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## THE CONTEMPORARY WOMAN IN FAMILY LIFE AND PROFESSIONAL WORK – SELECTED PROBLEMS FROM THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

**Abstract.** The article reviews the research and critical analysis of the status of women in social (family and professional) life, referring to the theoretical concepts dominating in social sciences in recent decades. One of the important problems of the contemporary society seems to be the still culturally conditioned, unequal access of women and men to socially valued goals, which is exemplified by scientific careers of women, the specificity of which is presented in the final part of the article.

**Keywords:** woman, family, professional career.

### 1. Introduction

The review of the state of knowledge on gender issues leads to the conclusion that studies on the social roles of women and men became a very important research topic in the twentieth century. Especially feminist concepts try to break away from the stereotype concerning the role of women in social life – a thought that has its roots in concepts seeking justification for gender inequality in biological conditions. For most contemporary researchers, the cultural determination of such social inequalities is obvious, although the specificity of cultural conditions in a given place and time requires constant clarification. It is worth stressing that the roles of women are culturally conditioned both in the spatial dimension, because these

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roles are defined differently by different cultures, and in the temporal dimension, because there is a change in the perception of the role of women in social life within these cultures, although with different dynamics. In recent decades, we have seen significant changes in European culture in terms of women's participation in social life, which, although affected by political circumstances, have become one of the most progressive elements of cultural development throughout Europe.

Recognising this tendency, the Authors of the article decided to critically analyse the status of women in social life, referring to the theoretical concepts dominating in social sciences in recent decades. One of the important problems of the contemporary society seems to be the still culturally conditioned, unequal access of women and men to socially valued goals, which is exemplified by scientific careers of women, the specificity of which is presented in the final part of the article.

The discussion of the problem began from a functional perspective, dominating in sociology from the 1940s to 1960s.

## **2. The functional and anthropological perspective in the definition of gender roles**

Functional structuralism treats the society as a system and assumes that the majority of its members have a coherent catalogue of values and beliefs useful in maintaining a systemic balance and social order. Functionalists refer to biological differences between women and men, which are perceived as determinants of different gender roles and consequent behaviours. Functionalists have made the nuclear family a basic component of the social system, formally integrated by a marriage act, living in a certain physical distance from relatives and performing two very important functions: the socializing function and the stratifying function. Spouses/parents carry out specific tasks with different and specialised roles within the family system. Some of them are instrumental in nature, relating to the manner of exercising power and making strategic decisions, connected with professional work (the role of a man), while others are connected with securing the expressive sphere (the role of a woman). In a nuclear family, the strategic and decisive role is therefore played by the man, while the reproductive role of the woman is related to the social role that comes down to staying at home, satisfying the emotional needs of family members, caring for and raising children. Treating the instrumental and expressive role as separate, or in principle mutually exclusive, resulted in the division of family life into two spheres: private (female family reality) and public (male professional work reality) (Parsons 1955: 16–23).

The anthropological theory of a Man – Hunter, referring to the functional perspective, reconstructs his fate in prehistoric times, pointing to adaptive sources of functional gender differentiation. At the beginning of evolution, as a result of

anatomical changes caused by climate change and the need to adapt to living on earth, the ancestors of man were forced to give up life in tropical forests and master the skills of two-leg walking, resulting in anatomical changes, with significant consequences especially for women. As a result of these transformations, children began to be born almost entirely unable to live independently and increasingly dependent on the care of mothers. This resulted in women's mobility being held back and men taking over the role of family supporters, which has significantly increased their chances of survival. The long-term effect of these transformations was the development of different, adaptive personality traits related to roles in both sexes. Since then, women have been adapted to act as empathic mothers as babysitters, while men have had their emotions, and aggressive attitudes and behaviour augmented (Lovejoy 1981).

However, feminist anthropologists find two stereotypical references in the Man – Hunter theory. The first is ethnocentrism, which consists in referring to one's own cultural practices as superior – hence the accusation of invalidity of the division into characteristics and behaviours of women and men and the model of the only just relations between women and men are universal and evolutionary unchangeable. The second criticized perspective is androcentrism, which increases the importance and significance of the social role of men and reduces the role of women to passive parenthood (Conkey 1997; Ehrenberg 1997). It has to be admitted, however, that in the current reality many skills are related to the male role of the hunter (e.g. cooperation or competition on the basis of aggressive behaviour).

Tanner and Zihlman (1976) shed new light on the role of women in evolution. According to their theory, the physiological changes that occurred as a result of the transition of the primitive human being to bipedal walk did not make women and children dependent on men, and even activated women to take action to protect their offspring from predators and seek new forms of transporting children and collecting food by hand (Ehrenberg 1997). The feminist reconstruction of the past made it possible to formulate a thesis that it was women and their creativity that brought about the then new forms of simultaneous transport of large quantities of food (Bleier 1984). As a result of the search for evidence questioning male domination, the feminist theory of the Woman – Gatherer was created as an alternative to the theory of the Man – Hunter. In this oppositional juxtaposition, however, we are dealing with a visible entanglement in cultural references to femininity and masculinity (Eller 2000).

Functional diversity shaped in the course of human species development has been institutionally sanctioned and is still the subject of reflection and discussion concerning the family.

### 3. Gender as a determinant of the role of the woman in the society

At the end of the 20th century, the functional perspective was criticised, especially with regard to the sharp differentiation of social roles into feminine and masculine, and the isolated nature of the nuclear family (Jayakody, Chatters 1997; Neighbors 1997). First of all, the attribution of a biological basis to family forms and organization was questioned, emphasizing the cultural context of the forms of family life and divisions of work in the family.

Critical positions towards structural functionalism are reinforced by the achievements of contemporary primatology. The latest research in this field indicates the matricentric structure of most groups of primates, the biological and social dependence of group members and the dominant role of females. In addition, recent research has shown that females have a key role to play in the creation of the structure of primate societies (Angier 2001).

Research conducted in various regions of the world today does not confirm either the general thinking about the existence of inequalities between women and men, or the universality of Western role models. The results of these studies show that although each society is characterised by a division of labour based on age and gender, the assignment of women and men to specific jobs is different, depending on the society and its cultural determinants (Angier 2001; Bonvillain 1998; Lepowsky 1994).

It should be stressed that the hitherto reflections on the social roles of women and men focused on a transformative approach to the development of gender, in the light of which biology and culture interact. This indicates the possibility of changing the behaviour of an individual under the influence of environmental, biological or physiological factors (Birke 1992: 74–76). For example, S. Freud's identification theory assumes that gender socialisation begins in early childhood when a child unconsciously begins to model their behaviour based on the pattern of a parent of the same sex. Erikson, on the other hand, emphasizes on the biological aspect, claiming that the development of the psychological sphere that encourages women to engage in caring for others is influenced by their reproductive capacity. The theory of social learning indicates, however, that gender is acquired through the use of positive reinforcement (rewards) or negative reinforcement (penalties) and imitation. In opposition to this position, however, there are theories of cognitive development, emphasizing the activity of children in the search for knowledge and their ability to critically evaluate it (Bem 1983). Children organise their own experiences and observations according to specific patterns using categories and schemes, and gender is a scheme that is characterised by unambiguity of assessment criteria and ease of identification. In the light of the theory of cognitive development, the socialization of children is directed towards the acceptance of the gender patterns of a given society (the process of enculturation, i.e. growing into culture). It takes place not only in

everyday life but is also present in social practices and media messages showing culturally significant differences (Bem 2000).

From a sociological perspective, the family is perceived as the place where the basic processes of restoring collective order – reproduction of population and social and economic order – are carried out at the lowest level (Giza-Poleszczuk 2005). On the other hand, educators describe the family in the perspective of the determinants of the processes of care, upbringing, socialization and education of the child as an entity centrally located in the family system. What is characteristic here is the functional approach to the family and its perception as a care and educational environment (Naumiuk 2003; Lepalczyk, Pilch 1995), linked to a network of various structures and social systems (Kawula 2006; 2009). This dual systemic optics of family life integrates the sociological and pedagogical perspective.

The multidimensionality of family life is emphasized by the definition formulated by Szczepański (1970: 70), who presented in the social, formal, legal, psychological, caring and educational aspect. The constitutive elements of the family were the persons “[...] who are linked by a marital and parental relationship and a strong interpersonal bond, while the parental relationship is used in a broad, social and legal sense of the term, reinforced as a rule by natural law, customs and cultural context”. It is therefore a definition that presents the (already classic nowadays) image of a family as a small primary group.

However, family and marriage structures are subject to evolutionary changes in almost all cultural circles, but this trend is particularly visible in liberal societies. The shape of the contemporary family is modelled by the pressure of subjectivist social trends, and permissive ideologies that significantly weaken the marital ethos. The structure of intra-family bonds is loosening and there are serious disturbances in the extra-material functions of the family (Płopa 2007; Gaś 2003).

In each of the eras distinguished by sociologists – the pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial – the directions of evolution of the family were adequate to the directions of civilization changes. In the *pre-industrial* era, it took on an institutional form because of its productive and patriarchal nature. The man had power and controlled family life, while the woman was forced to combine domestic work with production work (directed by the man). In the *industrial* era, the distance in family relations was significantly reduced, while the family was closed to external influences. With the advent of the new era of “freedom, democracy and equality”, the division of social roles between women and men has been significantly reduced (Kwak 2009). A new model has been developed based on close and direct family relationships, referred to as a partner family with two working parents or a domestic partnership (Ranzetti, Curran 2005). *Post-industrial* societies have seen the rise of cohabitant partnerships and other forms of family life, which have placed women in a position independent of men, free from the rigid ties of “femininity” and the roles associated with it.

The transformation of the patriarchal family model dominating until the end of the 19th century included the basic system of intra-family structural forces. This was due to the relative emancipation of wives and children, among other things. These processes were initiated as a result of progressive industrialization, political, legal, economic, moral and social changes and strong regional differentiation. The emergence of libertarian tendencies led to the transformation of a dependent lifestyle into an autonomous one (Tyszka 2001; Krzysteczko 2006; Wilk 2002). The traditional system of roles and social positions in the family was modified, which resulted in the evolution of the family from an institutional and patriarchal form to a partnership.

At the end of the 20th century, numerous mutations occurred within the traditional family model. As a result, they gave a mosaic-like picture of various forms of family life. This group of families also includes all relationships between people and partnerships in sexual and economic relations, which have the characteristics of a small social group but are not formal relationships (Kawula 2006). New forms of family life were created as a result of the successive weakening of the normative (moral) framework of the traditional form of family life in the married model.

#### **4. The role of women in the family and professional life in Western culture**

In order to describe a contemporary woman in two interrelated spheres of social life – the family and the professional sphere – one should refer to the results of research explorations carried out in this field by sociologists and psychologists, indicating the pedagogical aspects of the penetrated issues.

Nowadays, the sharp division of family life into private and public spheres has become blurred, as they have become interdependent. There have also been changes in the division of labour. Depending on the specificity of a given society, the activities traditionally attributed to women are performed by men and vice versa – women undertake to perform jobs previously considered to be men's jobs. The results of numerous studies on the division of domestic work show that despite changes in this area of family functioning (increased participation of men in daily household duties), women still perform domestic work more often and to a much greater extent than men. The cultural stereotype of "femininity" and "masculinity" is somewhat responsible for this. Each of them is represented by a specific set of gender-related psychological characteristics formed during early socialisation and participation of the child in social life (Bem 2000; Kuczyńska 1992). An interesting indicator of "femininity" is the consistency of mental traits with the biological sex and women's avoidance of behaviours associated with male social roles. Femininity is compatible with the high rank of marriage and

family and the good quality of social contacts and the satisfaction with making them. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the femininity model achieves high scores on social attractiveness scales, its adaptive significance is much lower than the masculinity model (Mikulska 1999).

Research conducted by R. Blood and D. Wolfe in 1960, and thus during the period of nuclear family dominance, showed that relations between spouses were based on the relationship of power, usually exercised by men, but that women also began to influence the decisions they made at that time, in proportion to their personal resources (level of education, level of income, social position). The results of these studies have been confirmed in cyclically repeated explorations of this issue. It turned out that better-paid partners have more power in the family, but modern women still have little influence on family decisions in most cases, regardless of their income level. This is particularly the case in marriages or domestic partnerships where the spouses have internalized traditional roles attributed to women and men (Thompson, Walker 1989).

A study conducted by Pyke (1994) found that women's paid employment and unpaid work as housewives have an impact on the power held. He stated that women who had remarried had given up paid work and took up the role of housewives. This was done by those women who, during their first relationship, worked in a position of low prestige and low income. It turned out that in the first marriage, paid work did not entitle them to exercise authority in the family, hence in the second marriage they decided to give up their professional career. They no longer treated it as a source of influence on family decisions.

The quality of marriage is much more important for women than men in terms of the sense of overall satisfaction with life. Studies initiated in the 1980s on the feeling of satisfaction with married life indicate that the more women share responsibility for the development of children with men and have the opportunity to participate in decision-making, the more satisfied they feel with their relationship (Ferree 1991). In democratically managed families where spouses are convinced of equal power sharing, women are more likely than men to care for the emotional state of their partners and adapt to their needs and requirements (Kudson-Martin, Mahoney 1998). The gender-based division of roles weakens not only women's but also men's ability to develop an equal relationship, as it requires equal participation in responsibility for children and the home, involvement in obtaining financial resources and exercising power (decision-making). However, in families of this type, mothers provide physical proximity, protect, support and care for their children more than fathers (Darling-Fisher, Tiedje 1990).

In building a satisfactory marriage relationship, difficulties in communicating with the partner are a problem. The results of research in this field indicate that communication turbulence is not only created by impulsive women, but also by those escaping into the world of fantasy, moody and chronically stressed. The quality of marital life is also adversely affected by female attributes such as:

excessive sensitivity, distrust, suspicion, frustration, low mood, self-criticism, problems with controlling emotions or a sense of inferiority (Płopa 2007). Women with a reduced sense of self-fulfilment and lower level of perceived professional satisfaction are more anxious to perform parental tasks, and their children are less socially adapted in comparison with the children of mothers who derive satisfaction from work (Kornacka-Skwara 2002).

The vast majority of modern women are burdened with “two-shift work” – paid work done for the first half of the day and unpaid domestic work in the second half of the day, which results in a serious limitation of their free time (Coltraine 2000). Women are usually entangled in everyday activities. They routinely carry out cleaning and meal preparation work. More often than men, they feel compelled to perform them (Shelton 1992; Hochschild 1997). Their sense of discomfort increases with longer working hours, as spending many hours at work disturbs family life, generates stress and conflicts (Blair-Loy 2001).

When a child is born in the family, the woman takes primary care of the child, even when she is employed. It is a dominant model in both traditional and partner families (Deutsch 1999). It provides women with the opportunity to establish strong links with their offspring and to participate directly in their development. These experiences are the source of their emotional fulfilment. They place them in a position that links three generations and maintains intra-family intergenerational ties (Arendel 2000). Women are also the carers of the family seniors. They are also involved by their adult children in the care and education of their grandchildren (Gallagher, Gerstel 2001).

In single-parent families, on the other hand, single mothers often experience a sense of alienation because they spend all their energy on balancing work and childcare. According to research, the biggest problem is finance (Seccombe 2000). Women are much more likely to make pro-divorce decisions than men, but at the same time show a higher level of stress (Płopa 1997). In a situation of no-fault divorce, women not only suffer greater economic losses than men, but also more often take custody of their children and are more exposed to the negative, financial and emotional consequences of divorce (Porter, Dupree 2001).

Today's women have a different range of family influences than men. However, their position is much lower than that of men, which is caused, *inter alia*, by the difference in income and access to material resources. Women's work is not valued on the labour market and is significantly less paid than men's work in the same job. Moreover, many employers and employees are convinced that women do not have the ability (in the physical and emotional sphere) to perform the numerous professions culturally associated with men. This unpegs discriminatory behaviour of employers against women, especially with regard to the recruitment process for a specific position and career advancement. Unpegged and socially conscious stereotypes about the social roles of women and men confirm and reinforce gender segregation in the workplace. This translates into women's employment in lower



positions and a glaring gender pay gap. Women working in the “two-shift” system (home and work) are doubly burdened – they have more responsibilities but less income. So far, all legislation has failed to eliminate inequalities in terms of employment and equal pay for women and men.

An interesting illustration of this trend is, among other things, the scientific careers of women. Bearing in mind that intellectual development is independent of biological traits associated with parenthood, which excludes the view that was dominant until the mid-19th century that the reason for the lower participation of women in science are their biological and psychological traits, i.e. lower ability of women to engage in scientific activity – one is left with consideration of cultural conditions as a determining factor for the lower participation of women in scientific careers. It is worth remembering that it was only in the 20th century that most universities began to accept women as students. In 1910 in Oxford and Cambridge there were almost a thousand women studying, but they needed permission to attend lectures and could not obtain degrees. In Poland, after regaining independence in 1918, women could study at all universities, but it was difficult for them to climb up the academic ladder (Perkowska 1996). After the war, the number of female doctors increased, but there was no increase in the number of higher grades and titles. It was as late as the 1980s that a woman became a rector in Poland. It was prof. Maria Joanna Radomska, who in 1981–1987 headed the Warsaw University of Life Sciences (Młodożeniec, Knapieńska 2013).

There is now a prevailing view that the main reason for the decline in women’s participation in scientific careers is social, cultural and religious conditions, which in various ways limit women’s ability to engage in scientific activities and achieve success in this field. The important question is, however, what type of cultural conditions these are and whether they are discriminatory and, if so, to what extent.

The participation of women in scientific promotions, which is reflected by the data of the Central Statistical Office, is an important argument for reflection on this subject. The CSO states that in 2017/2018, 45.1% of participants in doctoral programmes were men and 54.9% of them were women. In 2017, the degree of doktor habilitowany (*doctor habilitatus*) in 2017 was awarded to significantly fewer women than men – 922 men and 753 women. Hypothetically, it can be assumed (no research on this subject has been conducted) that women decide to have children during doctoral studies, which explains to some extent the decrease in the number of habilitations among women. However, the significant disproportion between women and men with regard to obtaining the title of professor cannot be explained by biological or cultural factors related to the role of the mother. In 2012, the share of women in the total number of professorial titles awarded was 27.5%, in 2013 – 29.8%, in 2014 – 34.3%, in 2015 – 28.3%, in 2016 – 33.3%, in 2017 – 33.2%<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Professorial titles were awarded to: 535 men and 202 women in 2012, 451 men and 190 women in 2013, 644 men and 336 women in 2014, 477 men and 188 women in 2015, 265 men and 132 women in 2016, 197 men and 98 women in 2017 (CSO 2019).

The above data indicate unequivocally a much smaller share of women in professorial promotions in relation to men and an increase in the disproportions in this respect, in relation to the scientific promotion resulting from obtaining the degree of doktor habilitowany. Taking into account the average age at which women decide to have children and the average age of scientific advancement, it is clear that the decline in the proportion of women in professorial advancement is not due to decisions on motherhood and the upbringing of offspring. This cannot also be impacted by biological factors associated with perceptual differences which, although they occur between women and men, only indicate less lateralisation of the brains of men, meaning that men are more dependent on one hemisphere of the brain for different tasks, while women benefit from both hemispheres in the same situation (Gazzaniga 1992; Shaywitz et al. 1995; Blum 2000).

Taking into account the logic of social reasoning contained in the Bayes theorem (Bayes 1763, cited in: Matuszewski 2017), who noted that the initial beliefs (e.g. about the nature of women) in confrontation with new data have a significant impact on the final beliefs, it should be pointed out that the search for sources of differences in the academic careers of women and men in cultural gender stereotypes is justified, especially as the available scientific research excludes biological determination as a real source of such inequalities.

Undoubtedly, therefore, the example of the specificity of women's scientific careers in higher education opens up an interesting research space related to the definition of the actual social conditions blocking or delaying women's professional careers and defining the place of women in public space in the modern society.

As a conclusion one can recommend permanently up-to-date study that illustrates the presented issue. It is a book by Przemysław Wiśniewski (*Un) equalled Women in the Academic System*, which consists interviews with the famous female academicians like prof. Renata Siemieńska or prof. Lena Kolarska-Bobińska. The author of the book remarks: "Every year many women that are excellently prepared 'fall off' that noble competition for the sake of the knowledge development. Allegedly egalitarian, non-discriminatory scientific world generates many restrictions for all those people that have not been supposed to participate for a long time". It is important to reflect on whether the mechanisms that we are more or less aware of, that are more or less intentional and do not give equal development chances for women in the academic system frequently governed by men do not represent an important obstacle for more dynamic development of scientific knowledge and humanisation of social life.

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## **WSPÓŁCZESNA KOBIETA W ŻYCIU RODZINNYM I PRACY ZAWODOWEJ – WYBRANE PROBLEMY Z PERSPEKTYWY SOCJOLOGICZNEJ I PEDAGOGICZNEJ**

**Abstrakt.** W artykule zaprezentowano przegląd badań i krytyczną analizę dotyczące statusu kobiet w życiu społecznym (rodzinnym i zawodowym), odnosząc się do teoretycznych pojęć dominujących w naukach społecznych w ostatnich dziesięcioleciach. Jednym z ważnych problemów współczesnego społeczeństwa wydaje się być wciąż uwarunkowany kulturowo, nierówny dostęp kobiet i mężczyzn do społecznie cenionych celów, czego przykładem są kariery naukowe kobiet, których specyfika została przedstawiona w końcowej części artykułu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kobieta, rodzina, kariera zawodowa.