Vlasta JALUŠIČ, Milica ANTIĆ GABER*

EQUALITY FOR WHOM? OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S ACCESS TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SLOVENIA[1]

Abstract. *Based on original fieldwork research (analysis of legislation, interviews with candidates and gatekeepers, and focus groups), the article identifies some of the less visible obstacles to women's participation in local politics in Slovenia. Between 2014 and 2018, 35.6% of parliamentary representatives were women while the share of women ministers in the Slovenian government was 50%. Considerably fewer women were involved in politics on the local level, with just 7.6% holding the position of mayor in the same period and 10 municipal councils were without any women at all. This article discusses the reasons for such subnational variations in women's representation in local politics. The analysis leads to the main conclusion that to change the low representation in certain local councils it is necessary to introduce a well-designed reform of the electoral system and measures related to gender mainstreaming, family life, and partnership roles.*

Keywords: *equality, gender quotas, women's representation, local politics, women candidates, political gatekeepers, political parties*

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Introduction

Up until recently, it was believed that women could have a considerable political influence on the local level. Specific problems/issues of relevance to women and their life experience, along with small constituencies, were seen to make it easier for them to obtain local decision-making positions than at the national level. While many women begin their political careers at the local level, they remain largely underrepresented in municipalities,

particularly as mayors. In many countries, this representation is continuously low and one can find districts, cities and local parliaments that have no women at all or where there are a small number of women holding positions of council officials or mayors. Such examples include Ireland, Slovenia, Scotland and until recently Germany (see Bilinski and Hartmann, 2010; Buckley and Hofman, 2015; Johnston and Elliot, 2015; and EIGE, 2017).

It was hypothesised that the higher numbers of women at the national level of politics could also influence other contexts while establishing a positive environment for changes at the local level and in other areas (IDEA, 2005: 17; also see IDEA, 2018). And, *vice versa*, "the paucity of female representation in local government has a detrimental effect on their political career trajectories in other legislative assemblies" (Johnston and Elliot, 2015: 1). Research thus confirms such local–national interdependence (Sundström and Stockemer, 2015), although no straightforward relationship exists between the two. In many countries that once had a high number of women politicians at the local level, these levels have fallen in the last few years (see Pini and McDonald, 2011: 3). Scandinavian countries are known for the rapid and numerical breakthrough of women into politics, yet even there a discrepancy exists between the national and local levels. For example, Norway, which was a pioneer in women breaking through to local politics, saw fewer women in local politics than at the national level after the elections held in 2011: just 38% of elected local councillors were female and only slightly more than 22% of mayors (Statistics Norway, 2015). Not only is there no automatic progress at any level of governance, but the numbers (descriptive representation) are also never guaranteed to be permanent. Experience and newer studies also demonstrate that gender prejudice, patriarchal thinking and male alliances, which create an unfavourable environment for women, are often entrenched at the local level. It is here that one can find the leftovers of anachronistic practices considered by many to have already been abolished.

In Slovenia, the discrepancy between the national and the local level is seen particularly in the last few years when the number of women elected to the national parliament has risen as a direct consequence of legislated gender quotas being introduced in the sense of a binding requirement and strong sanctions in the form of lists being rejected should they fail to provide the required quota (Antić Gaber and Selišnik, 2017). Since 1991, the best result in this regard is 35.6% of women representatives in parliament and 50% of government ministers in the 2014–2018 mandate. Another reason for women's better electoral chances at parliamentary elections was that newcomer political parties bringing 'new faces' to the scene have emerged in the last decade, whose performance at elections has not yet been measured and they therefore do not know in which district it is 'worth' placing

the candidates they want to see elected. In local-level decision-making bodies, the results are much worse: prior to 2018, Slovenia a mere 7.6% of mayors were women while as many as ten municipal councils had no elected women councillor at all. The share rose slightly at the 2018 local elections to 10.4% of women mayors and 33% of women municipal councillors. In the same year, the share of successful women candidates elected at national elections dropped to 24.5%. In comparison, the 2019 European Parliament elections (with a sanctioned binding quota and preferential vote) gave quite a different result: 50% of those elected to the European Parliament were women.

All of the recent elections in Slovenia confirmed that the electoral system and binding quota have a vital influence on the electoral chances of women (Dahlerup and Antić Gaber, 2017). Moreover, on the local level the quota has helped increase the number of women in local assemblies although, due to the specific voting system, this has only had a limited scope. The presence of women role models (in political elites) has probably also improved women's chances at EU elections. Further, a typical stereotype about women and elections was overcome: that voters (and thus also women) do not vote for women. All women-candidates at EU elections were elected through preferential voting (Državna volilna komisija, 2019).

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Newer research suggests "regional factors such as population density and support for left-wing parties can partially account for this (local)[2] variation" (Sundström and Stockemer, 2015: 14). Attention must therefore be paid to the complexity of the obstacles for women entering politics along with intra-country regional variations rather than to accepting the standard homogeneous institutional and political explanations. Therefore, the main research question of this study concerns the biggest structural and personal barriers to women's participation in Slovenian local politics and how they affect a candidate's electoral chances when we consider the variations between regions. While proceeding from freshly collected data (analysis of legislation, two sets of interviews, and focus group discussions in local communities, which took place in 2014 and 2015),[3] we therefore attempt to undertake a somewhat more nuanced analysis.

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[2] *Added by the authors.*

[3] *The project was carried out by the Peace Institute and the Faculty of Arts in partnership with the Association of Municipalities of Slovenia and the Slovenian Women's Lobby. Importantly, it relied on collaboration with a group of women mayors and local councillors while certain findings were applied directly in practice: other project results include a local support network of women councillors and mayors (Peace Institute 2015). The authors wish to thank to all of the project's partners and participants.*

Background

Unbalanced gender representation in politics is the result of personal and structural barriers faced by women at all levels and includes socio-economic, cultural and political factors (Norris and Lovenduski, 1993; Norris and Inglehart, 2001; Matland and Montgomery, 2003). The importance of what is ultimately an unfriendly electoral system must be considered: electoral districts, party politics (outdated structures, stereotypes held by gatekeepers, lack of gender equality norms in programmes) and the lack of regulatory mechanisms (quotas) to boost women's presence in politics on the national level (Rule, 1987; Freidenvall and Dahlerup, 2013). Recruiting by way of political parties and largely male networks that are not transparent leads to mainly male candidates being put in electable positions (Paxton and Hughes, 2007). A stereotypical understanding of gender roles in everyday life still prevails in political culture and society in general, even though the obstacles might be seen as "personal" (Burns, Schlozman, Lehman and Verba, 2001; Carrol and Sanbonmatsu, 2009).

To identify and overcome structural barriers, one must therefore consider traditional cultural factors/values, beliefs and attitudes to vital institutions of the (political) system. Moving closer to the local level, which has yet to be comprehensively explored, we first briefly analyse the legal framework and the election system that significantly shape women's chances of becoming elected on the local level. The findings from the fieldwork research on the obstacles, opportunities and needs of women (analysis of interviews with women – candidates at local elections, gatekeepers and focus groups discussions) are then presented and discussed.

Legal framework and its effects

Quotas are a common way and one of the most effective mechanisms to affect women's descriptive representation in institutional politics and in broader decision-making levels. Slovenia introduced them initially after long efforts by NGOs and later with the support of certain female politicians in left and later central-left and other political parties on both the national and local levels (Antić Gaber, 2002; Antić Gaber and Lokar, 2006; Antić Gaber and Selišnik, 2012). Quotas contributed to the gradual rise in the share of women in the National Assembly. In 2011, the share of women in the National Assembly had risen to more than 30% for the first time since 1991. The parties had to ensure that 35% of all candidates on their lists of candidates were women and, if they failed to do so, they were rejected (Pleš et al., 2013). Yet the legislation in Slovenia aimed (in line with the law on equal opportunities) at promoting a gender balance in politics is still

flawed at the local level. It is here that one can clearly see how the difference between the proportional and majority electoral system affects women's electoral chances, even when lists are prepared according to the mandatory quota system.

Voting for mayors, councillors and municipal councils in Slovenia is governed by the Local Elections Act of 2005 which introduced provisions that should ensure equal gender representation on candidate lists and thus balanced representation in municipal councils. Until 2002, the share of elected women local councillors was only 13.1% (ibid.). Still, in 2015 there were 10 municipalities in Slovenia with no women elected as a municipal councillor – although those preparing a list must include a minimum 40% of one gender on the candidate lists, while male and female candidates are 'zipped' or alternated in the top half of the list.

Slovenia has 212 municipalities that vary in size and inhabitant numbers: 11 urban municipalities are also the largest and possess some extended legal powers. The diversity arises due to the complex electoral system entailing a combination of proportional and majority electoral choice. The proportional or majority system is determined by the size of a municipality and its municipal council (see Pleš Murko et al., 2015). In 148 municipalities, among which there are 11 town councils, municipal councils are elected under the proportional electoral system. In this electoral system, an entire municipality may make up a single constituency, or there may be several of them, although at least five mandates are to be elected in each constituency. Voters chose from lists of candidates where they can use a preferential vote (ibid.).

Municipalities with a minimum of 7 council members and no more than 11 members elect their councils according to the majority voting system (64 municipalities or almost one-third). Individual mandates of the municipality are distributed among the constituencies so that only one mandate or a maximum of three are elected within a single unit. The smallest municipalities with seven-member municipal councils can represent a single constituency (16 municipalities). In those with the majority voting system, voters, therefore vote for each candidate and not the entire list. This difference among the municipalities has a strong influence on women's electoral chances.

It is well known that both the magnitude of constituencies and the number of mandates heavily impact the election of women who have greater chances in a proportional system in larger districts and when combined with quotas. Quotas are almost irrelevant in the majority voting system because voters do not vote for the entire list. In the case of three candidates in a constituency, the list proposer must ensure that among the three candidates one of them is of the "other" gender. However, when only one or two mandates are to be elected, which is often the case on the local level, the

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law does not provide any measure to ensure a more gender-balanced candidacy (ibid.). Quotas cannot be used as a 'zipper' and hence have no sway in the majority voting system, thereby negatively impacting the election of women. At the same time, the growing populism in Slovenia and suspicions of local corruption have increased distrust in political parties on both the national and local levels. Ever more so-called independent candidate lists are appearing at elections which are sometimes, but often not, independent of the political parties. Still, these lists cannot be influenced by legislation that obligates political parties and can in that way avoid the prescribed quota (Pleš Murko et al., 2015).

All of this is unfavourable for the electoral chances of women. After the gender quotas expressed in percent on political parties' candidate lists were increased at the 2014 elections, of those elected to city councils that follow the proportional electoral system some 40% were women while the figure for other municipal councils with a proportional system was 33%. Nothing similar happened in the municipalities that follow the majority election system. Like in all previous local elections, in 64 municipalities with less than 12 municipal councillors markedly fewer women were elected and in 10 municipalities none at all.

The incomprehensible and complicated local electoral system certainly does not assist in having more women candidates at the local level in Slovenia. In the long run, introduction of a uniform (proportional) electoral system at the local level would add to such a result, while the number of mandates in constituencies should simultaneously also be increased. However, these measures are chiefly accomplishable in the longer run since it is quite challenging to modify the electoral system, even if this would lead to making it simpler (Antić Gaber, Jalušič, Podreka et al., 2016).

Women-candidates (elected and non-elected) at local elections

On the other hand, women do not systematically build their political careers and often doubt their own skills. Considerable encouragement is needed and strong support in private life. They encounter more challenges in reconciling private and professional life, rarely connect with each other and are mostly left on their own. The family often plays a vital role in their decisions on running for political positions – but this is different for men where no typical politician–family relationship emerges when women become an elected representative (Antić Gaber, 1998; Antić Gaber and Selišnik, 2012). In the case of a man, it is usually the politician's partner (a woman) who takes over all of the family management. Women ministers and MPs in Slovenia take better care of their partners and family than their male counterparts do (ibid.). They retain responsibility for family life while

receiving quite general support from their family members. Women also enter politics at a later life stage than men, when their children have already grown up. On average, they have fewer children than their male counterparts, while more of them are single and widows. All this reflects both the former socialist double-burden framework of women as well as the post-1991 re-traditionalisation of gender roles.

Very little is known about women candidates at local elections in Slovenia: why they stand, who supports/supported them, how they see their role as candidates and as women. In the interviews we conducted with candidates, we asked them for some more details about themselves, especially the reasons for their candidacy and what they see as obstacles, what their needs are, and who supported them. The interviews were obtained via an on-line survey: we analysed 160 questionnaires fully completed by both elected (77%) and non-elected (23%) candidates for municipal elections.

Main findings about the obstacles and needs of women-candidates

1. Women who run as candidates at local elections usually recognise themselves as being a potential candidate for local politics: up to 60% of all respondents reported that they themselves were considering the candidacy. Their motivation was above all the fact that they were closely watching the local scene and had good knowledge of actual local problems they wanted to solve. Women's political ambitions are obviously linked to their efforts to bring concrete changes to the local environment and they have specific political goals more than an interest in overall or more general (ideological or symbolic) politics. This is corroborated when looking at their motives for a long-term political career where only one-third of the respondents saw their decision to run for local elections as strategic in the sense they were planning a further political career.

2. Nevertheless, to become a candidate, women generally needed an external incentive and support, particularly from the local community and political and party leaders. The greatest encouragement for their candidacy was received from people in political circles (65%), in the local environment (64%), and friends or partners (around 45%). The way to both the candidature and election of women is as a rule closely linked to their prior involvement in the local environment. Encouragement and support of individuals from this environment as well as political and party leaderships seem vital for recognising women's ambitions, making them push factors in the decision to stand for candidacy and in their eventual electoral success.

3. The interviewed candidates were however generally most satisfied with the support they had received in private life: from family members (74.3%), partners (68.9%) and friends (67.1%). More than half of the

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surveyed women (56.6%) were satisfied with the local community support and slightly less than half with the support of their political parties (49.4%). On top of the support of their political parties, support from the local environment was the most decisive for their chances of being elected. The difference between elected and non-elected candidates shows just how much this support counts: 63.5% of those who were elected were either very satisfied or satisfied with the support of the local community/environment, while only 27.5% of non-elected candidates were satisfied with such support.

4. In the process of deciding on standing as a candidate, the respondents saw the biggest obstacles in their personal and private circumstances. The primary difficulty in deciding whether to become a candidate is how to reconcile one's political and family life (39%), the second problem is the lack of knowledge and experience in political matters (37%) while the third is the potential public exposure of one's children and/or family (33%). When thinking about entering politics, women's first concern seems to be their families and the impact their political engagement would have on the life and members of the family. Their worries about placing their children's in the public spotlight suggest that the image of a woman as mother/guardian of the home is still strongly anchored at the local level and that family roles remain tied to the patriarchal model.

5. The role of political parties is essential in boosting the number of women in politics. Those interviewees who ran for office as a party member on a party list consider that the parties were important factors influencing the way they stood. They dissatisfied with the party's proceedings and support. Many women would opt to enter politics if the political parties gave them greater assistance while enrolling as a candidate. Most interviewees believed this could be achieved by increasing the number of women in important positions of power (61%). They would also like to see work in politics to be reorganised in a family-friendly way (organised childcare, flexible schedules, 46%), the establishing of a system of mentors, special women's groups (36%), and greater support from men for women in the party (24%). Being a candidate under the umbrella of a political party at the local level also allows for greater visibility, financial support and the acquisition of specific knowledge and political experience.

6. For women's equal presence in politics, a crucial role is played by the so-called gatekeepers and the candidates were well aware of this. The interviewees noted that what is truly vital is exact placement in electable positions as a main success factor at elections (besides knowing the local issues and a good election campaign). The political parties still play a decisive role as their leaderships function as gatekeepers and often do not place women in these positions. Parties adopting a different attitude to this question could

therefore significantly change the current situation.

7. Research shows that women as breadwinners and participants in public life continue to take on a greater role than men in caring for the family and household, which is hindering them in their professional careers (see Rao, 2005; Federici, 2012). This is confirmed by our study as the most of the women perceive care for the home and the family as a personal matter more than a structural problem limiting the decision on candidacy. The respondents' wish for increased support from men in their political party is particularly understandable when considering their concerns with how to reconcile political and family life and their worries about exposing their children and family to public scrutiny. They believe that measures are needed to reorganise work in politics so as to also enable political decision-making to take place in a more family-friendly way, including organised childcare, more flexible schedules etc.

8. The respondents indicated the most significant shortcoming in their campaigns was a problem with funding and unsystematic support. Electoral success requires two things: sufficient funding and a good professional and operational team. Given the respondents' high average education level, this need might relate to their relatively great requirements for professionalism and additional training better tailored to the campaign.

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The role of gatekeepers

While little is known about the candidates themselves, even less is known about how political gatekeepers in Slovenia act and think. The candidates themselves emphasised in the interviews the key role of the gatekeepers in their chances of being elected. Accordingly, we devoted part of the field-work to research the thinking, conduct and needs of political/party gate-keepers.

We already mentioned that political gatekeepers are more likely to recruit and promote individuals who are similar to themselves. The greater presence of women's political elites therefore also affects a greater number of women candidates at elections (Niven, 1998; Thremblay and Pelletier, 2001; Cheng and Tavtis, 2011). Besides, internal party rules for placing candidates on lists are much more decisive for the nomination and election of women to political functions than the later choice of voters themselves (Dahlerup, 2006). Previous research on elections to the parliament, at the local level or for the European Parliament in Slovenia show the candidates were often placed in less favourable electoral districts or in less electable places by the party leaderships/gatekeepers (Antić Gaber, 1998; Pleš Murko et al., 2015). Party politics and their democratic or non-democratic arrangements constitute a significant structural moment for women's entry into local politics

(OSCE, 2014). The Norwegian experience demonstrates that it is effective to encourage/reward political parties with regard to the result achieved, and not so much in terms of applying the rules of the candidacy in the election itself. It is vital to introduce mechanisms at the political-party level and legislation that reward and/or punish parties according to the number of women candidates elected (i.e. according to the outcome) rather than the sheer number of women appearing on the candidate lists (Delys, 2014).

Political gatekeepers are those individuals who hold the power to determine the criteria for the entry of other individuals (men and women) into political elites. By regulating the entry into politics of social groups that bring new issues to the existing agenda, they therefore also include/ exclude specific topics or social issues from the agenda (Rasmussen, 1981: 601). Gatekeepers also encourage individual candidates. In those situations where gatekeepers choose between (men and women) candidates with similar references, women are less selectable (Cheng and Tavtis, 2011: 461) or must perform much better than men to be selected. Due to specific conditions of local politics where people are more personally familiar with each other, one can also find specific male alliances. Political party officials might therefore restrict the entry of women to political elites (Rassmussen, 1981: 604–606).

We were interested in the behaviour of those people who seek and recruit potential candidates to enter politics for parties/lists/initiatives. Questionnaires were completed on-line by 29 'gatekeepers', namely, party and political functionaries in critical positions. Two focus groups with local political functionaries (women and men) were also carried out.

Main findings about the role of gatekeepers

1. The lack of women's experience in political work is seen by the gatekeepers as the key reason for women candidates' low participation in the local elections, followed by the alleged "lack of interest by women to work in politics". Men gatekeepers tended to think that the low reputation of politics plays a significant role in the smaller presence of women, and that women do not have sufficient experience of working in politics. "The local environment's negative attitude to women in politics" was mentioned as was the electoral system which hurts women's electoral opportunities. Women gatekeepers also thought the most important obstacle was women's lack of experience in politics coupled with the fact that women do not want to change their career (they appreciate their profession too much to replace it with politics). Interestingly, a much smaller share of women than men felt that women lacked interest in politics.

Typical differences reflected the size of an interviewee's municipality.

Those from larger municipalities pointed to women lacking work experience in politics, the low reputation held by politics among women, and the problem that women value their achievements in their current profession highly. However, those from smaller municipalities generally considered the lack of interest in politics as the reason for women's lower participation, followed by a lack of experience and the problem of the negative impact brought by the electoral system.

Gatekeepers often referred to the personal features and concerns of women who want to pursue a political career: their lack of experience and their negative attitude to politics, which implicitly reflects the overall reputation held by politics among the Slovenian public. At the same time, they believe that women are less present at the local level, especially in smaller municipalities, due to having no interest in politics.

The reasons for women's modest presence in politics are, therefore, first attributed to women themselves, i.e. to the stereotypical features of women as gender, while the systemic barriers to women's entry to politics, such as the electoral system, the ranking on candidate lists and, last but not least, how the local environment views women are considered less important.

2. Political gatekeepers generally believe that attitudes in their local environment do discriminate or attribute significant differences between men and women. Yet, in smaller municipalities, they indicted the environment is more favourable for men than women and that voters are more critical of women than men. On the other hand, women are seen as being more critical of politics than men are, and the low reputation held by politics is an obstacle to their candidacy. They do not want to expose themselves and their families to the public spotlight. Gatekeepers of smaller municipalities in particular felt that women often did not run due to a lack of self-esteem and political experience.

3. Most of all, political gatekeepers (regardless of gender and size of a municipality) reported that women usually need to be invited several times before deciding to run for office, while at the same time they stated they had problems filling the quotas. Men believe that this is mainly because women are not sufficiently interested in working in politics, while women repeatedly revealed that "women often sense they want them to run for office only so as to fill the quotas". The stereotype that women have no interest in working in politics is therefore still prevalent in men.

4. Political gatekeepers apply different criteria to find ideal candidates, and gender has a significant influence on them. Expressed differently, there is a gender-stereotypical search for ideal candidates. For the ideal men as candidate, the need for high expertise and professional qualifications were indicated in the first place, followed by the candidate's political visibility and rich experience in local politics. In smaller municipalities, ideal candidates

were described as those who have a well-organised family life, followed by extensive experience of working in different associations. Therefore, professional and socially well-connected men are preferred.

In the case of the women as ideal candidate, the most important feature is a "pleasant outward appearance", followed by the candidate's political visibility, then their visibility within the local environment. A candidate's considerable expertise and professional competence were ranked highest. In smaller communities, the political gatekeepers first highlighted family life and then rich political experience.

A stereotype also appeared in career preferences as a selection criterion. Even if almost no differences exist at the formal level, the general preference is for candidates with a background in economics. However, a tendency is noted whereby for women candidates a 'feminised' profession is preferred (like a degree in education). An important selection criterion is "visibility in the local environment and experience of working in the party". Political party gatekeepers would fill well-positioned places on a list with candidates who are party members and have a significant influence on the local environment, experience of working in the administration etc. The party criteria often rule out women who are unwilling to yield to party discipline and are more focussed on local issues.

Even though an essential feature of a woman standing as a candidate would be a pleasing appearance is evidently stereotypical and amounts to sexist bias, it is interesting that the gatekeepers reported this without hesitation. Political visibility, in second place as a characteristic feature, is also harder to find in the women candidates. They are newcomers to politics, which may be seen as another obstacle. The third factor is the presumption of "orderly family life". In more rural and traditional environments, such a requirement adversely affects women's possibilities for political engagement as an "idyllic family life" will be destroyed or neglected when a woman goes into politics.

5. Which candidates will be placed in electable positions is mainly decided by important people in the political party and outside (in larger municipalities), followed by the presidents of the local political party committee. In smaller municipalities, the chairperson of the local political party committee is mentioned most often, then the party president. The placement is usually decided by a local party committee, i.e. in the majority of municipalities, it is decided by the president of the local party committee, followed by important people within and outside the party. Who the local political candidate will be is typically determined by those who already hold a position in local or national politics.

This confirms the findings of previous research showing that gatekeepers largely recruit those who are similar to themselves. In the absence of

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women's political elites, this certainly means men, particularly if the main criterion is whether the candidate has experience of working in the political party and a strong influence on the local environment (larger municipalities). In smaller municipalities and rural areas, the most important candidate feature is a decisive influence on the local environment. For none of these factors are female candidates in the lead. A vicious circle seems to occur: if women are not present in politics, they cannot gather experience; if they do not already occupy important posts on the local level, they will not be placed in the privileged places and will therefore remain outside of local politics. Therefore, male homosociality in politics is so far not seriously endangered on the local level in Slovenia.

Conclusions

What do these findings reveal about women's electoral chances and possibilities for higher participation on the local level in Slovenia?

The study of the local level reveals considerable important information to support a further and more nuanced analysis of women's representation, the obstacles to it and the opportunities. Many decisions are made in local politics: from infrastructure through to the number and placement of schools and kindergartens and thus also about issues directly affecting women's interests (see Sundström and Stockemer, 2015). The Norwegian experience indicates that having more women politicians on the local level can create a system of thoughtful policies – for both women and men and therefore increase substantial representation (Norderval Means, 1972). Such measures include, for example, a strongly subsidised system of public and private kindergartens, flexible working hours and various other services for children and older adults which should facilitate a balance between paid work and care for children and older adults (Aars and Flo, 2011; Bjørn , 2012). Therefore, the community as a whole can benefit from them (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2012).

Slovenia has a relatively long tradition of equality of women and men, and the socialist policies of former Yugoslavia were primarily inspired by the Scandinavian model. Yet the extensive tradition of local self-government and participation has changed while also being weakened and fragmented by multiple post-socialist reforms. The high-quality areas of childcare, healthcare and social care enjoyed a considerable degree of self-organisation. This practice was infringed and partly replaced by the transition to a market economy. The new local government system led to smaller municipalities and greater numbers of them and a complicated system of elections at the local level. The consequence was not only a lower number of women in local politics but also a changed agenda on the local level, which (along

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with other factors) increased problems in the areas of childcare, healthcare and social care, and reduced the level of self-organisation.

Despite the general support for equal political participation, the introduction of legislated gender quotas and the more significant breakthrough of women at the national and European levels, women's representation on the local level in Slovenia remains low after many years of the country's independence. The area of local politics comes with several symbolic and many real obstacles that make it difficult for women to enter the game and remain in local politics if elected. This might also be related to the fact that women's political ambitions are more focused and time-limited. Only one-third of the respondents indicated that the decision to run at a local election was a long-term decision to engage in politics, revealing that women are obviously chiefly focused on bringing about tangible political changes.

What then are the barriers to women successfully standing as a candidate, i.e. to their election to local councils in Slovenia?

The first and most substantial is the current electoral system which does not enable the quota system to be effective in all municipalities due to imposing different elements and requirements. The general public is hardly aware of problem. Simultaneously, the prejudicial view dominates that women are not elected because voters, especially women, do not vote for women, or that they simply do not want to run as candidates. With few exceptions, neither the candidates nor the gatekeepers showed awareness of this circumstance either.

Second, as underlined by many candidates and gatekeepers, the 40% quota is insufficient. Namely, in reality, it keeps the number of elected women below 40%. The quota should be raised to 50% of each gender while one should keep in mind that women must be placed in electable positions on the lists. Thus, the order of names appearing on candidate lists should be different and fairer. More women should be placed to the top position, which is not the case today.

Third, the lack of awareness of the electoral system's impact is closely related to prejudices and stereotypes that still loom large regarding women in (local) politics. Proof of this is seen in differences in the women's assessments of the reasons for their lower participation in the candidate lists and for their success or failure at elections and those stated by the gatekeepers. Women see the reasons as mainly not being experienced enough and not having sufficient knowledge about how political affairs are run on a daily basis, yet they identified themselves as an appropriate candidate due to having good knowledge of local problems. However, many male gatekeepers maintain that women are "not interested in politics". Stereotypical and sexist bias still exists among the political gatekeepers: women are to be chosen based on their appearance, not on their competencies.

Fourth, there are significant differences in the positions held by gatekeepers in large and small municipalities, indicating a gap between urban and rural surroundings. Somewhat stronger conservatism is present in both small and rural surroundings and this influences the women's representation in local government.

Fifth, also at the local level women lack experience of working in politics and see a problem in 'dirty' politics, which could harm their representation and that of their family. This and some other findings resonated with the conclusions of previous research about the obstacles and needs of women entering politics. One problem is the reconciliation of family and professional life. It is difficult for female councillors to maintain a favourable work–life balance (Rao, 2005: 323). From the focus group discussions, we also received confirmation that, in addition to the other obstacles, 'old boys' networks' still exist.

Sixth, we also encountered some more nuanced insights. Some political gatekeepers from smaller municipalities still understand that the existing electoral system negatively affects the electability of women. On the other hand, smaller environments are more favourable for men. Therefore, traditional patriarchal patterns and stereotypes about masculinity and femininity remain prevalent there. Traditional values dominate in those smaller municipalities with a modest share of women in politics: they put the family first along with women's traditional role.

Seventh, associated with the larger–smaller municipality differences is the difference between urban and rural environments (the rural is often also smaller). Some recent studies focusing on the local level (Kjær and Matland, 2014) confirm the influence of the size of the municipality and urbanisation (as "geographical variables") on the representation of women. Our fieldwork shows that the conditions of work in the local politics are as a rule difficult (Pini and McDonald, 2011: 2) and complicated by the shallow reputation of the political party's politics.

We may conclude that a complexity of barriers exists to impede women from entering politics on the local level, and they move beyond the originally understood institutional and political causes to which this paper has drawn attention. The introduction of certain specific, systemic solutions (quotas) in themselves without any more profound structural changes has limited range. This implies it is vital to increase knowledge and raise the awareness of women and men, the professional, political and general publics about the structural elements which influence women's decision to enter in politics. Moreover, only a well-thought-out legal framework and support mechanisms that allow newcomers to stay and operate in local decision-making for more extended periods can bring about an important shift. Any alteration of the current trends would therefore have to include changes to

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the electoral system and measures related to gender mainstreaming, family life, and partnership.

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