

Gender Equity and the Role of Women in Poland

In 1920 AAUW's predecessor, the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, helped raise \$100,000 for Polish scientist Marie Curie to purchase a gram of radium. Members honored Curie in New York City as she kicked off her triumphant 1921 fundraising tour of the United States, which allowed her to continue her relentless work and eventually establish the Radium Institute for Research. The institute eventually became the Cancer Centre and Institute of Oncology, the government-funded, largest cancer research and treatment facility in Poland.

In fall 2014, a delegation of seven AAUW members traveled to Curie's hometown, Warsaw, to learn about what life is like today — nearly a century later — for Polish women. The group toured the Polish capital November 1–9, performing research, attending cultural events, and meeting with leaders in education, law, politics, medicine, and science.

This paper summarizes the delegation's nine-day visit. Unless otherwise noted, statistics and statements cited here are based on delegation members' notes from the discussions and cannot be verified by public data.

I. The status of women in Poland

During the trip, the AAUW delegates met with leaders in a number of different fields, including

- Magdalena Chechlinska, Ph.D., head of the Cancer Centre and Institute of Oncology's Department of Immunology
- Dr. hab Anna Wysocka-Rabin, associate professor in the Division of Accelerator Physics and Technology at the National Centre for Nuclear Research
- Karolina Wieckiewicz, lawyer and Network of Lawyers coordinator at the Federation for Women and Family Planning
- Bianka Siwinska, Ph.D., executive director of the Perspektywy Education Foundation
- Dr. Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz, member of the European Parliament
- Anna Peck, Ph.D., fellow at the University of Warsaw
- Wanda Nowicka, deputy speaker of the Sejm in the Parliament of the Republic of Poland
- Malgorzata Fuszara, secretary of state, government plenipotentiary for equal treatment at the office in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister
- Anna Drzazgowska Zachara, Onkolog, physician on staff at the Radium Institute
- Representatives from the Congress of Women

Poland's constitution guarantees equal rights for women and men in all spheres of life. Article 33 of the constitution states that "men and women shall have equal rights ... regarding education, employment and promotion, and shall have the right to equal compensation for

work of similar value, to social security, to hold office, and to receive public honours and decorations.”¹

Yet, as members have discovered on past AAUW delegations, reality often differs significantly from what is officially codified in the books.

“Our AAUW delegations keep hearing the same thing over and over again,” said Linda D. Hallman, AAUW Executive Director and CEO. “No matter the country or political landscape, you can codify gender equality all you want, but it does little to guarantee it. Just as we have here in the United States, you need groups and their vigilance to ensure that equity laws are implemented and upheld.”

The delegates to Poland quickly learned that, like their sisters in Cuba, Israel, South Africa, and China — and in so many other countries around the world — women and girls in Poland still have a long way to go before they achieve true equity. The delegates found that Polish women continue to earn less than men, suffer discrimination at the top levels of their professions, remain underrepresented in the STEM fields, are the victims of violence, and face attacks on their reproductive rights, among other things.

Delegates discovered that perhaps one of the greatest hurdles to achieving true equality in Poland lies in the presence of one very powerful institution — the Catholic Church. They learned that as the country transitioned into the post-Communist era, the Catholic Church grew stronger politically and used its deep-seated influence and control to push a conservative social agenda, which has since limited women’s reproductive rights and helped enforce traditional gender roles throughout contemporary Polish society.

But as the delegates are quick to point out, they also experienced a wonderful city that has risen from the ashes of World War II. They saw a strong commitment to democracy and a free economy. And they met with dedicated, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic individuals and groups at the Congress of Women, the Perspektywy Education Foundation, and the Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning who are working passionately to break through the complex and formidable barriers facing women and girls in Poland.

II. Employment

Women earn less than men earn. Past AAUW delegations to Cuba, Israel, South Africa, and China consistently heard the same theme — that women in those countries continue to earn less than men earn for equal work performed. Poland is no exception.

Delegates learned during their visit that despite often having a higher education (see below), women generally earn 20–30 percent less than men earn. They also heard that women face significant obstacles in career advancement and that men continue to dominate the top leadership positions in medicine, academia, and government. For example, at the Institute of

Oncology, women make up more than 50 percent of the doctors and nearly all of the nurses; however, only one woman has ever been at the director level and only one woman has served on the Scientific Advisory Board.

A panel of female doctors at the Institute told delegates that they felt they had to work harder than their male colleagues. They explained that although they were strongly supported in their work and that discrimination was not open or blatant, bosses tend to push and support the male colleagues more. The women added that they often struggle to balance job demands and family, especially with a lack of child care.

Women’s political participation is low. Poland was one of the first countries in Europe in which women were granted the right to vote, in 1918.² That same year, women won the right to be elected to office as well.

Delegates were told that in 2014, women made up 24 percent of representatives in the Sejm (the lower chamber of Parliament) and held 13 percent of the seats in the Senate (the upper chamber of Parliament). Significantly, Poland has had two female prime ministers, including current Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz. However, many of the higher-ranking women in government unfortunately are not supportive of women’s issues, and the right-wing party — described to delegates as “very old school and conservative” — has been in charge after the past two elections.

Delegates learned that an electoral gender quota system has been in place in Poland since 2011 to encourage women to run for office. The quota requires at least 35 percent of the candidates on a ballot to be women — but their names are often listed at the bottom. To address this issue, the Congress of Women has introduced a “zipper” bill, which would mandate that the names of male and female candidates alternate throughout the ballot. The Congress of Women is a diverse coalition that lobbies for legislative change on issues such as gender equality in public life, violence against women, women’s health, and equality in education.

III. Education

Poland completely restructured its education system in the late 1990s. Previously, the country’s basic education system was composed of

- A comprehensive primary school cycle lasting eight years
- A secondary school cycle with two tracks: a general track lasting four years, or a vocational track lasting either three years (basic vocational school) or five years (secondary vocational school)³

This meant that basic schooling for children was anywhere from 11 to 13 years (depending on track choice and duration) and that students had to decide the direction and duration of their education at the end of primary school, at around age 14.⁴

In 1999, the country changed its system into three stages:

- A comprehensive primary school cycle of six years
- A comprehensive lower secondary school cycle of three years
- A two-track upper secondary school cycle that could last either three or four years, depending on the choice of stream

Students now have an extra year to choose whether to pursue higher education or vocational training. In addition to these structural changes, Poland also reformed its curricula and teaching philosophy.⁵

The reforms seem to be paying off: The most recent test results from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) — an international survey that evaluates education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students — show that Poland is ranked 14th for reading, ahead of the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, and Germany.⁶

Women are underrepresented in STEM studies. As in the United States — and as previous delegates heard in China — women and girls in Poland remain underrepresented in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Delegates were told that the prevailing perception is that women “aren't as good” at STEM as men are. One delegate was even told that male teachers often actively discourage Polish girls from pursuing studies in math.

Although women make up 65 percent of university students in Poland, only 37 percent of technical university students are female. According to the Perspektywy Education Foundation, that number is up from just 29 percent in 2008. The delegates learned about the foundation's work to advance gender equality and support women's careers in technology through mentoring programs, research in career choices, and campaigns to engage girls in STEM. The delegates also learned of efforts by other organizations to increase female enrollment in polytechnic schools.

IV. Violence against women

Violence against women remains a significant problem. According to the U.S. State Department, rape, including spousal rape, is illegal in Poland and punishable by up to 12 years in prison. Polish law also prohibits sexual harassment; people convicted of sexual harassment may be sentenced to up to three years in prison.⁷ The Act on Counteracting Family Violence, the main law dealing with combating domestic violence in Poland, was introduced in 2005.⁸

Despite these legal measures, however, delegates heard over and over again during their time in Poland — as did past delegates to China, South Africa, and Cuba — that domestic violence against women remains a serious problem, just as it is in the United States. A recent survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that 19 percent of women in

Poland have experienced either physical or sexual violence since age 15, though incidents may be underreported.⁹

Delegates also learned that because of the influence of conservative political forces, the Polish Parliament has yet to ratify the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

V. Reproductive rights

Polish women have lost reproductive rights since the end of communism. Abortion was legal in Poland for nearly 40 years. In 1993, however, new legislation outlawed abortion except in three specific cases:

- If the pregnancy constitutes a threat to the mother's life or health
- If the prenatal examination or other medical reasons point to a high probability of severe and irreversible damage to the fetus or an incurable life-threatening disease of the child
- If the pregnancy is a result of a criminal act (for example, rape or incest). Termination of pregnancy in this case is allowed if the woman is less than 12 weeks pregnant; afterward it is illegal.¹⁰

Delegates learned that these laws are actually stricter in practice than on paper. These circumstances must be confirmed by a doctor other than the one conducting the abortion and by a prosecutor in cases where pregnancy is a result of a criminal act — and the health of the mother or fetus is often open to interpretation.¹¹ Hospitals report approximately 700 abortions performed each year, but as delegates learned, many more are performed illegally as part of the “abortion underground.” Performing an illegal abortion is a criminal offence subject to a fine and/or 10 years' imprisonment.¹²

Women lack access to affordable contraception. Delegates were told that during the Communist era, contraceptives were readily available under the state insurance plan. Today, however, despite the government's claims that all women have access to contraceptives — because “all women can go to a doctor to get prescriptions” — access to contraception remains limited and very expensive (no state subsidies help cover the cost). Delegates heard that some Polish women go abroad to obtain contraceptives, while others use mail-order prescriptions. They also heard that pharmacies sometimes refuse to fill prescriptions.

Quality sex education is lacking in Poland. In Poland, classes called “Preparation for Family Life” — the closest thing to sex education offered to students — are required in all schools. General stipulations for sex education in Polish schools are a part of the Family Planning, Human Fetus Protection, and Permissible Conditions of Abortion law introduced in 1993 and passed in 2002. According to this law, Preparation for Family Life classes should include “knowledge considering sexual life, conscious and responsible parenthood, family values, life in prenatal phase, and methods of conscious procreation.”¹³ During their visit, however, delegates

learned that these classes are often considered “a joke” and do not sufficiently prepare students.

VI. Questions for further discussion

This paper presents major findings from the delegates’ visit to Poland, but the discussion does not end with the delegates’ return to the United States.

A main goal of the delegation was to bring these research findings home to help seed further dialogue about the barriers facing women and girls in Poland. Some key questions guide further discussion of issues that affect the achievement of global equality for women:

- What does the Catholic Church’s continued influence in Polish society mean for the future of women’s rights? Given that Poland is more than 90 percent Catholic and the family is an extremely important social institution, will the church’s influence perhaps be modified from within?
- What steps can women take to regain the reproductive rights lost in recent years?
- How can women in Poland address legislative issues that can open access to greater equality?
- How can the Congress of Women and Federation for Women and Family Planning best encourage, educate, and gain participation from the often apathetic and disinterested women in rural provinces?
- What can AAUW do to strengthen ties with Polish women’s groups as well as with individual Polish women, many of whom know some English?

¹ www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201107/20110725ATT24649/20110725ATT24649EN.pdf.

² www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201107/20110725ATT24649/20110725ATT24649EN.pdf.

³ web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/0,,contentMDK:22767787~pagePK:146736~piPK:146830~theSitePK:258599,00.html.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/0,,contentMDK:22767787~pagePK:146736~piPK:146830~theSitePK:258599,00.html.

⁶ www.bbc.com/news/business-18151512.

⁷ www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/eur/154444.htm.

⁸ www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201107/20110725ATT24649/20110725ATT24649EN.pdf

⁹ The survey noted that the results may reflect the fact that some countries find it less culturally acceptable to talk about the problem than others. www.bbc.com/news/world-26444655.

¹⁰ www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201107/20110725ATT24649/20110725ATT24649EN.pdf.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ www.humanityinaction.org/knowledgebase/214-love-your-neighbor-but-not-too-much-political-and-religious-involvement-in-sex-education-within-polish-public-schools.