

Women's enterprise centres and woman entrepreneur days as a measure to help unemployed women in Poland

Gründerinnenzentren und Unternehmerinnentage als Unterstützung für arbeitslose Frauen in Polen

Zusammenfassung:

Nur zehn Prozent der fast 16.000 arbeitslosen Frauen in Gdansk genießen das Recht auf Sozialunterstützung. Auch wenn sie gut ausgebildet sind, finden Frauen immer noch schwieriger Arbeit, die ihren Fertigkeiten und ihrer Bildung entspricht. Entweder man meint, sie seien zu jung und würden wohl noch Kinder bekommen und ihren Job verlassen, oder weil man meint, sie seien zu alt. Viele von ihnen suchen nach einer Möglichkeit, ihr eigenes Unternehmen zu gründen: keine einfache Lösung. Das Netzwerk East-West Women-Polska hat gerade zum ersten Mal ein Programm aufgelegt, das sich sowohl an arbeitslose Frauen richtet, die ihr eigenes Unternehmen gründen wollen, als auch an diejenigen, die in den vergangenen zwei Jahren aus der Arbeitslosigkeit heraus ein Kleinunternehmen gegründet haben. NEWW-Polska möchte durch bessere Kenntnisse neuer Kommunikations- und Informationstechnologien sowie von Management- und Marketing-Methoden Chancen verbessern. Am Projekt beteiligt sind 20 arbeitslose Frauen und 20 Frauen, die ein eigenes Kleinunternehmen seit weniger als zwei Jahren führen. Es wäre äußerst nützlich, wenn diese und andere Frauen unserer Region ein multifunktionales Unternehmenszentrum nutzen könnten (z.B. nach dem Berliner Muster), das ihnen nicht nur Ausbildungsmöglichkeiten, sondern auch einen Ort bietet, an dem sie ihre unternehmerische Tätigkeiten beginnen könnten. Die Stadt Gdansk wäre bereit, Frauen solch einen Ort zu geben. Das Problem liegt allerdings bei den Betriebskosten. Polnische Frauen-NROs hoffen auf europäische Unterstützung für solche Projekte.

Introduction

In Poland as in other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, for a little more than a decade we have witnessed three overlapping processes – transition, EU accession and globalisation. Women seem to have suffered from these changes disproportionately. For women, as for the whole society, this has been a period of uncertainty and lack of security. From the beginning of the transition period, there was an attempt to challenge the view of the old regime which considered women's participation in the labour market as providing the route towards gender equality. Women's right to choose household and maternity instead of paid work was widely emphasized. It was very convenient for the politicians to send women home and in this way reduce the unemployment figures.

Double shifts influence women's pensions

At the same time, the role of the state in Poland has diminished, with lower government budgets and far reaching reforms of the pension and benefits systems. Because of the different roles they play in society and the economy these reforms have affected men and women differently.

The emphasis on women returning to their motherhood role, combined with benefit and pensions systems that have rewarded productive activities, resulted in big gender inequalities. The reduction of state support for childcare has shifted full responsibility for this function back to women. This has increased the "double burden" women have to bear and increased demands on their time. The existing pay gap and interruptions to working history are mirrored in the size of pensions and other work-related benefits. The situation of women in the labour market depends to a great extent on the double role that women have to fulfil in accordance with a dominant stereotype of a model of family life which takes for granted that a woman has to reconcile her job with family duties (besides being a mother, a woman

has to take care of the elderly). The transition period overlapped with the effects of globalisation over the last 15 years to substantially affect the structure of the economy. GDP has fallen, absolute poverty has increased and employment and wages have fallen. In addition, one can observe that women's working conditions have often worsened, women are marginalized and exploited, many live in poverty and insecurity, their needs are marginalized, unemployment and insecurity of families cause domestic violence, the rapid economic changes and the resulting poverty have brought about an increase in religious and cultural fundamentalisms, there has also been a considerable increase in trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation.

The same old story all over the world

The influence of globalisation on the situation of women in Poland can be described in the same terms as that of women all over the world – as Christa Wichterich, a researcher and journalist based in Bonn, Germany says: "For women around the world... globalization is not an abstract process unfolding on an elevated stage. It is concrete and actual. Female textile workers from... Eastern Germany are losing their jobs to women in Bangladesh; Filipinas clean vegetables and kitchens in Kuwait; Brazilian prostitutes offer their services around Frankfurt's main railway station; and Polish women look after old people at rock-bottom prices in... Germany." Women were second class citizens in the past, when they had to make up for the deficiencies of the communist system and remain so to the present day, when they have to make up for the deficiencies of the market system. Although amongst unemployed people they constitute only a slightly larger percentage than men, their situation is much worse. First of all women are not as choosy as men; they will accept jobs that are among the worst paid and they often agree to work even in very bad conditions. They earn much less than men doing the same work and they remain unemployed for longer than men.

Unfortunately the gender implications of transition and globalisation in Poland and in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe remain a largely unexplored subject. Even women NGOs have not dealt with the issue of economic justice for women and they are not in a position to propose policy changes and actions which would assist women. Women's groups and researchers in Third World countries have been dealing with the issue of economic justice for women for many years now. For women's groups in the CEE region and the former Soviet Union it is a new phenomenon, as yet barely addressed. They are not prepared for the process and they cannot propose policy changes and actions to assist women.

Some figures

The average salary of a Polish woman is 500 Euro, 100 Euro less than that for men. Women often say when being employed that their financial expectations are very low. Also, since it is so difficult for a woman to get a job, when she has one she does not want to let it go. In Poland, 38 % of managers and 30 % of general directors and presidents of big corporations are women. Women make up 38 % of those running businesses of their own. Among small and medium-size businesses, women run 35 % and the huge majority of these firms operate in urban areas (ca. 82 % according to a 2002 study by the Ministry of Economic Affairs). Most businesswomen are involved in trade or brokerage services (40 % each), usually they are self-employed (ca. 51 %) or employ up to five employees (ca. 30 %).

Women are a decidedly better educated section of the labour force; nevertheless their better education has no impact on their employment opportunities. The average unemployment rate among women reached the level of 20.6 %, while for men it is 18.3 %. The phenomenon of long-term unemployment of women is getting worse. Among those unemployed for up to 24 months women constitute 47 %, and among those unemployed for longer than 24 months women make up 60 %. Being permanently unemployed means the loss of unemployment benefits; in the third quarter of 2003, 16.3 % of unemployed men and 12 % of women were receiving such benefits.

The unemployment rate among women is to a greater extent dependent on age. Barriers preventing women rearing children (or those who might have children) from finding employment still remain. Reconciling family duties with work is even more difficult because of a lack of institutions offering childcare and care for dependent persons. Following a distinct fall in the birth rate in the 1990s (after the baby-boom of the 1980s), the local authorities whose duty it is to subsidize kindergartens reduced their number by 30 % (over 40 % in rural areas) and at the same time increased the size of these institutions. During the same period, the Ministry of Health closed over 50 % of nurseries. Private institutions were the only ones to fill the gap, but were only available to families enjoying higher incomes. Given this situation, the only way out for many women was to give up work.

Women's incomes are approximately 20 % lower than those of men. The pay gap is obvious and shows a tendency to widen especially with regard to high executive positions. The pay imbalance is also due to the feminisation of some usually low-paid professions (home helps, cleaners, laundresses, nurses, and midwives).

Already we can observe that women between 30–34 are encountering difficulties in finding work – once unemployed they remain unemployed for an average of 17 months, older women from 35–44 and 45–54 remain unemployed for 18.3 and 19.0 months respectively. For women university graduates – the period without work is on average 6.4 months, for high school graduates it is 14.3 months and for primary education graduates it is 18 months.

Only 1.2 % of unemployed women currently attempt to start a business – to become self-employed. The longer the period of unemployment the more seldom the search for self-employment opportunities.

Why women become unemployed

1. The employers are more eager to employ men than women, hence there are fewer work offers for women.
2. Women's education and skills are not fitted to current requirements. Although better educated than men – they tend not to have a definite profession. In the previous system this kind of general education was suitable for office work. Now office work is not required to such an extent and employees in this kind of job are also required to have special qualifications – ICTs, foreign languages.
3. There is a conviction prevalent in Polish society that when there are not enough jobs available, men need them more than women and a stereotype that women can cope with being unemployed better than men and that losing a job does not influence their self-esteem to such a degree as it does for men.

Entrepreneurship – fighting unemployment and women's discrimination in the labour market

When women become entrepreneurs they will find new social functions becoming accessible to them which they have hitherto been denied because of the traditional vision of their roles. Currently, it is mostly educated women with a university degree, high school graduates and women of great determination who find themselves able to take the risk of deciding to start their own business. But thanks to proper training and assistance methods, women in their first year of activity (including those who are not well educated) can be trained and given the support needed to become successful in business. A policy directed at raising the level of education and access to vocational training can make even those women who are poorly educated and poor, active and ready for self-employment. During the initial period of self-employment, it is essential that their unemployment benefits should not be taken away. Credit should also be made available for the poorest families.

What we need to make women start up their own business:

- *Special programs to train women to help them find a job or to become self-employed.*
- *Free advisory services on their projects for economic activity and help in drawing up a business plan.*
- *Support in getting in touch with credit institutions and providing information on possible sources of credit.*

It is extremely important to run parallel activities to remove social barriers to women's entrepreneurship – i.e. promotion of equality in the societal roles of women and men, promotion of women in non-stereotypical, non-traditional roles, woman as company managers, promotion of school textbooks which present non-stereotypical models of women and men. As far as unemployed women are concerned, special programs should be created which would allow them to start up their own business. The programs should offer training, financial support, advice and credit. There should be support to assist in creating legal and institutional conditions supportive of small and medium enterprises since they can help women to obtain employment.

According to the governmental program for women adopted in 1997 and aimed at supporting women's self-employment and the development of small enterprises led by women, both in cities and in rural areas, local and national government should:

- *Introduce instruments motivating unemployed women to use credit opportunities from the so called work fund to start up their own business.*
- *Spread knowledge about possibilities and conditions of developing small business in local communities.*
- *Develop care facilities for children and other dependants such as disabled people or older people as a potential area of services for self-employed women in rural areas and in local communities.*
- *Invest in small and medium enterprises managed by women through credits or grants.*

- *Develop local programs promoting firms newly started by women.*
- *Spread of information about women-entrepreneurs who have enjoyed success both in traditional and non-traditional economic activities.*
- *Provide training for unemployed women on how to manage their own company.*
- *Run research and analysis on women's participation in development of small and medium enterprises.*

Relatively little is known about women entrepreneurs in CEE. One fact certain however, that there is a rise in the number of women starting their own business. According to Ewa Lisowska, Polish women entrepreneurs tend to create their own businesses because of unemployment, in order to earn more for themselves and their families and to be independent. According to Ewa Lisowska, the biggest barriers for women to develop their enterprises is the culturally based conviction that women are less suited than men to creating and running their own firms because they have to fulfil their maternal roles first.

Critical challenges

- *To reconcile their roles as mothers, carers and business managers. "I am worried about my child even when I am working very hard. My husband is not able to take care of the family duties. Everything falls on me".*
- *Difficulties in obtaining loans. Women claim that if they were men the bank would be more eager to give them credit.*



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Conclusions

Unemployment and discrimination at the work place or unsatisfactory financial conditions and lack of prospects have been pushing a growing number of women to start their own business. In addition, a number of positive factors attracted women towards entrepreneurship including the desire to be their own boss, self-fulfilment, better earnings and a better possibility to balance a job with family life. Better credit facilities, unpaid advisory services and proper training will mean that many more women in CEE countries will be successful in business. It will change the status of women in

these societies. Only 10 % of almost 16 000 unemployed women in Gdansk have a right to social benefits. Despite being well educated, women still find it difficult to get jobs appropriate to their level of skills and education, either because they are considered too young, and therefore likely to have children and leave employment, or too old. Many of them are likely to be left out of mainstream social and economic life. Lots of them are seeking a possibility of starting their own business – which is not an easy solution.

The Network of East-West Women-Polska (NEWW Polska) has just finished the first edition of its program for unemployed women who want to start their own business and for those who have started their own small business in the last two years (after being unemployed). NEWW-Polska aims to increase their chances by providing them with a knowledge of new communication and information technologies and methods of management and marketing. 20 unemployed women and 20 women running their own small companies for less than 2 years are taking part in this project. It would be of great benefit to these and other women in our region to have a multifunctional enterprise centre (based on a model such as that found in Berlin, WeiberWirtschaft eG) which would provide them not only with training but also with a site to start their business activities. The city of Gdansk would be willing to provide women with such a site. The problem is one of operational costs. Polish women NGOs look with hope to European funding to support such activities.