

# Articles

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## On Gender Equality in Polish Democracy<sup>1</sup>

Maria Ossowska was a feminist and democrat. In her opinion, democracy meant equality of rights. Prejudice towards women not only prevented the development of democratic society, but was also a fundamental intellectual error. Her scholarly contribution in the field of democracy was complemented by engagement in public issues. How is this idea of equality – especially “being privileged or underprivileged” on the grounds of gender – implemented in contemporary, democratic Poland?

*Keywords: Ossowska, gender equality, democracy, civic participation, empowerment*

### Maria Ossowska: academic, feminist, democrat

Maria Ossowska is one of the social science scholars who still inspires the succeeding generations of sociologists. As a feminist, Ossowska was concerned about the ideal of equal treatment, regardless of gender, class or nationality. For her, feminism was a way of life – not only she was the first woman who became the senior assistant professor at the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw, but she also chose research topics – such as sex and war – which were not perceived as typical for female scholars (cf. Kurczewski 2005: 45). Ossowska sought to incorporate the idea of equality of women and men into practices, as she firmly believed that prejudice towards women not only prevented the development of democratic society, but was also a fundamental intellectual error, which she traced among classical and contemporary scholars. Ossowska was also a democrat: her scholarly contribution in the field of democracy was complemented by engagement in public issues. In her opinion, democracy meant equality of rights and she expressed such a standpoint in her booklet entitled *The Model citizen in a democratic system*:

The use of the word ‘democratic’ forces us to provide some clarifications. Without going into a detailed explanation of all, already proverbial, am-

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biguous meanings of the term in question, we assume that by the democratic system we understand the system in which there is not the oppressor and the oppressed, the privileged and the underprivileged; a system in which everyone can develop their capabilities in an atmosphere of freedom. When speaking of privilege and underprivilege, I refer to all types of privileges and underprivileges, not only economic ones. In that sense, democracy will not be built on a division into first- and second-class citizens, no matter whether it be the rich and the poor, or a national majority and the national minorities, or people of a particular religion and people of other religions, or men and women, etc. (Ossowska 1946: 3).

How is this idea of equality – especially “being privileged or underprivileged” on the grounds of gender – implemented in contemporary, democratic Poland?

## Equality in Polish democracy<sup>2</sup>

The concept of equality has been positioned in the periphery of public sphere and policy in Poland for the past decades. The financial and fiscal crisis, cascading through European societies since 2008, has undermined faith in the power of market mechanisms as the main drivers of development. It has also revealed the price paid by many members of society for the neoliberal model of transformation from a state economy into market one. And while in Poland debate regarding the nature of neoliberal growth strategy has not yet gained such intensity as elsewhere, the critical voices of the dominant discourse are becoming more and more frequent. Equality lies at the heart of these debates (Hardy 2010; Kowalik 2009; Majmurek and Szumlewicz 2009; Sowa 2015). The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Polish transformation has become a starting point for a discussion on Polish democracy:

“Almost the entire growth is absorbed by the caste of wealthy, unemployment has not actually decreased, social inequalities have reached a level that until recently was seen as a scandal. Yet we still have the illusion that this system can be slightly adjusted and will be fine. And this is very dangerous. We will end badly if reasonable people do not treat the universal ideals – equality and fraternity – seriously.”

“This is something new.”

“New? They are old ideas. Liberty, equality, fraternity (solidarity).”

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<sup>2</sup> This article is based on the result of the survey research conducted on a Poland-wide representative random sample of adult men and women (address sampling) and took place from 13 April to 20 May 2015. There was a total of 1501 respondents, and the response rate was 64%.

“Yes. But your generation chose only freedom from this triad. Mostly, we talked about it. Free and entrepreneurial people will manage themselves well as long as nobody disturbs them” (from a conversation with Marcin Król, Polish philosopher, historian and dissident in the communist times, published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*)\*.

One of the lenses through which equality should be analysed is gender. The cutbacks in expenditure on health services and education hit women with double force. They not only lost jobs in the most feminised segments of the labour market, but also a variety of the state’s tasks and responsibilities in care, health, and education were moved into the private sphere. Now these are ‘family problems’, which in fact in everyday life means women’s problems. Hence the concerns about whether economic growth has indeed brought equality as well as whether the dominant economic order has not become an obstacle to pursuing fundamental human rights. The neoliberal system without a doubt resulted in new opportunities for educated and wealthy women, but at the same time it caused huge inequalities among women from different classes and social groups. It has recently become clear that social development cannot be measured through the number of motorways, fast trains and high GDP. By contrast – it should also be seen as a social project in which gender equality is one of the key aims and results. Our findings support this assumption: almost 80% of respondents believe that gender equality is an important value for a fair and just society (Figure 1.)

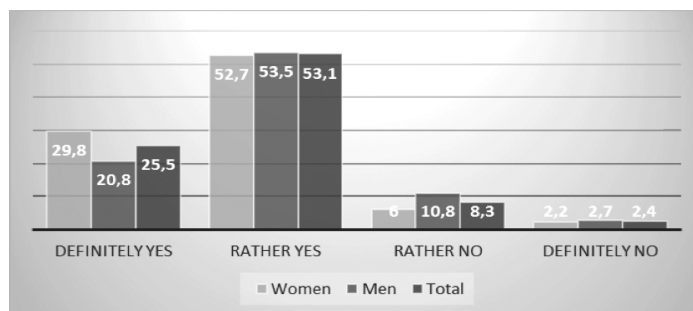


Figure 1. Gender equality is an important value for a fair society

Although gender equality has been criticised in public debates as a foreign notion, conflicting with Polish values and threatening Polish family, the respondents seldom share such concerns (Figure 2).

\*‘Byliśmy głupi’ [‘We were stupid’], Grzegorz Sroczynski interviews Marcin Król, 7 February 2014.

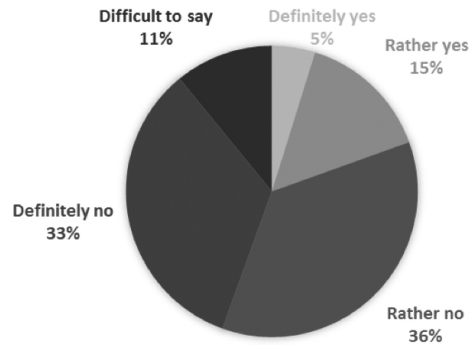


Figure 2. Gender equality threatens Polish family

On the contrary: 82.8% of women and 76.5% of men emphasise the importance of gender equality in their lives. At the same time, the respondents note that gender equality still remains an area of concern. Despite introducing equal treatment policies, gender inequality persists and the respondents emphasise that women are still treated worse in many domains; significant differences between women and men are noted below:

- 30% of respondents (38% of women and 21.6% of men) notice discrimination occurring in the workplace;
- 41.7% of respondents (49.2% of women and 33.5% of men) notice unequal division of household duties;
- 17% of respondents (20.5% of women and 13.1% of men) notice discrimination in public places;
- 9.1% of respondents (12.9% of women, 4.9% of men) – in education.

These opinions reflect the practices observed in social reality, but they are also rooted in the respondents' personal experiences. For example, women are three times more likely to experience worse treatment while applying for a job (26% of women, 10% of men) and in the workplace (18% of women and 7% of men), in the division of household duties (30% of women and 11% of men) or in public places (14% of women and 9% of men).

Taking into account the above-mentioned inequalities between men and women, Figure 3 (below) shows the most important areas which should be improved.

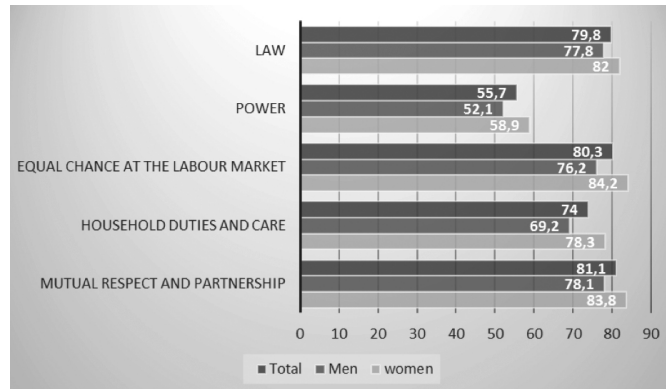


Figure 3. Key areas where gender equality should be implemented

The recognition and achievement of gender equality in the areas listed in Figure 4 requires the engagement of individuals as well as social actors. Although almost 50% of male and female respondents claim that every individual is responsible for fostering the advancement of gender equality, only 24% of men and 31.5% of women admit that they take actions to implement gender equality. In parallel with the importance of individual actions, media, public institutions and schools continue to be identified as key actors in ensuring gender equality. Interestingly, non-governmental organisations are seen as playing a minor role in promoting gender equality, along with other actors such as the Catholic Church (or other religious institutions) and trade unions.

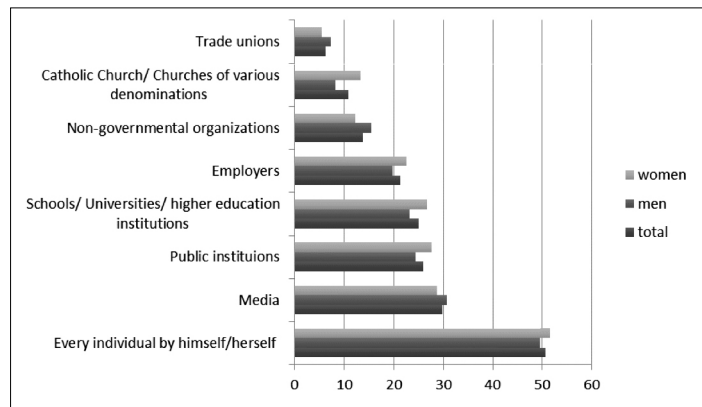


Figure 4: Actors responsible for promoting gender equality

The results of our study prove that equality should permeate both family and public life. Hence, it should be seen as a private value, manifested in

mutual respect and in an equal relationship as well as social value, which affects the functioning of the labour market plus educational and political institutions. In that sense, equality is a prerequisite for individual development: it broadens the spectrum of opportunities in life, enables an individual to decide about their own life, and also gives a sense of accomplishment and respect from others. Yet the proposed connection between equality and individual development is only possible if the structural barriers faced by women in the labour market, in education, in decision-making and legal regulations, are removed. The lack of gender equality is seen not only from the perspective of individuals, in their own biographies, resulting in fewer opportunities for personal development, but also has far-reaching consequences for the development of society as a whole.

## Equality and empowerment

Maria Ossowska's approach to the development of democratic society underlines the interlink between the individual and collective level. She emphasises the need for individual and collective actions as an obligation of every active citizen who "actively improves the conditions in which one lives (...) an activity aimed at improving personal material situation or an activity aimed at ridding the world of exploitation" (Ossowska 1946: 7). While discussing the responsibilities of a good citizen on a collective level, Ossowska distinguishes four components to induce citizens to build a coherent, equal and just society: interest in social issues and the competences required to address them; overcoming one's egocentrism and the ability to analyse the situation from other people's (especially those in underprivileged situation) perspective; dedication for the common good and the obligation of working actively for the advantage of the entire society; and the ability to cooperate and work together. Therefore, engagement in civil society and participation in public life have been given a special place not only in shaping a good citizen, but also as a necessary condition of an equal and just society.

Referring to the data collected we would like to operationalise selected dimensions of gender equality and illustrate them with concrete examples. We propose to use the concept of empowerment as theoretical settings. It is a dynamic concept, and therefore difficult to measure. Usually, empowerment is defined as a kind of social transformation that allows marginalised people and groups to define and enforce their rights. We would like to analyse three different dimensions of empowerment:

personal	• developing self-esteem and other abilities that help reduce the effects of internalised oppression
relational	• developing the ability to negotiate and influence relations
collective	• cooperation among individuals in order to achieve a greater impact on the structural basis of society than if acting separately

Empowerment has been at the centre of gender equality discourse for the last two decades. It attempts to connect the personal and the social, the individual and society, the micro and the macro level which overlap and are interconnected (cf. Gaventa 2006). The spectrum of capabilities to decide about one's own life is embedded in the individual empowerment which we analyse in our research, focusing on the importance of education and work. Access to education and paid employment is one of the most important means of empowering people on a personal level. These, in turn, influence the nature of intimate relationships – the relational dimension – that we study through opinions and everyday practices (cf. Gaventa 2006). However, as gender equality has become a real value which permeates the functioning of education, law, labour market policy and administration, combined struggle for change is needed. That collective dimension of empowerment, in reverse, influences the private sphere where gender patterns deeply rooted in culture change very slowly. The material spheres – of economics and politics, technology and organisation – are transformed more easily. Culture absorbs the changes slowly, but the difficulties are even more serious in regard to the family opposing such changes. The transformation in family life derives from transformation in other spheres of social life. Women's access to education and the labour market not only delays marriage and starting a family, but it also raises self-esteem and often promotes more egalitarian forms of organisation in terms of family relations.

### From individual emancipation to democratisation of relationships

Access to education and paid employment is one of the most important means of empowering women and men on a personal level. It affects their self-esteem and other abilities which help reduce the effects of internalised oppression, barriers and discrimination faced in everyday life. Development of the education system in Poland resulted in expanded access to education – primary, secondary and higher – for men and women. This finding is also confirmed by our study: more than a half of our respondents have at least upper secondary education: 22% completed general secondary education,

13% secondary vocational education and 20% higher education, while 3% have lower-secondary education and 13% have primary education. There are, however, differences between women and men in their educational attainment. Women outnumber men among the graduates of higher education institutions (22% compared to 18% among men) and secondary schools (25% compared to 18% among men). Men are more likely to dominate among the graduates of vocational education (31% compared to 20% of women) and secondary vocational education (15% compared to 12% of women) (see Figure 5).

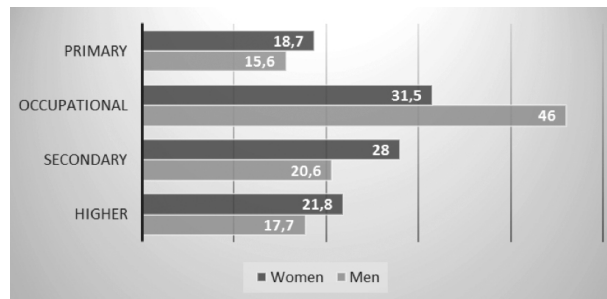


Figure 5. Education attainment by gender

Another important factor contributing to empowerment on an individual level, equally as important as education, is paid employment. According to our respondents, such work is defined as an opportunity for self-development (see Figure 6), but also provides a sense of stability in life. Therefore, our study confirms that employment is a key element of empowerment on an individual level as it gives a sense of stability and security (see Figure 7).

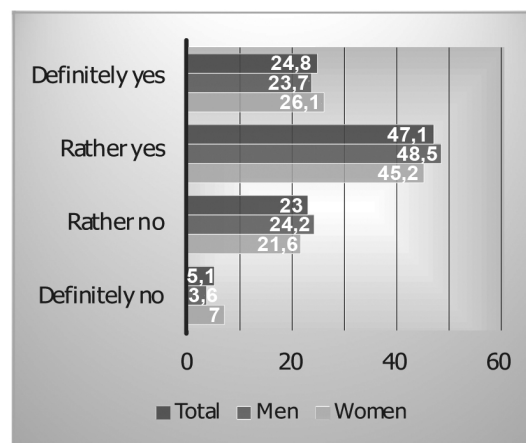


Figure 6. Work as an opportunity for self-development

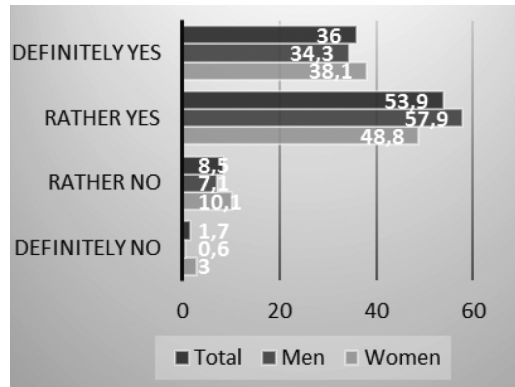


Figure 7. Work as a source of life stability

Though paid employment is a pathway to empowerment, and women continue to increase their presence on the labour market, the GEQ2015 study brings into focus gender inequalities that still persist in employment patterns and income:

- the proportion of women active in the labour market is lower than men among those employed in standard salaried positions (55% of men compared to 42% of women), self-employed outside of the agriculture sector (7% of men compared to 3% of women) and self-employed in the agriculture sector (3% of men compared to 1% of women);

- women more often than men declare that they do not work due to taking care of their home and family (7% of women compared to 0.3% of men);

- women’s net monthly income is lower than men’s income: almost twice as many women (26%) as men (12%) declare net monthly income below 1500 PLN. Detailed information on income distribution is presented in Figure 8.

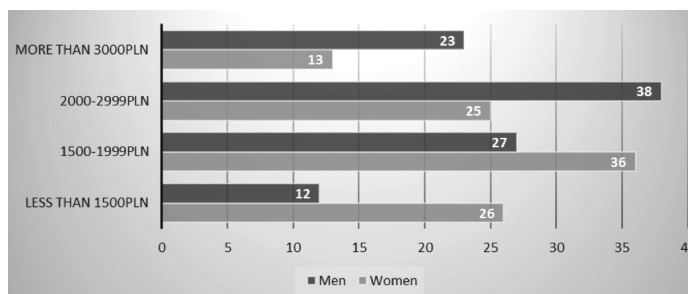


Figure 8. Net monthly income by gender

It should be noted that even if we observe a ‘small misfit’ between the educational success of women and work patterns, these two dimensions of empowerment on an individual level – as proved by the analysis of data from the GEQ2015 survey – are related:

- the higher the level of education, the higher the income for both men and women, but in the case of women the level of education can be treated as a remarkably significant predictor of income. For example, completing higher education by women pays off in monthly income above 3000PLN (66% of all female respondents declaring income above 3000PLN). When we look at the net monthly income among the respondents with secondary or lower education, only 17% of them declare income above 3000 PLN;

- despite the fact that there is gender pay gap, having higher education is associated with being less likely to be offered a lower salary (respectively 86%, 66% and 50% of female respondents with primary and lower-secondary, vocational and secondary education have monthly income below 1500 PLN).

To sum up, education is a pivotal factor leading to empowerment. Even in a context of growing precarization, a university degree translates into higher income. Yet, although we can talk about the undoubted educational success of Polish women, their salaries are still lower compared to their male colleagues’ salaries, while they also account for a smaller proportion of those making up the labour market. Therefore, for female and male respondents educational resource translates into higher income, but this process is slower for women who are still lagging behind men. Drawing on the findings from our survey, we can note several factors contributing to this gender inequality: the most important refer to horizontal and vertical segregation in the labour market. The results of the GEQ2015 survey also show that almost 40% of women noted unequal treatment on the grounds of gender on the labour market, 44% of women experienced unequal treatment either when seeking employment or in the workplace and 9 out of 10 female respondents argue that equal chances in the labour market are a necessary condition of implementing gender equality in society.

Education and employment not only determine position in society and enable women and men to become agents of social change involved in decision-making processes, but also alter the relations in families. However, as data from the survey shows, women are still responsible for managing family life: for taking decisions about what should be served for meals, for taking care of school-related matters (such as homework, parents’ meeting), for maintaining cleanliness, and for caring for people who need assistance. The cultural model of the family life’s manager who controls and manages house-

hold issues is still a major barrier preventing the democratisation of relations in a family. Yet, women's increasing participation in the labour market is accompanied by a growing level of engagement by men in family duties and childcare. As other studies show, a new model of fatherhood is emerging among younger men (Dzwonkowska-Gdula 2011; Fuszara 2008). More importantly, this new model based on partnership is being passed on to younger generations.

In the majority of our respondents' families both women and men are occupationally active. The financial inequalities resulting from the differences in salary between women and men do not translate into hierarchical gender relations. More than 60% of the respondents declare that they manage their household budget jointly with their partners. More detailed analysis indicates that the differences in income and education between partners have an impact on the unequal division of duties in their relations. Firstly, a higher income for the male partner is linked to lower equality in the sharing of household duties (Me=14.39). Secondly, the differences in educational attainment influence equality in care practices. Men who have higher education attainment compared to that of their partner are less often involved in childcare (Me=8.07). A similar level of education for partners contributes to more gender equal practices in sharing care duties in a family (Me=9.76).

The process of democratisation of family life is also reflected in respondents' opinions on gender roles. Yet, the picture emerging from our survey is not unequivocal. On the one hand, gender equality is perceived as an important value that should be passed on to children. It is also believed that both women and men are responsible for the financial situation of their families as well as managing the household duties. Almost 9 out of 10 respondents declare that fathers can take care of children just as well as mothers, even after a divorce. On the other hand, the cultural patterns that shape our opinions and practices in families change very slowly. While the respondents acknowledge that woman can enter the labour market and become professionally active, they have to be prepared to abandon their occupational plans when they have small children or/and to support her partner's career. According to a majority of the respondents, the woman also bears the main responsibility for home and family. Global and local economic processes as well as the pressure of changing cultural patterns influence the consciousness, behaviour and relations of Polish women and men. Education or professional work and the sense of self-esteem emerging from these two factors contribute to the development of partnership. In that sense, the individual level of empowerment affects its relational level, slowly changing the everyday life of our families.

## Equality and civic engagement

Equality does not refer only to equal chances, but also means real capabilities for living in keeping with one's own aspirations. To achieve this, the changes at the individual and relational levels are not sufficient and structural changes are required. The idea of equality has to penetrate the public sphere: the labour market, education system, public institutions and politics. Such a transformation should be legitimised at the collective level – civic engagement and collective actions aimed at changing the power relations and participation in decision-making. These collective actions are based on an assumption that 'my opinion counts and is valued', which – to a great extent – is related to the social capital gained through education (on an individual level).

Yet social inequalities undermine social cohesion and solidarity. A low level of social trust, inherited from the previous system as well as deep individualism<sup>3</sup> and competition embedded in the post-transformation model do not provide a solid and firm basis for collaboration to overcome social anomie and the lack of a sense of having an impact on the social reality.

Almost 72% of the respondents believe that they do not have any influence on their local community, city, town or village, while 77% argue that they cannot make an impact at the country level. There are only modest gender differences (see Figure 9) but still they can signify an unequal power distribution: men are more likely to occupy decision-making positions which give them a greater sense of influence.

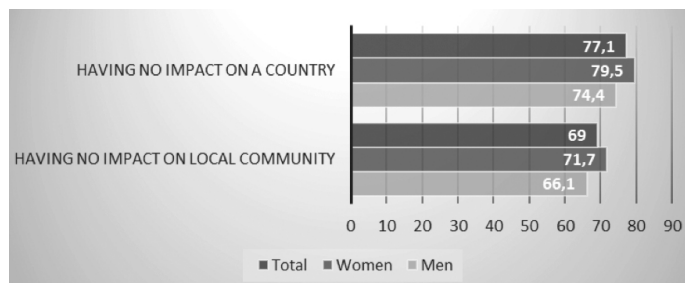


Figure 9. The sense of influence by gender

Higher education level translates into a greater sense of agency in both individual life and civil society. Moreover, it reduces the level of social alien-

<sup>3</sup> Ossowska is a critic of asocial individualism which limits collaboration on equal grounds, but values autonomy and solidarity.

ation; political and civic efficacy is higher among male and female respondents with education at a higher level.

We understood civic activity as “the network of ties and groups through which people connect to one another and get drawn into community and political affairs” (Skocpol, Fiorina 1999: 2). The meaning of civic participation has been broadened over the past decades and “civic engagement historically has come in many sizes and shapes” (Putnam 2000: 27). It encompasses a wide spectrum of involvement: from institutional politics (voting and participation in formal politics) through community associations (unions and professional organisations, local association, religious institutions) to informal groups. The opportunity to become actively involved depends on political, economic and social resources, resulting in different patterns of participation among people of different gender, age, social circumstances, economic and work situation, and place of living. Such a broad spectrum of citizens’ involvement in the public sphere makes it possible to capture the specificity of Poles’ engagement in building the common good.

In the GEQ2015 study, we examined various forms of political and civic engagement, but the primary focus was on activities related to the idea of gender equality. As stated above, both male and female respondents note discrimination against women in diverse areas of life and emphasise the need to eliminate it. This, however, requires social mobilisation, lobbying, and bottom-up initiatives that would exert pressure and promote gender equality. At the same time, more than 51% of the respondents say that “every individual is responsible for implementing gender equality”. This raises a fundamental question: Is the sense of individual responsibility for implementing gender equality limited to building a more equal relationship? Or does it refer to a need to make public institutions more equal?

The democratic system – which is the most efficient guarantee of the equality of all citizens – is based on citizens’ participation in public life. For example, citizens can vote, become involved in decision-making processes on various level, take part in protests, and get involved in non-governmental organizations. The picture emerging from the analysis clearly shows that voting is the most often declared form of civic and political engagement. Almost 84% of the respondents acknowledge that they take part – although with different frequencies – in elections at European, national or local level. Remarkably, being a woman or man does not translate into differences in voting patterns: almost the same percentages of male and female respondents vote. However, a positive effect of education on voting can be observed.

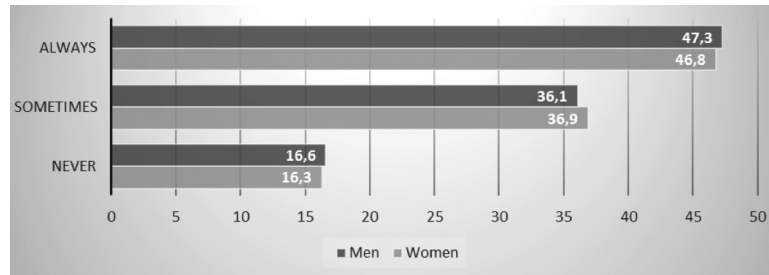


Figure 12. Participation in elections by gender

Reflecting on the civic participation in Poland, other studies show that two thirds of Poles are interested in public issues (Olech 2014: 4) and 77% believe that by acting together they can contribute to solving some problems occurring in local communities (Aktywność społeczna Polaków 2014: 3). Yet, the authors of *Social Diagnosis* claim that “this increase of sensitivity [for the common good] is not sufficient to say that we have already built a civil society” (Czapiński, Panek 2015, 2016). Data from the last decade proves that Poles – both women and men – rarely engage in civil society, and that civil society that derives from such involvement – has not developed well. The same trend can be observed based on the GEQ2015 survey’s results (Figure 11).

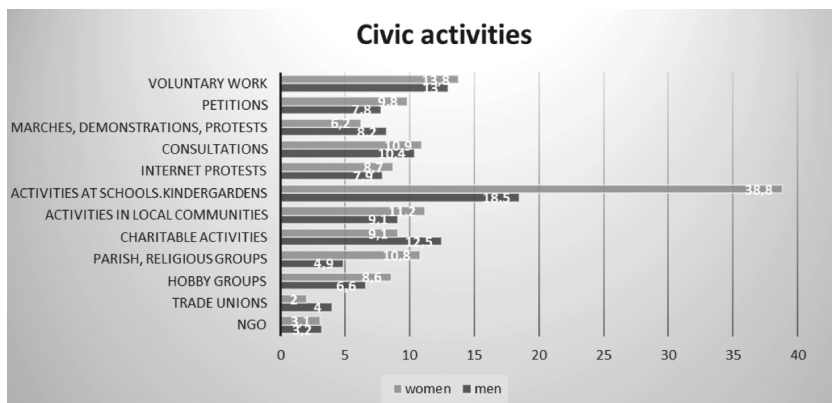


Figure 11. Civic engagement by gender

Our findings demonstrate little interest not only in participation in political parties and trade unions (which might be surprising given that the transformation from a socialist to a democratic regime was initiated by a trade union), but also in other civic activities. Even the collecting of signatures via the Internet – a less demanding type of civic involvement – is something

only a few respondents (8%) claim to have taken part in. Involvement in children's schools and kindergartens is an exception: almost 40% of mothers and 20% of fathers are engaged in this form of civic activity. We could interpret these results as indicating the strategy of schools which tries to activate parents and engage them in school's (mandatory) activities. It may be also suggest that creating a particular environment or satisfying expectations formed by a school's or kindergarten's authorities stimulate the civic activity of parents. Or perhaps schools or kindergartens are treated as extensions of the private sphere – our parental responsibilities (especially maternal), and hence greater involvement in this area?

## Democratic order and civic participation

According to Maria Ossowska – the central figure of this volume – civic participation is the fundamental issue for democratic society. As it was mentioned above – four of its components should be taken into account:

- interest in social issues and the competences required to address them;
- overcoming one's egocentrism and the ability to analyse the situation from other people's (especially those in an underprivileged situation) perspective;
- dedication for the common good and the obligation of working actively to the benefit of society as a whole;
- the ability to cooperate and work together.

The social system without “the oppressors and the oppressed, the privileged and the underprivileged”, a system where people can develop their own capabilities regardless of gender, requires policies that support reconciliation career plans and plans for parenthood, reducing both the existing cultural barriers as well as structural constrains. However, the implementation of such a system needs civic participation – the third dimension of empowerment. Although Ossowska's paper was published 70 years ago, its diagnosis remains topical.

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