

## WOMEN'S TOP-LEVEL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN UKRAINE

TAMARA MARTSENYUK

**Abstract:** In this article the main barriers which impede Ukrainian women's way to top political level are indentified: inefficient gender politics followed by sexist speeches of politicians, gender-unfriendly political parties, rather patriarchal public opinion, lack of women's activism and female leaders.

**Keywords:** Gender Politics, Women Empowerment, Women in Ukrainian Politics.

## ЖАНОЧЫ ПАЛІТЫЧНЫ ЎДЗЕЛ ВЫШЭЙШАГА ЎЗРОЎНЮ ВА УКРАІНЕ

**Анатацыя:** У гэтым артыкуле вызначаныя асноўныя перашкоды, якія замінаюць уздыму ўкраінскіх жанчын на вышэйшы ўзровень палітыкі: неэфектыўная гендарная палітыка, сэксісцкія прамовы палітыкаў, недобразычлівыя да пытання гендарнай роўнасці палітычныя партыі, патрыярхальнае грамадскае меркаванне, брак жаночага актывізму і лідараў.

**Ключавыя словы:** гендарная палітыка, надзяленне жанчынаў уладай, жанчыны ва ўкраінскай палітыцы.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2011, Ukraine takes 64<sup>th</sup> place in measuring gender-based gaps. The worst ranking is with political empowerment for women, where Ukraine takes 106<sup>th</sup> place among 135 countries (Hausman, Ricardo et al. 2011). In Inter-Parliamentary Union database of Women in Parliaments, Ukraine takes only 122<sup>nd</sup> place in the world among 189 countries.

Since independence Ukraine has not shown significant improvement in the number of women in the Parliament, and it will be difficult to achieve 30 per cent in 2015 (as it was ratified by Ukraine in the UNDP Millennium Development Goals).

What are the main barriers of women's participation in top-politics?

### **Barrier No. 1: State level of gender politics in Ukraine**

Negative macro-picture of Ukrainian women participation in top politics could be explained by analyzing state level. *De jure* gender equality is supported by the national institutional mechanism (law "On Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women" 2005). *De facto* not much is implemented in terms of tangible policies.

The second largest problem of the Ukrainian politics concerning gender issues could be analyzed via sexist public speeches from top authority. In spring 2010 it was rather load case with the Prime-Minister Mykola Azarov's words: «*There's no one to look at during cabinet sessions: they're all boring faces. With all respect to women, conducting reforms is not women's business*». <sup>1</sup> In Azarov's words it became clear that Ukrainian women were "beautiful commodity" to look at, to inspire politicians.

In general, on the Ukrainian streets and in media there is a lot of sexism, especially in commercial advertisement. State hardly does something to control exploiting of female's image as "beautiful commodity". Ukrainian women are supposed to fulfill two main roles – *to be beautiful* (in order to inspire men) and *to be mothers* (to provide reproductive resources for nation). In this situation it is hard to imagine and fulfill the other roles for women.

### **Barrier No. 2: Gender-Unfriendly Political Parties**

Representation of women in elected organs is not currently priority reforms in political parties and elections (Women's Participation in Politics 2011). In general, all the most popular Ukrainian parties tend to be "gender insensitive" (at the declarative, populist level), but, at the same time, they do not include important gender equality implementation issues in their party programs (except "Udar" political party headed by famous boxer Vitaliy Klychko).

Political parties declare equal opportunities for women and men and absence of discriminatory policies. But normally parties don't make special

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/24/ukraine-mykola-azarov-women>. Accessed 2 April 2012.

efforts to engage more women into their structure. Moreover, analysis of first five party list candidates demonstrates that in electoral campaigns parties try to follow “at least one woman in first fifth” rule. At the same time, female candidates never constitute at least one fifth of the whole party list (at least 20 per cent of listed candidates).

### **Barrier No. 3: Public Opinion and Gender Stereotypes**

Why may we argue that society can't see Ukrainian women are taking active decision-making role? From one hand, the results of public opinion monitoring demonstrate that in general the Ukrainian society becomes more egalitarian when speaking about female participation in the political life of the country. This positive dynamic could be followed between 1999 and 2007.

In 1999, nearly 63 per cent of respondents agreed that most men were better suited for politics than most women. The results of the same public opinion survey made in 2007 demonstrate a visible change in attitude towards this issue. The quantity of respondents with patriarchal views decreased almost 20 per cents. On the other hand, 36 per cent of respondents and among them 30 per cent of women expressed patriarchal views: they agreed or rather agreed with the statement that “For Wife it is More Important to Support Husband's Career than to Have Own”.

But the Ukrainian society in general is eager to see women on top positions. Almost 60 per cent of respondents replied that quantity of women in the Ukrainian Parliament should be at least one third and more.

### **Barrier No. 4: Lack of Women's Activism**

We may argue that there is lack of female solidarity both in civil society and in politics in Ukraine. There is no strong women's movement in contemporary Ukraine to promote increasing the number of women in politics. Ukrainian women participate in politics on the basis of gendered social roles, as mothers and wives. As a result, their participation in post-communist public life is covered mainly in 'nonpolitical' projects to build civil society (Hrycak 2007).

Among new (grass-root) initiatives is “Feminist Offensive” which in 2011 established tradition of alternative celebrating 8th of March. But 200-person street protests are hardly enough to raise real awareness of society towards gender equality issues (Martsenyuk 2012).

According to the Centre for Society Research *Ukrainian Protest and Coercion Data*, in Ukraine in 2011 there were only 23 protests on the topic of women's rights (that is approximately 1% of all protests). Almost all pro-gender protests are done by FEMEN, while one third of protests are on anti-gender topics (especially, demonstration of anti-abortion position).

### **Barrier No. 5: Lack of Female Leaders**

The Ukrainian society has positive role model of an active female figure that influenced public opinion towards possibility for women to be a politician. But Yulia Tymoshenko never proved to be gender sensitive and female friendly. During the last parliamentary elections (in 2007) the next woman after the aforementioned party leader placed only 30<sup>th</sup> in her party list. She did not take particular interest in gender discrimination overcoming issues, problem of gender-based violence etc.

Moreover, we may argue, that being a famous female politician, Yulia Tymoshenko managed to follow gender stereotypes public opinion on women's role in the Ukrainian society: to be "beautiful feminine object" and "mother of nation" (especially during the Orange Revolution).

### **Further Discussions**

Gender scholars (Bryson, Lister 1994) argue that "double burden" provides to women less compare to men time for political activity. Ruth Lister believes that "active civic position demands time: people are supposed to have it in order to be active citizens, volunteers or active participants of community political life" (Lister 1990).

Lack of such resource as time is an important further issue to discuss when raising problem of women's participation in public life.

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