

■ POLAND

Poland – A New Reality, Old Problems

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In 1989, Poland started a successful transition to a market economy. Changes affected the whole of Polish society; economic benefits were not distributed evenly and social difference deepened. Long-term negligence of certain issues and vulnerable groups has begun to manifest in Poland. This report presents two aspects of such negligence – homelessness and discrimination against women – and examines how the authorities are addressing them. The place of gender equality in Polish development assistance is also discussed.

Poverty and social exclusion in Poland

Poverty and social exclusion have escalated in Poland in recent years. The rate of relative poverty risk¹ in Poland was 17% in 2008 and remains at the European average (Central Statistical Office 2010a). Poverty has become the subject of many discussions and its alleviation a priority for the government and social projects. Unfortunately, Poland's continuing neoliberal transition into a market economy, in conjunction with the global economic crisis, may further exacerbate the situation.

The most common measures of poverty in Poland are the 'social minimum' and the 'subsistence minimum'. The social minimum indicates a particular threshold needed for a household to lead a decent life and is based on the cost of a 'basket of goods' considered necessary for this. The subsistence minimum is based on a more restricted 'basket of goods' considered necessary for survival, i.e., to sustain one's vital functions and psychophysical capabilities. Researchers from the Institute of Labour and Social Studies (IPISS) calculated the social minimum at 854.9 Polish Zloty (PLN) (€206.26) per person for a one-person household, 703.6 PLN (€169.75) per person for a two-person household, and 705.2 PLN (€170.14) per person for a three-person household in September 2008. For elderly people, the social minimum was calculated as 860.6 PLN (€207.63) for a one-person household and 700.7 PLN (€169.06) for two-person household (IPISS December

2008). In comparison, the average monthly gross wage/salary in the national economy amounted to 3102.96 PLN (€788.33) (Central Statistical Office 2009a).

The IPISS report also showed that the subsistence minimum for a person in a one-person household was 386.3 PLN (€98.14), 329.6 PLN (€83.74) per person for a two-person household and 316.6 PLN (€80.43) per person for a three-person household in 2007. The subsistence minimum for elderly people amounted to 364.7 PLN (€92.66) for a one-person household and 308.0 PLN (€78.25) for a two-person household in 2007 (IPISS April 2007).

The Central Statistical Office reported that the percentage of people living below the subsistence minimum dropped from 12.3% in 2005, to 7.8% in 2006, 6.6% in 2007 and 5.6% in 2008. The number of Poles living on the border of relative poverty fell from 18.1% in 2005 to 17.6% in 2008. The number of people living below the poverty threshold fell from 18.1% in 2005, to 15.1% in 2006 and 10.6% in 2008 (Central Statistical Office 2010b). However, despite this decrease in poverty, significant improvements are still needed.

Homelessness in Poland as the result of poverty

The dire situation of many Polish families may result in failure to fulfil basic needs. It may also lead to social marginalisation and social exclusion in a broad sense. Poles who live on the border of the social or subsistence minimum should be treated as threatened with homelessness. Unfortunately, the Polish Government is not well prepared to deal with this problem. The homeless assistance system functioning in Poland is aimed primarily at immediate assistance (intervention), and less at prevention (directed to people threatened with homelessness) and re-integration (directed to the homeless). In addition, Poland has not developed strategies at the national level to combat homelessness. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy was working on the development of such a strategy, but stopped during the final stages.

Despite the various ways in which social workers are working with homeless people (street work, assistance, life coaching), only a small percentage of homeless people manage to obtain their own house and become self-sufficient. The typical homeless person in Poland is male, over 50 and has been homeless

for at least 7 years. He usually has a low level of education and is an abuser of alcohol.

The exact number of homeless people living in Polish territory is unknown. Researchers estimate the number of homeless Poles to be in the range of 30,000 to 200,000. Such a large difference in the reported data is related to the lack of reliable assessment of the number of homeless people living in institutions (institutions, night shelters) and other places (allotments, gardens, garages, and railway and bus stations). Research among homeless people, irrespective of their place of abode, is conducted only by the Pomeranian Forum in Aid of Getting Out of Homelessness.

Poland is also being confronted with the problem of homeless Poles outside the country, for example, in the United Kingdom, Belgium and Ireland. Unfortunately, no data is available on this.

Homelessness and municipal housing resources

The issue of homelessness, and the low number of homeless people who become independent, should be considered in the context of the dismal housing conditions in Poland. In 2008, the Supreme Chamber of Control negatively evaluated the municipal housing policies (Gazeta Wyborcza 2008). It found that municipalities showed very weak commitment to preparing sites for housing and measures to streamline the process of starting and implementing housing projects were inadequate. There has also been no significant increase in the surface area allocated to housing in recent years, which does not help to increase the pace of housing investment.

Due to the lack of consistent action in the field of housing, and other external factors, 35.5% of Poles live in poor or very poor housing conditions. The number of dwellings per 1000 inhabitants is very low in Poland at only 327 in 2002. Data gathered during the National Census conducted in 2002 show that 3.2 million households are not self-sufficient, and 6.5 million people live in substandard conditions (e.g., without sanitation or water supply, in old buildings that are in poor condition, or without enough space per person). The problem of overcrowding (by European standards – more than 2 persons per room) affects 11.9 million Poles. Seventy per cent of people aged 18 to 29 live with their parents, and a quarter of them never move out. It should also be added that house-

¹ A level of poverty defined as below the relative poverty threshold.

holds are often in debt. In addition, the number of municipal houses is usually insufficient.

The majority of homeless people are aware that there is little chance of obtaining a dwelling from the municipality. The municipality allocates few places for people in difficult circumstances. The number of places is often insufficient, and people sometimes have to wait a number of years to obtain social housing or a communal apartment. Such housing often needs expensive repairs. Taking into consideration the conditions described above, it may be assumed that a homeless person obtaining a flat is highly improbable. Unfortunately, statistics published by the Central Statistical Office and independent reports show that little has changed since the National Census in 2002.

Social exclusion and discrimination against women

The social exclusion of women is becoming an urgent issue in Poland. It is caused by many different factors, some of which are outlined here. Despite the fact that official statistics and independent reports prepared by non-governmental organisations highlight the difficult situation of women in Poland, little has been done to improve it. As sociologist Izabela Desperak noted, “despite constitutional provisions and numerous anti-discrimination laws, gender equality seems to be a fiction in Poland” (Desperak 2009). This situation is well recognised and the European Commission recently sent reasoned opinions to Poland about the non-transposition of EU rules prohibiting discrimination in the work place (Gazeta Prawna 2008).

Discrimination against women is mostly reflected in lower than average wages. Data provided by the Central Statistical Office shows that women's salaries are generally lower than men's. On average, women earn 23% less than men. Inequalities can also be seen in the number of executive positions held by women – women hold only 35% of executive positions and most of these are lower-level management positions. Differences in salary are most visible at the executive level: men earn 28% more than women at this level (Central Statistical Office 2009a).

This unequal situation is clearly shown in the survey of professional activities of the population: in the fourth quarter of 2009, 17.4 million Poles were professionally active – 9.5 million of them were male, 7.9 million were female. Women are more often professionally passive (neither working nor unemployed); in 2009 there were 5.4 million professionally passive males compared to 8.7 million females (Central Statistical Office 2010b).

Occupational segregation and the feminisation of some professions are also important issues. Rates of pay in ‘female’ professions are inherently lower than in ‘male’ professions. According to the Central Statistical Office report, ‘Women and men in the labour market’, the most feminised sectors of the national economy are health and social work (412 women to every 100 men), education (337 women to every 100 men) and financial mediation (243 women to every 100 men). The most feminised professional group were ‘office workers and shop-assistants’; in 2007, there were 199 women to every 100 men in this profession. Feminised professions also have the lowest average gross salaries (Central Statistical Office 2004).

Poland has an increasing number of self-employed women. The situation is officially presented as an example of resourcefulness. However, some cases of self-employment are forced by the employer and others are the result of an inability to find other forms of employment. Women are often forced into self-employment under threat of losing their jobs. Sociological studies indicate that, compared to other European Union countries, Poland has the highest percentage of women opting for self-employment. They constituted 36.3% of all Poles who decided to launch their own business in 2006 (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy 2006)

Discrimination against women in the labour market is often justified by the fact that they benefit from maternity leave. Poland introduced paternity leave at the beginning of 2010. However, paternity leave is too short – one week, with the possibility of it being lengthened to two weeks in 2012 – to be considered a problem for employers. The length of paternity leave also prevents it from being effective. Firstly, its duration does not allow fathers to spend a sufficient amount of time with their newborn babies. Secondly, it does not improve the situation of women, who are still perceived as less ‘flexible’ workers.

The reconciliation of professional activities and family duties is another serious problem for women. According to the Central Statistical Office, Poland is ranked one of the lowest in terms of enrolment in pre-school education (Central Statistical Office 2009b). The number of places in kindergartens is insufficient. Pre-school education is also very expensive, which excludes poor families and single mothers.

This situation is accompanied by a lack of awareness that it is women who are mostly responsible for the family budget. This is clearly visible in the case of single mothers. Difficulties in the collection of child maintenance, discrimi-

ination in the labour market and lack of real support from authorities, such as effective social care and social protection, make single mothers one of the social groups most threatened with social exclusion.

Polish Official Development Assistance and gender equality

EU policy regarding development assistance programmes places special attention on gender equality, defining it as a crosscutting issue that should be a core idea in all strategies and policies regarding development (European Commission, 2010). The ‘EU Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Development’ for the period 2010 to 2015, adopted by the European Council in June 2010, recommends the implementation of a twin-track approach entailing gender mainstreaming and specific actions targeting the promotion of women’s rights and the empowerment of women (European Commission 2010)

At the international level, Poland has signed and accepted all instruments dealing with gender issues in Official Development Assistance (ODA). But, in reality, the Polish Government has done little or nothing to put these principles into practice. The truth is that all guidelines for organisations that implement development projects contain requirements for the equality of opportunities for men and women, but, in reality, the level of this equality depends on the organisation implementing the project.

Regarding the gender dimension in Polish ODA, there is no gender disaggregated data. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is about to announce figures for Polish foreign assistance according to recipient country and sector, not for particular actions. In 2010, Grupa Zagranica published a commentary on Polish Development Aid Programmes (Grupa Zagranica 2010), which points out the lack of any reference to gender or women’s issues. As the EU recommends prioritising gender equality in every project implemented, it is very important to take gender into consideration in Polish Official Development Assistance programmes. The Ministry of Regional Development is not able to even estimate the funds spent on projects aimed at women or on the promotion of gender equality in 2008. There is a strong need to create and implement special tools and indicators to measure gender mainstreaming, including the collection of gender disaggregated data regarding ODA. Unfortunately, the Polish Development Aid Department of the

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