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### 3. (L)EARNING POWER

#### *Gender and Power Based on the Commitment to Marital Relation*

Power in marriage depends on the social and cultural norms regarding gender roles and expectations addressed to spouses and families. In European societies men are culturally provided with family power, and are called “heads of families”, but together with an increase in the level of economic development power granted to women grows. Such a scheme of power relations is transmitted both in the process of socialization, and gained by women and men in the process of learning, understood as active and social behavior in which meanings are created in order to better understand the reality. Those meanings are formed *inter alia* through interactions with others (Bron, 2006). In this perspective, marital relation becomes one of the space of learning, including learning and negotiating power.

#### GENDER AND THE SOCIALIZATION TO POWER

In the process of socialization children learn the basic principles of power and social influence. Initially this learning is through the family, but later through other social institutions such as school, peer groups, through work and in public life. A family, as the basic context of power, is also a place where the groundwork is prepared for future close, intimate relationships and all other relationships based on power. Children observe who has power, how a person behaves when he/she has it or when he/she comes under it. Lips (1991) lists three principles of power, which are gained in the process of socialization and informal learning. Children learn that power:

1. *is transmitted socially*, sometimes against the rules of logic and in a very arbitrary way; they learn that some people are more important than others, such as adults being more important than children, and men than women.
2. *may be the result of negotiations*, and they may be open or hidden; that it is better to cooperate than be in conflict; that it is easier to gain power or to negotiate it when you have some resources, or something to offer.
3. *can be above the law*. They learn that one can experience the submission to other people, or be forced to submit to it even when the power of those people is unjustified; sometimes they learn that it is a “natural” state and should be accepted (Mandal, 2008, pp. 88–89).

The implementation of those principles in private, intimate relationships has its own gender specific. In the process of socialization women and men are prepared to perform certain social roles based on gender: they acquire a variety of patterns of private relationships as well as learn their place and ways of functioning according to gender. Women are taught in society to focus on private relationships and on the roles of a wife and a mother; in stereotypical terms, to be feminine it means being gentle, sensitive, staying at home and taking care of children. To be male it means being independent, competent, self-confident, demonstrating initiative and being the head of a family, including making a family feel safety and providing with money to survive (Strykowska, 1992, pp. 14–15).

The process of differentiation and activation of different behaviors as well as development of different characteristics regarding gender starts and runs mostly in a family. Daughters are taken care very carefully: they experience more indulgence and understanding; they are allowed more often to express their feelings; they care more about their appearance; they are also more limited in going out (Ostrouch, 2004). *Stereotypical womens' socialization* connected with the formation of attitudes of care, sensitivity to the needs of others and sacrifice, promotes the development of passivity, submissiveness and subordination, *akin to attitudes specific to the role of a victim*.

The universality of the traditional family model, in which a woman is mostly engaged in household duties and taking care of dependent people – mostly children, delays the development of women's social and professional activities. This kind of family model is connected with historically and culturally grounded men's power. Unfortunately, a silent approval or impassivity of other family members, neighbours, managers and co-workers or institutions towards physical and psychological violence used by men against women and children is a strong consequence of that connection. Research shows that women who stay at home and are not professionally active quickly become victims of violence from their husbands, especially psychological and economic violence (Duch-Krzyszczek, 2007, pp. 223–234).

In case of sons the situation is slightly different. Parents are more willing to tolerate competitive attitudes and aggressive behaviour, particularly physical aggression. Aggression is often the only emotion openly expressed by fathers, and observed by their sons (Eichelberger, 1998). Emotional and physical distance, rigour and the use of punishments, including physical ones, are included in paternity models and relationships with children, especially with sons. In traditional, patriarchal family models, respect and admiration, sometimes with fear, are above all the basic feelings that should be shown by a child to a father (Oleś, 2000). Traditional stereotypes of “pure masculinity” and the social order of being an authority for children generates many problems and difficulties in building open and intimate relationships, especially between a father and a son; a relationship, which is made more difficult by authoritarianism, egoism and violence (Biddulph, 2003).

It also includes positive reactions of parents when boys are successful and “victorious” and avoidance of the the label “loser”. It should be emphasised that girls do not receive such labels as quickly as boys in case of failure (Goldberg, 1979). Though early socialization experiences boys learn to express assertive attitudes, without emotion, except when they express anger. They are not allowed to express any sign of weakness or intimacy. They are stimulated to be active, to develop a sense of competence and to control their emotions. They are taught how to develop the feature and attitudes related to leadership training. They are taught self-sufficiency and encouraged to make an effort to expand the boundaries of their abilities. Traditional male socialization is focused on developing their self-control and dominance (Golczyńska-Grondas, 2004; Biddulph, 2003). The analysis of existing research clearly shows that *the traditional socialization and male stereotypes* (physical strength, emotional coldness, tendency towards aggression, risky behaviour and domination), *the traditional pattern of paternity* (focusing on the role of breadwinner, physical and emotional absence, authoritarianism) as well as *stereotypical pattern of father – son relationship* (“reasonable” authoritarianism, consent to inflict severe punishment on boys) *are factors encouraging men to adopt behaviors specific to the role of a perpetrator of violence, through having power* (Chmura-Rutkowska & Ostrouch, 2007).

All of these powerful socialization messages play an extremely important role in the genesis and duration of private relationships; they include *intellectual training*, connected with the development of intellectual differences between men and women, *emotional training* – indicating different expression and strength of emotions regarding gender, and *social training* – consisting of learning a gendered place in society (Mandal, 2000, p. 38). What should be emphasised here is the wider context of those messages connected with progressive individualization of human life, collapse of state-sanctioned “normal” biographies, role models, including those related to gender (Beck, 1992). It also extends in Poland and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to the transformation of political and economic systems and socio-cultural change. Stereotypically-shaped women and men, who want to use the potential of change that brings them a new socio-cultural reality, and who try to create different private relationships from their families of origin, are typically forced to work out and to learn new rules regulating their relations. That also applies to the sphere of power in marriage.

#### GENDER AND POWER IN PRIVATE RELATIONSHIPS

Power is a fundamental and omnipresent phenomenon in society; it exists also in private relationships. Today, in the discourse of psychology power, it is defined as “the ability to influence others and to control them, the ability to make other person do what we want, even though internal resistance” (Mandal, 2008, p. 29). However power can be also defined in relation to the commitment and resources available to spouses. In this case, it can be understood as “the ability to change the condition of

other people by being able to supply or withdraw resources” (Ibidem). Thus, power in close, intimate relationships may be defined as:

- the ability of a person to make requirements of another person and execute them,
- the ability to carry out one’s own will, even in the case of resistance from another person,
- the control of important resources.

Mandal (2008, p. 80) argues that power in private relationships is characterized by certain, key features. Several of the features of power the author mentions include its:

- *relational nature* – power refers more to the characteristics of the relationship itself rather than to the characteristics of the individual;
- *dynamics and variability* – power is not static;
- *connection with the asymmetry in relationships* – power is often connected with predominance of one person over the other, but the power in one sphere may be compensated by the opposite situation in other spheres, so the general correlation can be symmetrical;
- *multidimensionality* – power contains individual elements (e.g., intellectual level, needs, values, etc.), interactive ones (who makes key decisions and who decides about the methods of their implementation, therefore the strategic and executive level of power) and socio-cultural ones (social expectations towards women and men).

These features are specific to power in private, intimate relations, which being a kind of social power, is significantly different from power in professional or political organizations, mainly because of its relational nature (Nęcki, 1990).

In the analyses of different power systems in private relations, there are two types of power (Mandal, 2008). The first type is based on *exaction* privileges, resulting from domination over a spouse, making him/her addicted to him/her. The second type of power is based on the *commitment* to relationship, resulting from the preferred system of values, self-esteem and respect for a spouse as a person. The second type of power resembles the “*good*” power as defined by Janeway (1981), which is power that allows people to achieve goals (as opposed to “*bad*” power, the essence of which involves dominance over others). Janeway emphasizes that in democratic structures and relations, including in marital ones, there should be no space for constant leadership by one partner, and also the fixed power of men over women. However, in western culture the possession or acquiring power by women as the ones mostly subordinated to the power of the family, requires the initiation and implementation of processes of “empowerment”, which means providing possibilities for people without power to act, and promoting gender equality so as both genders are freely able to achieve their own goals and benefit from them.

The above mentioned type of power based on the commitment to relationship is usually observed in egalitarian marriages, which are based on the principles of

equality, justice, freedom and openness, and that type of power is in the centre of my presentation.

In egalitarian relationships, if there is equal relationships regarding financial power, it is positively related to perceived satisfaction in relationship and there is less tendency of wives and husbands to use different social influence tactics (Mandal, 2008, p. 69). If such tactics occur, they are usually based on bargaining, as shown in the study by Howard, Blumstein and Schwartz (1986). Thus the choice of an egalitarian idea of a private relationship largely determines the choice of *bargaining/negotiating technique*, as justifying, endeavoring to a compromise and to offer an agreement, as the lead technique in the context of gender and power in private, intimate relationships.

At present, regarding the power between spouses in a family, the importance of individual factors such as education or professional activity is also stressed. In dual-career families, highly educated women have prestigious and well-paid jobs. Despite the fact that patriarchal culture does not provide women with power in private relationships, but today thanks to their education and financial independence, they have a similar chance to gain power in marriage as men to whom power is “given” as determined via the dominant gender stereotypes. However, the issue of power in egalitarian marriage is still an unrecognized sphere, especially in the context of changing gender roles and patterns in a family. Therefore I wanted to know via research how power based on the commitment to marital relations is constructed and achieved in everyday life. I derived answers to that question from the analysis of support strategies received and given by each of the spouses in the proces of achieving individual career goals as well as in achieving a common goal, which is the harmonious functioning of their marriage and family.

#### CONTEXT OF MY OWN RESEARCH

The main aim of my biographical research (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011) was to find answers to questions about how egalitarian relations between men and women are built in everyday life, how it becomes an individual biographical project; how the process of negotiations of everyday family life and relations proceed, and also what are the ways in which people achieve it. My intention was to understand and interpret the phenomenon of equality between spouses. I wanted to grasp the different meanings of egalitarian everyday family life as manifested by different narrators.

During several meetings I interviewed dual-career families: separately women and men, who were between 32 and 47 years old, professionally active, highly educated, who had been in a relationship for a minimum of three years, had children and lived with them. Issues raised in the interviews related to: biographical experiences of the family of origin, the meanings attributed to professional work, the ways of understanding and interpreting the phenomenon of gender equality, strategies of division of daily chores, reconciliation of work and family life, and the

meanings attributed to parental and intimate relations. I referred to the foundations of phenomenology of the family (Klein & White, 1996, pp. 106–109) in order to reach a reflective insight into inter-subjective family experiences.

SUPPORT STRATEGIES OF A SPOUSE AS AN EXAMPLE OF EARNING POWER  
BASED ON THE COMMITMENT TO MARITAL RELATION

The interviewees are seen as examples of active employees, focused on their development and achieving personal goals, for whom professional work is an extremely important sphere in life; important for both men and women, who even if they could stay at home and stop working, they would not do it. In fact work is one of central sources of women's self-concept, an inexhaustible source of self-esteem and dignity, building or increasing the feeling of being a partner in marital relations. Work and earned wages are not goals in themselves, but are means of achieving the specific vision of women's lives and "speaking in their own voices" - becoming a subject, a person, an individual.

For men professional involvement is a key component of their male role and the basis of a sense of personal agency. The income and self-esteem accumulated on the basis of earning money is the main source of male self-concept in relation to marital relations. The meaning of work revealed in narratives vary by narrator's gender. For women it is *a source of empowerment and liberation from traditionally assigned roles*. For men it is *a source of realizing the role of breadwinner, according to the traditional, male gender identity*.

The label "support" was revealed as a dominant category in narrations about spouses' work. Among the revealed strategies of support there is a triad of emotional support, and support strategies related to attitudes towards professional careers of the spouse as well as sharing chores and organizing the day. The first three strategies are called:

- "mutual interest and attention"
- "open communication", and
- "acceptance"

Interviewees who emphasized a high level of communication in their relationships regarding professional work and the career of both spouses often expressed a belief in their husbands' interest in women's professional role, their achievements, difficulties and plans. Because of this, they often had a greater sense of understanding, support and acceptance of women's choices:

I even have the impression that he is too burden by me. (...) We talk about it constantly – about my well-being, my self-esteem at work, what would change, about my problems. (III/7/Woman)

That sense has a positive effect on their self-esteem, self-acceptance in their role and declared general satisfaction of life. A sense of compassion and community in what they do was also very significant.

Open communication and interest in the field of professional activities were also what other women missed the most; much more than the possibility of a more balanced division of daily chores. They expressed a longing for acceptance of their actions by their husbands; they wanted them to be proud of them, and they were able to talk to them about those emotions. That openness in communication was also connected with the ability to express husbands' acceptance, particularly of wives' professional successes.

A specific type of support system that I call "a system of appearance" was to provide the wife with a full understanding of the specifics of her work, accompanied by husband's admiration for her ability to reconcile the many spheres of her life at the same time. However, that understanding did extend to support shown to his wife in daily family tasks and chores, and into interest in her professional career:

He understands everything but it does not give rise to his reflection.

(V/9/Woman)

The other two support strategies were connected with attitudes towards a spouse's career and the organization of everyday life. The first strategy was called "the strategy of 'lack of resistance' to spouse's self-development and career involvement". Interviewees – men had more problems with providing their wives with emotional support, but underlined that they told their wives nice words and compliments regarding their work successes. However, it seems that the greatest possible men's support offered to their wives, and simultaneously the biggest approval of their professional role, was the lack of objections to wife's development and her involvement in career:

As she must go somewhere, she goes. I do not make any remarks or coimplaints about that. But I know that there are colleagues at her work who make nasty remarks to their wives that they are not at home. (IV/6/Man)

This strategy of support was also emphasized by women and treated by them as real support received from their husbands. The fact that both women and men indicated husbands' acceptance showed to wives through lack of their resistance causes that this strategy seems to be one of the most frequently used strategies in interviewed marriages.

The second strategy of support offered mutually by the spouses was "the strategy of 'providing time'". It was connected with the dynamics of mutual sharing and taking over chores as well as looking after children by spouses, regulated by the level of involvement of a spouse in professional activities, its duration and the time of appearance. This strategy resembles a *dynamic partnership or equality* in meeting professional challenges:

If I know that I can not do some chores, because I have to go to work, I know for 100% that she will do it. But on the other hand, if she has to leave, or to get involved much more, she knows that I .... will do ... all those duties and chores. (VII/13/M)

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It is worth mentioning that this (temporary) taking responsibility for the sphere of family functioning, mostly for childcare, was treated as marital support mainly by men:

My ongoing support is probably then when my wife is overloaded with her work. In such a situation I take care of children and she does not have to worry about anything connected with them. (VIII/ 16/M)

Women emphasized this fact more seldom. The two of them were even so much convinced that childcare and daily chores belong to sphere of women and identified them as “female” that they did not treat their involvement in that sphere as an element of support:

I do not even think that this is my support to my husband. It is obvious to me that when he goes to work, I need to adjust. (V / 9 / K)

The reason for this difference has its roots in stereotypical gender socialization. “Support” was defined by interviewees mostly in terms of specific, additional, specially addressed activity to a spouse. Thus, daily women’s involvement in chores and childcare, being connected with traditional female role, could not be perceived by wives as support. Men treated daily chores as additional activity regarding their culturally defined role, so they not only indicated doing chores and childcare as a support to their wives, but also were able to perceive those activities as a support received from their wives.

Trying to explain deeply the meaning of described marital strategies of support we can refer to the concept of violence known as “coercive control” by Stark (2007), described in the book entitled *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. The purpose of this form of domestic violence is a deconstruction of being a person. The most important aspect here is not what men *do* to women, but what they *stop* them from doing. Strategies of mutual spouses’ support revealed in narratives, particularly the strategy of ‘lack of resistance’ may indicate the ongoing proces of power negotiations in interviewees’ families, striving for compromise and consensus, as well as the construction of equality from the same level of power in marital relations.

#### CONCLUSIONS: LEARNING POWER BASED ON THE COMMITMENT TO MARITAL RELATION

One of the meanings of work disclosed in narratives was work as the source of marital intimacy/privacy. That meaning was connected with a sense of shared experience, understanding, the perception of the world and other people, and finally reciprocity as a result of professional involvement of both a wife and a husband simultaneously. In the process of building and sharing this intimacy, a key position was occupied by showing interest to a spouse and open communication, also categorized as major strategies of support to a spouse in fulfilling his/her career aspirations.



Results of my research shows women and men's transgression of culturally defined female role, traditionally connected with family experiences and maternity (particularly in Polish culture of strong Mother-Pole pattern) (Ostrouch, 2005), and male role, connected with professional experience, towards the professional emancipation of women and the "domestication" of men. The process of learning and "earning" power based on the commitment to marital relation becomes the process of constructing gender equality in a family, as well as the process of women's empowerment. The abovementioned transgression can be observed only in those marriages in which spouses actively and deeply are engaged in constructing their relationship (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2012) in the process of informal learning from each other and with each other in interactions in everyday life. The process of (auto)reflection that initiates and deepens self-understanding as a condition of informal learning in relation to a spouse can initiate a real change in female or male identity, and support process of "work on identity", in which the dialogue takes place between *Me* and *I* (Mead, 1975).

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