

Equal chances remain a declaration. Women's status in Belarus

Introduction

Women's status in Belarus is a complex issue. On the one hand, the state declares a will to improve women's status and promote equal rights, but on the other, women are still deprived of opportunities in professional advancement, salary increases, access to professional positions and power. The burning issues invariably remain: domestic violence, human trafficking, sexual abuse, economic discrepancies, discrimination on the job market and the so-called "glass ceiling" – the obstacles that make it harder for women to access high decision-making positions.

A large number of Belarusian women wish to play an active role in their private lives, in the community and the entire country. Along their way, however, they stumble upon obstacles, the most important being: inadequate education and social consciousness on issues such as gender inequalities, discrimination and lack of solutions to these problems. Furthermore, Belarusian society is still clinging to deep-rooted stereotypes and traditionalist images of women's roles. The media in Belarus often support the patriarchal context of a woman's place being at home, not in the social or public space. This creates quite a high barrier for self-realisation and career. Many Belarusian women with impressive professional experience have failed to obtain promotions to decision-making positions. Their defeat means a loss for the entire society.

Analysis of women's status

Belarus is a signatory to all international documents on women's status and gender equality, including the Optional Protocol to the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Furthermore, owing to the resolution dated 3rd of September 2008, the Council of Ministers approved the National Action Plan for Gender Equality 2008-2010 and last year, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare issued a document entitled "Implementation of Gender Equality Policy in the Republic of Belarus", which specifies actions and governmental representatives responsible for execution of these measures. The National Action Plan, however, has failed to actually improve women's status. Firstly, the budget does not envisage funds for execution of the Plan. Secondly, the Council of Equal Women's Status (established under the umbrella of the Council of Ministers), composed of officials from various ministries, includes only one representative of a women's organisation – a co-chair of the Independent Women's Democratic Movement – Ludmila Pelina. This fact proves that the activities of the officials are virtually beyond social control. Under such circumstances, implementation of the

Action Plan is largely reduced to the level of decorations and declarations. No legal mechanisms have been developed which would specify legal liability for acts of gender-based discrimination.

Women have been awarded a minimum quota of 30% of parliamentary seats, but in view of the fact that the Belarusian parliament is not as autonomous as it supposed to be, the even greater number of women in this body does not contribute to tackling the problem. During the tenure of the previous parliament (2004-2008), we observed negative changes in gender politics. For three years, a lack of systemic activities in this respect led to a significant deterioration of women's status. It was then that the activists for women's organisations were holding a campaign publicising the National Action Plan for Gender Equality. Nevertheless, none of the letters addressed to any of the female members of the lower chamber of the parliament were answered. This fact proves that we cannot actually speak of political independence among women in the Belarusian parliament.

Women do not occupy higher positions in the democratic opposition, nor are they important actors in the decision-making process. What is more, the leaders of the Belarusian opposition assert that active women jeopardise their power. This is best illustrated by the example of Alexander Milinkevich's wife (a leader of the movement For Freedom), Inna Kuley, who actively participated in the events of March 2006. She was most often mentioned as a potential candidate for president in a ranking list published in a Minsk blog. Recently, though, Inna Kuley ceased to appear as an independent political personality and has kept a low profile. It is said that this resulted from discontentment among her colleagues from the opposition community.

According to official data, women account for 52% of Belarusian job market, their share in the population being 53%. It is worth mentioning here that the number of women with higher education is 16% higher than men. Simultaneously, statistical data shows that the amount of a woman's salary accounts for only 78% of that earned by a man. The problem of disproportion between higher education among women and their lower remuneration continues to exist. Moreover, women perform lower paid and less prestigious jobs. Nevertheless, it is they who constitute the more resourceful part of society, which is connected with a considerable rate of lonely mothers, often deprived of alimony. Contrarily, men prefer to spend their income on personal needs, rather than family expenses.

Women in Belarus are employed in all sectors of the economy, but very few of them take high positions in the professional hierarchy. The Council of Ministers comprises virtually no women, and there is a deficiency of women employed as managers of enterprises and in universities.

The educational system is one of the most feminised professional areas, as is healthcare and culture, yet here, too, women rarely occupy high positions. Consequently, the country has seen development of the following phenomenon – a woman occupying a higher position becomes the bearer of unique experience, as she has to undergo all levels of professional advancement. Men, in contrast, make quick careers without proper experience or high levels of professionalism.

The issue of gender equality to a large extent contributes to the inhibition of development of civic society. This results primarily from the fact that the country has virtually no free media, the presence of which is an inextricable part of a civic society. It is free media – called to “look upon the hands of the authorities” and inform the public about their activity (or inactivity) – that constitutes a tool of social control. Another obstacle, as has been mentioned already, is the oftentimes oppositional leaders, assuring their respect for democratic and European values, yet remaining essentially patriarchal.

In the atmosphere of gender discrimination, the woman has to fight on her own to change her situation in society, change attitudes to her sex and mutual relations in the family. Gender-based social roles must nowadays undergo changes. Even in the case that a woman earns a bigger income than her partner, which may sometimes be the case in the Belarusian family, it does not mean that she is relieved from non-paid domestic work. Such *status quo* provokes tensions in the family, triggering a revival of old stereotypes which, leading to an increase in economic, psychological and physical violence, denigrate the woman’s dignity. In Belarusian society, we can observe an overlapping of numerous problems related to gender inequality, which needs to be constantly voiced. Meanwhile, the country lacks reliable radio and TV programmes and press articles which would contribute to the shaping of social relations and changing of women’s status. It is hard to resist the impression that the attitude towards women in Belarus is often of a purely consumptive nature.

Perspectives and conclusions

Virtually all countries of the former Soviet Union have seen adoption and enforcement of the Act on the Equal Status of Men and Women. A model draft of such an act has been developed by Belarusian activists from woman’s organisations and presented for discussion by the parliament as early as 2000. Unfortunately, it has not yet been debated by the parliament. Adoption of the law prohibiting discrimination and development of legal mechanisms against violation of such regulations is a key task for the government to improve women’s status.

An increase in the influence of various Belarusian social groups and non-governmental organisations, especially women's organisations, is predicated on a change in the political situation. Presently, the third sector operates in the underground. The state does not permit freedoms and initiatives beyond its control, thus obstructing democratic transformations. The few women's organisations must often struggle for their survival instead of focusing on their primary tasks. The biggest of them – the Belarusian Women's Society – could become an influential factor in the lobbying for women's interests and solving their problems. This, however, will not be possible without lifting state control and dependence.

Yulia Mitskevich