

Women's status in Poland: a permanent crisis

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Polish women today face disproportionate levels of unemployment and are pushed into the informal economy due to outmoded perceptions of women's roles. Moreover, the economic and financial crisis worsened an already critical situation and led to the pauperization of entire sectors of society in which again women were most negatively affected. In addition, gender-related institutions face a significant loss in resources. To deal with the situation it is crucial that gendered-budgeting becomes a standard methodology of all public budget processes and that investments are made in social infrastructure, particularly in education, health, and care of children and dependent persons.

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The last 20 years have been a period of economic struggle for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The transition from planned economies and authoritarian regimes to democracy and market economies significantly affected the region. Gender equality was also affected by this transition and women bore the brunt of the negative effects.

Since 1995 when the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women took place, many countries in the CEE/CIS (Central Eastern Europe/Commonwealth of Independent States) region have made some progress in the 12 areas of the Platform for Action, although this progress was uneven and insufficient.¹ However, there are some worrying trends in the CIS since the economic status of women has deteriorated as a result of job losses, there is a move towards low-wage jobs in both the formal and informal sectors, and cuts in social protection. Also, access to health services and social support worsened which led to a substantial rise in poverty. Furthermore, a renewal of traditional views of women's roles is occurring in a number of countries and gendered-based violence is a key concern throughout the region.

Crisis as a permanent condition

Because of the current economic and financial crisis countries in the region reporting on the advances and setbacks to CEDAW are making the economic status of women a priority. Nevertheless, the situation in Eastern Europe and particularly in the CIS illustrates the fragility of women's economic position in times of crisis. Although the level of women's entrepreneurship and self-employment has increased, their employment opportunities declined drastically.²

1 The 12 areas of the platform of action include: Women and Poverty; Education and Training of Women; Women and Health; Violence against Women; Women and Armed Conflict; Women and the Economy; Women in Power and Decision-making; Institutional Mechanism for the Advancement of Women; Human Rights of Women; Women and the Media; Women and the Environment; The Girl-child.

2 UN Economic Commission For Europe (2004), *Review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the UNECE Region*

Today women's employment is increasing in low wage sectors, like housekeeping, public health or lower education and in areas of work without any social benefits such as part-time jobs or jobs in the informal sector. "Financial and economic crises and a rapid loss of existential security are nothing new for women and men in the former socialist block countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). These crises have been a permanent condition of everyday life for the majority of populations in the region".³

For a majority of women in the region the transition has been difficult and is characterized by insecurity and inequalities in access to resources, paid work, and other sources of income. The new EU countries and the countries that emerged from the former Yugoslavia faced instability and struggle for survival, which led to a loss of security. As E. Charkiewicz has pointed out, "[t]he paradox is that the new crisis comes exactly at the time when the transition has been at last declared completed, and women's and men's lives have gained stability for good and bad".⁴

Poland, a case study

In 1995 the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was signed and endorsed by many countries in Central and Eastern Europe and just two years later the Polish Government approved the "First National Program for Action on Behalf of Women". The first reporting period occurred in 2000. The "Second National Program for Action on behalf of Women" was implemented in 2003-2005. But, "in 1989 and 1990, when Poland embarked on the free-market road, the first casualties were women garment workers, as inefficient factories closed and nothing replaced them. Today the revamped garment sector, where women again predominate, is shrinking as import orders (mainly from Germany) fall and local subcontractors downsize or close, resulting in an estimated net job loss of 40,000".⁵ The social costs of transition are disproportionately borne by

3 Charkiewicz, E. *The impact of the crisis on Women in Central and Eastern Europe* (AWID: 2009). See: <www.awid.org>

4 Ibid.

5 M. Czepczynski, "An even gloomier development Picture", *Making finance work: People First. Social Watch Report 2009*.

women. In particular in countries like Poland and Russia, where the poorest 10% of the population account for less than 2% of the total income, and the richest 10 percent account for approximately 40 percent of the total income.⁶

There is no gender disaggregated data regarding the poverty level in the country. The Central Statistical Office does not disaggregate data by gender among the poor. The official statistics state that the percentage of people living in poverty rose from 4,3% in 1996 to 5,6% in 2008 (however if one used the newly formatted indicators in gathering these statistics the level of poverty in 1996 would have been 9,5%!!).⁷ This dynamic is worsened by the current global economic crisis. Decreasing family incomes may lead to the pauperization of entire sectors of society and most likely will impact women who are traditionally employed in low wage jobs and responsible for unpaid family care.⁸

The grey economy and job losses among women

According to some analysts, economic crises amplify the grey (informal) sector in the Polish economy as many, especially small entrepreneurs, try to minimize labor costs and avoid taxation and other costs associated with formal employment. It seems very likely that the growth of the grey economy will affect women more than men, as they are more often engaged in lower wage jobs, especially in the private service sector (e.g. in retail).⁹ In 2007 the percentage of women working part-time in the EU was 31.2%, four times higher than for men.¹⁰

Women are also the main providers of public services, providing up to two-thirds of the workforce in education, health and social care. It is expected that, as the public sector experiences cuts due to the economic crisis, female unemployment will rise disproportionately. Furthermore, surveys show that women are more likely to be fired when jobs are scarce, since there is a widespread perception that

6 Charkiewicz. *Op. cit.*

7 P. Szumlewicz, *Rzad nie widzi ubogich kobiet*. Polish Women Lobby materials for Beijing +15 review meeting In New York, non-published

8 "An even gloomier development Picture".

9 "An even gloomier development Picture".

10 EWL report.

DEFICIT IN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

There is large deficit regarding sexual and reproductive rights in Poland: sexual education is non-existent, access to contraception methods is very limited, and abortion, besides being severely restricted by law is criminalized in most circumstances. While it is permitted only in rape situations, if the fetus has severe abnormalities or if the woman is at risk of death, the law also protects doctors who refuse to perform an abortion for reasons of 'conscience'.

The European Council has ordered the 46 Member States, including Poland, to ensure access to abortion procedures wherever it is not prohibited. The country has received several observations from different international agencies in this regard. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women ordered Poland to implement measures aimed at expanding women's access to health care, and urged that research be carried out on the extent, causes and consequences of illegal abortion and its impact on women's health.

There are many reasons to understand why the anti-abortion law was introduced in the country. In a process of political transformation of the State, radical conservatives lobbied to introduce the abortion debate on the political agenda. The climate during the transition from the communist regime to democracy, allowed the Catholic Church to present the existing laws favorable to abortion as the remnant of the 'godless communism'. The commitment of the Church in Rome and the Pope's support played a key role in exerting political pressure to criminalize abortion. The society was not prepared to face the anti-abortion rhetoric. ■

Sources:

The Struggle for Abortion Rights in Poland (Wanda Nowicka)
Reproductive Rights in Poland (Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning)

men are the legitimate breadwinners.¹¹ All the indicators show that poverty in Poland is not abating and in fact, as the economic crisis advances the situation is worsening. The Government is not doing much to prevent the deterioration of the status of women or to create mechanisms which could improve the situation.¹²

Enterprising woman: an answer to economic woes?

According to Polish sociologist Piotr Szumlewicz, in spite of the fact that women's poverty is considered a priority for the Polish Ministry of Work and Social Policy, actions to deal with the effects of the economic crisis and the increase in poverty among the female population have not been implemented. The only action the Ministry of Work and Social Policy has undertaken is the implementation of the program "How good it is to be an enterprising woman!" which aims "to promote entrepreneurship among women and to stimulate their involvement in social and professional life".

11 European Women's Lobby, "Women, the Financial and Economic Crisis—the Urgency of a Gender Perspective". See: <stofnanir.hi.is/gendiv/european_womens_lobby_women_financial_and_economic_crisis_urgency_gender_perspective>

12 *Ibid.*

The Ministry perceives the promotion of entrepreneurship as the only one way to resist poverty among women, although it is not supporting this idea since there are no financial resources or programs available to those who chose to take this route. Women's entrepreneurship is very often a part of ministerial rhetoric, as well as major events on women's status such as the Women's Congress¹³ where women's entrepreneurship becomes a catch all for promotion of the status of women. During the Women's Congress many panel discussions took place about women in business, the labor market, politics and government but there were no discussions about poverty, social exclusion, access to healthcare, or change of pension plans.¹⁴

13 The Women's Congress took place on 20-21 of June 2009, in Warsaw. The Congress was organized as the major event on the occasion of 20th anniversary of 1989 transition, and its aim was to present the systemic transition from female prospect. Many celebrities and VIP from polish political scene were invited, like Jolanta Kwa niewska, Magdalena Sroda and Henryka Bochniarz.

14 European Women's Lobby. *Women, the Financial and Economic Crisis—the Urgency of a Gender Perspective*. 2009. <stofnanir.hi.is/gendiv/european_womens_lobby_women_financial_and_economic_crisis_urgency_gender_perspective>

In Poland, "women in the retirement age group can access their entitlements enshrined by legislation from the pre-transition period. However, women approaching retirement age – who are covered by new legislation linking pension level to earned income and to the overall performance of private pension funds – receive pensions below minimum wage level – an extremely small amount. Additionally, there are now women and men without health care or pension entitlements. The effects of rapid mass privatization (as opposed to more gradual restructuring), such as that performed in Russia, point to an increase of 12.8% in mortality rates among men in Russia with the burden of providing for and provisioning for children falling exclusively on women".¹⁵

Hard times for women's organizations and gender institutions

The impact of the economic and financial crisis is also widespread among women's non-governmental organizations. NGOs were already experiencing a loss of funding from foundations and individuals in 2009 when the drop in GDP led to a loss of government funding also. "The budget of the Civic Initiatives Fund, a government-run program that supports non-profit organizations was cut by half. While it prioritizes a neo-liberal agenda (diversity management, discrimination, entrepreneurship) and shifts NGOs to the role of service providers as the state withdraws from the social sector, the Fund has provided important resources for sustaining NGO activities. It is very likely that the local authorities' funding for NGOs will diminish as well. Furthermore, the economic crisis is already having a negative impact on the ability of women's NGOs to raise money, from both private and public donors, for their own share in a project co-funded by the European Commission. This is particularly alarming since, while the EU funds created new opportunities for NGOs in Poland, neither the State nor local authorities have developed the required mechanisms for financially supporting NGOs that secure EU funding".¹⁶

Government's response is lacking

It is worrisome that policy makers at all levels of decision making continue to ignore the impact of the crisis on women and men's livelihoods. The initial crisis and subsequent recovery plans at different levels – including European, national and international (G20) – have failed to acknowledge, understand, analyze and rectify the gender impact

15 Charkiewicz, E. (2009). *The impact of the crisis on Women in Central and Eastern Europe*. Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID).

16 Czepczyński, M. (2009). "An even gloomier development Picture", *Making finance work: People First. Social Watch Report 2009*.

of the crisis' – stated the European Women's Lobby (EWL).¹⁷ The European Commission, in its 2009 Report on equality between men and women, asserted that 'the economic slowdown is likely to affect women more than men'. Furthermore, it stated that understanding and dealing with the gendered aspect of the impact of the crisis, in its various dimensions, represents a challenge for both European and national policy makers.

To deal with this imbalance and the pursuing inequities the EWL in its statement on the occasion of the Beijing +15 meetings in Geneva recommended that European, national and international policy

makers guarantee continuous financial and human resources for existing institutional mechanisms, policies and programmes for gender equality and women's rights at all levels including supporting women's organizations. Additionally, the EWL called on states to address the current loss in resources for gender equality institutions with strong political engagement given the current financial and economic crisis.¹⁸

In light of the above considerations, it is crucial that gendered budgeting becomes a standard methodology of all public budget processes; and that investments be made in social infrastructure,

particularly in education, health, child and dependent persons care. These investments make both social and economic sense because these would firstly create jobs in the public sector (where a high number of women are represented) and secondly ease the disproportionate burden on women to enable them to participate in all areas of society. There is also an urgent need to revise the outmoded assumption that men are the 'family breadwinners' given this dynamic's effect on women's participation or lack thereof in the labor-market, and women's access to social benefits specially their access to pension plans.¹⁹ ■

17 European Women's Lobby (2009). *Women, the Financial and Economic Crisis—the Urgency of a Gender Perspective*. <stofnanir.hi.is/gendiv/european_womens_lobby_women_financial_and_economic_crisis_urgency_gender_perspective>.

18 European Women's Lobby (2009). EWL Statement on the occasion of the Beijing+15 Meetings in Geneva, 29 October – 03 November 2009. See: <www.womenslobby.org>

19 European Women's Lobby (2009). *Women, the Financial and Economic Crisis—the Urgency of a Gender Perspective*. <stofnanir.hi.is/gendiv/european_womens_lobby_women_financial_and_economic_crisis_urgency_gender_perspective>