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Reconstruction of the Contemporary Woman's Identity. Paradoxes of Emancipation

ABSTRACT: The article considers the three main paradoxes of emancipation and dilemmas of contemporary women. First one is connected with dynamics of women's access to the higher education and the career. The prevalent assumption behind an educational gap between men and women is that of privileged men who enjoyed much greater access to all levels of education. However, most data on women's access to higher education is telling of an educational emancipation of women. It is difficult to talk about female discrimination in terms of numbers. On the other hand when we analyse labour market structure the position occupied by women and men differs to a significant extent when compared to the educational context. It turns out that the rule of meritocracy, which applies to women at the level of education, is not applied once they have graduated. The same diploma, which is a definite advantage for males, is a less significant advantage for females. Second paradox considers the dynamics of choices between maternity and career. The third one is focused on tyranny of choices connected with the pressure on continuous reconstruction of women's identity around body and consumption. The Author of the article is convinced that every women should have power of choice considering creation of her own identity and biography.

KEYWORDS: Femininity, education, maternity. consumption, professional career, emancipation paradoxes.

In the social and pedagogical thought of at least the last two centuries, two contradictory approaches to women and femininity have been clashing in a paradigmatic context. One of them is essentialism which derives these concepts from 'natural' (biological) characteristics; the other is social constructivism which assumes that they are shaped discursively during social processes, and have a local, historical and conditional nature.

In the second perspective, the term 'gender' is usually used to describe gender in a cultural context. There are various interpretations of this term, but

it is most often used in literature, as opposed to 'sex'. 'Sex' refers to all that we understand by biological sex and therefore refers to physiological and anatomical features of sexuality. Gender, on the other hand, is defined as "the social, cultural and psychological meaning imposed on biological sexual identity". In this sense, gender is used to distinguish the socio-cultural nature of differences between women and men (Gontarczyk 1995, p. 33). K. Millet emphasizes that gender is a psychological and cultural category, therefore it can be completely independent from biological sex or even contradictory to it (Millet 1982, p. 66). As J. Butler argues, "there is no essence that [...] manifests the gender, or an objective ideal to which gender aspires". Gender is constructed through social activities. "In other words, gender refers to the fulfillment of oneself [...] production of oneself, but is not a performance in the classical theatrical sense of playing a specific role". Gender does not exist as "a given fact of nature or an authentic core". It is a set of historically shaped social practices (Banet-Weiser 1999, pp. 11–12). As J. Flax writes, genders (female and male) do not have any constant 'essence'. They change over time, and the relationships between genders (women and men) have (in the culture and tradition of the West) a 'highly asymmetrical' nature based on dominance. One of the genders – male – managed to obtain the status of a kind of 'universe', which constitutes a standard based on which the second, subordinated gender – female – is defined (Flax 1989, pp. 54, 58–59).

It must be added that in Western culture there is a tradition of understanding gender as being identical to the category of sex. Thus, gender and its properties are perceived as natural phenomena. In this perspective, it is assumed that men and women naturally differ not only biologically but also mentally. This approach considers that mental differences are a natural consequence of biological determinants.

For centuries there was a clear answer to the question: what does it mean to be a woman and a man? Masculinity and femininity were, in the vast majority of cases, two poles of antinomy. During the socialization period, different identities as well as aspirations and social roles of women and men were constructed. The man, intended for the public sphere, exercise of power and conquering the world, was to be courageous and confident, precise and success-oriented, intellectual, assertive, aggressive and competitive. On the other hand, the woman, assigned to the private sphere, was formed as an empathetic, caring, delicate person, oriented towards caring for the 'hearth and home' and childcare, and mentally defensive. Recent decades have undermined the dichotomous perception of sexes. We are dealing with a radical emancipation of women in all spheres, above all in education and the labor market, and

the emergence of such forms of identity for women, which in the past were reserved exclusively for men. Masculinity and femininity are no longer poles contrasted with each other, and there are many equivalent versions of femininity and masculinity in society. Often, female and male identities are almost 'intertwined' and it is difficult to distinguish them from each other.

From the perspective of problem-historical analyses, it can be concluded that both women and femininity are always in the process of 'becoming'. Derivation of a woman's identity from any absolute premises (whether biological or 'god-intended') led to the imposition, during socialization, of an oversaturated identity on representatives of this sex – referring to the assumptions of post-structuralism – using knowledge/authority that controlled (and *de facto* marginalized) them, both in the socio-cultural and economic spheres.

The aim of this text is not to formulate any postulates concerning an 'adequate' female identity, but rather to reconstruct, in a certain time dynamics, the paradoxes of emancipation and dilemmas that modern women face, assuming that each individual woman should have the power to choose between creating her own identity and her own biography.

The first problem concerns education. Since the beginning of the fight for equality of women, education has been one of the most important levels of action in this scope; increasing access to it was also one of the most important criteria for social change. This is also the case nowadays, which results from the fact that, in modern societies, education is one of the most important foundations of the entire system of social stratification (as Claudia Buchmann and Emily Hannum write, this is connected with the "functioning of formal education [...] in the processes of social differentiation and social mobility") (Buchmann, Hannum 2001). The days of a 'self-made person' are gone – a person who, thanks to their own efforts, reached the top of the social ladder, gaining both status and a high level of material life. Today, an indispensable prerequisite for social advancement is the possession of 'educational credentials', embodied in the form of a good diploma, which is a symbolic manifestation of knowledge, qualifications, competences and psychological traits that are attributes of a 'person of success' (cf. Gmerek 2003, pp. 13–22).

In this context, it should be stated that the criteria used to assess the progress of womens' 'educational empowerment' are a social construct variable over time. Over the last decades, they changed as the emancipation of women progressed. The fight for access to any education (or learning) was replaced by the fight for co-educational schools, which turned into a battle for equal access to higher education. Now that women have a majority in the total number of college students, attention is focused on women's lack of access

to college majors traditionally reserved for men (for example, technical majors) and gender equality problems on the labor market.

The core of the problem of women's equality in terms of access to higher education has therefore undergone major restructuring in the last decade. In quantitative terms, it is already difficult to talk about discrimination against them; on the contrary, women have a growing majority in the population of college students as a whole. Therefore, most analyses focus on the differences in prestige of higher education institutions in which women and men study, as well as the gender-differentiated choice of majors (disciplines) mentioned above.

An analysis of women's access to the Master's degree in Poland in 2011 (the latest available data in the OECD database) clearly shows that they predominate in most fields of study, with the exception of technical studies. And so, women constituted 85.1% of the graduates in pedagogical studies, 73.9% in humanities and arts, 70.6% in social sciences, management and law, 52.8% in mathematical and IT sciences, 57.3% in agricultural and veterinary sciences. Only in the field of technical sciences did female graduates constitute 40.5%. However, there is a clear increase in the share of women also in the fields of education traditionally reserved for men (OECD 2017).

Examples of other countries can also be given. And so, at the level of Bachelor's degree, in the academic year 2012/2013, in all fields of study in the United States, for the white population, women made up 56% of the total number of successful graduates, and for the black population – 65%, Latin – 60%, and Asian – 54% (NCES 2017). Not only do these figures indicate a huge progress, but even supremacy in terms of access to the Bachelor's degree level of higher education in that country. The data for the 2013/2014 Master's courses allow to draw equally optimistic conclusions for women. Out of the total of 754,475 people studying at this level, there were 451,668 women i.e. as much as 69.8%. The figures for doctoral studies are even more surprising. That year, at the doctoral level (or equivalent), out of 177,580 Americans who received a PhD, 91,993 (51.8%) were women. Dozens of examples of women's supremacy at the Master's degree level in particular fields of study in the United States could be given here. In the prestigious field of biochemistry – 51.4% of all students (2013/2014) are women, in the field of neurobiology – 54%, marketing – 56.4%, management and administration in education – 64.7%, international law – 57.6%, psychology – 83.2% (NCES 2013-2014).

In Europe, on the other hand, women accounted for 57.1% of all students in Master's courses in 2015, with the following figures for selected countries: Bulgaria almost 60% of all students, Denmark 59.7%, Germany 53.5%,

Estonia 62.5%, Greece 58.2%, France 53.6%, Lithuania 65.2%, the Netherlands 53.5%, Slovenia 64.6%, Finland 62.1%, Sweden 55.8%, United Kingdom 58.6%, Serbia 61.3%. Only in the case of Turkey do women account for 43% (Eurostat 2015). It is therefore possible to justifiably suggest women's 'statistical advantage' in accessing this level of education in European countries.

At this point, however, it should be noted that on a macro scale – compared to men – women are graduates of less prestigious universities and this is a typical worldwide trend. It is a fact that women obtain statistically 'worse diplomas' than men, although the existing disproportions in this area are not very significant. The lower participation of women in elite higher education institutions can be explained by different socialization patterns leading to the self-exclusion of women (low aspirations). Another reason may be related to the attitudes of parents who prefer to invest in the future of their sons, either because of their traditional views on sex roles or because they assume that boys are more likely to make a career (Jacobs 1999). Margaret Sutherland notes, however, that this approach does not exist in the case of higher social classes (Sutherland 1991, p. 134). There is also a suggestion that some elite universities create various (more or less hidden) blockades of access for women for fear of their quantitative domination at the university, which could lead to depreciation of their diplomas and diminishment of their prestige (Jacobs 1999).

If, in the above context, we were to give a symbol of the most elite and 'perfect' education, the majority would probably say one of the two words: 'Oxford' or 'Harvard'. These two universities, as well as more members of the American Ivy League, are traditionally – in the minds of millions of people around the world – the 'apogee of education' and their diploma seems to guarantee access to an 'immediate career', without the need for strenuous climbing the social ladder. Therefore, it is worth analyzing the sex structure of students at both these universities.

According to the latest information about the class of students who will graduate from law at Harvard in 2019, women account for 51%. It is worth mentioning that 5485 people applied for admission to this class, of whom 562 were admitted (http://hls.harvard.edu/dept/jdadmissions/apply-to-harvard-law--school/hls-profile-and-facts/). In the entire Harvard student population, the ratio of women to men is 49.12% to 50.88 (https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/harvard-university/student-life/diversity/#secMaleFemale). The figures for some of the universities that belong to the prestigious Ivy League for 2015, with regard to the percentage of women studying there, are as follows: Brown University 51%, Cornell University 49.8%, Dartmouth College 49.5%, Harvard

University 48.5%, Princeton 49.3%, University of Pennsylvania 49% (https://www.ivycoach.com/2015-ivy-league-admissions-statistics/).

It is also worthwhile to analyze data on the proportion of women among people studying at Oxford University – in the Bachelor's course, which seems to be an introduction to the best possible socio-occupational career. And so, the statistics as of 1 December 2016 indicate that in medical sciences and social sciences, women account for 51% of the total number of students, 48% in humanities, but only 28% in mathematical sciences, physical sciences and (natural) life sciences (https://public.tableau.com/views/Uni- versityofOxford-StudentStatistics/YearlySnapshotSummary?:embed=y&:display_ count=yes&:s howTabs=y&:showVizHome=no). Analyzing all available information on the structure of Oxford students, it can be concluded that the male advantage in accessing university studies continues, but with every decade, it changes in favor of women.

It is worth noting one more fact, which pertains to both the American Harvard and the British Oxford (or, more broadly, to schools united in the elite Ivy League). It must be assumed that according to the neoliberalist policy, recruitment for both universities is largely 'blind to sex' (and to race). The attempt to obtain a 'cohort' of the best students probably results in there being no significant sexual (or racial) prejudices. The 'measurable quality of the candidate' counts – after all, the recruitment procedure is very quantified. Harvard and Oxford are applied for by absolutely the best secondary school graduates – there is no doubt that there is 'equality of candidature' there. At the level of such rivalry, there are no longer major differences in the level of intellectual competence or school achievements. There are simply the best male and female students, perfectly prepared to study at these universities. After abandoning (even if not completely) sex stereotypes in recruitment policies of the best universities, the chances of women to study at them increase many times. Globally (and this also applies to many 'Third World' countries), equality of women in education is increasingly becoming reality, not just a postulate (cf. Gromkowska-Melosik 2011, pp. 103–136).

Another problem that I would like to address pertains to the dynamics of tension, concerning millions of women, between motherhood aspirations and the orientation towards professional success. I wrote above that the definition of femininity and masculinity, which is typical (or even binding) in a given place and time, is subject to change – the answer to the question 'what does it mean to be a woman?' (or what does it mean to be a man) varies in different communities and epochs. In relation to a woman, however, one variable (or rather a 'carrier of femininity') can be found, which functions in a 'time-

less' and 'extra-territorial' way, evading (at least apparently) social constructs and constituting the most prominent and irrevocable attribute of a woman. This is the biological ability to reproduce the species, the sexual exclusivity of pregnancy and childbirth. In the social perception of women, it is this attribute that is the essence of femininity, as well as the starting point of socializing women into the cultural gender. The birth as a woman determines to a large or even decisive extent – in all cultures, places and times – the biography and life opportunities. Motherhood is one of the most important social roles of women. Nancy Reeves even calls motherhood the only certain 'career of a woman' and the area which is absolutely 'monopolized' by her, regardless of her intelligence, education, interests, aspirations and ambitions (Reeves 1982).

In most societies, motherhood is considered to be the 'natural' virtue of women, a symbol of 'femininity' and its glorification. Childless women are often stigmatized, regardless of whether they have children because of their choice or infertility. Women who consciously renounce having children seem, in the common opinion, to deny 'maternal instincts', are often described as 'egotistical' and rejecting the laws of nature. On the other hand, "women who become mothers acquire a predefined status in society, a role that is taken up within the framework of clearly defined principles imposed by the ideology of motherhood and family", "biology is presented as an expression of necessity: »that which is biological, is given by nature and confirmed by science«"(Coopock et al. 1995, p. 32).

At the same time, when we analyze the history of women's struggle for emancipation, one can formulate a thesis that, for centuries, it was motherhood that seemed to create the most important symbolic and real (practical) context for the social and psychological incapacitation of women. It was motherhood that constituted a (natural) starting point for dividing social life into public and private spheres. The former was dominated by a man who 'conquered the world'. The latter was reserved for a woman who gave birth to children and took care of the quality of the 'hearth and home'. For centuries, in Western culture, motherhood (as an irrevocable 'vocation') excluded women from the economic and political spheres, deprived them of access to social power, however misunderstood it might have been.

In recent decades, there have been fundamental changes in the educational, socio-economic and political situation of women. This also applies to the plane of awareness. Nevertheless, the changes in the social perception of women (and their self-perception) seem to have little to do with motherhood, which is still to be the most important objective of women's lives (although, of course, the ideal of a Victorian mother described above has long

been a thing of the past). In other words, even in those social groups that clearly prefer the model of an emancipated woman, women who for whatever reason do not have children seem to be burdened with a life failure stigma. Clearly, in counter-argumentation, one can cite more and more examples of women who give up motherhood (for example, in favor of a career). However, in the dominant 'ideology of femininity', femininity is still very often reduced to motherhood, and such reductionism leads – as it has for centuries – to a fundamental limitation of women's life opportunities (and to a specific disciplining of their identity).

At this point, I would also like to say that four parallel and largely contradictory discourses exist today – on the issue of maternity – at the level of popular awareness and social practices.

The first is based on the conviction that the liberation of women 'has already taken place' and that an emancipated woman can – in her life practice – combine the role of a mother with that of a professionally working woman (cf. Gromkowska-Melosik 2004a, 2004b, pp. 23–32). Two alternative approaches can be noticed in this discourse. The first one is optimistic. Its essence is the conviction that it is the woman herself, having social and personal freedom, who can decide what the dynamics of the relationship between one (private) and the other (public) sphere of her life will be. Various flexible forms of employment, as well as institutional forms of childcare are supposed to facilitate this. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly easier to find a partner who is ready to share the efforts of caring for the offspring with her. This way, she can make her maternal vocation a reality, as well as climb the socio-occupational career's ladder. Here is what we can read in *the Venus Strategy*: "If you want to realize all your intentions, then: you should find a partner who fits your goals and is ready to support you, you should choose an industry in which a woman can make a career, you should think carefully if and when you want to have children, you should consider with your partner who will take care of the children, [...] you should entrust other people with all the insignificant duties (cleaning, cooking, washing, ironing), you should plan your time together with your partner and provide him and yourself with a lot of shared, wonderful experiences" (Enkelmann 2003, p. 193). In such an – I repeat again – optimistic approach, combining professional and maternal responsibilities does not mean giving up the desire for perfectionism in any area. Supporters of the second approach are convinced that women's emancipation, especially in the professional context, has not only failed to solve their problems, but has actually created a sense of a kind of schizophrenia. They agree that a modern woman can (and often does) take on duties both in the

public and private spheres, but they perceive this in a very pessimistic perspective. And so, a woman, forced to share her responsibilities as a wife, mother and worker, is twice as burdened with work, tension and stress. Being aware that it is impossible to reconcile these two extremely engaging spheres of action, sooner or later she starts to feel frustrated, either because of neglect in the field of bringing up the children, or because of the impossibility to focus on the professional career. As a result, she does not achieve satisfaction on any plane of her actions and lives in a constant sense of guilt and failure.

Such a life situation of a woman is associated with the symbol of 'superwoman' – an ideal imposed on millions of women described, among others, by M. Hansen-Shaevitz. The author draws attention to the (common in our culture) pursuit of perfection, which combines playing the role of ideal mother, wife, daughter, granddaughter, sister and, on the other hand, employee. Such women want to do everything perfectly, paying a tremendous price for it: they live in great hurry and stress, they 'never have time for anything'; as a result, they ruin their health and are permanently frustrated. According to the cited author, this attitude of women seems to be rooted in traditional socialization, which does not allow them to give up perfectionism in the performance of every social role they assume, for fear of being accused of laziness or failure to fulfill the role of a 'true woman' (Hansen-Shaevitz 2000, pp. 157–159).

The essence of the second of the four discourses in the social consciousness is a kind of essentialist return to the past – to sacrificing one's life to the 'true vocation of a woman', i.e. giving birth to, and raising children. Being a mother brings, as is believed, self-fulfillment and satisfaction, and a woman who does not have to be torn between home and work is happy; she can also achieve 'true freedom'. However, such an approach is subject to obvious criticism – it undoubtedly implies unconditional acceptance of the idea of a patriarchal society. 'Full-time' motherhood can, according to critics, pose many threats to the identity of a woman. The term 'momism' is used in this context, which can be defined as the orientation towards mothering. This term was first used by the journalist Philip Wylie in the bestseller *Generation of Kipers* (1942). He accused American mothers of being overprotective, hypersensitive and overly involved in the lives of their children, especially sons. This was supposed to lead, in his opinion, to the upbringing of 'mama's boys' unable to live independently. However, the ideology of the new orientation toward mothering, which has been gaining strength in recent years, rejects its misogynist roots and is definitely a positive concept which expresses adoration for the institution of motherhood (Douglas, Michaels 2005, pp. 4–5). In this context, sometimes references are made to the idea of 'intensive moth-

erhood'. This term was introduced by Sharon Hays in 1996, defining it as de-voting a huge amount of time, energy and material resources to bringing up a child. In this context, the mother is perceived as a comprehensively educat-ed person, who knows the child's developmental stages and their correspond-ing specific emotional and intellectual needs (quoted from: Titkow et al. 2004, p. 206). At the same time, she gives up work after childbirth or treats it as a completely secondary activity.

The third discourse is connected with this specific form of functioning as a mother, which A. Katz calls *macho mothering* (Katz 1998, p. 6). There is no doubt that for many 'liberated female professionals', having a child is sup-posed to be a logical 'complement' of their female identity. They want to have this subjective certainty that they have fully realized their potential of femi-ninity. Having a child (even if at a late age) has become 'fashionable' in the environment of women oriented toward climbing the career ladder. However, the decision in this area is taken by them mainly on the 'intellectual plane' (if I refer to one of the traditional essentialist categories, it can be said that they do not have an awakened 'maternal instinct'). Consequently, in many cases, such women 'do not have the heart' for the future child. It is supposed to be only a 'social symbol' of their self-fulfillment and life opportunities. Very soon after the birth, they return to work and put the child under the care of their mothers, hired nannies, nurseries, and sometimes accidental people (see Os-trouch 2004).

In this context, there is also a special (and spectacular) case of orienta-tion toward motherhood – 'being a mother' has recently become particularly fashionable among Polish and foreign mass media stars. From the covers of colorful magazines, beautiful and rested actresses or singers smile at the female readers, proudly showing their pregnancies (or they look equally attractive a few days after childbirth). Even some advertisements of well-known compa-nies refer to the image of a pregnant woman and the motherhood period (the first advertisement for perfume that showed a pregnant woman was the Brit-ish Burberry). Suddenly, after years of showing slim, beautiful and sexually liberated women, attention has been turned to the images of mothers. Having children and being a mother seems to be 'trendy'. Articles in women's mag-azines are devoted to the charms of motherhood, and being a mother seems to be a welcome role in the life of every woman, even one making a 'glitter-ing' career. Popular mass media spread the idea – rejected by at least some of women's emancipation movements – that a 'real woman' needs a child in or-der to fulfill her femininity. Only that child can complete her true vocation and deepen the meaning of life.

At the same time, I have no doubt that the ideology of the 'return to motherhood' is one of the consequences of the demographic decline and ageing of Western societies. At least to some extent, it results from the concern about the loss of 'national identity' (due to the small number of representatives of the new generation), the shortage of labor force and the need to base the economy on foreigners from the Third World (hence the intentional socio-political strategies being pursued to increase the birth rate in many Western countries).

The last, fourth discourse – in the context of social trends in maternity – is easy to describe: the woman who gives up motherhood altogether, devoting herself exclusively to self-fulfillment and a socio-occupational career. A child – at least until a certain point in time, which usually comes 'when it is too late' – does not appear to her as a 'challenge' or 'problem'. Femininity and motherhood seem to be 'separable' for this group of women (in this context, it can be noted that the pejorative term typically used in the past for this group, i.e. *childless*, is more and more often replaced with the essentially positive term *childfree*).

The above discussions of some of the controversies about motherhood lead to a single conclusion concerning contemporary society. Namely, in terms of the problem of 'socialization into the discourse on motherhood', there is a large number of contradictions, both on the theoretical and conceptual plane, and on the social life plane. Each discourse of motherhood has 'opportunities' and 'limitations' in it, depending on the perspective of perception. It is hard to deny that there is a growing 'confusion' in this area of awareness and social practice (to have or not to have children?; how many?; in a marriage or as a single in order not to bind yourself?; at what age?; to give up your career and look after your children?; to give your child up to your grandparents for upbringing and make a career? etc.) Consequently, at some point in her biography, every woman faces choices which irrevocably determine the shape of her future life.

There is no doubt that women are attaining unprecedented educational successes – even, as shown above, in terms of access to elite fields of study, which until recently were men's domains. However, it turns out that little has changed in the labor market. There is a clear gender divide in the elite professions – in law, natural sciences or architecture, men and women work in different sectors, with uneven prestige and unequal income opportunities. For example, women are more involved in those sectors where activities concern symbolic and cultural capital rather than material wealth. Female lawyers specialize in family law, and female doctors undertake general practice (often al-

so become pediatricians). Men, on the other hand, are more active in places where you can gain direct prestige and money. This leads to another conclusion: male and female lawyers, male and female doctors (and so on) take on significantly different social roles, although they have the same 'professional title' (Delamont 1999, p. 214).

Here we can also mention several approaches to the phenomenon of professional discrimination against women. The metaphor of the 'glass ceiling' is used to describe the phenomenon of preventing women from being promoted to managerial positions. The glass ceiling symbolizes the visibility of potential advancement and, at the same time, its impossibility. The term 'sticky floor' is used to refer to the inability to get promoted of women hired in positions with low social prestige (civil servant, secretary, seamstress, etc.). On the other hand, the concept of 'glass escalator' refers to a situation of a fast, unsubstantiated advancement of men in occupations dominated by women (Titkow 2003, pp. 8–10).

Therefore, while data on educational issues are very optimistic, this cannot be said for the labor market. In this context, an analysis of statistical-demographic 'biographical tendencies' of women in many countries leads to the conclusion that – in the case of millions of women – such countries offer education that in practice becomes an end in itself, for a good diploma does not result in increased opportunities to climb up the social ladder. Using the concept of Earl Hopper, it can be said that in many modern societies, women's educational aspirations are 'warmed up' in order for them to gain higher education, and then – upon entering the labor market – they are rapidly 'frozen'. Women are therefore cut off from professional success, which remains the domain of men (we can even imagine a situation in which a population of educated, more or less frustrated 'housewives' is growing in a given society).

The desegregation of genders' access to education has not caused any fundamental desegregation in the labor market – "the professional distribution of women and men has changed little recently" (Bradley 2000) and yet, as Hopper rightly points out, professional advancement is the key to social mobility, it is like a 'social trampoline' (Hopper 1972; cf. Gromkowska-Melosik). It can therefore be remarked – following Jerry A. Jacobs – that the gradual elimination of gender differences in access to education is rightly seen as proof of the triumph of the 'ideology of achievements' over the 'ideology of assignment' (because of some attribute of identity e.g. gender). However, at the level of the labor market (which can be regarded as a certain contradiction), there is a reverse situation, namely, the primacy of 'occupational assign-

ment' by gender category, which leads to women being deprived of the possibility of professional success (Jacobs 1996).

It turns out that the principle of meritocracy, which includes women on the level of access to education, is not applicable after obtaining a diploma. The same document that 'gives a lot' to men, 'gives little' to women; in other words, their diplomas are useless in the labor market. Logically, if we take into account the objective fact that professional success is largely due to educational achievements, then increasing women's 'access to diplomas' should bring about changes in 'gender parity in the occupational structure' (Bradley 2000). But this is not the case: "The occupational distribution of women and men has changed little recently" (Bradley 2000). As a consequence, women as a social group still occupy – in comparison with men – lower levels of the social and professional status pyramid.

To conclude this passage, I would like to mention two important theoretical approaches that provide a basis for analyzing the various problems in it. The first is called the theory of direct gender hierarchy. Its essence is the conviction of male domination in society and discrimination against women. The main categories involved are gender equality and inequality. It is assumed that the dominance of men and the resulting forms of inequality have a structural nature. This approach is consistent with the conviction that women and men are "competing groups with different opportunities on the market" (I shall add – in the entire social life). In this tradition, the categories of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are static and internally integrated; sometimes even the distinct nature of women and men is cited in relation to biological determinism (Gullvag Holter 2005).

In turn, from the perspective of structural theory of inequality, "general trends in discrimination or inequality and their causes, but not necessarily those related to the gender hierarchy per se" are sought. Here, gender inequalities are analyzed in the context of wider problems of social stratification (often using a class model). Critics of this approach point out that, as Oystein Gullvag Holter puts it, "structures of structural inequality are often relatively hidden and difficult to identify, especially when they seem to have a neutral nature in the context of sexes". Also, in this approach, "the acting entity capable of autonomous action" seems to disappear (Gullvag Holter 2005, pp. 18–19).

It seems to me that both these approaches are justified and their use depends on the analysis of a particular problem. In some contexts, there is a clear opposition in social life between the groups referred to as 'men' and 'women'. The dividing lines in terms of access to various forms of socialization and identity, as well as education and the labor market, run along the line of

gender segregations. Other times, it seems that it is social origin that determines this access. Therefore, these approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as complementary to each other.

Finally, the third problem that I would like to address relates to those socio-cultural constructions of female identity that are linked to the ideology of consumption, as well as the fragmentation and relativization of the category of femininity. It is hard not to notice that, in contemporary society, femininity is constructed 'around consumption'. Firstly, the woman is definitely a consumer (though often an indecisive one). Secondly, her identity is constructed by 'consuming' various *images*. Thirdly, and finally – from a different perspective – femininity and women are the 'object' of consumption. Here, it seems that on the level of consumption, 'everything is possible' – a woman can construct and reconstruct herself in almost any given way, and the broadly-defined popular culture gives her an unlimited number of choices in this area. This does not mean that currently the traditional 'Victorian corset' does not exist – paradoxically, however, it is created by the unlimited freedom to construct one's own self and the cultural pressure on constant 'retuning' according to the changing requirements regarding the shape of the body and identity. At the level of consumption and pop culture, discourses of femininity are spinning faster and faster. A woman has a historically unprecedented freedom of choice but (paradoxically again) her enslavement consists in the fact that she must constantly choose. For example, as far as the body is concerned, fashion, advertising, the cosmetics industry and women's magazines convey one basic message: 'keep up'. And so the woman has to 'jump' from one image to another, reconstructing herself in accordance with the annual, seasonal, monthly, almost momentary rhythm of change set by the ideology of consumption (cf. Gromkowska-Melosik 2001).

Of course, the 'tyranny of choices' concerns not only the visual aspects of female identity (and her aspirations for having a beautiful, 'forever young' body), but also her characterological traits. According to popular magazines, depending on the social system of reference in which she is located, a woman should be either a passive and incapable-of-making-decisions 'housewife', or a dynamic, entrepreneurial and active businesswoman. She should be 'meticulous' or 'synthetic', subordinate or dominant, unavailable or seductive, open/closed, shy/promiscuous, ready for making a sacrifice / egocentric, brittle/strong, empathetic/assertive etc. So how to find oneself in a constant desire to be super-feminine and desired by men, full of 'feminine charm', and at the same achieve social and professional successes, which undoubtedly are not facilitated by a charming or empathetic way of thinking or being? How to be

a good mother and wife at the same time, and how to run a home perfectly and simultaneously pursue one's interests and develop internally?

Sometimes, when analyzing the discourse of consumption and popular culture, one gets the impression that a woman should be like a radio – 'tune in' to a given moment, to a given frequency and be 'appropriate' to the situation; that she should have unlimited potential for 'tuning'. At the same time be this, that, and something else altogether. She should be everything. However, she herself usually wants to be 'some specific kind' and clearly defined, not just a collection of 'interchangeable' and freely transformable images.

In the 'cultural mess' of the first decades of the 21st century, a woman may more and more often feel like an Aborigine in the streets of New York – she does not know how to find herself in the tangle of contradictory images and desires which are constructed in her by the society. Have a child or write a doctoral thesis? Accept the prominent position and travel around the world, or clean up at home and be happy when the husband likes the soup? Wear feminine, gauzy dresses and high heels or an almost male suit? Be empathetic, soft and good (and lose everything that is possible), or tough and determined (and be forever lonely or a three-time divorcée)? As a result, more and more women are seeking clear answers to their life dilemmas, clear answers to the questions: who to be? how to be? how to think?

The culture of consumption is not willing to answer these questions. On the contrary – the discourses of femininity are evolving faster and faster. The logic (or interest) of the consumer society requires uncertainty in terms of one's own identity, instability and the search for new images. Fragments of identity lie on supermarket shelves and are visualized on the pages of favorite magazines, in the narrations of favorite soap operas. It seems that there are no answers, only being 'condemned' to continuous, often ephemeral choices mentioned above (Melosik 1996, pp. 107–108). In this situation of ambiguity – as Zbyszko Melosik writes – for millions of women, it is precisely this "»withdrawal into the body« that is one of the possible rational answers". "Controlling one's own body (sometimes, every calorie and every stroke of a lipstick) gives a sense of control over life, no matter how misaligned this control may be". Paradoxically, it leads to a 'return to the past' and re-incapacitation of the woman in the 'trap of beauty'.

At the end of this text, it is worth trying to make a general prediction (on a macro-scale) of opportunities for women's access to a career, status and income. It seems that three variables will play an important role here: ideology, economics and demography. At this point, I shall focus my attention on the ideological factor, which stems from prevailing views on the social role and so-

cial 'destiny' of women. There are three possibilities here. The first one explicitly assumes asymmetry in this respect. Women are claimed to be biologically predisposed to motherhood, bringing up children and running a household. This is also how their biography is shaped. The social assumptions concerning their fate, resulting from a specific (particular) answer to the question of 'what does it mean to be a woman?', construct their fate. If such an approach is implemented in social practice, the prophecy contained in it will surely be fulfilled: women, deprived of access to the public sphere (education and diploma, labor market, jobs and income), will primarily give birth to and raise children and take care of hearth and home. They will reaffirm their 'destiny', the boundaries of which were previously defined by ideology.

The second case assumes ignoring sex/gender as a criterion for the division of social roles. In such an approach, a woman has (a socially accepted) possibility of giving up her orientation toward 'home and family'; she can compete with men for a diploma, job, income and status. Theoretically, there are conditions for 'equal opportunities' here, but – as everybody knows – in practice, early socialization and various social stereotypes (to a small extent in terms of access to education but, still, to a large extent among employers) often prevent women from 'equal' or 'fair' struggle for access to success. The essence of the third case is 'reverse discrimination', which consists in the so-called 'affirmative actions' – striving, by means of legal and formal actions, to create a parity in women's access to careers. And so, for example, a certain number of places for women at the Harvard Law faculty or Oxford Management faculty could be allocated 'in advance', as well as in managerial positions at large companies and, in a broader context, at the parliament.

I would like to comment further on these problems. It seems that in the case of highly developed countries, women's social and professional success opportunities depend, to a large extent, on factors of an economic and demographic nature (with which various ideologies are overlapped). And so, in a situation of increased demand for labor force, the labor market 'opens to women' – they have greater opportunities for mobility, both intra-generational and intergenerational. In a situation where employers are confronted, due to the lack of employees, with the need to eliminate jobs (which is tantamount to a reduction in profits), the choice is very simple, i.e. they accept women for work (for many of them, taking up any job is a form of 'upward' mobility; in the context of changing the social situation and gaining an income). It should be added that if such an economically justified practice becomes widespread in a society, changes occur at the level of social awareness. The ideology of 'classical essentialism', which reduces women's life opportuni-

ties to the role of a wife/mother/housewife/sexual object, is replaced by another social structure (at the level of 'common sense') – a 'woman of success', capable of taking up (professional) social roles, which in the past were the exclusive domain of men.

In contrast, in the case of countries with patriarchal fundamentalism, ideology usually prevails over economics in the sense that, even in the case of fundamental labor demand on the labor market, women do not have any professional opportunities, because social (traditionally reductionist) beliefs in this area block any changes. Even in a situation of economic crisis, there is no possibility of extending women's access to work or careers, as this would undermine the foundations of existing social structures. Another case of the primacy of ideology comes from the times of Soviet Russia – here, let us use female tractor drivers as a symbol. In such situation, ideological beliefs have primacy over economic imperatives.

At a time of rising unemployment (when many men are looking for a job) there is usually, at the level of consciousness, a shift towards essentialism – women are started to be perceived again in the light of their traditional features and attributes. As C. Kramarae and P.A. Treichler write, in a situation of economic depression, we are dealing with the questioning of women's emancipation and with growing popularity of anti-feministic ideas; a turn towards the 'old, softer ideals' of femininity (cf. Kramarae, Treichler 1992, p. 133). Then, there appears – in the mass media and in the 'public opinion' – the problem of the 'crisis of family and upbringing' and the 'crisis of maternity', the 'decline of traditional values' and other social threats, which are supposed to result, among other things, from women giving up performance of traditionally defined roles. The social constructs of femininity (emphasizing the idea of the 'return to femininity') begin to question the idea of sex/gender symmetry. In such situation, women have much fewer opportunities for any 'upward' mobility.

Here, we can refer to the concept of backlash, introduced into the theory of culture by Susan Faludi, which means an 'anti-feminist counterattack' directed against the emancipation of women. According to Faludi, four 'backlashes' appeared in recent history – each of them corresponded to a specific phase of women's emancipation (mid-19th century, early 20th century, early 1940s and early 1970s). The last of these 'backlashes' contained the following (reactive) myths/messages, widely disseminated in the society: fertility of women decreases significantly after the age of thirty (so it is necessary to give birth to children as soon as possible – even at the expense of education and professional work – because 'later it will be too late'); divorces result in a significant

reduction of women's standard of living; academic diploma significantly reduces the possibilities of finding a husband; mental problems of many women are the result of ('unhealthy') prioritizing of professional careers over ('natural') raising of children (Faludi 1992, p. 37). Another variant of a backlash states that women are very unhappy because of their newly established social status based primarily on the principle of equality – for which, above all, feminism is to blame. Here, it is critically claimed that independence and career are in contradiction with 'true happiness', which can only be found in the 'natural roles' of a wife and mother (Coppock et al. 1995, p. 5). This approach refers to two groups of women whose lives negatively verify the accomplishments of feminism. The first one is those who try to combine professional and domestic work, but they feel that both love and family suffer from it, because they "have set themselves too high a priority in the area of self-satisfaction" (Coppock et al. 1995, p. 5). The second group includes women who have devoted themselves exclusively to their professional careers in order to "discover that this is not as wonderful as it seemed". The final conclusion is as follows: "No woman, not even a »super-woman« is able to limitlessly do what she has always done at home plus what men do at work". She has to give up something and usually, as it is emphasized, the family loses in consequence. The conclusion is clear in this context. We ought to return to traditional roles and life attitudes, old values and 'clearly-defined roles for women and men – a strict distinction between the public and private spheres'. Again, men's main role is to 'provide for the family' and women are to raise children, run the house and support their husbands (Coppock et al. 1995). Of course, due to fundamental legal and awareness changes, it is not possible to 'go back to the past' (especially since women in Western countries know how to fight for their rights). The dynamics of change takes place at the level of 'daily pressures' or reconstructions of aspirations and life goals done by women step by step (from professional success to family and motherhood).

The cycle described above may be repeated from decade to decade, depending on the economic situation and labor market needs. In each of these cases, we are dealing with the primacy of economics over ideology. There is no doubt that the 'scheme' presented here is simplified – in current social practice, changes in the perception of social roles and opportunities of women are never obvious, they do not change consciousness and reality in a radical way. They take the form of 'ideological fluctuations', various (sometimes minor) 'reconstructions' of everyday practices or 'affective panics' concerning the answer to the question: 'What does it mean to be a true woman'? It seems, however, that it is no longer possible to permanently reverse emancipation trends –

in the context of education and, further, life situation of women. Let us finish this article with this optimistic conclusion.

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