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## CRISIS AND GENDER: A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

**Summary:** The paper is an attempt to highlight the significance of gender in reflections on the crisis, whose outcome, though mainly regarding the sphere of economic activity, in the perspective adopted in this paper goes beyond the domain of economics in a narrow sense. Reflections on the effects of the crisis makes one consider women's condition in three spheres: production, reproduction and consumption. This enables to show both problems they encounter outside their homes and specific opportunities which arise for women in the age of so-called crisis.

**Key words:** gender, crisis, consumption, production, reproduction, women's success.

### Introduction

The notion of "crisis" in economics is connected with the business cycle, i.e. "a periodical fluctuation in economic activity" [Milewski 1999, p. 373]. The business cycle usually consists of four stages: crisis, depression, upturn and prosperity<sup>1</sup>. That is why writing about "crisis" in an economic perspective makes it simply one of the stages of the business cycle which, in addition, is ebbing away, as "in contemporary economic literature instead of the four stages of the cycle [...], only two are distinguished: recession, combining the stages of crisis and depression, and expansion, combining the upturn and prosperity" [Milewski 1999, p. 374]. Such an approach to the problem seems less "dramatic" than what one deals with when analysing press discourse on economic issues in the period of the current crisis whose symbolic dividing line may be the 3. January 2007<sup>2</sup>. One can say that what we call a global world crisis has had its origins in, among others, "deregulation

<sup>1</sup> The author [Milewski 1999] pays attention to the fact that perhaps the notion "stagnation" would better communicate the essence of the depression stage, but commonly used terms are hard to combat.

<sup>2</sup> That day Ownit Mortgage Solutions Inc collapsed. It dealt with giving subprime loans – see [Kalendarium 2009, p. 413]. According to research, the 'subprime' category is influenced by gender.

of financial markets and making speculation a basic way of earning money which compels to reflection on the essence of economic life, and not only that [...]. The current crisis breeds reflection on at least three dimensions: (1) theoretical – in terms of searching for a new pattern of economic relations [...], (2) ideological – which can be expressed by the question whether the “marketed” politics is able of controlling the market? [and N.K.] (3) civilizational – as it inevitably seems that contemporary consumption and passive consent to liquidate public sphere and democracy in return for a survey-medial fake are simultaneously the cause and effect of the neoliberal hegemony” [Sierakowski 2009, p. 9–10].

Such a perspective makes the crisis transgress the boundaries of economics and become a multidimensional social issue. That is why, in spite of the contemporary “economic” genesis of the notion of “crisis”, I would like to extend it by possible non-economic meanings and connotations and in the further part of the paper – try to indicate how the crisis – also in economic sphere – may affect women’s situation. Hence – perhaps in a somewhat provocative manner – I would like to ask the question whether the crisis can be a specific opportunity for women and whether the crisis, thanks to numerous analyses carried out to find an antidote, does not emphasize not only the economic significance of women, but also – in a broader sense – importance of gender for socio-economic reflections. Such economic analyses, extended by social deliberation, are in a way legitimized by the current, crisis-struck situation whose ambiguous reasons lead to a conclusion that “the current crisis results from social changes which have occurred in the last two-three decades. The changes encompassed, among other things, a decomposition of social structure and transformations of political organization of the society” [Jałowicki 2010]. It is also worth noticing that an eminent part of these social changes is a creation and enhancement of what is called emancipation movements which also cover studies on women’s condition, such as: organization and consequences of unpaid labour in households, childcare, influence of social-economic situation on the number of children in a family and last but not least – women’s functioning outside homes: on labour markets or in politics.

## 1. Crisis – the notion’s etymology

The notion seems extremely ambiguous and at the same time is commonplace; it means “a decisive moment, turning point, breakthrough” [Dictionary of Foreign Words 1999, p. 617]. It originates from the ancient Greek. For ancient Greeks *crisis* (Greek *krinō* – ‘I distinguish’, ‘I decide/I adjudicate’) had a very wide spectrum of meanings, being a combination of a few verbs: “to divide”, “to choose”, “to judge”,

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Women found themselves in the “subprime category”, since in spite of higher income and lower loans they were considered high-risk borrowers [Ginty 2010].

“to decide”, but also “to cope with something”, “to dispute” or “to fight”. “In classical Greek the term was central for politics [Dictionary 1999]. It meant not only “a divorce”, but also “a decision” in a sense of reaching a point when the scales turn” [Koselleck 2006, p. 358.], i.e. a moment of a breakthrough, becoming almost a forecast of something new, a new quality. Moreover, R. Koselleck notices that the notion of “crisis” in Greek also referred to the fields of the law, medicine and theology and – as an idea – it introduced binary oppositions mediating between extremes: good-evil, salvation-perdition, life-death. It is also worth noticing that since the 17<sup>th</sup> century till this day this term, often used metaphorically, has extended its meaning beyond the spheres of politics and economics over history and psychology [Koselleck 2006]. As Koselleck puts it, due to its flexibility and a surplus of metaphorical load, not only did the term permeate into colloquial language, but also became an extremely popular and attention-drawing slogan. Hence “in this century there is no field of life which would not be confronted or interpreted from the angle of this concept whose immanent part is a demand of making decisions and choices” [Koselleck 2006]. Simultaneously, spheres such as politics, owing to its strong links to the media for whom “the best news is bad news”, seem to thrive thanks to different types of crises. This leads some researchers to a conclusion that a constant state of political crisis characterizes in the best way what we call modernity [Str ath & Wodak 2009, p. 22].

As it seems, a contemporary understanding of crisis emphasizes the role of time when certain occurrences take place, situating it in a broader social, economic and historical contexts, and of its negative meaning/connotations. This means that “crisis” has somewhat lost its quality of “transition”, “transformation”, “reconfiguration” and begun to be associated with negative consequences and threat deriving from risk. Presumably, “three elements are characteristic of every crisis: suddenness and unpredictability, temporary character of its occurrence and a significant influence it exerts on the system’s functioning” [Bankowicz 1999, p.119].

That is why the central question of this study is how the economic crisis affects the condition of women whose functioning outside home (not only in politics, but also in economic activity) is characterized by a certain range of traits connected with what we call *gender*, i.e. socially and culturally determined role of the sexes. It is linked with social expectations, influenced by sex-connected stereotypes, prejudice or downright gender-related discrimination practices – all of which hinder achieving professional positions and income comparable with those of men functioning on the labour market and make it difficult to achieve the so-called success (in a broad socio-economic sense). The following reflections are organized according to the three spheres (production, reproduction and consumption) in order to avoid the division of women’s activity between the “private” and the “public” sphere, criticized by feminist thought [see Philips 2003], as the division distorts in a way the specific condition of women.

Simultaneously, gender is perceived in this study from the social sciences' point of view which results in an assumption that "gender is not only a psychological organization of biological difference – it is a social order of this difference" [cf. Marshall 1994].

## 2. Sex and gender

The term *gender*, concerning the social and cultural aspects of being a man or woman, as opposed to the biological *sex*, understood as primary and secondary sex characters, is ascribed to Ann Oakley, the author of the dissertation on this distinction "*Sex, Gender and Society*" [Oakley 1972]. The author focuses, among other things, on social ways of gender constructing and norms defining masculinity and femininity. Hence, it is adopted after Oakley that "gender is a social construct" [Bradley 2008, p.17] and at the same time "gender is not merely an attribute of individuals, but also a social phenomenon [...] and a set of sociological relationships" [Bradley 2008, p.15]. This perspective on the problem contributes to the fact that in spite of several similarities, individual societies, their history, creating in a way relations between men and women, their duties and what we call public and private, affects the place and role of men and women in a given society. For "gender only becomes a meaningful term when we consider relationships *between*" [Brad 2008] men and women. Ulrich Beck also "perceives gender as all-embracing" [Beck 2004; Bradley 2008, p. 17], as also social "institutions which make up our society (marriages, families, schools, workplaces, political organizations) are themselves *gendered* and are loci in which the *gendering* of individuals and relationships take place" [Bradley 2008, p. 16–17]. Certainly, this *gendering* is defined as socialization, and numerous studies on how children and youths are prepared to fulfill social roles play a significant role in sociology, whereas in feminist reflection attention is drawn to the *differences* in socialization of boys and girls. Bożena Chołuj observes that differences in upbringing girls and boys are "not only a result of parental efforts, but of all the surroundings consisting of [...] all the *others* whom a child meets on its way. They, as well as all the texts children hear (f. ex. fairy-tales) and generally the language, teach the children how to belong to the given gender" [Chołuj 2000, p. 13]. These differences in child-raising procedures, evaluation standards and demands made not only in the family, but also at school or in the media, may be perceived as potential reasons for different aspirations, different life limitations, success definition, the spheres of life one derives satisfaction from and social expectations towards an individual – all of which are, after all, gender-related, too. It seems that the manifold, lifelong training in socialization towards social statuses and roles, within the family, at school, in the media, peer group, co-worker group, but also in relation to the values promoted by (pop) culture (literature, cinema) or

groups of fellow believers, tends to be reinforced in education processes<sup>3</sup> and is eventually manifested by both women and men. The effects are particularly visible in the fields which are commonly referred to as spheres of gender inequality. Among the most important ones there are the public sphere, with politics playing a prominent role [see Fuszara 2002, 2007; Siemińska 2005] and the sphere of economics [Lisowska 2004].

### 3. Economics and gender

When speaking about gender in economic context, I understand “femininity” as a range of characteristics which in some way affect the condition of market participants. It is my objective to demonstrate how this range of characteristics influences construction of a certain set of social expectations and affects the conditions and realization of aspirations, plans and needs of the participants denoted as “feminine”. In this interpretation “femininity”, understood as a set of characteristics which hinder (due to f. ex. tradition and convictions of *what* women should do and *how*) participation in the labour market, obtaining the same income as men or access to career advancement on full and equal terms with men. All the above mentioned barriers result, as a matter of fact, not merely in impeded access to certain instruments (credits<sup>4</sup>, guarantees), but also in lower pensions. This sort of differences in men and women’s functioning legitimize reflections on whether femininity may be treated in terms of a certain “risk”-increasing construct (implicitly internalized

<sup>3</sup> For analysis of gender statuses and roles in school textbooks and media broadcasts and their potential influence on socialization process see R. Siemińska [1997] or N. Krzyżanowska [2008].

<sup>4</sup> The word “credit” originates from the Italian “credere” - to trust, to believe, and renders the level of trust and what we would call today “creditworthiness”, connected with the risk run by the lender (person or institution). Women have a more difficult access to them, as one of the economic rules expressed in form of the equation “labour+capital=getting rich” works to their disadvantage. It is so because, in spite of the fact that women sometimes work more than men, their work is lower-paid and it may be interrupted by maternity or (culturally reinforced) necessity of caretaking J. Philips [2009, p. 86–105]. Women too, often owing to tradition which excludes them from inheritance, possess less than 1% of the world capital. All these factors affect a lower creditworthiness of women throughout the world, but as opposed to the Euro-Atlantic culture where women thanks to education and several instruments of equality-promoting policy seem to be doing better and better, the mechanism is specifically visible in developing countries. The negative influence of women’s lower creditworthiness is to some extent eliminated by some actions such as a “microcredit” which is a financial tool for realization of social aims” –and as Maria Nowak maintains – “it is especially valuable that due to them women can enjoy a greater responsibility and autonomy”. Her research proves that women who have the opportunity to take microcredits, develop their own business activity, and in effect – become richer and are able of raising themselves from extreme poverty, improve their own situation and that of their children, and thanks to the possessed assets feel “socially empowered”. As practice shows, women more often tend to repay the microcredit and their repayments are more regular than men’s [Nowak 2007, p. 555–556].

by market participants) which compels women to putting more effort in achieving things which are somewhat easier to achieve for men.

Perceiving women as market participants in a non-essentialist way, it is worth mentioning that feminist reflection has always recognized the significance of such issues as: women labour, their access to education, different approach to workers of equal qualifications but different sex, restrictions (often self-imposed) of women-workers connected with motherhood and childcare or care of the elderly, or traditionally perceived duty to perform unpaid work in the household. These issues were already raised by Jane Marcet, Harriet Martineau, Millicent Fawcett, Beatrice Webb or Rosa Luxemburg, whose works can be located in socio-economic stream of reflection. It should be underlined that the majority of feminist authors had very practical reasons for taking up economics: most notably improvement of women's living conditions. Simultaneously, within the sphere of feminist thought, emphasis is put on significance of various ideologies (patriarchal family whose structure combined the early form of capitalism with patriotic rhetoric), gender roles and culture which socializes women, as all of these often impede women in economic sphere and affect the course of women's professional activity [Kelly 1991; Still 1997; Dijkstra & Plantega 2003].

Possibilities of feminist thought allow to perceive gender on micro level of an individual, its experience and its social relationships on meso level (f. ex. social institutions) and on macro level of a society as a whole (surveys based on representative samples and using statistical data concerning the whole society). In order to meet needs of the present elaboration and to demonstrate functional differences between women and men, seen as an effect of socialization and gendering on micro – and meso – level and the gender contract (on macro level), women's situation can be outlined in relation to three spheres which are significant for contemporary feminist reflection: *production, reproduction and consumption*.

#### 4. Production

The notion of production involves several different issues which relate to the “mode of production, forces (technologies and raw materials) of production and relations (social arrangement) of production” [Bradley 2008, p. 110]. It is important that “each type of society (social stage) has its distinctive mode of production by means of which goods and services necessary for the survival of society are developed” [Bradley 2008, p. 110]. The term of “production” corresponds to what we call work, employment and the labour market in contemporary economic and social thought and what is nowadays perceived as directly connected with social development.

Elaborations describing women's problems on the labour market are a joint part connecting economics with feminist thought. As on the ground of feminist

reflection a broader perspective of women issues is desired, “in feminist texts it is assumed as a standard that disproportions in approach to men and women on the labour market are essentially connected with women’s exclusion from the public sphere” [Majewska et al. undated; Krzyżanowska 2010]. On the ground of economics, women’s problems are, in turn, part of broadly understood reflections focused on unemployment or barriers on the labour market development [Dijkstra & Plantega 2003; Kalinowska-Nawrotek 2005; Michoń 2008].

In spite of numerous changes in women’s situation on the labour market, it is worth noting that “social and professional roles realized by men and women vary from culture to culture, though there is no contemporarily known culture where feminine roles are more appreciated and awarded than masculine ones” [Klimowicz, Paczeński & Wiktorska-Święcka 2010, p. 85], hence the conclusion that “the world of work is highly gendered” [Bradley 2008, p. 111]<sup>5</sup>. An undoubtedly essential factor for women’s participation in the processes of reproduction, production and consumption is that “women still more often than men give up their professional careers in order to take care of their homes and families. In consequence, women’s income is treated as secondary, which has a demotivating impact and discourages women from taking up professional activity” [Majewska et al. undated, p. 40], whereas “the existing gender segregation of labour leads to inequalities between positions held by men and women in terms of power, prestige and wealth” [Klimowicz, Paczeński & Wiktorska-Święcka 2010, p. 85]. This fact influences both the number of women in political representation of a nation and, due to women’s lower income, a lesser impact that women have on reproduction mechanisms. It also means that women can afford a smaller consumption, as their salaries are lower than men’s.

Interestingly, research on women’s employment indicates that critical situations (such as economic crisis, military threat, loss of independence, rebuilding after a war) affect positively the rate of women’s employment, whilst the times of peace and welfare seem “to be characteristic of dismissing women from work and a comeback of overly extensive pro-family ideologies. For instance: Polish authorities much more eagerly sought women’s employment right after the second world war, when demand for the workforce was tremendous. Meanwhile already in the 1960s and 1970s women’s professional work was much less appreciated. 1980s are, in turn, regarded as a time of return of women’s labour which translates into taking women in industry (it is worth remembering that in 1980 approximately 30% of workers in Stocznia im. Lenina [the Lenin shipyard] were women)” [Majewska et al. undated, p. 41]. The thesis seems to be confirmed by both research carried out by Kalinowska-Nawrotek, who proved that a higher standard of living and income

<sup>5</sup> One of the most influential feminist sociologists, Sylvia Walby, argues that the 20th century saw the switch from “private patriarchy rooted in the family to a system of public patriarchy which is manifested primarily in employment and in the state” [Bradley 2008, p. 111].

in a family makes women withdraw from the labour market [Kalinowska-Nawrotek 2005], and the fact that the current “economic crisis, which so significantly affected the numerical data concerning the labour market and unemployment (as) from May 2008 to September 2009 the EU men’s unemployment rate rose at a higher pace (from 6.4% to 9.3%) than women’s (from 7.4% to 9%)” (report *Equality between women and men*, Polish Ministry of Labour and Social Policy). Such a state of affairs is probably caused by the fact that women seldom hold prominent positions which are more prone to loss and are rarely employed in the hardest-hit sectors, f. ex. construction. However, women’s situation on the labour market is complex, as in spite of the fact that women’s unemployment rate is somewhat lower than men’s in the time of crisis, “the experience of previous crises shows that men’s employment returns to the previous level faster than women’s employment. In case of persons who have lost their jobs, the risk of not finding new employment is higher for women” (*Equality between women and men*).

The sphere of labour is not only significant because of the gained income, but also because labour is “one of the main determinants of an individual’s personal development” [Kamińska-Berezowska 2005, p. 5]. Women’s situation in the sphere of production and their weaker position at work are influenced by women’s stronger connection to the private sphere, which is illustrated by the results of the research “Social Diagnosis 2009”. The conclusion of this analysis indicates a high unanimity between men and women that if there are no children under 12 in the family, the roles of men and women are similar, i.e. they should be both professionally active, whilst in the respondents’ opinion, women working part-time is also an acceptable situation. A man’s part-time job is not accepted when his partner works full-time. Having young children makes both the majority of men and women consider limitation of women’s involvement in the labour market [Diagnoza społeczna 2009, p. 121]. What is important, having offspring makes ca. “70% of the respondents think that in a family with children under 3, the woman should temporarily or constantly give up her job [...] [whereas] women’s part-time work is commonly perceived as the best solution for families with children aged 3–6. Approximately 85% of the surveyed women and men think that women should return to full-time or part-time work when children reach school age” [Diagnoza społeczna 2009, p. 121].

One can, therefore, say that having children and the spectre of at least three-year break caused by taking care of children may, according to the authors of the research, affect perception of a woman as a precarious worker. Employment of such a worker in child-bearing age may bring about disintegration in the company’s work due to the prolonged absence caused by childcare. On top of it, ascribing duties connected with care to women [Phillips 2009] which has its roots in tradition, enhances their image of less flexible, hence less worthy, workers. Moreover, based on the above mentioned research, it can be assumed that a woman’s actual skills at reconciliation of the roles of a “worker” and a “mother” may have a less important meaning that

the *social expectations* towards mothers. As a result, fixed mind-sets and ingrained stereotypes lower *ex definitio* a woman's worth as a worker. Assumptions of a strong correlation between "maternity" with "absence at work" or a break at work are also confirmed by little understanding for non-working women who do not have children, or whose offspring have reached the age of 12.

In the times of crisis, when the threat of unemployment is greater, the fact of being a mother can be decisive for a woman's chance for employment, since "the number of companies planning to employ professionally active mothers have dropped by one fifth in relation to the same period last year [...]. Among the questioned companies, 45% are planning to increase overall employment in 2011, but only 36% are planning to employ mothers. In 2010 the rate equaled 45%" [*Matki mają problem 2011*].

Women's situation on the labour market, also in the times of crisis, is worsened by the traditional impediments which, according to Henryk Domański, contribute to the fact that "work considered feminine is less paid, as it is assumed easier. If it was more difficult, men would perform it. – It is called *sex typing*: feminized jobs are worse paid than masculine ones only because they are feminized. According to some American research, when men leave a certain profession and are replaced by women, the income decreases" [Cieśla 2009, p. 24–26].

One should not forget the well-known and well-described mechanisms which slow down women's careers. The most important one is undoubtedly *the glass ceiling*<sup>6</sup>. It causes that in spite of illusory access and possessing all formal competences for professional advance, promotion remains out of a female worker's reach, due to intangible reasons, whilst her male counterparts seem to achieve it with greater ease. The phrase was coined by Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt, based on analyses of women's careers. It was used for the first time on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1986 in the "Wall Street Journal", in a feature on women's condition in corporations. In this way what had been inexpressible in terms of an individual professional biography, became visible thanks to a broader analysis. The term concerned a phenomenon which could be called amalgamation of Western corporational practice determining that certain practices (including these concerning ways of spending spare time or informal relationships between workers) or gender bias (or even stereotypes) initially blocked or hindered women from promotion, and the situation was perpetuated on the highest level of organizational structure [Davidson & Cooper 1992].

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<sup>6</sup> "The glass ceiling" is related to other metaphors concerning mechanisms which segregate men's and women's position on the labour market. I mean phrases such as "sticky floor" which makes it more difficult for women in the lowest levels of job structure to be promoted, or "glass escalator" – when in feminized jobs men get rapid and easier promotions than their female counterparts, despite their shorter work experience and similar, if not lower, competences.

Also in Polish research practice “the term *glass ceiling* is used to describe barriers met by women holding positions of leadership. This phrase symbolizes promotion’s visibility at its simultaneous unattainability” [Budrowska, Duch & Titkow 2003, p. 4].

The impact of the crisis on discrimination processes may be illustrated by an example of an interesting mechanism called *the glass cliff* which, in spite of numerous threats, may turn out to be a source of women’s professional success. Allowing for the link between women’s situation on the labour market and general problems that women suffer in the public sphere, the glass cliff must be perceived as an extremely complex, multi-faceted phenomenon, as “the very existence of the glass cliff in politics has several important implications, also for women who consider a career in politics. Randomly chosen women who apply for a seat do not influence in any way the fact of underrepresentation of women in politics, if the positions they apply for is barely attainable for them. As a matter of fact, the almost unavoidable defeat in election results inevitably in placing women in roles of sacrificial lambs, which on top of that reinforces the conviction that women are not fit for politics. This, in turn, discourages other potential female candidates from political involvement.” [Ryan, Haslam & Kulich 2010, p. 63]. This seems to be the situation at the time of peaceful prosperity, but at the time of crisis the mechanism of the glass cliff may produce very an interesting outcome, since according to Stillman, “statistically women are a rare breed at the top of major corporations, but there is one exception — companies in crisis” [Stillmann 2010]. Some examples of “critical” decisions which contributed “non-standard” decisions, i.e. placing a female in a leadership position, the case of Iceland’s prime minister, Johanna Singudardóttir’s, can be mentioned. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2009 she was entrusted with forming a new government, after the collapse of the one of Geir Haarde whose reaction towards the financial crisis in Iceland had been improper, in many people’s opinion. Though Iceland had been one of the richest countries in the world at the end of 2008, it was soon forced to seek help in, among others, the International Monetary Fund. Another example was Lynn Elsenhans, who was appointed “Sunoco’s” manager in 2008 as a reaction to a fall of share prices.

Research shows that the glass cliff defined as “promoting women into risky, difficult jobs where the chances of failure are higher” [Ryan & Haslam] is a useful tool in studies on female leadership. In spite of the fact that the effects of women’s leadership are mainly of a positive nature, it is worth noting that “a glass cliff is a dangerous place to be. Companies that have experienced consistently bad performance tend to attract attention, both to themselves and their boards [...] [hence when – added by N.K.] women take on leadership roles in such situations, may be more exposed to criticism than men in the same position. Women may also be in greater danger of being held responsible for negative outcomes that were set in train well before they assumed their new roles” [Ryan & Haslam].

## 5. Reproduction

Reproduction is a notion which covers the processes whereby “the conditions of existence” of a mode of production are recreated. This includes the birth and rearing of new labourers [...], but also all the social activities needed to keep the system going (such as the socialization of children into their future social roles, education and training, the physical and emotional nurturing of labourers). Women were (and often still are – added by N.K.) holding the major responsibilities for reproduction which was primarily based in the household” [Bradley 2008, p. 110–111]. The reproduction process is often based on the assumption that women not only perform unpaid work in households, but also on the conviction that they are “by nature” fit for care. As it has been illustrated in the section on production, it affects their position on the labour market, since in the European Union “women who have children work less (employment rate is 11.5% lower) in relation to childless women, whilst men who have children work more than the childless ones (employment rate is 6.8% higher). An important factor affecting parents’ participation in the labour market is connected with the traditional gender roles and lack of care services for children in several member states” (report *Equality between women and men*).

Additionally, one could hazard a guess that performing unpaid work in household, which is not only financially unrewarded, but in addition hinders women’s functioning as workers, is irrational from the point of view of the *homo oeconomicus* model. Yet, even within the field of economics, one can discern other (also called heterodoxical) ways to perceive economic entities which enable the conceptualization of the market and its participants in relation to *not always* rational individuals. It might be the influence of the ever growing interdisciplinary character of the social sciences (including economics) which is in a way imposed by the level of complexity of the issues they concern. Absolutizing rationality as a foundation of an individual’s conceptualization on the grounds of economics, which functioned as a certain paradigmatic base, was questioned by f. ex. A. Sen<sup>7</sup>. Then the approach was adopted by the so-called feminist economics where the issues of production and reproduction are inextricably intertwined with each other.

Feminist economics tries to carry out research which goes beyond the pattern of the classical economics. The latter is characteristic of the following assumptions which feminists find controversial: (1) Women are dependent on men, hence their income – if they have any – is in a way a complement to the income of the man they share household with. (2) Household (family) is the basic unit in economics. Therefore, if a woman works within the household, which involves both household duties and childcare, the value of her work – as unpaid – escapes economic research. It results in duality of basic values, different for men and women, and reinforces

<sup>7</sup> I am referring to the title of a lecture read by Sen at the Nobel Awards Ceremony [1977, p. 317–344].

women's assignment to the household sphere, and men's – to the sphere outside of home. Social practice, regulated by the above rules, reinforces the conviction that *outside the family* one should be a *rational* participant of markets, focused on one's own profits, whilst *within the family* the governing rule should be *sacrifice* and the not always rational *gift economics* [Staveren 1999, 2001] – a metaphor referring to unpaid work for the benefit of husband and children. Such a situation can present women with some difficulties, because as a rule they function in both worlds [Folbre 1994]. Another conviction, contested by feminist economists, refers to the fact that. (3) People are separate agents and act rationally<sup>8</sup>. This assumption excludes the possibility of being guided by the needs of others rather than one's own and implicates that agents are only focused on increasing their own profits and minimizing their realization costs. Such a conviction contradicts the realities of women, on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of taking care of the elderly or children, and the mechanisms of patriarchal family, reinforced by socialization. At the same time, it is especially the fact in feminized jobs that demands for better pay conditions do not meet with social understanding: by providing care (as f. ex. a school – or nursery teacher, a nurse) a woman realizes, after all, her vocation, so her “rational” demands are contradictory to the “gift logic” and women's home activities.

The above convictions, questioned by feminist economics, not always apply to women, which is especially significant when a woman is suddenly deprived of men's support and placed in a situation of market rationality<sup>9</sup>. Therefore A. Sen's achievements are so important for feminist economics, as it emphasizes the significance of non-economic terms such as “commitment” or “sympathy” in the sphere of economic activity. Those terms are absent in classical economics concentrated on the selfish *homo oeconomicus*<sup>10</sup>, whose basic driving force is a desire

<sup>8</sup> On the ground of feminist economics, Diana Strassman criticizes the above assumption in the text [1999].

<sup>9</sup> It is not difficult to envisage such a situation in case of a divorce of a “traditional” marriage where the husband was the earner, and the woman mainly took care of the household, treating her professional career with less passion, or simply working part-time. In spite of the fact that the relation was “rational”, it was unjust: after the time spent together the woman's is going to have smaller income, a weaker professional position, shorter seniority than her ex-husband and a lower pension. The man, in turn, is still going to benefit from the capital gathered during their marriage: a better professional position, greater experience and a high pension, influenced not only by the amount of income, but also the number of years at work. The example comes from [Becker 1990, p. 15].

<sup>10</sup> It seems that the age of suspicion towards axiomatic rationality of *homo oeconomicus* was significantly reinforced by the already mentioned lecture by A. Sen [1977, p. 317–344]. It is worth remembering the critique of the *homo oeconomicus*' term carried out by Julie Nelson who remarks that “economic man, the agent of the prototypical economic model springs up fully formed, with preferences fully developed [...] he interacts in society without being influenced by society: his mode of interaction is through an ideal market in which prices form the only, and only necessary form of communication [...] but humans don't just spring up from the ground. Humans are born of women, nurtured and cared for as dependent children, socialized into families and community groups”, and

to gain profit. According to Sen, the two notions are important in f. ex. motivation to work which determines the production process [Sen 1977, p. 333]. At the same time he emphasizes the notions' influence on trust [see Sztompka 2007] as a factor facilitating social cooperation which also affects tremendously economic activity.

It seems that partnership-based patterns of sharing household duties, connected frequently with procreation and enabling professional activity for both men and women, might lead to a "merger" of two logics – the household logic (not always rational) and the one concerning non-household matters (driven by rationality). This could positively affect the level of trust in a given society. After all, "the ability of forming groups depends on the extent to which a given community recognizes and shares a set of norms and values [...]. Sharing opinions and values breeds trust which is a substantial and measurable economic value" [Fukuyama 1997, p. 20]. Trust as a value capable of increasing and generating social capital is hence really important, as its extent may co-decide on the shape of economy [Fukuyama, 1997, p. 64]. Probably it is so because "in societies where the level of trust is higher, people offer a lot more and as a result gain more. It is a very important part of market mechanisms, yet not taken into consideration by standard patterns" [Żakowski 2008].

Therefore, keeping in mind the feminist conviction of correlation between women's problems at and outside of home, I would like to mention one of the ways of counteracting women's discrimination in the public sphere, i.e. affirmative actions aimed at showing those merits of mothers which have been developed during childcare. The actions, by emphasizing merits such as patience, sacrifice, perseverance or ability to compromise and efficiency, are to make public opinion appreciate the merits of mothers who may as well be the merits of a good worker. As a result, acknowledgement of women's economic potential is to be obtained, as it is a sort of surplus acquired in reproduction processes<sup>11</sup>.

## 6. Consumption

The spheres of reproduction and consumption are determined and strongly linked with production. Consumption is "part of the process of exchange, the use of the goods and services produced by the mode of production" [Bradley 2008, p.111] and

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this means that the agents owe a lot to what they received as a gift from women whose specific work (maternity, taking care of children and the elderly) is passed over in economic analyses [Nelson 1996, p. 31].

<sup>11</sup> An example may be an article by Marzena Potepa [Potepa]: "Patience – shown in stressful or conflictual situations, with difficult customers (who can be more difficult than a fretful baby at night?) [...]. Organization skills – it is namely young mothers who should coach others in planning and work-time management. None is better than them in effective multitasking, remembering priorities and the notion of what is important and right. They do it every day at home – by combining a few roles in the same time".

is a key idea for contemporary conceptualization of what we more and more often call *consumer society*. It is, certainly, a metaphor which conveys the significance of consumption processes both in terms of a society (and its classical relevant notions, such as f. ex. social class) and a culture produced/reproduced by the society. The metaphor of consumption society underlines that “as a result of (social – added by N.K) changes, consumption permeates our lives, absorbs us more and more” [Ritzer 2001, p.9]<sup>12</sup>, and – as Ritzer puts it – “we increasingly find ourselves in cathedrals of consumption. Even our homes become consumption goods – as they are attacked by telemarketers, shopping channels [...]. We are almost incessantly encouraged to consume” [Ritzer 2001, p. 9]. It is worth emphasizing that consumer tendencies (i.e. “*who*”, “*how*”, “*where*” and “*what*” consumes) change not only according to the economic situation (though, of course, the time of crisis and the risk connected with the term do affect consumption level), but also under the influence of certain ideas. Good examples of such ideas are actions which support the ideas of *fair trade*, popularizing alterglobalist awareness, connected very often with ideas such as *slow food*, where the importance of ecology is stressed. These tendencies emphasize even more the role of women as conscious consumers<sup>13</sup>.

The power of female consumer consists, however, not only in the awareness of new consumption trends. As it turns out from the research carried out in the USA in 2008, women’s purchasing power “is going to equal 28 trillion dollars in five years time. In a number of countries, research on women’s needs, attitudes and values has been taken up in order to gain a new customer segment, hence increase the income” [Kitlińska et al. undated, p. 16]. A significant fact is that it is first of all women who make shopping decisions on behalf of all household members<sup>14</sup>, which indirectly strengthens their position in professional activity outside home. In order to increase the income by reaching a female consumer and trying to define her needs, companies implement diversity management where focus is put on acceptance and recognition of numerous differences, connected not only with the consumers’ and workers’ gender, but also age and ethnic background. Hence “looking on business through diversity is not accidental, but it results from determined economic tendencies [...], creation of a new consumer and customer groups (new challenges) – the growing diversity of consumer needs requires more creative

<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, a woman is often perceived as a perfect consumer. One can say that advertising has developed both different narrations for the two sexes and different marketing strategies for women [*Marketing zorientowany* 2004, p.15–21].

<sup>13</sup> On the ground of feminist reflection eco-feminism has for years played an important role [Salleh 1984, p. 335–341] or [Putnam Tong 2002]. The influence of feminist thought on alterglobalist reflection is also visible in N. Klein [2000], J. Rachočka [2003, p. 185–191].

<sup>14</sup> The authors of the above mentioned elaboration note that “based on the respondents’ declarations, both women’s and men’s, mainly women are responsible for the shopping in households (61.7%). Men rarely declared that they did the shopping themselves (23.9%), whereas only 14.5% of their wives and partners indicated them as the ones who provide households with goods”.

strategies of keeping them and more innovative products. The processes, products and services have to be adjusted to the specific needs”<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, it seems that a company which realizes the principles of diversity management may be more flexible and better adapted to satisfying the changing consumer needs also in the age of crisis, since a multitude of opinions, experiences and social roles played by the employees may boost new solutions and help to adjust the offer to consumer needs which change more dynamically in the age of crisis”<sup>16</sup>.

Therefore “crisis [which – added by N.K.] in the initial phase was more mediated than real for Polish consumers, triggered purchase limitation in the product segment “pleasure and comfort”. In the following years one could observe replacing more expensive products with cheaper ones. It was not until 2010 that buying smaller number of products and a greater restriction in necessary purchase took place<sup>17</sup>. Nevertheless, “on the Polish market women are still consumers of the greatest number of goods and services [and] this fact does not exempt them from spending money in a responsible way” [Zduńczyk-Słup 2010].

The multitude of issues concerning consumption makes a woman not only a perfect target for advertisers (she has her own capital at her disposal and still takes care of the household to a greater extent than a man), but also a regular advertisement heroin. Consumption is, after all, closely connected with advertisement as a persuasive message encouraging to buy a product in a way attractive for a consumer. It can rouse his/her desires, widen the potential spectrum of sensations and last but not least – embed its message in fear of being excluded from a select consumer group<sup>18</sup>.

Advertisement’s role in the contemporary society is sometimes perceived as surprisingly significant. Bogunia-Borowska remarks that “advertisements’ messages provide people with fundamental knowledge on socio-cultural reality” [Bogunia-Borowska 2004, p. 50]. In this perspective, the function of advertisement is, apart from information and persuasion, providing knowledge which “as a factor determining social and cultural development [contributes to] widening of its scope and

<sup>15</sup> [Brdulak 2009] The publication also contains examples on implementation of diversity management in companies such as City Bank or HRK, dealing with recruitment, whose business goals may be facilitated thanks to the principles of diversity management.

<sup>16</sup> Also business practitioners speak of the need to implement diversity management. It is worth quoting Elin Myrmel-Johansen, an executive vice-president at the Norwegian financial services group Storebrand: “If you took the typical board of a European company today, you see almost nothing but white males between the ages of 50–65 [...] we don’t want anybody [our workers] to be the same age, from the same schools, reading the same magazines” [Clark 2010, p. 18].

<sup>17</sup> [<http://www.managernaobcasach.pl/warto-przeczytac/792-jak-zyc-w-kryzysie.html>], based on [Bombol 2011].

<sup>18</sup> As an example of fear of exclusion it is worth quoting the widely-criticized commercial slogan of a popular chain which is “not for idiots”. The advertisement triggered a lot of publicity, but one publication is especially worth mentioning due to its originality: [Bator 1998].

boosting social change” [Bogunia-Borowska 2004, p. 52]. Mass consumption which “became a new social practice thanks to which people learnt the rules of the new order and gained new social competences” was promoted by advertising which, according to the author, after 1989 has grown to be the simplest strategy to acquaint oneself and get familiar with the new world [Bogunia-Borowska 2004, p. 53].

Seeing advertisement as consumption’s driving force, it is worth noting that “the Western discourse about consumers is deeply gendered. At its most extreme, men are portrayed as autonomous and instrumental – as *homo oeconomicus*. Women are constructed as dominated and expressive: “fashion victims”. Men are rational actors, women are dupes” [Aldridge 2006, p. 33]. Baudrillard goes a step further, introducing two highly gendered consumption models, masculine and feminine. He claims that “the models have a binary and dichotomous structure. They are the product not of the *differentiated* nature of the sexes, but of the *differential* logic of the system” [Baudrillard 2006, p. 117]. At the same time it is important that the masculine and feminine consumption models “are not descriptive: they *govern* consumption” [Baudrillard 2006, p. 117].

In interpretation of the whole advertising process as manufacturing/recommendation/persuasion to consume goods, a woman is extremely significant, also as a topos. Therefore “numerous feminist researchers draw attention to thousands of advertisements where various products are accompanied by women – their whole bodies or their parts. These are standardized bodies. Mary Ann Doane maintains that the woman’s objectification, her susceptibility to fetishization and production of surplus value, situate her in relation of similarity with the product’s form. Other researchers add that women “on market” are subject to the process of becoming abstract (in a broader sense – in the sphere of representation and performance of contemporary culture) – we do not deal with concrete women, but with abstract femininity” [Jakubowska 2004].

## 7. Success in the age of crisis – not (only) for Gentlemen

The title of this section is an ironic allusion to the first slogan of the magazine *Sukces* published since May 1990 (its first publisher was “Inter-media”). It was the first high-circulation (100,000) monthly in the post-transformation Poland which, apart from its high circulation and a new thematic horizon, distinguished itself with a very high quality of print, photos and editorial level, presenting unashamedly the world of people who had succeeded in accomplishing their visions and plans. Initially the advertising slogan of the monthly was *Sukces* – a magazine not only for Gentlemen (*Sukces* – magazyn nie tylko dla Panów).

The slogan, barely remembered today, contains, apart from the potential class differentiation (“pan” in Polish refers to both “male” and “master”), an obvious

gender differentiation: though women *may also be its readers*, the real target are men, taking serious interest in business. The magazine's activity over the last twenty years has been varied. The initially adopted profile (elitist-masculine) evolved towards a magazine situated between opinion weeklies (Polityka, Przekrój, Wprost) and exclusive women's magazines (Twój Styl), whereas in its section "Portraits" aberrations have appeared more often in form of "women of success".

Success is sometimes a problematic term for women who function in a traditional paradigm (on the Polish ground a heroin of the traditional paradigm is a slightly modified figure of the Polish mother [matka Polka]) which makes them balance between what is rational (the labour market, the sphere outside home) and *what is not always rational*: family life, often marked with sacrifice, *gift economics* and unpaid work in the household. Women also tend to have problems with "learning" to discern their own success. Features on biographies of women of success are designed to counteract the situation. If a woman feels overawed by their achievements, often accompanied by posed photograph of someone who does not resemble a typical reader, there are always how-to books on success. However, they do not often recognize women's needs and situation, which can be illustrated by the following quotation: "in order to achieve your goal you need to perceive yourself as a self-sufficient economic individual, not as a functional element or a component of a whole in which you function" [Bridges 1994, p. 104]. In addition, according to Ulruch Bröckling, success also depends on "whether a person is capable of creating himself as an unmistakable "Brand You" and setting herself/himself apart from the masses and is able to beat the competition" [Bröckling 2005]. It is worth highlighting that women are expected a totally different attitude than the one they are socialized to in order to fulfill their primary social role – i.e. the one of a mother, a person who sacrifices herself for others, whose work is transparent and dissolves in everyday life (as it turns out from "Social Diagnosis 2009").

One can also assume that women are somewhat shy in defining success or recognizing the notion as a significant element of a woman's life, since "success is stereotypically perceived in terms of a professional career, prestige or an improved financial status. When values such as family or interpersonal relations are prioritized, it contributes to lack of aspiration to achieving the so-called "success" [Frąckowiak-Sochańska 2009, p. 150]. Surveyed female respondents also identify issues of success as part of a professional life, and thus – as "the antithesis of a family life" – Frąckowiak-Sochańska notices [2009, p. 150]. Therefore if you want to be loved and have a happy family, you should, so to speak, shun "success".

It should also be considered whether in a volume on crisis, an article on women's success is at all legitimate. Whereas women's success is decidedly less obvious than men's, and in times of prosperity success is not easily achieved by women, the times of crisis make it more visible.

Examples of the so-called women businesses, so vividly propagated by (not only women's) press, are inherent in feminist practice of demonstrating women's success. Its goal is to embolden other women and provide them with business patterns which are barely present in the standard education of girls [Krzyżanowska 2008] and which are later missed by businesswomen. Agnieszka Jucewicz writes about the success of Cath Kidston – a famous British decorator who offers customers several do-it-yourself solutions, products for freshening up old clothes and furniture, using traditional, cheerful, often floral design – whose “company became one of the few examples of business which not only survived the recession, but also doubled its profit when other companies collapsed” [Jucewicz 2010, p. 48]. Jucewicz notices that crisis influenced the secret of the company's success. In times of economic crisis “a lot of people fear the future, that is why they nostalgically return to the past times. They search for more universal values and feel the need to commune with what is old, archival and inherited from our ancestors [...]. Instead of dining in costly restaurants and enjoying themselves in expensive clubs, [they] prefer to spend more time at home. They cook more frequently and entertain guests, therefore they want their home to be cosy and charming” [Jucewicz 2010, p. 48]. Cath Kidston's company provides the means for realization of the projects which are imposed by the limitations of the economic crisis.

According to several researchers, women better adapt to the changing situation on the labour market due to their empathy and features acquired in the privacy of their homes such as patience, ability to reach a consensus or readiness to take up a lower-paid job or a job where the payment is postponed (often because of the crisis). This is additionally connected with the socially accepted tendency among women to work flexitime or (even temporarily) – part-time<sup>19</sup>.

It also seems that the fact of women's growing adaptation to the demands of crisis-struck economical activity has an impact on men's situation: the issue of the so-called crisis of masculinity is more often recognized [Dench 1998; Coward 1999; Melosik 2002; Galasiński 2003; Szlendak 2005].

Hence, one can more often read that “three magical words of post-crisis economy are: profit, effectiveness and women. It has become clear for economists: who wants to win the global race, has to show concern for women's greater participation in business” [Mackiewicz 2010]. The results of changes are gradually beginning to show, because in effect “a woman is in charge of every third small and medium-sized enterprise in Poland. The rate is growing from year to year, but according to specialists, it is happening anyway too slowly” [Mackiewicz 2010]. To confirm the

<sup>19</sup> Analysing transformations on the labour market, some authors remark that in the age of globalization the changes (flexible employment forms, lack of the so-called “permanent” jobs and unilinear careers) “mainly hit men, [because – added by NK] [...] they meant the end of stable paths of career [...] whereas the idea of unilinear, clearly defined career, had been the basis of masculine identity” [Coward 1999, p. 66].

above statement, it is worth quoting the report of the previous year, made out by the Vice-President of the EU and Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, Viviane Reding, who claims that “if Europe wants to overcome the crisis and remain competitive, it has to make better use of women’s talents. The authors of the EC report, published in March, emphasize that the greater the number of women holding managerial positions, the faster the economic growth – as it turned out from the research carried out the previous year under the Swedish presidency” [Mackiewicz 2010]. When it comes to economics itself, i.e. a field dealing with economic activity and elaboration of strategies to overcome difficult moments, called *crises*, addressing the issues of gender and significance of this construct for the sphere of economic activity should be more and more important, because “rejecting anthropological determinants makes economics drift towards fiction” [Żakowski 2008, p. 3–9].

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### KRYZYS A PLEĆ W PERSPEKTYWIE SPOŁECZNEJ

**Streszczenie:** W artykule zostały podjęte starania wskazania ważności kategorii gender dla rozważań nad kryzysem, którego skutki – choć odnoszone najczęściej do sfery gospodarowania – w prezentowanym poniżej ujęciu wykraczają poza wąsko rozumianą domenę ekonomii. Rozważania nad skutkami kryzysu prowadzą do namysłu nad kondycją kobiet w trzech sferach: produkcji, reprodukcji i konsumpcji, co pozwala pokazać zarówno problemy, na jakie natrafiają kobiety, funkcjonując w sferze pozadomowej, jak i swego rodzaju możliwości, które otwierają się przed kobietami właśnie w czasach tzw. kryzysu.