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## ‘WOMEN OF CAREER’: WORK AS A VALUE AND A SOURCE OF EMPOWERMENT

**„Kobiety kariery”: praca zawodowa jako wartość i źródło upodmiotowienia kobiet**

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### Abstract

The author analyzes categories of work and career, understood as the space of experiencing personal satisfaction and self-efficacy. In this regard work has an emancipatory function, especially for women, for whom professional activity is a way to become independent. Different meanings of work for women are reconstructed in relation to the ways of their professional engagement: ‘women of work’, and ‘women of career’. The author is focused on the second type. As an example of a ‘woman of career’ it is described a case of one dual-career family interviewed, as a part of bigger biographical research on gender equality in dual-career marriages. The case analysis shows that woman’s professional biography is constructed around the central category of continuous development. Professional career becomes a source of empowerment, release from traditionally assigned gender roles, and a space of acknowledgement of human dignity.

**Keywords:** women, work, professional career, dual-career family, empowerment.

### Streszczenie

W artykule dokonano analizy kategorii pracy i kariery zawodowej, rozumianych jako przestrzeni doświadczania osobistej satysfakcji i budowania poczucia bycia skutecznym. W takim ujęciu praca pełni emancypacyjną funkcję, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do kobiet, dla których aktywność zawodowa jest sposobem na zdobycie autonomii. Różne znaczenia przypisywane pracy zawodowej kobiet zostały zrekonstruowane w odniesieniu do poziomu ich zawodowego zaangażowania, na podstawie którego wyróżniono dwie grupy: „kobiety pracy” i „kobiety kariery”. Szczegółowej analizie poddano znaczenia pracy zawodowej dla drugiej grupy kobiet. Jako przykład „kobiety kariery” przedstawiono przypadek kobiety i jej męża funkcjonujących w rodzinie o równoległych karierach rodziców (*dual-career family*), z którymi przeprowadzono wywiady w ramach większego projektu badań biograficznych dotyczących partnerstwa. Analizy pokazują, że kobieca biografia zawodowa jest konstruowana wokół centralnej kategorii, jaką jest nieustanny rozwój. Kariera zawodowa staje się źródłem upodmiotowienia i uwolnienia od tradycyjnie przypisanych ról związanych z płcią.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kobiety, praca zawodowa, kariera, rodzina o równoległych karierach zawodowych, upodmiotowienie.

## Introduction

Due to the systemic transformation, and the marketization of the economy, work is no longer guaranteed by the state. It has become a good that must be striven for (Rifkin, 2000). According to M. Marody and A. Giza-Poleszczuk, work has stopped to be a well-marked career path, giving meaning to an individual biography, and has begun to resemble more and more a roller coaster ride – full of ups and downs, sudden turns, unforeseen events, and risks (Marody, Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004, p. 250). Structural changes of work related to the characteristics of postmodern society cause changes in social relations. U. Beck emphasizes that the process of ‘releasing’ individuals from the social forms of industrial society as class, family, or gender-based position, have caused the lack of any guarantees, and protection against unemployment, or poverty, to which all people become vulnerable because of limited state support (Beck, 1986/1992).

On the other hand, the ‘released’ labour market seems to create opportunities for realization of individual concepts of professional role, as work is looked for, and valued in terms of demand and supply of specific skills, and competences. By changing the criteria of selecting individuals for professional positions, the real possibilities of women's professional success has been changed. This phenomenon is accompanied by the process of negotiating the new social ideologies containing indications of what should be rewarded. Work and professional careers have stopped to be reserved only for men. Equal opportunities for women and men in the labour market, which are also a measure of social justice in highly developed countries, have become an important factor of social and economic development positively influencing economic growth (George, 2011).

Research shows that equal access to the labour market, and opportunities for professional career for women and men, have a positive impact on the quality of life, both at the individual level, and at the level of the entire society (Boreham, Povey, Tomaszewski, 2016). It can be seen in the analysis of women's life choices. A growing number of women set themselves goals related to individual development, perceiving the possibilities of self-fulfilment increasingly often not only in the domestic/private sphere, but also beyond it, through active participation in economic and political life. A higher professional activity of women is encouraged by changes in the labour market structure, and managerial methods applied in many companies, promoting team work principles, egalitarian relations, flexible working hours, and employment relations. Not without significance is the increase in women’s level of education – research shows that, on average, working women are better educated than working men, and prevail among university students (Lisowska, 2009).

Let’s emphasize once again – changes in the structure of education and labour market, in the sphere of attitudes and patterns, as well as a gradual decrease in im-

portance of the traditional model of marriage, promotion of egalitarian values, and development of individualism in contemporary society, necessitate changes in work-life relations, and within the family (Tomaszewska-Lipiec, 2015). The number of relations in which both spouses hold double roles, and for whom professional career is equally important is increasing.

Because of work people achieve specific social and economic status, establish social contacts, organize their time, build the feeling of their own value, their activity level increases, and they can enjoy specific consumption possibilities. It promotes building an adequate image of themselves, their personal identity, feeling of independence, and personal dignity, as well as developing mature personal relations. It provides an opportunity to experience success, personal satisfaction, and the feeling of being useful and efficient. In the opinion of psychologists (e.g. Rostowska, 2008), the proper development of a professional career facilitates the satisfaction of the need to maintain, to reach an appropriate social status, to receive remuneration adequate for the work performed, to experience the feeling of safety, as well as it favours the development of creative attitudes in using one's own skills. The work is one of the most important values in people's life – for women in a special way.

### **Professional commitment and career: work as a value**

The value of employment can be examined in different contexts: social (for the whole society) and institutional, or family life and individual. In this article I would like to discuss the second context, which is more important for understanding my main argument – about emancipatory role of women's professional career, and their empowerment through work.

The main value of work in the context of family life is connected with its providing role of the foundations of family existence. The work of both parents protects the family against poverty, which may be one of the main factors leading to social exclusion – and not only of the family, but also of further generations (Kalleberg, 2009; Balcerzak-Paradowska, 2008). Double income families are less frequently exposed to stresses related to consequences of work loss, or a decline in the living standard. They are able to increase expenditure on child care and education, providing their children with such abilities that will permit them to achieve success in future. In this context work is treated, first of all, as a source of income, and its lack, or a fear of losing it, provides a justification, e.g. for illegal activities. Such an approach to defining work is similar to the meaning of 'job', and is typical for 'women of work' (Strykowska, 1992), who focus first of all on the family, and treat work primarily as a source for increasing the home budget, and satisfying basic life needs. The 'self-fulfilment and 'emancipatory' function of work is emphasized in that meaning as a way to obtain

economic autonomy, and independence from their husbands/partners, or in the society and their lives (Bäck-Wiklund and others, 2011).

The second approach to work underlines the dimension of psychological and self-fulfillment needs, if we refer to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). Work is treated almost as the major life activity, which requires involvement, constant effort, constant readiness to improve one's qualifications. Such a significant extent often provides high income, satisfaction and development possibilities. The highest value is attached to education, hard-work, flexibility, creativity and perfectionism, which describes those who are nowadays defined as 'successful people'. According to M. Strykowska (1992), such an approach is typical for 'women of career', for whom work provides the fundamental content in their life and is a huge source of satisfaction. The key categories in defining work are commitment, and self-awareness of subjects in creating their own life path, and their approach towards work, as well as high level of involvement, and continuous development (Freeman, 1990).

The notion of 'career' can be understood either in a more objective manner, referring to measurable parameters of the professional position, as a level of education, qualifications, professional promotion, and material gratifications, or in a more subjective manner, referring to the category of individually understood 'prosperity', or life success' (Firkowska-Mankiewicz, 1999). J. Rostowski (2002) emphasizes that, on one hand, 'career' is a process covering work-related experience, consisting in a series of promotions, either in the same organization, or in relation to holding various positions in various organizations over a longer period of time. On the other hand, with reference to more contemporary understanding of a career, the focus is placed not only on the achievements, but also on failures experienced during the professional career, in the subjective evaluation – without referring to normative opinions. A career is considered as a series of events taking place during the life of an individual, rather than as an outcome subject to any type of evaluation, or assessment. Following this approach, the author defines career, after M. Seligman, as a "comprehensive constellation of psychological, sociological, educational, physical and economic factors, and certain chance factors which, by forming different combinations with each other, shape the professional career of an individual over their life" (Rostowski, 2002, p. 160).

For 'women of career', professional work is related to high commitment, and provides a significant source of life satisfaction, while the fact of receiving remuneration is not the main argument for taking up the work. According to Strykowska, commitment is more a feature of a person than of work, and an involved person is a person who emotionally responds to the entire work situation, since they treat it as a place where their most important needs can be satisfied:

*"a psychological mechanism explaining work commitment is the degree to which work occupies the central place in the own image of an individual. The more cen-*

*tral category in the hierarchized structure of Self is taken by work, the higher the commitment of the individual is” (Strykowska, 1992, p. 75).*

Among other roles played by the individual, the professional role ranks very high as regards satisfying expectations not only towards work, but more broadly – towards life achievements. Such an approach to a professional career is most typical for partners forming dual-career families.

### **A portrait of a woman of career: a case of dual-career family**

A dual-career family is perceived as an egalitarian family with both heads of household, partners, who are involved to the same degree in domestic life, and the development of their professional careers, for whom they are mutually and equally important (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1971). Since the focus is placed on the aspect of simultaneous building of the professional life sphere in the whole life perspective by the husband and wife, it is described as ‘double-career’, and not ‘double-income’. L. A. Gilbert defines such families as ‘role-sharing’ (1993), and L. Peplau – as ‘a fully egalitarian marriage’ (1983).

In a dual-career family each of the spouses has the same position, and each one is to the same extent responsible for emotional, and economic development of their family. No one dominates; roles are not specialized, and individuals have a lot of space to express their own identities (Pogrebin, 1975; Giza-Poleszczuk, 2005). Such families consist mostly of highly educated spouses, highly allocated in professional, and/or social structure (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1971; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1976; Gilbert, 1993). Their life style and professional choices extort incessant negotiations the division of tasks and roles, as well as the shape of their relation within the family from spouses (opposed to other working parents who can, but do not have to, (re)negotiate everyday life).

The way in which spouses in dual-career families want to realize their life together depends more on their communicative abilities than any other predetermined roles. T. Rostowska (2008) emphasizes that combining professional and family roles in such families is possible only due to a high quality of family life, and the personal maturity of spouses, expressed in well-developed system of internal control, self-discipline, ability to plan and clearly formulate (short- and long-term) aims, a properly shaped system of values, and rational time management.

As an example to reconstruct the women’s of career meanings of work, I would present one case of dual-career family in the context of spouses’ professional life. That case comes from biographical research I conducted with twenty Polish women and men, living in three big cities in Poland, highly engaged in developing their professional careers, forming dual-career families, aged 32-47, having and upbringing children (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2015).

The wife works as a director of a large branch for Poland and neighbouring countries, in a professional service company with a global range. She is 40 years old, has a higher education diploma (graduated in two majors), and is a mother of four. Her husband (41) is the owner and managing director of an outsourcing service company. He graduated from medical school, as well as from postgraduate managerial studies at a renowned economic university. They have been married since they were students. The first child was born at the beginning of their studies, and the second one was born three years later. Two more children were born when the parents were at the peak stage of their professional careers. At the moment of the interview, the children were 21, 18, 8 and 5 years old.

The professional path of the interviewed couple developed very dynamically. The wife started working in governmental administration immediately after studies, and later worked in the company dealing with social and market research, and in a foreign public relations agency, where she was responsible for human resource consultancy and consulting. She continued those tasks in subsequent companies providing general consulting services. She was promoted very quickly to the position of chief manager in various projects, in which she managed an increasing number of persons. Later on, she reached the position of director of a key department, where she is dealing with creating the company promotional strategy in the market, in the sphere of advertising and supporting sale processes – first in Poland, and later on in part of Europe. For her tasks, she reports directly to the management board of the company, manages a team of more than twenty people, and is the head of several offices in Poland and in other countries. Her husband started working at the hospital after completing medical studies. Several years later he was hired by a pharmaceutical company where he continued his career, from a representative through individual managerial positions, reaching the function of general director. He has recently resigned from this position and started his own business activity in a similar area. He manages a group of about forty people, and is fully responsible for the direction of the company development.

Those briefly presented professional biographies are constructed around the central category, namely, continuous development. Work and study are inseparable, are treated in the perspective of unfinished and full-life activity, also as highly important values, developed in the interlocutors life since childhood:

*(Woman) I was always confronted with somehow perhaps higher demands than other people. Children laugh at me, saying that I suffer the top student syndrome.*

*(Men) deeply inculcated respect for work as such. Perhaps not even the effects (...). [I am – author's note] still at the stage of learning.*

Professional activity is perceived as a key element of the entire life project of the interlocutors, providing a feeling of independence (emphasized in particular by the female respondent), own value, satisfaction, as well as intellectual, and social

attractiveness. Work facilitates contacts, and competition with interesting people. The need to compete and to cope with difficult challenges mark important determinants of professional activity of the interviewed couple, emerging several times in both narrations. However, gender specificity is revealed here: the man assigns higher importance to the need to prove himself, and to maintain the family (although they both support the home budget to a comparable degree), the woman – satisfaction of the need to explore, experience, and learn.

Professional experiences are presented with extraordinary enthusiasm, with a confident voice, and a smile, her fascination in what she does is clearly observed:

*(W) What I do, is very interesting, I have unique projects (...) it is such a pure life pleasure. Fun... (...) I always wanted, I really wanted very much to work, to do what I do, I was never afraid of those topics that some people consider strenuous, not feminine, difficult.*

Task-oriented thinking, setting clear targets, consistent striving for their completion, independent search for solutions, and great self-efficacy is observed in both female, and male narrations. Such an approach to work requires adopting a specific attitude, not only in the professional life sphere, but also in private life, becoming an inseparable element of one's identity. For both interlocutors, the professional involvement of their partner is of high importance for constructing his or her image. Through community of stress and professional success experiences, the presence of the other person in subsequent stages of career, they have a feeling of being individually and mutually attractive, and important for each other, of providing support, building a platform for exchanging thoughts, and emotions:

*(W) I know even the details of what he does. I even help him in some things, so... I also sometimes ask for his opinion, as he is a very reasonable person, has very extensive managerial experience (...) We share our views. We are very much interested in what we do. Exceptionally, for a pair.*

*(M) There is somebody who is willing to listen to her; not only because she has to, but because she is really interested. (...) we often talk to each other, we sometimes seek each other's advice (...) I always confirm her in the belief that she is better than others (...) there is a kind of friendly, but mutual competition between us.*

However, it should be emphasized that it is the career of the man in the family life was verbalized as the one that was more important – the woman, as she explains, 'calmly gave priority to that madness', consistently carrying out her professional project.

### **Discussion: the meanings of professional career**

The marriage presented above provides an example of employees who are active, oriented towards development, and goal achievements, for whom a professional career makes a highly important sphere of life; important, both for the husband, and

the wife, who even in case of the possibility of lower commitment, or complete withdrawal, would not resign from it. The main meaning of professional career can be described as the source of women's freedom from traditionally assigned roles. It is worth emphasizing that the interlocutors – regardless of their gender, assigned the responsibility for the economic foundation of family life to men, sustaining the traditional, gender-polarized distribution of responsibilities.

Another meaning assigned to professional career is the source of development. Although her professional path did not proceed in a linear, or even fashion, resembling more a mosaic of decisions and choices, yet some elements characterized by a certain stability can be distinguished – orientation towards development, action, reaching subsequent stages – determined by oneself (or circumstances), initiative taking, and in the situation of a failure, perceiving it in terms of a temporary 'biographical blank' (Beck, 1986/1992) to be filled up. In the professional sphere, what prevails is the feeling of being in a continuous process of becoming and incompleteness, individual efficacy, and conviction about the sense and validity of undertaken efforts oriented towards controlling one's own fate. What can be seen is a shift in structural thinking about the professional path towards individualism.

This attitude to life resembles a distinguished personality type specified by E. Fromm (1947/2018) as 'market orientation' that improves the chances of achieving success in some professions. This is also one of possible factors shaping the way in which the interlocutor perceive the problem of gender inequality in the labour market, situated mainly among mechanisms of the so-called indirect discrimination, and therefore the phenomenon is non-existent in wider social awareness. In this context, it seems crucial to refer to the still-present stereotypical division of roles, and social differentiation of gender related expectations, mainly in the aspect of reconciling the world of work, of family, and slow redefinition of roles of women and men as employees, and as parents/spouses.

Meanings attributed by the interlocutor to professional career were also revealed in her attitudes towards the professional career of her husband, being one of main prisms of the reception of him, as well as being perceived by him. Those attitudes also feature another meaning of professional career – as a source of partner/marital intimacy. This source of meaning is related to the feeling of the community of experience, understanding, and perspective from which the world and other people are perceived, and finally, the mutuality resulting from professional involvement of both spouses. Being professionally engaged also means being attractive for the partner. In the process of constructing and sharing this intimacy, a crucial place seems to be taken by demonstrated interests, and open communication, also classified as main strategies for supporting the spouse in realizing his/her professional ambitions, showing indirectly the degree of 'importance' of both careers in one family.



Professional career as the source of 'completing' other worlds of life and women's identity was the last meaning revealed in the narrations. Although the family ranks the highest on the hierarchies of values of both male and female interlocutors, professional work provides a significant area, sometimes even equal to other worlds of life, for realizing one's own self-concept. The transgression can be observed beyond a culturally defined female role as the one directed by family, and motherhood experience towards professional emancipation of women.

### **Conclusions: towards women's empowerment**

The process of identity transformation takes place as an effect of social interactions in which men and women in families participate. A. Honneth (Honneth & Fraser, 2003) emphasizes that identity is built in relations through which we are assured about our features, and become members of a community. In dual-career families, because of professional engagement of both spouses, those relations are symmetrical, but not in the sense of an equal measure of esteem. According to the author, symmetry means the chance to be valued for one's own abilities and achievements, without experiencing contempt. Acknowledgement of human dignity becomes then the main principle of justice, which regulates different relations, also in a family. In his concept, Honneth draws attention to the practice of mutual care and sympathy, in which subjects perceive each other as individuals with their own needs. Moral progress in this sphere can, in author's opinion, mean a gradual elimination of all *clichés*, role-related stereotypes and cultural biases, which structurally stand in the way of the possibility of mutual adjustment to the needs of the other human being. Striving for acknowledgment, which Honneth (1992/1995) describes as 'the struggle for recognition', becomes the fight for reinterpretation of the commonly accepted ways in which achievements are valued, to recognize values of underestimated, or ignored types of activity.

Women of career, together with other women struggle for recognition in intimate relations, in families, in institutions, in labour market, and in society (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2016). The research shows that the feeling of satisfaction derived from functioning in the professional role is a significant effect for the sense of satisfaction with the roles played in other spheres of life. Success in the professional field, and in solving problems related to combining professional and family life affect the increase of self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect, and sense of being competent (Burke & Weir, 1976; Sekaran, 1986; Eagly & Carli, 2007). At the same time, mutual involvement of both spouses in professional career makes it possible for them to share similar experience, and provides various perspectives for receiving reality which brings about its better understanding, enables communication, and en-

hances the quality of the marriage and family. Therefore, for the same reasons, the importance of work grows, not only for specific individuals, but also for their families.

### Conclusions

Professional career provides one of central sources of feminine self-concept, an endless source of women's own value and dignity, building, or increasing the feeling of being a partner in life, and marital relation. For women of career work is not the aim in itself, but a means making it possible to implement a specific vision of women's own life and 'speaking with their own voices' – becoming a subject, a person, an individual; it is an important source of women's empowerment. Women of career are advanced in their 'struggle for recognition', and more conscious about their resources, competences, and power in changing both their own lives, and male-oriented labour market. Being aware of the price they pay for the so-called success, they do not want to go back to stereotyped world, and prepare the future for the next generations of women.

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