

## Where Political meets Women: Creating Local Political Space

Ann Graham and Joanna Regulska

Rutgers University

Do Polish women continue to reject politics or does politics continue to reject women? The dirty game of traditional politics appears to be for men, and the lives of women today are molded by conventional female roles of keeping families together, managing the household, and caring for children. Throughout Polish history, behavior similar to the selfless image of the "Matka Polka" or Polish Mother rewarded invisibility in women's behind-the-scenes support of the political struggles of more deserving male heroes (Penn, 1993). Such anonymity and idealized selflessness do not encourage avenues for and acceptance of open participation in the political process. Yet, Polish women do employ a variety of strategies in their attempts to enter political space and to participate as political actors.

The key variables influencing participation are gender and political culture. Analysis of the political, economic and social dimensions of past and current regimes point to a tightly woven legislative, institutional and social norms matrix organized to prevent women's entry into the political sphere. For women in Poland, neither the official sameness imposed by the communist political culture nor the difference engendered by democratization liberates women as fully participating citizens. Evident through years of totalitarianism, Poland's patriarchal political culture has not diminished during democratic transition, and its manifestations emerge in different patterns throughout the country. In short, Polish women did not have political power under communism, did not share it during the early years of transition, and remain marginalized even today.

Incorporating gender issues into the "political" demands redefinition of the latter. What becomes less obvious is how the project of reconstituting the political will be carried out, and how and where political space for women will be created. As the legacies of the past confront the forces of liberalization on the one hand, and the renewed strength of centralism attempts to diminish new initiatives on the other, the outcomes of these debates will have long term consequences for how group interest is articulated and how women will be represented. What rules and

norms will be set and how will they affect women's ability to act; what rights will be guaranteed, to what extent will they be reinforced; and what strategies need to be employed to overcome women's passivity?

The project of reconstituting the political must look as well to the behavior and attitudes of women to discover what has political meaning and what works for them. Their words, actions, and viewpoints, in turn, must be examined within the context of the political culture in which they occur. The relevance of a political or "civic culture in which the importance of orientations to politics and experiences with the political system" (Almond and Verba, 1963) cannot be overemphasized. Political culture influences individual attitudes and behaviors toward government, and individual capacity to participate in community decisions.

It is our contention that women in Poland have rarely been regarded as actors with individual or collective agency to direct their own lives. A new democratic, political state in itself will not make a difference. Neither state structure-totalitarian or democratic-has supported the right of women to "translate individual experience-of male oppression and conflicting interests between women and men - into collective action as women" (Eduards, 1994). Political equality will only be achieved when women themselves grasp the necessity to act collectively as women.

It has been argued that despite existing local barriers and constraints that restrict women in their attempt to become political actors, it is local action in which women are most effective (Regulska, 1994, 1995; NGO Beijing Committee, 1995). What makes the present research differ from previous studies is its focus on localities which are themselves marginalized within the national political, economic and social context. Activities of women in small and medium-size towns is unrecognized. Little is understood about local barriers and challenges that need to be overcome by women who wish to engage in political activism. Equally little is known about

attitudes and strategies women use to turn passivity into action.

Comprised of three sections, the paper focuses on the ignored context of women's activism and analyzes three approaches used in three different Polish communities. First, the paper examines the political culture of women's participation under communism. Second, it discusses new barriers that emerged during the transition period. Third, the paper links the larger national/central context with local expression and discusses the empirical evidence of the behaviors and challenges women face when organizing in small communities. The paper concludes with a call for women's collective action.

### **Women's Participation During the Communist Era or the Inequality of Sameness?**

The former totalitarian state's exclusive control of all spheres of public life permitted no political space for women and, in fact, for the majority of men. Communism's elimination of an open, active public sphere encouraged the development of a "private society" in which the world of friends, family, and close work colleagues were the extent of social life, as "official" politics became the exclusive domain of authorities (Marody, 1992). Its make-believe social contract (Di Palma, 1990) belied the promise of socialism which, for women, promised equality with men, emancipation, and participation in the labor force not as a means of subsistence but as a "good" worker or professional (Petrova, 1994: 268).

The very nature of real socialism in Poland ensured the abrogation of political rights for all persons—especially women—by the monopoly of an omnipotent state. Despite Watson's assumptions of socialism's "political unity" (Watson, 1996) in which all persons were excluded, and an official doctrine which claimed "sameness" for all, emancipation for women neither included equal political rights nor, by extension, membership in the elite political cadre which promised them. Espousing equality for women, and promulgating policies and programs to ensure it accomplished two purposes from the state's point of view: 1) legitimation; and 2) control. By fulfilling socialism's promise of (official) full equality, the state legitimated its claims of a true socialist state to its citizens and the outside world. Claims of legitimacy, in turn, provided credibility for the state to exercise its control over the lives of women for the purposes of the state.

Policies formulated to formally satisfy the socialist pledge to women—maternity leave, child care, medical care, employment—were not used to liberate women, but were developed for instrumental reasons significant to the state. In actuality, the system liberated women not so they could choose their work and interests, but so they could more easily contribute to the "common good" as dictated by the totalitarian political system.

Paradoxically, however, Poles justifiably came to believe that the government is "responsible for assuring general prosperity for the country, but also for guaranteeing employment and the basic material needs of individual citizens (Millar and Wolchik, 1994: 16). Reversing the traditional Anglo-American expectation of rights proffered as individual rights first, the Eastern European understanding is that social rights or the state's duty to guarantee material rights precede the former. Comprehension of such rights is conditioned by what comes first, and, in Eastern Europe, collective identities are more powerful. Collective identification, therefore, and its assumptions of basic material security are well ingrained.

Control, however, did not rely completely on amorphous ideology or anonymous leadership. The communist social order transformed the pre-socialist, traditional social structure into one which depended, despite its new ideologies of social justice and central planning (Mokrzycki, 1992: 271), on a system of "distribution of privileges". The distribution of privileges and the awarding of collective rights were used by a state to reward, punish, and manipulate for its own ends. These ends were determined primarily by an elite cadre of men.

Under communism, women did not occupy positions of power. As noted by Regulska, communism promoted its own "particular notion of equality" (Regulska, 1994: 5). In both politics and industry, the more powerful the political body or industry, the lower the representation or employment of women. This absence of women in high political and industrial managerial positions restricted severely the access of women to levels of power in which decisions were made. The entrance denied to higher levels of power also prevented the acquisition of political skills and resources necessary for political participation. Forced further into the private space of a closed society, open discussions and actions validating women's issues were not permissible behaviors. Organizational activism

occurred only within the narrow boundaries of state-sanctioned activity.

### **Participation During Transition: The Liberation of Difference?**

Past legacies cannot be easily overlooked during the transition to democracy. In Poland, these legacies have negative consequences for a participatory society. Watson's assumption that the "mobilization of the very differences which under communism had been a matter of political irrelevance" (Watson, 1996) is only partially correct in its understanding of the forces unleashed by the transition to democracy. The problem is that these differences were only a matter of official political irrelevance. The rights, privileges, and benefits awarded by the communist state were not equal, and the problems they generated are still relevant today. Women are now officially and unofficially different as citizens. Public policies and public discourse which espouse this difference hold "the ominous threat of women's exclusion from political activity, that is from the active and conscious organization of social relations" (Eduards, 1994).

The push toward difference reveals a number of practical effects for women in the region. Increased nationalist sentiments, the strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church, decreased state-guaranteed employment, unstable benefits, the emergence of formal party politics which favor the interests of men are each converging to submerge the role of women in rebuilding the Polish state. Wolchik's research further highlights problems significant to the implementation of democratic institutions, and the barriers they pose to women:

- 1) an emphasis on the importance of personalities rather than firm, accessible party systems. The lack of women in leadership positions highlights the achievements of men;
- 2) submersion of women's issues and interests to the "larger" issues of democracy and economic restructuring; and
- 3) negative psychological costs of venturing outside the traditional role of wife and mother (Wolchik, 1992).

There are, however, new political entry points that were not available in the past. These entry points are: 1) increasing numbers of women are elected to local council

positions; and 2) the emergence of the non-governmental sector. Despite the election of women to local councils, data on women local government officials elected in 1990 offers evidence of societal pressures and expectations which limit their effectiveness. This data demonstrates that lack of time, excessive responsibilities, lack of trust in women office holders, lack of interest, belief that women are not assertive enough, and no tradition of political participation are primary barriers to women's participation in political activities (Regulska, 1992).

National non-governmental organizations which address women's needs (at least 50 created since 1989) and managed by women represent a new avenue of women's political organizational activity. There are, however, some weaknesses and some questions about their political effectiveness. The accumulated experiences over the last six years point to limitations of the abilities of NGOs to overcome the following barriers: "the lack of information about NGOs focusing on women and their unclear purpose hinder their influence and growth. NGOs also suffer from larger structural constraints such as unclear tax laws, ambiguous legal regulations and cumbersome financial stipulations" (Regulska, 1995: 10).

Equally important is the lack of power of NGOs to influence the policy-making process. The sector's ability to work for women's interest is compromised both by the weakness of NGOs in general and their image as organizations which serve primarily women. NGOs are not regarded as equal players in the political process, and, therefore, are viewed by men as less attractive avenues of political participation. The political implications of this "empowerment" are paradoxical. While an entry point has been created, the formal definition of the political rejects women's collective action through NGOs.

Reorganization of the bureaucratic machinery of the central and local state also erects barriers to the participation of women in public life. Many of the benefits received under the previous government are now embedded in the socioeconomic system. Although Mokrzycki believes that fear of the disintegration of the old system will ultimately preserve some of its characteristics creating an odd combination of what cannot be discarded and what one would like to have (Mokrzycki, 1992: 281), continuation of paternalistic patterns has consequences for how group interest is articulated. The assumption of group rights as "natural"

rights awarded through the "natural" duty of the communist state diminished the need to learn group negotiation and interest articulation skills necessary in a pluralistic society. Group interests are more easily resolved by favors, personal pleas, and informal, personal ties. Development of and adherence to rules of procedure and regulations for citizen access to the political system are not clearly understood or perceived as advantageous. Furthermore, group behavior is characterized by its members' eagerness to discount and distrust activities of other groups rather than to work together constructively to empower civil society.

The beneficiaries of this unstable, transition period are men. As women's interests were manipulated by the instrumental needs of the totalitarian state, they are now submerged in the collective identity of male interests. As Schepple notes, "when an empowered group claims a large share of scarce resources for itself, it may be leaving with nothing individuals who do not have such groups to argue on their behalf (Schepple, 1994: 26). As men learn new political rules within formal party and interest group structures, women's capacity to emerge as an effectiveness political voice within the NGO sector is still unknown.

### **Local Reality**

Although researchers have discussed the barriers to women's political participation in a national context, women and their attempts at community organization have not been the subject of empirical inquiry in Polish small and medium-sized towns. The following case studies represent three distinct examples of attempts by women to claim political space. In each case, women did not influence local public policy decisions and were affected adversely by local and national political barriers to the participation of women. Their experiences resulted in the following: 1) the women of Jozefow complied with male authority and the local state; 2) in Biecz, after encountering resistance from the local state, the women retreated into the private sphere to reassess their agenda; and 3) the women of Skwierzyna did not become participants in the group. A few overall remarks about the study and its preliminary findings regarding participation will provide a context for the case studies.

### **Gap between Rights and Activism**

Polish citizens in the study have idealistic expectations of democracy. These expectations are based on part on their strong belief in individual rights within the context of what is also best for the "common good." The participants in this project asserted the following rights:

- 1) women have the same rights as men;
- 2) free elections and the right to vote;
- 3) right to organize persons in my community to develop alternatives to existing governmental policy;
- 4) right of ordinary citizens to bring to public arena issues that they feel require public debate;
- 5) right to form non-governmental groups that focus on local issues;
- 6) right to freely express their opinions; and
- 7) right to openly dissent from government policies and actions.

The results of survey and interviews show that in the three case study towns support for rights grew stronger between 1994 and 1995. The responses to the following statements illustrate this point: 1) persons in my community have the right to organize to develop alternatives to existing government policy; and 2) the right to dissent from government policies and actions underpins democracy. For both men and women, the belief in the right to organize increased to nearly 100% in 1995 from 95% and 89% respectively. Conviction of the right to dissent from government policies, however, increased only slightly for men (74% to 78%), but jumped from 44% in 1994 to 77% in 1995 for women.

Stronger belief in democracy and rights have not translated into productive, practical action. Realism altered citizen expectations about participation in the political process, and differences emerge during the year of study between the perceptions of men and women. While the majority of all 1994 participants believed that citizen input into the decisions and activities of local government officials is important to local democracy, in 1995, the men dropped their support by nearly ten percent

(64 to 55) and the women by 16 percent (56 to 39). In 1994, 61% of the men and 78% of the women supported the statement that community groups have the power to change local government policies. By 1995, the men maintained their support in the power of community groups, and the women reduced their support by 22%.

Interviews with group leaders and group members in study towns confirm that general discussions about the idea of democracy and its requirements are more abstract for men and more substantial for women who determined that their rights would be further diminished if they did not insist on basic rights of dissent. In actual community situations, however, women were more easily concerned about the impact of open criticism on jobs, inter and intra-group relationships, families, and support from city hall.

Although the results indicate that Poles believe strongly in basic rights, the concept is not tied solely to individual rights. Rights include the individual, but are related to community and family obligations. The current interest in community, however, may be only temporary as collapsing infrastructure, declining employment, and reduced social safety nets require immediate attention without which other family needs cannot be met. Furthermore, gender analysis reveals that this initial interest and concern in collective community rights may disadvantage women when perceived community needs are met. At that point, individual interests of men may take precedence and further eclipse the needs of women.

In practice, however, belief in rights does not translate into political action. For both men and women, a gap remains between rights and actions. Data analysis reveals that, rather than a lack of conviction in their right to act, knowledge gained about local government and the political process ensured that both men and women are more realistic about what they can and cannot change. For women, however, the importance of the quality of life in their communities encouraged them to regard the acquisition of knowledge and skills as first, albeit insufficient steps, to community participation. For men, community activism was instrumental. They either failed or succeeded to achieve their goals and accomplish their tasks. Three Case Communities and their Subcultures

### **"Good Girls" Syndrome**

A small community of 7,600 in southeastern Poland, Jozefow is tightly controlled by the local council and the

mayor. Reflecting long-standing traditions of deference to authority imposed by Tsarist, noble family rule and the communist state, new community groups view their role as supportive of the wishes of local government. They believe that their goals must coincide with those already expressed by the mayor and council. At the same time, the mayor and gmina council are not supportive of independent citizen opinion or action.

The two community groups in Jozefow are divided by gender, and this difference distinguished both their activities and their outcomes. Under the leadership of a retired, strong willed woman, the primarily female group worked to buy equipment for the local health care delivery system, and the group of men hoped to build a sports center. The women achieved many of their initial goals and believed strongly that success is tied closely to their ability to work well with and anticipate the concerns of local authorities. As the leader stated, "All we do, we do with the close agreement of the mayor" (Interview with author, 1994). The group of men assumed that their "old boy" ties to the mayor and gmina council would certainly work in their favor. Depending on a few loose promises by officials, they failed to influence gmina council to allocate monies for a sports center, and the group no longer meets.

Because the expectations of and control by the local state had strong effects on the way the women's group perceived their role and judged their success, the group did not believe that the power of their non-governmental organization included challenges to local government policy. Thus, their ability to raise sufficient funds for an EKG machine simultaneously justified and diminished their existence. They were required to do no more than what was expected. The women's group support of citizen input declined by forty percent during the research period, and the belief in the power of NGOs was reduced by 30 percent. Although the women believed strongly in the necessity of group activity to assist the government, their role was not to challenge it, and citizen input was only needed when required. Failure, they insisted, would not occur as long as each issue was sanctioned by the local state.

Caught in the transition between old and new rules of the local power game, the sports group was humiliated by its failure. Their loss and subsequent embarrassment suspended their belief in the power of citizen activism

which fell from eighty-eight percent to zero with fifty-seven percent claiming they were unsure of what to do next. Interviews confirmed that the local state did not support their project, and their belief in their capacity to influence official opinion in public as well as in private curtailed any expectations of future citizen involvement.

In Jozefow, gender differences strongly influenced group success. The independence of the men encouraged them to make assumptions about the support of local government for their activity. Women, however, were certain that they could not initiate or continue their project without government support. In other words, women's activities were framed by parameters of state-sanctioned (read: male) support. Compliance allowed group activity, but the activity did not independently influence local public policy. Although both groups suffered from a political subculture which did not reward independent action, the men openly threatened the system, but were forgiven. The women knew they could not.

### **From Public to Private**

A sixteenth century rival of Krakow in the southeastern mountains of Poland, the town of Biecz has not thrived without its former royal patronage. Further neglected by the Austrian-Hungarian Empire which preferred to invest in its original territory rather than Polish lands, the future of the gmina's decaying Gothic and Renaissance monuments is one of the sore points between its rural residents and town dwellers. The town's five thousand inhabitants and council members support the renovation of the Gothic City Hall tower, and the construction of a bypass road to prevent its further erosion from the pounding of heavy trucks as they pass through the area's only east-west route. The twelve thousand rural inhabitants are minimally interested in these projects as long as the money is found outside the gmina. In Biecz, the majority is clearly in charge of public resource allocation.

Activism is led by a group of four women (with the sporadic assistance of two men) who live in the town and also work for the gmina. The minimal amount of activities undertaken through the citizen participation program closely parallels the responsibilities required for their jobs. Thus, distinctions between citizen activity and employment duties are ambiguous. In addition, feelings of outsider status and fear of official retribution for their community activity by an authoritative, vengeful mayor

limit the degree of activity as well as their perception of what can be accomplished.

The local political culture did not support individual or group action which supplanted the priorities of the mayor and other local officials. Without support from the mayor who privately scorned it and despite their attempts to convince the mayor the success belonged to him, the women feared the attention the successful festival garnered from local officials.

The group's support of citizens' participation increased from 50 percent in 1994 to 67 percent in 1995, but their belief in the power of non-governmental organizations (their community group) to change local government policies declined by nearly 20 percent. The explanation for this apparent contradiction lies in their isolation. Belief in the overall benefit of participation failed to compensate for their lack of success as a group. As one member noted, "There is nothing to blame myself for. We just met resistance which was stronger than our group. The local authorities are threatened and perceive innocent activity as a threat to their power."

Failing to achieve its overall goal, the group dissolved and reformulated itself as a loosely-defined women's "consciousness raising" group. Although discouraged by their initial failure to influence local policy decisions, they now perceive their activism as behind-the-scenes networking. Talking to women and discussing ideas with friends are preferred rather than overt actions which may conflict with local authorities or the Church. Furthermore, the women members also felt more comfortable working among themselves in a collective atmosphere of deliberation rather than exposing themselves to the more hierarchical managerial and decision-making style required in city hall. Although uneasiness with the latter style certainly contributed to their lack of success, it also exhibited a style of decision-making which may empower women with one another but marginalizes them in association with men. In addition, their failure as a local community group cut off potential ties to regional and national groups which offered important moral, financial, and informational support needed to continue. This network was especially important as they became more isolated in their work.

### **Women without Group**

The women in Skwierzyna, a former Prussian town near the German border, dropped out of group participation. In actuality, they barely joined. Citizen initiatives in Skwierzyna were controlled by three, task-oriented male activists who decided the agenda and did the work. Members of the Polish Democratic Party, the three men assumed leadership of community opposition to the post-communist party which holds the majority position in the town and on gmina council. Deep divisions between the two political spectrums contributed to diminished respect for the mayor and a growing number of post-communist city council members. The leaders' strong association with the opposition on gmina council and their meeting place in the political party headquarters strongly tie the development of grassroots activism with traditional, male-dominated party politics.

Although two women were interviewed and surveyed in 1995 (in contrast to six in 1994), their input into group activities was negligible. Men still believed in citizen activism (approximately the same percentage (57) in both years), accomplished many of their goals, but successfully manipulated the group to their own ends. In effect, three male leaders defined the agenda, did the work required, and consulted others on an as-needed basis.

The women were increasingly marginalized as the group of men became more efficient and eventually officially registered the organization. In fact, the male leaders in the region decreased their support of equal rights for women during the year of study. Although women admitted that their opinions were solicited occasionally, they were never invited to meetings or asked about their own agendas. They also rarely volunteered independent agenda items. Although the women claimed that lack of time and traditional responsibilities of home were responsible for their non-participation, they acknowledged no understanding or realization of how their participation was denied. In fact, it never existed. Potential grassroots activism was subverted into opposition party politics in which the male activists hoped to gain control of gmina council.

## Conclusions

The research findings suggest that although national political culture is important for our understanding of women's political participation, it is the existence of political subcultures at the local level that provides us with insights of how politics affects the everyday life of

Polish women. Analysis of the three case study communities points out the restricted meaning of the political and underscores the importance of the examination of participation of women in the context in which it occurs. This requires knowledge of the capacity of women at the local level to initiate and sustain new courses of action that result not only in the increased well-being of the community but also enhance their collective capability to influence public policy.

Five points merit emphasis from the results of this study. First, local strategies are influenced by local political culture. Issues such as attitudes of men in the community toward women- especially local government officials; attitudes of male local government officials toward citizen input into governmental decision-making; and the perceptions of women about their role in the community are each affected by the local environment. Secondly, women's issues tend to be marginalized prior to community discussion, and the form of group interaction and decision-making may have negative consequences for the continued participation of women. Community groups comprised initially of both men and women lost more women than men during the year of study. In these groups, women's issues were never brought to the table for discussion as problems to address.

Third, the participation of women must also be noted in the context of what they did. Most issues were defined by the state, acceptable to the state and/or male participants, or developed by male leaders who included women because their role as school teachers or friends of the family required their occasional input. Except for the women of Biecz who were isolated for their interest in the community, women's own interests and community needs were not placed on the local agenda.

Fourth, lack of time was a function of age and professional responsibility. The women of Jozefow consisted primarily of retired women who clearly relished the time available to work on health care issues. In their 30s and early 40s, the women of Biecz and Skwierzyna cared for husbands and children and worked full-time outside the home in professionally demanding positions that did not end at a certain time. They were tired and found it difficult to participate in additional activities. Indeed the double and triple burden represents a significant barrier difficult to overcome under current economic conditions.

Fifth, women did gain new understanding of their role in community participation. Although these cases reveal little independent action, the observed women did learn of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Whether or not this knowledge will be translated into more effective future action is still unanswered.

While justifiable claims are made that women's participation often disappears when activism becomes institutionalized, different forms of participation may suit the requirements of women's activism in small communities. Furthermore, it is also true that formal mechanisms favor the experience of men. The absence of local action groups over the past four decades and their preliminary re-introduction as loosely-defined community groups and/or branches of national parties dominated by national and/or male interests leave women "with few mechanisms with which to promote policies, programs, or political people of their own" (Simpson, 1991: 127). In the observed communities, neither the context of the political nor women's space within it was altered during the year of study. How women understand and begin to challenge this problem will have direct consequences for the development of Polish civil society and the reconstruction of its political culture.

#### Notes:

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