

# Women in the Social Policy of the Second Polish Republic

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## Abstract

The system of support for women within the framework of the social policy of the Second Polish Republic included: the adequate regulations of work legislation, the rules of social insurance, the activities towards the maternity protection of the insured and, finally, social services directly or indirectly provided to women by the central as well as local governments.

These activities were extensive and, in many cases, very modern. What is more, they were directed towards solving the most important social problems of women. However, rather than common, the scope of those activities was very limited and selective. Moreover, the implementation of those activities was not always in accordance with the plans and expectations of their authors.

From the point of view of the existing social needs, the most advanced solutions were those which resulted from a privileged position of women in the work legislation and the system of health insurance. The problem of the insignificant influence always had its roots in the socio-professional structure of the country. Only women in employment or covered by the insurance could receive the benefits. For the rest the offer was no longer that beneficial.

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**Keywords:** Social policy, social insurance, maternity protection, social care, Second Polish Republic

## Introduction

Women were an important element of the state social policy as early as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The situation did not change after the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. The position of women in the context of the social policy of the Second Polish Republic was undisputed. Working terms and conditions that were created for women (such as maternity rights, social security benefits as well as the actions taken by the social services and public healthcare in favour of mothers with children and the support offered to single mothers) were the

fundamental elements of the state social policy in the interwar period. What is worth analysing is the formation, the organization and the implementation of those actions. The analysis is based on the problem type and each section of the article treats about a particular form of activities which fall into the category of the social policy.

### **State social policy towards working women**

In the Second Polish Republic the problem of the legal rights of working women was not solved for a relatively long time. Although the first project of Ignacy Paderewski's government was approved on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1919, the act on juvenile and women's employment was passed by the parliament of the first term of office as late as in July 1924. The reason for the delay were numerous obligations and limitations imposed on employers which were included in the act (Grata, 2014, p. 126).

The act of 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1924 included fundamental decisions on the working conditions for women and their maternity rights. The act protected women from working in dangerous or harmful conditions. The regulations introduced in the act were additionally complemented by the ordinance of the minister of labour and social services which was announced in the article 4 of the act and then published on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1925. The ordinance included the list of work restrictions for the juvenile and women. The 2<sup>nd</sup> attachment to the document (related to the restrictions on women's employment) included a list of twenty jobs which women could not do. The extended list was introduced 10 years later in the ordinance of 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1935 (Jończyk, 1961, p. 217-227).

The standards regulating the way women were employed (introduced in the mid-20s) were important from the point of view of the protection of women's employment rights. However, their significance was depreciated by the way women's legal rights were enforced. The following standards were often violated: a night-shift ban, adequate working conditions and also work restrictions for women. Sexual abuse of women by their supervisors – men was also present in many factories where young women were hired. Although the problem with applying the binding legal standards existed till the end of the interwar period, the number of incidents was gradually declining (Inspekcja, 1930, p. 36, 86-87; Inspekcja, 1938, p. 17-18; Przedborska, 1936, p. 47-51).

The position of working women in the context of social insurance was even worse than in the case of work legislation. Apart from the solutions offered to pregnant women, women in labour or breast-feeding women (discussed below), working women (similarly to women in other European countries) did not exercise any privileges of the state social insurance system. According to the resolutions of the act of 28<sup>th</sup> March 1933, the age

entitling workers to receive disability pension was 65 and was equal for both men and women. Only women undertaking intellectual work were entitled to receive old-age pension earlier than men - after 35 years of work and after turning 55 years old (D. U. 1927, no. 106, pos. 911; 1933, no. 51, pos. 396).

### **Benefits for widows of insured husbands**

The Polish social insurance system was closely related to the entitlements of wives and children of insured husbands/fathers or breadwinners entitled to receive benefits. In such case, widows had to be regarded as a separate entity of the Polish social policy, especially because they constituted a numerous category of insurance benefits recipients. They were legally entitled to receive benefits of their insured husbands. The situation of widows of civil servants and professional soldiers was the most beneficial. In this case, men were entitled to receive pension after 10 years of work (from 1932 after 15 years) which meant that also their wives could receive their entitlements after the same period of time. In the case of the insurance of intellectual and physical workers the age caesura was binding meaning that they could receive pensions after obtaining the pension entitlements (65 years old for physical workers and 60 years old for intellectual workers) (Piątkowski, 1983, p. 134-142).

The level of benefits was also diversified. The highest benefits (in relation to the income of the insured) could receive a widow of an intellectual worker. It amounted to three fifth of the pension of an insured husband. For a physical worker it amounted to half of the pension, similar as in the case of a widow of a civil servant. The entitlements of a widow entitled to receive the benefits in respect of work accident insurance was fixed on the level of less than a half of the benefits in respect of complete incapacity for work (Piątkowski, 1983, p. 39-45).

The number of women claiming the benefits differed depending on the binding rules. The highest number of pensions was paid to widows of civil servants and professional soldiers. In 1938 it was paid to 58 000 women. The old-age pension insurance was paid to 47 000 widows of physical workers, 7 000 widows of intellectual workers and 13 500 widows received accident insurance. In total, in the late 30s, there were nearly 125 000 benefits paid to widows, plus slightly more than 60 000 pensions paid to war-disabled people (MRS 1936, p. 215; 1939, p. 294, 307; Ubezpieczenia, 1940, p. 60).

### **Maternity protection for working women**

The challenges related to the maternity of working women were present in the Polish social policy from the very beginning of the nation. The decree of 11<sup>th</sup> January 1919 on the health insurance granted working mothers

the right to medical help and to the eight week allowance in the amount of the regular income. Although the regulations of the decree were slightly restricted by the act of 19<sup>th</sup> May 1920, they remained beneficial for the insured, especially because the government was obliged to make supplementary payments to childbirth allowance. A significant change in the rules and regulations was introduced in the act of 28<sup>th</sup> March 1933 on social insurance which resulted in the government withdrawing supplementary payments which were on the level of 50% of the income of the insured (D. U. 1919, no. 9, pos. 122; 1920, no. 44, pos. 272; 1933, no. 51, pos. 396; Turowicz, 1929, p. 2-4).

The second element of the maternity support and protection were the rights granted in the act of 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1924 on juvenile and women's employment. According to the regulations of the act, pregnant women had the right to stop working six weeks prior to childbirth. They also had the right to have breaks at work and they couldn't be employed within six weeks after childbirth. During that time, an employer could not terminate or denounce their contact. The act, however, did not guarantee the continuation of employment of pregnant women earlier than six weeks prior to childbirth (D. U. 1924, no. 65, pos. 636; Jończyk, 1961, p. 247-259).

The obligation of running nurseries imposed on the entrepreneurs who hired over 100 women was an important, yet difficult, task to fulfil. The idea was introduced in the act of 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1924 and it met with such a sharp reaction of industrialists that its implementation was postponed for a few years. The regulation entered into force only in the middle of 1928 and the process of establishing nurseries started in the late 20s. However, it still met with the protests of entrepreneurs. The breakthrough happened in the mid-30s when day care centres, established and run by the specialized social organizations, became more common. They were funded by the entrepreneurs who did not have to establish their own nurseries. The result was a rapid increase in the number of enterprises which were able to fulfil this obligation. In 1937 about 60% of enterprises met the obligation and in 1939 – 90% (MRS, 1939, p. 292; Zawadowska, 1937, p. 296-298).

### **Support and protection of non-working mothers**

The legal and insurance protection of working women was claimed only by a small number of women in Poland. This meant that the majority of them were not covered by the social insurance and could not receive any benefits resulting from the work legislation. Although the legal regulations on maternity protection were announced in the article 103 of the 1921 Constitution, the wide scope of obligations which would have to be imposed on local government meant that they couldn't be passed. The thesis to the project of the act on maternity, children and youth support were presented in

1936 and made it to the forum of the Social Care Council. However, still no solution was found within the Polish social policy (D.U. 1921, no. 44, pos. 267; Protokół, 1937, p. 11).

As a result of the lack of the system solutions, the support for mothers who were not covered by the social insurance was based on a set of activities undertaken by the social services and public healthcare. Their main task was to provide medical care to mothers and their children. In this respect, the amount of resources was unsatisfactory till the end of the 30s. Although the number of midwives increased from about 6 000 in 1923 to 10 200 in 1938, the shortage remained on the level of 8 000. The number of hospital beds for women in labour was not satisfactory either. What is more, in the majority of cases, medical services were provided to insured patients (MRS, 1939, p. 295, 297; Danielski, 1938, p. 436-437).

With time, mother and child care centres became the institutions whose main aim was to improve the level of support provided to pregnant women, women in labour and breast-feeding mothers. Although, in the 20s, the number of the centres was rather small (about 100 centres in the country), it was gradually increasing. In the mid-30s, there were over 400 centres and in 1938 – 700 centres. They provided care and support to over 225 000 children and 23 000 women. Although the number of the centres was steadily growing, they could only provide help to only a small percentage of women in need. Still, the results of their activities were clearly visible as women gave birth in the centres more willingly than at home. The provided support resulted in a lower infant mortality rate (MOS, sign. 12, p. 16-17; Sprawozdanie, 1936, p. 418).

Institutionalized help provided to single mothers also fell into the category of the support activities related to maternity protection. It was based on secured institutions which, in the 30s, were called Mother and Child Shelters. In 1938, there were seven of them in Poland and women usually stayed there for the last months of pregnancy and the first 6-12 months after childbirth. They received shelter and food and they were also provided with medical care. Although, this form of support was modern and specialized, the number of Shelters was low so the problem of single mothers deprived of family support could not be entirely solved (every year, in Poland, there were about 60 000 unwed children born and the number of places in this type of institutions was only a few hundred) (Rasiówna, 1938, p. 320; Robakiewiczowa, 1938, p. 33-38).

### **Social services vs. women**

The aim of the social services was to complement the activities of the social insurance system. The act of 16<sup>th</sup> August 1923 set out support activities in the area of maternity protection. Many women also resorted to

the classic support activities. The support was mainly addressed to women unable to work or with no financial means. The statistics of 1927 show that there were 13 100 women living in 24-hour adult care centres and they constituted nearly 70% of all patients (the clear predominance of women was also visible in the next years) (D. U. 1923, no. 92, pos.726; MRS, 1937, p. 276; Rocznik, 1930, p. 355).

A separate category of social services recipients were women and girls in danger of or already involved in prostitution. There were two fundamental aims of the activities undertaken in this area. The first one was the registration of all active prostitutes, their obligatory medical examinations and treatment if needed. The second aim was the attempt of social institutions to give support to prostitutes as well as the prevention and protection against prostitution. The success of the registration of prostitutes was very limited, similarly to the success of obligatory medical examinations (only half of the registered prostitutes underwent regular examinations) (D. U. 1922, no. 78, pos. 715; Grata, 2013, p. 267-272).

The activities towards providing support to women in danger of or involved in prostitution were more successful. The extensive system of support and care provision was introduced by the Polish Committee for the Fight against Woman and Child Trafficking. It provided support to travelling women through the network of, so called, missions which were located close to the train/bus stations. They offered shelter, food, information and even small financial support. With time, the hostels for morally unstable women were set up and run by them. In the 30s, there were over 20 missions and the number of women who used their services was about 120 000-130 000 a year. Educational and care centres, whose main task was the rehabilitation and resocialization of prostitutes and the support of morally unstable girls, were also an important element of activities aimed at fighting against prostitution. In the late 30s, there were 25 educational and care centres with about 2 000 women living there (MOS, sign. 456, p.1-7; Działalność, 1937, p. 79-82).

## **Conclusion**

The system of support for women within the framework of the social policy of the Second Polish Republic included: the adequate regulations of work legislation, the rules of social insurance, the activities towards the maternity protection of the insured and, finally, social services directly or indirectly provided to women by the central as well as local governments. It needs to be noticed that, without any doubt, these activities were extensive and, in many cases, very modern. What is more, they were directed towards solving the most important social problems of women. However, rather than common, the scope of those activities was very limited and selective.

Moreover, the implementation of those activities was not always in accordance with the plans and expectations of their authors.

From the point of view of the existing social needs, the most advanced solutions were those which resulted from a privileged position of women in the work legislation and the system of health insurance. The problem of the insignificant influence always had its roots in the socio-professional structure of the country. Only women in employment or covered by the insurance could receive the benefits. This meant that only a few hundred thousand women (out of about 9 million living in Poland) could receive the support. For the rest the offer was no longer that beneficial. Despite visible progress, the activities towards the support of maternity of non-insured women were inadequate in relation to their needs. The activities of the social services, especially in the area of the institutionalized support for single mothers, were not sufficient, either.

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