



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

Synergies between gender equality and climate action


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Comments paper – Poland



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Gender equality and climate action in Poland

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Abstract

Despite the recent governmental changes, Poland remains a conservative country regarding its approach both to gender and climate issues. Years of practice have shown that policies which do not take in account specific national characteristics, are not very effective. It is only by recognising the specific country potentials (like importance of family farming, high percentage of women with high education degrees and in STEM jobs, traditional family model...) and challenges (like difficulties of just transition for coal and mining regions, differences of perception between city and rural areas) than positive results can be obtained in both of these fields. A focus on communities, local governments, and grass roots initiatives, should be considered equally important to any top-down approach. Although changes in the legal system and public policies are undertaken, they can only be implemented with an appropriate participatory process, focused on people's needs and solutions and not on division. It is also important to provide more practical and local opportunities for women to be involved in the green transition, in a wide range of sectors, like supporting small green businesses and community initiatives.

1. Reliable data reflecting a complex reality

1.1 Poland is among leaders for reliable and open source data

- Data are collected and centralised by the Main Agency of Statistics - Główny Urząd Statystyczny (GUS), from different sources, mainly public administration but also polls and censuses. Poland ranked very high: 2nd in the world in the Open Data Inventory (ODIN) 2022 assessment. ODIN also analysed the gender disaggregation of data and found it insufficient only in very few categories. Poland also ranked 3rd in the Open Data Maturity Report 2022 published EU advancing from 4th place the previous year.
- Gender disaggregated data are fairly available and can be accessed on the GUS website and the SDG platform. Improvements could be made about data coverage and updating. It could be also beneficial to develop more indicators for climate policy and impact analysis.

1.2 Work force and labour market with traditional divisions

1.2.1 Women are highly educated but choose lower paid sectors

- Key specifics of the Polish labour market are a high women's inactivity rate (17% versus 8% for men); women's early retirement age (60 versus 65); a payment GAP of 4,5% among lowest in the EU (hiding big differences by sector). Women tend to stay at home when having children, they retire earlier, they often do not return to the labour market once they quit.
- Women undertake higher education more often than men and represented during last 10 years 2/3 of graduates. But their choices are different: they are a large majority in education, social care, health (80% or more) and even nature science, mathematics and statistics; but remain a minority in sectors like tech, building, industry (39,2%) and IT (15,2%)¹.
- Women less often undertake scientific career reaching higher degrees as doctors or professors (37% of professors in 2022).

1.2.2 Some key transition sectors dominated by men but not HRSTC

- As a result of education choices, women represent a minority of the workforce in mining (10,6%), energy production (24,8%), water supply (28%), building (7,8%), transport and logistics (22,8%), industry (34%)². There are therefore less directly involved in the necessary transition of these key sectors.
- Poland has a high percentage of women in farming (42%), and very high in the Core of Human Resources in Science and Technology sector (HRSTC). Six of the 25 NUTS1 EU regions with higher share of women in HRST jobs were Polish regions, giving Poland the 5th place in the EU ranking. But again, women specialists and engineers are a majority in the health sector (80%) and very few in the IT (15%).

1.3 Women in green decision making: quick progress but huge disparities

1.3.1 Recent important changes at the top political levels

- The new government appointed 9 women in December 2023, and gave them some key ministries for gender and climate action: Ministry of Civil society, Ministry for Equality (newly created), Ministry for Senior Policies, Ministry of Industry which will be in charge of energy issues, Ministry of Family, Work and Social Policy, Ministry of Environment and Climate, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Regional policy and Funds.
- However, they are only 135 women in the parliament (29,3% of all the seats). They are more present in left-wing than conservative parties (46,2% Lewica,

¹ data for the year 2021/22.

² data from 2022.

38,9% KO, 29,2% Trzecia Droga, 21,6% PIS, 5,6% Konfederacja). This despite a law granting 35% of places to women on the lists of candidates to parliament.

1.3.2 Disparities and deficits at local level

- Women kept being underrepresented at the local governments levels, where they represent from 1/3 to 1/4 of the local councils members (depending on the level-voivodship, county or commune) and only 12.2% of mayors and presidents. However, the representation of women in local governments is growing with each election and the next one is coming as soon as April 2024.

1.3.3 Women in management positions: a varied situation

- Women hold 42,9% of management positions across all sectors which gives Poland the 2nd place in the EU just behind Latvia. Women represent 60% of managers in the public sector – but only 1/3 is of high ranking posts.

2. A heated policy debate in a conservative context

2.1 Women rights, gender equality and environment don't always run together

2.1.1 Most divisive issues: the debate may be closed soon and leave space for action in other fields

The toughening of the already restrictive abortion law by the former government had certainly a decisive impact on latest elections result and women votes. At the same time, the so-called populist policy of support for families including child allowances is kept in place by the new government. Despite change, Polish society upholds some specific traditional values. It remains a question whether providing a legal framework where women will feel safer and not oppressed (as promised by the new government), will actually increase their involvement in public life and climate action. A trigger of women's interest could also be health, a sector where women are presently more attentive about. With growing knowledge of health impacts by air pollution, industrial agriculture or climate, this could be some space for synergy.

2.1.2 Linking gender equality and environmental activism failed at larger scale

Linking progressive policies in terms of environment, gender equality, LGBT rights, is not so obvious in Poland. The history of the Polish Green Party which creation was supported by external funds shows that trying to create cooperation between LGBT and environmental movements failed. Even if women are more than men supporting left-wing, egalitarian, pro-environmental and climate focused policies, the society divisions are more complex due to factors like the socialist heritage, the importance of rural areas, or the role of the church. New synergies have to be created with a less divisive approach, and women could be at the front. Seeing politicians play on the eternal left/right division seems a worn out strategy.

2.2 Energy is the big challenge ahead

2.2.1 Mining sector, Europe's last remains

Poland is still highly dependent on coal and gas, and it impacts very much daily livelihoods. Women represent 10% of the mining sector but are part of the households impacted by forecasted lay-offs. They are also directly affected by energy choices and energy prices, as they often manage the household regular expenses budgets. Economic decisions prevail at this stage over environment or health concerns, especially in the countryside and for lower income households. We also must remember the impact of the geopolitical context on the energy debate.

2.2.2 Public policies need more transparency, participation, and decentralisation to gain broader support

It is not known yet whether the new government will uphold the plans to develop nuclear energy. According to polls a minority of men and even less women are in favour, and certainly most environmentalists do not approve them. A nuclear centralised model would also negatively impact the quite successful development of photovoltaic and stop investment in micro-generation. There is also a plan to promote windmills by reducing the minimal distance from households. Little place is given to initiatives like biogas or energy cooperatives, community-based solutions where women are keener to be active. Some programmes supporting energy transition in households like „clean air” are also not widely subscribed because of lack of long-term visibility, unclear rules, unclear impact on economic situation and feeling of increased dependency on external factors for energy supply.

2.3 Food and farming is the next debate

2.3.1 Specific country situation in terms of agriculture

Poland has 1,3 million farmers, a unique situation in EU, many small farms, and 42% of women in agriculture. There is also a high and growing percentage of the population living in the countryside (more than 40%). Due to still low intensity of farming, biodiversity is better preserved than in Western EU and sustainable and organic agriculture are huge potentials. Whether the EU proposed Green New Deal will help or harm this asset is to be discussed. With farmers protests starting all over EU this is the burning question on the table.

2.3.2 Climate change and rural women

Rural women and farmers have a different perception and are differently impacted by weather conditions than city inhabitants. A report by the Polish Institute of Public Affairs, analysed the attitudes of rural women towards climate change and environment. It stated among others that rural women are more climate skeptic and resistant mainly to decarbonisation proposals. Reasons are economic worries, projected impact of climate policies on farming, and also bigger exposure to poverty. At the same time the majority of rural women is concerned about the environment and would be ready to be involved in local initiatives. Women represent also 44% of the chief of villages and are active in local NGOs and rural women circles.

3. Good practice examples

3.1 Women starting to lead the environmental and social policies

The recent appointment of women in key ministries could be a way forward. It is of course too early to know whether this opportunity will be well used. Not all of the appointed women have a strong curriculum and will certainly face big pressure and scrutiny in a challenging context. It is certainly signalling important change and giving women the possibility to influence some key policies.

3.2 Promoting women leadership and expertise in green businesses

As statistics show, women are occupying managerial positions in private companies and as business owners. Promoting positive green examples of active business women in the media, with initiatives like „25 women leaders of sustainable development” by Forbes is a good practice example. The idea is to show successful women entrepreneurs that integrate environmental concerns into their company policies, or even build whole business around sustainability. This could be in a range of various sectors like for example fashion.

3.3 Giving space to non-governmental and community initiatives

NGOs support and civil society building seems key successful implementation of any change in a democratic society.

A good example of a successful approach is the initiative „Kongres Kobiet”, created in 2009 as a nationwide association and movement promoting gender equality. The movement is today supported by many known women, whether from politics, non-governmental organisations, business or celebrities. However, it is officially apolitical, it gave the „men of the year award” recently to the current Minister of Justice. The Congress also officially requested from the winning coalition the creation of the Ministry for Equality and appointment of more women in government – the request was fulfilled. The movement focuses on women’s rights, but environmental aspects are represented, and women active in the climate field are part of the movement.

There were also many NGOs projects that did associate women and climate. We may notice the „women for climate” initiative which promoted women from different fields of environmental action: youth activism but also culture or agriculture. Not all women acting in the environmental world want to focus on the big climate topics, they could be active in circular economy, zero waste solutions, biodiversity, animal rights, etc. This is what should be seen as a synergy in reaching transition goals.

It worth remarking that the focus on fighting climate scepticism which still ranks high in Poland, seems only to lead to a burn out of young climate activists. Protests by radical movements like Extinction Rebellion gathered only few supporters. It seems better to unite different environmental initiatives contributing to solutions.

4. Recommendations

- According to many polls, women are in general more than men concerned about environment and climate and the level of concern seems increasing with the level of education. Synergies for a green transition and climate action should be looked for in sectors where well-educated women are already present, like health, tourism or certain STEM jobs. It seems counterproductive to push women to sectors like IT or energy, as their absence does not necessary result from unequal opportunities.
- The role of small-scale agriculture and organic agriculture which is huge in both preventing, adapting and mitigating climate change should be recognised. Women play an important role in this sector.
- The only way to engage broader communities in a just and green transformation in a context where woman are the most active in any community work, is to grant funds to local NGOs, rural women circles, and local organisations or local governments for specific local activities. This shall also include activities related to children and youth, which are very often woman led. It is also crucial to involve local governments at all levels, and keep in mind that it is especially in the rural areas that the percentage of women in power positions and the support for decarbonisation is low.
- As women tend to be more interested in just transition than men, promoting female leadership in general in the political and public sector should help the implementation of green transition policies. However, societal change recognising women qualities and interests as equally important is needed. Women should also be given more opportunities to be involved in decision making and public life without having to give up family life.
- Environmental issues should not be confined to left wing parties or city activists. There is too much communication emphasis on decarbonisation and little on positive aspects of a just transition like lowering pollution, empowering communities (by creating energy cooperatives for example) or creating new jobs. Women that may not be engaged directly in the climate emergency issue but can contribute to the solution by acting in other related fields should be taken on board.

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