

## The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Women's Education in Poland\*

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### Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present the role of non-governmental organizations in women's education. Lifelong learning is widely regarded as playing a key role in enhancing the economic performance and prospects of individuals and, indeed, of whole economies. Women are a group for whom lifelong learning is particularly important, as they need to maintain and enhance their skills if they are to return to work. Lifelong learning is also a key to gain economic independence by women who faced many social problems such as poverty, domestic violence, social exclusion. Education is proven as the most effective way to empower women. Not only does education open the door to any employment and better employment opportunities, it also teaches a woman their rights, solving problems and making positive choices. Many non-governmental organizations help women in their daily struggles and support them when they face social problems such as poverty, violence, exclusion. Those institutions offer various range of trainings and psychological support to women.

**Keywords:** Non-governmental organizations, Women, Gender, Education, Lifelong learning

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### 1. Introduction

In the modern world, education has become an integral part of everyone's life. Lifelong learning is no longer a voluntary educational activity undertaken by a privileged part of society, but rather the necessity and precondition for adequate functioning in the surrounding world. In the 21st century, knowledge has become a determinant of socio-economic development, and formal and informal (non-formal) education undoubtedly contributes to the realization of this goal. Lifelong learning is one of the priorities of education policy in EU countries. Implementation of continuing education programmes supports the transition of the EU to knowledge-based economies and societies that have to cope with constant socio-economic changes. Lifelong learning should last from pre-school to late-retirement. Although the participation of women in paid employment has increased greatly in developed economies over the last fifty years there remains a sizeable gap between male and female participation rates. Responsibility for caring for children and other dependent family members continues to be borne mainly by women, and they frequently have spells out of paid employment as a consequence. Women are also more likely to experience various social problems such as domestic violence, stereotypical perception, labour market discrimination. Implementing gender equality measures (information, educational, or political ones) plays a key role in sustainable social development. Education of women (including adult women) is important, as it allows them to compete on the labor market, enhance their personal development and improve their quality of life. The key actors in adult women education are non-governmental organizations providing support to them. The purpose of the article is to show the role of NGOs in the education of women. The article is largely based on the analysis of own research conducted with the aid of a qualitative method and an individual in-depth interview technique. The research was carried out among 30 representatives of non-governmental organizations in Poland working for women.

#### 1.1. Lifelong Learning in Poland

Lifelong learning includes all forms of learning over the life course, including formal (learning that takes place in education and training institutions and leads to recognized credentials and diplomas), non-formal (learning that takes place in educational and training settings, but does not typically lead to a formalized credential), and informal (learning that takes place in everyday life and is not necessarily intentional and may not even be recognized by the individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills). Lifelong learning was proposed in the context of reducing inequalities and poverty as a means to provide workers with skills necessary

to remain in the labor force at older ages (Commission on European Communities, 2000). Lifelong learning includes ongoing skill development which relies on an integration between education, training, and work. Individuals with skills desired by employers are better able to take advantage of employment and social opportunities, resulting in increased productivity of both the employee and the employer (ILO, 2010).

According to data from a variety of studies conducted over the last few years in Poland, we are experiencing a significant increase in the educational aspirations of Poles, reflected directly in an overall increase in the level of education. At the same time, though, such attitudes are not reflected in growth in how widespread lifelong learning is. Data on average participation in training shows that, contrary to European trends and despite the growing range of courses and other training (available thanks to training projects co-financed by the EU) the level of participation in lifelong learning in Poland is not rising (Morysioska, 2015).

In comparison to other European Union countries, Poland has a very good performance in the education of young people (the results of skills tests and percentage of people with secondary and tertiary education). Nevertheless, in the area of adult education, the results are much lower in Poland than the European average. Low participation of adults in learning and their unsatisfactory results of basic skills tests should be noted. According to the 2016 Labor Force Survey (LFS) data, the share of people aged 25-64 in formal and non-formal learning was 3.7% in Poland and 10.8% in the EU. It should be pointed out that the share of women in these forms of education both in Poland (and on average in the EU) is slightly higher (4.0%) than men (3.4%) (Eurostat, 2016).

**Table 1.** Participation rate of people aged 25-64 in formal and non-formal learning.

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	Goal – 2020
EU	10,7%	10,8%	10,7%	10,8%	Min. 15%
Poland	4,3%	4,0%	3,5%	3,7%	Min. 10%

**Source:** European Union Labour Force Survey (EU LFS).

Reasons behind lifelong learning not being very widespread in Poland can be puttogether in the two most important groups:

- 1) Individual factors - Lifelong learning is not favoured above all by a low level of formal education already acquired, advanced age, not being employed, or by living in rural areas. Paradoxically, lifelong learning is more appealing to and participated in more often by those currently holding jobs and with greater opportunities on the job market than the unemployed or those absent from the job market in the long term (occupationally passive). On the other hand, the reluctance to get involved in learning later in life is heightened by a number of stereotypes rooted deeply in social perception, as well as the lack of a well-developed culture in businesses for investing in their personnel.
- 2) Systemic factors – connected to the country’s education policy, its legal system, and also the attitude displayed by lifelong learning establishments themselves (Morysioska, 2015).

### **1.2. The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Women Support**

Non-governmental organizations pursuing societal objectives are one of the oldest existing forms of social organization, operating on non-profit basis but at the same time under market economy principles (Limanski, A., Drabikm I., 2007). Non-governmental organizations have gained increasing importance as actors in international relations and world politics. They are recognized as key third sector actors on pursuing development, human rights, humanitarian action, environment, and many other areas of public action. NGOs are best-known for two types of activity: 1) the delivery of services to people in need, 2) the organization of policy advocacy, and public campaigns in pursuit of social transformation (Lewis, 2010).

In Poland, there are tens of thousands of NGOs operating in many areas as sport, culture and the arts, education, social work and environmental protection. In 2015, 17 thousand foundations and 86 thousand associations were registered in Poland, and about 70 thousand of them were active. For 34% of registered non-governmental organizations, the core domain of activity was connected with sport, tourism, leisure and hobbies. Every sixth of the NGOs (15%) mentioned education and upbringing as the main area of activity, and every seventh of the NGOs pointed to culture and art. However, the description of Polish non-governmental sector on the basis of the main area of activity only would be incomplete, since NGOs often pursue a broad scope of

activities, not limited to one area only. Hence, any activity related to sport, tourism, recreation and hobbies is carried out by more than half (55%) of Polish organizations. Slightly fewer organizations (53%) work in the field of education and upbringing, and 35% of them are involved in cultural activities. Most organizations (52%) operate locally (municipality, county, voivodship). Every tenth Polish NGOs operates internationally (Adamiak, Charycka, Gumkowska, 2016).

NGOs have been influential in shaping the current global policy framework on women's empowerment and gender equality. The data show that organizations whose statutory activity concerns the development of human rights or the protection of equal rights for women and men represent 10% of all registered foundations and associations in Poland (Borkowska, 2012).

The activity of organizations working to promote equality between women and men is crucial because women are still more vulnerable to social exclusion. Women are experiencing difficulties both in the labour market, public space and family life. The main differences in the situation of women in the labour market - compared to men - are their lower participation in paid employment, more frequent and longer unemployment spells, difficulties in finding employment and reintegration into the labour market, for example after the periods devoted to bringing up children. Women's inequality in the labour market is also linked to the sphere of income and career advancement. Women generally earn less than men working in the same position and have limited career advancement opportunities (the glass ceiling phenomenon) (Tarkowska 2005).

Women are more likely to experience difficult life situations such as lone parenthood and the problems related to it. They are also the main victims of domestic violence.

Reconciliation of work, family and educational careers is challenging, particularly for women who are nowadays expected to be more involved in employment and work longer, while evidence shows that care provision at all stages of the life course is still more frequently provided by women (EU, 2006). Opportunities in the labour market are important for women to achieve equality with men. Overcoming the challenges that confront women in gaining access to education and training and in using this training to secure better employment This includes overcoming logistic, economic and cultural barriers and meeting the training needs of women re-entering the labour market and of older women who have not had equal access to opportunities for lifelong learning. (ILO, 2010). NGOs are significant providers of lifelong learning (particularly adult and community learning opportunities). The "third sector" is generally regarded as most successful at engaging in learning opportunities disadvantages members of society (O'Grady, 2013).

### **1.3. Non-Governmental Organizations in Poland and Women Education - Analysis and Interpretation of Own Research**

The research was carried out at the end of 2015 using a qualitative methodology and the technique of individual in-depth interview (IDI). Qualitative interview has a fairly loose structure. Formulating individual questions, their precise verbalization or the order in which they are asked is less important than getting specific information, regardless of the question (Maison, 2010). The research was carried out among 30 representatives of NGOs supporting women from all over Poland. The surveyed individuals represented organizations based in large cities (metropolitan areas) as well as large, medium and small towns and rural areas. The study included both international, national and local organizations. The sampling selection was purposive, but it was attempted to include in the study the diversity of non-governmental organizations on the basis of their seat and area of action. The key element connecting all the researched organizations was their focus on women's support and the inclusion of this objective in the organization's statutes. Qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews allowed to highlight several roles /measures aimed at direct or indirect support for women's education. Among these, we can distinguish: 1) direct educational activities in the form of courses and trainings organized for women in order to improve their skills and knowledge, 2) programmes aimed at the reconciliation of professional and family roles, 3) information and dissemination programmes, 4) activation of unemployed women. A significant proportion of the surveyed organizations implemented more than one of the above-mentioned measures aimed at women in the scope of their statutory activities.

A sizeable proportion of the surveyed non-governmental organizations conducted trainings and vocational courses to enhance women's career opportunities on the labour market. On the one hand, these measures were to boost women's confidence in their own abilities and sense of competence, and on the other hand to increase professional attractiveness of women for employers. Some of the educational activities of the researched NGOs

was aimed at developing specific skills required for a particular occupation or position, especially those that have recently developed, allowing women with career breaks for childcare reasons to have fully up-to-date qualifications, e.g. courses in computer skills. According to a representative of one of the surveyed organizations: *"We want to appeal to the women who are already educated but they choose more important matters such as childcare, thus putting aside some interesting training opportunities. They have already achieved some success, but there comes a moment when they want or need to supplement their knowledge, because the world is moving forward. We organize trainings on modern negotiation techniques, interpersonal communication, and financial issues"* (IDI 13, big city, provincial coverage). One of the researched organizations was involved in the education of female farmers and farmers' wives in the field of agricultural accounting so that they could keep their farm accounts in line with applicable laws.

Some non-governmental organizations have been undertaking actions to promote developing skills in information technology and foreign languages, regardless of the level of education, current status in the labor market or occupation. Measures in the field of modern technology were targeted by a significant proportion of the surveyed organizations to women aged 50+ who, according to the respondents, were particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion.

Some of the NGOs focused on educational activities aimed at encouraging women and preparing them to run their own businesses. They have provided practical trainings on how to start and run their own businesses. The courses curricula covered the basics of economics, management, bookkeeping, law, and accounting. According to a representative of one of these organizations: *"We started doing such trainings on how to set up your own business, as these women often have the opportunity to work at home or do some temporary jobs. We prepare legal training providing information on what to do, how to start a business and how to settle it, step by step. Coaching is also very helpful here because they often come and are lost, and at that point, a psychologist who supports and guides them is essential"* (IDI 1, big city, nationwide coverage).

Few researched non-governmental organizations have implemented training programmes for women in the scope of breaking down professional barriers. Such measures were aimed at adequate assessment of women's own skills, negotiating employment conditions, shaping their individual career path, and increasing their assertiveness and mobility. As one of the representatives of these organizations emphasizes: *"Our goal is to make women in touch with their own strengths so that they can begin to regain control of their own lives and acquire psychological and social competences that will enable them to live with dignity. We teach them how to manage themselves and how to set their paths in adult life"* (IDI 10, big city, provincial coverage).

Some organizations operate on the basis of self-help and support: *"We have the following slogan on our website: 'mutual motivation is the source of inspiration'. We see that the higher self-esteem of the girls, the bigger their causative power, and since each of us has various competences, we share them with those girls"* (IDI 21, small town, local coverage).

Some of the studied NGOs are taking action in the scope of reconciliation of professional and family roles. The actions were generally aimed at stimulating women's professional activity and popularizing information on the partnership of women and men in the family and at home through social campaigns, seminars, and trainings. Training in this area and various types of campaigns were mostly targeted at women, although some of the organizations addressed them to men and women alike. However, none of the studied non-governmental organizations has taken direct measures aiming at organizing care services for children and adults in need of care. Such measures could be extremely important in rural areas, where access to day nurseries and kindergartens and other forms of care of dependent persons is difficult. This inaccessibility of appropriate care institutions is often the main barrier for women wishing to undertake educational or professional activities.

According to a large proportion of the representatives of the researched NGOs working for women, a number of activities that women take up in social sphere (e.g. on the labour market) stem from inaccurate information about the rights they are entitled to. Some women do not know what they can do in a crisis situation, for example when experiencing domestic violence. Some non-governmental organizations are working to promote information about possible solutions to difficult situations and the rights women are entitled to. As one of the representatives points out: *"Our main goal is to support women who experience violence. We work to improve their knowledge and self-awareness of what relationships and situations they are in, when they can react and to what extent. We teach them appropriate reactions and assertive attitudes aimed at protecting themselves, their own physical and mental health. We would also like the people we work with to respond to the violence they see*

around them. We carry out a number of educational and awareness-raising campaigns both in lower and higher secondary schools, and in local communities. We also conduct various seminars and meetings focused on combating violence. We organize focused trainings for groups, e.g. one of such trainings was targeted at groups of journalists. Education is very important in the whole anti-violence discourse" (IDI 4, large city, local coverage).

One of the studied non-governmental organizations was undertaking information activities on the role of women in history. It spread knowledge about important female figures in Polish history and cooperation with other non-governmental organizations in this area. This organization has released several volumes covering the so-called herstory and a guide to Poland, covering ten routes in various cities and towns in Poland, following the footsteps of women in Polish history.

A significant proportion of the NGOs carried out activities aimed at the vocational activation of the unemployed women. Some of these activities were targeted at people experiencing various social problems such as domestic violence or single motherhood. Professional activation and financial independence, according to the researched representatives, were the key factors in combating social exclusion and the factors of change in women's lives. A large part of the NGOs supporting long-term unemployed women implemented comprehensive measures ranging from increasing their motivation, providing appropriate professional qualifications, psychological support, job search skills, CV and cover letter writing abilities, or job interview techniques.

In the scope of vocational activation of women, some non-governmental organizations combined education (courses, vocational training) with professional internships, which allowed women returning to the labour market to obtain up-to-date work experience, highly appreciated by prospective employers. According to a representative of one of the studied organizations, the actions supporting vocational activation were adapted to the needs of different categories of women: *"If the women had computer skills but could not do electronic invoicing, we were teaching it. If they had no occupation at all, we provided vocational training for child minders, community support workers, kitchen help or home help. We have been training and looking for a job for such a person. We have also set up a Job Club where we teach the interview skills, do practical exercises on interviewing, cover letter and CV writing, but also how to dress, what makeup to do. These are the things that allow you to enter the market. If they have no job, then of course, as I said, we do the training and then help them to look for a job. If their experience is outdated, we offer internships which may help them to find a job"* (IDI 2, big city, provincial coverage).

The representatives of NGOs active in the field of vocational activation of long-term unemployed women emphasized the need to combine various measures and, above all, to increase women's self-esteem, skills and sense of competence.

## 2. Conclusion

Ever increasing economic and social changes bring about the need to adapt competences and skills to the transformations not only in the professional but also in the social sphere. Lifelong learning covers many forms of formal, non-formal and informal training. Lifelong learning is also a tool that reduces social inequalities, minimizes exclusion, and encourages the acquisition of qualifications which help women to remain in the labour market. Women are still particularly vulnerable to poverty and exclusion from the labour market. Lifelong learning can thus be an instrument for increasing their professional opportunities and enabling them to return to the labour market and update their skills and qualifications. Non-governmental organizations play an important role in educational activities for women. According to the data, about 10% of Polish non-governmental organizations have statutory measures aimed at promoting equal opportunities for women and men and directly supporting women in various activities. The qualitative research carried out among 30 representatives of non-governmental organizations dealing with women's empowerment enables to highlight their main activities in this area.

A large proportion of the surveyed organizations undertake direct educational activities in the form of courses and trainings aimed at improving their skills and competences. The activities are targeted at working women, those who want to return to the labour market and the long-term unemployed ones. Non-governmental organizations offer trainings which develop specific competences required for a particular profession, information technology and language skills, and provide support in starting their own business. Some



organizations focus on breaking professional barriers, boosting women's self-confidence and assertiveness and developing abilities to plan their career paths. Another organizations work towards promoting reconciliation of family and professional roles and partnership in relationships. They support a change in mentality and incentives for greater participation of men in domestic and childcare duties. A wide range of non-governmental organizations undertakes information and educational measures in the scope of problem-solving (e.g. in case of domestic violence), crisis support and public education on anti-discrimination policies.

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