



EmpowerMap

MINI-REPORT

MAPPING ORGANISATIONS SERVING
ECONOMICALLY VULNERABLE WOMEN IN
FRANCE, POLAND, ROMANIA AND SPAIN



Poland



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Foundation



EmpowerMap

EmpowerMap is a joint project of the European Women's Lobby (EWL) —the largest umbrella organisation of women's associations in Europe— and the Orange Foundation.

The goal of the project is to gather information about grassroots women's organisations in Spain, France, Romania and Poland which have on-the-ground programmes aimed at the socio-economic empowerment of vulnerable women.

This mini report is based on empirical data collected by Agnieszka Król, from March 2017 to October 2017 in Poland, on behalf of the European Women's Lobby and the Orange Foundation. The collected data were drawn from desk research, in-depth and semi-structured interviews and a free online survey in Polish.

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Introduction

Women and the Digital Divide

Today, in a world where more people have cell phones than toilets, basic digital skills are essential for a vast number of activities ranging from simple communication to finding decent employment. But even in the most developed regions, including throughout Europe, women are less likely than men to have these skills, putting them at a severe disadvantage from an economic perspective.

For women who are already in situations of economic difficulty because of poverty, lack of education, their immigration status, or surviving violence, a digital skills deficiency only increases a woman's vulnerability. The digital skills gap creates an additional barrier to seeking information, communicating with support networks, and finding a job.

The Orange Foundation's Women's Digital Centres

The lives of vulnerable women, whether they are in Africa or Europe, can be improved by learning digital skills and gaining access to information and communication technology. Telecommunications company Orange has recognised this and devoted part of the work of its charitable foundation to providing grassroots women's organisations with the means to empower vulnerable women by teaching them digital skills.

The scope of Orange's Women's Digital Centres Programme has been ambitious, with hundreds of Centres being opened globally. However, the Orange Foundation is limited in its ability to be impactful by the fact that it does not have a comprehensive sense of the needs of the women it aims to serve with its Centres, nor an understanding of which grassroots organisations are the most successful at actually enabling women's empowerment.

Knowing more about the needs of the economically vulnerable women in its operating countries, as well as more about the grassroots organisations which work with these women, will allow the Orange Foundation to make more informed decisions about which organisations they choose to partner with, and which groups of vulnerable women would be the most positively impacted by their training programme.

The EmpowerMap Project

In response to this need for information, this six-month project provides a mapping of the needs of vulnerable women and the practices and capacities of grassroots organisations which assist them, in four Orange operating countries in Europe, (France, Spain, Poland and Romania).



Tapping into the European Women's Lobby's network of over 2,500 member organisations, this project illuminates the various issues and struggles that women in situations of economic difficulty face across diverse countries, how service-provision organisations assist them in their journey to empowerment, and how digital education has the potential to help them become independent.

This information will enable the Orange Foundation to make better-informed and more strategic choices about which kinds of organisations and which groups of vulnerable women can be best served by the Orange Foundation's 'Women's Digital Centres' Programme.

The European Women's Lobby

Comprised of 2,500 members, the European Women's Lobby (EWL) is the largest umbrella organisation of women's associations in Europe with 25 years of experience promoting the participation of women's organisations at the EU level and in designing and leading campaigns with its members across Europe.

The European Women's Lobby has strong national members in the four selected countries, all of whom serve as a hub for dozens of grassroots organisations working with diverse groups of vulnerable women, in different ways. Each of the four members represents the voice of women in the country and is staffed by experts who have a deep understanding of the local, regional and national economic and social contexts in which women live, as well as best practices for overcoming obstacles to empowerment and independence.

The European Women's Lobby is also known for its proprietary feminist mapping research methodology, which it debuted in 2015 with a ground-breaking ten-country study of the needs, experiences and profiles of women social entrepreneurs (WEstart). This best practice methodology has been continually refined over the course of the past two years, as the EWL has undertaken additional country mappings at the request of the governments of Belgium and Luxembourg. Using research tools that have been crafted by a group of international experts and successfully used to gather data on over 1,200 women and organisations to date, the EWL has a unique ability to quickly and efficiently gather data that would otherwise be inaccessible.



Background

The current political situation in Poland plays a key role in women's economic independence. Since 2012, Poland, along with other Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs), is experiencing the so-called "anti-gender ideology" movement (Graff 2014; Korolczuk 2014). By limiting women's reproductive rights (restricting access to the morning-after pill, attempts to ban abortion), downplaying the prevention of violence against women (suggesting to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention) and devaluing the very concept of gender equality, the governing Law and Justice party is creating a hostile environment for women's autonomy.

Interestingly, the government did introduce a new child support programme (known as 500+) that supports families with two or more children. As it has only operated since 2016, its influence on gender equality is still under-researched, although current ad-hoc interpretations show mixed results. On the one hand, the programme seems to have helped some women to exit from poverty. On the other hand, it has also encouraged some women to resign from employment, in favour of staying at home.

The recent political changes can be observed in fluctuations of the status of the Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Women and Men established in 2001, later called the Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment, which was a department head post tasked with ensuring the implementation of gender equality policies and preventing all forms of discrimination. The Plenipotentiary post was the subject of constant negotiations. It was recently re-named the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society and lost all links to the original aims, as the current post-holder tried to stop the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and further threatened to withdraw from it.

The main issue influencing women's economic independence in Poland is discrimination in the labour market despite women's high education levels. Surveys estimate that almost three times as many women as men have experienced discrimination when looking for a job (Krzaklewska et al. 2016). Moreover, average individual income declared by women is 20% lower than that declared by men regardless of profession (Czapiński and Panek 2015). Care work as the reason for unemployment is indicated almost only by women, as care for children, elderly and people with disabilities is mainly expected to be done within the family and by women (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2013).

Other major problems that contribute to women's unequal care burden include insufficient places in preschools, no integrated personal assistance system for people with disabilities, and obstacles in elderly care programmes. Additionally, women in Poland experience domestic violence (there are insufficient violence prevention measures despite implementation of CEDAW (Koalicja Karat 2014)) and economic violence, for example 19%

of women reported that their partners took important financial decisions without consultation in a relationship (Chelstowska, Druciarek, and Niżyńska 2015).

Women's economic independence is also hindered by the issue of alimony. An estimated one million children do not get alimony from their parents – mostly fathers. There are around 600,000 bailiff cases for debt enforcement collections, but their effectiveness is estimated at 19.5%.

Single mothers are in an extremely vulnerable situation since they can obtain state support only if their earnings are very low, less than 725 PLN (around 171 euros) per person (Chelstowska 2016).

Among economically vulnerable women, the most vulnerable are those who experience violence, women with disabilities (Gąciarz et al. 2014), single parents who do not receive alimony (Chelstowska 2016), women who are primary caregivers for children with disabilities, homeless women, women in unstable housing and young and elderly women (Ancyparowicz 2012; Petelczyc and Roicka 2015).

We need also to address women who experience intersecting discrimination due to ethnic background, migration status – especially migrants from Ukraine (Nowak et al. 2013), refugees, asylum seekers (including those residing in aggregated housing) as well as queer and transgender women (Abramowicz 2012; Mizielińska, Struzik, and Król 2017).

Mapped Organisations and their Programmes

The survey was conducted among women's grassroots non-governmental organisations that had (1) legal status and (2) access to physical space where the potential women's digital centre could be located. Non-formal feminist initiatives connected with the new wave of feminist activism after the 'Black Protests' (National Women's Strike) did not meet the criteria since they often function as informal social movement initiatives. 11 women's organisations took part in the survey, and six individual interviews were conducted.

Among organisations who took part in the survey more than 55% operate with an annual budget lower than €10,000.

One-third of the organisations do not hire any paid staff. Approximately half of organisations employ more than seven peoples, with only one hiring more than 10. The rest operate with 1-3 peoples. Taking into account broad uncertainty and the predominantly grant-based funding schemes, the staff is hired mostly for specific time-limited projects, which is a widespread practice in the NGO sector. The budget of socio-economic empowerment programmes for half of the organisations does not exceed €999 annually, whereas a quarter operate with a budget that is less than €10,000. Nevertheless, the survey found working

conditions for the programmes to be somewhat stable, and no one reported frequent cancellations of activities.

Almost all of the organisations are volunteer-based: a third engage one to three peoples, and others many more than three (some even more than 20). Usually, it is between one and three volunteers implementing the socio-economic empowerment programme. The time spent on socio-economic empowerment programmes for two-thirds of organisations is up to seven hours weekly, while the other third spend more than 11 hours weekly.

Organisations highlighted that due to lack of funding or unstable funding conditions (in some cases directly linked to the current political situation), they had to recently withdraw from implementing most activities.

The programmes of socio-economic empowerment tend to be rather long-lasting: the majority of them last at least a few months, with only one organisation reporting one-day workshops. Regarding the number of participants benefiting from the services, half of the organisations support more than 100 people per year, while the other half support between 11 and 51 people. Organisations conduct both workshops (gatherings of 6-15 people at a time) as well as offer individual consultations. 75% of organisations evaluate their programmes, mostly through surveys but also with rounds of feedback depending on the project.

The primary focus of surveyed organisations is social-emotional counselling and mental health support (78%), job preparation including interviewing, soft skills, resume writing (56%) and legal support (56%).

Despite reported difficulties and the protests of mothers and caregivers for adult children with disabilities, it is interesting to note that no organisation provides support in accessing eldercare or care for other family members, and childcare support is provided by only two organisations that took part in the survey.

Regarding digital skills, the survey indicated that the staff members of NGOs are skilled. Two-thirds of the organisations describe the skills as basic, while one-third reported good computer skills. Organisations tend to have some equipment – two-thirds have a computer, one-third have a laptop, and half of the organisations own a printer. However, no organisation reported having smartphones or tablets. 75% have wireless internet access. For most organisations, the overall problem is old or outdated technology.

It is crucial to highlight that the current political situation in Poland, especially the consequences of the “war on gender” and the aftermath of the 2016 women’s strike significantly limit organisations’ activities due to cuts in funding.

As one organisation noted:

“The Foundation is now in something like hibernation because we do not have possibilities to get funding for the activities that we implement. That is, in our case, supporting women to enter and function in the labour market and working for gender equality. As Minister Rafalska pointed out two days ago: ‘in women, we find care potential’. Or MP Pięta, that he would give women an additional 600 zloty if they would stay at home and take care of kids.

We need money to support our basic programmes, to provide services and to pay for expenses for trainers and specialists that were cut off. It would be helpful to have laptops and computers to open a Women’s Digital Centre, and we need better programmes and database systems to have better statistics.”

The situation of vulnerable women in Poland

Women as Service Users

The most common situation of vulnerability that service users find themselves in is domestic violence (indicated by 75% of organisations), which is consistent with the data on the high prevalence of domestic violence and insufficient measures taken by the state in Poland. Moreover, more than half of the organisations claim that service users’ vulnerability is shaped by the experience of single parenthood, systemic discrimination due to an element of their identity, unemployment and underemployment, as well as social isolation (lack of community and network) and immigrant status.

The main barriers that prevent the women served from getting a decent job are defined by organisations to be low self-esteem (88% of organisations) and domestic violence (75%), which is exacerbated by long-lasting legal procedures and a lack of measures to expel perpetrators from the house, among others. More than half of organisations also indicated lack of job skills, being out of the labour market for an extended period and taking care of others (children, family members, etc.) as well as mental health issues and discrimination, as barriers to employment. Lack of digital literacy was indicated as a barrier by 50% of the organisations.

Survey respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of population served regarding diverse characteristics. Summarised results of these estimations show that concerning the place of birth more than a half of service users were born in Poland, 26% in former socialist states, 8% in the EU and 12% outside these regions.

Concerning the age of women served – 60% are estimated to be 25-50 years old, whereas the remaining 40% is evenly split between older and younger women.

In terms of education levels, 20% reported primary school education or less, with high school education at 40% and higher education at 40%. However, it has to be mentioned that one organisation works mainly (95%) with individuals that only have a primary school education (or less). Excluding this organisation would show even higher education levels. Estimations



of organisations indicate that 27% of service users lack job skills or job training. 40% have some skills, and 33% have high skills.

It needs to be highlighted that an estimated 53% of women served claimed to find themselves in an unstable living situation, whether homeless, refugees, in temporary housing or a shelter. Moreover, approximately 80% of women are struggling with financial insecurity and poverty issues, but only 40% can claim state benefits related to work and employment.

This figure highlights the crucial role that women’s NGOs play in finding and supporting vulnerable women in the labour market.

Among service users, 55% are estimated to be engaged in unpaid care work. The figures below on income and other dependent peoples in the family indicate that one-quarter of served women are the main breadwinners for dependent family members. Organisations report that women encounter problems when the primary breadwinner of the family decides to leave family due to the illness of women.

ANSWER CHOICES		AVERAGE NUMBER
Main breadwinner for dependent family members.	Responses	25
Not main breadwinner for dependent family members (there is another working adult or source of income).	Responses	44
No dependent family members, relying on own income (work, aid) for basic survival.	Responses	19
No dependent family members, relying on others (family, shelter, friends) for basic survival.	Responses	17
Total Respondents: 7		

Migrate Women

Despite relatively high literacy rates in Poland, organisations working with migrants estimate between 60-80% of their service users cannot communicate in Polish.

As one organisation noted, “many migrant women are in Poland as students or graduates without a support network or elder family members. They need the life guidance that they come to us for. Many people arrive after word-of-mouth advertising.”

Approximately 40% of service users are estimated to have high digital literacy, whereas up to 50% of users are described as having basic skills and 10% have no digital literacy skills. Again, migrant organisations provide support for less digitally skilled women. The organisation further explains the profile of their service users noting:



“Asylum seeking women are frequently victims of domestic violence, fleeing their countries to escape from husbands. They are single parents with a few children. Self-esteem is an issue. Many women have never worked before in their countries of origin, where they were expected to raise children. Lack of awareness of Polish habits and norms related to the workplace is also a barrier.”

Intersecting Discrimination

Estimations of service beneficiaries reflect a significant division of NGOs in Poland as they specialise in specific areas: children, disability, LGBT, women. Cooperation exists, but the division remains substantial.

This makes it significantly difficult for women experiencing intersecting discrimination on the market due to age and gender, for example, to find support. It is crucial to apply intersectional lenses to understand the vulnerable positions that women find themselves in. The founder of a new organisation focusing on women with disabilities notes:

“Women with disabilities experience intersecting discrimination and violence. Despite high job skills and education they often do not have work or are underemployed. Some of them encounter difficulties in reaching places of social activity. All encounter barriers in communication, as well as architectural, technical and structural barriers”.

Case Studies

- **Centre for Women’s Rights**

Established in 1994, the Centre for Women’s Rights is one of the most well known Polish women’s organisations committed to ensuring the equal rights of men and women in public and private spheres. Its work focuses on the prevention of violence against women through direct services, lobbying and education, and it is the most significant publisher of manuals for women about women’s rights as well as for various professionals (police officers, teachers, social workers, etc.). It operates nation-wide with offices in four main cities: Warsaw, Gdansk, Łódź, and Wrocław.

The organisation has established battered women’s shelters around which most of their activities are focused: social work, legal consulting, hotlines, programmes to accompany women in court, psychological assistance and so forth. The organisation is well known and often is the first reference point for women experiencing violence. A representative from the organisation explains:

“We serve women that come from different environments. We have branch offices in other cities. Women of different ages seek our support, sometimes very young women who are

justing ending secondary school, but also now we have 70-year woman beaten by the husband of her daughter. It was the worst case we ever saw.

We encounter women in a diverse situation in the labour market. One woman in the shelter has a high level of education in arts, but for over 10 years she did not work and is insecure about her skills, so we have encouraged her to start painting. We agreed in September or October to have an exhibition, help her to find someone to assess her skills and start doing new work and to organise.”

The centre has been implementing projects on economic empowerment, job skills and digital literacy, but due to lack of funding, they had to cease part of their activities. The centre is currently in a very vulnerable position as main government funding was cut off as a result of political change and the targeting of women’s organisations due to “war on gender”.

The organisation explains:

Our situation changed when for the first time we did not get funding from the government, which usually allowed us to provide comprehensive services for women. It was the largest funding we ever got. Two years ago we got the answer that we are not eligible because we provide services only to women.

Only a few weeks after the EmpowerMap site visit to the Centre in Warsaw, the organisation’s computers were confiscated by the police during a raid.

- **Polish Migration Forum**

The Polish Migration Forum was set up ten years ago and is dedicated to serving migrants and refugees in Poland. The organisation has three main areas of work: 1) providing information, 2) providing direct assistance, and 3) building bridges and working with local communities to teach them about migrant-related issues and build multicultural communication skills.

In terms of direct assistance, the Polish Migration Forum has two projects: the first works with migrant mothers and the second works with both men and women, helping them enter the labour market.

The Polish Migration Forum’s ‘women’s programme’ offers a group of around 30 migrant women information on how to navigate the Polish health and education system as a pregnant woman and new mother. The programme provides valuable information on the timeline for delivering a baby, what to bring to doctors appointments, what vaccinations are needed, etc. Over time the course expanded and now includes a labour course for couples, and social and emotional support for migrant women and parents until the child is five years old. Most participating women come from Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia.



The organisation's labour market training programme has been in operation for the past four years, and they are currently waiting for news of whether they will continue to receive funding for it. This programme, which has served 400 people, half of whom are women, focuses on providing migrants with labour counselling, support in setting up a business, and financial counselling.

Programme participants come to the organisation, where they first meet with a job counsellor, who helps assess their needs. Depending on their situation, they can then schedule follow-up stand-alone appointments with a job counsellor or financial counsellor who can help them address their particular employment issues.

An organisation representative notes,

“Many people come to the centre because they feel discriminated against and abused at the place they work- they are not paid, paid below what they were promised, or misled by their employer. We have had women who were dismissed when they became pregnant, for example. These people have been mistreated by their employers, and believe they are better off being their own boss.”

Sometimes migrants who already had a small business set up in their country of origin need help to transfer their company's legal paperwork to Poland. Other times the participants have been asked to set up their own 'freelance' company by their employer. For example, people who work in care work and nursing, or people who work in IT and graphic design, who have specific skills and need the means to be able to legally use them in Poland.

Every three or four months the organisation holds workshops about specific labour market topics, based on the needs of the participants. For example, a group of women participants expressed that they felt the working culture in Poland was very different from what they were used to in the Ukraine, with regards to working relationships, expectation from bosses and colleagues, etc. The organisation responded by holding a workshop focused on working relationships and soft skills, and a follow-up workshop focusing on dress codes and personal image.

Young women come with additional needs, because they are usually coming straight from school. As the representative notes, *“many of the women we work with have never had any contact with the formal labour market, and they come to the city without any support networks. As such they are much more inclined to take jobs on the black market, (because they don't understand their rights as workers)”*

When it comes to technology, the digital literacy of the Polish Migration Forum's users varies widely, with most having access to smartphones and being skilled at social media. In fact, the organisation does not use printed advertising for its training programmes and workshops, preferring to use social media, and often classes are full within 24 hours.



However, even though they use social media and smartphones for personal communication, service users do not know how to use these tools for their job search. As such, the organisation feels that digital education would be extremely beneficial for their participants.

What kinds of women's organisations would be best served by Orange's Women's Digital Centres?

The research shows that women's organisations in Poland have a high capacity to provide socio-economic empowerment to vulnerable women: they have the skills and experience. Many of the organisations have been operating efficiently and have the know-how, but due to cuts in funds, they find themselves in a precarious situation.

Nevertheless, some of them find a way to sustain activities and it would be of great support if they could invest their efforts in creating Women's Digital Centres with the cooperation of the Orange Foundation. It seems that the Centres would operate most effectively within the structure of established organisations that have their own spaces and target groups in place. As one organisation explains, their mission is in line with that of the Orange Foundation.

"For our organisation, the priority is to empower. We want to support girls and women in strengthening their own potential (power, strength), courage (in combating inequalities, injustice, asking for support, breaking social barriers, etc.) and solidarity (with others –and other women especially– who have similar experiences of exclusion and discrimination) in order to build together a strategy to oppose those injustices, to develop support networks, to create alternative, community-based solutions to problems and challenges".

As experiencing violence remains one of the most striking problems for women in Poland, it would be of great importance to address the issue by, for example, supporting women's shelters and organisations that have direct services for the prevention of violence against women.

Because unpaid care work remains a primary reason for women's unemployment and single parenthood was defined as one of the main factors influencing women's vulnerability, it would be recommended to organise childcare in the Women's Digital Centre or simultaneous workshops for children. The parallel sessions for mothers and children could be implemented within existing programmes of the Orange Foundation, such as FabLab. Since one of the recognised obstacles to overcoming women's vulnerability in the labour market is low self-esteem and isolation, the Centre should also emphasise its role as a place of networking.

It would be beneficial if Women's Digital Centres were dedicated directly to strengthening job skills, addressing diverse communities through IT-supported Polish classes for migrant and refugee women, advanced digital skills for service users and the staff and so forth. It is also important to address the class division. As advanced digital centres that teach unique skills are wonderful tools for some women, others might prefer to develop skills that would be of immediate use on the labour market as they cannot afford to spend time on tasks that might not be useful in the future. Therefore, the Centre's agenda would need to be broad.



Moreover, as experiencing discrimination due to identity was diagnosed as one of the main obstacles in the labour market, the activities could also include addressing women who experience intersectional discrimination especially due to migrant, asylum seeker and refugee status.

Regarding women with disabilities, a twin-track approach is recommended: the horizontal approach for accessibility would be necessary as well as programmes that offer assistance and dedicated workshops for women with disabilities.

To ensure the effectiveness of the activities, it would be recommended to develop programmes with the participation of the women themselves, as participatory methodologies have been shown to be the most successful when it comes to empowerment.

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