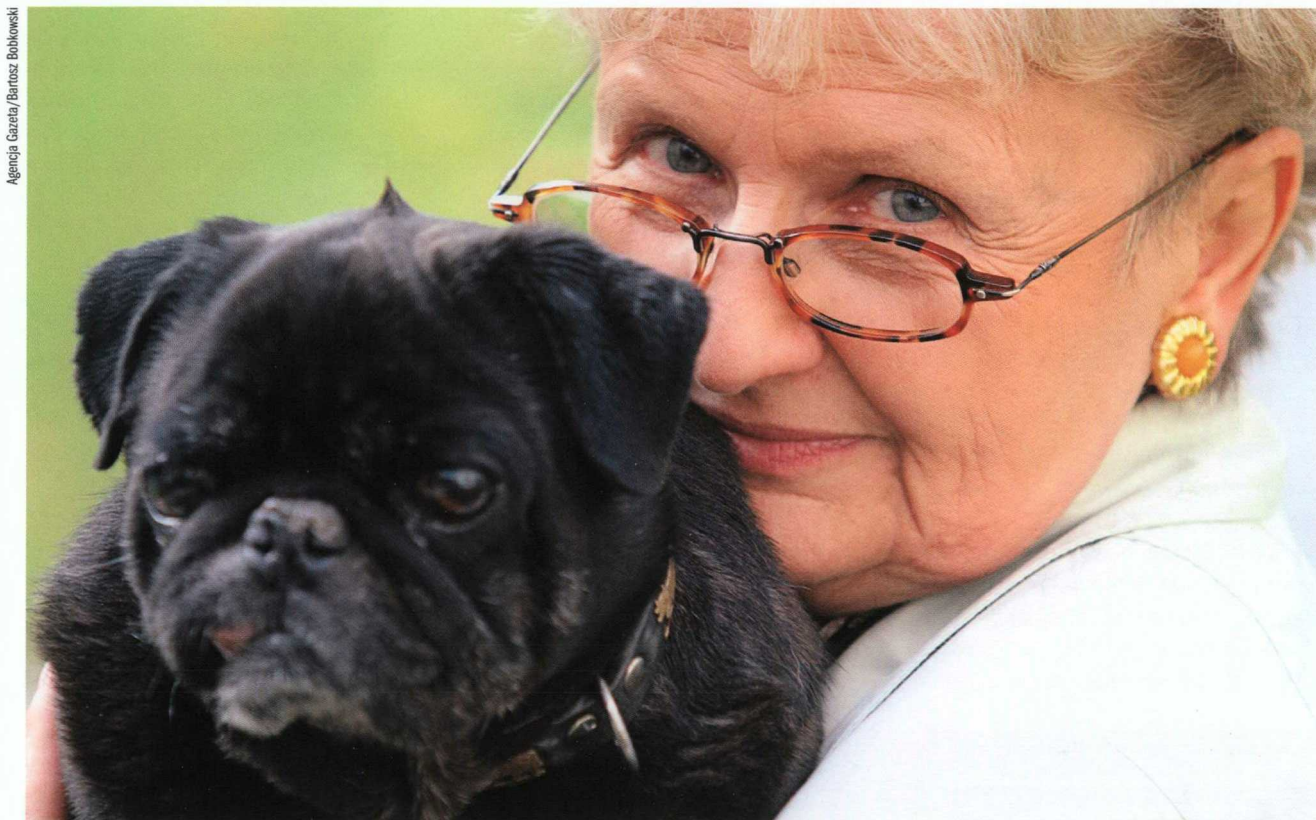


Women in science: Interview with Professor Ewa Łętowska

For Equal Competition



Agencja Gazeta/Bartosz Bobkowski

Ewa Łętowska is a professor of law at the PAN Institute of Legal Studies, a judge of the Constitutional Tribunal, a lecturer in civil law at Warsaw University's Law Department, and the author of many books in the field of civil and constitutional law

Academia: Professor Łętowska, this past December you were elected to become a member of the Polish Academy of Sciences. From your point of view, what is the position of women in science?

Profesor Ewa Łętowska: For many years, in similar situations, I used to tell the following joke, not without a certain sarcasm: what's the difference between a woman-scientist and a guinea pig? There isn't any. Guinea pigs are neither pigs, nor from Guinea. And this gives one a bit of insight into the presence of women in science. I circulated this little quip amongst the leadership of PAN, and I have to admit that it sparked mixed emotions. There is something in it, because if there are 10 women out of

300 PAN members, that is disconcerting. Perhaps this is related to the way new individuals are brought in to the elected body of members. As far as I know, the current procedure evolved under the influence of bad historical experiences. As recently as in the 1950s, the Academy was open to affronts from people who had been elected to become members, but ultimately refused to accept. As a result the rules were changed, and new rules were instituted whereby one has to express not just one's consent, but also a certain desire at the outset. And I have to say that I initially declined for this reason. Because I believe that distinction is something you receive because evidently someone else believes that you are worthy of it. And so, if you are asking me about the position of women

in science, I get the impression that women are put off by this, that they are more sensitive to the entire atmosphere that accompanies such elections.

You are a known and well-respected individual in scientific and public life. You are a judge on the Constitutional Tribunal, a professor, and you work at the Institute of Law Studies. What path did you take into the scholarly world?

It was commonplace and very simple. I began to work at the Polish Academy of Sciences in 1961 as an intern at the library of the Institute of Law Studies, and many years later I gained a professorship. In fact, I "acquired a taste" for scholarship gradually. In essence, it was quite late – meaning after my habilitation –

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that I gained scholarly maturity and started to take great satisfaction in the fact that I work with the law as a profession. In the field of law, things are a bit like in music - maturity is of very great importance. One is simply better once one matures. Besides, a lot of people of my age have remained in science. Perhaps there was a sort of genius temporis at Warsaw University in those years. I began my university studies after the "thaw" of October 1956, when there was a clear easing of the political climate. Pluralism of views was permitted, the country opened up to the world to a greater extent, and this was important especially in the humanities. But getting back to the position of women in science: no one treated me seriously until more or less the time I gained my habilitation. I was just some woman who was doing some sort of doctorate. Where did this stem from? Probably from this line of thinking: she will get married, have children,

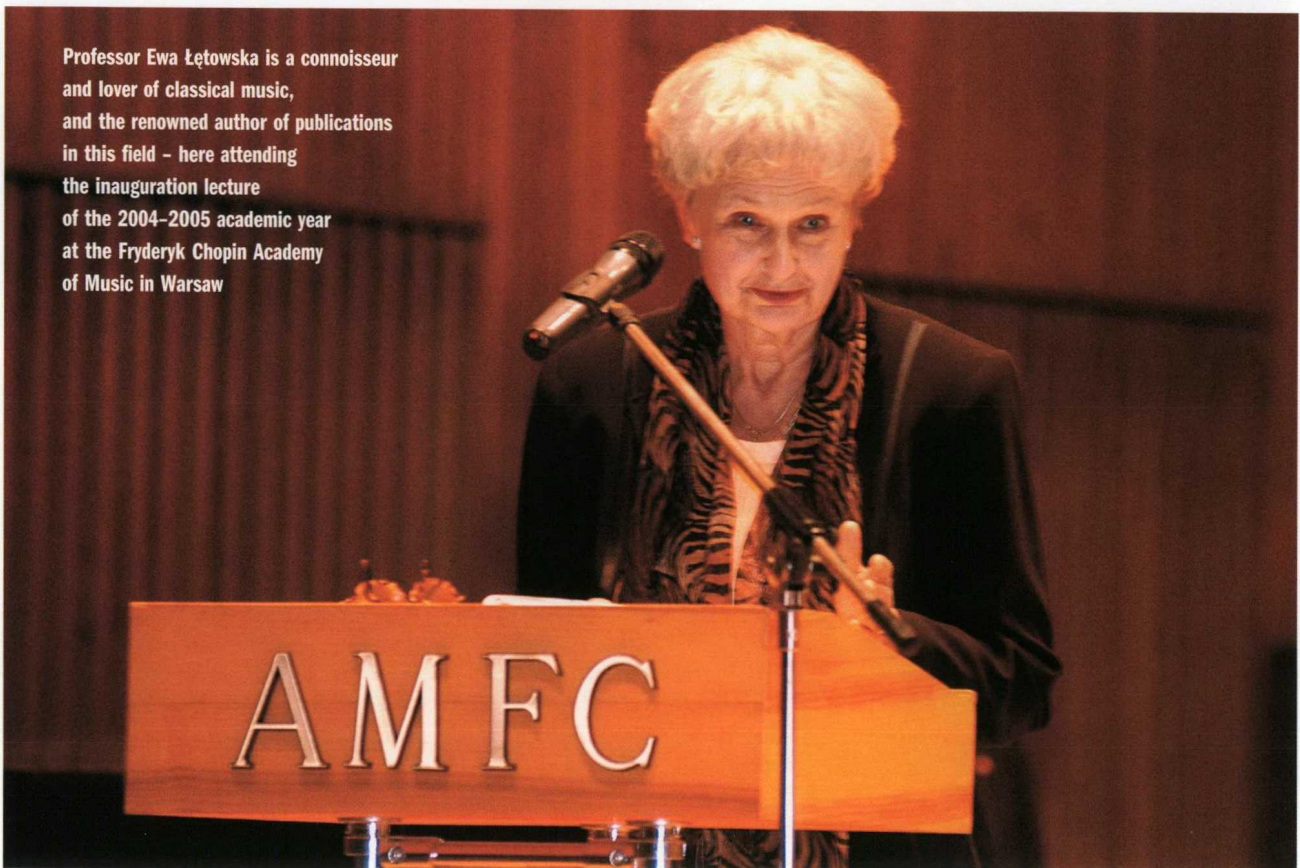
and disappear. And this is not a stereotype - it is the truth. I do not have children and this was my own conscious choice. I do not know how things would have gone for me if I did.

Nevertheless, more women than men in Poland start programs of higher education and graduate from them, yet relatively few of them remain in science.

In theoretical work, in science, there is a greater risk of failure. More creative thinking and independence are required. In programs of education it is enough to learn what is expected for an exam. Please note that Poles graduate from university at the age of 23-24. At that time people usually do not have family obligations. And exactly then, when one is most in need of a good professional start, when one can demonstrate some sort of ability, is when most women get "stuck" with their family situ-

ation. Besides this, in order to make a name for yourself in science, one has to be creative, original, and have a bit of stamina. My research specialization is - and interestingly, was - the issue of consumer protection. I got into the field in the 1970s, under a completely different system than today, under the conditions of a planned economy. I remember the reaction of my professor colleagues: what in the world do you want to study? If someone wants to buy something they will, if they don't they won't, and in general if market conditions were more free the invisible hand of the market would take care of everything. They did not encourage me, they did not believe that a topic defined in this way made sense. It is normal that a group of musty professors take a somewhat critical view of the fits and starts of a young inexperienced lecturer, regardless of which gender they are. But the problem is that then you have to persist and

Professor Ewa Łętowska is a connoisseur and lover of classical music, and the renowned author of publications in this field - here attending the inauguration lecture of the 2004-2005 academic year at the Fryderyk Chopin Academy of Music in Warsaw



Tadeusz Friecki

know how to demonstrate that it can be done. Humility towards the world is generally a good characteristic, but you can't assume in advance that something is being done badly at the outset. And women are frequently too conciliatory.

Does this hold for science?

Our entire culture is a paternalistic culture. This is very visible in the social sciences and in my field of science: law. After all, because in captivity society as a whole is reared to be obedient to the authorities, to the law, to be non-rebellious, to be accustomed to not having much of a say on things, then as a result we have shortcomings in terms of civil awareness and civil society. This breeds people who are meek and who surrender to the authorities, regardless of where these authorities draw their strength from.

Aside from the fact that women are more engaged in childcare, are there other reasons why scientific institutions are more frequently headed by men?

This is evident. I know a great number of women who really are the souls of their scientific institution or of their community - but they are just a gray eminence, they stay in the shadows. Perhaps this stems from the fact that being a director of anything, under our conditions, requires a horrible amount of wasted time for ritualizing: holding various sorts of meetings, consultations, and delegations. I hate this. When I was Civil Rights Ombudsman, and was therefore in charge of a state institution, I myself shaped the style in which it functioned. I did not want to travel for meetings or negotiations which I felt were a waste of time. If someone wanted something, an exchange of telephone calls or correspondence generally sufficed.

Your statements and your involvement in various groups indicate that you perceive

a need for women to be more prominent in public and scientific life.

Yes. Perhaps they simply need to be promoted more. Or perhaps something else: the promotion criteria in general, in our public life, are set in such a way that they promote what is more visible in the world shaped by men.

The European Union has such promotion programs. Do they make sense?

They do. Being a lawyer I am aware of the weak points of all sorts of programs for the special promotion of women, in the sense of giving them added points. This is a very tricky matter, because then reverse discrimination can be generated. But I have to admit that I have a kind of affinity for these programs. I know the weak points of the solutions, I know that they are criticized, I am familiar with the rulings of the European Court in Luxembourg, which with great artistry tries to retain such a balance that there should be no simple gender-based advantage. But what is most needed in Poland is a certain kind of cultural leap, involving taking an amicable stance towards aspirations. The point is not to promote someone against one's own interests, but rather to view this equal competition with favor.

Do you have any specific recommendations as far as science is concerned?

There is constant talk about the ties between science and practice. But these ties cannot be institutionalized, because no one has the time or ability to do so. I, for example, can see that in social life there is nothing that I would call a "disinterested binding agent." There is a shortage of informal groups for backing various useful initiatives. We do have NGOs, but they have to have some sort of ad hoc ability to consult or to contact someone who has more extensive or more theoretical awareness of the subject. Assistance simply needs to be given,

whether by pointing out some material or report to read, or putting people in contact with each other - acting as a kind of "binding agent" amongst various people. The point is not for there to be an institute or institution to handle this, but rather for people to help others out without doing any harm to their own profession. I try to do so in certain fields, and I admit that I have great satisfaction when I do manage such "binding" successfully. I think that we have to sew such a patchwork together. Ultimately, we are all dealing with the same thing - working with the same pieces. Only sometimes they fit together in a different order, and as a result we see the same pieces a bit differently and in differing light.

Interviewed by
Anna Zawadzka
Warszawa, 3 January 2005

EWA ŁĘTOWSKA

An international expert in the protection of consumer rights as well as civil and human rights, born in 1940. A professor at the Institute of Law Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and since December 2004 a member of the Polish Academy of Sciences. She acts as an expert on the Council of the European Human Rights Foundation in Brussels.

Professor Łętowska was the first Polish ombudsman in 1988-1992, and was a judge of the Supreme Administrative Court in 1999-2002. Since 2002 she has been a judge of the Polish Constitutional Court, a post she will hold until 2011. In 1993, Professor Łętowska was a nominee for the title of the Woman of the Year in Poland. Privately she is a music lover and an author - together with her late husband Professor Janusz Łętowski - of books and TV programs on classical and operatic music.