

Chapter 11

Women in Transition: Institutional Change and Women's Situation in Poland

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ABSTRACT

The chapter describes institutional and gender relations in the society and the economy, the influence of institutions and the state that may lead to the institutional change, which is understood as an adaptation of habits of thought to changing circumstances. The situation of women in Poland has been chosen to illustrate this phenomenon. Poland, as a country, has gone through major social, political and economic transformations in the last 25 years, and they have had important impacts on people's lives. The analysis of the impact of major transformations in Poland's post-war political economy enables the distinguishing factors (policies, institutions) that guarantee certain continuity in a society, and the ones that lead to institutional changes. Knowledge about the mechanisms of institutional change in the context of gender relations is helpful in designing policies aiming at promoting gender equality in societies as well as economies.

INTRODUCTION¹

As a type of social relation, economic relations are defined by institutions in which people act or are constrained from acting by social norms and expectations that structure people's lives. Institutions are understood here not only as frames such as law but also as repeated actions, norms and informal rules that have their roots in experiences, traditional values or customs. In this sense, institutions are not only boundaries, but they function to shape the very essence of social life (Hodgson, 1993). People behave in the market in a way they are expected to, and it is very visible in gender relations present there.

In the chapter the situation of women in Poland is used as an example of the influence of institutions on social relations, with a special focus on gender order. Poland, as a country, has gone through major social, political and economic institutional changes in the last 25 years. The main objective of this paper is to present the impact of major transformations on the situation of women in Poland's post-War

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political economy - the command economy, system transformation, and integration with the European structures. Institutional change leads to transformations in social relations, and since institutional change might be achieved through the use of policies, it is worth trying to adapt policies that aim to promote gender equality. The paper begins with a presentation of the theoretical background – an institutional-feminist perception of economic and gender relations. Then the analysis of major political changes and their impact on the position of Polish women is presented. The chapter concludes with an attempt to answer the question of the impact of policy transformations on gender relations and institutional change leading to the new gender contract.

BACKGROUND

Institutionalists, a group of economists whose roots might be traced to as early as the 19c., are united by shared beliefs even though seemingly they form a rather diverse group of scholars. The institutionalist concept of society is holistic in nature, in other words social reality is viewed as a unified whole. Institutionalists view society from a 'processual' perspective. This means they view social systems as dynamic, ever-developing entities, and are aware that all social activities occur in both historical time and an environmental uncertainty regarding the future. According to Wilber and Harrison (1978), "social reality is seen as more than a specified set of relations; it is the process of change inherent in a set of social institutions which we call an economic system" (p. 71). The Institutionalists' view on society and the economy is systemic because they believe that parts of the system make up a coherent whole and can be understood only in terms of the whole (Wilber & Harrison, 1978, p. 71). It is also evolutionary because changes in the pattern of relations are seen as the very essence of social reality. Foldvary (1996) adds to this perspective that institutional economics is historically grounded, the economy exists in real, historic time, not in an abstract, timeless equilibrium. Every economic activity involves a process in which the economy moves constantly from a well-known past, through the present, and into an unknown future (W.C. Peterson, 1994, 29).

Institutionalists regard economics as 'social provisioning' (Foldvary, 1996, p. 3). According to this definition, markets represent only one type of human institution involved in provisioning. Institutionalists recognize that other institutions – including the state, the family, culture in its totality – are also significant (Whalen, 1996, p. 87). The economy, like society, represents a complex of institutions, ranging from the smallest, such as the family, to the largest and most comprehensive, namely the state (Chavance, 2009, p.23). According to Walton Hamilton² (1932) the institution is a cluster of social usages, designating a way of thought or action of some prevalence and permanence, which is embedded in the habit of a group or the customs of a people. Geoffrey Hodgson (2003), a leading contemporary institutional economist, writes, "[i]nstitutions are durable systems of established and embedded social rules and conventions that structure social interactions. Language, money, law, system of weights and measures, table manners, firms (and other organizations) are all institutions. In part, the durability of institutions stems from the fact that they can usefully create stable expectations of the behaviour of others. Generally, institutions enable ordered thought, expectation and action, by imposing form and consistency on human activities. They depend upon the thoughts and activities of individuals but are not reducible to them" (p. 163). An institution is made up of people performing activities according to a set of rules that are justified by a set of values, beliefs and meanings. As people perform their activities according to the rules, they internalize values, beliefs, and meanings that justify the rules (Dugger, 1996, p. 25).

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