

Country Report

Participation of Women in Public and Political Life

Belarus

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Introduction

Belarus is the only country in Europe which is not a member of the Council of Europe. Belarus supports only 9 out of more than 200 legal instruments of the Council of Europe (in the spheres of culture, education, law, corruption and sport). At present, possible accession of Belarus to a number of other Council of Europe conventions, open for non-member states of the Council of Europe, is under scrutiny. But none of these prospects seem to relate to gender equality perspective in public and political life.

This means that Belarus is not eager to undertake commitments of implementation of many legal instruments of the Council of Europe and the European Union in the field of equal rights and opportunities for women and men. Here in Belarus modern institutional mechanisms for gender equality are formed without consideration of provisions and practices of the European Union. The potential of cooperation in the field of gender equality within the framework of Eastern Partnership of the European Union is strongly overlooked.

Belarus ratified and signed a number of international documents in the field of gender equality on overcoming gender discrimination. Since 1981, Belarus is a party to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and since 2004 it is a participant of the Optional Protocol to the Convention.

So far the Republic of Belarus has prepared seven periodic reports on the implementation of the provisions of the Convention for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women CEDAW. A number of alternative reports, prepared by Belarusian non-governmental organisations, were also presented to the Committee CEDAW in 2003 and 2009. Belarus is expected to prepare a new periodic report for the Committee before February 2015. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women asked Belarusian Government to respond in the future report to the questions posed by the Committee in its concluding remarks following the revision of the previous report from Belarus.

Current report is prepared by the experts of the East-European School of Political Studies, which, being part of the Council of Europe project, expresses great concern about achieving gender equality and overcoming discrimination within the framework of its educational and outreach activities. The topic “Belarus and European standards of equal rights and opportunities for women and men” makes part of the programmes of the study sessions and conferences organised for current students and EESPS alumni. The School cooperates on this issue with the representatives of non-governmental women’s organisations, trade unions and business structures.

1. Traditional concept of women's role in society

Traditionally there exists a distinct division between the roles a man and a woman play in Belarusian society. A woman is seen as a homemaker, who is responsible for the preservation of a family. She is a wife, a mother and a housewife. A man on the contrary is supposed to go beyond the family and the house. He is supposed to be engaged into public, political, military, scientific and other socially significant activities. A woman is supposed to be an embodiment of femininity, which implies tenderness, gentleness, care and agreeableness necessary for the preservation of the family comfort. Accordingly a man is expected to be an epitome of masculinity, which suggests about assertiveness, independence, will and restraint necessary for achieving success outside the family.

During soviet times within the framework of emancipation policy women received state benefits and privileges, but there was no intention to challenge patriarchal patterns. Hidden discrimination of women reflected in a double load at work and in the family continued. All discussions about women emancipation were linked to the necessities of the construction of communism and not to the interests of women. During the soviet period feminisation of low-wage sectors of the national economy took place. It still exists in Belarus. Only one women public organisation existed in the USSR (and in Belarus); it was a Committee of Soviet Women with membership of tens of millions of people. All its activity was under strict control of Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

In fact, the Belarusian Union of Women created in 1991 was the successor of the Belarusian Committee of Soviet Women. It incorporated women's councils set up in different regions, districts, and towns as well as in many working communities, educational institutions and at the places of residence. Currently, the Union of Women consists of more than 170 thousand women; about three thousand primary organizations are active today; and the members of the Union's governing body make up the majority of the National Council on Gender Policy at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus.

Patriarchal traditions suppress all the aspirations for the establishment of modern assumptions about harmonious and equal relations between men and women in Belarus. These traditions to date determine the role and the place of women in society, define the frameworks for their potential. Women suffer most from old assumptions and yet continue fitting in patriarchal pattern: they are ready to be obedient wives and maids, be underpaid, be the object of violence, and observe the "glass ceiling".

Modern women have learned to get an education, to develop a career, and to be useful for the society. But they also have maintained traditional behaviour in the family against the new circumstances. They continued serving the children and the husband, being occupied with household chores and remained obedient and

concessive. Among working women 54, 6% have higher and special secondary education, while the percentage among working men is 37,1%¹. The high level of education among women has not resulted in the new image of a woman in a society. Women rights are declarative not only because of the government politics. Women do not refer to their rights because they worry that they can compromise them as “women” in the society where patriarchal model dominates.

Gender politics has been and is still interpreted as dealing with women problems. Gender stereotypes in their turn are exploited from each and every political tribune. The speech of the head of the Central Election Commission Lydia Yermoshina after the events of December 19, 2010 became proverbial for the vision of a woman in society. She addressed the women, who took to the streets to protest against the falsification of the election results in a following way: *"You had better seat at home and cook borsch instead of pottering on the streets"*². The statements of the kind pointing at the traditional role and place of women in society have been expressed not once by the president as well^{3 4}.

As can be seen, inherent for Belarus normative patterns of gender relations have negative repercussions on both men and women and on the development of society in general.

To overcome these archaic patterns and promote new patterns of gender equality and equal partnership we need to establish sustainable cooperation between Government, civil society, international organisations and democratic institutions.

Deconstruction of patriarchal patterns is an important step towards better living standards for each person, irrespective of gender, and eventually, it is a big step towards harmonious development of society in general.

¹ Statistical Bulletin “Women and men in the Republic of Belarus”. Minsk, 2010
http://mintrud.gov.by/dfiles/man_wom.pdf

² http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2010/12/20/ic_news_623_357675

³ The Head of the State underlined that Belarus does not know such problems as gender inequality, women discrimination and violation of their civil rights. <http://www.president.gov.by/press64218.html#doc>

⁴ Lukashenko: Women should not run for the presidency; it is a misfortune and a sorrow; so, God forbid this
...<http://news.tut.by/society/253398.html>

2. Political participation of women

There are no any legal barriers for equal participation of women in the decision-making process in Belarus. Our country signed all international documents on gender equality. Belarus is a party to the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women from 1981, and since 2004 participates in its Optional Protocol. Nevertheless, to date, there is lack of legislative and institutional mechanisms for gender equality and women's rights in Belarus.

On the one hand, the accession of Belarus to international standards requires recognition of democratic norms and their implementation in the country. On the other hand, there is a marked intention to defer specific solutions, to postpone introduction of legal measures and legislative decisions in this regard.

A National Council on Gender Policy had been established under the Council of Ministers in May 2000. However, its activity was irregular from the moment of its inception, and particularly so since the end of 2004 and till January 2009, when the Council remained almost idle⁵.

Among the reasons for the inaction were low priority of gender policy for public institutions and public authorities, overall passivity of women's organisations, and the absence of real opportunities for women to influence the decision-making in public policy.

It should be acknowledged that even the adopted instruments as well as implemented national plans do not have significant social effect and do not change traditional gender roles and relations in Belarus.

The UN Committee on Elimination of Gender Discrimination against Women repeatedly expressed its deep concern⁶ about participation of women in political and public life of Belarus. It concluded that women are poorly represented in top positions in the Government, judiciary positions and Diplomatic Service, are excluded from men's political networks, and that gender equality is generally missing from the election programmes of both male and female candidates. Along with economic barriers preventing women from participation in political and public life of their country, experts name prejudiced attitudes to women politicians and absence of representation in the media.

Women are not enough involved into decision-making processes at a variety of levels, be it executive, or legislative power, political parties, including opposition ones. There is only one women minister in Belarus. Among 7 chairpersons of regional executive committees there are no women. Among their 43 deputies there

⁵ <http://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/3236.html>

⁶ www.lawtrend.org/ru/data/808/

is only one woman (2%). Among 132 chairpersons of district and city executive committees there are only 2 women (1, 5 %).⁷ Among state administration of the republican bodies and their deputies there are only 19, 6 % of women.

On the other hand the percentage of women MPs is relatively high in Belarus. There were 58 women among 293 candidates at the parliamentary elections in Belarus in September 2012. 29 became MPs and made 26, 4 % of the total number of parliamentarians elected in the single-member majoritarian constituencies. In the local councils of all levels women account for 45 % of the deputy corps.

But this all does not reflect the real state of women in Belarusian politics, and is a direct consequence of the order of the president, who said that there should be no less than 30-40 % of women in the parliament.

Despite relatively high representation of women in the Belarusian parliament, the chances for improvement of gender policy in Belarus remain low. In Belarus the parliament cannot be really considered a full-fledged legislative body for it is heavily dependent on the Administration of the President⁸. There is no factions in the lower and upper houses of the parliament (no women's group either).

Starting in 1996, the EU and OSCE did not recognize the results of a single electoral campaign in Belarus, accusing Belarusian authorities of misuse of authority and falsifications⁹. Besides, women candidates do not play significant role in the context of the election campaign. Gender equality issues were not included neither in the electoral platforms of the candidates nor in their speeches before the voters and during the election campaign of 2012.

Despite the fact that almost a third of the parliamentarians are women the leadership of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly is represented exclusively by men. Of the 16 members of the Council of House of Representatives only 2 are women. They are the heads of the two Standing Committees, when men are the heads of 12 Standing Committees.

Gender equality issues are not within direct competence of the existing 14 Standing Committees. Gender equality is supposed to be within the competence of the Parliamentary Commission on Healthcare, Physical Education, Family and Youth Policy.

⁷ The information was obtained by analysis of the data available at the webpages of the executive committees as of March 1, 2013, <http://president.gov.by/press23538.html> .

⁸ Even the cost of travel tickets and other travel expenses bared by MPs are covered by the Office of the President. See, for example, the Decision No 73 of the Ministry of Finance of May 7, 2002, http://www.spravka-jurist.com/base/part-tz/tx_sswgme.htm .

⁹ Numerous attempts to restore the status without making real reforms have not been successful so far: http://belapan.com/archive/2009/05/20/eu_305360/

Women are also underrepresented in the opposition to the current regime. The only Belarusian Women's Party "Nadzeya" was liquidated by the decision of the Supreme Court in 2007. According to sociological surveys the rating of "Nadzeya" was quite high. In Belarusian society, where public policy is driven out to the periphery of public life and the majority of citizens do not distinguish parties along their ideological divide, the position of the women's party was the most clear and easy to identify with.

Among 15 officially registered political parties in Belarus only one is lead by a woman. In the 3 out of 15 political parties women are deputy chairpersons. It is predominantly men, who are members of political parties and who are in the leadership there. This suggests about limited impact a woman can have on the decision-making in political parties.

In December 2012 a number of political and public organisations of Belarus signed a memorandum on the implementation of the National Gender Platform. This is a strategic document prepared by the experts of public organisations and political parties. It is addressed to civil society as well as to Belarusian Government to consolidate the society in attaining gender equality in Belarus. Along with stating the problem, the document suggests the mechanisms for gender equality, including the sphere of decision-making, improving reproductive health of women and men, creating gender-sensitive public awareness, and preventing domestic violence.

So far both state and independent political and public actors (parties, trade unions and public associations) voice the problem of women's participation in political and public life and take definite steps to overcome discrimination against women.

However, these activities have not yet proved to have a real social impact in Belarus. The reason lies, on the one hand, undoubtedly, in the non-democratic regime, which minimizes the opportunities of public influence on decision-making, including protection of women's interests. On the other hand, in Belarus dominates traditional patriarchal pattern, which suggests about unequal division of power and unequal access to the decision-making level for men and women.

3. The role of education and of the mass-media in promoting women

The composition of the staff of the Belarusian system of Education speaks for itself about gender imbalance at the job market and in the society in general. The proportion of women in there in their total number is 85,3%. The majority of men working in the educational system occupy leadership positions. The number of male employees reduces with the age of pupils. Very few men work in the kindergartens, but there are more male than female professors at higher educational establishments.

At school men traditionally work as teachers of physical education and labour education. And they are poorly represented in other subjects. Such composition of the educational system is on the one hand the consequence of gender inequality at the job market (education is not prestigious and poorly paid sector for men to go there), and on the other hand it clearly reflects the existing in the society patriarchal stereotypes (it is a woman who is supposed to bring up the children). This indicates that by all its structure the system of education encourages reproduction of the patriarchal system of values.

Patriarchal system of values is reproduced in the school books and teaching materials as well. For example, in the text books for primary school children the most common illustration is of a daughter, mother and grandmother over the “women’s work” (cooking, cleaning, sewing and knitting). More active type of activity (sports, cutting firewood, wood craftsmanship, etc.) is mainly/always about the boys and men. Some pictures depict boys solving the problem by their physical abilities and girls by intellectual abilities. In the A-B-C book you would always see a mother reading a book for her children before sleep, or bathing them. And it is never there an occupation of a father, who does not do household chores or perform a “routine” connected with upbringing of the children.

In the kindergartens there is a clear differentiation between boys’ and girls’ toys. Girls are offered dolls and soft toys, when the boys get the cars and construction kits. And a nursery/preschool teacher generally starts shaming a child out of playing the “wrong” toy, when he/she tries to play with a car or a doll accordingly.

The analysis of the attitude of teachers to the biological and social factors in the formation of a person showed that the majority believed that the sex of a child determines what a teachers is supposed to discuss with him/her, what to advise and what to give as a present¹⁰. The survey among the pupils and students revealed that 47% female pupils quite often heard from the teachers: “Shame on you, do not you forget that you are a girl, who is supposed to be a future mother (a wife and a housekeeper)!” , when a female pupil ceased to follow the exclusively “feminine” type of behaviour and imported some elements of “male” one. As it is seen

¹⁰ Schurko Tatiana, Kuznetsova Marina, “Gender Competence at School: Teachers”, Gender Route, 2012, available at: http://gender-route.org/articles/sex_gender_practice/gendernaya_kompetentnost_v_shkole_uchitelya/

Belarusian teachers think by the categories of a traditional patriarchal pattern of society and transmit them to the pupils.

The survey of 2009-2010 conducted among Belarusian pupils and students showed that the notion of “gender” is unfamiliar to most of them. The majority of respondents supported patriarchal relations between men and women, where woman is first of all “a mother and a house keeper”. A considerable amount of the interviewed is for the division of the professions and occupations on “male” and “female”. They equally disagreed to see women at the leadership positions neither in public nor private spheres. And they deemed participation of women in politics as out of the question. The survey also demonstrated that the gender factor plays during the admission process at higher and secondary institutions, and affects the choice of a profession.

If to follow the guidelines prepared by the Ministry of Education¹¹ for gender education at schools¹², the main criteria of the gender culture of a person in Belarus are “understanding of a traditional to the national culture image of a man and a woman; awareness about socially approved qualities of boys, male adolescents, men and girls, female adolescents and women; the adoption of the relevant gender roles and the readiness to implement them”. This signifies that the Ministry recognises the sex based understanding of the role of a man and a woman in society. But at the heart of the sex based approach lies biological determinism of male and female roles; in other words, the government supports and transmits the assumption about the “inborn” male and female qualities and functions.¹³.

Hence, the priority of the gender educational policy in Belarus is to maintain the institute of family and to mainstream sex based definition of the roles and abilities of women and men. This assumption is transmitted via national system of education.

Nevertheless, some preconditions for a positive change have been also established. In the last few years, Belarusian legislation have been improved and better aligned with national and international standards in the field of gender politics. As of September 2011 a new Code on education is in force in Belarus. It guarantees equal access to education for all Belarusian citizens, and gives an opportunity to combine education and parenting. And it mentions gender education and training as one of the key components of the education system.

¹¹ Konovalchik E.A., Smotritskaya G.E., Formation of the Students Gender Culture: A Guide for the Teachers of General Education Institutions. Minsk: National Institute of Education, 2008.

¹² Instructions and methodological guidelines from the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus “Specificities of organisation and planning of the ideological and educational activities in the general education institutions in 2011/2012 academic years.

¹³ Solomatina Irina, “Systematic Gender Imbalance in Belarus” or how gender discriminations occurs (in relation to women), Belarusian Centre of European Studies, December 3, 2011, available at: <http://eurocenter.by/studies/sistemnyy-gendernyy-perekos-v-belarusi-ili-kak-proishodit-diskriminaciya-po-priznaku-pola-v>

Gender aspect of education is included into the Program on continuous education of children and youth in the Republic of Belarus for 2011-2015¹⁴ as a separate section. It is worth noting that it was mentioned as just one item of a rather general character without any specific measures being offered in the previous programme on continuous education of children and youth in the Republic of Belarus for 2006-2010.

What can be considered as a progressive step is the inclusion into the programme of the activities for the development and realisation of trainings. These trainings are organized within the framework of extracurricular courses aimed at formation of a culture of family relations and gender culture of students. In addition, measures promoting the system of gender education were included in the separate section of the National Action Plan on Gender Equality in the Republic of Belarus for 2011-2015¹⁵, approved by the Decision No 1101 of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of August 16, 2011.

This means that a legal framework which allows changing the traditional approaches to gender education in Belarus was established. The problem is how to begin to apply it in practice, how to change traditional attitudes to gender in the educational system. For this there is need to carry out outreach and educational activity with the representatives of the educational system at each level, from the functionaries, developers of the school and university programs to ordinary teachers.

Media also play an important role in the formation of the normative gender behaviour models. On the one hand, they reflect reality and reproduce the models of “male” and “female” behaviour, which exists in real life or in public consciousness. On the other hand, they have a direct influence on the public consciousness, and are able to transform existing in it images and create new ones. The latter tend to become normative patterns. Thus, media present a powerful instrument of constructing a reality either as an unconscious process resulting from the natural development of things or as a conscious activity resulting from somebody’s interest and order.

Media impact considerably on the construction of Gender. As a social institute, Mass Media form gender attitudes among men and women and orient them to the certain gender roles. It is exactly in the media, where they give the most vivid coverage of the relations between men and women.

Analysis of the Belarusian media (mass media, movies, commercials and advertisements) proved patriarchal discourse very powerful. As in the educational

¹⁴ Щурко Татьяна, Кузнецова Марина, “Гендерная компетентность в школе: учителя”, Гендерный маршрут, 2012, точка доступа: http://gender-route.org/articles/sex_gender_practice/gendernaya_kompetentnost_v_shkole_uchitelya/

¹⁵ [http://gender-route.org/articles/other_projects/ /](http://gender-route.org/articles/other_projects/)

system, in the media women are first of all mothers, wives and housewives. However, differently from education, media often presents a woman as an object of sexual/visual delight for men. The analysis of the advertisements in the print and online magazines shows that the pictures of naked or half-naked women are actively used to sell the goods and products for men (cars, wristwatches, alcohol and equipment). And in the advertisements of the products designed for women, women are constantly reminded that they first of all should answer the expectations of men.

The same gender models one can observe in the journalist pieces of work. The beauty contests held at the national level receive much more coverage in the media than parliamentary elections. The word "woman" in the journalistic materials, regardless of the context, most commonly is associated with notions of beauty, affection, family, care, fashion and cooking. The questions from women spheres are being addressed to women-politicians, business women, women top-managers and so on. But successful and entrepreneurial women are not frequent phenomena on the pages of the Belarusian media; they are sooner an exception. Moreover, the journalists indicate that the success was reached "despite" the family with children, pretty appearance, happy relationship or culinary talents.

Men prevail among the experts, which are contacted by the journalists. What is interesting is that for the discussion of the gender issue the journalists might invite women, who research on the topic or represent women's public organisations and men are not supposed to have competence in gender for they automatically considered experts on the subject being men.

Most members of the media, advertising and cinema reproduce patriarchal gender patterns and encourage gender stereotypes from generation to generation in Belarus. In the last years the discussions on gender considerably increased in Belarusian mass media. They had educational character, were meant to deconstruct existing stereotypes and create new normative models. Especial attention was given to the issue of family violence. Less vividly was covered equal parenting. In most of the cases this was the result of the activity of a number of non-governmental organisations, occupied with gender equality.

In Belarus the topic on construction of gender norms in the educational system and mass media does not receive due attention. More studies as well as information and educational programs should be carried out in both spheres. However, in the National Action Plan for 2008-2010 as well as in the National Action Plan for 2011-2015 mass media is rather expected to cover and promote state politics on gender equality than to become a target object of its policy.

4. Standard of living

Belarus occupies 50s place in the rating of the Human Development Index, prepared by the UNDP in 2013. According to the rating, which takes into consideration healthcare, education, income per capita, Belarus belongs to the countries with high human development level¹⁶. What was interesting is that the index of gender inequality, which also serves as indicator in the rating, was not available for Belarus.

According to estimations, on January 1, 2013, Belarusian population was 9 million 463.3 thousand people. Starting from 1994 the population of the country is decreasing; and the key factor influencing the situation is still the excess of deaths over births.

In recent years there has been a tendency of the decrease in the level of mortality and increase in births. Official forecasts predict the stabilization of the population in the country (9 310 thousand people in 2025). Independent scholars point out that the increase in the birth rate is a temporary phenomenon (as the generation of the last “baby boomers” entered the reproductive age) and after it the decline in population will be more dramatic. The Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat assumes that the population of Belarus will decrease to 8 851 thousand in 2025 and 7 275 in 2050. Several other sources claim that the population of the country will be less than 7 million.

Belarus is the country with the ageing population. People over 60 make up 19.4% of the whole population. Of these, 65.3% are women, and 34.7% are men. On average, women live 12 years longer than men (women - 76.5 years, men - 64.6 years). The women pensioners present the largest disadvantaged group in Belarus.¹⁷

Belarus is among the top five countries in Europe with the lowest average wages. According to the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, the average monthly wage of a working person in the Republic in January 2013 amounted to 4,368,023 BYR (506 USD or 383 EUR)¹⁸.

According to the Statistics Committee of Belarus, 48, 4% of Belarusians are spending their income on food. This is a very high indicator testifying that the problem of poverty in Belarus cannot be ignored.

Belarusian women are more likely to be below the poverty line than men, because their level of income is on average much lower. This is due not only to the above-

¹⁶ <http://news.tut.by/society/339205.html>

¹⁷ http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2012/09/28/ic_news_116_402536/

¹⁸ http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2012/09/28/ic_news_116_402536/

mentioned large number of female pensioners, but also due to the the gender imbalance in the labour market.

From the Soviet period Belarus has preserved gender differentiation of the sectors of the economy, which led to a clear feminization of the industries with low wages. Most of the women work alongside men, and are actively involved in the formation of the family budget.

This raises the problem of the "double load" when the woman before or after work has to actually work one more working day to ensure the needs of the family. Being in fact not less and sometimes even more a "breadwinner" than a man, a woman still has to work for free in her own family in order to match the existing in the society standards.

In response to the questions of sociological studies, working women in Belarus indicate that their contribution to the household is more than those of men with whom they live together. This difference is markedly increases in the couples with children. In Belarus, 53.1% of women in couples without children feel that they contribute more to the household. In families with children, this figure rises to 81.5%.

More and more women than men are beginning to work part-time because they want to pay more attention to their children. For example, in Belarus, 8.1% of women and 8.5% of men who do not have children, work part-time. For women with children, the figure is higher - 9.7%, and for men it is significantly lower - 2.5%.

The fact that all the temporary costs associated with the care of children are borne by women, puts them on an unequal footing with men in the labour market, worsens their career prospects and economic situation. When a couple splits up, practically all the responsibility, including financial one, for the upbringing of children goes to a woman.

In the vast majority of cases a child lives with a mother after divorce. In Belarus according to the surveys conducted in 2009 about 20 % of families are single-parent families; 94 % of these families are represented by single mothers and only 6 % - by single fathers. These figures mean that this group of men and women is forced to combine their traditional role of a housewife (a host) with the socially active role associated with earning a living for themselves and their children.

Women work in the lower-paid and less socially prestigious industries. They are engaged mainly in the public sector of the economy. The wages of workers there are about 80% of the average wage in the country and well below the average wage in the industrial sectors. The industries that employ mostly men, are more

prestigious or well-paid, even when it comes to work, which does not require high skills and education.

In Belarus there is a traditional division of labour into “female” and “male” sectors. In healthcare around 80% of women are involved, in education – 81, 3%. More than 70 % of women work in culture and art, trade and catering, as well as other types of non-production services. These are mainly fields of public sector, where the average salary in January 2013 was 3285300 BYR (288 Euros).

Men in these fields of public sector tend to occupy managerial positions and earn more than women. According to Belstat, in 2009, men in the combined areas of healthcare, physical education and social welfare were paid 60 % more than women. In the sphere of non-production public services men are paid 57 % more than women. Independent sociological studies commissioned by women's NGOs in 2007¹⁹ and in the middle of 2009²⁰ years have shown that low levels of income and difficulties with employment are the most acute and painful problems for the majority of the female residents of Belarus.

In the most difficult situation are women who are raising minor children, graduates with no work experience, women approaching retirement age, women with disabilities, as well as having a profession in which by virtue of the existing mechanism of competition in the labour market advantage is given to men.

According to the official data of Belstat²¹, the unemployment rate as to the end of 2012 made 0.6 %. Of the total number of unemployed, registered with the agencies for labour, employment and social protection, women account for 49%. However, experts say that low official numbers do not objectively reflect the real state of things at the job market. According to GALLUP consulting company 24 % of economically active population can be included to the category of unemployed. Belarus does not use ILO methodology, which takes account of those officially unemployed as well as of those, who are in the process of looking for a job. The process of registration of the unemployed is complicated and requires from the registrants to participate in the community works in order to receive small assistance. Among the unemployed from 15 to 24 years and from 50 years and older women predominate significantly.²²

Inequality in the labour market is directly linked to the traditional division of gender roles, according to which childcare was always the responsibility of a woman. Gender analysis of the Labour Code of Belarus showed that many of the

¹⁹ Sociological Survey by the “NOVAK” Laboratory, “Social Well-being of Belarusian women” (2007).

²⁰ Sociological Survey by the “NOVAK” Laboratory, “Women’s Position in the Labour Market and Women’s Health Problems” (2009).

²¹ <http://belstat.gov.by/>

²² Alternative Report of the Republic of Belarus on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (2009) widm.iatp.by/?download=Shadow%20Report-2010_ru.doc

norms designed to ensure the protection of motherhood actually discriminate against women and hinder them to exercise their rights to work²³.

Discrimination against women in the labour market is a widely spread phenomenon. Women are viewed as employees, who can take a maternity or a sick leave, who will ask to work part-time or will ask for some form of a leave related to caring of a family. That is why *ceteris paribus* an employer will rather take on board a man or will pay a woman less.

To prove in court the fact of such a discrimination against women is almost impossible, for the employer can always conceal the true reason, why he did not offered the position to a woman or did not promoted her. In any case the decision to terminate the employment relationship is taken by the employer.

The implementation of the policy of equal opportunity in employment is the responsibility of the respective state bodies, their structures, national organisations for women and trade unions. In Belarus gender politics and creation of equal opportunities for men and women, as well as creation of jobs for women and so on till now are not reflected neither in the Program of Social and Economic Development of Belarus for 2011-2015, nor in the Programme of the Government Activity on 2011-2015 years.

The policy of equal rights and opportunities in employment, with an accent on gender, can include the following measures:

- reassessment of women's labour participation (including both paid and unpaid work);
- wider recognition of the need to distinguish between women's labour participation and women's paid work and to understand this difference;
- adoption of more flexible working schedules and patterns, which will take into consideration family responsibilities of women;
- adoption and implementation of the law on elimination of discrimination against women;
- affirmative action programmes on elimination of current and indirect consequences of discrimination against women in the past;
- training, guidance and counselling for women to empower them in the choice of occupation;
- information campaigns, specifically aimed at promoting more equitable distribution of production and family responsibilities between men and women;
- additional measures for integration and retaining of women within non-traditional for them areas of employment.

²³ I.Chistyakova, I. Chutkova, Gender Examination of Legislation regulating working relations, the UNDP project "Support to Expanding Public Space for Women in Belarus" ("Empowerment of Women")

5. Domestic violence

Belarus does not have generalised statistics of the cases of domestic violence. Nevertheless, this problem can be analyzed objectively. First, in the statistical report of the Ministry of Internal Affairs there is a group of crimes committed because of jealousy and domestic quarrels. The analysis of the storylines allows identify the cases of domestic violence. Second, family relations are studied by sociological service agencies. These sources allow evaluate the scales of danger, which women are facing at home, and understand the reasons of this violence.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, more than 500 people in Belarus are annually convicted of violence against family members. Law enforcement agencies interpret such cases of domestic violence as “intentional infliction of long lasting pain or torture to the victim by the ways causing particular physical and mental suffering or systemic infliction of beatings”. 500 more people become victims of violence with intentional infliction of physical injuries of different severity.

Each year around 400 inflictions of trivial injuries by family members are being registered in Belarus. In 75 % of cases women are the victims and their partners and husbands are the aggressors. These numbers do not reflect the real incidence of domestic violence in Belarus. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs the facts of domestic violence rarely reach the court and that is why most of them do not appear in general statistics. In its bulletins the Ministry daily records 200 reports of family scandals. In the majority of cases the victims or witnesses of domestic violence prefer not to call the police.

According to statistical analysis conducted within Joint National Information Campaign against domestic violence only around 47% of women exposed to a partner’s aggression seek assistance from the law enforcement agencies, psychologists, relatives and friends.

Sociological surveys give us approximate picture of the real extent of domestic violence incidence in Belarus:

- four out of five Belarusian women in the age of 18-60 years experience domestic violence;
- every fourth women in Belarus has been subject to physical violence in the family;
- 13.1 % of women are regular subjects to sexual abuse by their husbands or partners.;
- 9,5% of women were subjects to physical violence by their husbands or partners during pregnancy;
- 22.4% of women experience economic violence.

The fight against domestic violence should be conducted at several levels:

- direct work with problem families - assisting the victims of domestic violence (hotlines, crisis centres, shelters);
- work with potential sexual abusers (consultation with a psychologist);
- work with children who become witnesses of domestic violence;
- public awareness rising – information campaigns aimed at preventing domestic violence;
- educational programmes and trainings;
- legislative level – adoption and implantation of the normative acts designed to prevent domestic violence.

Domestic violence as a social problem became subject of public discussion not very long time ago. In 1993 on the initiative of women's organisations first publications on this issue appeared in Belarus. From 2001 till 2003 Belarus was involved into regional information campaign for protection of women's right to live free of violence, organized by UNIFEM in 8 countries of the CIS and Lithuania. Within the framework of the campaign international working meetings and conferences were held to discuss legal mechanisms to eliminate violence.

Belarus took the responsibility to prepare a draft law on domestic violence. In 2004 a draft law on the prevention and elimination of domestic violence was introduced to the House of Representatives. It was aimed at identifying and eliminating violence in the family, and organization of work with the family.

In working towards prevention of domestic violence in Belarus several Belarusian non-governmental organizations and state social services are involved. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is particularly active in this field. Thanks to their joint efforts each year large scale information campaigns against domestic violence are organised in the country. Hotlines for the victims of violence have been set up, and crisis rooms to assist them have been opened on the basis of social service territorial centres.

At the same time, there is lack of shelters and crisis centres in Belarus, were women exposed to domestic violence could hide for some time from the aggressor. Psychological work with the potential male aggressors is barely, if not at all, organised.

The biggest obstacles to effective fight against domestic violence, according to the experts, are at the legislative level. International instruments, applicable in Belarus, have exclusively declarative status here. The Norms of the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Violations of the Republic of Belarus aim not at the prevention of violence, but at the elimination of its consequences, and start to act after the violence has been completed. Belarusian State does not have the right to interfere into private life of a family/couple before completion of the act of violence, when it can still prevent it from happening.

Combating domestic violence is declared as one of the priorities of the National Action Plan on Gender Equality in the Republic of Belarus for 2011-2015. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus developed special programme for preventing domestic violence.

There is a separate section for prevention of domestic violence in the National Gender Platform, which is an alternative programme for reaching gender equality, created by political parties and non-governmental organisations.

The authors of all these instruments agree about the need to toughen the punishment for violence against family members and to provide an effective system for protection of victims (for example, to introduce protection orders). To do this a law on combating domestic violence should be adopted.

The concept of this law was first developed in 2004. However, national parliament has repeatedly rejected the idea of its adoption, stating that there is no any need in it. According to the fourth National Action Plan on Gender Equality, it is only planned “to assess the relevance” of adoption of this law, and “if necessary”, to work on its development in 2013-2014. The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection promises to introduce the draft law in the next National Action Plan on Gender Equality. Given the fact that this plan is to enter in force in 2015, we cannot expect changes in the situation in the near future.

Special attention to domestic violence will be paid in Belarus in the three coming years. This is due to the fact that there have been launched several international technical assistance projects for the prevention of domestic violence in the country. These projects will be implemented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection in Belarus. The project has more than 2 million dollars budget. The key donors are the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

In the framework of these projects all state and non-state actors are supposed to work together to help the victims of domestic violence.

6. Enforcement of the legal framework in the field of gender equality

In the article 22 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus it is said that all the citizens are equal before law are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the rights and legitimate interests. However, the Basic Law does not contain provisions that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex or specific provisions on equality between men and women.

Nevertheless, the general principle of equality is enshrined in legislation such as the Code of Marriage and Family, the Criminal Code and the Civil Code, the Labour Code and the Law "On the Procedure and Conditions of detention." These laws in their respective fields prohibit discrimination based on gender and other grounds.

Belarus recognizes the priority of the generally recognized principles of international law and ensures compliance of national legislation with these principles (article 8 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus).

Belarus ratified and signed a number of international documents in the sphere of gender equality on overcoming gender discrimination: The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the resolutions of world conferences on women, including the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference.

The National Action Plan on Gender Equality of the Republic of Belarus for 2011-2015 was approved by the decision No 1101 of the Council of Ministers of August 16, 2011. It is already the fourth programme document aimed at ensuring gender equality.

The document declares that implementation of gender policy in Belarus is based on the universally recognized international norms, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on Political Rights of Women, the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Millennium Declaration, and other documents.

The National Plan aims at coordinating the activities, led by national bodies of state administration, local executive and administrative bodies, public organisations, and directed towards prevention of gender discrimination and ensuring equal opportunities for men and women in all spheres of life.

Among the objectives of the document is achieving equal representation of men and women at all levels of government; integration of gender into education system; creating public awareness on gender equality in all spheres of public life;

improving reproductive health of men, women and teenagers to ensure normal reproduction of population and improving the quality of life.

Special attention is given to strengthening the institution of the family and family relations, advocating marriage and family values, achieving gender equality in families, including introduction of men to the household and childcare.

It is important to achieve gender equality in economic sphere, to ensure further development of women's entrepreneurship, and to increase women's competitiveness at the job market. The emphasis is placed on the transformation of public consciousness, eradication of gender stereotypes, which suggest about any kind of superiority and domination of one sex over the other.

It should be noted that three previous National Plans have not been fully implemented, and most of the obligations not carried out under the first Plan are still to be met in the forth (current) Plan.

This means that the government recognizes the importance and relevance of gender equality since 2001. For example, the National Plan for 2001-2005 provided for development of the draft law "On gender equality." But the law has not been adopted to date, since it had not been submitted to the parliament. More than that, under the last National Plan it is planned not even to develop and to submit this draft law to the parliament, but only to evaluate the relevance of its adoption. The same approach is applied to the draft law on the prevention of domestic violence.

The NGO "Women's Independent Movement" initiated the monitoring of the implementation of the two last National Plans. The monitoring was carried out by experts, representatives of women's NGOs and government institutions.

It showed that the objectives of the National Plans have not been met. The experts pointed at the lack of target financing and low priority of the National Plan for state institutions, the lack of clear mechanisms and performance indicators, as well as explicitly paternalistic approach of the Plan. The analysis revealed the lack of transparency in presentation of the implementation of the annual reports and work plans. The National Action Plan for Gender Equality currently remains a purely formal document that does not have real impact on society.

Conclusion

As have been presented, despite high level of education and qualifications, and active participation in economic life, women still have very limited access to decision-making at all levels and in all spheres of political and public life.

This leads to reproduction of gender imbalances in employment, social security, economic development, family status and so on. On the one hand, this is due to the overall political situation in the country, with the suppression of any civil or political activity, low political culture, specific media market and weak development of civil society.

On the other hand, the majority of political parties and movements, claiming to offer an alternative to the current regime, are also far from understanding the principles of gender equality as regards their internal organisation, political programmes and communication with female representatives of the electorate.

It is very typical to Belarus to see gender exclusively within women's perspective. Practically all the activities related to gender equality are focused on fighting for women's rights in different spheres, and solving different women's problems.

At the same time the majority of actors involved (government institutions, political parties, NGOs and media) still act within old patriarchal paradigms.

They lack an integrated approach to gender, suggesting about interaction between sexes and the system of functioning of the society in general. Thus to date we are witnessing the substitution of notions, when instead of introducing fundamental changes into the structure of social relations, people start pursuing improvement of the living conditions of women in the existing system.

It should be noted separately that the notion of gender in Belarus exists exclusively in the dual system of "male-female". The issues of alternative gender identities, LGBT + community are almost excluded from general discussions on gender at all levels.

At current stage in Belarus it is necessary to establish a coherent policy directed towards elimination of gender discrimination and development of gender equality as well as implementation of the following strategies:

- to develop and implement a comprehensive action plan to support equal parenting: changes in the family and labour law, work with education and healthcare systems, public awareness;
- to adopt the law on combating domestic violence and its full implementation at all levels;

- to prevent gender discrimination at the job market by offering adequate positions and equal remunerations for work; regularly study the job market and monitor the implementation of the respective legislative norms; work with state bodies responsible for overseeing the implementation of the law; actively involve trade unions, and organise education and outreach activities for employers;
- to develop the opportunities for women's self-employment; support private and small businesses; provide trainings and consulting for women;
- to promote gender education; develop and integrate gender equality programmes for primary, secondary and higher educational establishments; develop trainings for the employees of state departments (Education, Healthcare, courts, law enforcement agencies, local authorities and so on);
- to increase women participation in political and public life; active work with political parties and organisations: promoting gender-sensitive awareness, enhancing involvement of women, ensuring equal access to the decision-making level;
- to raise public awareness on LGBT + community issues: education and outreach activities;
- to hold information campaigns aimed at promoting the principles of gender equality in the society;
- to introduce the mechanisms combating promotion of gender discrimination in media and advertising; educational work with journalists;
- to conduct education and training for the citizens of Belarus on defending their rights and freedoms.