



# Exchange of good practices on gender equality

**Gender training  
in education**  
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Comments Paper – Poland

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# Gender training in education in Poland - policy context and transferability of good practices from Denmark, Portugal and Spain

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## 1. Policy context in Poland

### 1.1. Formal system of education

The education system in Poland consists of pre-school institutions, primary schools, gymnasia (lower secondary education) and post-gymnasium schools (upper secondary education). The pre-school education for children aged 3-5 is not compulsory. Six year-old children receive mandatory pre-school education at kindergartens or pre-primary classes at primary schools. Children aged 7-13 attend primary schools and then continue their education in gymnasia (3 years). Gymnasium leavers can attend schools belonging to upper secondary stage (two-year basic vocational schools, three-year general or specialized upper secondary schools and four-year technical upper secondary schools). Education in Poland is under the supervision of the Ministry of National Education while the Ministry of Science and Higher Education is responsible for higher education. In Poland teaching profession is highly feminized, although the proportion of female teachers decreases with the stage of education (women make 98% of pre-primary education teachers compared to only 43,1% in tertiary education (Education at a Glance 2012).

### 1.2. Gender issues in formal system of education

In Poland legal framework for promoting gender equality and gender training in education is formally assured by international commitments resulting from joining UE and such international laws ratified by Poland like the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. Although in the past National Plans were developed as a consequence of adopting Beijing Platform (the last one comprised period 2003-2005) "since then there has not been one central comprehensive document that would guide government policy on equal treatment or gender equality in particular" (Szelewa 2011).

As a result, gender-sensitive perspective in Polish system of formal education is difficult to introduce and mainstream. What is more, Polish educational policy in this area has been influenced by the 2005-2007 period when the Ministry of National Education took very conservative direction with openly expressed homophobia and perceiving gender issues as a *dangerous* topic.

At present basic documents, as *School Education Act*, *Teachers' Charter* and official *Core Curriculum* refer only to general notions of human rights and universal ethics and do not address *gender* directly. Both scientists and NGOs emphasize that so far the Ministry of National Education has not worked out consistent gender policy and they critically report such problems concerning the formal educational system as lack of gender-sensitive teaching policy or guidelines on curriculum, books and hidden curriculum. They also point out that educational authorities do not carry out or support gender mainstreaming research or projects (Abramowicz 2011, Piotrowska, 2009, Dzierzgowska, Rutkowska 2008). As a result, Polish school system perpetuates stereotypical and traditional sex roles and educates towards national and patriarchal society where male domination is considered natural (Środa 2008). Candidates for teachers are generally not provided with knowledge on gender and there are very limited opportunities of in-service training in this area (Teutsch 2011). Consequently, teachers' gender mainstreaming awareness is very low. According to various researches they often transmit stereotypes, prejudices and present insensitive or even discriminatory behaviour related to gender-issues (Kopciwicz 2011, Ślusarczyk 2011, pp. 19-35, Chomczyńska-Rubacha 2004, Dzierzgowska, Rutkowska 2008, Jonczy-Adamska, Wołosik 2009).

### **1.3. Socio-political context related to gender issues in system of education**

The context of introducing gender equality can be well illustrated by the recent Polish Minister of Justice objections to the Council of Europe *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*. The minister, referring to gender issues in the *Convention*, called it the expression of feminist ideology and a threat to traditional family values. Catholic bishops, who supported the minister's point of view, claimed that the *Convention* encouraged and promoted homosexuality by challenging stereotypical gender roles (Wiśniewska 2012). The *Convention* was finally signed but the conservative politicians have already declared that its ratification in the Parliament will take a very long time

At the same time, Poland is the country with a high rate of domestic violence, higher unemployment rate among women than men, gender pay gap, noticeable *glass ceiling* effect and feminization of poverty, as one the effects of the economic crisis.

### **1.4. The institutions promoting gender equality**

In the situation described above gender issues in education are mostly undertaken by such institutions as Teacher Trade Union (ZNP) and NGOs (e.g. Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning, Nobody's Children Foundation, Group of Sex Educators "Ponton", "Toward the girls" Association). One of their initiatives, supported by prominent scientists, was establishing Alliance for Compulsory Sex Education (2009). Other activities of Teacher Trade Union (ZNP) include seminars, setting up working group on equality, assistance in preparing reports, research, publications, exhibitions and legislative action related to introducing compulsory sex education (Obidniak 2009, 2011). The importance of NGOs role in promoting gender in education is difficult to overestimate. Their projects at least partly fill the gap left by formal system of education. The most significant projects have been realized by "Toward the girls" Association, House for Polish-German Cooperation (with *Equal*

*school –school free from discrimination* project), Ponton Group of Sex Educators, Silesian Gender Zone, Feminoteka Foundation, The Women's Rights Centre, Campaign against Homophobia, Lambda, Crisis Intervention Association, Autonomy Foundation and "The Konsola" Women's Association.

In 2010 the national teacher training institution, Centre for Education Development, started "Lost teenage girl" project which is one of the very few examples of such activities undertaken by formal education sector. Taking up gender issues, the project is focused on the process of girls' identity development. It's also worth mentioning that the present Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment has become more active in monitoring gender issues in education and reacting in situations when this perspective is neglected (including homophobia-related violence occurring at schools).

## 2. Policy debate related to gender in education

Important issues that have recently been raised and debated in Poland related to gender equality are as follows:

- Lack of proper sex education in spite of state obligations and promises to do that (Fells, Zahorska, Walczak 2010, p.60)<sup>1</sup>. Although the subject that could cover it does exist in the curriculum (called *Preparation for family life*), parents have the right to withdraw children from it and in practice a lot of schools do not organise such classes at all. At the same time it is a very ideologically-biased subject with textbooks presenting Catholic approach to human sexuality and gender, showing conservative view of family and strengthening gender stereotypes instead of delivering objective knowledge. The bodies that call for objective and obligatory sex education are mainly NGOs and researchers
- School violence related to sexual harassment and homophobic bullying. In spite of the alarming data concerning the problem and coming from NGOs reports, the issues are not given due attention by education authorities (Wołosik, Majewska 2011, Świerszcz 2012)
- Women's prevalence among higher education graduates (72% of women graduate compared to 39% of men) with their underrepresentation on technical studies. Fields like engineering and construction are perceived as "masculine" and chosen mostly by men while education, health, social services are preferred by women. The nationwide campaign "Girls As Engineers!" started in 2008 contributed to the increase of women on "masculine" faculties by over 14 thousand and is considered a great success in challenging traditional educational paths

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<sup>1</sup> Polish commitments to introduce sex education result from International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo 1994) and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) as well national acts.

- the situation in which girls and women outperform their male peers as far as exam results, achieved education and ambitions levels are concerned but these successes are not reflected in the employment outcomes of women

## 3. Transferability issues

### 3.1. General comments

Legal framework makes it possible to implement all these practices and each of them would be extremely useful for Polish system of formal education but their transferability depends on successful dealing with main possible constraints (below). What makes the projects particularly valuable, taking into account Polish context, is that they present a model of cooperation between governmental bodies (e.g. Ministry of Education), academic environments, teacher training centres, teachers and other institutions engaged in promoting gender equality in education. All the projects seem to be well received by the NGOs in Poland which have the knowledge and skills to introduce them as well as the awareness of their potential usefulness.

#### 3.1.1. Possible constraints (refer to all projects)

The main obstacle is related to very low research-based knowledge about gender by the representatives of all levels of educational system in Poland, including policy makers. The constraints listed below more or less directly refer to this crucial problem and they are as follows:

- Lack of direct reference to gender equality in main acts, priorities, regulations and requirements related to functioning of Polish educational system. The general statements (e.g. about promoting tolerance and understanding) proved insufficient
- Resistance of educational authorities, teachers and parents to face gender issues as they are perceived as irrelevant, unimportant and threatening traditional values
- Lack of experts on gender equality in educational bodies
- Lack of motivation from the side of teachers and educators as gender-related knowledge, skills, attitude are not required by the authorities on any level of education or professional development
- Financial limitations that can affect implementation of the projects
- Protests of traditionally-oriented bodies (Catholic Church, some political parties), especially when it comes to introduction of the gender themes to pre-school children

### 3.1.2. Possible threats (refer to all projects)

- The risk of counter productivity when used by teachers who are not convinced to introducing gender-sensitive perspective and lack basic knowledge of this issue
- Rejecting the projects by teachers or educators as something imposed and/or next fashionable trend that will soon go out of style

### 3.1.3. Possible effects (apart from the ones mentioned in the country discussion papers)

- The process of consultancy, monitoring, implementing and training within the projects could be the chance to start concrete cooperation between educational authorities, local authorities, teachers, scientists and NGOs (e.g. as the source of experts) in gender area
- Each project could initiate the national debate on introducing gender issues in education

## 3.2. Comments by country

### 3.2.1. Portugal

Portuguese experience shows it can be incorporated in different subjects due to the cross-curricular approach. Although such approach is not obligatory in Poland, the guides could be highly appropriate for History, Civic Education, Lessons with Class Tutor, Introduction to Management or Preparation for family Life. The advantage of the project is its language that is accessible for those who have no experience in gender issues. Similarly to Portugal, in Poland teachers should receive continuous training if they are to progress in their careers. The training sessions are organised both at schools and in training centres regularly which makes it institutionally possible to introduce gender-related theme in the programs of the courses/seminars/workshops. Moreover, the project transferred into Polish practice would create a unique opportunity for governmental bodies to cooperate. However, as it requires active engagement of the Ministry of National Education and Municipalities, the question of the real will to tackle the topic could pose a serious problem. What is more, the areas where *Guides* activities could be incorporated do not belong to the priorities of the Ministry of National Education (contrary to Portugal where the priority areas of the Ministry of Education are, for example, health, sexual and reproductive health education, non-violent dating relationships).

### 3.2.2. Denmark

*Children's book and educators' guide*, although extremely necessary would have to be accompanied by intensive professional training/workshops and seminars to raise teachers' awareness of the importance of challenging stereotyped perceptions and expectations related to boys and girls. Taking into account this provision as well as

the constraints mentioned above referring to all projects, it would be difficult to transfer it into Polish educational practice

*The magazine+film/CD for girls and boys about body confidence and “porn chic”+teachers guide.* Out of the two projects the one aimed at teenagers seems more transferrable. The topic is highly relevant as Polish teachers often express their helplessness in dealing with influence of highly sexualised mass media. The project could also help them learn more critical approach to the contents of media. Last but not least, the project would fit and complement the initiative of the national teacher training institution, Centre for Education Development, which runs the “Lost teenage girl” project.

### **3.2.3. Spain**

In Polish conditions, the project with two online courses is transferable when one takes into account its technological aspects and communication-related skills of teachers, especially desirable in course No. 2. Various educational projects realised in Poland so far proved teachers’ openness and willingness to share and exchange their professional experiences with others. However, in Spain the project is based on the national law for equality of women and men and its references to education. Moreover, it has been developed with institutional support of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports. In Polish context, these basic principles of the project would be difficult to apply for the reasons described and listed in point 1.2, 1.3 and 3.1.1 of this paper. Moreover, although teachers in Poland are required to develop professionally, they often prefer more traditional and formal ways of training.



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