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## CHANGES IN THE OCCUPATION AND SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN POLAND SINCE THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION TILL 1939

It was first and foremost the development of the modern textile industry that before World War I and in the inter-war period brought the large entry of Polish women into the labour market. The mechanization of textile work made it possible to replace a large number of skilled weavers and spinners by unskilled workers trained to operate machines. This opened the way to a large-scale employment of women and juveniles. It was in this branch of industry that the technological revolution brought the greatest changes in the structure of labour force as regards its qualifications, sex and age. In Poland both in the 19th and 20th centuries, women textile workers were the largest group of workwomen employed in industry; they accounted for 74% (in the Congress Kingdom) of all women industrial workers in 1912, for as much as 43.5% in 1921, and 31.1% in 1931<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, the entry of women into the labour market meant, as if by definition, the entry of unskilled labour. This starting point affected for many decades the workwoman's social status, placing her on a low rung of hierarchy in industry. Sex determined that the workwoman belonged to the lowest social and occupational category of the industrial proletariat, the category of "women".

The social status of women employed in the clothing industry, which made use of women's traditional qualifications, was slightly different. The production of luxury clothes and underwear, embroideries, lace, artificial flowers and such like goods required high qualifications. This was mostly

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<sup>1</sup> *Rocznik Statystyczny Królestwa Polskiego za rok 1914 (The Statistical Yearbook of the Congress Kingdom for 1914)*, compiled by Władysław Grabski, Warszawa 1915, Table 1, pp. 129–130; R. Centnerszwer, *Ustawodawstwo fabryczne wobec wzrostu pracy kobiet w przemyśle Królestwa Polskiego (Factory Legislation Connected with the Growth of Women's Employment in the Industry of the Congress Kingdom)*, Warszawa 1910.

semi-manual work and it was done in the woman's home or in an artisan workshop. It was specific to Poland that at the end of the 19th century many of the women employed in the production of luxury garments were from families of the impoverished gentry or the intelligentsia. In addition to economic motives (loss of land after the peasant reform of 1864), more and more women belonging to this social group took up paid work for political and patriotic reasons. The collapse of the last Polish anti-Russian uprising in the 19th century (1863/64) led to the pauperization of many gentry families. Landowning and intellectual circles regarded it as a patriotic act when a woman took up paid work to support a family victimized by the partitioner. This enhanced the prestige of working women in broad public opinion.

In the Congress Kingdom the leading role in the process of industrialization was played by the textile industry which as early as the 1880s employed nearly a half (over 40%) of all industrial workers. In inter-war Poland, too, the textile workers were the largest group among industrial workers, constituting about one-fifth of all workers employed in industry and mining<sup>2</sup>. The textile industry also had the largest proportion of women. For instance, in the Congress Kingdom women accounted for 46.3% of the work force in the textile industry in 1908 and in some sections, e.g., in the linen industry, for nearly a half. Before World War I, women also constituted a high percentage of the workers employed in the clothing industry, both in the Congress Kingdom (over 57%) and in Galicia (over 40%); tobacco and cigarette tube factories were staffed almost exclusively by women. Both before World War I and during the inter-war period, large groups of women worked in the paper, timber and food industries. But there were marked regional differences in the proportion of women even in these typically women's branches. There were regions where the pauperization of artisans was very acute and where the number of people looking for jobs in industry was quickly growing, as a result of which the labour force supply exceeded the demand. In such regions, the proportion of women, even in the textile industry, increased more slowly than in the regions and centers in which the workers were recruited mostly from the impoverished peasant population flowing in from the countryside. At the end of the 19th century, the proportion of women stabilized at about one-third of industrial workers, but

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Żarnowska, *Klasa robotnicza Królestwa Polskiego 1870–1914 (The Working Class in the Congress Kingdom 1870–1914)*, Warszawa 1974, p. 27; Zbigniew Landau, Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Robotnicy przemysłowi w Polsce. Materialne warunki bytu 1918–1939 (Industrial Workers in Poland. Their Living Conditions 1918–1939)*, Warszawa 1971, p. 56.

in the first decade of the 20th century it again showed a tendency to rise, reaching 34.5% in 1908<sup>3</sup>.

The use of women as a labour force in industry increased markedly during World War I; however, in Poland this trend was much weaker, for the German–Russian front was moving through the Polish territories and the industry in central Poland, i.e., in the Congress Kingdom, suffered large-scale destruction. But in Poland, too, the demand for women's work greatly increased in municipal and artisan enterprises and in trade, in particular towards the end of the war.

Women in Poland, as in the whole of Europe, continued to extend the scope of their occupations and to increase their vocational activity outside agriculture after the conclusion of World War I, until the beginning of the 1930s, i.e., until the great economic crisis. This was connected with the mechanization and automation introduced in some branches of industry (in particular in the metal and chemical industries and also in the textile industry). One can assume that both the proportional and the absolute growth of women's employment took place on the whole when the economic situation was good. When it deteriorated, the first to be dismissed were women, who were usually employed in auxiliary work or in work not requiring high qualifications.

During the inter-war period, women in Poland, as in other European countries, shifted to occupations which before the war had been regarded as the exclusive domain of men, in services, offices and public institutions (in 1930 women accounted for at least 29% of all the white-collar workers in Poland), as well as in industry (e.g., in the metal, chemical and printing industries). At the same time, until 1930, the proportion of women was increasing, at the cost of men, in the branches of industry which had already used women's work before the war: the textile industry (up to 51.5%), the clothing industry (up to 47.5%) and the paper industry (up to 36.5%)<sup>4</sup>.

In sum, at the end of the 19th century as well as in the first thirty years of the 20th century, women constituted a similar proportion of the workers employed in industry in Poland as they did in the most industrialized countries of Europe. What was specific to Poland was the continued importance (also in numerical terms) of women's employment outside industry, in agriculture and services, as late as 1931 the largest group in the third sector being domestic servants and women performing personal services (a field

<sup>3</sup> *Statisticheskiye svedeniya po obrabatyvayushchey promyshlennosti Rossiyskoy Imperii za 1908 god*, St. Petersburg 1912, chast II: Prilozheniya Tab. A; St. Herse, *Frauenarbeit im Königreich Polen*, Zürich–Selnau 1912, pp. 53–56.

<sup>4</sup> Halina Krahelska, *Praca kobiet w przemyśle współczesnym (Women's Work in Modern Industry)*, Warszawa 1932, pp. 11, 24–25.

from which they nearly ousted men in the second half of the 19th century), especially in towns, but also in the countryside. In the capital, Warsaw, which was also one of the most industrialized Polish cities, domestic service provided a livelihood to more than a half of the gainfully employed women in the city prior to World War I. In 1892, there were five servants to each workwoman employed in industry. This dominant role of domestic service as the place where women earned a living was very slowly changing in favour of industry and handicrafts. As late as 1913, there were two servants for each workwoman employed in industry in Warsaw, while in 1921 there were already only three servants to two workwomen. The next decade brought the importance of domestic service in women's occupations up to the pre-war level (1:2). The great economic crisis in the 1930s worsened this proportion even further, restoring the 19th century occupational structure of women in Warsaw.

However, in Polish conditions both at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, the barriers separating a domestic servant from a factory workwomen or a cottage worker were not very distinct. Domestic servants, recruited almost exclusively from the countryside, constituted a specific reserve of labour force for factories, and marriages between industrial workers and domestic servants were quite common. But being an occupational group with unstable working conditions (especially irregular working hours!), a group which was completely dependent on the employer, was the most underprivileged as regards the chance of normalizing their family life and the most affected by illiteracy, the domestic servants constituted the lowest stratum of the proletarian population as far as social prestige was concerned. The servants' status and prestige were however greatly differentiated, depending on the wealth and social position of their employers.

Another specific feature of the women's occupational structure in Poland before World War II was the proportion between the workwomen employed in industry (including those working in handicrafts) and white-collar women workers, namely, the relatively small number of the white-collar women workers employed in administration, education, the professions as well in industry and trade, compared with workwomen earning their living in industry, handicrafts and domestic service. In Warsaw at the end of the 19th century (1897) white-collar women workers accounted for only some 5%–6% of all employed women. Even in 1931, white-collar women workers accounted for only 13.4% of the women working outside agriculture in Poland<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Żarnowska, *Robotnicy Warszawy na przełomie XIX i XX w.* (Warsaw Workers at

It is obvious that in Poland, as well as in other industrializing European countries, the growth in the employment of women in industrial production, and in other fields which were developing dynamically together with industrialization, was due first and foremost to economic factors: the growing need to supplement the man's earnings which were insufficient to maintain a family.

Against the background of European countries, the low value of women's work was particularly noticeable in the Polish territories at the end of the 19th century. In the Congress Kingdom, the region which alongside Upper Silesia was the most industrialized part of the Polish territories, the average wage of women employed in industry was more than 50% lower than of men in 1886–1888. There is no doubt that this was due to the fact at that time the majority of them did work requiring no qualifications, only the minority of the workwomen employed in industry belonging to the category of trained workers. Besides, even in this category the competition of men barred women from better paid jobs, since men, being stronger physically, were more productive (e.g., they could operate two looms).

There is no agreement among Polish historians on how much lower women's wages for the same work were than those of men (e.g. Elżbieta Kaczyńska defends the theory that at the turn of the 19th century women were not directly underprivileged in wages, especially in piece work)<sup>6</sup>. What is indisputable is that during World War I the wide-spread misery led to a levelling of wages, the average wage of women approximating at that time about three-quarters of that of men. This trend was maintained during the first years after the conclusion of the war, when inflation was high in Poland. According to women labour inspectors, the differences between men's and women's wages returned to the pre-war level in the mid-1920s, when the currency had been stabilized. In 1929, the average wage of women in industry oscillated in Poland around 65% of the average wage of an unskilled worker<sup>7</sup>. It seems that the difference between men's and women's wages in industry was just as great in Poland as in the industrialized European countries.

The reason why a comparatively large number of women, especially in the proletarian circles, took up paid work in Poland in the second half of the 19th century was to supplement the earnings the chief breadwinner, man,

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the Turn of the 19th Century), Warszawa 1935, p. 123; *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny 1939 (Concise Statistical Yearbook for 1939)*, Warszawa 1939, p. 260, Table 5.

<sup>6</sup> Elżbieta Kaczyńska, *Dzieje robotników przemysłowych w Polsce pod zaborami (The History of Industrial Workers in Poland during the Partitions)*, Warszawa 1970, pp. 139–142.

<sup>7</sup> H. Kraheńska, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–52.

which were insufficient to maintain a family. The effects were however double-edged.

On the one hand, the mother's earnings increased the family's income, raising its living standards; they were sometimes an indispensable condition for maintaining the family's integrity, allowing it to live together and protecting its members from separation. In the Polish conditions where the proletarian population earned low wages and had low living standards, the work of women, even mothers, was first and foremost a factor stabilizing the family.

On the other hand, the absence of a working mother from home had undoubtedly in many respects a disintegrating effect on the family, weakening its emotional ties and affecting the functioning of the household. This dilemma was particularly acute in the Polish territories at the turn of the 19th century, when the Polish state did not exist. For instance, in the Russian-ruled Congress Kingdom, which was quickly becoming industrialized in the second half of the 19th century, the maternal functions of a workwoman employed in industry were particularly endangered in view of the lack of any legal maternity protection and the long 10–11 hour working day. And yet the low living standards of the working class families forced a large proportion of wives and mothers to take up paid work even if this meant they had less time to look after family and bring up their children, while many women had to give up plans to start a family.

Contrary to widespread opinions married women and women who were the only breadwinners in the family accounted for a large percentage of the workwomen employed in industry in Poland, as well as in most industrialized countries of Europe. Admittedly, at the end of the 19th century (1897), almost a half of the women working in the industry of the Congress Kingdom were young girls up to 18 years of age (usually unmarried), but married women already accounted for a quarter of all workwomen employed in industry. It is interesting that these proportions did not change in inter-war Poland until 1931, when (according to the census) 26% of the women employed in industry and mining were married. It is worth adding that this was a higher percentage than that for the women white-collar workers in administration, industry, trade and insurance where married women accounted for 20% of the employed women<sup>8</sup>.

Both before and after World War I, it was the Polish textile centers (Łódź and the Łódź district, Żyrardów in the Warsaw industrial region, Częstochowa) that employed the largest groups of married women. In 1897, for instance, married women accounted for nearly one-third (31%) of the

<sup>8</sup> *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny, op. cit.*

women textile workers in Żyrardów. It is characteristic that 20–40 year–old women were the largest group among the married women working in the textile industry at the end of the 19th century (over 40% in 1897)<sup>9</sup>. This means that women textile workers did not stop working when they got married, even when they were the most encumbered by material duties.

Beside the textile industry it was the mineral, alcohol distilling and timber industries, usually sited outside large urban centers, that had the largest percentage of married women in the Congress Kingdom. These were mostly seasonal unskilled workers recruited from among the pauperized inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, and they were still strongly linked with agriculture. In this way the entry of married women onto the industrial labour market was assuming specific characteristics in Poland. In the above mentioned branches of industry seasonal work was for men, but especially for women, a source of additional earnings supplementing the income derived from agriculture which was not sufficient to support a family.

At the turn of the 19th century, the percentage of the married Polish women taking up jobs in industry was lower than in Belgium and Switzerland, and much lower than in Austria, which had the highest percentages in Europe. At that time, proletarian women in the Congress Kingdom avoided regular permanent jobs in view of the lack of adequate protective legislation, social amenities and organized child welfare. It was not only in the 19th century that work in industry did not enhance a woman's prestige in proletarian circles. The disfavour of women's work in industry turned out to be very stable in proletarian circles and was retained also in inter-war Poland, in spite of the law on the protection of workwomen's maternity, which was adopted in 1924. When forced to work, the wives of urban workers preferred to look for additional earnings, indispensable for maintaining the family, outside industry: in the services (e.g. by taking in washing), in trade or as cottage workers, since these kinds of work could be better reconciled with the functions of a mother and housewife, nor did they undermine the father's position as the family chief breadwinner and the patriarchal model of the working class family.

However, many widows as well as some married women, in particular in Warsaw, were the chief breadwinners in families deprived of the man's (father's) earnings. They, too, looked for earnings first and foremost in handicrafts and small-scale industry (production of clothing, wooden goods), in trade and services and more rarely in large-scale industry; but in practice they found them mainly in the textile industry<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> A. Żarnowska, *Klasa robotnicza Żyrardowa (The Working Class of Żyrardów)*, in: *Żyrardów (1829–1945)*, ed. by Irena Pietrzak-Pawłowska, Warszawa 1980, pp. 130–133.

The dangers which women's work out of home, especially in industry, spelled to their maternal functions, to the everyday life of the working class family and its unity, to the health of the women themselves, are, also in Poland, among the well researched aspects of the workwomen's social position.

The analytical reports made by women labour inspectors in inter-war Poland show that workwomen were overburdened by paid and household work, that the sick rate was higher among workwomen in industry than among men, and that factory work was dangerous to pregnant workwomen. The great crisis in the 1930s, which was very acute and prolonged in Poland, aggravated still further the psychic burden of women employed in industry, a burden caused by their "constant efforts to keep up to the mark" and their perpetual "fear of losing work."<sup>11</sup>

The Polish example shows very clearly another effect of industrialization and of the growing employment of proletarian women for their family situation. At the turn of the 19th century workwomen were clearly handicapped in establishing their own family. The lack of a family was, at that time, frequently a factor giving preference on the labour market. In the conditions existing in Poland, Russia and probably also in other countries of East Central Europe, industrialization in the 19th century restricted the workers' chance of setting up a family more than in other European countries. As late as the end of the 19th century, industry in Russia was, to a great extent, sited outside the great cities and more than a half of the workers were single. This was noticeable to a much lesser extent in the Congress Kingdom (in 1897 about one-third of the workers had no family), but unlike the situation in Russia, the proportion of single persons and persons separated from their families was similar for men and women. In towns, the women's working conditions in many sectors (domestic service, catering, trade) and in some branches of industrial production and handicrafts (the textile industry, production of clothing) frequently made it impossible for workwomen to start a family or at least forced them to put this off. In working class circles in Poland, as late as the beginning of the 20th century women's work was in many cases incompatible with family life<sup>12</sup>.

The ever spreading custom of proletarian women taking up paid work cannot, therefore, be said to have had an unequivocally positive influence

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<sup>10</sup> Eadem, *Robotnicy Warszawy*, op. cit., pp. 97–104.

<sup>11</sup> Halina Krahełska, Maria Kirstowa, *Ze wspomnień inspektora pracy (Reminiscences of a Labour Inspector)*, Warszawa 1938.

<sup>12</sup> A. Żarnowska, *Klasa robotnicza Królestwa Polskiego*, op. cit., pp. 205–248.



on their social position during the period of industrialization. On the one hand, industry opened up to women greater opportunities for earning money than the other sectors did, thus reducing their dependence on men (whether fathers, husbands or brothers). This undoubtedly undermined the patriarchy of the working class family and paved the way towards aspirations for equality, which however were hardly noticeable in proletarian circles in Poland at the turn of the 19th century and in the 1920s. On the other hand, in their work places, the working women were made to feel the Polish working class's traditional aversion to the regular work of women — wives and mothers — for these circles retained the established model of the family rallied round the father, the chief breadwinner. All this, combined with the lower wages paid to women, did not increase the prestige of vocationally active women. Treated as an economic necessity in Poland until the end of the inter-war period, the paid work of the working class women played a minimal role in developing workwomen's aspirations for education and advancement.