

Work In Progress

From Matka Polka to New Polish Woman

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Introduction

This article aims to provide a brief analysis of the main issues related to the socio-cultural status of Polish women, both prior to and after 1989. It identifies three dominant models of womanhood, which have been promoted in Poland throughout its more recent history: Matka Polka (Mother Poland), the Communist Woman, and the Contemporary Woman of post 1989 Poland. Each of those models has been created at a different point of time, but all three co-exist in contemporary Poland. It is believed that the discussion of the models of womanhood existing in contemporary Poland will bring the reader closer to an understanding of the specific cultural environment in which contemporary Polish women negotiate their identity, while at the same time avoiding some of the difficulties encountered by Western academics studying Polish women.

The article is based on research conducted by the author in Poland between May and September 1995. The data has been gathered using multiple research methods¹. It involved 31 formal open-ended interviews with women residing in two regions of Poland: Krakow and Silesia, and numerous informal interviews with both women and men including members of the general public, academics and activists addressing women's issues, members of the government and the Church. It also involved analysis of the contents of several popular magazines aimed at women published between May and September 1995, such as an analysis of variety of secondary polish sources including statistical data and gender focused literature.

The women who participated in formal interviews were recruited predominantly through personal contacts. After the interview they were asked to introduce the researcher to other potential interviewees. This snowball technique proved to be very successful and resulted in numerous women introducing their relatives, neighbours, co-workers and employees. Due to the nature of the recruitment technique, specific care was taken to include a cross-section of women, representing a variety of socio-economic and age groups. The youngest participant was eighteen years old and the oldest was in her late sixties. The majority of women were married and had children. The use of personal contacts rather than a more random way of recruitment was chosen as appropriate as it was believed that women would be reluctant to participate in interviews conducted by a person who was not known to them.

This article is a work in progress. It reflects the stage of research I was at when the data was collected in 1995. Since this time, my work has progressed and changed. However, this article clearly reflects the foundation of my continuing research.

Social position of Polish women - theoretical approach.

The changes of 1989 led to a great increase in the level of interest in the position of women in contemporary Poland by Western feminists. Western feminist discourse², however, encountered significant problems when attempting to analyse the position of Polish women. This can be partially explained by the fact that until the collapse of the Eastern Block women's studies were not recognised in Poland as a separate area of research (Pakszys, 1992:119). During the communist period the government had absolute control over the subject matter of research and nature of any resulting publications. The primary role of publications produced prior to 1989 such as Zólkiewska's 'Women in Poland 1945 - 1955' (1955); 'Poland, Facts and Figures' (1962), and 'Women in Socialist Countries' (1976) was to glorify the role of the communist state in 'liberating' women. Feminist research was not encouraged as the existence of any form of sex discrimination was denied by government agencies (Royer, 1992:100; Posadskaya, 1993:7).

In the 1970s the Polish government became more tolerant and an increasing number of academics (predominantly sociologists) chose women as subjects of their research. Pakszys identifies three main areas of gender research which existed in Poland during this period: statistical-

demographic studies, socio-economic works analysing women's labour distribution, and finally political analyses addressing the issue of equality of the sexes and the position of Polish women from an international perspective (Pakszys 1992:120). Despite relaxation of the communist state control over academia, researchers were still largely unable to be critical of the impact of the communist system on women's lives.

In 1975, Warzywoda-Kruszynska pointed out that despite the mass entry of women into employment and education, women were still not equal to men. Sokołowska (1976) addressed the 'double burden' experienced by Polish women, which involved combining domestic responsibilities with paid employment. Both authors however, emphasised that the case of Poland showed how much can be done for women through official structures such as law, education and employment opportunities. They argued that the responsibility for the still existing inequality between the sexes did not lie with the government but with the traditional attitude held towards women, which remained dominant in society (Warzywoda-Kruszynska, 1975:136; Sokołowska, 1976:277).

Prior to 1989 a number of articles by Polish academics addressing gender issues in Poland appeared in Western publications. Holzer and Wasilewska-Trenker (1985) attempted to analyse the relationship between women's economic activity and fertility. They argued that women are simultaneously expected to work outside the home and perform the majority of domestic duties. Furthermore, they pointed out that the main factor causing the increase in women's participation in paid employment was the national demand for an expanded labour force. But similar to their colleagues publishing in Poland, the authors simply described the lives of women in communist Poland, and did not provide any critical analysis of the relationship between Poland's political system and the social position of women. However, Polish academics, who offered assistance to Western writers critically addressing this issue, had to remain anonymous (Koski, 1977:70).

In 1989, the fall of the communist regime resulted in an explosion of Polish academic publication addressing women's issues. Some of the leaders of Polish feminists such as Siemienska, Titkow and Sokołowska³ had addressed women's issues prior to 1989, but now their research became unrestrained by political forces. However, possibly due to the language barrier, as most of the works had been published in Polish, the

Polish and Western analysis of the situation of Polish women remained parallel rather than interactive.

In the early 1990s numerous Western authors expressed a belief that the political changes of 1989 did not benefit women. Catalyst (1990) argued that changes in Europe had no room for women. Duchén (1992), Watson (1993), and Kiss (1991) noted that women participated in the 'velvet revolution' but then disappeared from the negotiating tables and the political elites of former Eastern Bloc countries. It was argued that economic nationalism combined with the political power of the church resulted in women losing limited but still useful gains made under the old regime. Increasing unemployment and reduced childcare services caused women to lose their jobs (Sheridan, 1992:93; Einhorn, 1991:22; Einhorn, 1993:85; Pine, 1992:72). Their reproductive rights were also threatened by restrictions on abortion and a war against contraception launched by the Catholic Church and other conservative organizations (Funk, 1993; Watson, 1993; Davin, 1992; Einhorn, 1993:74).

This negative attitude was not necessarily fully shared by women from the Eastern Bloc themselves. Paradoxically while high levels of female employment in Eastern Europe was seen in the West as evidence of their emancipation (Marx-Ferree, 1993; Haug, 1991), many women experienced combining paid work with domestic responsibilities as a double burden. As a result, some Central and Eastern European women still resent Western feminists for their naive acceptance of Marxist ideologies (Royer, 1992:101).

While Western feminists saw the involvement of women in paid employment and their official (sometimes very tokenistic) involvement in governance as synonymous with equality, they ignored the fact that this was not achieved through questioning gender relations or the concept of gender itself. The 'equality' of sexes was only addressed through encouraging women to work outside the home, and was motivated by the economic needs of the state (Walczevska, 2000). Gender relations within the private sphere were not questioned, and the 'equality' of women and men was declared with little consideration of the fact that women not only still did the majority of the domestic work and childrearing, but also continued to be restrained by rigid cultural and social norms (Ciechomska, 1996).

So while many Western feminists expressed concern over the negative impact of the 1989 changes on the lives of women, they largely

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ignored the fact that communism was oppressive to women in different, but certainly no less significant ways than capitalism. Economic crises and political oppression resulting from the Soviet dictatorship led to various difficulties which women experienced in their everyday lives (Manny, 1982:18). This, combined with the patriarchal nature of society, had dramatic consequences. This is not to say that there is no common ground between Western and Eastern women's feminism. Patriarchal discourses are problematic in both cases. However as Ang, a feminist writer of Chinese decent, points out "not all women share the same experiences of 'being a woman', nor is shared gender enough to guarantee a commonality in social positioning" (1995: 58) or, one might add, social analysis.

It could also be argued that as far as academic discourse is concerned, the 1989 revolution and subsequent interest in the position of women in Central and Eastern Europe could not have happened at a more convenient time. Caine points out that "the current moment in feminist thought and scholarship is very much one of reflection and revision" (Caine, 1995:1). This revision could create avenues for more flexible readings of the position of women in Poland, allowing for the understanding that what could be seen to be quite oppressive for Western women is not necessarily equally oppressive for women in Poland, and what is liberating for women in the West may not be seen as liberating in Poland. Looking at the different models of womanhood promoted in contemporary Poland can be one of such readings.

The dominant models of womanhood and social position of women.

The three models of womanhood, *Matka Polka*, Communist Woman and the Contemporary Woman, have been chosen for discussion in this paper as they all play a significant role in the everyday lives of Polish women. *Matka Polka*, Communist Woman and Contemporary Woman are all terms frequently mentioned in everyday conversations by politicians and church leaders, as well as being referred to in the Polish media.

Matka Polka

Every Polish person is familiar with the expression *Matka Polka*: the most idealised model of Polish womanhood, one deeply rooted in Polish tradition and culture. Although it would be difficult to date the birth of this term, it probably emerged around the time of the first partition of

Poland in 1772. In that year the state of Poland disappeared from the map of Europe soon after and did not re-emerge until the end of the First World War. In most partitioned sections of the country, Polish language was often banned, and Polish tradition and culture could not be cultivated in the public sphere. As a result, the Polish family became a bastion of Polish national identity (Sokołowska, 1975:72). And since the men were commonly imprisoned, exiled or executed, it was primarily Polish women who were responsible for sustaining Polish national identity (Sokołowska, 1975:72; Sokołowska, 1977; Siemienska, 1985). Women also had to insure the day-to-day survival of their families by running family businesses or farms (Titkow 1993:253).

The specific conditions prevailing in partitioned Poland gave women great political significance, autonomy and power in their families as well as in the broader society (Sokołowska, 1975:72). This autonomy and power was however limited in numerous ways. It was reserved only for women living out traditional women's roles: only women who were mothers, grand-mothers, or potential mothers (virgin maidens) were seen as deserving the name and the role of *Matka Polka*. The actions of women were subordinate to the interests of their homeland and family.

A woman who attempted to fit the role model of *Matka Polka* had to possess all the qualities of Catholic womanhood. Polish society at the time perceived the notions of patriotism and Catholicism as one. *Matka Polka* would usually wear a cross symbolising the fact that she was married to her husband, the nation and the Church (Reading, 1992:21). She was expected to remain faithful to her absent or dead husband. She was to be totally disinterested in any issues associated with more personal self-fulfilments. She was only permitted to fulfil herself through motherhood, religion and patriotic activity. Even love for her husband was not based on passion, but rather on duty and social norms: she married him, had his children, and therefore she loved him.

Matka Polka was portrayed in Polish art⁴ and literature as a sombre woman dressed in black, surrounded by her many children and grandchildren. The black dress symbolises not only the mourning for husbands, sons and brothers who met their death fighting for their motherland, but also the mourning for the loss of independent Poland (Reading, 1992:21).

The model of *Matka Polka* partially lost its significance during the communist era, as it was not fully suitable for the political agenda of the

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time. However, since 1989, once again it has been strongly promoted. The current nationalistic climate in Poland, promoting a return to 'traditional Polish values' (that is values which supposedly existed in Poland before the communist era), strongly contributes to the popularity of this model.

The Catholic Church, which in Poland has always been a highly political institution, is one of the strong advocates of *Matka Polka*⁵. The term *Matka Polka* is used by the church to describe the most desirable position of women in society (Kowalewska, 1995:1; Nowakowska, 1995:1). The campaign against abortion and contraception is just one of the methods used by the church to insure that every Polish woman has little chance not to become a *Matka Polka*.

It would be unjust not to point out that the position of *Matka Polka* gives women access to some power and integrity. The social position of the mother in pre-communist Poland often gave women much authority in their own families and broader society. In contemporary Poland it is the women of the family who play a central role in cultivating and controlling family, religious and social traditions. They are the ones who offer moral and often financial support for their children and grandchildren (Komorowska, 1976:156). In a country, where great emphasis is placed on tradition and family values, this gives women-mothers significant authority and integrity. Although, equally today as in the past patriarchal society promises women power and social respect only if they choose to live their lives as non-sexual virgin mothers.

The Communist Woman

At first glance the Communist Woman appears to be an exact opposite of *Matka Polka*. *Matka Polka* was ruled by national and Catholic values, while the communist woman was ruled by the values of internationalism and communism. The imagery that is associated with these two role models has also been quite different. Dressed in black and surrounded by her children *Matka Polka* was usually portrayed in the environment of her rural home. In contrast, the Communist Woman was dressed in overalls, her children were in government-run childcare, and if she was not driving a tractor it was only because she was working at the building site.

In reality the model of the Communist Woman was very complex. It varied in different regions of Poland, and throughout the years it

changed according to the needs of the state. The bureaucracy of the ruling United Workers Party reinforced patriarchy in the public sphere, while in the private sphere patriarchy was perpetuated by the Catholic Church (Bishop, 1990:16). It could be argued that the Communist Woman was as far, if not further away, from emancipation than *Matka Polka*.

The image of the Communist Woman promoted during the communist era showed women as workers, toiling alongside men for their communist homeland. Between the years 1945 to 1954 the Polish economy experienced labour shortages and women were encouraged to work outside the home (Plakwicz 1992:80). Posters showing women driving tractors and tramcars were used to encourage women to participate in non-traditional paid employment (Plakwicz, 1992:80). The state provided women with services such as childcare, and medical services, including free abortions. The provision of these services did not aim to improve the living conditions of Polish women, but rather, to insure that women were available as workers.

In the late sixties and early seventies the model of the Communist Woman was transformed. In this period fertility rates dropped and the government introduced pro-natalist policies in response (Holzer and Wasilewska-Trenker, 1985:122). Women were given an opportunity to have extended childcare leave⁶, there was funding cuts to family planning clinics and organizations, and restrictions were placed on abortions.

Free abortion had been available in Poland since 1957 (Matuchniak-Krasuska 1995:189), but women were far from being in control of their lives in terms of reproduction and sexuality as accessibility of contraception and family planning services very was limited (Duchen, 1992:4). In fact abortion was one of the main methods of birth control available (Jankowska 1991:178). Discussion of sexuality and eroticism was considered embarrassing, even vulgar, and there was a great deal of ignorance about sexual issues (German, 1991; Jankowska 1991).

Although equality between the sexes was guaranteed by the Polish constitution, this constitutional guarantee did not alter the traditional perception of women's role in society. In her 1955 book titled "Women in Poland 1945-1955," Zólkiewska (1955:40) attempted to illustrate the 'equality' of women in Poland. The book was illustrated with numerous photographs. One group of photographs with the caption "In schools with various specialisations they prepare themselves for work in profes-

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sions chosen according to their personal interests",⁷ showed young women cooking, ironing and nursing. Their personal interests appeared to be limited to traditional female professions. Traditional understandings of what constitutes 'feminine' values and attributes were also unchallenged. The caption under a photograph of female doctors read "More and more women become doctors. Compassion together with hard work can be well applied in that profession" (Zólkiewska, 1955:135).

Numerous photographs in Zólkiewska's book were dedicated to highlighting the high standard of living enjoyed in the People's Poland. In the photographs, women were cleaning their state supplied apartments, cooking, serving men and children at the table, making clothes and walking children to state-run kindergartens. The sexual division of domestic labour was never questioned; men were only seen sitting looking proudly at their wives, whose domestic work became much more efficient and pleasant due to the services and equipment provided by the state.

As a result of the political agenda, the economic situation and the main social value system, women in Poland were forced into a "double-burden" situation where they were expected to be workers, as well mothers and wives. They were not alone with their experiences of the patriarchal communist state. With the exception of brief episodes when the equality of women was seriously addressed, such as in the early days after the revolution in the Soviet Union, this trend was universal throughout the Eastern Block.⁸ Russian and European socialists did not challenge the fundamental social stereotypes of male and female roles. Most of them did not believe that men should participate in housework, rather they believed that women should enter political and economic work through the help of communal services (Hutton 1991:71).

The New Woman - women in post 1989 Poland

Both models *Matka Polka* and the Communist Woman developed in Poland before the 1989 transformation. With the advent of democracy a new role model started to be promoted.

The complexity of the New Woman is well represented in women's magazines available in contemporary Poland. Many characteristics of this model are carbon copies of the images of Western women. This is

partially caused by the fact that numerous magazines such as *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* are simply Polish version of magazines developed for Western readers. According to women's magazines, contemporary Polish women are sexually liberated. A model of family where the husband is the first and only sexual partner of the woman, and marriage is an unbreakable union, is not the one emphasised by the magazines (Laciak, 1995:233). Paradoxically, women's magazines still portray men as being the most important aspect of women's lives, regardless if it is as husband, fiancé or lover (Laciak, 1995:240).

Since 1989 the image of the Business Woman and Professional Women started to appear in women's magazines as well as in other popular media (Dukaczewska, 1995:213). The image of the professional woman is often disliked in Poland on the basis that this is not an 'appropriate' role for women who should place priority on the family and home. A professional career should not jeopardise their domestic responsibilities (Dukaczewska, 1995:228).

To illustrate, this attitude is reflected in an article about the first Polish war reporter Maria Wiernikowska, published in 'Twej Styl'. In this article, the author emphasises that although Wiernikowska has achieved a lot in her professional life, her private life is extremely important to her: she is constantly looking for true love (Stanislawczyk, 1995:11). Stories of Wiernikowska's encounters with death in the trouble spots of the world are intertwined with confessions of her love for her son (who, as it is pointed out was not planned, but now is very much loved) and regrets that currently there is no man in her life. Similarly, in the photos used in the article, Wiernikowska is presented as a reporter, but also (and perhaps most of all) a mother having breakfast with her son and their pet dog. It is emphasised that "Maria in every private conversation behaves like a journalist. In every relationship she wants to be the dominant one. As a result she loses as a woman" (Stanislawczyk, 1995:10). Wiernikowska's interest in her appearance is also highlighted. It is emphasised that when she goes to the war zones she takes a sleeping bag, knife, radio and an eye liner and that she was upset that she did not take powder to Chechnya because her nose was red when she was shown on television (Stanislawczyk, 1995:10).

The most commonly promoted model of woman is that of the 'superwoman' who manages to combine her paid employment with domestic responsibilities, marriage with sexual liberation, and finds time and

energy to be youthful and beautiful. This image ignores the realities of life for women in Poland.

Negotiating identity in contemporary Poland

The co-existence of the three models of womanhood results in women having to constantly negotiate between them. While constructing their self-identity women interact with the models as active agents adapting some of their characteristics while rejecting others, rather than simply accepting complete models presented to them.

This negotiation is not always a free process. It is constrained by the pressure exerted on women by the powerful Catholic Church, as well as numerous conservative political parties. The education system also contributes to the promotion of traditional role models of women as is evident in the curriculum for most primary schools (Gollinkowa, 1995; Morciniec 1995, Domanski 1995). Universities also perpetuate these traditional gender roles (Walczevska, 2000). Despite this, many contemporary Polish women associate *Matka Polka* with an image of an overworked mother of many children, caught between her unattractive job and equally unattractive domestic responsibilities, who does not have time for any form of self-realisation: most of the women that had been interviewed as a part of this research, for example, rejected the image of *Matka Polka*, seeing it to be unattractive, undesirable, and oppressive.

"A stupid goose with a wooden spoon stirring soup and surrounded by crying children" (Basia, interview, 1995).

"A woman who takes care of house and a child, a woman who doesn't work. *Matka Polka* for me is equivalent to a woman who is chained to the sink" (Kryisia, interview 1995).

Some women were also aware that the term *Matka Polka* was often used in specific political context

“This term was used during elections few years ago, our president (Lech Walesa)⁹ said Matka Polka. Well, every mother is a mother to me this description Polka is strange” (Ewa, interview 1995).

This does not mean that women do not fit this model to some extent. The image of Matka Polka is very strong in the consciousness of the Polish nation and therefore the traditional model of the woman-mother is promoted in Poland alongside more liberated images (Laciak, 1995:237). It finds its reflection in the way women live their lives, even if women themselves do not desire to or believe that they fulfil this image.

Marriage is still a highly regarded institution, promoted by the Catholic Church in particular and society in general. In a study conducted by DEMOSCOPIA in 1996, in which people were asked about their opinion about de-facto couples, 34% of respondents believed that de-facto couples should definitely get married, 42% percent believed that they should get married, while only 3% believed that marriage was not necessary (Naj, 1997:8). Polish women marry relatively earlier than women in the Western world and divorce is not very popular, with Polish divorce rate being two times lower than the European Union average (Biolik, 1994:6). Traditionally having children is perceived as a main aim of marriage (Adamski, 1976). Women who choose to remain single are commonly viewed with disapproval and suspicion by those in their immediate environment (Bishop 1990:30; Kořta & Domagalik, 1997; Ciechomska, 1996) which often leads to being pressured to marry by their families.¹⁰

Having children is one of the most important if not the essential aspect of marriage. Polish figures for extra-nuptial births are three times lower than those in the EU (Biolik, 1994:6-7). Many women believe that children are the most important aspect of a married life. Any deviations from this behaviour can result in feelings of guilt.

“I’m not a mother who sacrifices everything for her children, no, not at all. I believe that children are needed, that they make a marriage fuller, a marriage without children would be strange. Also children bind us even stronger. But I

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look at things more from the point of view of the marriage. Yes, sometimes I even blame myself that I spent too little time with them" (Anna, interview, 1995).

It would seem that in post 1989 Poland, the model of the Communist Woman as a whole has been rejected, but women still use some elements of the latter for their self-identity. In general, Polish women believe that they have to work outside the home, and if they do not, they see themselves to be doing "nothing". Interestingly, despite the fact that since the 1950s the role of women as worker was promoted in Poland, most women are still performing low paying jobs in feminised sectors of the labour market, such as administration and unskilled positions (Janicka, 1995:104). Furthermore since 1989, women have been increasingly pushed out of the labour market (Walczevska, 2000; Janicka, 1995: Reszke 1995). At the same time, increasing numbers of women are becoming small business owners (Walczevska, 2000; Dukaczewska, 1995). This trend is often seen as a measure taken to avoid possible unemployment, but a study conducted by Lisowska (1996) indicated that many women started their own businesses to prove their abilities to husbands and family.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to outline models of womanhood existing in contemporary Poland, and the way in which women adapt those models. Despite their significance, the 1989 changes did not completely transform the lives of Polish women. The economy, the political structure or even the constitution of the country can be changed almost overnight, but values, beliefs and social attitudes need more time to be changed. Ten years after the collapse of Eastern Block the process is still continuing.

Notes

1. For the detailed description of feminist multiple research methods see Reinharz (1992).
2. When referring to 'western feminism' it is not intended to imply that it is a homogenous discourse. As it is difficult to identify all the different variations of

western feminism in this short paper, in most cases a general reference to 'western feminism' has to be made.

3. See bibliography for specific references.

4. See for example images in Okon, (1992)

5. The Polish Catholic Church is one of the most, if not the most, influential institution in contemporary Poland. Historically it was always powerful, and during the Solidarity era it gained even stronger support via its association with the Solidarity movement and its role in defending the democratic rights of Polish citizens. After the 1989 transition the church became an official political body, involved in all aspects of Polish life. The power of the Church is supported by its extreme wealth. Its popularity has diminished since 1989, but despite this it still exerts substantial influence upon all aspects of peoples lives, from politics to sexual issues.

6. Until the 1970s women had the right to three months paid maternity leave. In the 1970s' this was extended to six months and additional unpaid leave could be taken until the child's third birthday (Einhorn 1993).

7. Quotes marked with asterisk were translated by Anita Seibert from Polish original.

8. For a discussion of the experiments with communist class struggles within the household that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1920s see Resnick and Wolff (1996). For an analysis of the difficulties women faced immediately after the Soviet Revolution announced them to be equal with men (the Soviets however, did not question the many fundamental problems experienced by Soviet women at that time), see Hutton 1991

9. Lech Walesa has been one of the most vigilant advocates of traditional roles for women, and one of the most active opponents of abortion and birth control.

10. For example on the discussion list "Gender", the only Polish language feminist email discussion group, in year 2000 alone there has been several debates sparked by group members seeking advice on how should they react to the pressure to marry exercised on them by their families.

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