



# Women in Poland

Issued July 1995

U.S. Department of Commerce  
Economics and Statistics Administration  
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS  
Population Division  
International Programs Center

WID/95-1

*This is the first in the series, Profiles of the World's Women. These profiles present issues related to the status of women in different countries of the world. Funding for this series is provided by the Office of Women in Development, USAID.*

*As with most countries in Eastern Europe, women in Poland have played an exceptional role in the economy, as well as maintaining their traditional responsibility for the home and family. Women in Poland... have low levels of fertility...are responsible for the home... have high levels of education relative to men...make a large contribution to the labor force...are suffering more than men from unemployment... earn less than men.*

With the transition to a market economy, Poland is changing rapidly. These changes have both positive and negative effects on the status of women. With the privatization of the economy, women are beginning to own

and run businesses. On the other hand, the transition to a market economy has brought about unemployment from which women are suffering disproportionately.

Although Polish women have high rates of labor force participation, there is a high degree of sex segregation in the labor force with women dominating fields with lower prestige and lower pay. Another negative result of the transition is that benefits which women previously enjoyed under communism, such as subsidized child care and paid maternity leave, are no longer guaranteed. Under the

communist regime, Polish women had equal access to education and today young Polish women have higher levels of educational attainment than young Polish men.

## Population Trends...

Poland has approximately 39 million people, 51 percent of whom are women. Poland's population grew at around 1 percent per year from 1970 to 1984. In the mid 1980s, the rate of growth began to decline, and it is now at a level of 0.2 percent per year. One reason for the decrease in the growth rate is the steady decline in fertility, especially since the late 1980s.

## The Velvet Revolution

As in all of the countries in the former Soviet Bloc, Poland has been undergoing dramatic political and economic changes since the late 1980s. In 1989, the Communist government in Poland was voted out of office and Solidarity came into power. With the change in government came the beginning of the transition from a centrally planned economy to a free market economy. Since 1989, the Polish economy has undergone major changes: prices were decontrolled; firms were privatized; and unemployment has become a serious problem.

In 1994, the total fertility rate reached an all time low for Poland of 1.8.

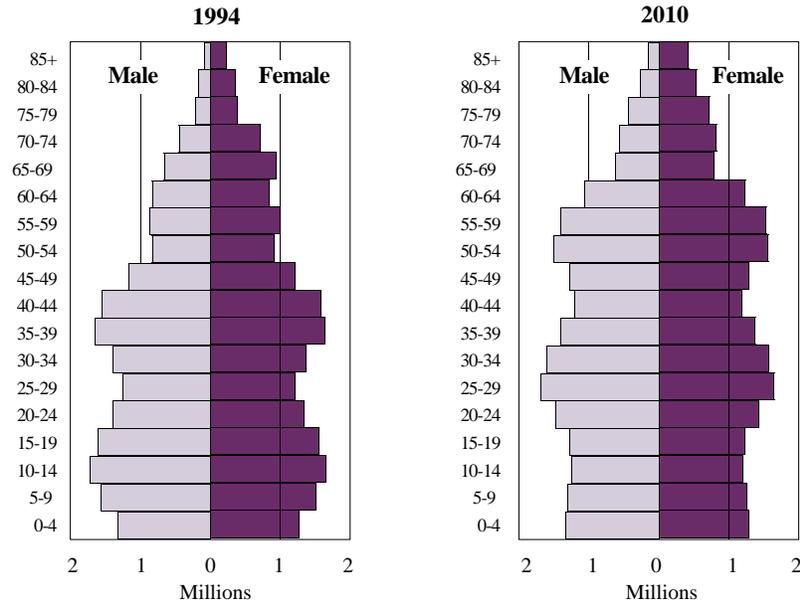
Currently, life expectancy in Poland is 76 years for women and 68 years for men. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a stagnation in male life expectancy in Poland, as well as in many other Eastern European countries and former Soviet republics, which many researchers link with life-style behaviors (e.g., excessive use of alcohol and tobacco). This stagnation in male life expectancy has caused Poland to have one of the widest sex differentials in life expectancy in the world, approximately 8.5 years in 1994.

Like most developed countries, men slightly outnumber women in the young ages and only in the middle and older age groups do women outnumber men.

The age structure of Poland's population clearly shows the effects of World War II (figure 1). The cohorts aged 50 to 54 in 1994, born during World War II when fertility was dramatically reduced, are smaller than average. The cohorts aged 35 to 49 represent the increase in fertility that occurred after the war. The echo effect of these post-war cohorts also can be seen in the population pyramid in the ages 10 to 19 (the children of the post-war cohorts). The blips and bulges of these cohorts will continue to move up the age pyramid in the future.

Another population characteristic that is evident in the age pyramid is that, like the other countries of Eastern Europe, Poland's population is aging. In 1994, 13 percent of the population was past the legal retirement ages (60 for women and 65 for men). By 2010, this proportion will increase to 16 percent.

Figure 1.  
**Population of Poland, by Age and Sex**



### Marital Status...

Marital status either directly or indirectly affects many aspects of well-being for both sexes. In Poland, women marry on average at age 23 and men at age 26. At the younger adult ages, the majority of both sexes are married while at the older ages relatively more elderly men than elderly women are married. Well over half (59 percent) of the women aged 65 and over were widowed in 1988 compared with 18 percent of men. This difference is the result of both higher male mortality rates at most ages and women tending to marry men a few years older than themselves. One result of the differing marital status of elderly men and women is that elderly women are much more likely to live alone than are elderly men (Fratczak, 1992).

More women are currently divorced than men (divorced men are more likely to remarry than are divorced women). However, divorce is not as prevalent in Poland as it is in many of the other former communist countries,

such as Russia. This difference is most likely associated with Poland being a traditionally Catholic country (over 90 percent of the population is Catholic).

Typically, in a divorce women receive custody of the children. In 1991, women were granted sole custody of the children in over 70 percent of the divorce cases involving children under age 18. In contrast, men received sole custody in less than 4 percent of the cases (the remaining 26 percent of cases involved joint custody). This pattern of single mothers being responsible for the care of the children is also reflected in the data on family type. In 1988, 14 percent of all families consisted of a single mother with children while single fathers with children accounted for only 2 percent of all families.

One of the reasons for concern about single-parent families is they are much more likely to live in poverty than two-parent families. A 1992 survey found that 28 percent of single-parent

households had incomes below the minimum sustenance level compared with 15 percent of two-parent households.

### Family Planning....

Recently, fertility regulation is becoming more restrictive in Poland. Data from surveys show that fewer than half of Polish women used some form of contraceptive method, and only 17 percent of women used a modern method (David and Titkow, 1994). Until recently, abortion was one of the main forms of birth control in Poland (primarily due to lack of availability of modern methods). However, this changed when a new abortion law which strictly limits access to abortions was passed in 1993.

This new law could have serious consequences for the health of women and for the level of fertility. The number of officially reported abortions already has decreased dramatically from 11,640 in 1992 to 777 in 1993 (Rich, 1994). There also have been

reports of deaths due to complications from self-induced abortions.

### Education....

Educational attainment is generally one of the key indicators of the status of women, and in Poland women have been making dramatic progress in this area. However, it is important to understand the organization of the Polish educational system before interpreting the data. After the completion of primary school there are three different options: 1) basic vocational (incomplete secondary); 2) vocational secondary; and 3) general secondary school (figure 2). Forty-six percent of the primary school graduates go on to basic vocational schools where they receive training for a trade but not a secondary school diploma. Graduates of these schools can either directly enter the work-force or go on to general or vocational secondary school to work toward a secondary school diploma. Men are much more likely to have only basic vocational education than are women, 32 percent and 16 percent respectively in 1988 (figure 3). Only graduates of the other two choices after primary school, vocational secondary and general secondary, are considered to have a completed secondary education. Thus, while only 32 percent of the population aged 15 and over in 1988 had a completed secondary education, over half (56 percent) had at least basic vocational education (incomplete secondary).

After completing secondary school, one can either enter the workforce or continue his/her education by going directly to college or by attending a "post-secondary" school (similar to community colleges in the United States). Women are much more likely to attend the "post-secondary"

schools than are men. Women accounted for 79 percent of the people with this level of education in 1988.

The educational level of Polish women is low compared to other developed countries. Only 35 percent of Polish women aged 15 and over had completed secondary school compared with 74 percent of American women in the same age category. Polish women also compared poorly to other Eastern bloc countries (57 percent of Russian women aged 15 and over had completed secondary school). Even if those with basic vocational education (incomplete secondary) are included, Polish women still compare poorly (only 51 percent of those aged 15 and over have at least this level).

Although the educational level of Polish women is relatively low, there has been improvement over time (figure 4). Well over half of women aged 25 to 29 had at least completed secondary school compared with only

Figure 2. Organization of the Educational System

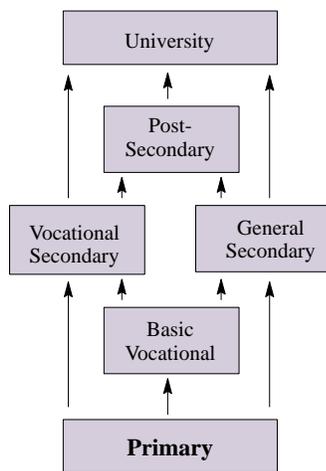


Figure 3. Percent of the Population Aged 15 and Older by Highest Level of Education: 1988

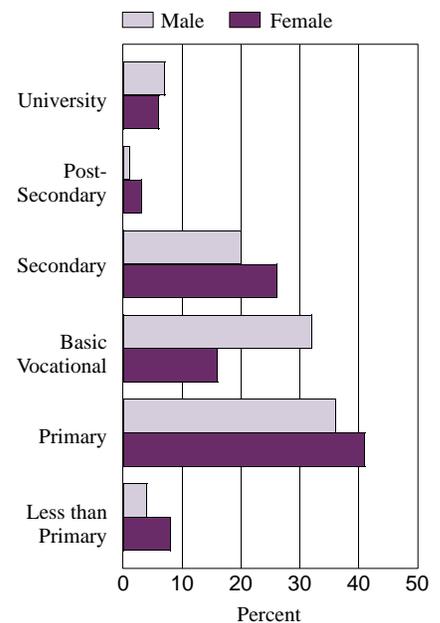
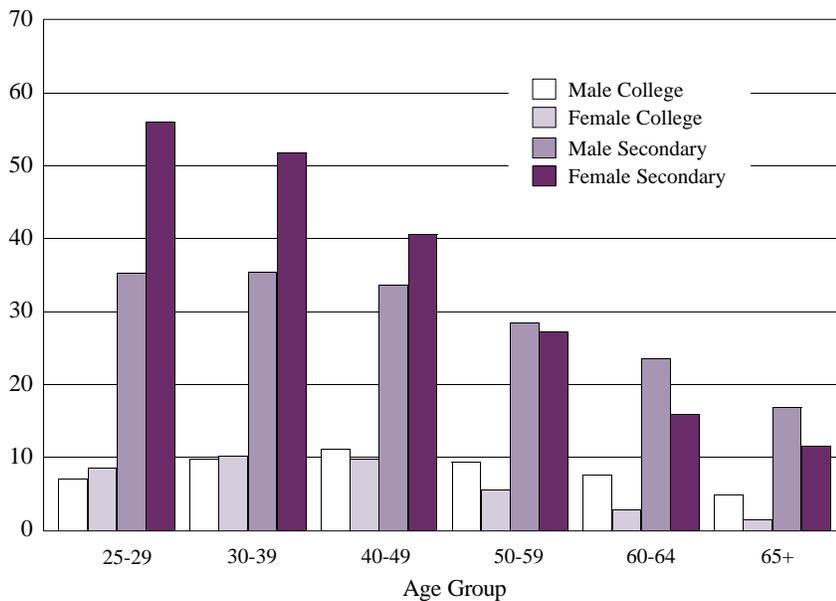


Figure 4.  
**Percent of the Population With Completed  
 Educational Level: 1988**



12 percent of women aged 65 and over. There has also been an increase in the proportion of women with a college degree. Ten percent of women aged 30 to 39 had a college degree in 1988 compared with less than 2 percent of women aged 65 and over.

One consequence of the gains in education for Polish women is that for the younger adult age groups, women actually have higher levels of education than men. It should be noted that the low levels of secondary education for men can be explained by the fact that men are much more likely to attend the basic vocational schools than are women. However, even if basic vocational education is included in the gender comparison, at the youngest ages, women still fare well compared with men (for those age 25 to 29, 85 percent of the men and 86 percent of the women had at least a basic vocational education).

These relatively high levels of educational attainment for younger women are a result of equal access to education for both sexes during the communist era. Since at least the late 1950s, girls have accounted for approximately half of the students enrolled in primary school (in the 1992-93 school year girls accounted for 48 percent of the students).

Women are also well represented at the higher levels of education. In 1950, women made up 35 percent of the students enrolled in universities and this proportion has increased steadily over time, so that by 1992-93 women accounted for over half (52 percent) of all college students in Poland.

There is little evidence of sex segregation by field of study at the college level. Women account for approximately half of all college students in all major fields of study with the exception of engineering, in which they make up only 17 percent of the students.

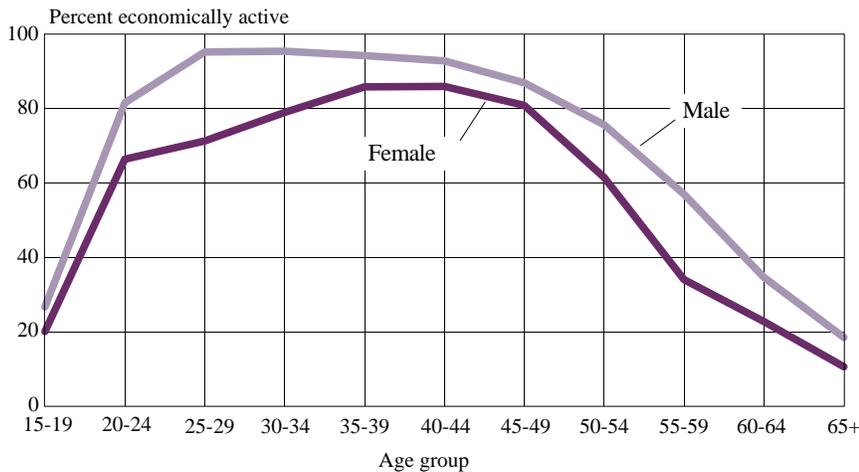
While women account for over half of all university students, they are not as well represented in the faculty. For the 1992-93 academic year, women accounted for 36 percent of all teaching staff at universities and only 17 percent of full professors. In this respect Poland is very similar to the United States, where for the 1992-93 academic year women accounted for only 16 percent of full professors and 33 percent of all teaching staff at universities.

### Labor Force Participation....

One of the legacies of the communist era in Poland is that women have relatively high rates of labor force participation. They constituted nearly half (46 percent) of the labor force in 1992. Their participation rates for most age groups were not far below those of men (figure 5). Although Poland's female labor force participation rates are somewhat lower than those in some other East European countries (e.g., Bulgaria) and former Soviet republics (e.g., Russia), compared with the rest of the world these rates of participation are high.

High labor force participation is not a recent phenomenon. As far back as 1960 women accounted for 44 percent of the labor force. There has, however, been a shift in the age pattern of female labor force participation over time. Participation rates for both the younger (20 to 29) and older (55 and over) age groups were lower in 1988 than in 1970. The decrease in participation rates at the younger ages could be related to both an increase in female education and delayed entry into the labor force because of childbearing. At older ages, liberalizations in disability and retirement policies have led to an

Figure 5.  
**Labor Force Participation Rates: 1992**



increase in early exits from the labor force.

Despite these high rates of female labor force participation, the labor force in Poland is still sex segregated with women dominating occupations such as health care and teaching at the primary and secondary level, and men more heavily involved in industry and construction (figure 6).

One recent claim is that men are beginning to take over areas—such as finance—that were traditionally

dominated by women but are now becoming more important in a market economy. There is some evidence that this is occurring. In 1988, women accounted for 86 percent of the full time workers in the finance sector. By 1993, their share had dropped to 80 percent.

A trend that has had a negative impact on female labor force participation in Poland is the reduction in the number of spaces in child care centers. Since 1991, the number of spaces in day care centers has decreased by

approximately 50 percent. Thus, working mothers are having an increasingly difficult time finding day care for their children.

One positive aspect of the transition to a market economy is that more women are starting their own businesses. In 1989, 290,000 women owned their own business. This number increased to 621,000 in 1992. Another way to look at these numbers is that in 1989, 3.7 percent of all working women owned their own business and this increased to 8.7 percent by 1992.

### Unemployment....

One of the negative aspects of the transition toward a market economy is that unemployment, which was virtually nonexistent prior to 1990, has now become a problem. Women have been disproportionately affected by unemployment. In the beginning of 1990, women accounted for only 41 percent of the registered unemployed but their share of the total quickly increased to over half by the end of 1990. Women still account for over half of the nearly 3 million people who are unemployed in Poland.

Although unemployment has become worse over time for both sexes (figure 7), there is some evidence that the gender gap is narrowing. In August of 1993, the gender unemployment bias ratio (the female unemployment rate divided by the male multiplied by 100) was at its highest, 130 (i.e., the unemployment rate for women was approximately 30 percent higher than that of men). The ratio has since declined to just 113 in February 1994 (see table 1).

Not only have women suffered higher unemployment rates than men (notwithstanding recent trends), but the duration of unemployment is slightly

Figure 6.  
**Employment by Branch of the Economy and Sex: 1994**

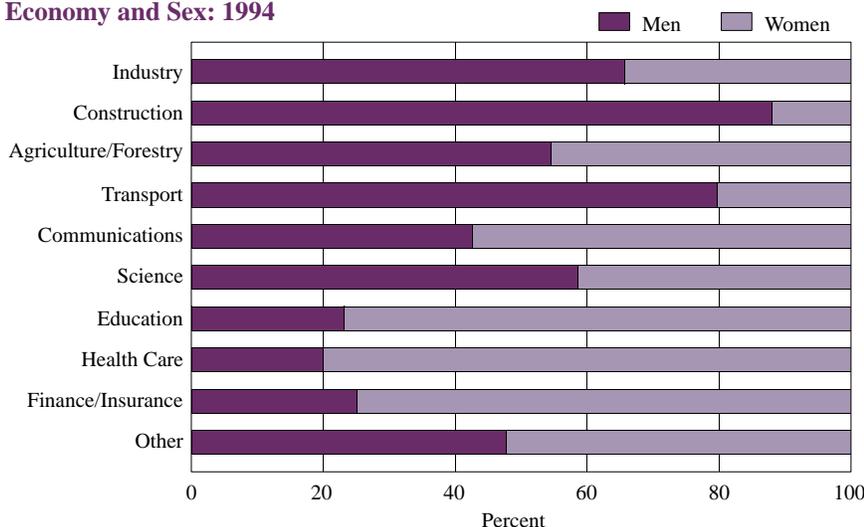
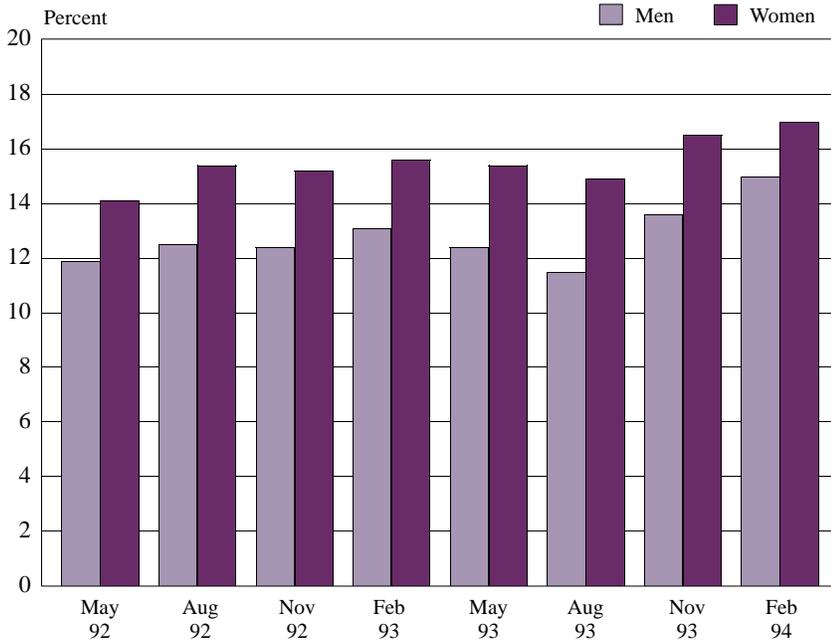


Figure 7.  
Unemployment Rates



longer for women than for men. In March 1994, 49 percent of the 1.5 million unemployed women had been unemployed for over a year whereas only 40 percent of their male counterparts had been unemployed this long. One of the reasons for this difference in unemployment duration is that there are more job openings for men than there are for women (e.g., between 1991-92, job openings for women accounted for between 23 and 34 percent of total vacancies).

**Income....**

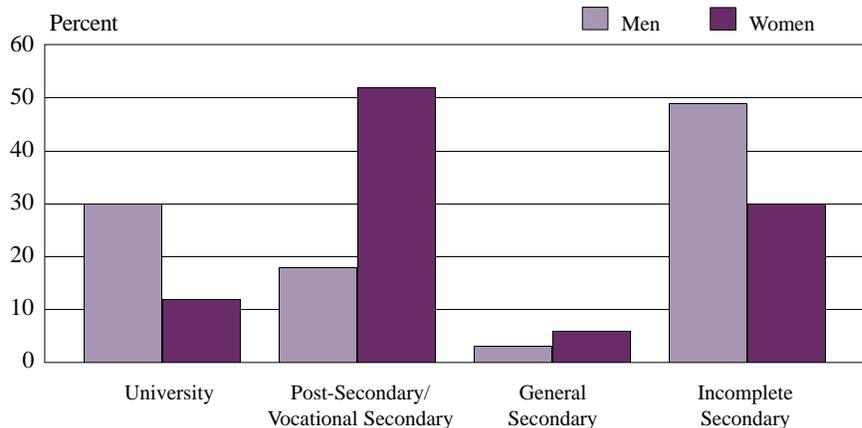
Although the Polish constitution guarantees men and women equal pay for equal work, women typically earn less than men. Women tend to work in lower paying fields, and within fields, men tend to have the higher level jobs. For example, women constitute 83 percent of health care workers, yet they account for only 54 percent of the doctors. This difference in levels of jobs by sex is reflected in incomes. Almost 9 percent of the men who work

in the health care field are in the highest income category compared with just over 1 percent of the women. The discrepancy becomes even greater when only the wages of non-manual (white collar) workers are considered. For white collar workers in the health care field, 18 percent of the men are in the highest income category compared with less than 2 percent of the women.

Part of the discrepancy in income can be explained by differences in educational attainment (figure 8). For instance, 30 percent of men in the health care field have at least a college education compared with just 12 percent of the women. Women are more likely to have a “post-secondary” or vocational secondary level education rather than a college degree (52 percent of the female health care workers have either a “post-secondary” or vocational secondary degree). This level of education is likely to train women to be nurses or doctor’s assistants rather than doctors.

Even when men do not have higher levels of education they often have higher wages. Men and women have different returns from education in terms of income. While the level of education has a more direct relationship for women-the higher the education the higher the income-this is not necessarily true for men. Men with basic vocational education (incomplete secondary) often obtain fairly high paying jobs such as skilled repairmen whereas women with this level of

Figure 8.  
Educational Attainment of Employees in the Health Care Field: 1992



education tend to be in lower paying unskilled jobs.

Another reason that women have lower incomes than men is that women are less likely than men to be employed in the private sector which typically has higher pay than the state sector. A recent survey of private enterprises found not only that women were less likely to work for these enterprises but that private enterprises had discriminatory hiring policies.

### Women In Politics....

One way in which women can affect their status is to have a voice in the political process. Under communism women were guaranteed a certain share of positions in the Sejm (the Polish legislature). They accounted for over 20 percent of the Sejm from 1976 through 1989. With the fall of communism and the rise of free elections, women lost seats in the Sejm. In the 1991-1993 governmental session, women held only 10 percent of the seats in the Sejm and only 8 percent of the seats in the newly formed Senate. However, in the latest election in 1993, the proportion of women in both the Sejm and the Senate increased to 13 percent. This increase is likely a reaction to the restrictive new abortion law that was passed in 1993.

Women also make up a small proportion of the members of the local County Councils although this differs by area. In urban areas women were better represented, accounting for 16 percent of the council members compared with just 9 percent in rural areas. Warsaw had the highest proportion of women in its council, 26 percent in 1993.

Women are not well represented in the different governmental ministries.

However, women that are involved in the government now may have more political power than the past female members of the Sejm. Past candidates were chosen by the Communist Party and did not necessarily have much decision making power. The women who are involved in the government today are more active than their predecessors (Kuratowska, 1992).

### References....

Most of the data presented are from official statistics. These sources consist of census volumes, Polish statistical yearbooks, and other publications of the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS). Other important references include:

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This report was written by Victoria A. Velkoff. Profile users are invited to send their comments to the Chief, International Programs Center, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC 20233.

Table 1.  
**Labor Force Characteristics**

Age	Male				Female			
	1970	1978	1988	1992	1970	1978	1988	1992
Percent in labor force								
15-19 .....	31.5	29.3	22.0	26.6	25.6	21.4	16.7	20.0
20-24 .....	85.7	82.7	79.0	81.6	73.3	68.4	64.0	66.4
25-29 .....	96.3	96.2	94.3	95.3	75.1	75.1	70.0	71.3
30-34 .....	97.1	97.1	96.1	95.5	77.7	79.5	76.7	79.0
35-39 .....	96.8	96.2	95.6	94.3	79.8	81.9	83.0	85.9
40-44 .....	96.1	94.8	94.1	92.9	80.0	82.7	85.5	86.0
45-49 .....	95.1	92.1	89.6	87.0	79.2	78.5	81.2	80.9
50-54 .....	94.0	87.1	82.4	75.7	75.9	71.6	71.1	61.5
55-59 .....	90.9	81.5	72.0	57.0	68.1	57.9	50.6	34.0
60-64 .....	83.0	62.4	53.6	34.6	51.1	37.4	34.3	22.7
65+ .....	56.4	34.9	32.5	18.4	33.0	19.4	19.0	10.5

Date	Male	Female	Ratio	Date	Male	Female	Ratio
Unemployment rates and gender unemployment bias ratio							
May 1992 .....	11.9	14.1	118.5	May 1993 .....	12.4	15.4	124.2
August 1992 .....	12.5	15.4	123.2	August 1993 .....	11.5	14.9	129.6
November 1992 .....	12.4	15.2	122.6	November 1993 .....	13.6	16.5	121.3
February 1993 .....	13.1	15.6	119.1	February 1994 .....	15.0	17.0	113.3

Table 2.  
**Population**  
[In thousands]

Age	1970	1978	1988	1994	2000
Total .....	32,642	35,061	37,879	38,551	39,238
<b>Males</b>					
All ages .....	15,854	17,080	18,464	18,767	19,094
0- 4 .....	1,281	1,588	1,574	1,325	1,258
5- 9 .....	1,399	1,389	1,723	1,571	1,290
10-14 .....	1,730	1,303	1,613	1,721	1,501
15-19 .....	1,772	1,517	1,391	1,617	1,716
20-24 .....	1,499	1,743	1,265	1,394	1,629
25-29 .....	949	1,651	1,444	1,249	1,431
30-34 .....	1,076	1,210	1,694	1,397	1,237
35-39 .....	1,127	960	1,585	1,654	1,324
40-44 .....	1,097	1,060	1,157	1,559	1,591
45-49 .....	915	1,096	898	1,168	1,541
50-54 .....	587	953	961	834	1,226
55-59 .....	674	744	957	874	759
60-64 .....	676	468	785	834	777
65-69 .....	498	576	567	661	702
70-74 .....	307	428	308	447	544
75-79 .....	155	243	303	207	332
80-84 .....	73	101	158	166	131
85+ .....	30	43	68	87	105
<b>Females</b>					
All ages .....	16,789	17,982	19,414	19,783	20,144
0- 4 .....	1,225	1,518	1,508	1,259	1,195
5- 9 .....	1,334	1,326	1,650	1,500	1,227
10-14 .....	1,659	1,244	1,541	1,650	1,430
15-19 .....	1,706	1,427	1,323	1,549	1,648
20-24 .....	1,459	1,676	1,208	1,336	1,567
25-29 .....	939	1,606	1,400	1,201	1,379
30-34 .....	1,079	1,197	1,657	1,364	1,191
35-39 .....	1,130	968	1,573	1,634	1,301
40-44 .....	1,158	1,083	1,171	1,572	1,589
45-49 .....	1,071	1,132	935	1,208	1,580
50-54 .....	694	1,101	1,033	903	1,298
55-59 .....	827	908	1,067	997	858
60-64 .....	824	615	1,008	1,007	945
65-69 .....	665	775	793	930	924
70-74 .....	490	632	487	713	835
75-79 .....	286	431	529	380	619
80-84 .....	155	222	327	351	279
85+ .....	77	114	187	231	278

Table 3.  
**Demographic Indicators**

Date	Growth rate (per-cent)	Total fertility rate	Life expectancy at birth		Infant mortality
			Male	Female	
1960 .....	1.3	2.98	64.8	70.5	54.80
1970 .....	0.8	2.20	66.8	73.8	33.40
1980 .....	0.9	2.28	66.9	75.4	21.30
1990 .....	0.4	2.04	66.5	75.5	15.77
1994 .....	0.2	1.83	67.9	76.4	12.57

Table 4.  
**Educational Attainment**  
[In percent]

Age	1970		1978		1988	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
<b>Completed secondary level and above</b>						
25-29 .....	23.7	29.2	31.8	46.7	35.4	56.0
30-39 .....	22.7	22.8	31.3	38.3	35.5	51.8
40-49 .....	19.0	11.7	26.6	25.2	33.7	40.7
50-59 .....	12.9	8.7	20.7	13.5	28.5	27.2
60-64* .....	9.6	6.6	15.0	11.0	23.7	15.9
65+ .....	(X)	(X)	11.9	8.5	16.9	11.6
<b>Completed higher education</b>						
25-29 .....	5.7	4.9	7.7	8.1	7.2	8.7
30-39 .....	6.5	3.5	9.4	7.6	9.8	10.3
40-49 .....	6.0	2.2	8.4	4.7	11.2	9.9
50-59 .....	3.6	1.1	6.3	2.2	9.4	5.7
60-64* .....	2.8	0.7	3.9	1.3	7.6	2.8
65+ .....	(X)	(X)	3.3	1.0	4.9	1.5

\* Data for 1970 refer to the age group 60 and over.

X Not applicable.

Table 5.  
**Women in Politics**

Legislative body/period	Total deputies	Female deputies	Percent female deputies
<b>Sejm</b>			
1985-1989 .....	460	93	20
1989-1991 .....	460	62	13
1991-1993 .....	460	44	10
1993-1997 .....	460	60	13
<b>Senate</b>			
1989-1991 .....	99	6	6
1991-1993 .....	100	8	8
1993-1997 .....	100	13	13