

Chapter 13

Women's Studies in Poland

Elzbieta H. Oleksy

1. Introduction

Women's movements, as other social movements, often emerge and flourish in times of major political and social change. It thus seems that the transformation Poland has undergone for over a decade would precipitate the development of a significant women's movement. Over the last ten years, Poland has been undergoing major political and economic changes. The rights to freedom of association and to free expression have resulted in a large number of political parties and organizations, and there is much debate about the civil society, both within the government and in society in general. It would thus appear that under such conditions of change women should have the possibility to organize and to interject their views and group interests into the public arena. Additionally, with the opening up of borders, contacts with western feminists and women's organizations abroad have made possible information about feminism—information which, until the 1990s, had been scarce. And although all of the above has had an impact on the development of Polish women's movement, it has not developed as rapidly as originally anticipated, and discussion about women's issues in Poland is still marginal.

The Polish case illustrates the necessity of situating the analysis in a specific historical, political, economic, and social context. So far, research on women's movement has focused on the West and has been made by western feminist scholars. It has recently been pointed out by a number of scholars and women activists that an examination of non-western contexts is crucial to a broader understanding of feminism's organized expressions (Tripp, 2000: 649-76).

This report will briefly address the changes in higher education that occurred in Poland over the last ten years in terms of university structures and degree structures, the research policies and equal opportunity policies, and will subsequently focus on the history of women's movement after 1989. It will finally present a case study of the institutionalization of Women's Studies Center at the University of Łódź, one of the five major universities in Poland. The specific focus of this analysis will be a demonstration how conservative approaches to education in terms of the overall structure of the universities as well as the degree structure hinder the development of Women's/Gender Studies in Poland.

2. University structures and degree structures

In Poland, the political and economic systems have experienced substantial changes since 1989, when the communist regime was overthrown and a parliamentary democracy and market economy were reinstated. However, transformation has chiefly affected the economy and politics of the country, with much less emphasis on the educational system, which is still controlled by a number of state agencies and institutions, such as the Ministry of National Education (MNE) and the Central Council of Higher Education (CCHE) that supervises fields of study for BA and MA degrees as well as the core curricula in all schools of higher education. The Central Commission for Degrees formally qualifies and approves post-doctoral degrees (habilitated doctor) and titles (titular

professor) that have initially been processed at qualified schools of higher education.

Poland has one of the lowest percentages of Gross National Product (GNP) assigned to education. The situation of higher education, though slightly better than in other types of education, is still much worse than in the EU countries and most countries of East Central Europe. According to the data provided by the Ministry of National Education, Poland's funding for education measured in terms of the percentage of GNP never exceeded a value of 1% in the period 1980-1999 (1999 is the most recent available data).

Table 1

| | 1980 | 1990 | 1995 | 1999 |
|---|------|------|------|------|
| | 0.97 | 0.70 | 0.70 | 0.82 |
| % | % | % | % | % |

Source: G_ówny Urz_d Statystyczny (GUS) [Central Statistical Office Yearbook], 2000.

As can be seen, funding of the institutions of higher education has been decreasing since 1980, which is especially grievous when one considers a tremendous growth of student population, especially in state schools of higher education, whose studies are subsidized by the state: from 584 thousand in 1993 to 1.431.900 in 2000. As Oleksy and Wasser argue, "Despite numerous declarations of increased budgetary allowances to higher education from all post-1989 cabinets in Poland irrespective of the political configuration of the government, the financial situation of institutions of higher education remains as grave as it has always been" (111).

Lack of funding is only one of several detrimental factors to the establishment of women's/gender studies programs at Polish universities. The other factors include: a rigid list of fields of study (*kierunki*) and specializations, or majors, within fields of study (*specjalno_ci*) and core curricula that constitute up to sixty percent of the curricula, both set up by the CCHE. As one of the commentators writes: "The teaching is limited by a list of specializations that can be taught at a university. The corresponding curricula have to fill so-called curriculum minimum [core curriculum] created under control of the bureaucracy" (Szapiro, 1996: 37). In spite of constant efforts of various academic and political bodies to introduce interdisciplinary fields of study, such as Women's/Gender Studies, but also, for instance, European Studies or American Studies, to a list of fields of study, the CCHE is adamant: no changes are necessary and possible. And though there is a lee-way, as will be argued in section 6, to by-pass the rigid regulations, they make it virtually impossible to create a coherent program of study in an interdisciplinary area, such as women's/gender studies.

3. Research policies

The State Committee for Scientific Research (SCSR) is the main source of research funding in Poland. SCSR allocates funding in the following categories:

- A. Statutory activities
- B. Integration with the EU
- C. Research projects and goal-oriented projects
- D. Research-connected investments
- E. International cooperation
- F. Research-assisting activities
- G. Other

In the year 2000 funding for education in Poland, measured in terms of the percentage of GNP was 0.45% and was allocated in the following way:

Table 2

| | A | B | C | D | E | F | G |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | 5 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| 9 | . | 3 | 4 | . | . | . | . |
| . | 0 | . | . | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 1 | 2 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 9 | 1 | 1 |
| % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |

Source: Publications of the State Committee for Scientific Research.

It is important to note that only formal faculty structures are eligible for funding in all categories. Such structures as Women’s/Gender Studies Centers, which in principle should be self-financed, are not eligible for funding with the exception of category C and only in the subcategory “individual or research team projects” submitted directly to SCSR.

4. Equal opportunities policies

The equal rights policy for women and men is established by Article 33 of the new (1997) Polish Constitution. However, there is a lack of specific provisions, and Poland still needs to adopt anti-discrimination policies based on constitutional rights. This is especially evident in the Polish Labor Code which lacks specific provisions as regards employment. As a consequence it often happens that employers openly articulate their preference to employ men, and women who, apply for a job, are frequently required to provide medical certificates stating that they are not pregnant. Such practices are incompatible with the European Union equality legislation—legislation which Poland will need to adopt prior to accession. It is especially important that the general principle of equality, already present in Polish law, gains practical expression and is mainstreamed. This will require introduction of a specific equal opportunity act.

5. History of Women’s Movement

Beginning in 1989, the reforms in Poland, such as freedom to form associations, to demonstrate, to publish and distribute information, stimulated feminist organizing. A group of feminist activists that first emerged in 1980 at the University of Warsaw, partly in response to Solidarity’s conservative stand on women’s issues, established an official national organization and registered as the Polish Feminist Association (PFA). The PFA began its work in Warsaw, but after the turnover it started launching branches, which afterwards transformed into autonomous groups. Typically, they are all grassroots, nonhierarchical, with flexible goals. Also, all of their members publicly call themselves feminists.

By 1993, there were 59 officially registered women’s organizations in Poland, and the number rose to 70 by 1995, 150 by 1998, and over 200 by the year 2000. These organizations include single issue and multi-issue groups; NGOs and federations that bring together several organizations; philanthropic organizations, self-help groups and lobby groups; women’s and gender studies programs. Not all of them are feminist; in recent years a number of conservative women’s

organizations were registered, and several of them are affiliated with the Catholic church.

The single issue that stimulated women to act concerned the threat to legal abortion. When the first anti-communist government came into power in September 1989, it proposed an act making abortion illegal and advocating prison sentences of up to 5 years for women undergoing abortions as well as for doctors who performed them. This caused a public uproar and led to demonstrations, petitions, and media discussions. However, activists of the period found many impediments to effective action. First of all, criticizing the proposed act was often interpreted as "siding with the enemy" (i.e., communists, who made abortion legal in 1956), while support for the proposed act was perceived as opposition to the oppressive regime, especially because the proposition came from Catholic church groups. The media often linked the new women's groups which opposed the act with the compromised regime, the result of which was that they could not significantly increase their membership and exert much influence.

Although Polish feminists helped to postpone the passage of the anti-abortion legislation and to make it less punitive, by 1993 the pro-life interest groups, the strongest of which has been the Catholic church, succeeded in the passage of the new law. The abortion issue has been a political football since then. In 1995, when the Democratic Left Alliance (post-communists) was in power, the anti-abortion law was revoked. But in 1997, when a conservative coalition came to power once again, the pro-life law was restored. The single focus on the abortion issue of the early feminist movement in Poland hindered mobilization around other issues, and some of the early groups ceased to exist, whereas new ones have been slow to form.

There are several reasons why newly emerging feminist organizations have not been able to attract large numbers of women. For one, in the transition period women's lives, already highly burdened under socialism, have not improved and, in some respects, have even deteriorated. The effects of privatization have hit women hard. They are employed predominantly in light industries and lower priority sectors of the economy, and continue to occupy lower positions with lower income. Additionally, women have been hurt by the emergence of the ideology of domesticity, strongly advocated by the Catholic church and its circles. Battering, pornography, and trafficking in women are increasing, whereas the number of women in political office has decreased. On the one hand, women who engage in daily struggle to make ends meet lack the time and energy to focus on anything beyond the daily survival. On the other hand, the relatively few women who have benefited from the transition have become attracted to consumerism and tend to avoid participation in any organizations that question the current system.

The above notwithstanding, small grassroots women's organizations are on the increase, and they have undertaken work in the areas where the state has failed to provide information and services to women and families. Their activities range from organizing workshops on self-esteem, providing information on reproduction and contraception and working to stop violence against women and trafficking in women, to helping women organize small economic enterprises and conducting training programs for women, to training women for political offices.

A growing awareness in Poland and in other countries of East Central Europe of the importance of gender analysis to policy development has been, in recent years, associated with an orientation towards the European Union membership. The gender dimension of enlargement has great significance, not only for the countries of East Central Europe but also for the EU. Recently some EU commentators have expressed a concern that the accession of socially conservative countries of East Central Europe will impede efforts to achieve gender equality within the EU (Bretherton, 1999: 132-54). Therefore, whereas present evidence suggests that enlargement to the East will enhance opportunities

for creative networking among women, there is an urgent need to promote gender awareness in East Central Europe during the pre-accession period. The adoption of the strategy to promote “equality between women and men in all activities and policies at all levels” (CEC 1996a), which attained treaty status in Amsterdam, implies that gender issues must be monitored in all internal and external policy areas, also in relation to the enlargement processes.

In view of the above, mainstreaming gender in education has gained a special significance. The development of women’s and gender studies programs and centers at Polish universities is the phenomenon of the last ten years, with only two precedents made in the 1980s: Interdisciplinary Research Team on Women’s Social Status at the Institute of Social Studies, University of Warsaw, which was set up in 1980, and Interdisciplinary Womens’ Studies Group at the Institute of Philosophy, University of Poznan, founded in 1989. The first independent Women’s Studies Center was established in 1992 at the University of Łódź (see the next section) and Gender Studies Programs were founded in 1996 - one at the University of Gdansk’s Institute of Philosophy and Sociology and one at the University of Warsaw’s Institute of Applied Social Science. These institutions offer postgraduate, tuition-based programs (two semesters in Gdansk and four semesters in Warsaw) in gender studies.

None of the programs in Poland offers a BA or an MA in Women’s or Gender Studies. The rigid disciplinary framework as well as lack of (mainly male) university authorities’ interest in setting up gender studies prevent their establishment. Set within traditional disciplines (mainly social sciences and humanities) the researchers introduce interdisciplinary perspective in teaching even though they work within institutional frameworks of disciplinary departments.

6. Women’s Studies Center (WSC) at the University of Łódź - a case study

WSC was founded in February 1992. To date, it is the only independent structure of this kind in Poland. WSC is an integral part of the University of Łódź, and its Director reports directly to the Rector. Its activities are addressed to the university community and the general public. The main areas of activities include research and teaching women’s studies from different disciplinary points of view (cultural anthropology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, literature, film, media, and cultural studies) as well as organizing international conferences, seminars, and workshops, hosting guest lecturers and publishing conference materials. The Center participates in the Fifth Framework research project “the Social Problem and Societal Problematisation of Men and Masculinities” (HPSE-CT-1999-0008) and in University of Technology at Sydney based research project “Women and Radical Social Change.” WSC is also represented in two major European women’s studies associations (AOIFE and WISE), participates in EU educational projects ATHENA and “Gendering Cyberspace,” and has Socrates/Erasmus agreements with seven universities in the European Union: University of Granada, University of Surrey-Roehampton, University of Sunderland, Univeristy of Tampere, University of Utrecht, Lund University, and Vic University in Spain.

In the early years of the Center, it offered two team-taught modules in Women’s Studies open to students of all faculties of the University of Łódź: “Women in Society” and “Women in Literature and the Arts.” Even though the enrollment was very high (over sixty students in each module), the drop-out process followed as the students realized that they would not get any credit for these courses in their “home” departments. At that time the credit system was not in place at the University, and all students had to follow the mandatory program of studies. The only faculties that eventually introduced the credit system that allowed for crediting courses taken outside the faculty were Faculty of Education

and Institute of International Studies (presently Faculty of International and Political Studies). The latter faculty offers an MA program of study in international relations, and a large percentage of theses in women's/gender studies is prepared within several specialization lines of this faculty. Since students of this faculty repeatedly express an interest in having a single gender studies focus in their specialization, as well as having a formal recognition of gender studies on their diploma, plans are now well under way to set up an MA program in International Gender Studies to accommodate this interest. The program will commence in the academic year 2002/2003, and WSC will coordinate the curriculum development and teaching of this specialization.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above, institutionalization of women's/gender studies programs at Polish universities is beset with difficulties that can be summarized as follows:

1. All degree programs at Polish universities can be conducted within such formal structures as departments/institutes/faculties. Interdisciplinary centers are in principle self-financed structures which can offer non-degree postgraduate study programs that are tuition-based and therefore addressed to relatively wealthy individuals.
2. Degree programs can be offered within fields of study approved by the Central Council of Higher Education, and women's/gender studies are not on the list of fields of study.
3. Even though universities can relatively freely shape specializations within fields of study, substantial core curricula enforced by the Central Council of Higher Education of most fields of study leave very few credit hours for specialization courses.
4. Scarce resources for research in general and for women's/gender studies in particular make it necessary to seek funding for women's/gender studies research outside Poland.

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