

## **WHY IS TERTIARY EDUCATION MORE IMPORTANT FOR WOMEN IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY?**

### **DLACZEGO WYKSZTAŁCENIE WYŻSZE JEST WAŻNIEJSZE DLA Kobiet NIŻ DLA MĘŻCZYŹN W XXI WIEKU?**

**dr Anna Odrowąż-Coates**

Akademia Pedagogiki Specjalnej im. M. Grzegorzewskiej,  
Warszawa

#### **ABSTRACTS**

The author discusses the key factors pertaining to the education levels of men and women, related to their standards of life and well being, in the context of lifelong learning and life expectancy. Firstly, tertiary education is argued to be a liberating factor for women in culturally biased gender power relations. Secondly, higher education is perceived not only as emancipating for women but also as an essential balancing factor, which provides good levels of social security and financial stability, particularly in the older years, contributing to the future elimination of the feminisation of poverty. It is argued that the effects of female education on the cultural capital of future generations, lead to further societal advancement. The benefits of higher education in terms of the employability of women, equips them with greater degree of independence, pension and self-esteem. These factors allow women to thrive in the third-age and prevent them from social exclusion. Tertiary education and the employment of women increase household income, stimulating economic growth and decrease the number of people dependant on state benefits. In summary, this paper provides an insight into why higher education can be viewed as more important for women than for men in the XXI century.

Autorka podejmuje rozważania nad istotnymi czynnikami dotyczącymi poziomu wykształcenia kobiet i mężczyzn, które wpływają na uwarunkowane kulturowo relacje władzy między płciami. Autorka udowodni, że nie tylko funkcja emancypacyjna wyższego wykształcenia, ale przede wszystkim jego funkcja stabilizująca w zakresie bezpieczeństwa socjalnego – szczególnie w starszym wieku – może wpływać na stopniową eliminację feminizacji biedy. Kształcenie kobiet ma bezpośredni wpływ na kapitał

kulturowy przyszłych pokoleń, prowadząc do dalszego postępu społecznego. Korzyści płynące z wyższego wykształcenia w odniesieniu do rynku pracy wyposażają kobiety w niezależność, świadczenia emerytalne i pozytywny obraz samych siebie, pozwalając im na korzystanie z dobrodziejstw trzeciego wieku i zapobiegając wykluczeniu społecznemu. Edukacja i zatrudnienie kobiet bezpośrednio wpływają na zwiększone możliwości konsumpcyjne gospodarstw domowych i zmniejsza liczbę osób korzystających z zasiłków państwowych. Podsumowując, w artykule przedstawione zostaną argumenty na rzecz tezy, że wykształcenie wyższe bardziej potrzebne jest kobietom w XXI wieku.

#### **KEY WORDS:**

*tertiary education, life course, life expectancy, social conditioning, identity*  
*wykształcenie wyższe, cykl życia, przewidywana długość życia, uwarunkowania społeczne, tożsamość*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Knowledge and education are the keys to a better life and essential qualities in the 'knowledge economy' (Ball, 2008, p. 25). One may say that despite gender, unequal access to education creates a climate of social exclusion. From 1990 onwards, boys have underachieved in education causing a 'moral panic' and concern in the UK, US and Australia (Renzetti, et al., 2005). Why would they underachieve when the education systems, particularly in maths and science favour male psycho-biological conditioning, as described by Lucyna Kopciwicz (2012) and further discussed by Renzetti et al. (2005, pp. 180-188). It has also been established that despite equal access at the start, in highly developed economies, class, race and gender are determinants for children's success in education (Ball, 2008, pp. 162-163). Despite high participation and the over performance of girls, their scholarly achievements are not reflected in the labour market later in life. Nevertheless, the pursuit of tertiary education is the accepted way to achieve greater gender equality in contemporary societies.

In social theory, a life course [gr: ky'klos' - cycle] may be interpreted as a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time (Giele, Elder, 1998, p. 22). The life course differs depending on the gender and socio-cultural background of individuals. Considering the male and female life course (Elder et al., 2003) and their social condition-

ing, higher education may be argued to be of more importance to women than to men. The author of this paper will discuss the reasons behind this point of view. A life cycle is a result of individual life strategies applied in an institutionalised social context. Talcott Parsons (1964) wrote that the individual choices of people are all institutionalised and therefore not so much individual, whilst Pierre Bourdieu (1994) thought that individual biography is an illusion and all people are determined by their social and cultural capital. In this Bourdieu-centric perspective, the analysis of education rates by gender in both traditional and liberal societies will enrich the debate. Women in more traditional cultures have a better chance of achieving equal status through the pursuit of further education. (The expressions 'further', 'tertiary' and 'higher' education will be used interchangeably in this paper.) Cultural programming in terms of the age appropriate behaviours expected of individuals by society, become almost a 'social timer' encouraging women to take on certain roles at a certain age (comp. Hajduk, 2001). Failure to comply may result in social sanctions. Nevertheless, even more danger may be caused by blind compliance of the social rules due to low reflexivity and a lack of planning for one's future. Self-reflexivity can be enhanced through higher education and conversely, pursuing higher education may be a result of a high level of one's reflexivity. Investment in the development of a child's full potential regardless of gender, may not be a cure for the fear of an unknown future (Bauman, 2000), but it certainly is the most rational decision to be made by reflexive parents (Odrowąż-Coates, Stańczak, 2013).

As Ulrich Beck puts it, the differences between men and women are bi-dimensional, the actual position in society (inequalities, their reasons and social conditioning) and the de-legitimization and realization of the gender positions (Beck, 1992, p.177). The second dimension can only be achieved by having access to the appropriate level of information.

The arguments in favour of tertiary female education rely on two basic factors, self-sufficiency through the ability to work and the aptitude to remain professionally active once passed the retirement age. Physical work is generally more demanding on an ageing body and puts limitations on how long one may carry out physical duties, whilst intellectual work allows people to work until their later years. Therefore, higher education, when not tied to physical labour, may allow individuals to work longer, which is particularly important to women whose life course for the majority, involves having children and therefore naturally prolongs, or postpones their professional

advancement. This child related period of life may obstruct or bring to a close a female's career path, reduce her pension and professional advancement.

To answer the question posed in the title of this article, arguments will be grouped into five overarching, interchangeable areas of analysis. First, the image of self (based on one's appearance vs. based on professional activity) will be discussed. Then, being a mother as a main source of identity, followed by the gender gap in employment and gender gap in mortality rates. The final section will be dedicated to social and cultural progress through the enhancement of social capital by higher education. The author will argue that access to higher education, increases women's independence and provides greater life opportunities.

### **THE BODY-BASED IMAGE OF SELF VS PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN THE MODERN CULTURE**

Due to the prevailing culture of youth and computer enhanced beauty in today's western societies, women are often perceived as sex objects, valued accordingly to their age and physical appearance (APA Report 2010). The effect on the perception of self, is clear. An ageing body brings females distress and leads to a redefinition of their personal identity. However, feelings of lost value may be compensated through feeling needed, appreciated and professionally active (Overcoming ageing in active living 2005).

In accordance with Erik H. Erikson's psychosocial development theory (1959), personal development in consecutive phases of life is achieved through overcoming reoccurring psychological crises. Irrespectively of gender, different phases in life bring different challenges. According to a renown Polish pedagogue, Zbyszko Melosik, feminists claim that women have become victims of a 'beauty' ideal, which in practice constitutes 'the ideology of female inferiority'. Moreover, women can only regain control over their own lives through the consumption of material goods, allowing them to free themselves from the yoke of old age and to obtain the culturally desired ideal of beauty (2010, pp. 23). Higher education can be a gate to the understanding of cultural expectations and models, freeing women from pursuing false and often unachievable ideals, or can enable them to fulfil culturally 'planted' aspirations due to the disposable income available to them. Karen Davis (1995, pp. 48-52) wrote that the culturally programmed ideal of beauty, surrenders women to balance on the edge and abuses their uncertainty in the sphere of body control and power

over their own appearance. Melosik thinks that the female body becomes the quintessence of femininity and the basis of her identity, reducing her self-identification through assessing her as a person based only on appearance (Melosik, 2010, p. 24). In a society obsessed with consumption, women who can not control the external world around them focus their control boundaries on their own body (Melosik, 2013, p. 127). The cult of youth and beauty has a strong negative influence on women, whose aging bodies loose value as sexual objects, causing them to redefine their own identity. Taking into consideration Daniel Bell's (1972) idea that paid employment can be a predominant source of one's identity, professionally active women may find that employment provides them with a strong and constant source of identity, making the redefinition of self in 'changing body' terms easier. In the current labour market in Poland, it is proven that higher education makes finding a job easier, shortens unemployment periods and lowers the unemployment rate to 4.5% amongst the best educated (Report on education 2012, 2013, pp. 68, 76). It is encouraging to note that Polish people of working age with a tertiary level of education, were the most professionally active (88.7%) in 2012 (Ibidem). Middle age, 35-65, is a period of increased independence but also of ongoing changes in social relationships, a decay of physical strengths and a decrease of physical attractiveness that may lead to a multiple redefinition of one's social roles and identity. In this period of life one may become a parent, a child in a carer's role, a professional, a partner, a leader or a team player. All these changes in self-image may lead to crisis demonstrated by feeling lonely, unhappy, unfortunate, loosing a feeling of safety, experiencing depression and lowered self-esteem, anxiety, irritation, obsession about illness or death (Ziółkowska, 2005, pp. 557-558). Financial stability, brought by paid employment may, to a degree, help in overcoming these critical situations. According to Ziółkowska, it has been proven that despite all the benefits of retirement, the time of non-productivity may result in low self esteem, a redefinition of ones self-worth and identity; moreover it may lead to social isolation. Therefore, staying professionally active, particularly for widows and single women at the age of retirement has an impact on the quality of life and on the image of 'self'.

#### **QUESTIONING MOTHERHOOD AS A PRIMARY SOURCE OF IDENTITY**

Women in Poland often give up their career opportunities due to child rearing. They also often opt for a career break for child upbringing, which

means that they fall behind their male colleagues in their chances for career advancement. Thus women are forced to work extra years to achieve the equivalent career progression. This professional break in a woman's life course may also cause disadvantages in pension rates. Due to career breaks, women in Poland often have lower pension contributions and thus may have to remain in employment for a longer period to catch up with their male counterparts.

Moreover, higher education may be an important factor in building gender equality. There is a considerable gender gap between men and women worldwide, when assessing overall access to education, employment, political participation, empowerment and women's rights (The global gender gap report 2013). It is significantly wider in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, where female access to education and employment is still compromised by cultural and economic barriers (see: GEI by Region 2012). At the same time, one may observe a reversed gender gap in the tertiary education rates of developed countries, where the number of females pursuing higher education exceeds males and this reversed gender gap widens year by year (Parro 2012). Does this mean that women have realized that full equality can be achieved through higher education and the financial independence that it may offer? Polish statistics for 2012, show clearly that Polish women exceeded men in the participation of middle and higher education. In 2012, 27.6% of women of working age completed higher education compared to 19.5% of men and 27.6% of women acquired a middle level of education versus 25.8% of men of working age (Report on education 2012, 2013, p. 59). Ryszard Borowicz (2008, p. 156) claims that the higher educational level of Polish people, irrespectively of their sex, has a direct positive impact on women's future plans of professional development. One may say that higher education reduces the cultural boundaries on female roles and predestination. Social conditioning and particularly the opinion of parents about a working woman's ability to combine their career with domestic chores, heavily influences the reproduction of similar opinions amongst their daughters (The first to research this phenomenon were: Simmons and Turner 1976). One of the side effects of women's educational achievement is the systematic rise in the age of women when having a first child. It has increased by three years in the past decade and this corresponds with the rising education level of mothers in Poland. 40% of Polish first-time mothers have obtained a higher education degree (Central Statistical Office 2011, p. 3). The ageing of west-

ern societies caused by low birth rates are alarming (Szukalski, 2009, pp. 18-38), nevertheless there are substantial gender related reasons for this situation. In the modern so called 'risk society', with increased geographical mobility and increased speed of life, social bonds and family ties loosen, so having multiple children no longer guarantees a sufficient level of care in older age. In contrary, in the case of women, it limits their ability to secure a pension and maintain independence. People on the lowest income, or the unemployed are no longer able to support their parents in older age. Moreover, they may depend themselves on the continued assistance of their parents. High property prices and relatively low levels of income in Poland often force parents to give up their savings or continually help their children with mortgage payments, instead of receiving financial help from them. Therefore, children became an ongoing, non-refundable expense. Conversely, well educated children have an increased chance of stable employment, which may enhance their ability to support their elderly parents and importantly, themselves in their own old age. Polish law is also unfair towards married couples with children, in cases when a will is contested or not found. Why should children inherit the fruits of the labour of their late father or mother, whilst the other parent remains alive and is surely entitled to inherit? The inheritance will be passed onto the children anyway when the other parent passes away. Depending on family situation this regulation may dramatically impoverish widows or widowers. There are cases in Poland when widows are forced to sell their house to pay off their children.

### **GENDER GAP IN EMPLOYMENT**

Gordon Tuula thinks that the superior qualifications of girls hide the horizontally and vertically gendered division of labour. Others (Kenway et al., 1998; Walkerdine et al., 2001) agree that on average better paid jobs are still occupied by men. This knowledge should not become an obstacle in considering tertiary education by girls. It may be the case that gender power relations need more time to develop in Poland and that social change will start at home with the equitable division of unpaid tasks and through a mother's input to her children's ideas of gender equality. Certainly, attainment of higher education by girls strengthens their position at home.

The high participation rates of women in higher education is yet to improve Poland's 54th place in the international ranking on the gender gap. Beata Nagy (2009, p. 196) analysing post-communist states in terms of

equal opportunities, showed that the number of females in higher education exceed the number of men. However, the employment rate compared with the communist era declined, leaving women in employment at 51% of the female working age population (data from 2007). The gender gap in employment was and still is considerable. The inactivity of women of working age in terms of employment was high 44.5%, but only 16% of them were on childcare leave and a wage gap still existed, at 15% (Nagy 2009). This is why Poland sits at a lower position to its western peers. Moreover, when considering International Standard Classification of Occupations ISCO (EU), one notices a large gap between men and women in managerial positions. Interestingly this applies even to the Scandinavian countries and the UK, which are considered more advanced in the quest for equal opportunities. Iceland is the only country in the world where there is an opposite ratio and females make up 80 percent of all managers with number of male managers remaining below 20 percent mark. Is this a result of culturally determined natural order in Iceland, where due to the harsh living conditions, men focused on physical tasks and chose manual labour whilst women chose higher education as more suited to female biological conditioning?

Professional activity and the independence that it brings may be crucial for women to escape toxic relationships. Domestic violence victims often state that they choose to stay and suffer abuse due to financial dependency on male perpetrators (Fleury-Steiner 2006, Ford 1987). It is also a proven fact that in modern societies women and female headed households are disproportionately poorer than men and male headed households (Wright 1992, Chant 2003, Medeiros 2008), leading to the so called 'feminisation of poverty'. The female quest for access to paid employment and education parity are considered to be the major factors necessary to combat this negative phenomenon. The demand for higher education amongst women in developing countries is justifiable, even if only considering the peril of female poverty (OECD Indicators 2013).

Authors such as: Elzbieta Pakszys (1992, p. 119) and Barbara Nowak (1997, p.148), similarly to Arlie Hochschild (2003) claim that women in Poland, through their access to paid employment, did not become liberated but that their duties doubled and instead of emancipating them, women became overburdened. Education allows women to notice this false equality reality and apply appropriate strategies to regain independence and manage their double work load. Danuta Duch-Krzysztozek (2009, p. 112)

states that men in Poland, in all age categories, are more professionally active than women and are much less involved in domestic chores. In the European Social Survey 2006 quoted by her, the research data showed that Polish people less frequently accepted professional employment of older women than that of older men. Duch-Krzysztozek thinks that it is closely connected to the cultural expectations posed on women by Polish society to provide unpaid child and elderly-care in their family. She considers it to be a burden on women's life, particularly in older age. Ryszard Borowicz is of the opinion that the model of democratic-egalitarian family is not fully accomplished if the only reason for a female to seek employment is a poor economic situation of her household (2008, p. 155). He implies that for true equality, career decisions should be made not as a consequence of financial necessity but as a conscious personal choice of women. Never the less, his analysis exclude single women, single mothers, widows and divorcees.

#### **GENDER FACTORS AND LIFE EXPECTANCY - IN NEED OF INDEPENDENCE**

Women often live longer than their partners and in patriarchal societies, they often women marry older men, which increases chances of becoming a widow. Through opportunities to work and particularly to continue their work until older age (in non-physical employment), women become less dependent on their spouses and ensure continued sufficient level of income when their husbands pass away. Higher education leads to higher pay and often a better pension scheme. People with more disposable income may also be able to invest in additional social security measures, private life insurance and private healthcare - solutions that secure one's older age. Women, due to their longer lifespan may develop a greater level of disability at older age and medical evidence shows that social or professional activity reduces that risk (Everard et al., 2000).

The male and female demographic ratios and the gradual social change (since the women's liberation movements) has made the status of single women socially acceptable and often a matter of personal choice. The numbers of single women is on a rise, both in Poland and abroad. For example, Bella De Paulo (2009) claims that 42% of the adult population in USA has a single status. Single status is defined as a lack of formal or informal hetero- or homo- sexual relationship (Stein 1981). According to the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS) every third adult woman in Poland lives on her own (Nachabe, 2013). In 2010, the number of children born out of

the traditional wedlock reached 17% in the countryside and 23% in the cities, accounting for children of single mothers and cohabitating couples (Central Statistical Office 2011, p. 4). The average male / female ratio was 111 women to 100 men (higher in cities, with 119 in Warsaw and 120 in Olsztyn). This statistic demonstrates that today's adult women need to be able to look after themselves without relying on male providers, or state welfare. This is particularly important when looking at the mortality of men and women. There is a phenomenon of disproportionately high casualty rate amongst males in Poland when compared to females. In some of the age groups it can be four times the female fatality rate. When analyzing the number of marriages finishing in death of the spouse, women's deaths accounted for about 40 thousand every five years, whilst men's deaths ranged from 118 to 138 thousand deaths, in every five years, which is considerably higher, leaving a significant number of women widowed. Marriages finished in divorce numbered at around 60 thousand for the period of 2005 to 2010 (Central Statistical Office 2011, p. 6). In single income families, divorce would have a much greater impact on the new financial situation of both parties and their children, thus again showing the need for a woman to have financial independence. In 2010 on average, women outlived their male peers by 8.5 years. The average life expectancy of a Polish male reached 72.1 and for a woman 80.6 (Ibidem, p. 11) and this has continuously increased yearly - 72.4 and 80.9 in the following year 2011 although the age gap was maintained. Considering French statistical data that compare child life expectancy of newborn children and their chances to live until old age by Jacques Vallin and France Mesle (2001, p. 102) in 1896, 1900 and 1996: men had respectively 34%, 48.6%, 94.4% chance to live until 60. At the same time women had a 36.2%, 59.7% and 96.8% chance to reach that age. To live until 80 - 7.7%, 17.2%, 80.6% men in France and respectively 9.8%, 35.1%, 92.2% of women were estimated to be able to reach that age. This shows that the difference in death rates between the sexes is evident not only in Poland. One may question whether paid employment shortens men life expectancy rates, however this is a question for another analysis and it shall not be expanded on.

Elżbieta Górnikowska-Zwolak (2006, p. 69) says that a discussion over women's education grew into force after the uprising of 1863, when many women were impoverished by the deaths of their husbands and fathers, confiscation of property and the lack of opportunity for re-marrying due to reversed gender demographics caused by executions and war. Women

had to move into cities to look for employment in service and the production industry. Their complete dependency on male relatives turned their situation into personal and social drama, caused by losing their breadwinners.

### **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL**

The idea of education as the most effective emancipatory strategy has been present in social sciences for years (Górnikowska-Zwolak, p. 346). In line with Elżbieta Górnikowska-Zwolak (p. 332) and Anna Titkow (2002, p. 58) education, a good job, high qualifications and economic independence play the key role in market driven economies and may determine a successful personal life and prosperity of the family. Moreover, higher education allows for increased autonomy of decision making and increased awareness of gender based capabilities and limitations. The researchers of mid and eastern Europe believe that the democratization of society requires full democratization of a family first (M. Baer, pp. 235-236). A greater participation of men in unpaid domestic duties and children's upbringing will, in their view, eliminate the privileged position of men in the labour market. From the point of view of modern social pedagogy and social psychology, Richard Nelson-Jones (1997, p. 70) highlights the importance of treating both sexes equally with the aim of enabling a full development of one's potential and expression of self-subjectivity in children, leading to them becoming successful and fulfilled adults. Although it will sound unintentionally sexist, educated mothers are on average more reflexive and keen to invest in their children's further education, they also equip children with added value cultural capital that helps them to succeed throughout public education. Therefore, well educated mothers increase human and social capital for future generations. The same applies to well educated grandmothers, who are able to provide high quality information for their grandchildren and by helping with childcare, enable work flexibility and the gender-bias free professional standing of their daughters. These arguments were present in feminist-oriented writings dating as far back as the nineteenth century (see: Waleria Marrene-Morzowska (1891) the first professional female writer, who earned her living from writing or from Paulina Kuczalska-Reinschmit (1897)). This argument is also present in the modern emancipation movements of women in developing and in Islamic countries (see: A. Ahmed 1983, L. Ahmed 1991). The common features of social pedagogy and feminist thought are

their social commitment and absolute discord with the tacit acquiescence to social injustice. They both focus on promoting general development and educational opportunities through fighting the barriers that reduce individual potential and aspirations.

Heidi Mirza (1997) suggests in her study on black women in education that there is an urgency and a desire to transform their opportunities via education advancement. Michele Cohen in the nineties argued that high achievers amongst girls were confronted by the world of contradiction generated by standards adhering to 'boy's potential'. Diane Reay (2001) agrees that the ideals of a learner, a font of knowledge and a high achiever are all masculine ones, which tends to contrast with the cultural expectation of a 'nice girl' ideal imposing unconscious self-limitation and self-surveillance on women. A similar idea comes from Victoria Foster's writings on empowered girls, who are treated as invaders of 'transpositional space', almost blocking their femininity. There is a tension in their agency and their gender in the place of learning and it will be continued until true gender equality is achieved and the female perspective comes to light in all spheres of life. High achievers amongst women may be perceived as invaders of space (Gordon, et al. 2000). They are expected (by cultural construction of what is female and what is male) to be more still in space, their bodies to be more contained and their voices to be quieter. Female agency in education may be perceived as a threat. Joanna Roszak in her research on gender stereotypes confirms that people in Poland think that only women who demonstrate male qualities and features may achieve success (Report. School and social inequality 2012). It is only through persistent presence and continued empowerment that cultural barriers may be weakened and what is perceived as invasion of space now, will become a norm in the future. (Ibidem).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

There are multiple benefits for women entering higher education. Opportunity to work outweighs benefits of not working and higher education gives more opportunities for employment. Working allows women to be financially independent from their partners, which proves to be highly important during older age. The independence is particularly significant for growing numbers of unmarried women, divorcees and widows who remain single. It shields them from economic marginalisation and social exclusion. In the postmodern world, monetary value is argued to be a tool

of liberation and a remedy for culturally stigmatised female aging. It may be of utmost importance to victims of domestic violence. Working women increase households' spendable income and therefore enhance economic growth. Working mothers set positive role model for girls, who feel more empowered by their mums and for boys who find educational and professional success of women natural and unquestionable, reinforcing equitable gender relations in the societies of the future.

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