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Marginalization of women with disabilities

The aim of the paper is to introduce the issue of marginalization and relate it to disabled women – the social group which rather rarely inspires interest among educational scientists.

Due to a multiplicity of definitions associated with marginalization, it is justifiable to explain the term. Among diverse methods of defining marginalization, there is a method and description grounded on an extensive set of signs signifying the phenomenon. According to J.Kwaśniewski, marginalization is both a state and a process. It refers to the fact that the living possibilities of an individual are to a large extent limited, and the individual begins to function outside the formal social and legal structure (pattern). Marginalization is also reflected in life quality, beliefs, attitudes, judgment regarding general life situation, assessment of opportunities and effective and satisfying participation in social life¹.

K.W. Frieske presents marginalization as lack of participation of an individual or a social group in fundamental institutions of a definite social order. The notion itself is in contradiction with the term integration².

However, T.Kowalak claims that social marginalization is a process of appearing (emerging) of certain (marginal) social groups; he also identifies it as a process in which individuals and groups enter in (become) the already existing (peripheral) social margin. It can be discerned that the very notion of marginalization denotes a process in which many individuals do not get out of the so-called social margin area. At the same time, one can notice certain situations in which the gap between a marginal individual or a group and the mainstream society, which constitutes a reference frame for it, gradually widens³.

Marginalization is a complex phenomenon. Researchers recognize that the phenomenon is inherent in the structure of social inequalities, which entails unequal access to many areas of human activity, viewed as crucial from the perspective of human functioning; and lack of

¹ J. Kwaśniewski, Postrzeżenie marginalizacji oraz strategii i środków kontroli społecznej, In: Kontrola społeczna procesów marginalizacji, ed. J. Kwaśniewski, Warszawa 1997, p. 196.

² Cf. K.W. Frieske (ed.), Ofiary sukcesu. Zjawiska marginalizacji społecznej w Polsce, Warszawa 1997, p. 8.

³ T. Kowalak, O istocie i przyczynach marginalizacji społecznej, in: Teoretyczne problemy nauki o polityce społecznej, ed. J. Auleytner, J. Danecki, Warszawa 1998, p. 134.

participation in social institutions. Marginalization is a process of losing social significance and the ability to influence a course of events. It can assume various forms: pauperization, degradation or a voluntary escape⁴.

The concept of marginalization helps to provide explanation for many situations and phenomena which dominate the course of social life, including the problem of disabled women. As a result of changes which have occurred in Poland, individuals and social groups function in a risk society, which implies the necessity to cope with difficult situations and unpredictability of the effects of individual and collective choice-making⁵. Introduction of market law, limiting the state protection, growth of unemployment, healthcare reform, dropping their protective role towards the disabled by the state and social support institutions, affected functioning of the disabled and their families. There has been decentralization and a statutory shift of decision-making powers in the area of adjudication, healthcare system, education, welfare system, social and professional rehabilitation.

The phenomenon of marginalization is determined by many factors, including lack of equal chances for the disabled. Due to the living conditions, which are generally unfavourable in the period of social changes, the process of placing the disabled on the margins of social life has been intensified.

If we examine disability from the point of view of its causes, character and consequences, it has two dimensions: individual and social. Because of their permanent or long-term incapability to satisfy their own needs, people with disabilities require help from the society, and from this perspective they can be regarded as members of dependent groups⁶.

According to Census data⁷ in 2002 there were 5456.7 disabled, including 2888.5 women. Women constituted 52.9 % of the disabled community. At the same time the rate of feminization among the disabled was higher than in the whole population (there were 100 men to 106 women). In the disabled group there were 100 men to 112 women (a higher

⁴ Cf. M. Pacholski, A. Słaboń, Słownik pojęć socjologicznych, Kraków 1997; See. also A. Radziejewicz-Winnicki, I. Radziejewicz-Winnicki, Pojęcie marginalizacji i wykluczenia w naukach społecznych (vademecum wiedzy ogólnej przydatnej w działalności pedagoga społecznego) In: Wybrane społeczno – socjalne aspekty marginalizacji, ed. A. Nowak, Katowice 2005.

⁵ Cf. U, Beck, Społeczeństwo ryzyka. W drodze do innej rzeczywistości, Warszawa 2002. ⁶ M.Sokołowska, Odpowiedzialność społeczna a grupy zależne, „Studia Socjologiczne” 1981 no.3.

⁷ J.Sikorska, Osoby niepełnosprawne w spisach powszechnych w 1078, 1988 i 2002, „Studia Socjologiczne”, 2004, no.1, p.109-111

feminization rate was recognized in cities). In 2002 the middle age for the whole disabled community was 58 years, at the same time it was higher among women and tended to rise with the degree of limitation in the functional spectrum. It was assessed that the median age for women was 62 years, and 56 years for men. The disability rate for women was higher, especially in rural areas. It has been noticed that the rate of disability among women was different in particular districts – it was the highest in Lubuskie District and Lubelskie District (194 women out of 1000 were disabled) and the lowest in Opolskie District (101 women out of 1000 were disabled).

“Impairment” of women with disabilities manifests itself strongly in the sphere of education. Analyses of Census data give grounds for stating that the increase in the number of people with higher education degree, between 1978 and 2002, was higher among disabled women (by 2.6 percentage points) than among disabled men (by 2.1 percentage points). There is a higher level of education among disabled men. A living place is the factor which characterizes the educational structure of population, and determines its diversity. The level of education is higher in cities than in rural areas⁸. There are numerous difficulties and problems concerning the process of educating the disabled, and their access in different districts to educational institutions at various levels, which is particularly limited in rural areas. Vocational education among disabled women and lack of reliable assessment of the current situation pose a serious problem. There is also a problem of neglecting the difficult process of transition from school to work. However, the situation of disabled women in the labour market is particularly difficult. In 2002 the rate of vocational activity among the disabled was 19.2%, and it was three times lower than among the general population. The employment rate among the disabled was 15.3% - 11.4% among disabled women, and 19.7% among disabled men. The rate of unemployment stood at 20.4%. The lowest unemployment rate among people with disabilities was recorded in the group of women inhabiting rural areas (9, 8%), and the highest – in the group of disabled women inhabiting urban areas (29.1%).⁹ In 2005 99.1 thousand disabled women were employed. The main income that the disabled have comes from non-employment sources such as pension or benefits, which in 2002 constituted 84.4%. In 2005 99.1 thousand disabled women were employed.

⁸ J.Sikorska, Osoby niepełnosprawne w spisach powszechnych w 1078, 1988 i 2002, „Studia Socjologiczne”, 2004, no.1, p.109-111

⁹ ibid. p.117 and 118.

Disability has been listed among reasons of poverty. It seems that the situation of disabled people becomes particularly difficult, since the chance of improving their financial situation is little or the merest. Poverty among disabled men and women refers not only to low income from work, low pension or social benefits, but also to lack of possibilities to meet their specific needs, related to the necessity of purchasing medicines, undergoing medical treatment and participating in rehabilitation schemes; which has become very costly and difficult due to price raise and lack of or low National Health Fund subsidy. (The phenomenon of relative pauperization can be discerned among disabled people and their families.) People with disabilities require support. Hence recognizing their family potential and marital status ¹⁰ is becoming more and more important since it provides opportunity for receiving support from family members.

Married women constitute 49.6% of all disabled women (in the group of disabled men, married men constitute 70.7%), 34.3% of all disabled women are widows (7.1% of all disabled men are widowers), 5.1% of all disabled women are divorced (in the group of disabled men it is 4.7%).

It is worth mentioning that the situation of disabled women is becoming more and more difficult since the social benefits they receive are very often limited, as well as their access to early diagnostics, hospital and specialist treatment. Disabled women encounter numerous difficulties related to the procedures for issuing disability degree or work incapability statements, for the purpose of receiving their disability benefit. (It is worth enumerating problems like: multiplicity of medical adjudication systems, lengthy proceedings, lack of specialist physicians, difficulties in collecting required documentation, difficult access to local adjudication panels, multiplicity and ambiguity of regulations...). The situation of women with intellectual disabilities is particularly difficult. For many years their problems have been marginalized, and intellectually disabled women have been placed on the margins of the society. Women with disabilities have very restricted access into most public buildings. The physical features of the premises can create barriers since in most cases they are not fit for the particular group or degree of impairment, and for the limited capabilities of disabled women. All the transportation and architectural barriers which women with disabilities experience restrict or even deny their access to buildings, premises or facilities.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.113 and 114

¹¹ Cf. E.Jutrzyzna, *Uczestnictwo w kulturze szansą społecznego usamodzielnienia osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną*. In: *Sfery życia osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną*, ed. Z.Janiszevska-Nieścioruk, Kraków 2005, p.185.

It is noticeable that political subjectivity of the disabled (especially women with disabilities) and their participation in political organizations is low. Disabled women also face difficulties in the sphere of culture. Their participation in various forms of cultural activity, both active, such as organized activities, meetings and activity aimed at culture, home amateur artistic work, and passive, which is consumption of culture products ¹¹is restricted.

A separate and equally important issue is a common stereotype of disabled women and men, which in general is not positive and reflects negative reaction towards this group of people. The stereotype underlines two main characteristic features of a disabled person- one of them is weakness (people with disabilities are weak, apprehensive, lack self-confidence), the other, a justified one, is lack of acceptance and social isolation (they are distrustful, secretive, lonely). According to the authors examining the issue, this stereotype defines two main parameters- mental weakness and social isolation¹². The disabled are often claimed to lack acceptance of the situation they have found themselves in, they often bewail the lost ability and envy the non-disabled. What completes the profile of the disabled person is negative self-evaluation of life opportunities for starting a family, being a wife, mother, daughter – in case of a woman, leading an appropriate lifestyle, obtaining a job, gaining promotion. Due to their ill health, kind and degree of impairment, disabled women experience numerous difficulties while performing their family roles. Because of their disability they can be permanently or temporarily absolved from some of or all the duties they fulfill, which are related to the social (family) role they perform. It happens that in many cases people with disabilities can fully participate in family life and carry out their duties; however it requires appropriate conditions and support from family members.

It can be stated here that marginality can refer to various spheres in which women with disabilities function, such as family, labour market, cultural and political activity, as well as consumption of and access to goods and services, access to health care and social rehabilitation. Women (especially disabled ones) live a hard life; they encounter numerous obstacles and barriers. They suffer from discrimination, which manifests itself in the fact that they occupy an inferior social position.

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¹¹ E.Jutrzyńska, Uczestnictwo w kulturze szansą społecznego usamodzielnienia osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. In: Sfery życia osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną, ed. Z.Janiszevska-Nieścioruk, Kraków 2005, p.185.

¹²A.Ostrowska, Badania nad niepełnosprawnością, Warszawa 1994, pp.43-45; Z.Kawczyńska-Butrym, Niepełnosprawność- specyfika pomocy społecznej, Katowice 1998, p.77.

Social policy towards disabled women should aim at respecting their rights, eliminating symptoms of discrimination and prejudices, counteracting the phenomenon of marginalization of disabled women, removing all barriers which restrict their functioning, especially social barriers.

Women with disabilities should be supported in the process of shaping their identity and subjectivity. Actions aimed at integrating the disabled into school, work place, local environment and into society should be taken. Government, self-government and non-government institutions, and even business people and social partners should be spurred into action towards integration of disabled women¹³.

¹³ Cf. A.Nowak, Marginalizacja osób niepełnosprawnych. In: Wybrane społeczno-socjalne aspekty marginalizacji, ed. A.Nowak, Katowice 2005

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