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*Przemysław Słowiński***POLISH WOMEN WHO DARED TO BE FIRST – PARTICULAR EXAMPLES**

*The article presents Polish women living in the past centuries as well as those currently taking up challenges, whose goal was the implementation of tasks reserved only for men due to different legal, social, moral and other constraints. Through the presented examples of monarchs, scientists, prime ministers, etc., there are shown the cases of overcoming cultural barriers in the history of Poland to gender equality achieving.*

**Key words:** history, women's rights, Poland.

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**ПОЛЬСЬКІ ЖІНКИ, ЯКІ НАСМІЛИЛИСЯ БУТИ ПЕРШИМИ –  
ВИБРАНІ ПРИКЛАДИ**

*У статті розглянуто становище польських жінок в минулому та на сучасному етапі крізь призму гендерних стереотипів та ролей. Акцентовано увагу на правових, соціальних, моральних та інших обмеженнях, що панували в польському суспільстві у визначені жіночої сфери. На прикладі монархів, вчених, прем'єр-міністрів показано подолання культурних бар'єрів на шляху до утвердження гендерної рівності.*

**Ключові слова:** історія, права жінок, Польща.

The first historically certified ruler, the first historian, the first province governor, the first poet ... Many examples could be mentioned, along with giving first names, surnames, and sobriquets. Indication of a few men who were the first to do something is not a special problem, while the same action and an attempt to mention women who first occupied certain positions, did something, performed "male" kind of work, are not so easy. While reviewing the history textbooks, the vast majority of the heroes appearing in them are males, although many times after more detailed research we can discover that they were very much supported by the females from their own surroundings or due to them they gained a position recorded in history. At the same time, we are all aware that the history of mankind is not about one but both sexes. So who were they when they lived, and what did they do? How did they serve their homeland? Did they accomplished their own dreams? What responsible, important and needed tasks did they perform? What problems did they face and how these pioneers were paving the way in pursuit of increased opportunities and opportunities in education, work, their self-realization, but also of other representatives of their own sex? Answering the mentioned questions posed by showing the fate of Polish women who have appeared on the pages of history as the first in various aspects of history and showing a great contribution to the development of humanity which the participation of women was is the purpose of this study.

When in 1370 Kazimierz Wielki died heirless, on the basis of previously concluded contracts, the throne of the Kingdom of Poland was taken over by his nephew – King of Hungary, Ludwik of the Anjou dynasty, whose successor was proclaimed his daughter **Jadwiga**. It was the first case in the history of Poland, when a woman became the heir to the throne. When, by the will of the magnates, she married Jogaylo – Władysław Jagiełło – Grand Duke of Lithuania, they became the rulers. It was the first, but not the last, situation in which two kings sat on the Polish throne. The next time it happened in 1530, when during the lifetime of Zygmunt Stary (Sigismund the Old) his ten-year-old son Zygmunt August was also acclaimed the king. For the third and last time, such a case took place after the male line of the ruling Jagiellon dynasty expired. In 1575 **Anna Jagiellonka** was acclaimed the Queen. The last representative of the Jagiellonian dynasty on the Polish throne was born on October 18, 1523, in Krakow. She was the daughter of Zygmunt I Stary and Bona Sforza. She spent the first 25 years of her life in Wawel. She was not really noticed by her relatives.

When they tried to marry her, either the indicated candidates showed no interest, or their dowry requests were too high, and the Danish Prince Magnus was a degenerate, and although the brother – King of Poland Zygmunt August – wanted his sister to get married, he did not decide to give Anna in marriage for such a candidate. The relations between the royal siblings did not go well, it was the reason why Anna left Krakow, from which she went away for Mazovia and then moved to Vilnius and Plock. Soon before the death of Zygmunt II August (1572) from France, an ineffective legation was sent with the proposal to deliver Anna to the husband, Prince Henri de Valois. He was the one who in 1574 became the king of Poland as Henryk Walezy and promised to marry a Polish princess as part of his obligations to take the throne. Anna was ready for that, but the king never did it. The rule of the first monarch elected in the free election lasted very briefly, because after learning about the embroilment of the throne of France, he fled to his homeland, where he became the King. After the dethronement of Henryk and the stormy subsequent elections, on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1575, Anna was hailed in Warsaw as the king of Poland and the great Lithuanian princess. A few months later, according to the decision of the gentry, Stefan Batory became the husband of the monarch, and was proclaimed the Prince of Transylvania since 1571 and the King of Poland since 1576. Mutual relations between spouses did not do well in the private field as well as in the state. Stefan dismissed Anna from the state duties, which resulted in the royal opposition favoring her. After ten years of his rule, Stefan Batory died. Anna, despite her acquired rights, did not decide to take over power, but she became involved in the election of her nephew, Zygmunt III Waza, successfully crowned as the King of Poland with in 1587. The queen spent the last years of her life in Warsaw. Formally she remained the ruler until the day of her death on September 9, 1596, but in reality she renounced the resulting rights after joining the throne of Zygmunt III [1; 7; 9]. It seems that despite the fact that she was an energetic person with a strong (though not easy) character and striving to achieve her goals, she was simultaneously lonely throughout her life.

The regaining of independence by Poland in November 1918 brought freedom to the country and nation, but also the abolition of state separation and equality in the rights of women and men. In the election ordinance of the Polish parliament announced by the Provisional Head of State to the Polish parliament, all citizens without distinction of gender, social, ethnic origin, etc. received the same electoral rights [2]. Due to this, Polish women could participate in the electoral process equally with men. During the vote in the constitutional parliament in January 1919, eight women were elected: **Gabriela Balicka** (the Parliament People's and Peasant Union (Związek Sejmowy Ludowo-Narodowy)), **Maria Moczydłowska** (National People's Union (Narodowe Zjednoczenie Ludowe)), **Jadwiga Dziubińska** (Polish Peasant Party Liberation (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe Wyzwolenie)), **Irena Kosmowska** (Polish Peasant Party Liberation (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe Wyzwolenie)), **Zofia Moraczewska** (Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna)), **Anna Anastazja Piasecka** (National Workers' Party, later PSL (Piast Narodowa Partia Robotnicza, później PSL Piast)), **Zofia Sokolnicka** (United People's Party, National Democracy (Zjednoczone Stronnictwo Ludowe, Narodowa Demokracja)), **Franciszka Wilczkowiakowa** (National Workers' Party (Narodowa Partia Robotnicza))<sup>1</sup>. In 1922, the first elections to the Senate of the Republic of Poland in the first term (1922–1927) were held. In its benches three women upheld their positions: **Aleksandra Karnicka** (PSL Liberation (PSL Wyzwolenie)), **Helena Lewczanowska** (Ukrainian Club (Klub Ukraiński)), **Józefa Szebeko** (The People and National Union (Związek Ludowo-Narodowy)).

The first Polish women in the parliament of the independent Polish Republic represented various political groups, constituted a small group against all the deputies in the Constituent Parliament, but they were an important team in an extremely complicated process of achieving equal status with men, for which they fought in and out of Parliament. They were involved in the work of parliamentary commissions: Constitutional, Educational, Health and Social Protection, and also Labor Protection. Throughout the interwar period, several dozen women became Members of Parliament. Some of them worked in the Parliament for only one term, the others for two or more. Two of them first held deputies seats and then the seats in the Senate and the other two did so vice versa. Among them there were women from various nobility and workers' backgrounds. As far as possible, they have been able to study at home or at universities, also obtaining academic degrees [13, p. 123]. Often, in their biographies, we find references to significant social involvement in the defense of women's rights, educational activities, and assistance to Poles during World War I, etc. They often cooperated with magazines, where they published their own texts and were the authors of book publications.

<sup>1</sup> Gabriela Balicka-Iwanowska was also elected to the Parliament of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd term of office and Jadwiga Dziubińska, Irena Kosmowska became the Member of Parliament of the 1st and 2nd term of office.

**Representation of women in the Polish Parliament between 1919–1939 [11, p. 16, 18]**

Lp.	Term of Office of the Parliament	Number of Women	Percentage in the Total Number of MPs	Term of Office of the Senate	Number of Women	Percentage in the Total Number
1	Legislative Assembly (1919–1922)	8	1,80%			
2	Parliament of the 1st term of office (1922–1927)	9	2,02%	Senate of the 1st term of office (1922–1927)	3	2,70%
3	Parliament of the 2nd term of office (1928–1930)	8	1,80%	Senate of the 2nd term of office (1928–1930)	4	3,60%
4	Parliament of the 3rd term of office (1930–1935)	17	3,82%	Senate of the 3rd term of office (1930–1935)	4	3,60%
5	Parliament of the 4th term of office (1935–1938)	2	0,96%	Senate of the 4th term of office (1935–1938)	6	6,25%
6	Parliament of the 5th term of office (1938–1939)	1	0,48%	Senate of the 5th term of office (1938–1939)	4	3,60%

The data presented above indicate a modest level of participation of women in the Polish Parliament during the Second Republic of Poland. In the PRL (PRP – People's Republic of Poland), the numerical and percentage participation of women in the Parliament was higher. Bearing in mind differences in the structure and size of both parliaments, reference should be made to percentage data. In the Parliament of the People's Republic of Poland, the lowest level of women in the parliamentary term was recorded in the Parliament of the second term (1957–1961), it was 4.14% (19 people) and the highest in the Parliament of the eighth term (1980–1985) was 25% (115) [11, p. 20]. Nowadays, in the Parliament of Republic of Poland (8th term – 2015–2019), women constitute 27% (131) and the Senate (9<sup>th</sup> term – 2015–2019) 13% (13), which is the highest result in the history of the Chamber of Deputies, while in the Senate it was even twice as high after 1989, eg in the 5th term (2001–2005). The contemporary, relatively higher level of participation of women in the life of the Polish parliament results, among others, from the fact that now, when registering electoral lists, 35% of seats must be occupied by representatives of one sex. The law does not directly specify that this provision refers to women, but it is by nature that men constitute the majority on the lists, which can be indirectly interpreted as an assumption involving women at the indicated level [16].

**Zofia Wasilkowska** became the first minister in the history of Poland. She was born on December 9, 1910, in Kalisz. In 1932, she graduated from law studies at the University of Warsaw, where she continued her assistantship. After graduation she also completed apprenticeship at the Court of Appeal in Warsaw, then until 1939 she was a referendary at the General Prosecutor's Office. After the Warsaw Uprising, she wound up in the Ravensbrück concentration camp after being released in 1945 and returned to work at the General Prosecutor's Office. Then she was appointed as a deputy director of the Training Department of the Ministry of Justice. Twice (during 1948–1955 and 1958–1981) she was a judge of the Supreme Court and during 1952–1961 she was also a member of the Parliament of the Polish People's Republic. In April 1956, she was appointed Minister of Justice in the Cabinet headed by Józef Cyrankiewicz (1954–1957). This function lasted less than a year until February 1957.

Before the Second World War, she approved her sympathy to the socialists, after the war was a member of the Independent Socialist Youth Union, joined the Polish Socialist Party, and from 1948 she was a member of the Polish United Workers' Party in which she held high positions. She was also active in other organizations licensed by the party of power. However, in the 1970s, she stood on the side of the opposition. At the beginning of the next decade, she joined NSZZ Solidarność. She was one of the founders of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights. She participated in the work of the Round Table as the opposition delegate. She died on December 1, 1996, in Warsaw [31, p. 147-148; 11, p. 22-23].

Until 1989, three more women were the heads of ministries in successive governments of the People's Republic of Poland. **Maria Milczarek** was appointed a minister three times. During 1976–1980 she headed the Ministry of Administration, Land Management and Environmental Protection (the government of Piotr Jaroszewicz) in 1980 and 1980–1981 the Ministry of Labor, Wages and Social Affairs (the governments of Edward Babiuch and Józef Pinkowski) [19, p. 1]. In 1985–1988, **Joanna Michałowska-Gumowska** became the Minister of Education (the government of Zbigniew Messner) and during 1988–1989 **Izabela Planeta-Malecka** was the Minister of Health and Social Welfare (Mieczysław Rakowski's government). In

the office of Tadeusz Mazowiecki (1989–1991), **Izabella Cywińska** was the Head of the Ministry of Culture and Art [11, p. 54].

The first half of the 1990s also brought the nomination of Hanna Suchocka, the first woman to the post of Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland. The future prime minister was born on April 3, 1946, in Pleszew. In 1968 she graduated from university and in 1975 she received a Doctoral Degree in the field of constitutional law at the Faculty of Law and Administration of the University of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznań. After graduation, she completed solicitor training, and also undertook research work, both at the home university as well as at the Polish Academy of Sciences, the National School of Public Administration, the Catholic University of Lublin, and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. In 2015 she received her Habilitation Doctor's Degree. In addition to her scientific activity, she began political activity as a deputy to the Parliament of the People's Republic of the 8th term [30, p. 68-69]. She also held the parliamentary mandate in 1989–2011 [20; 21; 22; 23; 24]. In 1981, she started her activity in NSZZ "Solidarność". On July 10, 1992, she took office as the President of the Council of Ministers<sup>2</sup>. She ruled the Cabinet for just over ten months. Then in 1997 during the governance of Jerzy Buzek she took the position of Minister of Justice and Prosecutor General. In June 2000, due to the disintegration of the government coalition, she resigned. In the following year, she was appointed the Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to the Holy See and in 2002 also to the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. In these positions she represented Poland until 2013. For 25 years (1991–2016) she was a member of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), in which she was entrusted with the dignity of the First Vice-President. In 2016, she was elected an Honorary President of the Commission.

Another woman on the post of the Prime Minister was **Ewa Kopacz**, who was also the first woman in Poland to act as the Speaker of the Parliament. The last woman to be the Prime Minister of the Polish government so far was **Beata Szydło**.

Women had to fight for the possibility to receive higher positions under the general system, sometimes using even imprecise rules or using artifices. On the Polish territory, the possibility of secondary and higher education was granted to women at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Previously, they had to use home education or (if the family's financial resources allowed it) as part of the female finishing schools, but their curriculums were far from those for which male students were educated. With the time flow, there appeared female faculty schools, professional courses, female teacher seminars, high schools that finish in high school diploma [28, p. 12-13]. In Krakow, the right to conduct school-leaving exams was granted only in 1907. Previously, they were held in male schools. It was not easy to get the right to university education. As the first in the Polish lands, the inhabitants of Galicia won them. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, using the then applicable law, women began to aspire to take education as free listeners and visiting students. Activities in this area were undertaken, among others by Kazimiera Bujwidowa, who initiated the action of writing applications as a result of which the first candidates for the Krakow University were accepted, though not all faculties [14, pp. 294-297; 6, pp. 100-104]. In 1894, three candidates were admitted to the Faculty of Medicine for Master's Degree in Pharmacy, which was confirmed by certificates of pharmacy assistants, namely **Jadwiga Sikorska**, **Stanisława Dowgiallo** and **Janina Kosmowska**. Three pioneers could attend classes with the consent of the teachers, they were also allowed to take exams, but without the right to obtain a diploma [10, p. 62]. The Law Department of this university made it possible to study for women only in 1918. The first woman to graduate and defend her PhD at the Jagiellonian University was **Stefania Tatarówna**. It happened at the Faculty of Philosophy on September 11, 1906 (At the University of Padua Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia, as the first woman, received a PhD in 1678) [33]. At the Faculty of Medicine, the first woman with a doctorate was **Helena Donhaiser-Sikorska** (1873–1945), who was also the first to pass school-leaving studies [4]. Soon after the University of Krakow, the University of Lviv began to admit women who not only graduated but also obtained Doctoral degrees. Until 1918, there were 55 women there. The first postdoctoral proceedings of the woman were completed at the Jagiellonian University in 1920, the Degree was awarded to **Helena Gajewska** [12, p. 110-111; 26, p. 266; 5; 8; 27, pp. 167-188].

The successes of women in the field of science did not always equate their status with men. Due to the gender of **Anna Tomaszewicz-Dobrska**, the first Pole who obtained her Doctor's Diploma, despite her

<sup>2</sup> The government of Hanna Suchocka was coalitioned and formed by seven parties: the Democratic Union, the Liberal Democratic Congress, the Christian National Union, the Polish Economic Program, the Christian-Democratic Party, the Christian Democrat Party and the Polish People's Party – People's Agreement.

PhD, she was refused nostrification of her diploma received in Switzerland. Marie Skłodowska-Curie was refused admission to the French Academy of Sciences, despite the fact that she was already a recognized scientist and a Nobel Prize winner.

**Halina Konopacka** (properly Leonarda Kazimiera Konopacka-Matuszewska-Szczerbińska) was born on February 26, 1900, in Rawa Mazowiecka. She was going to sport almost accidentally. Her friend had to persuade her to take up athletics training. It quickly turned out that she has all the predispositions in this field. She practiced running, shot put, javelin and discus, high jump. She beat Polish record 56 times. She won numerous titles of Polish champion: shot put (1924–1928), shot with both hands (1927, 1928), disc throw (1924, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1930, 1931), discus throw with both hands (1927, 1928), javelin throw (1926, 1930); relay races 4 x 100 m (1928) and 4 x 200 m (1927, 1931). She was the record holder of the world in three disciplines: discus throw (1926, 1927, 1928), discus throw with both hands, shot put. At the Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928, as the first Pole, she won the Olympic gold medal in discus throw. She died on January 28, 1989, in Daytona Beach [29, pp. 43-53].

**Wanda Rutkiewicz** was born on February 4, 1943, in Phungiany (now Lithuania). In 1967, with Halina Krüger-Syrokomska, as the first women passed the eastern wall of Aiguille du Grépon. In the following year, in the same duo, they were also the first women and the seventh in general; who did this passed the eastern pillar of Trollryggen in Norway. In 1976 she reached the top (together with Alison Chadwick-Onyszkiewicz, Janusz Onyszkiewicz and Krzysztof Zdzitowiecki) of Gaszerbrum III establishing the entry height record with the participation of women. On October 16, 1978, she was the first Pole and the third woman ever to reach the top of the Mount Everest. In 1978, together with Anna Czerwińska, Irena Kęsa and Krystyna Palmowska, they made the first crossing of the Matterhorn's northern wall in the winter in a women's group. On July 15, 1985, along with Krystyna Palmowska and Anna Czerwińska, she made the first entry exclusively for women on Nanga Parbat, the wall of Diamir. On June 23, 1986, as the first Pole and the first woman, she reached the top of K2. In 1987, together with Ryszard Warecki, they reached the top of the Shishapangma as the first Poles. Unfortunately, on May 13, 1992, during the summit attack on Kangchenjunga, she died; her body was not found [17, p. 110-111].

Nowadays, more Polish women are the first to win laurels in various sports. **Krystyna Guzik (Palka)** was the first Pole (2013) who won the silver medal in the run for the biathlon world championship in the New Town in Moravia [34]. The first Pole to reach the South Pole was **Małgorzata Wojtaczka**. She managed to do it in 2017 after a lonely walk through Antarctica lasting 69 days during which she traveled a distance of 1,300 km<sup>3</sup> [32]. Marta Otto was the first to overcome the distance of the double Ironman. The competition took place on August 26, 2018 in Lithuania. The runners had to travel 452 km, of which 7.6 km sailing, 360 km riding a bicycle and 84.4 km running. The Polish women took 27 hours 16 minutes and secured the victory. An additional difficulty was the fact that the participants did not have time to sleep [18]. Natalia Maliszewska was the first Polish woman who won in the World Cup short track competition on a distance of 500 meters, and was also the first Polish speed skater who, without division into a short track and long won twice in World Cup competitions. In the semi-finals of the 500-meter competition in Calgary in 2018, she established the best female track in the history of one lap track – 8.36 s. In 2019 she won the title of European Champion at a distance of 500 m and in February she triumphed in the overall standings of the World Cup 500 meters in the season 2018/2019 [3; 14; 25].

Undoubtedly, the position of women in the history of mankind, not only in Poland, was much weaker than men. Similarly, women have been appearing for centuries, who in their conduct have testified that putting men ahead of them or above them is a mistaken assumption, because they can be just as perfect as they are. Unfortunately, even the noble Church Fathers have repeatedly proclaimed the thesis that today is being read with disbelief, such as the statements of, among others, St. Augustine (354–430) about the inferiority of a woman and the natural order of things according to which she was to serve a man or a saint. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1275) assessed the value of a woman through reproductive abilities and the possibility of using it for housework. As we know, the Church shaped the foundations of Europe in the Middle Ages, hence, with such an approach of the representatives of this institution, one could not expect rapid changes in this aspect. That's why women had to fight for their rights and they did it in many ways. **Enthusiasts**, a feminist group operating in the first half of the nineteenth century, postulated the independence of women through access to education and economic autonomy. They promoted their ideas through journalistic, educational and political activities. They pointed out that the emancipation of women is the same as the emancipation of the nation. On the other hand, the **Association of United Landladies** created at the beginning of the

twentieth century set the socio-political activation of women connected with the village regardless of the social layer to which they belonged while maintaining the traditional role of women based on the doctrine of the Catholic Church. Many women independently and without organizational affiliation through their works showed the world that sex is not a burden in acquiring education, having talent or using skills to practice in a diverse range of professions. The aforementioned **Maria Skłodowska-Curie**, not only many times she enrolled in science and beyond as the first one, but above all she was a great scientist who contributed to the development of science. **Eliza Orzeszkowa**, one of the most outstanding Polish writers, not only created magnificent literary works, but she was also involved in helping the uprisings during the independence struggle in 1863–1864, she agitated, among others, through journalistic texts, lectures and actions for women's rights. **Maria Dulębianka** dared to take part in 1908 in the elections to the Parliament of Galicia. **Paulina Kuczalska-Reinschmit**, founded the Polish Women's Alliance and was the editor-in-chief of the magazine "Ster", which played the role of a platform for the exchange of information between emancipants from all partitions. However, when writing about the first, one cannot forget about those who were second and subsequent women who, through their achievements, contributed to groundbreaking discoveries, for which they were rewarded, among others, to the Nobel Prize, but also for those which were not rewarded for various reasons.

One of the impulses to write the above article was a film entitled 'Albert Nobbs' telling about the tragic story of the title character who, wanting to realize her dreams, took a job in disguise of a man so that she could get a better salary, unfortunately the fate was not good for her and she never did it. It should be remembered that many women were not easy. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and even at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, statements were made that indicated that women are less able than men, unsuitable for many jobs due to their gender, etc., and that they should deal with home and children rather than think about unnecessary things, such as their own education.

Among the first Polish women, whose profiles were approximated, there were queens, aristocrats, parliamentarians, teachers, students, and scientists. Naturally, the author realizes that he mentioned only a few examples of the first Polish pioneers. Apart from the first Pole who became general **Maria Wittek**, also the first Polish pilot of MiG-29 fighter jet – **Katarzyna Tomiak-Siemieniewicz**; the first Pole in Hollywood – **Pola Negri**; the first and only Pole who was chosen Miss of the World – **Aneta Kręglicka**; the first Pole who was conceived by in vitro – **Agnieszka Ziółkowska**; the first Polish woman who reached the finals of the grand slam tournament in the single – **Jadwiga Jędrzejowska**; the first person from Poland who received the World Summit Youth Award – **Aleksandra Zemke**; the first Polish woman in the Council of the World Aviation Organization – **Małgorzata Polkowska**, and many others.

Each of the characters mentioned in this study has been recorded in history; some of them were depicted in historical studies and films. Others are mentioned by gossip websites, still about some information is difficult to find, so it seems purposeful to remind about them of their profiles and achievements that this article is useful for, but also by the book being written on the subject.

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