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Womanhood—contemporary paradoxes of equality and exclusion

ABSTRACT. The article analyses currently emerging patterns of womanhood in the socio-cultural context. The author, using the feminist discourse, attempts to answer the following questions: What positive changes (based on the idea of gender equality) had taken place in terms of how the pattern of womanhood is culturally constructed? Are there still such areas in the contemporary model of woman's life, where we observe certain forms of discrimination, based on a stereotypical attitude (in both: biological and cultural sense) towards gender issues? The author, by adopting the gender perspective, analyses fundamental areas in women's lives: professional career and private life, to verify the level of their social (re)construction. Her reflection is also enriched with ponderings about the place of womanhood in popular culture. Through references to numerous research findings taken from the professional literature (mostly Polish), she tries to demonstrate that there are two opposing forces that influence womanhood: the first one bases on the mechanism of stereotyping and gender discrimination (determined by the essentialistic perspective) and the second one promotes equality discourse (determined by the perspective of social constructivism). In conclusion, the author makes the assumption, that contemporary patterns of womanhood balance on the line between two worlds, in which deeply rooted tradition (conditioned by the biological determinism) coexists with modern egalitarianism. The specific discrepancy between outer and inner (self)perception of the social and professional roles women play causes many dilemmas and forces them to make difficult decisions in life.

KEYWORDS: feminism, exclusion, women's careers, women's emotional life, womanhood in pop-culture

"[Our society] assigns different roles to the two sexes, surrounds them from birth with an expectation of different behaviour, plays out the whole drama of courtship, marriage, and parenthood in terms of types of behaviour believed to be innate and therefore appropriate for one sex or for the other. We know dimly that these roles have changed even within our history" (Mead, 2001, p. 23). If we were to believe Margaret Mead's words, the concept of womanhood (masculinity) is a flexible category, undergoing constant (de)construction. Drifting through time and space, it becomes more and more fluid and inconsistent, which certainly hin-

ders the process of giving it a particular form or shape. Socio-cultural standards, changing in every age, determine new, often contradictory, models of “the new woman”. Through the reference to the gender schema theory by Sandra Bem, I would like to present currently emerging patterns of womanhood, which are, as I assume, the result of the early socialization of girls and boys (Lipsitz-Bem, 2000, p. 129), whose developing identity becomes a “creation of an individual as well as culture” (Lipsitz-Bem, 2000, p. 145). The subject of my analysis tackles two fundamental fields in women’s life: the private and professional sphere. My reflection is also enriched with the cultural aspect, dealing with the role of womanhood in popular culture. As I take into account the feminist discourse, beginning with the 1st wave of feminism, I try to answer the following questions: What positive changes had taken place within the cultural construction of the model of womanhood? Are there still such aspects of “modern” woman’s life, where we can observe signs of a discriminating outlook (both biological and cultural) on the gender issue?

The official battle for equal rights: first, second and third wave of feminism

First-wave feminism, began in the decline of 18th century (ended in the fifties-sixties, 20th century), supported with the idea of liberalism rooted in the Enlightenment (Zamojska, 2000, p. 1), was named the liberal feminism (Tong, 2002, p. 26). “For the first time in history, feminists of the Enlightenment formulated a theory which liberated them from constrains of «unfair tradition» via equality, enabling women as a group to «self-authorize» themselves to emancipation”. On one hand, then, liberal feminism was based on a notion, that every human being, as a rational entity, “having the same reason and free will” (Bator, 2001, p. 32)—regardless of their sex—has equal rights in terms of access to public life, and the pathway to liberation leads through education. Though from the other hand, the success of emancipation depended on the fact, that women achieved “male standards” (Tong, 2002, p. 24). Therefore, we must emphasize, that the ideological quintessence of the first-wave feminists’ pursuits focused on the women’s social status and their participation in public life, while turning a blind eye to private life issues (marriage and family relations).

Subsequently, the “postwar” second-wave feminism (beginning in the sixties, 20th century), sometimes called the “feminism of new difference” (Bator, 2001, p. 49), emerged in response to the disappointment with results of the emancipation activity in the 19th century (Ślęczka, 1999, p. 31).

The second-wave feminism was based on a conviction, that the problem of asymmetry is rooted more deeply in the social structure and that the fundamental form of reproducing gender inequality is the culture factor. The main subject of deliberation was the question of womanhood at large, the concept of emancipation and sexual difference (approached in various ways) (Zamojska, 2010, pp. 74–74). “Modern feminism *à rebours*”, approving of essentialist perspective, headed towards solving the problem of inequality through glorifying womanhood identified with nature, while simultaneously degrading the “culture-infected” masculinity. In the innovative cultural feminism, however, “the sexual difference started to be understood as a *sex/gender* distinction” (Bator, 2001, p. 56). Although sex, regulated by biology, remained unchangeable, gender, determined with socio-cultural repressions, went through many transformations (Bator, 2001, p. 57). “The category of gender difference” became the keyword of the second-wave feminism and offered a chance to liberate from “fallogocentric” reality, (unsuccessful due to the movement’s internal division) (Bator, 2001, p. 48).

Formed in the end of 20th century, the third-wave feminism turned towards universal values, in which the concept of gender became relative (Tong, 2002, p. 58). According to Eva Zamojska, its followers postulated “the advanced individualization in creating each person’s identity, male or female, and rejecting (through deconstruction) any determined (biologically, metaphysically, socially, culturally, ideologically) femininity or masculinity” (Zamojska, 2000, p. 7).

When analyzing contemporary theories linked with construing femininity-masculinity, we observe a specific discrepancy, which began with the first-wave feminism, between biology and culture, tradition and changeability. Undoubtedly, emancipation movements and raising self-awareness among women has caused significant changes in shaping a new pattern of womanhood: the model of an “active woman,” manifesting itself in the need for independence: wide access to education and conscious career planning—something that the 19th century’s feminists could only dream about—became a reality today (Bartosz, 2011, p. 263).

Womanhood and social stratification on the labour market

If we search for new patterns of womanhood in professional life, we observe, that the affirmation of women's gender identity usually does not lead to conflict in workplace where the proportion of women versus men is close to 1 : 1 (similar number of male and female workers) or 0 : 1 (more women or mostly women), in so called "female jobs" (Wiśniewska-Szałek & Wiśniewska, 2007, p. 168). Krystyna Janicka says we are dealing here with the classic example of the horizontal labour stratification (Janicka, 1995, p. 95), which is, according to Natalia Sarata "the result of referring to stereotypical female and male competences" (Sarata, 2011, p. 272). A woman takes on a role of serving other people. Only she is equipped with enough humility, readiness to sacrifice herself, compromising her own benefits to serve higher values. She is also helpful and skillful in using indirect social influence strategies. (Mandal, 2004, p. 231). Therefore, it is not surprising that in this perspective a woman's professional life manifests itself in "public sector and activities in social infrastructure, that is caregiving, food supply, health and hygiene" (Janicka, 1995, p. 95). This is when the ideal of womanhood turns around stereotypical concepts, permeated by biological determinism, telling a story about caring, empathic and submissive female nature. (Reszke, 1991, p. 153). Such ideal, reflecting itself in a long-standing cultural transmission, somehow imposes a conventional distribution of duties and reinforces the "value system that is characteristic for the European civilization", where we find "clear patterns of womanhood and manhood" (Janicka, 1995, p. 96). The results of the report "Women, Men and Working Conditions in Europe", based on findings from the fifth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), conducted in 2010, over 78% of the population working as general clerks, personal care workers, health associate professionals, and cleaners are women. It turns out, that also in Poland "76% of intermediate level administrative clerks, office workers, retail and service workers, with dominance of physical, unskilled labour, and in education—97% of school pedagogues, 90% of the primary school teachers and 70% of high school teachers are women" (Sarata, 2011, p. 276). As Suzane Maddock puts it, female jobs are socially perceived as unattractive, because they represent low wages, "inferiority" of the work role and limited promotion opportunities (Maddock, 2003, p. 81). This type of gender stereotyping is described in the profes-

sional literature as a “sticky floor” phenomenon (Brannon, 2002, p. 404). On the basis of such concept, as Joan Acker puts it, lays the notion of women’s low status on the labour market, which in practice means male domination on executive posts (Acker, 1990, pp. 139–140). Empirical data shows, that the phenomenon of “female grouping” on particular labour market segments is still present, mainly because of the educational choices young women make. It turns out that the majority of female students graduate either in humanities or medicine. (Smith et al., 2013). Analyzing professional situation of women who internalize this model caused me to conclude, that they are prone to experience a discrepancy between the external and internal (self)perception of the role they take on. By playing the role which meets social expectations, they gain approval—or rather avoid disapproval—from their environment, yet they may be struggling with the inner sense of “underestimation” and gender discrimination. I define such model as the “Faithful Traditionalist”.

Situation changes dramatically, when womanhood trespasses on male territory. If a woman takes on a job which is largely dominated by men, i.e. of a manager or a lawyer, it certainly “switches on” another mechanism of gender inequality at work—the vertical segregation. The “glass ceiling” phenomenon reflects accurately in the Polish General Social Survey investigation, cited by Henryk Domański, about the place of women in the hierarchy of managerial posts (general managers, lower managers, non-managers). It turns out that in thirteen years, i.e. 1992–2005, “the shape of the job position ladder” is relatively solid and resembles a pyramid, on the bottom of which there are women non-managers. Such disproportion remained unchanged “also when we looked at the level of education, work experience, the size of place of residence and a few more variables” (Domański, 2011, p. 265). Similar results on the social stratification phenomenon in the workplace were presented by Erik Olin Wright and Janeen Baxter they showed that proportion of women (against men) on higher management positions equals 1:2 (Wright & Baxter, 2000, pp. 277–278). What action then should be taken by women, who managed to plough through the “thicket of corporate jungle” and stand on the top of androcentric power? What difficulties did they overcome—and still must—to maintain status quo? Referring to the thought of Agnieszka Gromkowska-Melosik, it is worth to assert, that “a woman, who holds a position of power over people and involves decision making, is somehow entrapped within contradicting

social expectancies" (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2012, p. 79). If she wants to achieve and then keep a high job position, she has to resign from the majority of attributes, commonly identified as womanly (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2012, pp. 82–83), and adopts a male identity. "Equipped" in a package of psychic resources, such as: professionalism, endurance, logic, leadership skills (well rooted in culture and passed on via socialization, as typically male traits), she demonstrates them while using standards of the opposite sex in creating her external image. Then she fulfills criteria of big corporations, which allow promotion and further career development (Brannon, 2002, p. 399). On one hand, battling with "the stereotypical attitude towards her gender (womanhood)" through assimilation of male patterns increases the chance of professional success, but on the other hand, it exposes her to "the accusation of losing her femininity" (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2012, p. 79). A woman who tries to neutralize this gender dissonance, sometimes manifesting itself as a psychological struggle, as Ilana Löwy puts it, chooses the option of "bilingualism." Opposed to the risk of losing her womanhood, she selectively (depending on a situation) "employs" male or female attributes (Löwy, 2012, p. 159). This perfectionism, through which she tries to express her personality in every life sphere, reflects itself, according to Bogusława Budrowska who cites Marjorie Hansen-Shaevitz, in a "superwoman syndrome." The author explains, that it has its source in "a socialization message addressed to girls", based on the patriarchal model. This is how an adult woman becomes convinced, that each and every action she takes should exemplify her professionalism (Budrowska, 2003, pp. 65–66). This balancing between traditional cultural transmission (striving to be feminine) and inner affirmation of professional satisfaction (taking up male schemes) designates—as I think—new standards of widely understood pattern of womanhood: "The Woman Warrior."

Womanhood on matrimonial market: the need of self-fulfillment versus/and synchronous love

"She is happy and satisfied with being single, which means that she is not a frustrated old spinster, by all means searching for a husband and love" (Szlendak, 2010, p. 467)—this fragment is about a woman who is not involved in an intimate, relatively stable relationship. In Polish sub-

ject literature, an urban single, or—according to American researchers—a single professional woman, is a contemporary alternative to the so called model of “living alone.” It describes an independent, educated woman (Tymicki, 2001, pp. 77–105), who surrounds herself with a web of support from her family and friends, while actively participating in a cultural and social life (Czernecka, 2012, pp. 139–140). According to the GUS [Central Statistical Office in Poland] survey from 2011, 33,4% of female population between 25 and 34 year of age were single (Nowak et al., 2012). The phenomenon of being single was also observed among young Japanese women in their thirties, half of which (50%) in 2001 identified themselves as singles, thus outnumbering their peers from the United States (37%)⁶ (Berg-Cross et al., 2004, p. 40). The results of Barbara Whitehead’s analyses, in the group of American single women, have shown, that young women’s life priorities had changed. They internalized (as a consequence of upbringing) a new, non-stereotypical pattern for creating their future, on the basis of which lays self-fulfillment. Professional education and getting a satisfying job that allows being financially independent became the most important venture for young women, lasting usually until the 30th year of age. The lack of a partner—according to this author—in majority does not result from a conscious decision of staying single, but is a side effect of realizing “the new life pattern” (Whitehead, 2003, p. 9), in which being well educated and a chance to live in cohabitation or having strictly sexual relationships (Whitehead, 2003, p. 10), caused them to postpone the decision to marry (Whitehead, 2003, p. 14).

Today’s singles—women with high self-esteem, conscious of their capabilities—expect more and more from men, which certainly prolongs the time of finding an appropriate partner. In turn, as years go by, “women’s chances of getting married drop sharply when they get past their thirties and almost hit the rock bottom, if they get past 35th year of age” (Szlendak, 2010, p. 468). Here we see a classical paradox: a young woman, absorbed with pursuing her career, postpones finding a partner, but when her financial and professional situation seem to stabilize (30–35 year of age), the number of potential candidates severely drops. The results of Beata Łaciak’s survey in the group of Polish schoolgirls

⁶ “According to American research data, in the past 30 years the number of married women aged 24 increased from 36% to 72%, and for women aged 30–34, from 6% to 22%” (Slany, 2002, pp. 117–118).

and young, unmarried women seem to confirm the above correlation. It turns out that in the hierarchy of schoolgirls' dreams (49%) as well as adult women (45%), the first place belongs to education and getting an interesting job. A satisfying family life comes second—it is chosen by 43% of schoolgirls and 42% of young unmarried women (Łaciak, 2002, p. 147, 167). Therefore, motives that make women stay single can be understood in the context of two coexisting opposites: free choice and constraint. As long as the first one results from a conscious resignation from unsatisfactory relationship, the second one is conditioned with the situation of not having a proper candidate, which whom a close, intimate relationship could be built (Paprzycka, 2008, pp. 58–59). However, none of the aforementioned options reflect an open declaration against being in a long-term relationship. The authors of the article “Living Alone: Its Place in Household Formation and Change” (2004), quoting research results of Lynn Jameson and her colleagues (2003), claim that the majority of young women perceive being single as a passing, temporary situation (Chandler et al., 2004). It is visible especially among Polish respondents. A positive image of a modern urban single woman is received with reluctance due to the traditional view on marriage and maternity as the woman's life fulfillment, still strongly rooted in Polish culture. “Alone but not lonely” single women argue, that their openness to having a partner and raising a family are elements of the life plan they want to realize, therefore, just as Emilia Paprzycka, I shall call them “Contemporary Marriageables” (Paprzycka, 2008, pp. 330–332).

Another pattern of womanhood, significantly changed due to emancipation, can be observed in marriage. More and more often young, educated women, who make a decision to legalize and/or sacramentize their relationship, reject traditional, patriarchal offer and choose equal partnership. Then they enter into “egalitarian marriages, also known as marriages with partnership, which means, that both sides have careers and their identification mark is compromise, constant negotiation in every sphere of their lives” (Szlendak, 2010, pp. 410–411). Each spouse is—according to Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim—an “individual person,” who pursue their own dreams and professional aspirations. Financial independence of both parties limits their expectances in a relationship to “emotional support” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 72). According to the results of research conducted by Renata Siemieńska, the number of people opting for a partnership in the family model is raising in Polish society (Siemieńska, 2011, p. 203). Achieving this type

of a relationship undoubtedly requires a new perspective on a question of “roles in love life.” Abandoning the traditional image of a romantic feeling, a continuation of patriarchy, allows women to regain their identity. Marriage is no longer a goal in itself (Szlendak, 2010, p. 144) and choosing a partner for life becomes a conscious and independent process. “The pure relationship”—which is how Anthony Giddens calls the new, alternative form of regulation in a partnership—is a “close and stable emotional bond with another person” (Giddens, 2007, p. 75), based on the principle of intimacy (Giddens, 2007, p. 117). When we think about it in the context of liberation, we must state that this type of a relationship gives a chance of creating new standards for the family roles. Anna Titkow’s research has shown, that Polish people approve of the concept of egalitarian relations between men and women, although the model of partnership, assuming fully even distribution of duties in private as well as professional life, is much more favoured by women (Titkow, 2007, pp. 229–230). It turns out then, that the autonomic participation of both spouses in family and professional roles is not equivalent to total devaluation of stereotypization mechanisms, deeply rooted in culture. The influence of culturally (re)produced gender inequality can be clearly seen when it comes to distributing daily chores. The majority of housework, such as laundry, ironing, cleaning and cooking is still a “feminine” domain (Giddens, 2012, p. 374). Research in European countries conducted by Voicu, Voicu and Strapkova (2007) confirms it. The highest rate of difference between men and women is observed in Greece, Turkey and Malta (above 70%), as well as Portugal, Slovenia, Italy, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Austria (above 60%). Also the result of the European average seems to be distant from the idea of gender quality in this matter (53%) (Giddens, 2012, p. 347). The factor which reduces disproportion of this kind is women’s professional career (i.e. on managerial posts), which directly forces men to take over some of the “women’s duties” (Brannon, 2002, p. 297).

In practice, the regulation of mutual relations between partners is not the only source of conflict. We must also mention the negative influence of external systems on the family. It can be exemplified through relation between women’s work life and birth control. Maternity—still perceived as a “central attribute of womanhood” (Budrowska, 2003, p. 57)—is still a subject of professional discrimination, as “women’s individual aspirations start to contradict the family” (Slany, 2002, p. 109). Therefore we can conclude like Judith M. Bardwick and Elizabeth Dou-

van, that the free choice becomes a personified oppressor (Bardwick & Douvan, 1983, p. 182). A woman is facing an incredibly difficult dilemma: should she resign (at least for a period of time) from her career to give birth “an economically worthless but emotionally priceless” child (Slany, 2002, p. 106), or should she postpone the decision about becoming a mother and, like her partner, devote herself to her career.

How Polish women try to solve this problem? Empirical data indicates, that young, educated women perceive career and motherhood as categories which not necessarily exclude each other (Titkow, 2007, p. 162). It appears that for them the family is still an autotelic value (Titkow, 2007, p. 238), and—according to Agnieszka Gromkowska-Melosik—balancing “work with being a mother, spouse and housewife is a specific form of matriarchy” (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2008, p. 107). On the other hand though, according to the public opinion, “the right time for a career” in married women’s life is a period before giving birth to a child, or when a child is already autonomous “enough” (Titkow, 2007, p. 237).

The emerging pattern of womanhood, “refurbished” with the new relationship with a partner and a liberal view of self-fulfillment is confronted with the perpetual, biological determinant of womanhood—maternity and a partial stereotypization of family roles. On one hand, a woman is freed from external patriarchal constraints, but on the other, she is a subject to the inner imperative of the essentialist ones and becomes—in my opinion—the “Emancipated Hera” (referring to the mythological goddess, patron of home and marriage).

Women and mass-media: The paradox of constraining the body for liberation

When analyzing current patterns of womanhood, it is worth to notice the message constructed by the media, which, according to Margaret L. Andersen “shows women and men are portrayed in stereotypical ways” (Andersen, 1993, p. 54). The evident sexualization of today’s culture and the cult of beautiful, perfectly shaped body creates an obligatory ideal of beauty which reduces women to sexual objects. A modern woman should look after her beauty in order to keep her body fit, vigorous and active. Simultaneously, in words of Zbyszko Melosik, she is “constantly tyrannized with advertisements and texts from popular magazines” which become a “decatalogue” of how to stay young and beautiful

(Melosik, 2001, p. 37). This type of attitude would certainly disappoint 19th century feminists, who claimed, that the “beauty fixation” served only as compensation. It was a form of substitute that regulated the lack of access to education and professional life for women (Löwy, 2012, p. 77). When we try to explain causes of this phenomenon in our culture, we can recall opinions of Ilana Löwy, a distinguished scholar. In one of the chapters of her book *The Chains of Gender. Masculinity, Femininity, Inequality*, she writes, that female body is constantly “assessed, valued and judged”. The culturally constructed message declares directly, that a woman should always control her appearance. Immaculate makeup, perfect hair and fashionable clothes are the quintessence of the external image of femininity. A woman cannot allow herself to show any signs of physiological/biological imperfections, which could even slightly disrupt her idyllic, perfect image. She becomes a slave of her own body, satisfying desires of her ruthless critic, lurking from behind her mirror reflection. According to Ilana Löwy, affirming one’s identity through body image is a form of gender equality. “The right of looking at female body is inseparably linked with inferiority of women’s status. They are obliged to constant thinking of their femininity, that is, of their appearance” (Löwy, 2012, p. 101). Pierre Bourdieu, who represents a similar way of thinking, says that femininity is perceived as a “symbolic object, whose being (esse) is first and foremost being-seen (percipi)” (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 82). Why then female body is a product of consumption that arouses desire in (male?) “consumers”? Trying to find an answer to this complex problem, it is worth to refer to the Sandra Lipsitz Bem’s concept of androcentrism, seen in context of male domination. According to her, perception of the world based solely on male point of view situated women on marginal position, reducing her to the serving certain functions (usually limited to procreation and caring for her offspring) (Lipsitz-Bem, 2000, p. 51). Despite the fact that relicts of old times were conquered to a large extent, some of them still remain in the social consciousness, but in a modern form. The message formulated in mass-media about the sensual nature of women clearly limits her functions to “satisfying male desires” (Lipsitz-Bem, 2000, p. 139). The reason for such situation can be found in early processes of socialization, which seems to be different for both sexes. It takes place because stereotypical “cultural patterns [are learned] from the nursery years” (Budrowska, 2003, pp. 55–56). Such contrasting way of looking on the issue of womanhood (as opposed to masculinity) presents a woman as a creature

diametrically different from a man; Simone de Beauvoir in her famous book *The Second Sex* calls her “The Other” (Beauvoir, 2007). Representatives of the above idea are “proud of exposing their bodies, objects of desire, to the public” (Löwy, 2012, p. 80), believing that their exposed bodies are not the mechanism of constraint but an instrument to gain domination over men.

Basing on the above analyses, we can single out another current pattern of womanhood, the result of socialization and the special influence of mass-media, which I allow myself to describe symbolically as a “Pop-Culture Star”. The more intense is the superficial glamour of this “Star”, the stricter and more determined she becomes in internalizing beauty standards from the culture. Her body is both an object of cult and an object of financial hopes of large cosmetic corporations and prestigious fashion designers.

The above data does not allow us to create a monolithic—from a perspective of a certain conception—pattern of womanhood, which would unequivocally reflect the traditional or egalitarian model. In our times, women balance between the two worlds, where deeply rooted tradition (derived from biological determinism) coexists with modern egalitarianism. The unquestionable success in the field of (re)definition of gender roles enabled women to access those spheres of social life which were, not that long time ago, reserved only for men. By citing the thought of Emilia Paprzycka, I wish to say that “the stereotype of so called traditional femininity seems to be still mandatory in terms of components of personality traits and appearance, external attributes of femininity, whereas egalitarian model of womanhood is more and more significant in terms of components of women’s social and professional roles” (Paprzycka, 2008, p. 190). There are still some “invisible” barriers, originating from the traditional view of gender issues, seen only through the filter of biology. Contrary to the popular belief about effectiveness of equality discourse, we can observe the existence of some socially constructed and reproduced stereotypization processes and gender discrimination in some areas of public (work, media) and private life. However, we must emphasize that it is not just men who adopt a dichotomous, simplified strategy of gender perception. Some women, despite realizing the model of “modern” femininity, yield to stereotypical pressures of socialization in some aspects of their lives.

To sum up, I would like to say that patterns of contemporary womanhood seem to form a mosaic of internalized, partly feminine, partly

male attributes, adopted selectively, allowing women to realize their goals and challenges effectively, and that they are a form of adaptation to the still—I dare say—strongly androcentric reality.

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