mass, female representation, gender quota, representation theory, Sejm,

**Abstrakt**

Niniejsza praca bada, jak powojenny (po 2011 r.) wzrost reprezentacji deskryptywnej kobiet w Sejmie jest doświadczany i urzeczywistniany w pracy posłanek nad polityką społeczną i rodzinną. Przepis o kwotach płci z 2011 r. traktuję jako ważny kontekst: poszerzył on pulę kobiet na listach partyjnych, jednak analiza koncentruje się na mechanizmach, które albo przekuwają samą obecność w wpływ, albo ją tłumią. Zastosowano jakościowy, tematyczny projekt badawczy: trzy poufne wywiady elitowe zestawiono z jedenastoma publicznie dostępnymi, długimi wypowiedziami/wywiadami byłych i obecnych posłanek (2011–2025). Ramy analityczne łączą wymiary reprezentacji u Pitkin z instytucjonalizmem feministycznym oraz debatą o masie krytycznej i aktorach krytycznych. Materiał kodowano w NVivo, wykorzystując kategorie dedukcyjne zaczerpnięte z teorii oraz kategorie indukcyjne wyłonione z języka samych posłanek.

Ustalenia pokazują, że formalne bramki dostępu są w świetle przepisów w dużej mierze neutralne ze względu na płeć, lecz o tym, kto zyskuje czas na agendzie i stanowiska koordynacyjne, decydują: miejsce na liście i przydział do komisji, wsparcie kierownictwa partii oraz dostęp do aren nieformalnych (nocne networkingowe spotkania, przestrzenie kodowane jako męskie). Seksistyczny język oraz policjowanie tonu przez media podnoszą koszty widocznego przywództwa kobiet. Ścieżki indywidualne są zróżnicowane: wiele posłanek priorytetyzuje politykę społeczną i rodzinną dzięki uspołecznionym doświadczeniom i wcześniejszemu aktywizmowi; inne strategicznie wchodzą w tradycyjnie męskie obszary, by poszerzać to, co uchodzi za kobiece kompetencje. Same liczby pomagają, lecz sama masa krytyczna nie wystarcza.

Słowa kluczowe: aktorzy krytyczni, masa krytyczna, reprezentacja kobiet, kwoty płciowe, teoria reprezentacji, Sejm.

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

## Background and rationale

Over recent decades, the increasing number of elected women in political institutions worldwide has generated a substantial academic and policy interest in the dynamics of the gender side of political representation. Gender quotas, which mandate a specific percentage of female candidates on electoral lists, have emerged as an essential tool for addressing historical imbalances in women's political representation (Krook, 2009; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). In Poland, the 2011 electoral code introduced a 35% requirement for women and men on party lists. Moreover, on the numerical side, it has worked; women's share on party lists has grown from about 23% in 2007 to roughly 42% in 2015 (Gwiazda, 2017, p. 13). However, the central question remains: Has this increase in descriptive representation translated into substantive change in the policy agenda, especially in social welfare and family policy? This thesis aims to move beyond headcount to trace whether and through what mechanisms the post-2011 increase in women's presence in the Polish Sejm translates into substantive influence over social welfare and family policy.

In Poland, quota reform grew primarily out of domestic mobilisation. The first Congress of Women (*Kongres Kobiet*) in 2009 united scholars, entrepreneurs, politicians and NGOs behind the "It is Time for Women" initiative, which proposed a 50% citizen's bill. After some compromise, it was settled to be 35% minimum for each sex. The law includes sanctions for non-compliant lists, but has no placement rules, allowing parties to meet the law's threshold while having freedom to place women however low on the lists (Śledzińska-Simon & Bodnar, 2013; Millard, 2014). EU equality norms did not impose quotas; all election rules are national. However, EU membership legitimised domestic claims that Poland should meet a "European standard" (Śledzińska-Simon & Bodnar, 2013; Millard, 2014) over the 2010s. Parties essentially learned and complied with the mechanics of the quota (Millard, 2014). At the same time, gender equality became increasingly polarised, conservative actors framed it as a foreign interference and elevated maternalist ideals, while progressives aligned it with the rule of law and democratic values (Gwiazda, 2021). The EU increasingly tied equality and rule of law to funding, as seen in disputes over municipalities declaring "LGBT-free zones" (European Parliament, 2021). Against this backdrop women's seat share in the Sejm rose toward roughly one-third (IPU Parline historical series, "percentage of women"). However, as comparative work cautions, numerical gains do not automatically convert into agenda-setting power, as informal rules and routines still filter access to winnable list slots, committee influence and credit-caliming (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Krook & Mackay, 2011).

Today, Poland is a compelling case for research because legal reform, party organisation, electoral rules and cultural expectations intersect distinctively. The Sejm operates under open-list PR and strong party control, while the quota has no placement mandate. Party leaders can comply with the law, yet keep winnable list slots in male hands. At the same time, the public is shaped by powerful gender scripts, the *Matka Polka*[1] ideal and church-inflected nationalism. That marks who is seen as a proper representative and what counts as a legitimate claim to represent. This context raises a classic puzzle in the representation literature. Numerical gains are visible, but informal rules and routines may still filter women's influence (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Krook & Mackay, 2011).

This thesis centres on social welfare and family policy because comparative research repeatedly finds that women legislators give these domains heightened attention across otherwise different systems. Evidence from India, Latin America, Africa and Western democracies links women's presence to greater focus on education, health, childcare and family benefits (Bhalotra & Clots-Figueras, 2014; Clots-Figueras, 2012; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Bratton & Ray, 2002; Clayton et al., 2018; Wang, 2022). In Poland, where maternalist frames are culturally salient, these arenas are particularly informative for observing whether and how descriptive presence becomes substantive influence.

**Research Focus, Questions and Methodological Approach**

This project examines how female MPs experience, perceive and respond to institutional and cultural barriers and their strategies to influence social welfare and family policy. The main research question is how the post-2011 increase in women's presence in the Polish Sejm is experienced and enacted in day-to-day work in social welfare and family policy, and how female MPs describe its effects on agenda setting and decision making between 2011 and 2025? First, the guiding sub-questions structured analysis of how the party affiliations, list placements and internal party dynamics, including disciplinary mechanisms, enable or limit female MPs' capacity to advocate for social welfare and family policies. Second, how do formal procedures and informal institutional norms within the Sejm shape access to the posts and processes that move policy? Third, how do personal biography, experiences of motherhood, prior activism, and ideology in professional background shape deputies' approach to advocacy?

[1] Matka Polka (The Polish Mother) - a 19th-century nationalist archetype, rooted in Mickiewicz's Do matki Polki and Marian devotion, that casts the self-sacrificing Catholic mother as guardian of language and culture and raiser of sons for the nation. (See Koczynska, 2022; Imbierowicz, 2012.)

Analytically, I keep Pitkin's distinction separate - authorisation and accountability, symbolism, descriptive *being there* and substantive *acting for* - so the argument does not slide between presence and practice (Pitkin, 1967). I read how MPs justify *acting for* using representative claim theory and mandate styles (Saward, 2010; Mansbridge, 2003). Feminist-institutionalist lens directs attention to rules-in-use, recruitment and ranking, committee assignment and leadership, agenda time and corridor culture alongside formal law (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Waylen, 2014; Kenny, 2013; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Finally, I treat critical mass and critical actors as complementary. Numbers set the context while agentic strategies and positions convert opportunities into action (Dahlerup, 1988; Kanter, 1977; Childs & Krook, 2009). Reading against Poland's cultural frames, especially M*atka Polka*, helps clarify how claims are perceived and which voices gain traction.

This thesis focuses on interpretations, mechanisms and patterns of experiences rather than average effects, so I use a qualitative thematic design covering the quota era (2011-2025). The data set combines two types of material: (1) three confidential, semi-structured interviews with current women MPs; and (2) 11 publicly available long-form interviews or statements in which current or former women deputies discuss list placements and quotas, committee work, informal culture and media, and social policy efforts. All texts were cleaned, translated where necessary and coded in NVivo. First, in my analysis, I applied a deductive frame drawn from the theoretical chapter to capture references to Pitkin's dimensions, feminist institutionalist mechanisms and critical actors' logics. Second, I allowed inductive themes to surface from MP's language so that unanticipated mechanisms were not forced into pre-set categories. Chapter IV: Methodology sets out full details on sampling instruments, coding protocols, ethics, and limitations.

**Thesis Overview**

This thesis contains an introduction, six analytical chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter II develops the analytical framework, defining core concepts, such as representation dimensions, representative claims, feminist-institutionalism, critical mass and actors. Chapter III reviews the empirical literature for Poland and clarifies why social welfare and family policy are the right arenas for observing movement from presence to influence. It also summarises findings on quotas without placement rules and the role of informal norms. Chapter IV details the methodology, design and rationale, case focus and recruitment, public source sampling, data collection, coding strategy, ethics, and limitations. Chapter V turns to the party dynamics, from quota compliance to rank politics and shows how list design, personal votes and committee

allocation can propel or blunt descriptive gains. Chapter VI examines informal rules in the Sejm: the language of the chamber, ornament versus *Matka Polka* framing, after-hours networking and media amplification, and how these practices shape credibility and agenda control. Chapter VII follows individual pathways and advocacy strategies, tracing how biography, motherhood, activism, and ideology inform women's social welfare and family policy work. The conclusion returns to the research questions, summarises what changed and what did not, and highlights where reform leverage likely sits, including party-level placement rules and care-compatible parliamentary practices. In short, this study is about how presence meets practice. It begins from the gains produced by the national quota, reviews the literature on recruitment and institutions, and then listens closely to how women MPs narrate the gap between formal inclusion and real influence. By keeping concepts clear and the focus narrow, the following chapters show where in Poland's Sejm numbers do their work and where informal norms still decide whose voices are heard.

## CHAPTER II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Purpose, scope and working definitions

This chapter develops the analytical lens through which I examine whether the post-2011 increase in the presence of women in the Polish Sejm has been translated into shifts in agenda around social welfare and family policy and into meaningful participation in parliamentary decision-making. The objective is to set out a compact but elaborated theoretical framework for this study to clarify what I mean by political presentation, to identify the mechanisms that possibly connect greater female presence to changes in practice, to specify the conditions under which that connection weakens or is redirected and to show how these ideas inform the empirical analysis. The chapter is organised around the study's research questions: parties, institutions and individual agency and how they influence women's political activity. It keeps Poland's post-quota Sejm in view as a setting where these mechanisms are the most likely to be observed. Country background and comparative literature are discussed at length in the literature review chapter. Evidence and illustrations are presented in the three analytical chapters that follow. The task here is to build the theoretical scaffolding that anchors both.

I start with a working definition that builds on Hanna Pitkin's classic formulation and later refinements. Political representation is an institutionalised relationship of authorisation and accountability through which elected actors act in the interest of those they claim to represent (Pitkin, 1967). The definition insists that representation is about action rather than mere presence, without reducing action to outputs alone. It opened space for questions about how representatives understand what they owe, how they justify their choices, which audiences they address and how claims to represent are received. Jane Mansbridge's (2003) account of promissory, anticipatory, gyroscopic and surrogate presentation foregrounds a different justificatory logic that representatives deploy over time and across settings. Those logics shape how representatives describe themselves and others and what it is to *act for*. Michael Saward's notion of the representative claim highlights that representation is performed in public. Actors put forward claims to stand for a constituency, which various audiences accept, resist, and interpret (Saward, 2010). Iris Marion Young argues for the democratic value of including perspectives historically excluded from decision-making and warns against treating difference as a private opinion detached from structural barriers to voice (Young, 2002).

Two clarifications follow from the starting point. First, this chapter does not treat any single threshold definition as positive. Rather, it treats representation as a set of practices that become visible in how actors speak, which posts they obtain, which procedures they can use,

and how others respond to their initiatives. Second, this chapter distinguishes presence from practice, not to privilege one over the other, but to avoid sliding between them and losing sight of where and through which levers change is most likely to occur in the party-centred Sejm.

**Concepts and Analytical Lens**

A useful starting point is to separate four dimensions of representation that are often conflated in ordinary debate. Pitkin's framework remains serviceable precisely because it distinguishes what is frequently blended: the formal rules by which the representatives are authorised and held to account, the symbolic meanings that citizens project onto institutions and office-holders, the demographic resemblance between representatives and those who they claim to represent, and the actions through which representatives advance or neglect particular interests (Pitkin, 1967). I use these distinctions pragmatically to keep the subsequent analysis from sliding between the senses of representation mid-argument.

The first dimension - formalistic representation - refers to the authorisation and accountability procedures that make representation legally valid. The delegation and oversight patterns can differ, but none guarantee that those present will have access to the venues where political decisions are made. In a party-centred system with strong discipline, formalistic rules structure how authority is delegated inside the parties, how committee placements are allocated, and how leadership positions are distributed. I keep this lineage in view and mark why formal authority and substantive action should be distinguished from one another in the following research.

Symbolic representation concerns recognition and legitimacy. Citizens can read signals about who appears in the parliament and their attachment to bodies, language, and rituals. Anne Phillips argues that presence has democratic value because it challenges the fiction of a universal citizen with implicitly masculine characteristics. At the same time, she warns that presence can become a surrogate for hard questions about power if it is not connected to decision-making venues (Phillips, 1995). Early quota effects can change the imagery of politics without shifting access to agenda-setting posts. The caution is not against symbolism as such, but against mistaken symbolic satisfaction for substantive movement.

Descriptive representation refers to demographic or experiential resemblance between representatives and those represented. The strongest defence of descriptive representation tends to be its democratic value rather than an instrumental one. If the assembly mirrors society, fewer interests will be systematically ignored (Young, 2002; Wängnerud, 2009). This study reveals that it matters because the 2011 reform changed the appearance of the Sejm, and visibility can

open doors that had previously been shut. However, descriptive presence is not the same as agenda control and it can coexist with practices that assign women to most visible but least influential roles. Suzanne Dovi has shown that not all descriptive presentations are normatively desirable. What matters is whether representatives have ties that connect them to the marginalised and foster that accountability (Dovi, 2002; Dovi, 2006). Therefore, I treat descriptive gains as a potential input to influence, not as evidence of influence itself.

Substantive representation is the core evaluated dimension for this project. Suzanne Dovi, Sarah Childs, Karen Celis, Mona Lena Krook, and Johanna Kantola have each cautioned against treating women's interests as a fixed object and have argued instead of for studying how interests are articulated, negotiated and advanced within institutions (Celis et al., 2007; Childs & Krook, 2009; Celis, 2009; Kantola & Squires, 2012). Eulau and Karps' formulation offers representation as responsiveness across policy, service allocation and symbolic dimensions from a behavioural angle, which is a helpful tool for operationalisation (Eulau & Karps, 1977). In this context, I follow how MPs give reasons for their conduct, describe success and failure, and locate obstacles such as party discipline, committee chairs, meeting times, and media treatments in their account of practice.

To connect these concepts to the Polish case, I integrate feminist institutionalism with insights about discourse and recruitment. Joni Lovenduski, Mona Lena Krook, Fiona Mackay, Georgina Waylen and Meryl Kenny show that formal arrangements and informal norms combine to allocate access to agenda power (Lovenduski, 2005; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Waylen, 2014; Kenny, 2013). Elin Bjarnegård's work on informal institutions and candidate selection clarifies how party networks and expectations reproduce gendered outcomes even when formal norms are neutral, or at least appear to be neutral (Bjarnegård, 2013). Within parties, Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski demonstrate how recruitment and promotion reflect supply and demand logics saturated with gendered expectations (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). The move from critical mass to critical actors – associated with Childs and Krook and building on Rosabeth Moss Kanter's analysis of tokenism and Drude Dahlerup's account of large minorities – provides vocabulary for asking whether it is numbers, positions or advocacy strategies that make the substantive difference when the descriptive representation is on the rise (Kanter, 1977; Dahlerup, 1988; Childs & Krook, 2009; Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo 2012).

Parties, media and civil society also function as environments that structure what is sayable and what is doable. Miki Caul, Kittilson, and Kim Fridkin show that women face stereotype frames and stricter scrutiny that can raise the cost of visible leadership (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008). Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon demonstrate that policy change in gendered

domains often depends on alliances between women's movements and state actors, suggesting that parliamentary action is embedded in wider fields of power (Htun & Weldon, 2012; Weldon, 2002, 2011). These perspectives allow interviewees to narrate internal hurdles and reputational, ideological, and cultural costs that shape their strategies.

**From presence to practice: mechanisms aligned with the research aims**.

This section keeps the discussion practical and theory-led. It explains how the ideas above helped me read what happened in the Sejm after the quota reform, and how I will look for traces of *acting for* in interviews and public documents.

First, in the party-centred Sejm, the path from simply *being there* to *being able to do things* runs through parties. Here, two points are important. The first is the entry, who sits high enough on the list to win, and what procedures shape who reaches the lower chamber of the parliament. Because Poland's 2011 quota has no placement rule, parties can meet the legal requirement, yet still place men in the safest positions. Research on candidate selection shows this is common when selectors rely on familiar networks and a sense of who fits the role (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Krook, 2009; Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo, 2012; Bjarnegård, 2013). The second point is what happens after MPs enter the Sejm. Parties assign committee assignments and who gets posts that carry real procedural weight, like committee chair, deputy chair or committee rapporteur. These posts influence what is scheduled, which amendments are considered, and how texts are presented in plenary. Comparative work finds that women's access to such roles often lags behind their overall seat share (Annesley & Gains, 2010; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016). Anne Phillips argues that visibility has democratic value, while Rosabeth Kanter explains why minorities can be steered toward high-profile but low-control roles (Phillips, 1995; Kanter, 1977). Michael Saward and Jane Mansbridge help explain how partisan MPs justify the resulting division of labour. Who speaks for the party, who drafts the texts and why (Saward, 2010; Mansbridge, 2003). Based on the existing theoretical knowledge, I listen to how interviewees talk about list ranks and district placements in the system without a zipper rule[2], about internal party dynamics, and how they describe being assigned to committees, and I trace how these allocations are defended or contested within parties.

Next, I focused on the informal culture of the Sejm and the hurdles women often described in such settings. Every day, misogyny, stereotypes, gendered expectations, and heightened

[2] A mechanism requiring male and female candidates to alternate down the ballot

media scrutiny. These are not side issues; in practice, they shape who speaks and who is heard, and how risky it feels to push for a contested proposal.

- First, I focus on stereotypes and gendered expectations. Women are more easily read as conciliatory, caring and harshly judged when they act with the same assertiveness as male colleagues. Violate feminine expectations and be punished for being too forceful, meet them and be judged insufficiently leader-like (Jamieson, 1995; Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Comparative media studies show that evaluations of leadership traits are also filtered through gendered frames (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008; Aaldering & Van der Pas, 2018). For instance, analysis of media coverage of political actors showed heightened scrutiny of their marital status and parenting choices for women. At the same time, male colleagues mainly were primarily evaluated on policy expertise (Rohrbach, Aaldering, & van der Pas, 2022).
- Second, I turn to language as it becomes a tool in the political realm. Speech act theory helps name this utterance as not only statements but acts. Feminist extensions show how sexist remarks, dismissals or constant interruptions can disable speech by lowering the uptake of what women say (Langton, 1993; McGowan, 2009). In parliamentary life, this looks like jokes that mark women as out of place, banter that raises the costs of intervening or patterns where women's questions receive short and thin answers, at the same time, men's are engaged with seriousness.
- Third, I use the concept of tokenism. When women are a minority in organisations, they often respond with a predictable mix of visibility, polarisation and assimilation. Women can be highly visible as symbols, or they may be marked as outsiders or feel pressured to adopt dominant styles or stay within women's issues (Kanter, 1977). Parties can therefore use women's presence for branding while keeping decision-making in male hands.
- The fourth objectification theory predicts pressure to self-monitor appearance and speech under constant observation (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In politics, this is amplified by the media's focus on dress, body, and family status, which narrows what is considered appropriate for a female MP.

These theories and concepts guide me as I listen for concrete accounts of interruptions, jokes and dismissals, for stories of being steered into *safe* roles, for self-policing of tone or appearance, and the reputational double bind around assertiveness. I note when leaders or senior colleagues shut down sexist talk or conversely, normalise it moreover, when and how media attention shapes female MPs' experience in the Sejm.

Finally, I use two ideas: critical mass and critical actors. Critical mass treats numbers as context: when women move from very small minorities towards a larger share (often discussed to be around 30%), some token dynamics, for example, visibility without voice, isolation, pressure to assimilate, can ease making coalitions and mutual support more feasible (Kanter, 1977; Dahlerup, 1988; Wängnerud, 2009). Moreover, critical actors focus on agency: change is started and sustained by motivated MPs who have at least one lever, for example, relevant expertise, a post or reliable allies, and who can turn presence into concrete moves in the political decision-making arena (Childs & Krook, 2009). I use critical mass theory to read the social environment of the post-2011 Sejm (how easy it is to form coalitions and get protection) and actors to trace the pathways and advocacy strategies inside that environment, linking them to substantive ideas and agendas MPs advance in social welfare and family policy.

This chapter sets out the theoretical and conceptual framework for this research. I define political representation as acting within a relationship of authorisation and accountability, and I keep four dimensions of representation separate so that presence is not mistaken with practice. I draw on Mansbridge and Saward to attend to how MPs justify what they do and how those claims are received, and on feminist institutionalist works to centre informal norms in the Sejm. I analyse numbers and agency together: critical mass as a background that can ease isolation, and critical actors as the people who can convert presence into concrete moves on social welfare and family policy. I use these ideas as guiding concepts; they tell me what to look for in interviews and publicly available data and how to analyse them critically.

# CHAPTER III: LITERATURE OVERVIEW

## Introduction and scope

This chapter reviews the empirical literature that informs and contextualises this study. This thesis asks how the post-2011 increase in women's presence in the Polish Sejm is experienced and enacted in day-to-day work in social welfare and family policy, and how female MPs describe its effects on agenda setting and decision making between 2011 and 2025. It also examines how party dynamics, institutional norms, and individual biographies shape this process. The previous chapter set out the theoretical lens: what I mean by political participation, how I distinguish presence from practice and why both numbers and agency matter. Here I turn to what existing studies show on the ground.

This topic is important because worldwide women now hold about a quarter of parliamentary seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024), yet reviews show mixed effects on agenda power and policy outputs (Franceschet, Krook, & Piscopo, 2012; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016; Wängnerud, 2009). In some settings, women gain agenda access and policy traction; party hierarchies, informal norms, and media scrutiny blunt those effects in others. Therefore, the empirical record helps explain when and how *being there* does or does not become the capacity to act. This chapter aims to map that record and identify what we already know, what remains contested and where my thesis can add new evidence. I first set the Polish context and the design of the 2011 quota. I then summarise post-2011 patterns, including who entered the Sejm and where women were placed once inside, including committees and roles. I place Poland alongside cross-national findings on female attention to social welfare and family policy. I close by drawing out points of agreement and disagreement in the literature and the specific gaps that motivate my interviews and document analysis. As defined in the theoretical chapter, I use descriptive and substantive representation terms to keep them separate so that the numeric change is not mistaken for influence.

## Context and quota reform

This section sets the cultural and institutional scene in which Polish debates on women's rights and political representation unfold. It shows how the *Matka Polka* ideal, Catholic nationalism and media narratives shape who is seen as a proper representative and which roles women are steered towards in the Sejm. It also foregrounds the effects of post-1989 marketisation and recent pro-family social welfare benefit programs, which reinforce maternalist expectations even as women enter the job market. Together, these background

forces help explain why descriptive gains do not automatically translate into agenda power, and why social welfare and family policy are the most likely (and contested) arenas for change.

Poland's contemporary debate on women's rights and political representation does not exist in a cultural vacuum; the Polish social-cultural stage is saturated with a powerful archetype - the *Matka Polka*. This image has long fused Catholic morality with nationalism and femininity. This image could be traced back to the times of hardship for the Polish nation - the Polish partitions[3], women of that time were cast as the self-sacrificing creatures, guardians of the family, faith, and language (Graff, 2014). Twentieth-century political elites, from interwar clerical parties to communist era pronatalists, have recycled this trope to frame childcare as an ultimate patriotic duty for a woman (Fuszara, 2006). This persisting narrative plays a crucial role in who is elected to parliament and how their work is viewed outside and inside the political stage.

This motherhood-citizenship nexus matters for formal politics, as it shapes who is seen as a proper representative, which portfolios are considered appropriate and how women's work is judged. After 1989, church actors gained durable access to family and education policy, framing equality claims as foreign to Polish tradition and elevating maternal roles as national service (Śledzińska-Simon & Bodnar, 2013; Mishtal, 2015). In Parliament, this cultural script travels through party gatekeeping and everyday norms. Women are often steered toward family and social policy committees and away from core coordination posts (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Kenny, 2013). Selector networks and ideas of fit amplify the effect, even when formal rules look neutral (Bjarnegård, 2013). Local-level interviews echo the same pattern. Women are welcomed into the institutional culture but kept out of the boardrooms where decisions are made (Rinker, 2009). Recent analysis showed that maternal frames also organise which gender policies move; benefits for families advance more rapidly than measures tied to women's autonomy (Gwiazda, 2021; Szelewa, 2017).

The media layer reinforces these expectations. Studies show women politicians are more often evaluated through stereotype-consistent frames and face sharper penalties for missteps (Aaldering & Van der Pas, 2018; Rohrbach, Aaldering, & van der Pas, 2022). In the 2010s, anti-gender discourse in Poland, tied to nationalist and religious narratives, intensified this climate, presenting feminist ideas as threats to national identity while celebrating maternal sacrifice (Korolczuk & Graff, 2022). Together, these cultural and institutional mechanisms help explain why motherhood responsibilities and patriotic duty remain entangled with woman's

[3] The "Polish Partitions" refer to the three divisions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century by Russia, Prussia and Habsburg Austria

formal political participation - who gets selected, where they are placed inside the Sejm, and how their contributions are read.

Besides a complex cultural and social landscape, economic restructuring is believed to have profoundly impacted the political terrain in Poland. Rapid marketisation that Poland saw in the end of the twentieth century shifted childcare costs onto the households at the same time as female labour market participation rose, producing a phenomenon that could roughly be described as a double burden on a working mother (Glass & Fodor, 2007; Heinen & Wator, 2006; Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2006; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008; Lewandowski, 2023). This created a context in which women, besides the traditional wife/mother role, were now taking on additional responsibilities such as working to contribute to the family's financial welfare. In the 2010s, the Law and Justice party[4] responded to these social crises by announcing a wide range of child-benefit programmes, notably Rodzina 500+[5], to promote traditional family norms (Magda, Kiełczewska, & Brandt, 2018). These efforts largely reinforced maternalist tropes, with all the benefits being transferred to mothers' bank accounts, and all the promotional material essentially depicting a traditionalist image of a woman as a mother. At the same time, the media often presented the narrative of men being the authors of said programmes, while depicting women more as the grateful beneficiaries. This media framing supports Lovenduski's argument on masculine norms of credit claiming, which often persists even with *feminised* policy areas (Lovenduski, 2002).

Taken together, the evidence points to a durable pattern. Cultural scripts of motherhood, church influence, party gatekeeping and everyday parliamentary norms make women's visibility easier than their authority. Women are welcomed into care portfolios and benefits debate, while access to coordination posts and agenda-setting venues remains tight. Economic restructuring and programs like Rodzina 500+ have further normalised maternalist frames, shaping how women's work is credited in public. This context frames the empirical analysis that follows. It clarifies why the study focuses on social welfare and family policy, and what kinds of barriers and openings we should expect to find when tracing how presence becomes practice.

**Post-2011 Patterns in Poland**

[4] Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) – is a right-wing populist and national-conservative political party in Poland

[5] Family 500+ – a government benefit program offering monthly payments for families with children, launched in 2016

This section shows how parties and institutions in the Sejm can comply with quota rules while limiting women's access to real decision-making power. I trace four interlinked mechanisms. The first is a symbolic ceiling/sanction-floor design (a 35% list rule without placement requirements). Second, ranking re-captures the meaning that women are added to the lists, but kept low. Third is the limits of open list PR, meaning small voter bonuses are spread too thin. Fourth is committee sequestration, when MPs are channelled into committees with less agenda control.

In 2009, the Congress of Women initially demanded quotas to be introduced; one of the requirements was to have a 50% gender parity with a zipper list. Committee bargaining eventually reduced that ambition down to 35% and omitted any reference to the ranking order (Śledzińska-Simon & Bodnar, 2015). The finished text, celebrated by the media as a breakthrough, threatened parties with disqualification if they failed to comply with the new 35% rule, yet at the same time, put no restrictions on the candidate placements inside the lists. In Poland's open-list PR, list position still matters: top positions in a party list are treated as winnable, get more visibility on the ballot, and attract campaign resources and cues from party leaders (Millard, 2014; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2019; Górecki & Kukołowicz, 2014). This arrangement is a high-visibility reform crafted for easy absorption by party elites. In short, while the law expanded formal inclusion, the power to allocate winnable positions remained with the party leaders who control rankings.

Statutory loopholes would matter less if political parties placed women in winnable positions on the lists, yet the second mechanism - ranking re-capture - shows they did not. By ranking re-capture, I mean parties meeting the 35% list quota rule but then recapturing control over winnable seats by placing women lower on party lists. Using Party Candidate lists from the National Electoral Commission (PKW) for 2007 vs 2011, Millard shows a sharp rise in women's share of nominees (about +21 % points) and a drop of roughly two places in women's average list position after the reform. Her model indicates that this ranking penalty offset most of the mechanical supply effect of the gender quota (see Millard, 2014, Table 1 for seat share; Table 4 for list-placement patterns). Jankowski and Marcinkiewicz replicated this research in 2019 and used stimulations to demonstrate that if women were randomly placed across the list, their seat share would have reached one-third (Jankowski & Marcinkiewicz, 2019, p. 27, Fig. 5).

Polish party lists obligate voters to cast a preference, the way this works is: a voter can pick one candidate on a party list, which marks both for the party's total and for the candidate's place within the party list. Because of this, preference votes can sometimes lift the candidate

above their original rank. Gendźwiłł and Żółtak (2020) discuss that, once the ballot rank and incumbency are held constant, Polish voters give women a small bonus. However, this advantage tends to spread across a larger pool of female candidates after 2011. It helps some individual MPs, but is too weak to change the overall outcomes when women start lower down the list. A cross-national study by Górecki and Pierzgalski (2022, Table 1) shows how Belgium's quota rule is associated with a 19% relative increase in women's parliamentary presence over two elections. At the same time, Greece and Poland saw much smaller gains of about 6-7%. Preference voting can help isolated women, but not in numbers sufficient to offset systematic under-ranking.

After entering the Sejm, women MPs might face another hurdle – committee sequestration. Rinker (2009) shows that women are treated as outsiders to the informal social activities, reinforcing male power inside institutions. Interviewees described being channelled toward lower-status issues and away from the rooms where budgets and compromises were made, highlighting the patterns of symbolic presence with no agenda control (Rinker, 2009). Initially, the interviewees did not recognise significant gender inequalities; however, as the interview progressed, more and more gender-based stereotypes began to make their way to the surface. "I would not want to hire a woman that was too beautiful... or too busy with children" (Rinker, 2009, p. 57). Based on the result of the interviews, Rinker concluded, neatly illustrating Kanter's (1977) visibility-polarisation-assimilation cycle, quota-driven high visibility, combined with other factors, often pushes female politicians to conform to the male standards and assimilate. Moreover, she highlights how deeply cultural and institutional norms are entrenched in the political system and calls for more research.

The Polish evidence shows how parties and institutions can comply with a list quota while limiting access to seats and agenda-setting power. Statutory norms themselves are not the core problem here. Poland's electoral statute sets the same eligibility and candidacy rules for men and women; in that sense, the law is formally equal. What limits conversion of presence into seats are: a 35% candidate rule without placement requirements lets parties add women but keep them low on the lists, open-list PR lifts a few individuals but cannot offset systematic under-ranking, and once inside the Sejm, women often feel channelled into committees with less power. These are predominantly party choices that internal rules could mitigate, for example, a voluntary zipper placement rule or gender parity, as chapters later show.

**Comparative evidence beyond Poland**

Across many contexts, studies find a systematic link between electing women and a greater attention to health, education and family policies. In India, constituencies that elect women to state assemblies subsequently see higher spending and better outcomes in primary schooling and child health (Clots-Figueras, 2012). At the local level, women-led councils shift investment toward drinking water, roads close to households and schools, goods, that survey evidence shows, women prioritise (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Other research has focused on parliaments in Latin America. It shows that regardless of party association, women pay more education and social welfare bills and devote a larger share of floor speeches to childcare provisions than men (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). Similarly, Bratton and Ray's (2002) study of Norwegian municipalities, a context with profound gender-egalitarian norms, shows that having a larger cohort of women can predict a higher day-care coverage attention even after controlling for party ideology and financial capacity. These research outcomes allow us to predict the possible replication of female MP to attention to family-centred welfare patterns in social contexts with varying cultural scripts.

Large-scale studies of African states reinforce the possible correlation between female politicians in office and attention to social welfare and family policy. Using matched MP and citizen surveys, Clayton, Josefsson, Mattes, and Mozaffar (2019) demonstrate that female politicians show a closer priority congruence with ordinary citizens on public-goods issues such as drinkable water, maternal health, and public education. In contrast, male politicians tend to focus more on the economy and security matters. Across OECD democracies, Ennser-Jedenastik (2017) finds that higher women's parliamentary representation is associated with greater spending on family benefits. Complementing this, Wang (2023) reports that an increase in women's descriptive representation – often via quotas – is linked to stronger substantive representation on family and children policies.

Taken together, comparative studies point to a regular association between electing women and greater attention to health, education and family policy from randomized reservations and natural experiments in India (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Clots-Figueras, 2012; Bhalotra & Clots-Figueras, 2014), the legislative behavior in Latin America and the United States (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Swers, 2002), to cross national work in OECD settings (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2017) and African evidence on priority congruence between women MPs and citizens on public goods (Clayton, Josefsson, Mattes, & Mozaffar, 2019). Macro-level analysis likewise links higher women's presence to stronger family and child-focused spending (e.g., Wang, 2022). These are the average effects, not rules: the size and form of the shift depend on party incentives, committee access, leadership support and media climates.

This is why I use these findings to narrow the empirical focus of this thesis to social welfare and family policy, where cross-national research most consistently detects movement without assuming that women are a single uniform block. Following work on critical mass and critical actors and how representatives justify *acting for* (Childs & Krook, 2009; Celis, Childs, Kantola, & Krook, 2008; Mansbridge, 2003), I treat the cross-national pattern as a starting hypothesis, not the essence. The following analysis looks for individual pathways and how party context, institutional gateways, and biographies shape MPs' strategies, rather than reading policy attention as automatic or identical across all women.

**Convergence, debates and the research gap**

A deep dive into Polish comparative-gender literature reveals a fascinating pattern. On the descriptive side of the argument, most major data sets agree that the 2011 gender quota worked precisely as intended at the mere headcount level. The 2011 law targeted candidate lists, not seats: it required 35% of each sex to be included on the candidate lists and on that metric, it worked. Women's share among all candidates rose from 23.08% in 2007 to 42.35% in 2015 (Gwiazda, 2017, p. 13). By contrast, the share of women elected increased only by about 7% in the same period, hovering at about 27% in 2015 (Gwiazda, 2017, pp. 3–4). According to IPU Parline, the women's seat share in the Sejm is currently hovering at about 31%, just above Dahlerup's 30% large minority estimates (IPU Parline historical series, "percentage of women"; Dahlerup, 1988). Cultural research, for its part, shows how the image of *Matka Polka* continues to carry significant influence, documenting how the Church and the right-wing actors deploy the archetype to define legitimate feminine citizenship as maternal, self-sacrificing and apolitical (Graff, 2014; Śledzińska-Simon & Bodnar, 2013). Outside of Poland, a robust pool of comparative studies has established a broad regularity: when women gain seats, they tend to be disproportionately drawn to social-welfare, family policies and education, although, of course, not exclusively (Bhalotra & Clots-Figueras, 2014; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Wang, 2022; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2017; Swers, 2002; Clayton, Josefsson, Mattes, & Mozaffar, 2019). These three empirical dimensions - numerical gains, entrenched maternal symbolism and a cross-national welfare focus - form a baseline for this research.

The consensus, however, ends the moment scholars try to explain how or when descriptive presence converts into a policy impact. Institutionalist researchers highlight the party's control over the candidate positions on party lists and committee chairs; so when the male candidates keep the top positions or praesidium posts, the substantive payoff of quotas

remains very limited (Wiśniewska, 2016; Jankowski & Marcinkiewicz, 2019). Comparative works highlight the importance of party rules and ideology, highlighting how left/left-leaning parties tend to amplify women's legislative influence. In contrast, no placement rules and conservative parties dampen it (Górecki & Pierzgalski, 2022). Feminist analysis of social-cultural norms and traditions adds a further filter: the ideological costs of challenging the *Matka Polka* narrative may push female politicians to re-frame proposals in a strictly maternalistic manner, thereby winning more benefits and support for the welfare policies without challenging gender hierarchies (Gwiazda, 2021; Zielińska et al., 2023). Gwiazda (2021) shows that under Law and Justice (2015-2019), maternalist policies such as Rodzina 500+ advanced, while efforts around reproductive autonomy stalled. Whether these outcomes stem from list-stage gatekeeping, intra-party discipline, strategic self-censorship, or other underlying factors remains an open question.

The literature above presents a complex field in which this research is positioned. Few scholars now doubt that Poland's gender quota has boosted women's descriptive presence, while not presenting any drastic changes to the Sejm composition, women's numerical presence on the party lists has nevertheless risen over a decade following the reform introduction (Millard, 2014; Gwiazda, 2017; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2019). Nor is there a disagreement on a consistent tendency for women legislators to prioritise the social-welfare agenda; cross-national studies on Latin America, Africa, Scandinavian countries, etc., all point to that expectation (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Clayton et al., 2018; Bratton & Ray, 2002; Clayton, Josefsson, Mattes, & Mozaffar, 2019). On paper, the law treats women and men the same. In practice, informal party rules, who gets top-of-list placements, how committees are staffed, how leadership signals are given, and how work is credited - decide access to influence (Bjarnegård, 2013; Kenny, 2013; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). The formal design (a quota even without a placement rule) opened the door, but informal ranking and workplace norms kept control of the best positions in the party's hands (Millard, 2014; Jankowski & Marcinkiewicz, 2019; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2019; Gwiazda, 2021).

However, questions remain unanswered and contested and therefore central to this research. First, what mechanisms help or stall descriptive representation's translation into substantive influence? The headcount approach assumes that policy impacts should follow once women reach a numerical threshold. However, the studies above show that this process is much less straightforward. Scholars disagree whether the blockage lies in the list placement and ranking (Millard, 2014; Jankowski & Marcinkiewicz, 2019; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2019), party/caucus discipline in a party-centred Sejm (Kenny, 2013; Krook & Mackay, 2011) or self-

censorship promoted by the persisting cultural gendered narratives and media framing (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008; Aaldering & Van der Pas, 2020; Rohrbach, Aaldering, & Van der Pas, 2023). Secondly, which contextual factors decide if the lineage will hold? A vast pool of research suggests that party ideology, open-list PR and informal parliamentary norms play a crucial role in women's political participation. Moreover, the Polish evidence adds an additional filter of strong religious ideals and right-wing populism's selective maternalism into the picture (Mishtal, 2015; Korolczuk & Graff, 2022; Szelewa, 2017; Gwiazda, 2021). How these factors interact or which ones matter the most remains an open question. Therefore, the existing research provides a perspective on the cultural and social traditions surrounding women's political participation and a comprehensive outlook on the formal gates in the authorisation chain; however, it rarely captures the lived experiences of the deputies who must navigate all these circumstances simultaneously. By collecting first-person narratives, this study aims to bridge the micro-level evidence gap on how descriptive representation does or does not translate into substantive influence. Moreover, this study aims to contribute to an ongoing refinement of the representation and critical mass theories by applying their key ideas and assumptions to a new empirical context. In doing so, it offers fresh evidence on the practical workings of the critical mass claim and the subtle informal barriers that numerical gains alone cannot overcome - thus enriching our understanding of the descriptive–substantive representation link under conditions of conservative backlash.

# CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains how I investigated whether and through what mechanisms the post-2011 increase in women's presence in the Polish Sejm translates into influence over social-welfare and family policy. The empirical window spans the quota era from 2011 through 2025, anchored in the Act of 5th of January 2011- Electoral Code[6], which introduced a 35% gender requirement for candidate lists. Field work for this project took place between February and June 2025. [7]

My research aims to capture interpretations, meanings, and patterned experiences rather than estimate average quota-induced outcomes, so I use a qualitative, thematic design. The study draws on two kinds of materials: semi-structured interviews with current female MPs and publicly available long-form statements and interviews with former and current women deputies. Analysis of the data proceeds in two phases. First, I apply a deductive frame from the theoretical chapter – Pitkin's distinctions, feminist-institutionalist attention to informal rules, and the critical mass/actors' debate to anchor coding categories. I then allow inductive themes to surface from MPs' language so that unanticipated mechanisms are not forced into pre-set boxes. The remainder of this chapter outlines the design and rationale for using thematic analysis in this setting, the case and participant selection, data sources and collection procedures, and the processing and analysis workflow, including coding choices and software. I close with the discussion of trustworthiness and limitations and a brief conclusion linking these methodological choices to the following empirical chapters.

## Research Design and Analytical Approach

A purely quantitative research design would have confirmed a known fact: women's seat share has risen to about 30% from the implementation of gender quotas; however, this approach would leave critical questions unanswered. A qualitative thematic analysis design was chosen due to its ability to uncover patterns and dive deeper into lived experiences, as well as being flexible enough to accommodate both codes drawn from theoretical dimensions of representation and unanticipated mechanisms of real-life political participation of women. My research questions probe backstage dynamics inaccessible to surveys and roll-call counts. Thematic analysis in this context allows for tracing recurring patterns, metaphors, and shared

[6] *Ustawa z dnia 5 stycznia 2011 r. – Kodeks wyborczy*

[7] AI Application Grammarly (Premium) was used for linguistic editing (grammar, punctuation, and style). No content was generated or analysis performed by the software

experiences across multiple personal accounts. This study moves beyond counting seats to examine how women elected under Poland's 2011 gender quota law experience and exercise influence. The aim is to foreground lived experiences, individual strategies, and the institutional and cultural barriers female legislators face in trying to shape policy. While the numerical rise in women's presence is an important milestone, it does not automatically produce policy change. Female MPs operate within party organisations, parliamentary routines, media scrutiny and gendered social expectations. Using qualitative evidence, I explore how they perceive, navigate and respond to these dynamics, especially in social welfare and family policy, where opportunities and obstacles are most visible in the Polish context. This study asks: how is the post-2011 increase in women's presence in the Polish Sejm experienced and enacted in day-to-day work on social welfare and family policy, and how do female MPs describe its effects on agenda-setting and decision-making (2011-2025)? To further explore these themes, I employ three sub-questions:

1. How do party affiliations, list placements, and internal party dynamics, including disciplinary mechanisms, enable or limit female MPs' capacity to advocate for social welfare and family policies?
2. How do formal and informal institutional structures within the Sejm affect the ability of female legislators to advocate for and influence social welfare and family policies
3. How do personal biography, experiences of motherhood, prior activism, individual ideologies, and professional background influence a deputy's approach to advocacy within social welfare and family policy arenas?

This study uses a simple toolkit. From Pitkin, I keep four meanings apart: authorisation and accountability, symbolism, descriptive *being there* and substantive *acting for*, so I can track how post-2011 descriptive gains did or did not become influence (Pitkin, 1967). To hear how MPs justify acting, I draw on Mansbridge's modes and Saward's representative claim (Mansbridge, 2003; Saward, 2010). Because rules on paper are not the whole story, I use feminist institutionalism to follow in formal party routines and list practices (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Waylen, 2014; Kenny, 2013; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Bjarnegård, 2013). I treat critical mass as context and critical actors to capture agency under constraints (Kanter, 1977; Dahlerup, 1988; Childs & Krook, 2009). Finally, I read claims through Polish cultural frames, especially *Matka Polka* and the church-inflected nationalism which shape what influence sounds like and who is seen as a proper representative (Graff, 2014; Śledzińska-Simon & Bodnar, 2013; Mishtal, 2015).

**Case Focus and Participant Recruitment**

This project concentrates on all women elected to the Polish Sejm after the 2011 gender quota reform, whether they are currently in office or have since retired. Resting the frame for the participant recruitment aims to control the institutional conditions and allow for longitudinal reflection. Publicly available Sejm records yielded more than 80 names that fit these criteria, excluding female politicians whose reliable contact details were unavailable, leaving a list of 56 women to be contacted. The goal was to speak to women across different ideological axes. An initial target of roughly one-third of each ideological bloc was set so that the analysis could probe whether party culture mediates quota effects, one of the key claims in the critical mass debate.

Between February and June 2025, I contacted 56 female Sejm deputies individually using publicly available official Sejm e-mail addresses. Each of these MPs received a personalised letter stating the project aim, the confidential nature of the interview and the approximate time commitment required (60-90 minutes). Six delegates replied - an overall response rate of about 9%. All six came from the left and a left-leaning ideological position. Three of the six could schedule an interview within the data collection window. The other three cited a lack of time due to professional commitments. It is worth noting that, unfortunately, the data collection time overlapped with the Polish Presidential Election campaigns, a period when deputies double as party campaigners, regional fund-raisers and media spokespersons. The election calendar, therefore, has depressed the overall response rates.

The final interview sample consists of three women of very different personal trajectories. A senior deputy entering her third term, a mid-career MP re-elected once and a first-term newcomer. Because of the minimal interview sample, I have collected 11 publicly available statements and long-form interviews that closely align with the themes I have adopted for the analysis. I have used Google News and Google Advanced Search, party websites, magazines, podcasts and YouTube channels for long-form Q&A published from 2011 to 2025, in which female parliamentarians reflected on their experience with the Sejm. I searched for long-form materials in which the sitting of former women MPs describe internal mechanics of parliamentary work, such as list placements and quota-induced changes, committee assignments and chairs, party discipline and promotion, informal networking, experiences of sexism, motherhood/work balance and their advocacy strategies on social welfare and family policy. I included items where the MP discussed at least one of the internal mechanisms above. I excluded brief quote pieces, campaign spots, and statements that only restated party lines without any organisational detail. All retained texts were translated where needed and coded in

NVivo using the same codebook as the confidential interviews. Once again, the content I found was predominantly associated with left-wing politicians, with right-wing politicians having more traditional talking points on motherhood and family roles, with no mention of list placements, committee hierarchies or corridor culture. In other words, the thematic data set is inherently ideologically imbalanced but analytically revealing. Instead of treating this as a research design flaw, I believe the silence is pretty telling. Both the private non-participation of right-wing politicians and the public absence of right-wing disclosure on informal parliamentary life suggest that conservative parties either do not frame these experiences as gender issues or see them as politically risky to talk about. Therefore, this silence could be treated as an empirical finding on how political party culture shapes the conversation on female representation.

**Data Sources, Collection, and Thematic Workflow**

Before conducting any interview research, this project received clearance from Glasgow University's Ethics Committee (See **Appendix A**). All participants received a plain language statement detailing this study's aim, the voluntary nature of participation, the possibility of skipping any themes and questions, and the possibility of withdrawing from the interview. No interview proceeded without the participant signing a consent form beforehand. Although the interviewees are public figures, the topics such as patronising treatment and sexist culture touch on reputational risks. All names, party names, and personal data were stripped from the transcripts to minimise risks. Any potentially identifying details in quotations are generalised. Participants were reminded that they could stop the interview at any given point and were free to skip any questions they deemed uncomfortable. I designed interview themes and questions that considered MPs' mental comfort, so no participant was distressed. If the MPs need counselling or professional help, contact details for psychological support groups and organisations were included in each participant's sheet. With these safeguards, the study maintains confidentiality, respects participant autonomy, and complies fully with institutional and legal standards.

All interviews took place on Microsoft Teams as per Glasgow University's ethical approval requirements and were recorded with written consent from the participants. The conversations started with a short introduction script - my academic affiliation, a brief description of the research and the voluntary and confidential nature of the conversation, followed by five thematic blocks. These blocks were designed to mirror the study's main research questions and loosely follow Pitkin’s dimensions of representation. Block 1 covered

personal trajectories into politics; Block 2 focused on social-welfare and family policy participation; Block 3 explored perceptions of the 2011 quota and its policy effects; Block 4 probed party discipline and advocacy space; Block 5 examined formal committees versus informal networks. Together, the blocks map directly onto the main research question and 3 sub-questions. Sub-question one (party dynamics), sub-question two (formal and informal structures) and sub-question three (individual trajectories), while also capturing Pitkin's descriptive-to-substantive spectrum. A small set of targeted probes followed the opening statement, but phrasing remained flexible so that deputies could lead with their priorities. The complete guide appears in **Appendix B**.

For the publicly available data, I used systematic keyword searches across Google, YouTube, and other media channels from 2011 to 2025, retaining 11 pieces of textual data. Four of these are classic extended-form interviews closely matching the themes of the interview guide, and the remaining ones are shorter pieces such as podcast mini and newspaper Q&As. However, each contains vignettes on informal culture, sexism, personal advocacy, ideological self-positioning and policy priorities. Purely decorative short statements, such as *motherhood is the first duty*, were not considered since they offered little to no insight into the hidden mechanism this study seeks to trace. Whether the text came from an interview or an open source, it underwent the same cleaning process. Audio and video items were first automatically transcribed using Microsoft Teams and Stream's built-in transcribing services, then replayed to correct any misinterpretations manually. Interviews initially in Polish were translated into English using an online translation application and manually double-checked to preserve any idioms and verbisms.

Initially, this research employed a third channel for the data collection - Sejm stenograms. However, after carefully analysing five plenary transcripts, I concluded that only about 1% referred to gender specific discussions, and almost none to the normal process and gatekeeping. While social welfare, education, and family policies were more noticeable, quadrupling the data volume was not feasible without adding substantive content.

For the data processing and analysis, I have chosen to use NVivo because it allows for a single, secure workspace in which both the textual data and the coding itself can be managed side by side easily. Its coding system, hierarchy charts, and reference count visualisation tool with exportable data trail help the transparency and reliability of the study, as it juggles 14 separate documents and more than 30 analytic codes. Before starting the coding process, I read the entire corpus twice, the first to get a general understanding and the second to mark

meaningful segments. A segment was defined as a short paragraph to avoid marking single words as hits and keep comparisons across all the sources consistent.

For the first round of coding based on the main research questions I posed and drawn directly from Pitkin's four dimensions, I created 10 parent codes (*Background, Descriptive Representation, Substantive Representation, Party Dynamics, Formal Institutions, Informal Practices, Barriers & Challenges, Agency Strategies, Outcomes, Public Discourse*). While coding, I allowed codes to overlap to preserve the complexity that this study seeks to capture. After the first sweep, I identified recurring sub-ideas, themes and concepts, leading me to create 33 child codes such as patronising treatment, sexist jokes, rivalry between women, psychological costs, etc. Saturation in child codes was reached after more than three documents failed to produce a new code. After two rounds of coding, I created analytical notes linked to specific references, which later became a baseline for the analysis.

**Trustworthiness, Reflexivity and Limitations**

Unfortunately, fieldwork for this study coincided with the Polish presidential election timeline, during which deputies were travelling and fundraising and were busy with their professional activities, sharply reducing their availability. To mitigate the effects of the small numerical sample, I triangulated private interviews with 11 publicly available statements and interviews gathered over the same cycle, ensuring to include as available data on the topic. These were drawn from mainstream Polish outlets - Newsweek Polska, naTemat, OKO.press, Wirtualna Polska, Onet, Krytyka Polityczna - and one YouTube channel. Items were identified through systematic keyword searches in Polish and English across Factiva, Google (including Advanced Search), and YouTube.

Although this data set cannot achieve statistical coverage, it trades the widths of the dataset for narrative depth. Saturation was reached only at high-frequency codes, such as sexist humour, double burdens, and backroom deals. Lower frequency phenomena, especially those characterising right-wing environments, might be underreported. To mitigate any additional data-associated risks, every analytical step is logged into NVivo, codebooks, memos, etc., allowing for the tracking of theme construction from limited transparent data.

All confidential interviews and media pieces came from progressive or liberal parties; conservative deputies showed a 0% response rate to the interview invitations. Their absence constitutes both a methodological limitation and a meaningful data point. It suggests that right-wing actors are either not willing to talk about gender quotas and women's representation, as they deem it not to be an issue, or consider it too politically risky to discuss. The interviewees'

thick description and use of verbatim language allow the reader to judge whether similar informal mechanisms apply to all women in the Sejm, including those in more conservative caucuses, even though direct evidence is lacking. A fully documented workflow offsets this study's modest scale; every transcript, code-book entry, and all notes are coded in NVivo, making the analysis replicable. The data collection constraints and ideological skew are spelt out rather than being hidden. My positionality as a researcher is foregrounded so the reader can see where interpretation and analysis might tilt. The results are transparently constructed and not intended as universal counts but as rigorously documented patterns that others may trace, scrutinise, or contest in future research.

Because informal norms are lived and gendered, any interpretation of them is unavoidably shaped by individual perceptions. Besides that, the analysts' beliefs and positionality influence what is perceived as significant. I am a young female researcher who grew up outside of Europe, in a society that likewise casts politics as a masculine arena and women's destinies to revolve around housework and childbearing. These parallel gendered expectations foster my empathy with Polish women politicians' stories; however, my non-Polish identity guards against insider complacency. I approached this project without a partisan agenda, aiming to capture women's experiences across the entire ideological spectrum. To keep personal views and positional forces from silently steering the analysis, I have used safeguards such as systematic triangulation between personal interviews and public statements, an audit of translation choices to make sure that emotional nuance survived into English, and peer debriefs with both Polish and non-Polish colleagues to question my assumptions. These steps do not erase bias; however, they make its contours more visible, so the reader can trace how my standpoint illuminates and limits what is significant to this research.

This chapter shows that a small-N design grounded in representation and critical mass theories, analysed through thematic coding, provides a transparent and replicable outlook on women's post-quota experience in the Polish Sejm. Three confidential interviews and 11 publicly available statements form a lean but information-rich corpus whose preparation and coding steps are fully logged in an NVivo audit trail. Double cycle coding produced a structured set of parent and child codes, memoing, reference counts, and visual queries, then guided theme construction directly aligned with the three research questions.

Limitations arise from the election-compressed timeline window and the ideological absence of right-wing voices - silences treated as data rather than concealed gaps. Ethical risks were mitigated through written informed consent, secure data storage, and respect for participants' comfort and right to skip questions or withdraw. Together, these choices position

the study to trace how party dynamics, parliamentary culture, and personal trajectories shape the promised shift from descriptive to substantive representation in the next chapter.

Returning to the aim set out at the start of this chapter to examine how and through what mechanisms the post-2011 increase in women's presence is experienced and enacted in social welfare and family policy, this design proves a clear route to answering the main research question and its three sub-questions. The mixed data corpus, a clear code book, and an explicit theoretical scaffold allow me to trace how formal inclusion interacts with party engineering and informal norms and how individual trajectories shape advocacy. The next chapter picks up those threads and shows where they gather in practice.

## CHAPTER IV: PARTY GATEKEEPING DYNAMICS

This chapter examines how the post-2011 increase in women's presence in the parliamentary lists is experienced in practice. Building on the theoretical framework and the empirical patterns mapped out in the literature review, I focus on where the path from being on the list to shaping policy opens and where it blocks. Rather than restating the law or summarising prior studies, I aim to show what MPs say happens after removing formal barriers. For context, Poland's electoral law is formally gender neutral, and since 2011, every party list must include at least 35% women and 35% men. There is no placement rule, and Poland uses open-list PR: voters choose one candidate on the party list, and that preference also affects the order in which party nominees are elected. In this setting, the decisive choices often occur inside parties – who is nominated, where a candidate is placed on the list, and which posts they receive after the election. When I refer to winnable or safe seats, I refer to the top-list positions in districts where the party is expected to win mandates. When I write about ranking, I mean the internal party decision on that ordering. I used *token* descriptively to signal the visibility without access to agenda levers, not as a judgment of individual merit.

This chapter is organised around mechanisms that emerged from the data. The first section of the chapter shows that the quota functions smoothly as an entry rule. However, the list ranking - still controlled by party leaders - often limits the presence conversion into seats. The second section examines what happens once women are elected, how top positions on the list are reserved, how scarcity is felt and narrated among women candidates, and how these dynamics shape access to committee work and agenda power. Evidence comes from three confidential interviews with current MPs (coded INT-1 to INT-3) and 11 public sources. I quote sparingly and paraphrase where possible. The goal is not to measure quota effect sizes, but to trace how MPs describe the roots that led to influence or stalled before reaching it.

### From Quota Compliance to Rank Politics

Statutorily, the Sejm runs on a gender-neutral ruleset: eligibility requirements make no distinction between men and women, and the 2011 quota law obliges every party list to contain at least 35% women and men, with non-compliant lists rejected by the electoral commission. Once elected, all deputies receive identical rights and responsibilities. The interview data and the analysis of publicly available sources show that the statutory authorisation chain: eligibility, list registration under the 35% rule, taking the oath and receiving equal speaking and procedural rights – no longer excludes women in law. The main obstacles identified in this chapter lie after

these formal steps: in party nomination and list ranking, and in the informal routines that shape who gets winnable positions and access to agenda-setting posts.

A rather extensive body of literature on the formal institutional mechanisms for women's representation in the Polish parliament seems to be proving this point (Millard, 2014; Śledzińska-Simon & Bodnar, 2015; Jankowski & Marcinkiewicz, 2019; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2019; Gwiazda, 2021). A work by Frances Millard in particular states that while there have been cases of gender quotas' failure due to parties failing to comply with the regulations, this does not seem to be the problem in the Polish case, primarily due to strict penalising measures (2014). Once parties in Poland learned the administrative mechanism of a gender quota, they have been compliant almost automatically, so the resistance and gatekeeping have moved further up the chain, migrating to more subtle areas.

Now that quota compliance is the norm, interviewees still stress how women hit a new barrier when party leaders decide the order of names on the electoral lists. Female candidates are often placed so low that, despite the quota, they have little chance of winning a seat. In a confidential interview, a third-term deputy summarised how list-ranking blunts the quota effect:

> In my party, yes, it made a difference (gender quota). However, in other parties, although they also follow the law on quotas, they often place women at the bottom of the list, where they have no real chance of being elected. (INT-1)

She noted that her party sometimes promotes a woman to a winnable slot because "their voter expects to see women", but said this practice is rare in conservative parties (INT-1). Another deputy recalled a similar experience with the party list position: "I was number 13, so it is not a very good position… but it was enough for me" (INT-3). Her almost grateful tone suggests that she already expected a fierce competition for the few winnable spots and did not anticipate negotiating a higher place. In other words, awareness of how scarce those safe positions are appears to normalise lower-ranking acceptance.

This strongly suggests that while having a place on the list itself might pose a challenge, it is not the deciding mechanism of whether or not one will be elected. A candidate's chances of winning a seat depend mainly on how high or low the party places her on its electoral list; those near the top are far more likely to secure a seat than those ranked near the bottom. This crucial party list design flaw has a simple fix - a *zipper rule*, a mechanism requiring male and female candidates to alternate down the ballot. Districts usually award seats from top to bottom, so this alternation ensures that women are not clustered in unwinnable positions at the bottom. Countries such as Belgium, France, and Mexico have all introduced a zipper rule aiming to increase women's numerical representation on the ballot and convert these numbers into seats

in parliament. However, the zipper rule was never introduced in Poland. “We had to reconcile too many interests, and the zipper list did not work out”[8], an MP, Daria Gosek-Popiołek, recalls (Kowalówka, 2019, para. 20).

My literature analysis and the data collected for this thesis indicate that Poland’s 35% quota now functions smoothly, all parties meet the numerical rule, and the law is enforced without dispute. This fulfils the authorisation stage of representation that Pitkin describes (1967). However, the same evidence points to a positional barrier. Once the party lists are compliant, party leaders still decide where each name appears, and low ranking can leave female candidates with little chance of election. This reform has therefore increased the number of women on the ballots, but it has not guaranteed that these names convert into seats. The next sub-chapter examines this positional hurdle in detail.

**Ceiling of Token Representation and Male Control of Safe Seats**

Between 2011 and 2024, women's seat share in the Polish Sejm has risen from 20% to approximately 31% (IPU Parline historical series, “percentage of women”). Dahlerup (1988) argues that around 30% marks a critical mass - a point at which women should, in theory, gain real influence. However, neither the three confidential interviews nor the 11 publicly available statements and interviews report a matching rise in agenda-setting power or policy outcomes, indicating that the numerical gain has yet to produce the expected breakthrough - the interview data points to two main mechanisms explaining the stall. First, being a token-representation ceiling, parties claim success once the 35% quota is met, and no effort is made to push beyond these numbers. The second mechanism is the safe seat monopoly - reserving the top, *guaranteed-win* positions on the party lists for men. A third-term deputy explained, “leadership - always male - decides who goes where” (INT-1). Her point is that the ranking is not always assigned democratically but tends to be controlled by a group of men who keep the winnable slots for themselves. She also recalled witnessing the same pattern from the first post-quota election: "The men were genuinely hurt that they did not get the top spot” (INT -1). This reveals an interesting pattern: first, male politicians still regard the highest list positions as their default entitlement; second, they perceive any attempt to share those positions as a personal loss rather than institutional fairness. These comments highlight how male control of safe seats can potentially block women’s substantive influence even after achieving formal quota compliance.

[8] All quotations from Polish sources are translated by the author

The second point, rooted not in party procedures but broader socio-cultural norms, was highlighted by several MPs as shaping their daily work and willingness to seek leadership roles. One interviewee captured a persistent hesitation which she witnessed among female candidates: “The women, I think, unfortunately do not have enough power to say ‘no, I do not want to’. They are not confident enough to say ‘I want this position. I want to be on the top.” (INT-2). Another participant echoed this confidence gap theme throughout her answers: “Women have both a good and a bad trait: we hesitate to go for positions of power. Even when we are well-prepared, we ask, ‘Am I ready?’, while men just go for it.” (INT-3). Finally, one of the MPs recalled the first ever post-quota election, saying that sometimes there were not enough women willing to be on the list, “we practically had to beg them to join”. (INT-1). Whether or not this is the result of the immediate hostility women face in the Sejm, or more of a cultural phenomenon is open for debate, however the repeated mentions among all three interviews that were conducted for this study point to fact that a share of female candidates might have internalized the idea that only a small fixed slice of the party belongs to them.

Once the party publishes its ranking list, rivalry can intensify inside the women’s cohort. One deputy put it bluntly: "We have only one place for a woman, so we must fight another woman” (INT-3). Another recalled her experience: "We have more competition between people on our list - much, much more that between parties. We must outperform our colleagues, especially the other woman” (INT-2). A third interviewee observed how this logic locks women in an invisible box: "People lock themselves into the idea that the 35% for women is fixed. That colleague suddenly becomes an enemy - either she gets the vote, or I do” (INT-1). These remarks point to a pattern of scarcity. Once the party leaders cap women’s share of safe slots some women treat the quota as a zero-sum pie.

My analysis of INT-1 to INT-3 suggests that quota's unofficial reading as a 35% cap feeds perceived rivalry among Polish female candidates: when they believe only a fixed number of female seats or committee posts are truly available, some women - though not all - begin to see other female MPs, particularly across party lines, as competitors instead partners. Based on the interview evidence, my analysis is that the perceived rivalry has an additional cost: it dilutes collective effort to reform the list-ranking system. Energy that might be spent towards pushing for changes, such as the zipper rule, is instead spent managing competition with another woman for limited spaces thought to be available.

These statements all together reveal a fascinating picture. Once the legal requirement is met, any additional women on the list are seen to be displacing another woman, rather than challenging a man. Moreover, the male leadership still controls the list ranking, turning this

perception into concrete arithmetic. While technically a quota-approved, a mid-table slot signals limited prospects, inspiring heightened competition among female candidates. Far from easing women's path to safe seats, quotas can freeze expectations at roughly one-third of electable spots, enclosing female ambition in a glass box.

However, the ranking itself is still a symptom of a deeper internal party choice: who the party wants to showcase, who the people will vote for, and how a party's brand aligns with the gender equality agenda. For the left-leaning parties, the presence of women is both an ideological marker and an electoral asset. The presence of women on a party list signals and secures the progressive vote. It proved helpful for several first-time candidates who might otherwise have stayed outside national politics. In an interview with a first-term member of the Polish Sejm, she noted how her party directs campaign resources to youth-oriented events, social-media micro targeting liberal audiences most responsive to gender equality, reinforcing the circle between voter demand and organisational supply (INT-2). Party elites make the same link at the leadership level. These remarks suggest a self-reinforcing loop. Voter demand for gender-equality cues drives parties to foreground women, and that foregrounding is advertised through youth-friendly channels, strengthening the brand. While other explanations are possible - such as ideological commitment - this reading best fits the patterns described in the interviews.

**Conclusion: Descriptive Gains, Substantive Gaps**

The evidence in this section points to a paradoxical situation: Poland now fulfils the formal requirements of descriptive representation - women appear on every Sejm party list in numbers that meet the 2011 gender quota law. Interviews collected and analysed public statements confirm that the legal steps from nomination to the public oath ceremony, finalising a deputy's mandate, run smoothly and without objection. This aligns with work showing that the Polish quota is implemented as intended at the level of list composition, while the conversion from lists to seats remains constrained by the party-controlled ranking (Millard, 2014; Śledzińska-Simon & Bodnar, 2015; Jankowski & Marcinkiewicz, 2019; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2019). However, the structures that convert female headcount into substantive influence remain gendered. In Pitkin's terms, formal authorisation is in place, but *acting for* depends on later stages inside parties and the chamber (Pitkin, 1967). My analysis of the interview and media data indicates that the levers that translate seat numbers into real influence are still controlled by men: male-dominated party executives decide party list rank, assign committee chairs, and dominate informal after-hours culture. This pattern of compliance with a candidate quota number, followed by control over winnable positions and posts, matches comparative

findings on how parties can satisfy the letter of quota law while keeping agenda levers in familiar hands (Franceschet, Krook, & Piscopo, 2012; Bjarnegård, 2013; Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Waylen, 2014).

While progressive parties such as Lewica, Civic Platform place women more favorably on their lists treating gender balance as part of their electoral brand, to signal modern values and attract liberal youth oriented votes (INT-2; INT-3), opening a wider range of possibilities for young female politicians, right-leaning organizations tend to regard quota places as a compliance chore, support stops at the door and rank politics reassert old hierarchies. That mix echoes the literature: parties differ in how far they move from descriptive presence to meaningful post-allocation, and without placement rules or leadership backing, the numerical gains often stall at the threshold (Kenny, 2013; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016).

An experienced third-term deputy reflects on a decade since the quota law:

> Since the quotas were introduced in 2011, we have had three elections, and the percentage of women has not grown. Even if more women are physically present, it has not translated into real change. It just means that at conferences, you see more women on stage. However, the decisions are still being made behind the scenes by men. (INT-1)

Her words separate two levels of representation. The first is public-facing visibility, which results in a higher count of women in plenary sessions and on conference panels. The second is the venue of substantial decision-making, which she locates behind the scenes and describes as still male-dominated. This distinction mirrors the descriptive versus substantive split in the literature and cautions against assuming that reaching a 30% *large minority* automatically changes outcomes (Dahlerup, 1988). Drawing this distinction she questions whether meeting the legal quota criteria alone can alter where and by whom policy choices are ultimately shaped.

Even on the left, parity in numbers is long to be translated into equal voices across policy domains, with informal culture still playing a crucial role in the parliamentary workflow. My findings show that having enough women in the Sejm is the first step. The descriptive threshold matters, but the substantive influence depends on two hard-to-secure resources - time and access to informal networks. Neither are formally restricted, yet women's access narrows when late-night meetings collide with caregiving schedules and when social rituals remain built around male habits, a well-documented pattern in comparative research (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). In practice, the same male leaders who control the list ranks also set the rhythm and venues of Parliamentary life, prop up new barriers for women after the election. This point from another angle: it leaves electoral mechanics behind and steps into the

day-to-day practice of law-making committee hierarchies, late-night amendments and corridor deals to ask how far even the most progressive party rules can reach once the formal session ends and the informal culture of the Sejm takes over.

## CHAPTER V: INFORMAL RULES IN THE SEJM

This chapter examines how informal rules, the unwritten routines and expectations that organise daily work, shape women's ability to participate meaningfully in the Sejm. On paper, women and men have the same rights, eligibility rules are the same, the 2011 quota applies symmetrically, and deputies share identical formal powers. The question here is what happens after those formal steps: who is listened to, who is invited into the room when compromises are struck (and has time for it), and how credibility is granted or withdrawn in ordinary interaction.

I trace hidden gatekeeping across four arenas that recur in the evidence. First, the language of the chamber and corridors: jokes, innuendos, and first-name address that mark status and narrow authority. Second, the framing of women as either ornaments or mothers that shifts attention from policy to appearance or maternal duty and displaces expertise. Third, after-hours networking, late-night timing and male-coded socialising limit access for many women with care responsibilities. Fourth is the media layer, which amplifies gendered frames by focusing on women's looks and family life rather than policy. Together, these practices help explain why formal equality does not always translate into equal voice.

The reading is guided by feminist institutionalists' insight about how gender-neutral rules can yield unequal outcomes once they pass through everyday routines, and by speech act and tokenism perspectives that show how small, repeated interactions assign status, sanction behaviour, and encourage assimilation. I use these ideas to make sense of what interviewees describe, not to impose a new model, but to clarify the mechanisms they point to.

### When Words Draw Boundaries

The most immediate barrier women face in the Sejm is not procedural and not even physical to that extent; it is the language used itself. Speech-act theory reminds us that some statements do not merely describe the world; they act on it, changing the social scene the moment they are spoken (Austin, 1962). Joanna Scheuring-Wielgusr recalled her own experience as a new-to-politics MP and how one of the first things she heard in the corridor was: "You are a hottie"[9] (Chłopaś, 2021, para. 4). This is an outrageous example of harassment at work that no woman should ever be subjected to. It is a form of everyday misogyny - a language that polices women when they enter male-dominated spaces (Manne, 2018). This type of harassment has a detrimental impact on women's mental well-being and professional

[9] All quotations from Polish sources are translated by the author

experiences, creating an unhealthy working environment and signalling that it is the woman's body and not her agenda that is the chamber's opening topic. This single quote encapsulates the broader pattern my interviews describe - misogynistic language acts as an informal barrier, setting limits on how seriously women's legislative contributions will be taken. One Sejm member recalled an episode in the back corridors of the Sejm. During an apposition huddle on abortion, a male colleague hovered nearby, then joined the discussion "with a dreamy, patronising tone" and remarked: "It is so nice listening to you girls. You can learn so much about sex!" (Chłopaś, 2021, para. 7). She interpreted it as a dubious compliment, but this shows how misogynistic language can shift a serious policy talk into a space for sexual condescension. I read these instances as workplace harassment that is only possible because misogynistic language is still tolerated in the Sejm. These remarks would not have made any sense if addressed to a male deputee; they sexualise and infantilise female politicians, reducing them to their sexuality. Because these insults work through ordinary speech rather than any formal rule, I treat this as evidence that misogynistic language itself is an informal barrier: it props the idea that a woman's professional standing is conditional on male approval.

More on language and the rhetoric it sets and supports, *humour* is another important tool of informal exclusion. During a committee coffee break, a group of men were launching crude sexual jokes about women, the younger woman present remembers that: "older female MPs laughed along… They were not amused, but they did not know how to say 'stop'. They wanted to be accepted by the environment, no matter what it was." (INT-3). Rosabeth Moss Kanter's tokenism model predicts a similar outcome: a minority group is often forced into assimilation and conformity with the majority norms to protect their fragile standing (Kanter, 1977). In my analysis, the laughter reported in INT-3 is best understood through a tokenism lens. When women join the sexist joking, whether out of genuine amusement or to fit in better, they perform what Kanter calls assimilation. Tokens echo dominant groups' humour and behaviour to protect their standing (Kanter, 1977). I argue that this *harmless* humour operates as an exclusionary device, normalising sexist behaviour.

Sexism is also embedded in the Sejm's micro procedures. Women report being routinely addressed by their first name while male peers keep titles; this informality erodes authority even when disguised as friendliness. For instance, Agnieszka Dziemianowicz-Bąk, recalls when moments before a Live TV discussion of the opposition programme, a male politician switched from formal *pan/pani* (Sir/Madam) to intimate *ty* (You-singular) (Chłopaś, 2021, para. 11). Because Polish reserves ty for family and friends, its use in a professional setting collapses the distance and signals that the speaker does not need to accord full respect. Another linguistic

tool of exclusion is women being habitually logged and addressed with the masculine title *poseł* (male MP) instead of the grammatically correct feminine term *posłanka* (female MP) (Szczęśniak, 2019). Polish is a gender-inflected language, so the masculine term re-centres the male norm. This seemingly small habit matters because by recording women in the masculine, the institution quietly reasserts a male norm and makes any request for linguistic accuracy sound pedantic. This framing sits directly within speech-act and institutional theories: small, repeated utterances do institutional work by assigning status and credibility and because they operate at the level of everyday practice, they are hard to reach with any formal rule change (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1997).

On the topic of speech and sexist behaviour in the Sejm, during a 2021 TV Debate, MP Marek Dyduch dismissed Barbara Nowacka's questions by saying she "just chatters, chatters, chatters, chatters" and claimed she was trying to drown him out with words "that do not matter at all" (Leszczyński, 2021, para. 1). No similar comments were made to Dyduch's lengthy interventions, and the debate moderator had to ask if Dyduch would have said the same thing about a male opponent. Politicians' emotional tone is equally gendered. The same display is judged differently in men and women; anger is often read as power and leadership when expressed by men, but as hysteria and instability when expressed by women. Moreover, studies show that anger raises perceived status for men and lowers it for women (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). A second-term female MP sums up the double standard: "If a woman gets upset, she is hysterical… a shouting man pounding the table is seen as strong, macho." (INT-3). Analysed together, the interview and the media evidence show how a sexist stereotype delegitimises female speech and how labelling women as "hysterical" or "chatters" (INT-3; Leszczyński, 2021) functions as a quick rhetorical tool for delegitimising their authority and sidelining their substantive contributions in the Sejm.

The evidence in this section shows that power is exercised through words before any formal rule comes into play. Catcalling, lewd innuendos, sexualised *compliments*, verbal threats and even forced laughter at crude jokes all function as what speech-act theory would consider to be performatives; they do not just pass along information, they actively re-order status in the moment of speaking (Austin, 1962). In Austin's terms, these utterances have illocutionary force (they enact ranking, permission, and exclusion) and consequences (intimidate, silence and redirect behaviour). Each incident imposes hierarchy, casting the female MP as a subordinate and the male speaker as the dominant (Butler, 1997). Role congruity work helps to explain why the same behaviour is evaluated differently by gender: expressions seen as tough for men are often read as improper or hysterical for women, supporting the hierarchy that speech creates

(Eagly & Karau, 2002; Jamieson, 1995). Kanter's (1977) concept of tokenism helps explain why some female deputies choose to laugh and smile politely at sexist jokes as a defensive move to avoid further isolation, but it also normalises the sexist script. Because this hierarchy is reproduced in everyday language, it slips under the radar of formal reform. Undermining self-confidence, reestablishing hierarchies and norms, and prescribing labels such as *hysterical, humourless*; sexist language creates an additional barrier that female politicians go through during their political career. Thus, even before we turn to spatial arrangements, after-hours clubs, or media frames, language has already become a barrier a female politician might face.

## From Ornament to *Matka Polka*: How One Gender Frame Replaces Another

Another barrier female politicians report facing in the Polish Sejm is objectification and sexualisation. It happens in two linked forms. First comes objectification: the "nice dress, lovely smile; I will take care of you" (Przyborowski, 2022, para. 9) comments that might sound like praise but shift the conversation from policy to appearance. The second comes from *Matka Polka* script enactment: good mother/bad mother judgments that measure her against Poland's ideal of a self-sacrificing national mother (Graff, 2014). The following section sets both patterns with the interview and press evidence and reads them through the lens of theories and literature outlined previously.

A third-term MP remarks: "Women are often treated like decorative flowers. They are expected to look nice at press conferences, but when it comes time to make real decisions, they are excluded" (INT-1). This comment highlights a recurring frame in the testimonies: female MPs are often acknowledged through references to their appearance or assumed sexual availability rather than their legislative competence. On a provincial tour, a mayor said to an MP, Aleksandra Gajewska: "Too bad I did not know you had been here since yesterday, I would have taken proper care of you" (Przyborowski, 2022, para. 9). This might appear as a lighthearted remark, but its subtext is unmistakably sexual. This phrase implies that a female politician's value lies not in her policy agenda but in her desirability to men. The MP is not being addressed as a peer but as someone to be taken care of and looked after, reinforcing a patriarchal dynamic where women are passive recipients of male attention rather than active shapers of political discourse. The same MP recalled an even more bizarre sexual remark she once heard from a male colleague, "Come here, Blond, I will give you a son!" (Przyborowski, 2022, para. 2), pushing this pattern to the extreme. The choice of words strips a female politician to her sexuality and reproductive role. It is not just a joke but a linguistic act of male dominance reassertion by positioning a woman as an object of a sexual conquest. This kind of language is

deeply rooted in misogynistic norms that trivialise women's professional presence, suggesting their primary role is decorative or reproductive, not legislative.

> Comments about how we look or dress, whether we are ‘feminine enough’, are common. The more active we are as MPs, the more often we speak from the parliamentary podium or in the media, and the stronger our views, the more it happens. It is not just a cultural habit. Reducing women to objects, trivialising them, and focusing on their looks is also, when there are no substantive arguments, a political tactic. (Chłopaś, 2021, para. 10)

This testimony from Agnieszka Dziemianowicz-Bąk, Poland's current Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy, exposes that sexualized remarks function as a calculated political tactic rather than a trace of a fading culture. She establishes a link between how well-known and outspoken a female politician becomes and the frequency of sexualized or appearance-based comments she must face. In her analysis, opponents quickly shift the terrain to appearance to rattle the female speaker and reclaim authority when they lack substantial arguments. “Whenever you react to inappropriate comments, the common response is still ‘Come on, do not exaggerate” explains a former member of the Sejm, now a European Parliament member, Joanna Scheuring-Wielgus (Chłopaś, 2021, para. 4). This, therefore, places an additional barrier for female politicians: to laugh along with misogynist jokes or protest and risk being labelled dry and humourless. Alexandra Gajewska notes that these comments are mainly used to throw the person presenting something off balance, “These are subliminal, completely unfair methods to weaken women”, she says (Przyborowski, 2022, para. 6). Taken together, these incidents above show that sexualized praise is not a relic of coarse manners but a speech act. It shifts the frame from programme content to female appearance whenever a woman gains recognition. No matter the response to these comments, it drains political capital and keeps the conversation off policy. Objectification thus functions as a barrier, marking female politicians' bodies available for commentary. (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997)

When sexualised talk loses its power, either because a woman is older, refuses to conform to sexist jokes, or wears masculine-presenting clothes, the repertoire flips to its mirror image - motherhood rhetoric. Instead of being reduced to a desired body, she is now reduced to one that nurtures, the *Matka Polka* archetype. This framing is equally restrictive, although the cast throws a shadow of respect. A liberal MP described a female colleague who brought her child into an emergency vote for a lack of better childcare options, the next morning tabloids splashed “Bad mother, Bad Politician” (INT-3). Not too long afterwards, a male politician was praised for being an attentive father for bringing his daughters to the Sejm (INT-3). Identical

behaviours were therefore condemned as neglect for women but celebrated as a virtue for a man. In my analysis, this asymmetry is deeply rooted in the *Matka Polka* ideal that expects constant maternal self-sacrifice from female MPs while treating fatherhood as an optional heroism.

An MP from Krakow, Daria Gosek-Popiolek - then pregnant - publicly announced that she would bring her infant daughter to sittings until the nursery place opened. She was met with an online storm of negative comments, such as the Sejm is no place for a mother with a child. Even commenters from otherwise sympathetic circles joined the refrain. (Kowalówka, 2019, para. 3) Her experience demonstrates how quickly political debate can be rerouted from program ideas to maternal legitimacy once a woman is pregnant or is accompanied by a child. As she later noted: "a pregnant woman, a mother with an infant, does not lose her active or passive voting rights, does she? A woman who gives birth has the right to organise her life and political work however she wants" (Kowalówka, 2019, para. 5). Her statement makes the point clear that, on paper, being a mother changes nothing about her MP status. The *bad mother* label is pinned on her public role, not her private life, so it chips away at her credibility as a lawmaker in the eyes of the public. When interviewed for a Polish YouTube channel, Alexandra Gajewska extends this contrast to fathers: "If he is an involved father, how wonderful it is that he is so involved in the family. "And when we have a woman with a family, there is some kind of suspicion here, who loses? The family loses, or the job loses?" (Trójkąt, 2025, 45:10). This observation exposes a double standard: paternal engagement is considered commendable and maternal engagement is a zero-sum threat to home or office.

Crucially, both stories share the same background at the time; the Sejm did not provide on-site childcare, so bringing a child to work was a last resort to an institutional gap rather than a personal failing. The public, however, framed the situation as the mother's irresponsibility, policing her credibility as a politician rather than addressing the systemic deficit of on-site childcare. Only after the controversy did Szymon Hołownia suggest an idea to launch a daycare for Polish MPs' children. Although welcome, the scheme remains temporary, meaning many deputies - especially mothers - still cannot rely on consistent support. It is worth noting that another major institutional gap affecting mothers disproportionally is the fact that, unlike any other civil servants, Polish MPs are not entitled to maternity leave or days off for childcare (Polskie Radio, 2024). This means they must organise private childcare options, considering both busy schedules, commuting to Warsaw for meetings, and getting little to no help from the Sejm as a workplace.

A long-serving left MP and a mother of several young children notes that her colleagues sometimes call her Matka Polka - Polish Mother (INT-1). In her view, the phrase carries two political effects. First, it narrows expectations: voters and fellow legislators presume that a real woman prioritises homemaking over legislative work. The second is that this label could be electorally useful - "a mother will represent other mothers better than someone who is not one," she says (INT-1). However, that very advantage reinforces the gender filter that men rarely face. Analytically, it could be said that Matka Polka could, in rare cases, become a gate-opener for women as a symbolic trust carer, while at the same time remaining a behavioural constraint (Graff, 2014).

My analysis of press material suggests that crude remarks such as "Too bad I did not know you had been here yesterday; I would have taken proper care of you" or "Come here, blond, I will give you a son!" (Przyborowski, 2022) are not just random slips of etiquette but a gendered tactic, they shift attention from her political activity to her appearance thereby marking her as a decorative presence. When this strategy loses force, conversation often turns to the Matka Polka script: the same woman is now assessed as a self-sacrificing mother who must prove constant devotion to family before her political claims are heard. Both moves operate through everyday language, not written rules, so they persist despite the gender quota law and equal-on-paper rights. Seen through Manne's (2017) notion of everyday misogyny and Graff's (2014) analysis of Matka Polka Ideal, the two scripts work together to police the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour on the parliamentary floor. Because male deputies are rarely subjected to either test, the result is an asymmetrical drain on women's political capital: time spent fending off objectification or proving maternal legitimacy is not spent on shaping political career and proposing legislation.

**After-hours Networking and The Double Burden**

Interview evidence points to a further barrier after the formal day ends: informal evening meetings where alliances and positions are negotiated in a much less formal atmosphere. A third-term MP explained:

> Political networking usually happens late at night, and women with family responsibilities cannot always be there, drinking and socialising with other MPs. Decisions about who gets what place on the list happen in those informal male-dominated spaces... Yes, of course. Some women do make time for that and like it, but when men talk among themselves, they have their own topics - sports, their favourite teams. Women usually are not interested in those conversations. This exclusion affects inclusion in politics. (INT-1)

This quotation points to two informal filters operating in tandem. First, the timing: meetings that begin “late at night - drinking, socialising” coincide with hours when many women MPs with evening caregiving duties are unavailable. Second, the content: once conversations pivot to sports and other male-coded topics, participants who do not share the same interests may feel excluded. Taken together, this suggests that list placements and other rewards are often negotiated in a setting defined by a demanding schedule and gender specific conversation themes, conditions that, according to interviewees’ view, can narrow women’s access even though no formal rule excludes them.

Topic selection, the interview implies functions like a verbal door-code: when the discussion revolves around sports or other masculine signifiers, it silently signals who belongs and who does not. A second-term female MP, reflecting on the dynamic, remarked:” What if instead of this we go to fitness together” (INT-3). Her suggestion highlights that the exclusion is produced less by the explicit bans, but by a mix of timing, setting and shared reference points. Same MP later talks about how one senior male minister recently tried to “go for a beer” with the leader of a foreign far-right party, insisting it was “only for beer, not for politics” (INT-3). For her, this invitation highlights how the default neutral space that is supposed to bridge networking is still a late-night alcohol centred setting.

Informal networking then collides with a second equally stubborn barrier - the double burden female deputies are expected to carry. Voters, journalists and even male colleagues expect a female MP to exemplify maternal devotion. However, the Sejm schedules decisive votes, and all-important corridors talk at times when good mothers are presumed to be spending time with their children. An MP spells out the bind:

> People expect me to be with children. I think many voters would consider me a bad mother if I were not. And if you are seen as a bad mother, you are also judged as a bad politician. … Only one of us (talking about her politician husband) can hold a high-ranking government position at a time. And, of course, it is always expected that the woman steps back to stay home. (INT-1)

This testimony shows that electoral trust is filtered through maternal performance. The speaker links political credibility to visible childcare, indicating that voters and party colleagues treat *good motherhood* as a prerequisite to *good politics*. She also reflects on her family dynamic, saying that even though she and her husband are equally involved in politics, she is expected to stay home to take care of the children (INT-1). In analytical terms, this illustrates that *Matka Polka*'s expectations operate as a time-based barrier, and legitimacy for a woman is earned by prioritising family, even if by doing so, she reduces her access to political informal networking. “But I do not just sit at home. I manage my own agenda; I organize my life so I can work. Still,

I cannot work like the men do - 24 hours, drinking, networking late at night. That is the unwritten rule of politics" (INT-1). Here, the same MP contrasts her adaptive strategy with the informal norm. Although she restructures her schedule around her busy lifestyle, nighttime demands constant physical presence in male-coded spaces, which identifies two patterns: first, caregiving reduces availability, and second, the networking culture itself is designed around men presumed to be free of such duties. A double burden female politicians often carry - maternal duties and round-the-clock political socialising - might limit the resources this female MP can deploy inside the Sejm.

**Media Frames and Public Scrutiny**

While the internal shadow hierarchies and informal networking often play a crucial role for the parliament insiders, the following day, headlines are responsible for who will be taken seriously by the public when the microphone is on. In interviews with female deputies, the media is often described not as an external observer but rather as an important actor turned gatekeeping mechanism, sometimes even more punishing than any of the informal structures we have already covered. A third-term politician with over 10 years of experience, summarising her week in a single breath, said:

> It is brutal. Politics is hard. It is public life. Anyone can write about you, comment on your appearance, personal life, and everything else. Most women don't want to be on the front line. It is like being in the army. When you are on the front, the newspapers write about you, the internet tears you apart. (INT-1)

The same MP claims that the first things a female politician must face are comments such as:"She is ugly, she is fat, look at her face." When asked about how the digital age and social media impact political careers, she said:

> It is really hard to be in politics. Every social media post is attacked. Men face criticism too, but it is usually about their ideas. For women, the criticism is personal. Because of social media, anyone can say anything anonymously. Moreover, the media want headlines and scandals because of influencers, tabloids, and online platforms. They do not care about policy or serious issues like education - that is boring. What gets clicks is emotional content and personal attacks, especially against women. (INT-1)

The speaker's observation highlights two layers of media bias. First, she notes that content criticism splits along gender lines. "Male MPs are often challenged based on their ideas, while female politicians are targeted personally" (INT-1). My analysis suggests that women's policy credentials are often displaced by commentary on character, family life or appearance. Moreover, the MP highlights that no one is interested in "boring" things like education; every

tabloid wants headlines and scandals because such material gets more attention and traction, and anonymous social media users supply a constant stream of sensationalised insults. Taken together, her account implies a feedback loop: platforms reward sensational personal content, so reporters foreground gendered stereotypes to keep the public entertained. Female MPs' advocacy in social welfare and education gets crowded out by the commercial logic of virality that amplifies gendered criticism over substantive policy debate, causing substantial psychological damage, discouraging female politicians from further work in social welfare and education, and across any other policy field.

Constant exposure and media attention could drain emotional capital faster than it erodes formal power. Several women interviewed made points on how psychologically demanding politics have been to them, with multiple making statements such as "women have it harder in politics" (Wróblewski, 2021, para. 16), “it is brutal on you” (INT-1). When referring to younger female politicians, it was said that they are different, not scared of expressing their opinions and are “like tanks”; however, when faced with the first blast of online attack and mocking, they become discouraged (INT-1). A trend the MPs notice revolves around men being attacked for their ideas and women for their appearances and emotions, and only then for their agendas. Even hardened politicians remember specific humiliating incidents, such as being called out for *chattering* (Leszczyński, 2021), being faced with low laughter when talking about teen suicide rates (Szczęśniak, 2021), etc. Small events in isolation accumulate into an extra barrier female politicians must go through, in addition to all the formal procedures and challenges male politicians face. This pattern matches what media-effects research finds: women are more often evaluated through appearance/family/emotions, while male politicians receive more attention on their policy and leadership (Aaldering & Van der Pas, 2018; Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008; Rohrbach, Aaldering, & Van der Pas, 2023).

Deputies speak of a void when asked if they can receive formal help to fight against online attacks. “Absolutely not. If you have a problem - say someone writes something defamatory - you have to find your own lawyer… You’re completely on your own.” (INT-1) Parties issue public solidarity only when headlines threaten collective reputation, legal fees, counselling and social media management all come from personal funds. Added harms of heightened media attention cause women to develop personal defence tactics such as turning off comment sections, outsourcing funds, or going to therapy (Trójkąt, 2025). The tactics work unevenly and take up even more precious time that could be spent working, forming informal alliances, or caring for children. As Daria Gosek-Popiołek admits: “I have already become immune” (Kowalówka, 2019, para. 4).

The evidence in this section indicates that, for women, media scrutiny layers on top of gendered obstacles documented earlier - misogynistic language and patronising treatment, exclusion from late-night informal networking, maternal expectations - so that each press article adds another demand on their emotional reserves. Male MPs also confront reporters, but the data I have gathered from women describes an extra psychological hurdle. In my analysis, this double exposure drains the *mental energy* needed for policy work, raising the threshold they must reach to gain the same political influence as their male colleagues.

**Conclusion: Informal Norms and Access to Power**

The evidence gathered in this chapter shows that obstacles confronting women in the Sejm do not stem from one significant discriminatory rule but from a sequence of informal tests that accumulate over time. Misogynistic language and patronising treatment are the first and most palpable of those tests. I treat this as a language problem simply because language is the visible tip of a much larger iceberg: the verbal bits are simply the most public, traceable signs of a broader pattern of gendered harassment and exclusion that runs deeper than the words themselves. As per speech-act theory, words are not neutral labels but deeds; the moment a crude joke or a sexual innuendo is uttered, it instantly lowers a woman's standing. In practical terms, the female MPs' testimonies align with definitions of hostile-environment harassment: day-to-day remarks on *appearance*, *lovely smiles*, or *just chattering* turn Sejm into a workplace where female MPs must manage intimidation before they can legislate.

Verbal put-downs are only the opening chord. Once a woman deflects or outlasts the *nice dress, lovely blouse* routine, the narrative rarely becomes gender neutral; my analysis shows that it often pivots to a different judgment register. The frame shift from the sexual-ornament script to the *Matka Polka* narrative measures the same deputy not by desirability but by her conformity to an ideal of self-sacrificing motherhood. Several MPs describe a chain reaction: if an emergency forces them to bring a child to the chamber, headlines quickly turn from policy to parenting, branding them *bad mothers* and, by extension, *bad politicians*. The workplace context amplifies the effect. The Sejm offers no guaranteed maternity leave, an on-site childcare facility is only a pilot project, and meetings are scheduled without regard to school hours. Yet these structural gaps vanish from public debates; instead, the individual female MP is framed as personally inadequate for failing to keep home and office perfectly separate. In effect, the enduring *Matka Polka* ideal - celebrating the self-sacrificing national mother - still sets the terms for legitimacy. The gap between expectation and institutional reality becomes a

built-in vulnerability that a male MP is presumed free of caregiving duties and rarely has to face.

The same judgment that polices women's public image as mothers also narrows their access to informal arenas where influence is brokered. Several interviewees describe these gatherings as late at night and over beer, at the very hour their caregiving responsibilities peak. Because these logistical realities overlap with the cultural pressure to be with the children, the same women who feel obliged to meet the *Matka Polka* ideal are also the ones most likely to miss the informal conversations where list slots, co-sponsorships, and future committee support are first floated. The content of these gatherings reinforces this gendered gap. Several interviewees note that the default bonding topics often revolve around sports, their favourite football team and bar talk (INT-1, INT-2, INT-3). One second-term MP joked that perhaps the informal networking venue should be moved to a fitness club (INT-3) so that women, too, could propose a neutral place to socialise. She framed it as wishful thinking suggesting that the burden of adaptation still falls on women, a group already often stretched by caregiving and public scrutiny. My analysis shows that motherhood expectations and late-night networking are interlocking parts of the same informal filter. The time demands of caretaking make it harder to enter male-coded social arenas, and the absence from that arena reinforces stereotypes that women are less committed to politics.

Being shut out of those after-hours networks already puts women a step behind inside the Sejm. However, the disadvantage deepens once the day's events spill onto television, tabloids and social media. Interviews and evidence suggest that constant media attention magnifies the informal barriers discussed above. Senior MP describes online environment as "brutal", where personal attacks on looks, family life flood, regardless of what the policy records are discussed (INT-1). Newer MPs initially approach politics confidently but withdraw after facing the brutal criticism for the first time, a trajectory that Aleksandra Gajewska calls almost a routine for young women entering public life (Trójkąt, 2025). The absence of institutional support reinforces this challenge. Parties do not fund legal advice or provide crisis support management, so each MP must absorb both the psychological shock and the financial cost herself (INT-1). Therefore, the media amplifies what might have been an isolated incident into a nationwide storyline, creating reputational risks. This results in emotional exhaustion ("becoming immune" Kowalówka, 2019) and a diversion of time and money that otherwise could have been invested into constituency work or policy research, thereby widening the influence gap already opened by sexist language, patronising treatment, and gendered informal networking.

## CHAPTER VI: INDIVIDUAL PATHWAYS AND ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

The chapter addresses the third research sub-question: how do personal biography, experience of motherhood, prior activism, individual ideologies, and professional background influence a deputy's approach to advocacy within social welfare and family policy arenas? It follows directly from the previous chapters. Where the party and institutional chapters showed how access is opened or narrowed from the outside, this chapter turns to what women do with their access – how they read problems, choose venues, form alliances, and accept and resist costs that come with public policy work.

The approach is simple; I do not assume there is a single female pathway. Instead, I read the interviews and public materials for the stories MPs tell about why they entered politics, which issues they see as theirs to resolve, and how they try to move proposals - three ideas from the theoretical chapter guide this reading. First, critical actors – change often travels through specific people who are motivated and have at least one procedural lever, not just through rising numbers (Childs & Krook, 2009). Second is gyroscopic representation – some MPs act from internalised commitments that steer them even when party incentives are weak (Mansbridge, 2003). Third, representative claims – MPs publicly frame who they speak for and why, and those claims are accepted or resisted by different audiences (Saward, 2010). I also draw on work showing how expertise and prior roles shape portfolios and tactics – committee choice, amendment entrepreneurship, cross-party caucusing (Swers, 2002; Childs, 2004) and on feminist cautions against essentialism: women's interests are not uniform and fixed, they are articulated and contested in practice (Celis et al., 2008; Dovi, 2007). These anchors help me keep the analysis person-centred without collapsing diversity into stereotypes.

### Routes to Politics, Activism, and Careers

A third-term deputy recalling her starter days in politics says that her first campaign was purely local. She ran for the county council to secure more funding to make dangerous roads safer; the project succeeded, and she realised how "politics was the only way to change the world around me" (INT-1). She added:

> I was very interested in education. I was in high school, then studying, and during my studies I ran in the elections and got elected. I felt a lot of things needed to be changed. At the time, I realized that being an MP would give me a way to do that. I got into the education in my first year, and I've stayed there ever since (INT-1).

Later in our interview, she acknowledged a familiar stereotype: "Women are often assigned to *soft* topics like education and social policy, while real power lies in foreign affairs or national

security" (INT-1). However, her journey makes this generalisation much more complex. Here the committee's choice reflects a long-standing policy passion rather than a gate-keeping nudge, suggesting that women's concentration in specific portfolios can stem as much from self-selection and personal activism as from gendered shunting. This, therefore, reminds us that the pattern of occupational clustering may hide complex mixed origins, institutional steering, and personal choice may coincide, and disentangling these two requires much analysis of both MPs' personal goals and the institutional practices and norms around them.

Besides her motivation and goals, she reflected on tools and circumstances that helped her become an MP, including introducing the Gender Quota Law in 2011. The national 35% quota created space on every party list for more women; however, her party went even further, reserving half of the slots for female candidates.

> We had 50% women on our lists. Additionally, our party had an internal rule: in the top three places on every list, there had to be people of different genders - so at least one woman or one man in the top three. Because of that, I had the chance to be on the list. (INT-1)

These rules lifted her to seventh place out of the 24 candidate list - a position high enough to be competitive, but not so high that she would displace senior figures. Family labour was the final piece of a puzzle in her journey to politics: relatives distributed leaflets, posted banners and found venues, lowering the financial and logistical costs that often prevent candidates from running for office.

Her story shows how the quota and the party's gender-balancing rule widened the door, but they do not explain why this deputy walked through it alone. In her account, three elements had to come together at the right time. First, her long-standing commitment to education, stemming from local schoolboard experience, made a Sejm seat instrumentally valuable. It gave her direct access to the Commission of Education - her preferred area. Second, a family network supplied the campaign labour that converts a promising list position into actual voter support and votes. Third, the party leadership promotes gender equal party lists, multiplying the effect of a quota. Descriptive gains are enabled by formal mechanisms, yet realised only when personal advocacy goals and informal support channels are also in place. Moreover, while women are often steered towards *soft* committees (INT-1), this story shows that assignment to social policy committees can arise from a deputy's own policy ambition, not merely from stereotype or gatekeeping.

A second trajectory discovered in my interviews likewise began inside a family network but follows a different political path. This female deputy grew up "learning local politics" from a father who already was a councillor (INT-2). Teaming up with him, she wanted to rebuild a

dormant political party branch in her mountain district and recruit dozens of new young members. The effort paid off when her party colleagues later offered her a high place on the party list, again under a 50% internal parity rule that magnified the national quota. In this sense, her entry path resembles the previous case: family capital and quota rules intersect to create an opening for a woman to enter the Sejm. What diverges is the way she sees her policy priorities. Conscious that women are "often confined to education and social policy", she states that "the most feminist thing I can do is specialise in economics" (INT-2). Therefore, choosing to specialise in economics serves two purposes: it matches a genuine interest in fiscal matters. It pushes back against an unwritten rule that channels women toward the *soft* end of the agenda. In my reading, this move illustrates how quota-enabled access does not automatically consign female deputies to stereotypical areas. A deputy aware of gendered expectations can treat committee selection as a site of contestation. This example is placed next to INT-1's education focus, highlighting the complexity and diversity of female policy focuses. Both MPs drew on parental networks and the party's 50% rule to secure electable slots. However, they used that foothold to pursue different substantive paths, one deepening expertise in schooling and the other claiming economic space. The contrast suggests that committee assignments-often read as signs that women are being shunted into low-status areas-can, in some cases, mark a deliberate effort by female MPs to broaden the range of policy domains in which women exercise clout.

Both MPs stressed that their party's internal parity mandate - 50% women overall and at least one woman in the top three list positions - converted the statutory minimum into a genuine opportunity. By contrast, an experienced third-term MP (INT-1) recalls rival parties "hit the 35% and stopped", clustering women near the bottom and effectively nullifying the quota reform. This contrast highlights that the quota's impact depends less on the national law than on how individual parties distribute winnable list positions. The two testimonies (INT-1 and INT-2) also mark a temporal shift. INT-1 has entered politics before the 2016 abortion-law protests, when party recruiters "practically begged" (INT-1) women to join to fill the lists. INT-2 arriving several years later describes a surge of female activism - partly sparked by those very protests. This explosion in female activism in turn strengthens parity rules already in place. The timeline suggests that social movements can amplify party-based reforms, turning an early supply-driven compliance into a later demand-driven influx of politically engaged women.

Regarding activism, INT-3 explains that her political consciousness formed in 2015, when, as she puts it, "very right-side, nationalist, authoritarian politics" took power - an outcome she found "totally unacceptable". The strength of that negative appraisal is analytically

very important as it establishes her position opposing a new government, rather than long-standing partisan ambition. Only a few months later, she "decided I must do something" (INT-3) and began uploading government-critical content and joining street demonstrations. The combined internet presence and the activist activity resulted in INT-3 having a substantial following of about 100,000 people across several social media platforms. This testimony shows a causal chain: dissatisfaction with a new government turned into a digital protest, resulting in a measurable public following. This chain provides observable resources - visibility, networks, perceived electability and mobilisation capacity - that parties can evaluate when filling candidate lists.

Once elected, she interprets her role through an explicitly feminist frame. Recalling 2020-21 abortion law protests, she says she felt "totally sisters" with other women and that the shared experience "changed our connection between women, politicians and activists" (INT-3). That connection shapes her strategic judgment: gender equality work, she believes, can face some resistance, "working with conservative women is harder than with conservative men", because some right-wing women "do not want to work on feminist politics" (INT-3). These comments show reflexive awareness of intra-gender ideological divides and show that she reads committee negotiations and coalition building through gendered lenses. Moreover, this testimony highlights that descriptive similarities - being a woman - are not a reliable predictor of substantive behaviour.

Her stance on motherhood further illustrates how her identity guides her political advocacy. She prioritises women's rights regarding having children insisting "it is your decision" (INT-3). This quote positions reproductive autonomy as a normative principle guiding her legislative identity, consistent with her activism origins in abortion-rights protests. Finally, she makes an interesting point emphasising her autonomy within party structures: "I say loud, very unpopular opinion… I vote with my values," (INT-3) even when it diverges from party discipline. It is a crucial point of agency, she does not rely on her party to prioritise gender equality. She asserts the issue herself, accepting the strategic costs of her outspokenness. INT-3's testimony completes the trio of entry stories. It widens the scope of our understanding of how a personal journey to politics intersects with the institutional-level reform and policy advocacy. Whereas INT-1 converted her local service into a Sejm seat and INT-2 leveraged family networks and local party activism into an economy portfolio, INT-3 arrives from a protest arena, carrying her clearly articulated feminist agenda and an independent support base. These three cases show that different personal resources can activate the same institutional opening of a 35% quota. This range of trajectories warns researchers against treating women

MPs as a homogenous group. It highlights the need to analyse individual stories and how they intersect formal rules and informal culture.

Stepping back a little, INT-3's testimony also closely resembles what literature calls a critical actor - a representative whose influence derives not from numbers but from a deliberate, agenda-setting agency (Childs & Krook, 2008). Critical actors initiate or sustain pressure for gender-equality reforms irrespective of whether women have reached "critical mass" in the chamber. INT-3's path from street activism and online content making to legislative office equips her precisely with the attributes linked to that role: a pre-existing feminist mandate, an independent support base she gathered through her online presence, and a willingness to confront even ideologically close colleagues when they obstruct women-friendly policies and equality goals. Her case, therefore, demonstrates how descriptive gains become substantively meaningful when at least some MPs enter with the motivation and capacity to act as catalysts for change.

Having traced how these deputies reached the Sejm, the analysis now shifts from pathways to work inside the Sejm. The following section turns to Female MPs' substantive policy work in social welfare and family policy arenas, examining whether and how their varied backgrounds translate into concrete legislative influence.

**Turning Presence into Policy Work**

This subsection moves from *who gets in* to *what they do* once inside. Pitkin's terms focus on substantive representation and how MPs act on welfare and family policy, using interview testimonies and public statements to trace how personal experience, socialisation, and party context shape concrete proposals. The discussion treats empathy as a learned strategic tool rather than an essential trait, and it notes counterexamples where women deliberately claim non-stereotypical portfolios such as economy or security.

Interviewees repeatedly link the quality they call stronger empathy to women's ability to understand social problems and to legislate on welfare issues. One MP argues that female deputies "perform much better in political positions. They have stronger empathy, so they understand social problems better" (INT-2). In the same interview she stresses that day-to-day family management falls mainly on women and gives them first-hand knowledge of care needs. However, she insists that "our work should not be limited by gender" (INT-2). Empathy for her is an experiential resource that can improve social policy design, but should not be used to confine women to a specific, narrow portfolio.

A public interview with a left-wing deputy, Magdalena Biejat, develops a similar point on women having more empathy, but attributes the fact to socialisation rather than nature. She frames empathetic styles as a product of upbringing:

> Because of our upbringing, and I stress upbringing, not nature, women are more inclined to dialogue... So, we prioritise differently - which is good for everyone, not just women. A concrete example: for me, gender equality also means giving men room to have good relationships with their children (Smoleński, 2019, para. 16).[10]

However, she also points out how female children often are raised in a way that results in female politicians being pushed into third-sector or grassroots activism that prizes collaborative work: "Also, because of upbringing, we are often pushed to do ant work in the background." (Smoleński, 2019, para. 16) This remark echoes points made by INT-1 and INT-2 about women being too hesitant to go for positions of power, discussed in a previous chapter on Party gatekeeping dynamics. In my analysis, socialised empathy equips female MPs to read welfare needs more carefully. However, the same gendered conditioning can reinforce gatekeeping by nudging women towards lower-status roles. These statements, therefore, locate women's perceived welfare expertise in learned behaviours rather than essential traits, while showing how these patterns can both expand and constrain women's substantive work inside the Sejm.

An experienced third-term MP made similar points on the impact of female empathy on politics. She claims that "if women were setting policies on … national security, the world would look very different - probably more peaceful and cooperative", yet that "many women are afraid of making hard or unpopular decisions" (INT-1). As well as the previous testimony, she mentions how, in her view, women "act more cautiously" and "tend not to like risk" (INT-1), shaping policy towards dialogue and de-escalation. However, she quickly notices how this is largely a generalisation, showing an awareness that this pattern is rather social than biological. What matters is how this stereotype manifests itself inside the Sejm. She describes committee portfolios as "very predictable, agriculture mostly men, education mostly women," and stresses that "it is not like MPs get to choose freely." (INT-1). This comment shows how party leadership can convert a culturally available stereotype (*women avoid risk*) into an organisational rule of thumb (*women into education, men into agriculture*) reproducing a gendered division of legislative labour.

However, this testimony points to a tendency, not an iron rule. Some women succeed in entering security or economy portfolios, such as a deputy from INT-2, when supportive party leaders, ideological fit, and personal ambition line up. However, her account shows how

[10] All quotations from Polish sources are translated by the author

cultural expectations about women's greater caution and empathy can be used as a default committee sorting device, steering women without a strong backing or an articulated alternative into *safe* welfare or education. This effect is uneven and contingent, but the mechanism is real, when party leaders have only a few prestigious committee seats to distribute, gender stereotypes give them an easy excuse to assign those posts to men, those same stereotypes gain extra traction if women MPs, having been socialized to doubt their abilities, do not push harder for high status roles. Committee placements, therefore, are more of a negotiation among party priorities, ideological stances, and individual preferences, with gender assumptions exerting weight depending on how these other factors align.

Some deputies turn to family life to explain why specific social-welfare and education goals matter to them and how they are specified in legislative terms. Magdalena Biejat links household experience to the design fails she sees in the Polish flagship child-benefit programme (Smoleński, 2019). I asked whether she receives the *Rodzina 500+* allowance, and she answered yes, but immediately added that the cash "will not buy a daycare spot if it does not exist" (para. 27). Day-to-day parenting, therefore, draws her attention to the service infrastructure that must accompany financial benefits. She then moves that observation to a proposal that childcare should be available for kids under three in every municipality, because "that enables women to return to work if they want to" (para. 31). The same interview shows her extending this logic outward: deficient public transport in small towns. She argues that it cancels welfare gains, and "Education Constitution" is needed to lock future school reforms into predictable consultative cycles (Smoleński, 2019, para. 41). Each component of her agenda - universal daycare, reliable public transport systems, rule-bound education curriculum - responds to mobility and schooling problems many families face, not just her own. A second-term Razem MP Daria Gosek-Popiołek employs a comparable frame. "My daughters are the reason for my political and social work" (Kowalówka, 2019, para. 1), she says before talking about a broad range of issues that comprise her agenda, that stretch from daycare to railway expansion and "fair energy transition"(para. 30). She justifies long-horizon investment - new rail corridors, green jobs, tax reform - by invoking responsibility for the world her daughters will inherit. Her motherhood is presented as less of a lens on immediate service shortages but a generational time. Climate adaptation, well-paid public service jobs, and an efficient state are grouped because, in her words, "we certainly cannot afford" to leave children with a deteriorating environment or unfunded schools (Kowalówka, 2019, para. 32).

A local government background shapes the agenda for a second-term Civic Platform MP Alexandra Gajewska. She recalls installing streetlights and receiving an e-mail from "a girl

that she is finally not afraid to go home in the evening." (trójkąt, 2025, 11:50-12:10) From that deeply personal episode, she derives a policy bundle - nurseries, low-emission buses, tram and metro expansions - that treats mobility, safety and childcare as interlocking features of a friendly city (Trójkąt, 2025). Another MP roots her flagship proposal in reducing class sizes to about 15 people to improve each pupil's education (INT-1).

The data in this section therefore, points to a substantive effect, not just a numerical one: the women describe how their everyday roles have equipped them with first-hand knowledge of nursery shortages, transport gaps, and classroom overcrowding, which they translate into concrete proposals such as universal daycares, education reforms, rail-way system expansions, and class-size gaps. They explain this focus in two, partly overlapping ways. Some invoke a *natural* female empathy, others emphasise the socialised nature of this, explaining this through greater exposure to caregiving and community work, which channels them toward welfare and education. However, none of these women claims that all women will prioritise these domains. They note that portfolio choice also hinges on party ideology, leadership support and personal ambitions. MP from INT-2, for instance, pursues the economy precisely to break the welfare stereotype. The evidence, therefore, creates a complex finding that gendered life experiences often equip female MPs to articulate and press for the kinds of social welfare reforms their interviews detail. However, translating that experience into parliamentary specialisation is mediated through partisan context and individual programme. A pattern of probability, not a uniform destiny, emerges: biography supplies a powerful, though not exclusive, pathway through which some women legislators reshape the content of Poland's welfare debate.

**Conclusion: From Biographies to Policy Impact**

The interviewees' testimonies and public statements analysed in this chapter point to a complex dynamic between institutional design, party strategy and biographical experience that shapes who reaches the Sejm and what they subsequently advocate for. Quota law is the starting gate, but the party choices determine who crosses it: several leftists MPs describe an inside of the party gender parity rules and explicit leadership endorsement as a decisive factor that turned the statutory 35% minimum into electable seats. Recruitment patterns are not static either; several interviewees state a noticeable surge in female candidates after the post-abortion-law mobilisation, when dozens of women became involved in civil society organisations and moved into party politics. In Childs and Krook's terms, the women who already carry strong motivation and at least one lever of access convert those party openings into concrete entry (Childs & Krook, 2009). In Saward's sense, they also make representative claims about whom they speak

for, for example, parents, pupils, carers, etc., that party can validate with a high list rank or sideline with a low rank, shaping whether biography becomes a resource or a label (Saward, 2010).

Inside the Sejm, deputies describe gendered expectations as both a resource and a constraint. Some embrace women's naturally stronger empathy, locating it in caregiving and third-sector experiences. Others treat the same label as the first step into confinement in *soft* committees. Where experience aligns with the stereotype, as in INT-1's long campaign for education reforms, welfare expertise is readily accepted. INT-2 chose the economy committee to counter that stereotype; she does not describe any resistance. However, the choice is framed as a conscious departure from the paths that women are often confined to. Overall, a significant portion of the data analysed for this research points to the fact that once in Sejm, deputies drawing on personal experiences with family matters and caregiving, as well as third sector work foreground education, childcare, household economics and benefits. This mirrors the cross-regional study's findings that female legislators often steer resources towards these areas. (Bhalotra & Clots-Figueras, 2014; Clayton et al., 2019; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). Analytically, this matches gyroscopic representation - acting from internal commitments (Mansbridge, 2003). At the same time, the interviewees resist essentialism, empathy is narrated as socialised, not innate, which is why some MPs purposely choose economy or security to expand where women exercise authority. In other words, biography is not destiny but a repertoire that can be deployed strategically for or against prevailing gendered assignments.

Synthesising the testimonies with comparative literature yields a probabilistic conclusion. Party ideology, list engineering and social movement tides shape how many women reach parliament and with what initial resources; lived experience, especially exposure to caregiving, shapes the issues they are most equipped to diagnose and the rhetorical styles they employ once there. No single pathway predicts either entry or agenda, instead, institutional incentives and biographical repertoires interact to raise the likelihood, not the certainty, that women in the Sejm will widen the scope and detail of Poland’s social-welfare debate. Biography supplies the compass, and parties and institutions decide how far it can travel. Where leadership endorses women into winnable places and visible committee roles, biographies can translate into substantive action. Where list ranks and informal norms remain male-controlled, the same biographies yield attention without authority, echoing the literature's caution that descriptive gains alone do not guarantee policy change. This is a conditional pattern that is precisely what this chapter is set out to test: individual experiences and commitments shape

advocacy strategies and content, but their impact is amplified or muted by party rules, committee gateways, and everyday cultural, male-dominated norms.

# CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

## Findings at a Glance

This thesis asked a simple question: when more women enter the Polish Sejm, does anything change in how social welfare and family policy are set and pursued and through what everyday mechanisms? The evidence supports a "*yes, but*". The 2011 gender quota widened descriptive presence but did not by itself deliver a proportionate shift in substantive influence. Where women shaped agendas, they did so when numbers met placement power, organisational backing, and the work of committed critical actors. Where change stalled, the same filters appeared repeatedly: rank politics on party lists, committee channelling into lower-leverage venues, patronising treatment and speech-based credibility tests in the chamber, exclusionary after-hours networking, and media frames that evaluate women through appearance, tone, and family roles rather than policy.

Read together, the chapters trace a single mechanism chain. A quota without a placement rule enables parties to comply while recapturing winnable positions for men. Once inside the Sejm, formally equal rules meet rules-in-use: who gets chairships and rapporteurships, who is *heard* in the room, who is present when deals are made. Language does institutional work – compliments shift attention from policy to appearance, interruptions that police tone, labels like hysterical or dry that lower uptake – so that authority is sorted before formal votes even occur. After hours, influence migrates to late-night, male-coded social spaces that collide with caregiving time. Against this grain, women still move policy by professionalising *care* into infrastructure (daycare, class size, transport) or claiming space in *hard* portfolios. However, these gains are conditional on list position, leadership backing, and sustained coalition work.

Methodologically, a qualitative thematic design was the right tool for seeing how reforms translate into practice. Triangulating confidential interviews with long-form public testimonies allowed the analysis to follow processes that leave no roll-call trace. Beginning with an explicit conceptual frame (authorisation vs acting for; Institutions-on-paper vs institutions-in-use; Critical mass vs critical actors) kept the argument clear. Letting inductive themes surface from MP's own language ensured that theory did not pre-decide the findings. The result is not a universal average effect, but a mechanism map, where in Poland's parliamentary routine, translation from presence to practice is most likely to stall or succeed.

Party engineering is the first hinge point between quotas on paper and women's substantive representation in the Sejm. In an open list PR system without placement rules, rank

politics decides who starts close enough to mandate to be competitive. Parties that treat the 35% requirement as a floor - and then go further by reserving top-of-the-list slots and distributing agenda-controlling roles - translate descriptive gains into influence. Parties that just *comply* recreate the ceiling through ranking and committee allocation, signalling that women are welcome as candidates but not as agenda setters. Internal discipline magnifies the effect: when leadership backs the proposal, a well-placed MP's idea can move quickly. When leadership frames gender linked reforms as off-brand or risky, even skilled advocates find their initiatives stranded. In short, the law opens the door, but the party executives still decide who stands on the threshold or who is invited to the table.

Institutions-in-use are the second hinge. On paper, all rights are identical. In practice, informal filters still decide if an MP will be excluded from the policy talk. Credibility tests in the chamber, patronising treatment, tone policing disguised as humour, and first-name familiarity when titles should have been used all chip away at authority before any agenda can be discussed. Moreover, late-night gatherings and offside drinks where committee bargains and list promises are often brokered precisely when female MPs with care duties are least available. Male-coded venues and bonding topics quietly sort out who is entitled to be invited. Moreover, a media layer that focuses on looks, tone and family life more readily for women than for men, and the costs of visible leadership rises. These routines help to explain why a larger female cohort does not automatically show a policy change. The levels that matter most operate where no formal rules matter.

Biography and strategy are the third hinge. Many women translate lived experiences into welfare programmes such as universal childcare, school reform, and transport that enables care, drawing on experience in households, schools, municipalities, and NGOs. Others deliberately claim hard briefs in the economy or security to within what counts as women's expertise and to resist being quarrelled into a soft portfolio. Neither path requires essentialism; the point is rather probabilistic. Some female MPs do concentrate on so-called soft portfolios – welfare and education- because their lived experiences equip them for this. Whether this pattern is driven or enforced by societal expectations and the *Matka Polka* script, rather than individual preferences, is out of the scope of this thesis and needs further research. However, whether or not female politicians can exercise their influence in any policy domain largely depends on the opportunity structure that parties are willing to create and on the informal filters discussed above.

These findings also recast the critical mass debate. Poland now hovers around the 30% threshold, often treated as a “large minority” benchmark (Dahlerup, 1988). However, critical

systematic issues dampen any presumed automatic effect. First, coalitions among women are episodic and filtered by ideology; descriptive similarity does not erase pragmatic differences. Second, where parties ration winnable list slots and top posts, a scarcity mindset takes hold: women perceive themselves as competing with other women for a fixed slice, not with men for equal access. In this setting, critical mass operates as context, not the cause. This thesis, therefore, resists the essentialist leap from *more women* to *women's interests,* and instead shows how numbers interact with placement power, posts and norms to shape what becomes possible.

**Contributions and Impact**

Conceptually, this project maps the micro-mechanisms that connect presence to practice: list rank and seat viability, committee channelling, credibility tests in speech, the timing and venue of coalition-building and media frames that raise or lower women's chances of taking the lead. Empirically, it grounds those mechanisms in women's own accounts of the quota era, showing where progress is real (greater visibility, some party-level parity rules) and where it is blocked (ranking, committee sorting, after-hours exclusion). Methodologically, it triangulates confidential interviews with public long-form statements, allowing for analysis of institutions-in-use that leave no formal traces. Theoretically, it applies and operationalises established frameworks – Pitkin's dimensions of representation, feminist-institutionalist accounts of rules-in-use, and the critical mass/actors debate – to a new empirical context: post-2011 Poland's open-list PR with no placement mandate gender quota. In doing so, it specifies the conditions under which those frameworks travel and shows how party list engineering and informal norms mediate the transition from descriptive gains to substantive influence.

The implications are practical as well as theoretical. If the goal is to convert descriptive gains into influence in welfare and family policy, then the leverage points are where formal authority meets routine practice. Parties can adopt placement mandates and transparent criteria for distributing chairs and rapporteur roles. Parliamentary leader can make care-compliant practice the default – predictable schedules for key votes and meetings, reliable on-site childcare rather than pilot-based, and norms that value daytime committee work over midnight corridor deals. The Sejm can enforce standards of conduct that treat sexist put-downs as workplace violations rather than simple banter. None of these proposals assumes a single "women's agenda". They remove filters that currently make it harder for women to exercise the same repertoire of tactics men can rely on.

Finally, the study answers its main question directly. The post-2011 increase in women's presence in the Polish Sejm has enabled more participation in social welfare and

family policy and has sometimes shifted agendas. However, the effect is contingent, not automatic. As representation theory predicts, descriptive gains do not, by themselves, guarantee substantive change. In Poland's Sejm, the transition from presence to practice is mediated by party-level placement power, the distribution of influential posts, and informal norms that determine who is present when decisions are made. Until those levers move more consistently, the quota will remain a milestone, not a destination: it is necessary to open doors and insufficient to decide what happens inside.

The conclusion is both sobering and helpful. It cautions against resting arguments on headcounts alone and points to the ordinary, movable parts of politics, such as lists, posts, schedules, words, and rooms, where reforms can act. It also clarifies why critical mass remains an open question and needs further research. In this case, with no changes to scarcity dynamics and informal filters, more women can mean more of the same work under the same constraints. The alternative is straightforward: when parties adopt gender equal list placements, when leadership backs women's proposals, and when parliamentary practice is compatible with care and basic workplace dignity, presence will become practice and welfare and family policies will shift in ways that are both visible and well-informed.

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# Appendix A. Glasgow University Ethics Application Approval

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

**Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects**

**Notification of Ethics Application Outcome – UG and PGT Student Applications**

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**Application Details**

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application ☐ Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application ☒

Application Number: PGT/SPS/2024/26/IMCEERES

Applicant's Name: Kamilla Begebayeva

Project Title: Master Thesis. Gender Quotas and Legislative Advocacy: How Female Politicians in Poland Navigate Social Welfare and Family Policy

**Application Status: Fully Approved**

Date of Review: 05/02/2025

Start Date of Approval 07/02/2025 End Date of Approval 25/08/2025

**NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval.**

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**Recommendations** (where changes are required)

Where changes are required by reviewers all applicants must respond in the relevant boxes to the recommendations of the Committee and provide this as the Resubmission Document to explain the changes you have made to the application as well as amending the documents. Changes to the application form or supporting documents should be highlighted either in block highlight or in red coloured text to assist the reviewers.

All resubmitted application documents should then be provided.

**Approval Subject to Amendments** means that the applicant can proceed with data collection with effect from the date of approval, but amendments must be fulfilled.

**Amendments Subject to SEF** should be submitted to ethics administrator.

**If your application is rejected** a new application must be submitted to the ethics administrator. Where recommendations are provided, they should be responded to and this document provided as part of the new application. A new reference number will be generated.

| REVIEWER MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS | APPLICANT RESPONSE |
|---|---|
| | |

| REVIEWER MINOR RECOMMENDATIONS | APPLICANT RESPONSE |
|---|---|
| | |

| ADDITIONAL REVIEWER COMMENTS | APPLICANT RESPONSE |
|---|---|
| Thank you for fulfilling the required amendments. | |

**Appendix B. Semi-structured interview themes and questions.**

Hello, thank you very much for meeting with me today. My name is Kamilla, and I am a student from the University of Glasgow, the University of Tartu and Jagiellonian University. I am researching the role of women in Polish politics, especially since the introduction of gender quotas in 2011. My study focuses on understanding how having more women in parliament has influenced policies related to social welfare and family issues. I am interested in learning about your personal experiences and your work in parliament, how you see these changes affecting policy, and what challenges or successes you have experienced. I want you to know that your answers are very important to my research, and I hope this conversation will help us understand better how these changes have influenced politics in Poland. The interview is fully confidential, and you can choose not to answer any questions that you do not feel uncomfortable with.

- Could you please tell me a bit about your journey into politics? What motivated you to run for office?
- Did any personal experiences, beliefs, or your professional background influence this path?
- Why did you choose your political party? Was there anything in the party's values or goals that spoke to you?

**Policy focus and social welfare and family policy involvement**

- What are your main policy priorities in parliament at the moment?
- How do social welfare and family policy issues (e.g., childcare, parental leave, elder care, benefits) fit within your work?
- Have you authored, co-sponsored, or advocated for any initiatives in these areas? What was your role and what was the outcome?
- Which stakeholders (e.g., NGOs, expert communities, local governments, unions, churches, business groups) do you engage with on these topics, and how have they shaped your approach?

**Gender Quotas, Representation & Policy Impact**

- Do you think the introduction of gender quotas in 2011 changed the political landscape for women in Poland?

- Do you feel these quotas created more opportunities for women to get elected-or just to be included on party lists?
- Since the quota reform, have you seen any changes in how issues like childcare, social support, or family policy are treated in parliament?
- Do you feel that women MPs have more influence now on shaping these types of policies? Why or why not?
- Have you personally worked on any policies in these areas? What was that experience like?

**Party Dynamics and Advocacy**

- How much freedom do you have within your party to focus on the issues that matter to you?
- Are social and family policies seen as important in your party's agenda?
- Have you ever felt pressure to follow party lines, even if it goes against your personal beliefs or priorities?
- Is there space within your party for women to support each other or work together on shared goals?

**Institutional Environment and Barriers**

- What is your experience with formal structures like committee assignments or leadership positions? Have they supported or limited your ability to shape policy?
- Are there informal practices or networks, such as political "old boys' clubs" or gender stereotypes, that affect your influence in parliament?
- Do you feel that women MPs have equal access to decision-making spaces? If not, what are the main obstacles?
- What kind of changes inside the Sejm or in society would help women have a stronger impact on policy-making?"