

Women's Position in Politics and The Labour Market in Contemporary Poland

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to present the position of women in politics and the labour market after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. The recent reports on Polish women's participation in politics show a considerable increase in 2010. Yet, although the number of female Members of Parliament (MPs) has increased in absolute terms, there is still a meaningful disproportion between men and women in the Polish parliament. There are several important reasons responsible for these disproportions such as patronizing attitudes towards women often expressed by male politicians in public debates and in the media and the absence of females' names at the top positions of electoral lists with the result that fewer women win elections and sit in the national parliament. A similar situation can be observed in employment. There are several causes of the weak position of women in the labour market. First of all, the general level of unemployment in Poland is quite high (around 11.5% in January 2015). Secondly, many women are discouraged from actively seeking jobs because of unequal pay. Thirdly, the majority of women occupy professions which are less respected and thus lower paid, and where the prospects for promotion are poor. Finally, many women succumb to social pressure deriving from the attitude of a traditional model of family which is still prevalent in Poland.

Joseph Conrad said, 'Being a woman is a terribly difficult task, since it consists principally in dealing with men'.

Introduction

This essay will compare women's position in politics and the labour market in Poland between 1989-2003 and 2004 until the present. The year 1989 was a year of a political transformation: Poland changed its political system and became a fully independent country. The political transition which resulted was accompanied by various social changes which affected people's adaptation to the new system. Marek Ziolkowski, a Polish sociologist, distinguishes two aspects of the socio-political transformation. One is

connected with creating new institutions, whereas the other is related to new attitudes and the perception of the world in the transformed political and social reality (Ziolkowski, 2000). Another Polish sociologist, Hanna Swida-Ziemba, stresses the importance of the regained sense of independence and delineates the period after 1989 as “the new world” (Swida-Ziemba, 2005) which brought about challenges deriving from the new perception of independence.

Feminism, with its demands for gender equality, is one of the new ideas which started developing from the political changes (Gornikowska-Zwolak, 2000). Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004 accelerated the government’s attempts to help women achieve equal status with men. Thus Poland introduced Gender Mainstreaming, the political strategy which assumes that women and men have to be equal in all spheres of life (Balinska, 2007). Another significant change was an amendment to the labour code introducing the definition of discrimination which stated that “Any types of discrimination in the workplace, on the grounds of gender, race, ethnic origin, nationality, religion, beliefs, disability, age, and sexual orientation are impermissible” (Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich, n.d.). Taking into consideration the initiatives above, this essay aims at both determining whether and to what extent Poland’s accession to the EU has correlated with women’s increased participation in political life of the country and the labour market as well as presenting the main obstacles on women’s way to equality in these spheres.

Politics

In absolute terms, the number of female Members of Parliament (MPs) has been steadily increasing since 1989. Nevertheless, Polish women still constitute a minority in the country’s political system and their representation in parliament has never exceeded 30%. Thus in 1991, the representation of women in the lower chamber of parliament amounted to 44 MPs (9.6%) out of 460, whereas in 2002, it increased to 93 (20.2%) (Olenski, 2007). In other words, until 2005, although women’s representation in politics doubled between 1991 and 2002, it was still insignificant and remained around 20%.

As far as ministerial posts are concerned, there was only one woman in the Council of Ministers at that time period (Druciarek, 2012). The 2004 accession of Poland to the European Union brought a considerable increase of women involved in the political life of the country, from 20% in 2005 to 38% in 2010 nearly doubling in only 5 years. Additionally, after 2004, the number of women in the Council of Ministers rose to 20%. The introduction of the quota system on January 5, 2011, which requires a minimum 35% representation of females on election lists, resulted in the increase of women’s electoral candidates to 44%. According to the latest report (2014), the introduction of quotas has improved women’s position in the lower chamber of parliament: currently there are 112 (24.3%) female MPs (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2014). Moreover, for the second time in the post-transformation period (i.e. after 1990), the Prime Minister’s office is held by a woman (Ewa Kopacz, elected in 2014). The involvement of women in politics can be observed also during the present campaign for presidency: for the first time in history four women (Anna Grodzka, Magdalena Ogorek, Wanda Nowicka, and Iwona Piatek) declared their willingness to run for this position.

Despite the growing number of female MPs, there is still a meaningful disproportion between male and female representation in the Polish parliament. There are several important reasons responsible for this disproportion and one of which could be the absence of female names on the electoral lists. For example, during the latest election, women's names on the electoral list of one of the political parties (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD, the left-wing party) were pushed down to lower positions on the ballot card, which rarely guarantees victory. Magdalena Sroda, a philosopher and feminist activist, remarks that "[...] it is scandalous because earlier the first and the second place on the election list had been promised to women" (Sroda, 2011). She further suggests that the male politicians seek would not want to endanger males' political establishment. This becomes clear when one observes the party's search for female candidates: the desired characteristics are good appearance and the lack of political experience. What is more, those women who have already achieved a good political position are often slowly eliminated from the political scene. This mechanism was widely discussed in the media in 2002 during the municipal election when parties preferred to put male novices on electoral lists instead of promoting female candidates popular in the region for their hard work for local communities. Although the recent (2010) survey by the Institute of Public Affairs shows that 48% of the respondents agree that there should be an equal number of male and female candidates on electoral lists, most Poles still believe that women are not fit for politics (Institute of Public Affairs, 2010).

Another barrier for female politicians is the patronizing attitude often expressed by their male colleagues during public debates or in the media (Balinska, 2007). This condescending approach is manifested in paying pseudo-compliments which are to diminish the woman's position as a politician or pseudo-protective embracing or even hugging on camera. For instance, the right-wing party leader once remarked that the popularity of one of the female ministers resulted from her looks rather than political achievements (Gasior, n.d.). Another politician of the same party suggestively remarked that "Polish parliament shouldn't dismiss her [the minister] because [they] (i.e. male MPs) have to keep an eye on her". As a consequence, such remarks lead to discrediting or detracting women from their public achievements.

Unfortunately, similar behaviour can also be observed among politicians representing the Polish Left. Recently, Leszek Miller, the leader of the Social Democratic Left (SLD), has nominated a completely unknown female politician for a candidate in the forthcoming presidential election. Magdalena Sroda (2015) argues that Miller assumes that the candidate's very attractive appearance and perfect presence will guarantee success in the election. Miller's opinion seems to stem from the conviction that as public relations specialists believe, most voters draw their attention to the appearance rather than real achievements of the candidate (Sroda, 2011).

As a consequence, as *Polska The Times* journalist Magdalena Zuraw claims, male politicians treat women like objects which are to add credibility to and soften the party's image (Zuraw, 2011). Finally, Sroda (2015) concludes that the women's position in Poland is still inferior to that in other countries of the European Union and, according to the 2014 Global Gender Gap Report, Poland is ranked 57th among 142 countries (e.g., France is ranked 16th and Great Britain is ranked 26th) in terms of the number of women sitting in the national parliament (Beczek, 2014).

Employment

Before 1989, women were more active professionally and their position in the labour market was relatively stable. The situation changed dramatically after 1989 when the political and economic transformations began: the percentage of employed females went from 61.6% in the late 80s falling to 43.2% in 1990 (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, n.d.). The indicators of the deterioration of women's participation in the labour market were observed in 2003, however, this situation has not changed considerably since then. In 2003, the employment rate for women was 47.8% while the rate for men was 61.1%. In 2005, after the economic boom, the employment rate for men increased more in comparison to the rate for women and the difference in the gender gap increased to 14.8 % from 13.3% in 2005. Then, in 2010, the proportion of women who were economically active rose to 48.2% (Ministerstwo Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2010) whereas the latest comprehensive statistical review (2014) shows a surprising decrease to 45% in women's employment (Ministerstwo Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2010).

In theory, the Polish legal system provides for equal treatment and access to work for men and women. In reality, however, Polish working women's situation in large measure is circumscribed by both their role as mothers as well as the traditional model of family life. In other words, the great bulk of childcare and domestic work is done by women. As there are not enough affordable kindergartens, especially in smaller towns and villages, women have to organize childcare on their own. Usually, they ask family members or friends for help, yet in many cases women either give up their jobs or take up less paid or part-time jobs which let them combine all of their duties. The government tries to support women and together with the European Union's assistance, runs and finances several significant projects which aim at helping various groups of women (Zaworska-Nikoniuk, 2008). One of such projects, *Mother at Work* (2007), prepares campaigns to promote women who have to combine their work with motherhood. Apart from promotion, *Mother at Work* also examines the conditions of the Polish labour market and publishes the results of the study. According to their research, Polish women postpone motherhood due to the real likelihood of losing a job (Zaworska-Nikoniuk, 2008). Another initiative, *Flexible Employee - Partnership Family* which is also supported financially by the European Social Fund, encourages employers to employ pregnant women so that they could reconcile their family with their professional lives. Finally, the project *Gender Index* is worth mentioning as it fosters equal opportunities for women and men in the workplace and rewards companies which try to employ more women (Zaworska-Nikoniuk, 2008).

However there are several factors discouraging women from an active job-hunt. One such factor is unequal salaries. Despite the legislation aiming at leveling the differences in salaries, women are regularly denied their rights to equal pay for equal work. The latest statistics of the National Salary Study from 2013 show that a man's average monthly salary is 4500 PLN or more whereas that of women is c. 3500 PLN. The most striking difference is between men and women having a master's degree: women earn c. 4100 PLN compared to c. 5816 PLN earned by men (National Salary Study, 2013).

Moreover, women are not only the victims of inequitable attitudes but also have to struggle with negative stereotypes. One such stereotype is the belief that some professions, such

as teaching or secretarial jobs, are 'clean' and therefore more appropriate for women than men (The World Bank, 2004). According to this stereotype, men are more knowledgeable and/or stronger therefore they are fit for business and politics, or 'dirty' jobs. Prejudice and stereotypes make an invisible barrier which separates both sexes at work and prevents women from reaching the highest levels of their careers.

Another negative stereotype which impedes women's promotion and career is called the 'sticky floor' (Wszechnica Sejmowa, n.d.). According to the Polish Professional Women Network (Bilinska, 2011), the survey carried out between 2010 and 2011 by Deininger Consulting questioned 200 women in managerial positions about the barriers which they encountered in their careers. The majority of the respondents pointed to gender stereotypes as being the greatest obstacle in their way for moving into top positions at work. The surveyed women enumerated several reasons why a small number of women are in pre-eminent and influential positions. For example, according to their explanations, women tend to abandon their jobs rather than continue their careers because the benefits are incommensurate with the effort and time devoted to maintaining a career. Besides, they claim that gender bias is a real problem which 39% of the surveyed women experienced personally (Bilinska, 2011).

Discussion

The European Union has been taking measures which should considerably redress the situation of women in the labour market as well as in politics. In 2012, the European Commission accepted a legal proposal concerning the promotion of women in business (Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu, 2012). According to the proposed directive, until 2020, women should represent 40% of the top positions in the labour market. Another effective legal regulation is the Diversity Charter promoted by the European Commission (Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu, 2012). This Charter is a written commitment which forbids sex discrimination and promotes sex diversity at work. In Poland, the Diversity Charter has been signed by fifty employers and it has already brought some positive changes, particularly those concerning hostile attitudes and prejudices. As Zbigniew Gajewski (Deputy Director-General of the Entrepreneurs' Association) has observed recently, sex diversity promotion in the workplace results in the economic improvement of businesses managed by women (Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu, 2012). He believes that businesses under women's direction generate higher profits and deal with economic crisis more efficiently.

Conclusions

It should be noted, however, that despite the fact that there has been a little change for the better in women's participation in politics and the labour market, especially after Poland's accession to the EU, the change seems to be relatively slow. Therefore, Polish parliament should consider further legal amendments concerning women whereas the society could re-define the roles of women in the contemporary world and reject the cultural bias which builds barriers for women. Women's involvement in politics and the labour market compared to that in other countries of the European Union still comes out

poorly. It is sad that many Polish women feel that they have to work harder than men to achieve a similar status in their workplace. Even though their position has improved within the last decade, still their work tends to be underestimated and their salaries are lower than those of men. It often happens that women having the same or higher university degree than men, receive less money than their male counterparts, which is often caused by the misconception that female's work and effort is less valuable. Despite the government's initiatives aiming at financial help for women after they have children (longer paid maternity leave, extra money for each newborn child, discount tickets to museums, cinemas or swimming pools for large families, etc.), still too little is done to support women who want or have to combine work with childcare. Many women complain that employers are reluctant to introduce flextime or organize childcare. What is worse, it happens that women coming back to work after maternity leave are transferred to often worse or lower paid posts on the pretext of lower competence caused by the time off work or lack of flexibility. All this causes considerable physical and financial obstacles that are difficult and sometimes impossible for women to overcome.

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