

## FRAME CONDITIONS OF XX CENTURY IN POLAND

The XX century was the time of the great changes in Poland: the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, regaining independence, 20 years of state building, the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, the dependence on Russian conditions and a period of Polish independence. Therefore living conditions of women in Poland changed greatly during the XX century.

First of all they were different in different periods of the century, such as:

1. Annexation of Poland till regaining independence 1900-1918
2. The II Republic – period of independence 1918 -1939
3. The 2<sup>nd</sup> World War – 1939-1945
4. Socialism -1945-1989
5. Democracy since 1989

This presentation describes women's rights during the time of the II Republic and during the period of the Polish People's Republic in socialism, commonly referred to as communism.

### Period 1918-1939

Until independence in 1918, women had limited rights in all three partitions. The reborn Poland granted women voting rights in November 1918. Electoral law from 1918 stated: "Every 21 years old Polish citizen has the right to vote without gender distinction". Equality of rights was confirmed by the March constitution in 1921. Despite of constitutional guarantee individual law did not follow the equality rule. For example civil service law of 1922 conditioned the entry of women into the civil service on the consent of her husband. Practical application of the law also left a lot to desire. The first woman judge was appointed in 1929 only.

The first parliamentary elections in which women could participate passively and actively took place in 1919. Political parties were dominated by men, therefore they did not let women to be included in electoral lists. Women gained in that election 8 mandates which was 1,85% of members of Parliament. Women's members of the parliament came from gentry and intelligence elite. But they did not occupy high positions and very seldom talked about a big politics. They fought for changes in civil law and labor law.

The Second Republic of Poland changed a civil status of woman. Draft Code of matrimonial law from 1929 provided equal rights of husbands and wives, the introduction of secular form

of marriage and divorce. It never entered into force due to the opposition from the Catholic Church.

The II Republic did not solve the problem of women's discrimination in access to education. The reason was a very small number of the secondary schools for girls. The daughters of rich parents attended private schools. Remaining girls did not have a chance to achieve a secondary and higher level of education.

## **Period 1945 – 1989**

The Polish Peoples Republic after the World War II brought a great change in the life of Polish women. Women were granted full access to education free of charge and they began to educate themselves on a large scale. Peoples Republic of Poland promoted emancipation of women. It preached gender equality and called on women to join the work in the industry and in agriculture. This was due to the need to rebuild the country from war damage and shortage of men who had been killed during the war. Work of women became a standard and not something special just for ambitious women or a necessity arising from poverty. Widely proclaimed respect for women's work did not translate into reality. There was a division on heavy industry / male / and light industry / feminine /. While the propaganda slogans proclaimed the equality of women, in the textile factories in Lodz in the 50's, to 400 masters only 3 were women. But there was no unemployment, there was no problem in finding a new job.

The Family Code of 1950 provided for civil marriage and divorce.

In 1956, Poland legalized abortion for medical reasons and social reasons. Treatments were free of charge. The communist authorities decided that they had met the demands of feminism. It is true that the legalization of abortion occurred in the People's Republic 20 years earlier than in the United States and France. However, poor quality of contraception resulted in the spread of abortion as a method of a birth control and in many cases it substituted for contraception.

During the time of communism the living conditions of Polish women improved very much but we have to remember problems such as bad food supply, undervaluation of women's wages, blocking women's promotions.

During communist time no feminist movement had developed and none of the pre-war feminist traditions were continued. The Polish women had rights but they did not have awareness of what those rights mean. The Polish women have not learnt to fight for their rights and the weakness of that they moved to the new state system.

Determinants of women's situation in the Polish democracy that is after 1989 will be discussed in a separate paper.

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## Links:

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