

Chapter Nine

Promoting Education and Mentorship for Women in Politics

Maja Bizjak

Adult Education Centre Celje, Slovenia
maja.bizjak@lu-celje.si

Rebeka Dečman Podergajs

Adult Education Centre Celje, Slovenia
rebeka.decman@lu-celje.si

The EWA project explored the barriers preventing women's entry into politics. Preliminary research identified three primary challenges: lack of knowledge, family responsibilities, and fear of public exposure. To tackle these issues, the project developed a 30-hour training programme that equipped women with the knowledge for active political participation and engagement. The training combined theory and practice, proving to be effective. The success of the EWA project activities demonstrates the importance of customised training programmes in encouraging women's participation in politics.

Keywords: education, training, women's political participation, effective communication, workshops

Introduction

With the European project EWA, financially supported by the European Commission, we aimed to raise awareness among girls and women about the importance of active citizenship and empower them for political engagement and careers in politics. The project partners – the University of Maribor, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, the Institute for Political Management and the Public Institution for Adult Education Celje – approached this question comprehensively. We invited 74 women to participate in pre-tests and focus groups, followed by an intervention programme. We aimed to identify the barriers that women perceive to political engagement and determine whether education and mentoring are indeed crucial tools in helping women overcome these barriers and encourage more active citizenship.

From the beginning of the project, we were guided by the question of why young women, despite their interest in active political participation, do not choose a career in politics or become more actively involved in public life (Dežan et al., 2023). Initially, we will present studies that cite various reasons for the underrepresentation of women at all levels of decision-making, both locally and nationally.

Butorova and Gyarfašova (2000) argue that women do not consider the public sphere as their own and do not feel at home. In a Slovenian survey conducted by Jalušič & Antić Gaber (2020), respondents identified the reconciliation of family and political life (39%), lack of knowledge and experience in politics (37%), and potential public exposure of children and family (33%) as key barriers to political engagement. The main concern thus stems from considerations about how political engagement will affect the lives of family members (Antić Gaber, 2007). Additionally, it is noticeable that women who decide to enter politics do so later in life than men, have fewer children than their male colleagues, and are more often single or widowed (Jalušič & Antić Gaber, 2020).

In our initial project survey involving 74 women, participants most frequently cited the following reasons for political (in)activity: lack of confidence in their knowledge, unwillingness to expose themselves publicly, insufficient confidence, and difficulty in balancing political and family life. During the focus groups conducted in March and April 2023, participants expressed the opinion that there is still a lack of will and motivation for political engagement among women. They also felt hindered by traditional and conservative attitudes and beliefs, such as the notion that women must choose between family and career, the perception of women as more emotional and less rational, and the belief that politics is a male sphere.

Cultural and social expectations are also significant factors that prevent women from participating in politics. These expectations stem from various elements, including discrimination, gender stereotypes, and lack of access to education. Gender stereotypes that confine women primarily to private and family life and cultural norms that favour men as natural leaders create substantial barriers to women's political participation. Overcoming these stereotypes in society and fostering a culture that encourages and supports women's political participation is essential.

An example illustrating the persistence of certain stereotypes and

expectations in Slovenian society is evident in the research conducted within the Slovenian project *Meta Dekleta – Promoting Active Citizenship of Younger Women* (2014). In this study, not a single man under 40 considered family an obstacle in his career path. This indicates the presence of gender-specific expectations in Slovenian society.

In Slovenia, there are several initiatives aimed at empowering women and girls for political participation (Antić Gaber et al., 2014, p. 41). For example, the Women's Lobby of Slovenia is an organisation dedicated to promoting gender equality and women's political participation. In addition, many political parties in Slovenia have programmes that support women's political participation. Although Slovenia has made some progress in this area, much remains to be done. With continued efforts towards this goal, we can ensure that women have an equal voice in the political process and that their contributions are valued and respected.

During the EWA project, we identified the following strategies to help create a more equitable political sphere:

1. *Education and Training*: providing women and young girls with comprehensive political education to build their knowledge and confidence in leadership, politics and public speaking.
2. *Mentoring and Support Networks*: establishing mentorship programs and support networks to guide and encourage women and young girls to participate in political organisations and programmes. This can be done also with the support of role models and successful women politicians as a source of inspiration.
3. *Promoting Gender Equality*: advocating for policies and practices that promote gender equality within political parties and institutions.
4. *Challenging Stereotypes*: actively working to challenge and change gender stereotypes and cultural norms that discourage women from participating in politics.
5. *Awareness Campaigns*: Launching awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of women's political participation and to change public perceptions about women's role in politics.

By adopting these strategies, we aimed to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in the political arena since education and mentorship were identified as key tools for encouraging wom-

en to enter politics. Jalušič & Antić Gaber (2020) also provided recommendations on how to promote women's presence in politics, emphasising continuous training for women politicians and introducing mentorship as an effective training method.

Mentorship can offer women support, networking, and guidance to navigate the challenges of political life. Experienced politicians can share their experiences, advise on strategic decisions, help establish contacts, and provide moral support during difficult times. Mentorship is especially important in the early stages of a political career when young women politicians face numerous challenges and self-doubt. Programs that are tailored for women in politics can be instrumental in overcoming barriers and fostering a new generation of confident and capable women leaders.

The project focused on an intervention approach that included an educational programme with various content modules. The content was tailored to the needs highlighted by the women in the focus groups as most necessary and desired: knowledge of legislation, the functioning of the political system in Slovenia, public speaking and argumentation skills, communication skills, insights into the work of women politicians in Slovenia, and motivation and confidence building.

Within the following lines, we present the educational programme organised for 65 women who participated in the project. The intervention programme serves as a pilot project that can be replicated at national and local levels even after the project ends. The overall aim of these activities is the political empowerment of girls and young women, raising awareness of the importance of women's participation in politics, creating spaces for experiential learning, and developing materials that can help civil society in the political socialisation of individuals.

The programme comprised both theoretical and practical elements, which were interlinked and mutually reinforcing. In the theoretical section, participants deepened their understanding of public speaking, learned the rules of diplomatic and political protocol, and acquired skills to successfully reconcile political and private life. The programme included lectures on the roles and functions of individual state institutions and current political issues facing modern society. With the assistance of experts, participants gained valuable theoretical foundations that enabled them to comprehend the political system and its processes more effectively. The practical component of the programme

offered participants direct insight into the work and life of politicians and political institutions. The training followed contemporary pedagogical guidelines and utilised a wealth of audiovisual resources and interactive activities, emphasising the learning-by-doing method. An interdisciplinary approach was employed, drawing upon knowledge from a range of disciplines, including law, public administration, psychology, sociology, social dynamics, and human rights.

The 30-hour training was divided into the following lectures.

The Importance of Women in Politics (Ecofeminist Perspective)

This lecture provided an overview of the fundamental principles of ecofeminism, including key concepts and definitions, and explored the intertwined nature of ecology and feminism. It also highlighted key historical events where women gained the right to vote and began participating actively in politics. The workshop then examined the current position of women in politics, presenting global statistics on women's representation in political institutions. Finally, the lecture emphasised the importance of women as influential environmental activists and their achievements in addressing environmental issues. The lecture concluded with a discussion of the role of women in both the political and environmental spheres and the importance of their active participation in creating a more sustainable and just world.

Democracy in Practice

This activity integrated theoretical and practical elements, allowing participants to gain a concrete understanding of the work of national and local institutions. They acquired knowledge of the functioning of parliament, including legislative procedures and the role of various parliamentary committees. Additionally, they gained insights into the workings of local self-government, learning about the daily challenges and responsibilities of local authorities and how local communities interact with national institutions.

The workshop also examined the responsibilities of the President of the Republic of Slovenia, including her role in the legislative process, representational duties, and her role in appointing key state officials. Through this combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experiences, participants gained a deeper understanding of the functioning of political systems at various levels and how they can actively engage in political life.

The Democratic Political System in Slovenia: Opportunities for Further Development Towards a Green State

This workshop examined the relationship between democracy and sustainable development, with a particular focus on the concept of a 'green state' and its significance for Slovenia. The lecture commenced with an overview of the fundamental characteristics of the Slovenian democratic system and the concept of the 'green state.' Participants were then introduced to how this concept contributes to sustainable development. A historical overview highlighted Slovenia's political development since independence in 1991 and the role of democracy in its progress. The current environmental state in Slovenia was discussed, addressing challenges such as pollution, water management, and biodiversity, while evaluating the effectiveness of current environmental policies. The central theme of the workshop was the connection between democracy and environmental sustainability. Participants learned how democratic institutions can improve environmental management, drawing inspiration from successful examples worldwide. The workshop concluded with a summary of the key findings, highlighting the crucial interconnection between democracy and sustainable development. Furthermore, participants gained a more profound comprehension of the intertwined relationship between democracy and sustainability in the Slovenian context.

The Power of Words: Effective Communication in Politics

The workshop systematically addressed key aspects of effective communication and conflict resolution in stressful environments, emphasising the critical importance of these skills for workplace success. Participants gained theoretical knowledge, which they then applied through practical exercises. Special emphasis was placed on developing communication strategies tailored to challenging situations, including establishing clear communication protocols to improve information flow and reduce misunderstandings. Active listening was highlighted as a crucial element for better cooperation and understanding among colleagues. Furthermore, the discussion encompassed the influence of positive language and nonverbal communication on conflict reduction and the utilisation of technology to optimise communication processes in challenging circumstances. Participants acquired practical abilities for effective public speaking, including understanding target audiences and adapting messages to suit them.

What Do Children's Clothes and Political Negotiations Have in Common?

The time management workshop placed significant emphasis on the pivotal role of achieving a harmonious balance between personal and professional commitments, particularly in the context of demanding political careers. Participants engaged in an in-depth exploration of various techniques and strategies designed to optimise time allocation, thereby increasing productivity while maintaining personal well-being. Key topics included prioritising tasks, setting boundaries, and utilising tailored productivity tools to achieve greater efficiency without increasing workload. The objective of the workshop was to provide participants with practical insights and strategies for effective time management, enabling them to fulfil political responsibilities while preserving time for their private lives. Mastering these skills is essential for sustainable success and well-being in the political environment, allowing participants to navigate their careers while maintaining a balanced and fulfilling personal life.

Power, Influence, and Professionalism: Business Protocol in Politics

The workshop offered insights into the key principles of business protocol in politics, where every action and behaviour is under constant public scrutiny. The emphasis was on the importance of presenting oneself professionally and appropriately, ensuring that interactions with colleagues, voters, and fellow politicians are conducted with the highest level of etiquette. An understanding of the subtleties of business etiquette in the political environment can significantly impact a political career. The topic encompasses several aspects, including effective communication, engagement with others, conflict resolution, and navigating the intersection of political roles and business interests. The lecture provided practical advice for building and maintaining professional relationships and navigating the complexities of political negotiations while preserving reputation and business interests.

Conversations with Women Politicians: Challenges, Achievements, and Aspirations

The workshop was conducted through several recorded interviews and job shadowing activities with women politicians. Participants engaged in discussions with experienced women leaders on a range of topics,

including barriers to entering politics, the impact of gender on policy-making, the importance of diversity in politics, and the future of women in politics.

The programme offered participants the opportunity to gain firsthand insight into the daily workings of women in politics. This involved observing their activities, legislative work, engagement with voters, and interactions with other political actors. The programme included visit to the Presidential Palace, participation in a ceremonial event, and conversations with the President of the country. Additionally, participants learned about the functioning of the National Council and the National Assembly, holding discussions with the Secretary of the National Council and women members of parliament. Furthermore, the programme provided insights into the work of female politicians in local government, with participants having the opportunity to meet the Deputy Mayor.

Conclusion

Based on feedback from participants, the programme was successfully implemented. Participant satisfaction was assessed through a short evaluation questionnaire, which indicated that the content was relevant and met their needs. The programme was rated as balanced between theory and practice. The most attended workshop was ‘The Power of Words: Effective Communication in Politics,’ demonstrating the importance of communication skills in both the political and everyday contexts.

During the implementation and organisation of the programme, several challenges were encountered, including scheduling workshops. The majority of participants were employed, making participation in activities held in the morning (e.g., job shadowing) quite challenging. A partial solution was found in holding workshops on Saturday mornings, which proved to be the most optimal time.

Our principal conclusion is that such educational and training programmes are of considerable value and importance. Participants gain knowledge, skills and confidence that are essential for a successful political career. Programmes that combine theoretical education with direct practical experiences are particularly effective in preparing women for the challenges and responsibilities that political engagement entails.

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