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The masculinization of identity among successful career women? A case study of Polish female managers

ABSTRACT. One of the most fundamental principles which underpins the functioning of Western societies is the gender binary system, based on the eternal division into men and women as well as their social and biological predestination. Critiques of the binary system claim that there is an apparent lack of symmetry between the polar opposites constituting the binary system. The male-female dichotomy appears to be asymmetrical since the binary opposition is viewed as unequal: females are dominated and controlled by males and forced to perform less significant, minor (less valued) social roles. Binarism refers to identity and social roles, as well as to physical attributes of females and males. The consequence of binarism on the realm of physicality is the view that a woman is obliged to constantly improve her attractiveness so that she could be “won over in an impressive way” by “the best possible partner.” The main aim of this article is examination of social anxiety over the effects of women’s emancipation, which is believed to give rise to the masculinization of females, particularly those who have achieved social and professional success, and aspire to (or have already acquired) a high social status, income, or professional position. The theoretical considerations are confronted with results of the qualitative research related to female managers’ identity.

KEYWORDS: masculinization, identity, career, emancipation, female managers

One of the most fundamental principles which underpins the functioning of Western societies is the gender binary system, based on the eternal division into men and women as well as their social and biological predestination. Critiques of the binary system claim that there is an apparent lack of symmetry between the polar opposites constituting the binary system (Melosik, 1996, p. 28). The male-female dichotomy appears to be asymmetrical since the binary opposition is viewed as unequal: females are dominated and controlled by males and forced to perform less significant, minor (less valued) social roles. Binarism refers to identity and social roles, as well as to physical attributes of females and males. The consequence of binarism on the realm of physicality is the view that a woman is obliged to constantly improve her attractiveness so that she could be “won over in an impressive way” by “the best possible partner.” The es-

sence of the binary approach, which surprisingly seems to interweave Orthodox Christian beliefs with the views put forward by socio-biologists such as D. Morris (2000, 1997, 2006), lies in unavoidable biological essentialism, which refers to both males' and females' identity characteristics as well as to the attributes of their appearance. The main criticism about the concept of binarism is that it provides an explanation for a patriarchal structure of society, and perpetuates social inequality as well as the phenomenon of social exclusion of women (Gromkowska, 2002; Melosik, 2010; Bem, 2000; Bordieu, 2004; Sloop, 2004).

As a result of the process of women's emancipation the principle of binarism was gradually undermined. It turned out that the concept of essentialism, which refers to the characteristics exhibited by females and males, and to different social roles they perform, is no longer considered to be "unavoidable," but proves to have been formulated and applied by men, in a male-dominated power structure. It seems that the essentialist view was imposed on the society in order to provide justification for the existence of the type of relationships between men and women which would sanction male dominance over females. It has been established beyond doubt that women's emancipation affected these relationships, giving rise to changes in identity as well as in appearance. Decade-to-decade observations revealed that female and male characteristics have been "blending," which is observable in all aspects and dimensions of men's and women's functioning. However, aspirations towards becoming a "real" woman or a "real" man in the traditional sense still exist both in "collective" social awareness and in the minds of millions of individual females and males. Thus, paradoxically, it appears that currently the phenomenon of decreasing the gender differences coincides with dreams of an embodiment of "absolute" femininity or masculinity, which constitute an intrinsic element of patriarchal ideology.

The aforementioned comments should serve as an introduction to further examination of social anxiety over the effects of women's emancipation, which is believed to give rise to the masculinization of females, particularly those who have achieved social and professional success, and aspire to (or have already acquired) a high social status, income, or professional position.

Upon this a question arises: whether it is true that the principles which govern the functioning of large hierarchized organizations and social institutions refer also to the features that underlie a traditional male identity? It seems that the question should be answered in the af-

firmative. Large organizations and institutions, particularly corporations and large business companies are, metaphorically speaking, rational, self-confident, determined, success- (profit-) and power- oriented, and focused on efficiency and good results. They are also “dispassionate” and able to undertake accurate and precise operations. The aforementioned characteristics are believed have been displayed by men in traditionally patriarchal societies. However, organizations and institutions cannot exhibit the features which in traditional societies were regarded as attributes of traditional femininity, that is to say, they cannot be emotional, empathic, thoughtful, delicate or sensual since this would significantly decrease their competitiveness or even threaten their existence. Metaphorically speaking, a large firm “is a male.” Accordingly, making successful professional career in such an institution is possible only for individuals who embody its “principles,” that is to put it simply, its masculinity (decidedly in its traditional form). History of large institutions shows that it was predominantly men who, owing to their male identity characteristics corresponding to the masculine features (and meeting expectations) of the firm, had an opportunity to “work their way up the career ladder” and achieve professional and institutional success. There is no escaping the fact that through traditional socialization, men developed certain traits which are identified as indispensable in institutional and professional life; whereas women assumed specific roles related to their positions in the private sphere (e.g. a mother, a wife or a housewife), as well as traditional “subservient” and “female” roles related to their professional career, which they started to perform having entered the job market (e.g. a nurse, a shop-assistant or a teacher).

It is beyond doubt that the western women who are focused on institutional and professional success are forced to compete against men. However, it should be remembered that through the process of socialization men acquired the traits which are identified as useful for large firms. Whereas, (traditional) socialization of women seems to defy the logic of the companies. Hence, in order to achieve success, women are forced to accept “masculinity” of the firms they work for, and adjust their social and identity functioning to the principles of a traditional male identity. It is also obvious that a woman who enters the competition against men, and wants to “climb the ladder of professional career,” cannot, metaphorically speaking, “afford to cry.” In other words, she is not allowed to express the aforementioned emotions in an excessive way, or be carried away by mood swings, empathy, compassion or con-

cern. In order to achieve institutional success, a woman needs to be able to function in compliance with the logic of the institution which she is working for, that is to say, she must be "very masculine."

In the light of the aforementioned observations, it would be interesting to mention the "fear of masculinization," which many females tend to experience more or less consciously when entering the professions that have been labeled as typically masculine. C. F. Epstein points to a clash between discourses of traditional femininity, remaining in Western society, and the qualities required for a professional woman. In order to become a professional achiever (particularly in such fields as medicine, law or management) a female has to possess such "personality attributes" which are generally recognized as masculine. Moreover, the sociologist maintains that women in traditionally male occupations are, as it were, deprived of their gender characteristics. Consequently, they are faced with a choice whether to maintain identity characteristics corresponding to traditional femininity, or to adopt a masculine persona (Epstein, 1973, p. 22-3). (The television series *Ally McBeal*, focusing on American women lawyers, proves to be a perfect example of controversy surrounding the identity of a female high-achiever) (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2002).

It is also a fact that a woman who aspires to achieve professional success, particularly to gain a position of power and decision-making, gets, as it were, "caught in a trap." If she displays traditional characteristics of her cultural gender (femininity), a woman will undoubtedly be doomed to professional failure since her power and authority can easily be challenged by her male subordinates, or the men who compete with her. On the other hand, if a woman decides to assume stereotypical masculine traits of a team leader, she certainly lays herself open to the charge that she is "losing her femininity." What strategies do females employ to cope with the problem of masculinization of their identity and appearance? Some of them tend to mitigate the problem at the very outset, by making specific educational choices. A large body of research shows that both females and males regard professional success, social prestige and income as important criteria of life success. Then, one might expect that women would enroll in and graduate from programmes of study that would lead to better-paying and higher-status positions in the future (Bradley, 2000, p. 3).

In practice, however, a crucial factor which determines women's educational choices that lead to low-paying and low-status occupations importance is cultural transmission (Bradley, 2000, p. 4).

In this way women escape the masculinization of their identity and life. Those of the females who are ready to compete with men, following the principles of male logic and rationality, do not feel “ambivalent” about, or have trouble accepting and adopting a masculine identity. They graduate from the fields that are regarded as masculine, enter traditionally male-dominated occupations and decide to make a successful career in large corporations. Accordingly, women “eradicate” their useless traditionally feminine characteristics, and willingly adopt a masculine “corporate persona,” accepting all the consequences and avoiding establishing emotionally committed relationships with men, since the females don’t want their personal lives to be “thrown into turmoil,” which is likely to jeopardize the chance of their professional success (Melosik, 2006, p. 59-60).

The hypothesis concerning the masculinization of female high-achievers was also confirmed by research findings which indicate that women in managerial positions are more likely to show resemblance to their professional colleagues than to other women who are not managers. Moreover, as it has been observed by B. Budrowska, the differences between female managers and other women prove to be much bigger than those between male managers and other men. Furthermore, women who hold managerial positions do not build stable relationships with their partners; and are believed to be “self-confident, success-oriented, eager to come to power and focused on making a career” (Budrowska, 2003, p. 79).

There is also an easily observable tendency among such females towards changing their appearance in order to look more (stereotypically) “reliable,” “serious” and “responsible” (in other words – more masculine). They tend to have their hair cut shorter and avoid blonde hair colour (which is likely to trigger stereotypical associations); they keep their lace skirts hidden in closets and put on “female” men’s suits (men’s suits for women). The females usually wear cold-scented perfumes – they opt for fragrances that evoke the atmosphere of “frosty winter” rather a lily or a rose. Occasionally, they undergo various cosmetic procedures such as botox injections or cosmetic surgeries including nose job or chin reshaping, which is aimed at making their facial features more “business-like.” However, while creating their masculine image, they do not forget about female “accessories” which help them maintain their femininity (which is designed to weaken the impression of masculine appearance), which undoubtedly include high-heeled shoes (however, due to the fact

that they are designed to increase height, high heels, to a certain extent, seem to correspond with the logic of masculinization); and jewellery, such as earrings or finger rings (the mechanism seems to resemble that which occurs among female bodybuilders, who tend to enhance their masculine appearance with heavy make-up and saucy female accessories in order to convey the following message to the excited male audience: "I am a woman, after all" (Gromkowska, 1999).

Some of the women who consciously decide to reject traditional female traits in favour of male identity characteristics tend to devalue femininity and adopt the strategies and methods which men employ in their professional life (Kennelly, 2002, p. 610) (it is also E. Mandal who maintains that some female high-achievers accept a male system of values and tend to devalue everything that is associated with femininity; 2000, p. 62-3). It is indeed true that some of the females who hold high professional positions frequently express great contempt for women who are focused on family life, regarding them as "house-bound mothers," and, paradoxically, clinging to the opinion that the latter fail to realize both their life and ... female potential. Such a stance seems to result from the fact that some modern women consider professional success to be an intrinsic part of the process of realization of femininity. This in turn leads to rejection of the fundamental, most widespread Western cultural pre-assumptions regarding women's and men's "nature."

The aforementioned phenomenon has been labeled as the Queen Bee Syndrome, and was first defined by G. L. Staines, T. E. Jayaratne, and C. Tavis in 1973.¹ The term was coined to describe the general phenomenon that successful career females, who accept male-defined standards and value systems, are likely to show disregard for traditional female values as well as other women². Such females, as E. Mandal claims, try to demonstrate their distinctness and tend to distance themselves from other women, since they feel no bonds of gender. According

¹ The term was first used by G. Staines, C. Tavis, T. E. Jayaratne, in the article entitled "The Queen Bee Syndrome" in *The Female Experience*, which was published in a book edited by C. Tavis (Del Mar, California: CRM Books, 1973), as cited in: Blau, DeVaro, 2006, p. 16.

² Interesting results of the research aimed at investigating the Queen Bee Syndrome among female professors were reported by Ellemers *et al.* (2004, p. 325-6) (females who have been successful in an academic career in the fields perceived as male-dominated, are more likely to oppose promoting women in these fields. Moreover, their self-evaluation points to lack of gender identity in this group of females, and demonstrates that they are inclined to view other members of their gender group in gender-stereotypical terms).

to K. Horney, such females try to “escape” from femininity which they regard as worse and less valued than masculinity (Mandal, 2000, p. 21). It would be interesting to mention the results of research concerning the way female leaders of public life in Kenya are perceived. The studies revealed that women who used to achieve success in “big” politics, and were admired for maintaining “quality standards,” are currently considered to be “masculinized conservatives.” Here is a quotation from the research report: „These women were perceived to have become more arrogant, violent and oppressive than men and this change was viewed as detrimental to women leadership as a whole. Such women set an example of ineffective and perverse leadership and prove that –women can’t lead; they just want to replace men” (Daunt Escandon, Mbura Kamungi, 2008).

Thus, having examined the aforementioned aspect of masculinization, especially with respect to successful women’s tendency towards identifying themselves with men, a conclusion can be drawn that there is yet another paradoxical context of women’s emancipation. The females who have achieved career success on the terms dictated by males, while working in firms which function based on traditional male logic, represent, in the neoliberal world, a symbol of emancipated femininity. For who could be a better symbol of emancipative dreams of equality? However, on the other hand, successful women seem to confirm the androcentric (and patriarchal) character of modern culture, particularly “organizational” one, not to mention “corporate culture.”

There is, however, a certain flaw in such reasoning. It needs to be rejected if we assume that essential traditional femininity does not exist “as such,” and that it is solely a form of power that males exert over females. Thus, a woman who adopts a corporate persona, does not lose her original identity, but gets rid of the identity which men have been imposing on her for ages in an attempt to create, or construct themselves in accordance with their views on femininity and life aspirations. It is difficult to settle the issue conclusively.

It is also necessary to emphasize another context of the masculinization of women who are in positions of power. In modern societies women are still viewed as “sex objects” to “conquer.” Consequently, from society’s perspective, one of the most fundamental forms of social stratification of women is not determined by sociological factors (such as social class, education or socio-economic status), but it stems from specific socio-biological criteria related to sexual attractiveness. Research

findings demonstrate that a sense of attractiveness proves to be the most essential component of women's self-esteem. This certainly also applies to successful career women in positions of power. However, in the light of this observation it emerges that women in high power positions are, as it were, "trapped." This results from the fact that on the one hand, the females are perceived by their male subordinates as "sex objects," which they frequently accept in order to realize their femininity (they find various ways of emphasizing "traditional" components of their femininity; some of them even frequently compare their own attractiveness to the attractiveness of their female subordinates). On the other hand, the females seem to be aware of the fact that since they are viewed as "sex objects," there is a risk that their role is limited to such objects (Gromkowska, 2002). This in turn undermines their authority, effectiveness as well as the very "essence" of their power. So how can women in powerful positions remain sexually attractive, and at the same time maintain full control and power? The simplest possible solution is to adopt the traditional male model of functioning and exercising power, and combine it with keeping distance from male colleagues (subordinates) at work. Employing such a strategy would help a woman create the image which is likely to convey the following message: "I might be a beautiful woman on the outside, but I'm a tough man on the inside," which inevitably gives rise to the masculinization of her identity.

Upon this the following questions arise: in what way can a woman cope with the problem of identity masculinization, particularly in the context of the "corporate roles" she is obliged to play? Is it likely that the phenomenon of feminization of power, based predominantly on democratic and horizontal relationships, which is rooted in "traditional femininity," will be accepted in the manipulative world of business and management? (cf. Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001, quoted after: Mandal 2008; Mandal, 2008, p. 34, 59; Budrowska, 2003, p. 81; Goodchilds, 1979, quoted after: Mandal 2008).

It seems that in practice, the aforementioned process is likely to occur solely in the area of lower level decision-making. Hence, it is fairly feasible that masculinization will pose a growing dilemma due to an increasing number of "successful career females."

The phenomenon of masculinization of successful career women is the main issue addressed by the present author in the qualitative research, which was conducted in a population of female managers and university academics, using the in-depth semi-structured narrative in-

interview method. The main purpose of the current study was to examine the problem of women's unequal chances of educational, social, and life success; as well as their limited possibilities of adopting the particular types of identity, in the context of females' perception of their access to social and professional career opportunities.

The primary research question has been phrased as follows:

"How do women assess their chances and limitations of using education in life, and how do they view their access to social and professional career opportunities?"

One of the sub-questions addressed in the present study concerned the attitude of the examined females towards the phenomenon of masculinization, and was formulated as follows:

"What is the attitude of career-oriented women towards the potential masculinization of their own appearance, identity as well as the nature of interpersonal relations, and their life style?"

The females comprising the qualitative research sample were selected intentionally. The fundamental selection criteria included sex (only females were included as study subjects) and professional career success (it has to be emphasized that all research participants were higher education graduates). All the female managers who participated in the research are likely to be regarded as successful due to their professional achievements and the positions they currently hold. Each of the female humanist academics has at least a doctoral degree and has been pursuing her academic career. Taking into consideration the standards prevailing in our society, all study participants had broken out of traditional biographical patterns and rejected the gender roles which had been assigned to them by the society, and currently are successful career females (all of the study subjects exhibit the characteristics of A-type personality, and according to A. Mitchel's classification are likely to be categorized as "achievement-oriented" (Mitchel, 1983, p. 17). The research participants included 9 females working in Polish higher education institutions, all of whom had at least a doctoral degree in humanities and social sciences; and 9 Polish females holding managerial positions in corporations. The current author conducted narrative interviews with the females, which was aimed at assessing their attitude towards the phenomenon of the masculinization of identity (and occasionally also appearance). Analysis of the narratives, presented below, focuses on the views expressed by the female managers. An attempt was made to answer the following questions: Do the interviewees fear that

their success is likely to be interpreted as denial of femininity? Are the examined individuals aware of stereotypically “male” patterns of a career, existing in Polish society, and the consequent necessity to exhibit the traits traditionally identified as masculine? The narratives below reveal female managers’ stance on masculinization of businesswomen, which is commonly understood to denote the phenomenon of assuming the traits which are traditionally regarded as masculine.

It is beyond doubt that the examined individuals display an ambivalent attitude towards the aforementioned phenomenon, which is evident from the statement quoted below. Its author expresses her indignation at the fact that some women deliberately undergo the process of masculinization, which they view as a chance of achieving corporate career success (although in another part of the interview the same person admits that she has assumed some male characteristics). The interviewee claims that women are “equipped” with the traits that men do not exhibit, which gives them an advantage over their male colleagues with regard to professional success. As such, they should not renounce these qualities.

I think it's nonsense to say that a woman who is making a career, is adopting male characteristics, and if this really happens, it shouldn't be like that. If a woman wears a suit, it doesn't mean that she is more competent. If she is more masculine in bearing, and it is purposeful because the woman believes that she will be more successful, she makes a mistake. Women have an advantage over men when it comes to professional career, and can effectively achieve professional goals using their femininity. I don't mean these primitive elements of feminine appearance like short skirts or low-cut necklines, but rather intuition, the faculty which men lack (...). [MARIANNA]

Majority of the female managers examined in this study maintain that successful career women are doomed to undergo the process of masculinization. They also emphasize that it is a common occurrence that some women have been exhibiting traditionally masculine characteristics since their childhood. This can be well illustrated by the statements of other interviewees, which are related to biological determinism or to the social process of adoption of the traits that are traditionally labeled as masculine.

I sometimes think that women want to assume such masculine personality traits because then they feel stronger, more serious, maybe more respectable; perhaps then more people feel respect for them. The example I'm going

to give might be stupid because it is not connected with career-making. I don't like watching my sister driving a car, because the way she does it is very "feminine." I don't mean she is a bad driver, or that she causes accidents. What I mean is the way she is holding a steering wheel, changing gears and sitting behind the wheel. Personally, I absolutely adore big, "masculine" cars and a "masculine" style of driving. And I don't mean fast or dangerous driving, but the manner the person behaves in a car. It seems that men's manner [of functioning] is more interesting than women's one. That's why I think that a woman sometimes wants to adopt such masculine behavioral characteristics, because she feels stronger. [MILENA]

Certainly, there are such characteristics which have to be adopted, or learned by women, the traits which help a woman develop a get-tough approach to people (...) – I know it from my own experience. Being a woman, I had to learn how to be self-confident, but I'm sure there are such women whose confidence was nurtured by their family, so now they find life much easier. [MONIKA]

One of the female managers reports difficulties she has in her close relationships with men, which are commonly experienced by successful career women who undergo the process of masculinization. When 'confronted with' a self-confident, mentally strong and financially self-reliant woman, a man is not able to perform the traditional roles of a caretaker and a breadwinner. This seems to point to a concealed assumption that a woman finds a particular man attractive only if he has a mental as well as material advantage over her (e.g. he is mentally stronger and has higher earnings). If a man fails to fulfill this condition, he does not conform to the archetype of masculinity. Deprived of control over a woman, a male tends to develop complexes and employ psychosocial defence mechanisms. It seems that successful career women not only undermine the masculine archetypes of a leader and a breadwinner, but also evoke a sense of danger and resentment in men.

Then, it is definitely a problem, since we are being perceived slightly differently. The situation requires us to act and behave extremely tactfully and cautiously because men who deal with the so called successful career women frequently fear that such females are butches. And this doesn't surprise me at all, because if I were a man and had to deal with a self-sufficient woman, who out-earns me, and whose social status is the same as or above mine (...), [I would think] I don't need such a man. You would

have to be a really masculine man if you wanted to believe that this woman still needs you. Because if she doesn't need you to support her and the children, to provide her with accommodation, to drive her somewhere, to ask her out for dinner, or to take her to the cinema, what exactly does she need you for? From my experience, I know that men tend to select such women who they can easily give something to, because they find it easy to figure out what the women lack. It is easier to make money and bring it home than to be an emotional and intellectual partner. The requirements that we [successful females] set out are simply different, higher. [MAŁGORZATA]

Majority of the female managers participating in the present study claim that the transformation process that they have experienced, wherein their typical feminine qualities have been gradually replaced by the characteristics that are traditionally perceived as masculine, is rooted in the specific character of their jobs, which does not conform to the stereotype of a fragile, delicate and emotional woman. The females maintain that the obstacles which they have encountered on their career paths and which they had to overcome made them stronger and less sentimental. There are grounds for supposing that the individuals who did not undergo the aforementioned process, either abandoned their professions, or maintained lower positions in the occupational hierarchy.

I became more pragmatic, decisive and assertive; and less sentimental, less inclined towards being affected by various situations. [MAGDALENA]

[I am] definitely less feminine now than if I had a different job. It is not because of my inborn personality characteristics. I became tougher, more decisive. Once, when talking to my husband I said: "You know what, I have turned into a real butch. [MARIA]

[A female manager] has to adopt masculine qualities. Yes, you have to get a drubbing, so that one day you could get back up and adopt a more level-headed approach to the surrounding world. [MARLENA]

Definitely, I am becoming more decisive, and of course more assertive, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to get ahead at work. On the other hand, I can't say that I am becoming more masculine. [MARTA]

One of the interviewees expressed the view that changes in her identity had occurred not so much as a result of the masculinization of her personality but of the process of growing in maturity, understood as gaining more experience.

The older I get and the more life experience I have, the more difficult it is for me to get emotionally involved (...) However, if you are 30 and have a bit of life experience, not every film moves you to tears. [MAŁGORZATA]

Other female managers examined in the present study claim that the “masculine qualities” which they have adopted are displayed solely in their working environment. Then, their genuine emotions and real feminine traits are disguised, only to be shown in private life (it seems that thus the females, when at work, “release” their femininity, which they tend to “hide” behind the mask of masculinity). While examining the narratives presented below, it would be interesting to ponder whether it is likely that when performing their professional roles women tend to exhibit traditionally masculine traits, whereas in their private lives, they seem to embody the essence of traditional femininity. The question is whether it is possible that a woman can be assertive or even aggressive in one social context, and delicate and empathic in another? It is valid to speculate that over time, in dozens of social micro-situations, these traditional feminine characteristics gradually become blurred.

I am becoming more assertive, that's for sure. I get emotional in many situations; this is what I am like. So if don't burst out at the given moment, when I'm at work, I let off steam afterwards, after work. So I release these emotions. The point is I've learned how to control these emotions and step back to assess the given situation (...) In the course of training, or talking to couches, you can develop the skill of managing emotions, and learn how to be assertive. However, this does not lead to disappearance of the so called feminine characteristics. No, not at all. They are revealed in other situations, anyway. [MONIKA]

I'm a normal person while on holiday. Then, I can unwind a bit, 'because here [at work] one needs to put on a mask to be tough and demanding, in order to feel fulfilled while working with these guys. That's the truth. [MARIA]

This was the case in my professional life [I became more masculine]. But out of my firm, I've got this feeling that I make up for my lost femininity, I feel so light and airy. And other people out of my workplace have a similar opinion; they say that I'm not the same person at work and in my private life. [MARIANNA]

The final narrative which illustrates the female manager's views on the issue of the masculinization of identity seems to stand in glaring contradiction to previously quoted statements, which probably stems

from the life experience of its author (the woman is undoubtedly referring to the phenomenon which in the subject literature is commonly understood to mean “masculinity crisis”) (Melosik, 2008).

In my experience, women, compared with men, are stronger. They cope better with failures and problems. Contrary to common beliefs, they are less self-pitying. Modern men are weak, which, unfortunately, is frequently our, women’s, fault. [MAŁGORZATA]

Another issue addressed in the current study was the potential masculinization of women’s appearance. It is in the females’ statements on this topic that their paradoxical attitude towards femininity, masculinity and specific professional roles was most clearly revealed. The ideal of feminine appearance, which has traditionally included long, curly, blond hair, long lashes and a lace skirt is inevitably associated by female managers with a romantic version of femininity, which by nature stands in contradiction to the prospect of pursuing professional career. It seems that the characterological traits which female managers tend to attribute to this type of image (e.g. empathy, intimacy orientation and the habit of entering interpersonal relations imbued with emotions) decidedly do not correspond with the concept of aloof and dispassionate professionalism which characterizes the world of business. It seems that female managers (sometimes vigorously) reject the thesis that masculine image is helpful in the area of business. But then they discredit traditional feminine appearance.

The starting point for the interpretation of further narratives is the issue of a “dress code” which is understood to mean a set of rules that govern the dressing styles of people in various professions. The author of the current study focuses on a dress code policy among managers. The fact remains that compliance with dress code rules is likely to help an individual adopt the role of a real professional who is able to act absolutely rationally, and who is endowed with an “ideal” professional identity which is represented by the person’s attire (the dress code phenomenon proves to be inconsistent with the idea of “classlessness” of clothing, a symbol of which might be blue jeans; it also contradicts the concept of utilizing clothes in the process of post-modern “decentration, fragmentation and performance” of identity, which occurs as a result of the extremely eclectic blending of various dressing styles) (Melosik, 1996, p. 103-5). Hence the view that a person’s outfit is not a mask that hides something, but it should be perceived as an integral part of identity (but

only a professional one, which is illustrated by the narratives quoted below).

I try to observe the dress code in our business organization. I wouldn't dare to violate it. But to me, it's obvious. Definitely, I wouldn't wear a low-cut neckline, a short skirt or, let's say, sandals, cut out clothes, jeans, or bright, garish-coloured clothes. I think I shouldn't dress like that. There is a certain range of colours which you can wear. I wouldn't go for garish pink because this colour is too extravagant to wear in my workplace, and I have to follow the rules of the office dress code. If you work in an organizational structure, you have to obey its rules. And I have accepted this. [MONIKA]

And it is good that you have to adhere to a dress code, because this introduces a certain order. [MARTYNA]

I (...) took on a business-like style: a suit, a jacket, because it is obligatory (...). Such a dress code has been approved by the society. [MAGDALENA]

I think that we abide by the rules which have been imposed on us in order to improve our functioning (...). I don't think that the obligation to wear a suit while being a member of a certain professional caste is a bad rule. There are certain situations or places [for example the court] in which we have to be aware of the seriousness of such places. It is just as if someone came to a wedding party wearing flip-flops and Bermuda shorts. Then the person might offend the wedding couple, showing a lack of respect for their big day (...). [MARTYNA]

The female managers interviewed in the study claim that appearance serves as a vehicle for self-expression; it speaks for the person. They emphasize that women should no longer express their femininity through girly looks or other forms of presentation which are considered to be unprofessional or lacking dignity. They should shun traditional feminine colours, such as red, and avoid wearing flashy jewellery.

When I go to a business meeting, I usually wear more official clothes. I have to look good and professional, and not like a girl. I prefer soft colours, subdued grey, black, white or purple. I don't wear garish red. My make-up is also subdued. I tend to steer clear from large earrings, necklaces and garish rings. I prefer discreet, unobtrusive jewellery. [MARLENA]

I keep it in mind that (...) I perform a certain function, and I try to stick to the rules which I have imposed on myself. I'm not going to wear a strappy

top for work even in 30 degree heat, but I try to cover my shoulders (...). When I've got a meeting with my client, I try to follow these rules, because I think that in this way I show my respect for the meeting (...). I want to be treated seriously. [MARTYNA]

There has always been the following dress code for work – a suit, a black or gray jacket, a skirt, trousers, and a white blouse - not a red or pink one. Only soft, subdued colours, but everything must suit the body shape. One needs to look more serious (...). Here, you must look more professional. Recently, bead necklaces have come into fashion. This used to be unthinkable some time ago. [MARIA]

Interestingly, one of the interviewees expressed the view that a suit complemented with a tie is not so much masculine as stylish and chic.

To be honest, I like when women wear suits. I myself wear suits. When I go to some official meeting, I very often put on a tie, and I like it very much. But I don't think I look masculine. This look is simply elegant and tidy (...). I think that a women's suit also makes a female look credible. [MILENA]

One of the female managers puts emphasis on the phenomenon of violation of a dress code, interpreted as a vehicle for challenging common stereotypes about females. It seems that the woman's viewpoint places her outside the mainstream of the opinions quoted above, and it also stands in contradiction to the views she had expressed in the narratives presented earlier in this study. She uses an image of a "sugary-sweet blond," yet highly professional female, who utilizes feminine attire to break the female stereotypes, as well as to manifest her strong personality.

Perhaps wearing a lace dress, a woman doesn't maintain the common standards of appearance; she is out of dress code. But it is also possible to speculate that in this way the female shows that she is strong enough to break the "uniform" stereotype (...). And again we get back to us, women. To what extent are we able to challenge the stereotype and show that it is possible to wear pink and be a competent professional at the same time? On the other hand, do we really have to manifest this in such a way? I think a certain balance should be maintained. [MARTYNA]

The issue of dress code violation was also raised by another study participant; however, it is interesting to emphasize the fact that the person views the phenomenon from a completely different perspective. The

woman claims that feminine attire stereotypically represents lower intellectual capacity, therefore she strongly rejects it, opting for masculine clothes (such as military trousers and combat boots), which the study subject perceives as unisex. Such clothes do not correspond with the demands of a dress code, but, as the woman suggests, seem to function as a form of rebellion against the dress code enforced in the firm. Moreover, the interviewee maintains that such attire allows her to “dissociate herself from” other women working for the same firm, who she discredits, referring to the common “dumb blonde” stereotype. According to the interviewee, such attributes of femininity as women’s suits or high heeled shoes, which are commonly accepted elements of professional appearance, represent absolute conformity to the rules defined and imposed by the women who lack a strong personality and managerial talent. The aforementioned stance can be examined in the context of the Queen Bee Syndrome and a tendency towards showing disregard for one’s own gender, which was addressed in the first part of this paper.

I still wear combat boots at work. There was a period of time when my superiors used not so much to battle with me over my appearance as to discuss the matter with me. There was a time when a dress code was enforced in the firm, but it changed soon, after the conversation I had with my boss, who suggested that I should wear, just like all my female colleagues, women’s suits and high-heeled shoes, and I was wearing combat trousers then. I said that it was ok with me, but I added that if he wanted me to dress like all those blondes, I would also adopt their working style. After a moment’s thought, he came up and said that in fact he liked combat trousers himself. Now, despite the fact that I’m a manager, I wear my Converse sneakers, a black sweatshirt and jeans. I put on elegant clothes only if it is absolutely necessary, for example when I have meetings with my clients, but it is usually no great shakes though. The only female accessories I really like are earrings, and I wear them practically every day. So, as you see, I go for some attributes of femininity, but these are usually components of my personal style rather than elements of appearance that are imposed on me by the dress code policy in my workplace. [MAŁGORZATA]

It is also the narrative quoted below that illustrates the view that persons in high positions feel no constraint in violating the rules of a dress code.

We’ve got a standardized dress code policy. However, no one knows what clothes a woman should wear. The code says: a women’s suit, a skirt (...)

I do not fully comply with these rules, because I will never put on a dark blue women's suit and a knee-length skirt. It is not me; I have to wear clothes that make me feel good. My position in the firm allows me to do so. [MARLENA]

Taking into consideration the issue of the relationship between appearance, identity and social perception of the representatives of certain professions, the female managers interviewed in the present study partly agree that masculine appearance helps them achieve success. The study participants make attempts at explaining the phenomenon, referring to the stereotypes that are common in society. The study subjects seem to be aware of the fact that they have internalized them.

I think I myself would like to entrust my most serious matters to [a man]. If I had to select a lawyer or a broker during a casting, seeing through a Venetian mirror, I would make the same choice. And if I knew the blonde female was highly competent, this wouldn't bother me. If the woman is good at what she is doing, and wears sweet pink dresses and has such a sense of taste, this doesn't bother me at all. [MARTYNA]

My divorce was handled by a petite woman. Perhaps this [a tendency towards preferring masculine appearance over feminine one in certain professions] results from the fact that women are viewed as more delicate and emotional than men. It is believed that, compared with males, females are unable to be in full control of themselves. And working in the stock market or a bank requires such qualities as great self-control and the ability to take a dispassionate attitude towards various issues. I think that these are the characteristics that people tend to associate more with men than with women. [MONIKA]

There is a certain model of business, which is featured in billboards and commercials. The most common image is a man wearing a white shirt, with a mobile phone in his hand and a computer. A professional. And this is a copy of a real life. When a man sets up his own business, the first thing he buys is a suit, a mobile phone, a laptop, a good quality briefcase and a watch. But I do not fall for a gray suit. I tend to examine the firm effectiveness. However, I think that those beautiful grey suits affect our first decisions. But a person who often uses such services is able to judge also other things. [MARIANNA]

The females' statements concerning the issue of masculinized appearance reveal a certain paradox. The interviewees claim that in the world of business attractiveness and femininity are considered to be the

most important assets if accompanied by intelligence and professional competence. Moreover, they maintain that female attractiveness is of great significance and value in professional situations. They seem to promote an ideal of a “beautiful female professional,” since an “ugly female professional” is doomed to develop complexes (however, the extent of approval of the aforementioned ideal, which is shown in the statements quoted below, is somewhat astonishing).

Masculine appearance? God forbid. A super model, a great body shape, great legs plus the brains. Men? They judge by appearances, they just can't help it. So if an attractive woman says something and shows that she's got the brains, she will immediately become more popular with men than a less attractive female. [MARIA]

It is better to work with good-looking people than with less attractive ones. It is easier to come into contact with attractive people (...). Those of my female colleagues who are more feminine, tend to be more self-confident, they are better workers, managers. Those who care less about their appearance, who don't focus so much on emphasizing their femininity, suffer from complexes, which are revealed at a certain moment of cooperation. In my experience, men, and perhaps women, too, prefer to work with feminine looking women. [MARLENA]

The author of the narrative quoted below emphasizes the fact that the factor which predicts a woman's success is not her appearance but a strong personality.

Majority of the woman [who hold managerial positions in our firm] are rather small, dainty and petite. There are maybe two well-built hags. (...)The women in managerial positions are small and dainty (...) The president (...) was a petite, frail, slightly-built woman, a real weakling, size 32, and she earned tremendous respect of her subordinates. [MARTA]

The issue of attire is a recurrent theme in the statements of the female managers interviewed in the present study. They seem to demonstrate, at least verbally, their preference for a feminine style, although the study subjects still emphasize certain dress code restrictions. They opt for subdued colours as well as a specific length and cut of a skirt. The women tend to avoid frills, low-cut necklines and colourful jewellery. The aforementioned tendency facilitates the process of blurring the differences between males and females, which occurs in the corporate are-

na. However, the narratives quoted below illustrate also certain exceptions to the rule.

A woman should have a few feminine attributes, and this does not prevent her from being a woman, but there are obviously certain limitations like no red nails or lace clothes. It's because we come here to do business, and not to have a date with someone whose low-cut neckline we're going to admire. [MAGDALENA]

I usually wear skirts at work. The only exception is a men's suit. But I hate white men's shirts. If we have meetings with our clients, we try to wear more elegant clothes, so we put on skirts and jackets – I hate jackets. But we always wear really nice earrings and high-heeled shoes – I can't imagine not wearing high-heels. [MARTA]

According to the female managers who participated in the current study masculine appearance fails to help women practice certain professions. In fact quite the reverse is true: it makes them less credible. The interviewees hold the view that women who make themselves look masculine are fake, artificial and graceless (obviously, it is likely that the appearance which the female managers perceive as “still feminine,” will be viewed as “already masculine” by female representatives of other professions). It is interesting to indicate that when essentially female attributes are taken into consideration, the theme of sexualisation of professional relationships emerges, which seems to be somewhat paradoxical in the context of the previously addressed issues. It is understood to mean the process wherein a female becomes a sex object, however she does not perceive herself as a “helpless prey,” but considers herself to be a “hunting predator” ,aware of the manipulation tool she is “equipped” with, which she can use to attain her business objectives.

Masculine appearance? No, absolutely not, rather more feminine. It helps to soften up men. [MAŁGORZATA]

In my firm, women are more feminine. They work together with men. Since 90% of the employees are men, then if a woman wants to force something through, she has to be feminine, because it is not always that she can find the right arguments to support her ideas (...). I always wear very low-cut necklines, and men like it very much, and nobody causes troubles. [MARTA]

I don't like women who pretend that they are men, who make themselves to look masculine and strong. Men don't like it. They are not idiots. By

changing her appearance, putting on a men's suit or a women's dinner jacket, wearing trousers and white shirts every day, a woman will not be able to gain professional qualifications. I think that if she follows a business dress code policy, wears some minimalist dresses and shows off a bit of her calf, then she has a higher chance of making it to the top (...). I use the fact that I'm a woman. I try to be feminine. [MARTYNA]

There were situations (...) in which men, while taking part in business meetings, were made to agree to do certain tasks, affected by female attractiveness (...). [MONIKA]

(...) For example nails, my nails are red today, but it is not every day that I can wear red nail polish, because red nails are sometimes inappropriate, they might look too sexy (...). However, if I know that red nails might be my asset, the argument which I'm going to need to gain something in the business conversation with a man who finds me attractive, and I know it, although I am aware of the fact that he is my business partner, then I do paint my nails red and use this attribute. [MARTYNA]

The final observation made by the present author refers to the fact that the female managers who participated in this study claim that their identity and appearance have not undergone the process of masculinization. It was also found out that the very notion of masculinization seems to cause anxiety among the study participants (a similar tendency was detected among the general public, which stems from the fact that, as S. A. Inness maintains, "One reason the tough woman who adopts a persona that is strongly coded as masculine is disturbing to many is that she reveals the artificiality of femininity as the „normal” state of women. The masculine tough woman reveals that femininity is a carefully crafted social construct that requires effort to maintain and perpetuate") (Inness 1999, p. 21). The fact remains, however, that female managers exhibit a tendency towards reshaping the perceptions of their own identity. They tend to incorporate the traditional masculine characteristics of identity and appearance into an accepted, or even mandatory, masculine version of femininity.

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