The Integration of Poland into the European Union: Opportunities for Equality between Women and Men or Adherence to Tradition?

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Introduction: Our Hopes and Anxieties

In relation to social, economic and political changes in Poland, and particularly, our aspirations for the integration into the European Union, it seems justifiable to have hopes and formulate expectations that the principles of European democracy, recognised as the European Union’s fundamental objectives, would also be adopted in our country. Taking into account various declarations, assurances and efforts regarding the creation of a democratic state, it may also be expected that not only the recognition of these principles would be articulated, but also their implementation would be evident in initiating changes in social practice. Moreover, they would gradually be reflected in the alterations of our realities.

However, the appearance of doubts whether these principles would actually be realised is also very justified, particularly, if we take into account our experiences of history and sociological knowledge. In this context, it seems inevitable to refer to the sociological concepts of Florian Znaniecki (1934/1974) concerning the creation of a new reality, not flowing out from the former one. As Znaniecki pointed out: “Since there is incipience, since human efforts directed towards the creation of a new civilisation have appeared and developed, there also is no relying upon it that they would still develop by their own spontaneous impetus without a cognitive reflection and conscious management until at last they would certainly triumph. How many times in history new creative forces were wasted in vain in a struggle with the unconquered resistance? How many times the apparent triumph of a new idea was actually defeat because it was brought about at the cost of such adjustment to existing reality that the idea was becoming only a new rationalization of that what already was? Those, who believe today in the spontaneous victory of their ideals without the help of science and practical art based on it, only prove that they have no idea about reality, and do not realize the character and power of forces hindering this higher, dynamic synthesis of present civilizations” (95-96).

Our experiences acquired from the realities of living in the previous system do not give us certainty that we would not experience again the creation of such democracy which would be only ‘our’ democracy, and in effect no democracy. Such democracy was before the so-called socialist democracy that is deprived of fundamental democratic principles which realisation is the goal of European democracy. In this respect, anxieties may particularly appear regarding the realisation of the principle of equality between men and women. In relation to various disadvantageous phenomena in the situation of Polish women, it is possible to claim that it is the idea of equality between men and women, which still encounters the “unconquered resistance”.

The idea of equality between women and men

“Nothing can be more absurd than the practice which prevails in our country of men and women not following the same pursuits with all their strength and with one mind, for thus the state, instead of being a whole is reduced to a half” (Plato Laws VII 805). This statement was expressed
almost 24 centuries ago. Paradoxically, however, it may be as well used as a quite accurate way to
depict the situation of contemporary Polish society. The ideas of equality between women and men
were articulated almost as early as the views based on the assumption of the inferiority of women and
limiting their role to the domestic duties of wives, mothers and homemakers. Although they were
articulated in the beginning of the formation of European culture, nowhere the equality between the
sexes has been achieved (Okin 1979). For millennia, the patriarchal attitudes have pervaded and
dominated our culture and its institutions. They have been formulated into the patriarchal tradition
constituting the male dominance as natural and inevitable. This tradition has shaped the relations
between the sexes based on unequal power divisions and inequalities between women and men. It has
also assigned separate roles, domains and qualities to women and men.

In the course of history, many changes were taking place, and many social, political and
economic problems were solved, however, the fundamental problems of women have remained
unsolved. As Rosalind Miles (1989) points out: “All democratic experiments, all revolutions, all
demands for equality have so far, in every instance, stopped short of sexual equality” (287). Cross-
cultural studies on women and gender relations show that there are gender inequalities in all
contemporary societies, and everywhere the status of women is lower than that of men. It is also
evident that women’s issues are subordinated to other priorities in most social, political and economic
changes. But, at the same time, it seems that there are some countries, mostly the European Union’s
countries, in which the need for gender change to benefit both women and men has already been
accepted. It also seems that in some of these countries women are nearer the achievement of the goal
of equality between women and men than elsewhere. Moreover, it is evident that some states have
responded to the problems of women with public policies on such issues as equal pay, sex
discrimination and abortion. International organisations like the European Union and the United
Nations have also reacted to the pressure for social change, with various initiatives (Norris 1987).
There is no doubt that the impact of feminist ideas and activities is becoming visible in various
changes.

The publication, Europe for Women, Women for Europe (1999), concerning the European
Union indicates its longstanding commitment to equal opportunities between women and men, and
recently, also applying the gender mainstreaming principle. With the Amsterdam Treaty, equality
between women and men has been recognised as one of the European Union’s fundamental objectives,
and a great deal of work is going on at European level towards this goal. It is also pointed out that the
European institutions have set up structures that are specifically responsible for equality issues. They
have been also very active in supporting legislation and programmes aimed at promoting equality and
fighting discrimination. It is recognised that equality between women and men is a question of basic
human rights, social justice and democratic representation, and it cannot be fully realised without
equal participation for all, women and men, in every area of activity, including the political process.
The European Union is built on the basis of democratic representation of its citizens, with a view to
social progress and justice. It means that European democracy cannot be complete without the
balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process.

Polish Transformations: Adherence to Tradition

In relation the European Union’s policy and initiatives concerning equality between women
and men, it should be noted that the attitudes and policy towards women and their issues are very
different in Poland. In the official documents on our integration into the European Union, these issues
are omitted, and in the leaflet on our integration, women appear only twice: as a farmer’s wife and
French language teacher. It is meaningful that the title of the newspaper article presenting this
information is the following: “The Union without Kowalska” (this is a very common Polish surname –
as for instance, Mrs. Smith; ewa 2003). In Poland, paradoxically, the Minister for European
Integration is a woman, but, in fact, it seems to confirm only the coherence of our policy towards
equality, or rather our ideas of inequality, and retaining of the dominance of the patriarchal status quo
with the practice of tokenism.

In this context, considering the initiatives towards the realisation of the goal of equality
between women and men in the European Union, inevitably, Polish women themselves must take up
this challenge. The dominance of the patriarchal attitudes and the omission of our issues cannot discourage us. “There is no question that there are forms of continuing anti-female discrimination even in advanced, emancipated societies. But this is not an explanation; on the contrary, it needs explanation. If, in social relations, female difference is exposed to evaluations, which damage women, the cause is to be found in the gendered nature of social relations. There is no ungendered social subject who will wish for and effect the end of all discrimination; if the social translation of the human value of being a woman is not done by women, it will be done by men according to their criteria. Criticizing these criteria and trying to better them in favor of the female sex, whatever the result may be, cannot fill the gap left if a translation done by women themselves is missing” (The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 1990: 146).

In fact, it is possible to claim that women do still not do this “social translation of the human value of being a woman” because their share in the power to make political decisions is missing in Poland. Women have continuously been trying to fill this “gap”. But their efforts still encounter the “unconquered resistance”. It is evident in the traditional patriarchal attitudes towards women, their roles and domains, and manifested in various practices of sexism and discrimination against women. Therefore, many changes should be introduced to remove such sex inequalities as sex segregation in the fields of education and occupations; the concentration of women in low-paying occupations; discrimination in hiring, pay and promotion; the division of domestic duties and roles; and sex-role stereotypes. But women, their issues and demands are still in various ways ignored, silenced, discounted, ridiculed and overwhelmed by the dominant forces represented by voices of both men and token women who try to maintain the patriarchal status quo. It shows that there is considerable discrepancy between what is made known about women and what women actually perform. It should be noted that Polish women actively participated in the struggles for the independence of our country. They participated directly in the battlefields, or indirectly, whenever it was necessary because of the absence of men, they performed both male functions and duties in the state, community and home, as well as traditional female roles of wives, mothers and housekeepers. There also is evidence that women were fighting for their rights to the freedom to be women, as well as equality between women and men, however, these rights are still denied to them.

It seems that women have been allowed to participate in traditionally male domains and duties in such circumstances as partitions, wars, struggles for the independence, shortages in the labour force, securing basic means of maintaining the family, or as token women, etc. But they have not been allowed to question and change the patriarchal status quo. They have also been treated as objects subordinated to other priorities. In the course of history, women have continuously been subjected to face almost the same experiences of objectification and manipulation. Nowadays, these experiences cannot be denied. It cannot be claimed that it is just a coincidence, or a personal problem, and not discrimination. In Poland, as probably also in other countries of our region, it is particularly visible now when we are able to compare our past with present experiences. That is, the experiences connected with the realities of living in the so-called socialist system and democratic transformations taking place currently. In fact, we can see their implications for our condition. We can also see how the patriarchal treatment of women is manifested in Poland. It seems to manifest in the following way: when there is such need women are expected to fulfil male roles and participate in male domains, and their competence is not questioned. When such need does not exist anymore, they are told that their place is at home and it is in accordance with nature that their roles should be limited to the household. Thus, until now, women have not been able to become the subjects in their own right defining what means to be woman and what means the achievement of the real equality between women in men in practice. Moreover, women still have to struggle and demand that “equal sharing by women of the power to make political decisions is an essential condition for democracy, because equal representation is a demand of justice” (Estor 1992: 4).

In the most recent experiences of Polish women, it is evident that again women are not the subject, rather than the object, in the processes of social, economic and political changes. They are still treated as objects subordinated to ideological and economic priorities. They are perceived in terms of their functions of wives, mothers and homemakers, as well as duties and domains assigned to them within the patriarchal tradition. They are still not treated as independent human beings, citizens having own rights or as subjects in the transformations currently taking place in Poland. The fundamental democratic principles, as for instance, that: “Women together with men, must be able to determine the
way in which the society in which they live shall be organised and operated, in the interests of the community at large” (Estor 1992: 3) are not recognised nor realised here. Still, only the minority of women, that is just token women, has access to decision/political-making positions. This situation is accompanied by various claims, for instance, that: politics is a male domain and it is not for women; it is because of women who are not interested in politics; if women really want, they can be politicians; there is no discrimination against women (Pawłowicz 1999: 68-74). Moreover, when women call for reforms to bring about the elimination of the rigid gender roles which both result from and perpetuate sexism, and to bring about the elimination of discrimination against them, it is usually claimed that women have been predisposed by nature into roles different than those of men, and there is no discrimination, or that men are also the victims of sexism and both sexes suffer alike (Pawłowicz 1999: 68-74). It may also be suggested that the maintenance of separate domains for women and men, including the images of politics as a male domain and women’s reluctance, helps to keep women in inferior positions without opportunities to reach decision/policy-making positions.

There is no doubt that discrimination against women manifests itself in various forms in Poland. It is also accompanied by various forms of insults, disrespect and humiliation, and women’s issues are disregarded, marginalized or ridiculed. Inevitably, such realities also affect the Minister for Equal Status of Women and Men personally. In the mass media it is commented, for instance, that: “It is clear that the Prime Minister did harm her, appointing her to this post. A woman (niewiasta is used in the Polish text; it is an old Polish term used to denote a woman, and nowadays, it has jocular, derogatory, degrading connotations) sits in her spacious cabinet having problems of existential nature: what am I for? – She thinks of it everyday in the morning. Being led by understandable need to prove that her post is of any use, from time to time, she conceives the idea of doing something. So, /.../ again she concocts a compulsory pushing women in government offices because the half of posts should fall by right to them. The recent wave of heat inspired Mrs Minister with a new idea: one must have done with sexual harassment at work” (Wenerski 2002: 6). Moreover, the author also contains in his text such comments as the following: that “whatever she intends to do it is certain, it will be funny, /.... / and she will make an order, but before this perhaps the Prime Minister will manage to dissuade her from doing this, or a physician” (Wenerski 2002: 6). In the cited text, the author’s attitude toward women, their issues and various attempts to improve their situation is very clear. It is by no means an exceptional case. In our realities, it is rather quite usual as jokes about ‘a woman and too long a chain’ or ‘blond hair women’. In this context, I simply feel compelled to mention that I heard many times various stories about the chivalrous and respectful attitudes of Polish men toward women. It is rather only a myth that does not find its reflection in social practice; if it finds, it seems that such attitudes are only exceptions to the rules of sexism. There is no doubt that urgent efforts should be taken to alter these notions of women, to alter attitudes toward them and their roles, removing sex-stereotypes and sex inequalities combined with disrespect.

The expression “compulsory pushing women” refers to the Act on the equal status of women and men. The project of this Act was elaborated as a result of activities of feminist movement and women’s organisations. In 1996, the Parliamentary Women’s Club forwarded this project to the Parliament. “ The parliamentary debate on the project of this Act was a stream of primitive, vulgar, coarse jokes” (Podgórska 2000: 6). Afterwards, the debates on its project were postponed. However, in the meantime, the Senate adopted it. Unfortunately, on the 6th of May 2003, the Sejm again postponed its debate to an indefinite time. It shows that there is a contradiction between officially stated declarations regarding the democratic transformations and decisions actually made in the Sejm. It also shows that social expectations expressed in Poland are not respected. There also is a contradiction between reforms initiated recently, or in this case, it is rather lack of reforms in the adjustment of Polish reality not only to social expectations, but also to the European Union’s fundamental objectives relating to equality between women and men, as well as legislation and programmes aimed at promoting equality and fighting discrimination. In such circumstances, it cannot be a surprise that people show their distrust and dissatisfaction. The research carried out by the Institute of Public Affairs (Paradowska 2003: 88-89) reveals that Polish society is generally not satisfied with the way Polish democracy functions, and shows lack of confidence in the government, Sejm, our institutions and politicians. Moreover, it is expressed that the direction of our changes is wrong. It can be claimed that there is no justification, reason or need to postpone the implementation of laws which must inevitably be adopted; and there is no need to ask: “When? Now. There are no
possible or necessary intermediate stages. Putting things off in time is necessary when one must reach ends which differ from their means, like sowing grain in order to eat bread, whereas in the work necessary for attaining free social existence, the means is the same as the end. Freedom is the only means for attaining freedom. To find out what society will be like when female difference can express itself freely, we need only to know how we can make belonging to the female sex the surest guarantee of freedom for each individual woman” (The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 1990: 146). Moreover, according to Znaniecki (1934/1974): “The only efficient activity which may lead to come into being of a new civilisation is a conscious development, today and incessantly, of just these and not other cultural forces which this civilisation needs to its existence. Therefore, it is necessary to create at once, and in a greater extent, such people as the people of the future should be, and at the same time such social system as the future system should be like - and not the ‘transient’ people and ‘temporary’ system” (98).

There are also other contradictions. As Renata Siemieńska (1996) points out: “Taking up women’s issues was and is perceived by many politicians as ridiculous, as creating artificial problems in the situation when the state is bothered with the problems of considerably greater importance which demand rapid solutions” (118). Paradoxically, it is evident that some female politicians and scientists also express such opinions. Until now, it was not possible to concentrate successfully on the issue of equality between women and men, but, in fact, it was women’s issue as one of the first issues taken up after 1989. It was a result of the Catholic Church campaign to criminalize the termination of pregnancy under any circumstances and curtail the availability of contraceptives. “The socialist state had subsidized all drugs, including birth control pills. But in May [1991 – E.G.], the government eliminated subsidies for birth control pills on the Jesuitical ground that “avoiding pregnancy is not a sickness”. Removing the subsidy tripled the price of birth control pills for an already impoverished population. The decision was announced only days before the bill criminalizing abortion came to a vote in the parliament. In May 1991, the legislature rejected the total ban on abortion sought by the Catholic Church, but adopted a non-binding resolution petitioning the government to ban abortions by private doctors (whom women prefer, so the abortion does not appear in public records)” (French 1992: 95-96). It seems that in the situation of women nothing can be certain. Particularly, the issue of abortion shows that the right which was once given to women can be also taken back from them. Moreover, it is evident that what was once termed ‘abortion’, later, it can also be termed ‘killing of a conceived child’. There is no doubt that it shows how great still is the power of the patriarchal value-system. In general, it also shows that “unless we tackle the patriarchal value-system itself – a value-system which discounts women – then the sexism will be removed from one area, only to reappear in another. And then we shall have to start all over again” (Spender 1985: 182).

It seems that whenever and whatever circumstances or initiatives of any social, economic and political changes appear for improving the condition of the state, it is usually declared that it would obviously bring about the improvement for its whole society. But, taking into account women’s experiences, it is not so obvious that various declarations actually mean that the improvement would also be made regarding women’s condition. In its realisation, this ‘improvement’ is often illusory only or even deteriorating women’s condition. Moreover, new inventions can be interpreted or reformulated in such a way that “in a new form would live an old content” (Znaniecki 1934/74: 97), or sometimes they can be implemented contrary to intended goals or principles. “Such a split between pronounced value and actual value, between what is said and what is done, is not acceptable to feminists” (French 1986: 477).

It can be suggested that, in the transformations taking place in Poland, the ideas of democracy, citizenship society and global Europe with their principles of justice, equality, rights, as far as they concern women, are reformulated in such a way that it is again only the new gendered rationalisation of old ideas of unequal power divisions and inequalities between women and men, as well as adjusting our realities in contradiction to both our expectations and the European Union’s standards. Indeed, in Znaniecki’s phrase cited above, it is “a new rationalization of that what already was”. It seems relevant to refer to the sociological knowledge and experience contained in Znaniecki’s theories so that the implementation of changes could not take place in contradiction to social expectations and objectives. Considering opportunities for the realisation of new ideas in order to create a new civilisation, he claims that: “It takes new people and new social groups so that a new civilisation would rise and live. [Moreover], /.../ the formation of new human personality types is the fundamental
condition for the development of a new civilisation” (Znaniecki 1934/1974: 96-97). Thus, the evolution of contemporary society towards the realisation of the ideal of gender equality poses important issues - not only the need for the reorganisation of political, social and economic structures, and institutional arrangements; but also the issue personality formation. It has become obvious that changes in structures and institutions do not automatically bring about changes in personality, tendencies, interests, motives of action, etc. We see that when people with traditional attitudes, tendencies and motives enter new structures, they soon adapt these new structures to former goals. They will continue to employ old modes of action, and as a result, great re-organisational efforts may become re-oriented and exploited toward objectives incompatible with the intended ideals. However, Znaniecki is not interested in social macrostructures; he does not see their profound pertinence to the processes of personality formation. But he argues that in any social macrostructure, the decisive social factor for the ultimate personality formation is its social microenvironments. The latter retain basic similarities in every macro-structure. Therefore, by transforming macro-structures, while retaining microenvironments unchanged, the formation of a new and different personality type can never be attained (Znaniecki 1934/1974; Szczepański 1989: 71-75).

Conclusion: Feminism and Democracy

In Poland, it was previously claimed that feminism was invented by bourgeoisie women and concerned only their situation, and it did not concern us because women’s emancipation was achieved. In fact, at that time it was not so much information on feminism and its ideas and issues. Nowadays, the patriarchal rhetoric against feminism takes various forms. I don’t think that the situation of Polish women has been in any way very distinct from the situation of women in other parts of the world. Obviously, there are cultural differences. At the same time, however, there are many similarities. They are particularly evident in the dominance of the patriarchal value-system and in it’s various manifestations and forms of discrimination against women. “Over the millennia of civilisation, the source and site of women’s inferiority has been located in nature, biology, religion, physiology, brain size and the female psyche. Women have fought back, for the right to read, to own money, to vote. One by one those oppressions have gone down in some parts of the world, thereby undermining the ‘natural’ and inevitable status of those that remain. But underlying patterns change slowly. This is in no way to belittle the fruits of the struggle to date. It is simply to insist that in the deeper struggle which feminists world-wide now realize that they face, changing the world takes longer” (Miles: 286-287). Therefore, for the time being, we must be aware that ‘sexism will be sexism’.

In this context, it should be pointed out that the number of feminist and women’s organisations, as well as individual women struggling for women’s rights is growing in Poland. Their activities and initiatives are becoming more and more visible. But, as it has been shown, the resistance to changes also is enormous. It seems that human rights are still confused with men’s rights, democracy with patriarchal democracy, and civil society with its male part. Therefore, further efforts toward the spread of the feminist movement and the development of feminist research and teaching may stimulate activities toward the improvement of the women’s situation and the achievement of a real gender equality, as well as the formation of a democratic state. As Orit Ichilov (1998: 8; see also Sapiro 1998: 174-190) points out, “women’s movements can play an important role in the incorporation of gender equality into democratic theory and practice. Such movements are not just agents of mobilisation and conduits of pressure on political leaders: they are also agents of socialisation and education”.

In conclusion, it may be claimed that, sooner or later, we must build a society in which equality between women and men, as well as difference between them, is respected. I still hope that the creation of such a civilisation is possible.

References


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