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# In search of identity patterns of Polish women

## Introduction

The subjects of numerous analyses that have been lately carried out are individual and collective coping strategies in changing society. When examining social behaviours, their authors tried to recognize local chances and limitations of the undertaken action. It allowed abandoning the hitherto normative interpretations, such as the “legacy” of the previous system, towards a search for rationality and sense of the applied strategies in the new socio-economic conditions of Poland.

In order to understand newly defined rationalities, it is worth to refer to the earlier considerations connected with the hitherto methods applied to explain the mechanisms of social transformations. How should we survey and compare the societies functioning according to the market economy rules with the ones that have just entered or are trying to enter this destination? How should we survey the situations often defined as “in between”?

The events initiated in 1989 in the countries of the Central and Eastern Europe questioned many of the hitherto paradigms and theoretical models, concerning actions initiated by various social actors. Understanding the logic of the transformation process requires taking into account the resources at disposal of particular individuals, as well available methods of their capitalization. With such approach, social reality appears as the resultant of the existing macro-systemic institutional solutions and acting strategies of particular individuals.

## Interpretational schemes

One of the significant parts of transformation processes is a change in the hitherto attitude towards

work. “Regardless, whether after Weber we will treat it as the necessary condition for the emergence of capitalism, or similarly to Marxists, we regard it as the effect of the appearance of specific, capitalist structures, we should not forget it, also when analysing the processes accompanying the Polish transformation.” (Marody, Lewicki 2010:85).

In the industrial society, both work and performed occupation constituted an axis around which the life of an individual was concentrated. Even the fact of having a job comprised a value itself, treasured equally to family life, material assets, or friendship<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the occupation and performed work defined our identity, while “old age” simply meant lack of paid work. Family and work gave a meaning to human life and secured a feeling of “internal stability (Beck 2004:207). Therefore, industrial society may be perceived as the society of paid labour. Also any transformations of its functioning had to be connected with the need for change. This was pointed out by U. Beck, who wrote about the real possibility of a conflict emerging in the situation when young, well educated women would expect equality and partnership, not only in legal regulations, but also in real life, i.e. at work and in family. Their expectations would have to clash with opposite tendencies observed both in the labour market, as well as in behaviours of men (Beck 2004:152). Beck states that with equalized conditions (as regards education and legislation) the situation of women and men becomes simultaneously more unequal, more perceived and less validated (Beck 2004:152). Thus, he poses a thesis that the next years will be stigmatised with the conflict of the sexes, illustrating it with the date on the increasing number of divorces, parents bringing up children single-handed, or people living in one-person households. Similar phenomena

to the one described by Beck in Germany, may be observed in most European countries.

However, the increasing feminization of education is not followed by the changes in the labour market or in the existing employment system. Still, both in the politics, as well as on top executive positions, women are exceptional. This is also confirmed by the Polish surveys (Lisowska 2008; Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2006). The Beck's conclusion that the growing social significance attributed to a particular area, the increasing 'strength' of a group translates in a decreasing number of women. Whereas, the reverse regularity is observed: the more marginal a particular scope of tasks is, the less "influential" a particular group, the more likely is that women will gain employment opportunity in these areas (Beck 2004:156) still remains true.

Beck indicates a certain paradox: the classical model of the labour market requires from individuals full occupational mobility, irrespective of their personal situation, which causes the need for a model of society deprived of the institution of family and marriage. It is effective only in the situation when for a woman marriage signifies resignation from paid work for the sake of having a family and children. Meanwhile, for at least a part of female population, this strategy, which sociologists call "escape into marriage" (Chybicka, Wojciechowska-Postaw 2009) is often imposed by the situation in the labour market. Persisting unemployment and shrinking capacity of this market preserve and stabilise traditional female and male roles. Therefore, unemployment and intention to have children appear as the two main stabilisers of traditional female roles, which according to U. Beck may have a particularly strong impact in all areas where shortages of educated women are observed.

It is worth stressing that barriers observed in the labour market only seemingly stabilise the nuclear family model, as in reality new poverty of women was "programmed" causing even stronger tension between sexes. Some men refuse to take up a life-long role of the sole family provider, while women would like to pursue their professional career, thus gaining economic independence from husbands.

- In addition, U. Beck indicates (Beck 2004:184): recreation of the old relations between men and women in both occupational and family spheres contradicts the principles of advanced societies; according to these principles unequal positions are not attributed through birth, but achieved through one's own merits and available to all exactly due to participation in economic activity;

- changes inside family and relations between sexes are reduced to the private phenomenon and problem; whereas, which is often forgotten, they are strongly connected with cultural transformations and processes of modernisation, meanwhile this is often forgotten.

It is worth to remind here the concept of individualization, which seems to adequately describe contemporary society, also the Polish one (Jacyno 2007). It allows a distinction between things that happen to people and the way the changes are reflected in people's behaviours and perception. U. Beck asks a question: How may we comprehend individualization? Shall we comprehend it as the change of life position or biography patterns? What kind of life position and type of biography are significant in developed labour market conditions? (Beck 2004:178). Therefore we will try to analyse the phenomenon of individualization in respect to the changes in the ways of constructing the course of occupational patterns of the contemporary Poles.

## Individualization process

According to both U. Beck and M. Jacyno, in the process of individualization, the hitherto class differences and family relations still exist, but they are moved into the background as compared to the newly established "centre" of biography organization. Instead of the traditional relationships and social forms (such as social class or nuclear family), there are emerging institution of secondary character, which nevertheless strongly influence individuals and escape any control or intervention. The example may be changeable situations, fashions, or markets (Beck 2004:197).

The earlier, traditional rhythms of the life course, determined through state, culture or family, were crisscrossed with patterns of institutionalized biographies, describing, *inter alia*, entering and leaving education system, taking up or resigning from occupational activity (Jacyno 2007)<sup>2</sup>. They somehow may be "designed", the concept of professional career was treated as the synonym of the obligatory in a particular social environment model of life success, which directed human activities. It was a kind of biography describing the sequence of roles and positions taken by individuals at various stages of their life cycle. Whereas professional development regarded these aspects of the individual's life that could have been directly referred to the work relat-

ed situation. Both notions: career and professional development were dynamic categories, undergoing constant transformations.

The currently observed individualization process, in practice means that a biography is becoming more a kind of task (project) to complete, where the role of life opportunities depending on the individual's own decisions increases. In practice, according to U. Beck, it means appearance of various "biographic combinatory possibilities". Therefore, in described by him transition from the "normal biography", characterising industrial societies to "choice biography", the type of biography of the "do - it - yourself" would be shaped, which probably gives the best characteristic of contemporary societies.

To what extent the described changes may be referred to the current situation of Poland? Some researchers when describing our reality use the term "hybrid". Thus, is it being "in between" that imposes construction of different coping strategies in the market than in the more developed economies? What biographies are constructed by female and male Poles in the conditions of the insecure market, trying to "tame" unfriendly reality?

These are questions that I will try to answer in the further part of the article.

### Life values of the Poles

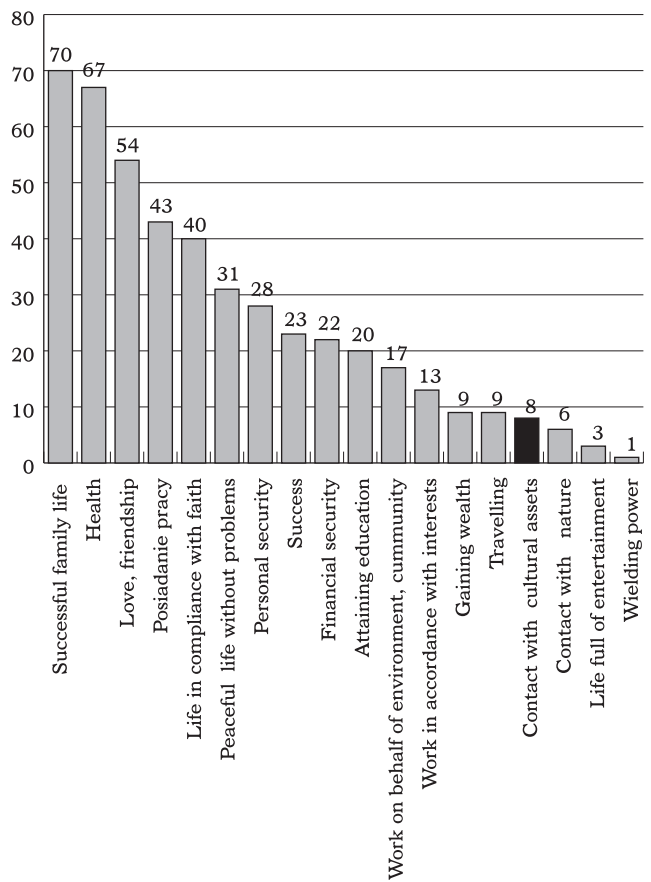
In the declarations of the Poles, the values such as: family, friends, health, have been invariably placed very high for many years (por. figure 1). Having a job appears on the fourth place, just after love and friendship. What is then the meaning of work for the Poles?

The data, published within the framework of the Philips Index Report <sup>3</sup>, show that:

- among all aspects of one's life asked about by the interviewers, the Poles were least satisfied with those that were connected to the performed work,
- lack of satisfaction from work decreased with age: 67 % people aged between 25 and 34 years and 22 % in the age group 55–64 years,
- work and career were not important for the well-being in case of almost 1/3 of women participating in the survey; for comparison, the share of men who made similar declaration was 20 %.

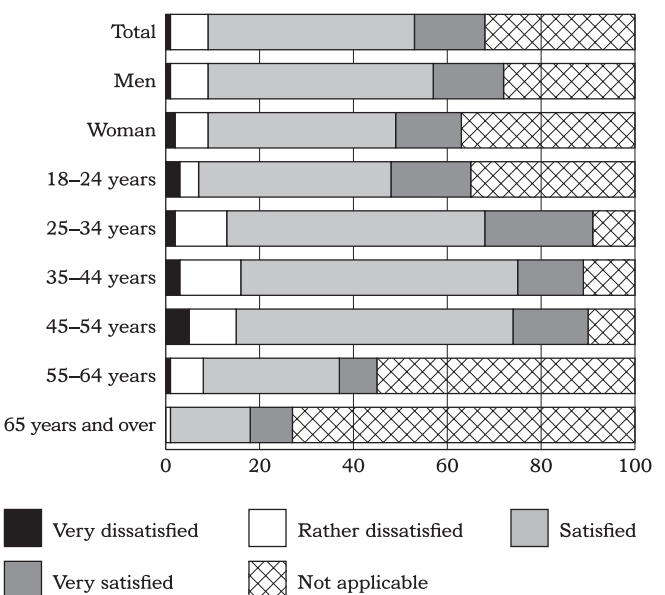
Therefore, it turns out that women still perceive their professional success as the success as the secondary matter. For men work and career remain very important. The obtained results are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Life values important for the Poles



Source: [http://www.cbos.com.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2004/K\\_098\\_04.PDF](http://www.cbos.com.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2004/K_098_04.PDF) (September 2011).

Figure 2. Level of satisfaction with the aspect of life which is work and career by sex and age



Source: [www.jakzyjemy2010.pl](http://www.jakzyjemy2010.pl) (downloaded September 2012).

The above figures show that we are a traditional society. Family determines the quality of our life and is the core around which it evolves. Work is treated as the necessity – for 71 % of the Poles surveyed in 2011 it is the way to gain money. Every second respondent (52 %) believes that you cannot make a fortune in life through honest work. Only every third person declares satisfaction with their job and career. What is important, since 2005, the importance of work has gradually dropping down the general scale of values<sup>4</sup>. Then it is worth to ask about the reasons for this phenomenon. One of them might be insufficient aid of the state offered to family. A. Titkow and D. Duch-Krzysztozek in the text published in the “Demographic Studies” of 2009 (Titkow, Duch-Krzysztozek 2009), write that the state policy regarding procreation is in Poland strongly political, ideological, moralised and it does not solve the authentic problems of women. High position in the hierarchy of the child declared value does not translate into an enthusiastic attitude to the fact of his birth and possession<sup>5</sup>.

Preferred by women life roles show that a woman combining home and work responsibilities remains the “ideal”. It is a declaration of pursuing the “super women” syndrome, a relict from the previous époque. A. Titkow writes that preferring particular life roles by women is related to their psychological characteristics (localisation of the control centre, vision of one’s own person, type of femininity or masculinity) and sociological (age, place of residence, education), which indicates mainly social determinants of women’s life plans (Titkow 2007:137). The surveys show that:

1. having children significantly changes identification of women and men; for women it means that being a mother and wife is gaining importance over being a human and woman;
2. parental roles are much more important for women than men; women with children perceive themselves as mothers (34.5 %) much more often than men – fathers (11.3 %).

The author notifies “the social role of being the Wife, thus definition of own identity in relation to a man, will play increasingly lesser role in women’s life. It is not the perception of Wife, but the perception of the Mother’s responsibility that will increasingly stronger determine plans and behaviours of women” (Titkow 2007:145). The Author’s conclusions sound rather pessimistic; on the verbal plane she does not see signs of any drastic change in the hitherto obligatory cultural script determining women’s and men’s

identity. In practice, it means limitation in possibility of women succeeding in the public sphere. Real barrier constitutes fundamentally different way of female and male identification with parental roles, which poses a significant social problem. If we also add the state reducing its support to family and motherhood. This is the situation of women, who want to perform a professional appears to be very difficult.

The exception comprise women who place at higher strata of social structure who actually rejected the model of Mother – Pole as the obligatory for them model of life. They represent type described by A. Titkow, as “assertive” and “egocentric”. They are women who have a positive image of their own person and are intra-controllable. This group is treated as the avant-garde of the process of women’s emancipation from cultural stereotypes (Titkow 2007:152). Can they become role model for other women?

The quoted data show that formula for individual career strategies seems to relate only to strong and determined women. However, it is at the expense of their personal life. Is there a solution for this situation? Titkow shows that the chance may present going outside individualistic strategies of functioning at work and attempts at development of female solidarity, the phenomenon practically non-existent in Poland.

It may be observed that economic changes (the labour market and unemployment) are overlaid by transformations of socio-cultural character. How will Polish women cope in this situation? What action strategies they undertake?

## Professional careers of the period of transformation

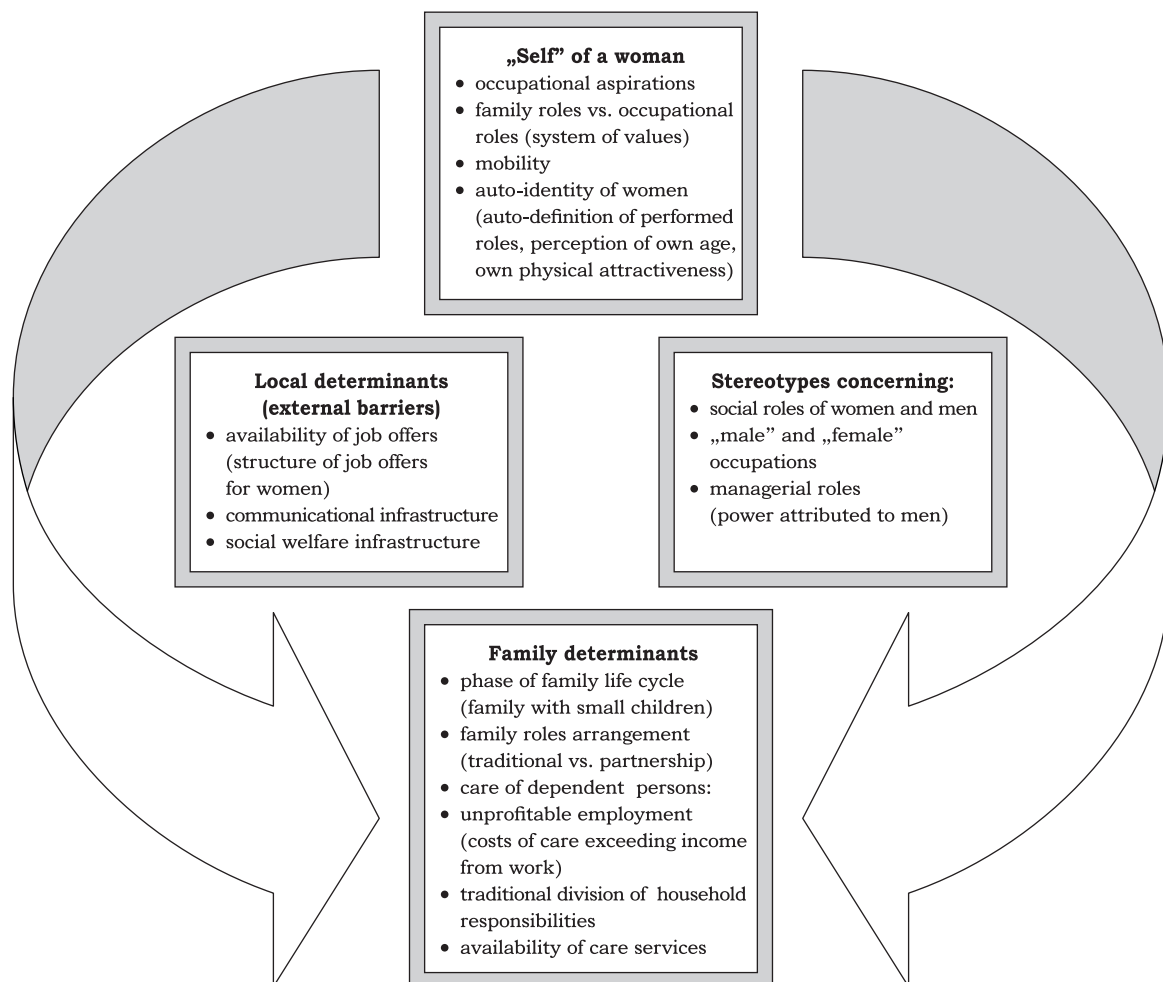
As was mentioned, the scientists studying transformation processes ask questions about resources and barriers embedded, on the one hand in people, while on the other – in the existing culture and institutions important for the course of changes and the shape of new economy. They make the context of transformations occurrence. They refer to the tradition of M. Weber’s understanding sociology and those conceptions that put stress on the issues of individual behaviour formulas, meanings and interpretations attributed to institutions, processes and social phenomena, rooted in the world of personal, everyday experiences and in tradition and structures of thinking and acting (Skąpska 2002). This is facilitated by, e.g. the questions about existing in literature canons of notions referring to capitalist

economy; to what extent they provide excuses and justifications of contemporary actions. Further questions concern the role of tradition, particularly the tradition of main social groups where social stereotypes and ideas regarding the sources of poverty and wealth are rooted. Others are questions about specific language codes significant from the point of view of “taming reality”, i.e. such expressions that are evoked in the situations difficult to explain rationally (e.g. proverbs). Finally, the questions arise concerning historical experiences shaping social awareness which are different in particular regions of Poland. They try to find how the contemporary market defines resources that guarantee the individual professional success, i.e. income, placement within occu-

pational structure and prestige (Markowski 2000). The Poles’ way of “constructing reality”, the type of rationalisations they use, allows also explaining emerging of these strategies that may hinder the process of capitalism “installation” in Poland.

Most analyses available on the market include information about numerous determinants influencing the course of professional careers of the Poles. The Authors of the mentioned below paper, concentrated on the four types of factors: identity, existing stereotypes, family determinants and the policy carried out by local labour offices<sup>6</sup> (por. Figure 3). The collected data seem to confirm the hitherto opinions about unequal chances of women and men in the labour market. They are:

**Figure 3.** Determinants of professional career of women



Source: Own elaboration based on the analysis on the results of the survey “Occupational role of women in citizen society. Multidimensional model of discrimination against women”. November–December 2010, <http://www.wup.pl/files/content/zorp/ZawodowaRolaKobiet.pdf> (access September 2012). Publication was financed by the means from the project “West Pomeranian Observatory of the Labour Market” co-financed by European Union within the framework of the European Social Fund and the State Budget. SubAction 6.1.2 of the Operational Programme Human Capital 2007–2013.

- universality of stereotypes concerning division into male and female branches and occupations,
- branch feminisation – sectors where women would like to work (over 10 % choices) are: public administration, activities connected with culture and entertainments, hotels and restaurants, real estate and business activities, education, health care and social work, financial intermediation, professional, scientific and technical activities,
- the significant share of women (45 %) who want to work but cannot take employment indicate child-care as the reason. Most jobless and looking after children women declare willingness to take up work, providing that they could send a child to an adequate care facility. These results would be consistent with the ones obtained earlier by A. Titkow,
- for women exchanged the benefits available to the labor market include: education, qualifications, professional experience, team work skills, creativity, resistance to stress, and good organization of work, conscientiousness, orderliness and concentration on task performance,
- lower availability of women, which is the result of unequal division of household and family responsibilities which results from unequal division of the household and family responsibilities,
- the existing belief of the employers about low availability of women, which translates into lesser burdening them with tasks requiring mobility and limitation of their future promotion possibilities is also conducive to exclusion,
- most women believe that with their skills they would manage on the higher position; they are ready to take additional responsibilities and shoulder their burdens, most often though they do not want to ask for promotion themselves and wait for the employer to recognise their talents,
- work women's work is assessed in a more strict way than work performed by men.

As it could be expected, women's career is generally easier in feminized branches; younger women increasingly more often declare readiness to take up paid work, rejecting the hitherto stereotypical perception of female and male roles. They also more often implement partnership model in their families.

Then, relatively little is known about the role played by diversified resources, culturally shaped practical knowledge or ability to more reflective definition of life projects in constructing strategies of coping with changes. M. Domecka and A. Mrozowicki attempted to fill this gap. They applied the method consisting in surveying the applied narra-

tives, initially assuming that it describes the process, in which the respondents understand and interpret reality. Narratives are the method used mainly in psychiatry, although not exclusively. They are histories that people tell about themselves. It is assumed that they have one inseparable connection with human identity. The Author of one of the works devoted to narrative identity (McAdams 1996) indicated the integrating role played by narratives in life of each person, granting it coherency, direction and meaning. Then, J. Trzebiński underlines the huge role of narrative in shaping human motivation (Trzebiński 2002). He quotes numerous studies that suppose to confirm that even constructing of an auto-narrative facilitates finding the sense of ongoing events and one's own role in them, formulating goals and plans stable over time, in accordance with the individual values and resistant to competitive motives. Therefore, auto-narratives are not only histories that tell our life, but also the histories that shape this life (Chszczonowicz 2011:283–289).

J. Trzebiński specifies two basic types of a narrative: defensive and proactive. The first one begins at the moment of the problem emergence and evolves around problems and attempts at coping with them. The main motivation of persons applying such narrative is a desire to maintain the existing *status quo*. Then, proactive strategies begin with description of the hero's goal and intentions. In most cases they are increasingly adaptive – they are conducive to bigger self-satisfaction, greater effectiveness in carrying out one's own activities, better social adaptation (Domecka, Mrozowicki 2008:287).

The main thread of the analysis carried out by M. Domecka and A. Mrozowiecki was determining the impact of segmentation of particular communities (in the context of w resources of their members), collective ethos (practical cultural knowledge) and individual reflexivity (ways of defining oneself in respect to the social context) on the strategies of coping with social changes after downfall of real socialism in Poland. The studies allowed drawing conclusion assuming the existence of a twofold kind of cumulated effects of life strategies:

1. Consolidation of capitalism in Poland was supported by at least some individual and collective practices. They, *inter alia* included support to market reforms and organizational changes in enterprises, investment in qualifications and education and the so-called spontaneous entrepreneurship. It was accompanied by the strategies described as a “construct”.

2. Radical strategy of market reforms may be undermined by intended and unintended consequences of life strategies. The shortage of workers in the labour market caused by foreign migration on a mass scale and first symptoms of trade unions revitalization in the private sector constitute examples of the alternative between the continuation of the strategies based on individualized withdrawal into the private sphere (in case of women) and construction of mechanisms of market economy, which to a greater than previously extent may be based on the principles of social inclusion and control. They were two kinds of strategies: “anchors”, which assumed a defensive form and “patchworks”, constituting the example of seeking biographies.

The surveys carried out within a comparable period in the Warsaw School of Economics, show that elements auto-creation, realization of one's own vision, i.e. individualistic threads in a classical form (self-made-man syndrome), were particularly evident in case of the surveyed group of women (Gładys-Jakóbiak 2005). Career and success concerned mainly the individually perceived style of life and consumption. They were the way to mark identity and social identification, which turned out to be particularly significant in case of men, and to a lesser extent – women. Therefore, it may be said that career was perceived mainly as the effect of individual efforts, while much less significance was attributed to external determinants, including the environment.

## Conclusion

The scientists studying social phenomena indicate the changes taking place in the perception of the impact of the hitherto knowledge, qualifications and education on the course of professional careers. Education, as an element of tradition, was treated as the target point for individual aspirations. In the modernised approach it has instrumental value: knowledge in the past treated as the sign of cultural and social advance, currently means just a set of qualifications and skills enabling achievement of other values, e.g. life quality understood as the prime of life and intensiveness of experience.

A rather coherent vision of the career phenomenon emerges from the analyses. The presented data indicate deepening and increasingly unambiguously perceived its material context, while even

at the beginning of the 1990s career was definitely negatively associated, often meaning acting at the edge of law.

However, the strategies that are to dominate in the future; which of them will favour women, and which – men, is still an open issue. Without making changes to the existing models of the functioning of the roles of men and women, without the support of the state and its institutions, it can be assumed.

<sup>1</sup> According to the CBOS survey „Work as a value”, for 72 % of the respondents, work gives the meaning to their life, for 24 % it is a way to earn money, 4 % do not have any opinion (CBOS survey, no. BS/87/2004).

<sup>2</sup> The casus of overlapping of these rhythms were particularly evident in case of women's szczególnie widoczne biographies, which was, and still is, connected with numerous conflicts.

<sup>3</sup> [http://gazetapraca.pl/gazetapraca/1,90443,8815454,Co\\_Polacy\\_cenia\\_w\\_pracy\\_.html](http://gazetapraca.pl/gazetapraca/1,90443,8815454,Co_Polacy_cenia_w_pracy_.html). (September 2011).

<sup>4</sup> CBOS surveys, Attitude of Poles towards work and diligence. Bulletin of the surveys (BS/38/2011).

<sup>5</sup> Looking at the fertility map of European countries, it is obvious that the highest fertility characterises the countries where the state implements active women supporting policy. Among the countries with highest level of fertility is France with abortion on demand (European leader in fertility), Sweden, Finland, Denmark (popular partner's relationships, legal abortion, sexual education). Below European average fertility (1.5) is Catholic Poland (restrictive antiabortion law, continued discussion about sexual education and refunding contraceptives) and South Europe countries (Portugal, Italy, Spain). In the countries with high fertility, a significant number of children is born outside of marriage institution: Sweden – 55.5 %, France – 50.5 %, Catholic Ireland – 33,2 % (Eurostat data of 2006).

<sup>6</sup> after: <http://www.wup.pl/files/content/zorp/ZawodowaRolaKobiet.pdf> (wrzesień 2012).

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