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**Recent Trends in Social Work in the Context of Women Empowerment**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The aim of this article is to present the assumptions and principles of empowerment as a new trend in social work, particularly with regard to women, who are a special category of social welfare recipients. Social welfare and social work provide an important support system to individuals and social groups facing difficult personal situations that are impossible to overcome without assistance. One of new trends in social work is empowerment. Empowerment can be achieved either through micro-scale activities such as: self-help groups, networking, consciousness-raising groups, local social projects, educational and charitable projects as well as macro-scale measures. More and more studies prove that there are social problems affecting women more often than men. The essence of women empowerment is striving to make a person or a family look at themselves and the surrounding reality from a different perspective, which is supposed to help them see and recognize their strengths, skills and abilities, so that they can begin the change process.*

**Introduction**

Social welfare and social work provide an important support system to individuals and social groups facing difficult personal situations that are impossible to overcome without assistance. In recent years Europe has seen a paradigm shift in the approach to social welfare, which departs from passive support measures towards intensified efforts to help people (specifically women) at risk of exclusion. The challenges that reality poses for contemporary social work seem to require from social workers new skills and constant search for new tools to carry out social work. Due to the nature of the tasks and the problems that social workers are confronted with, they should demonstrate openness in perceiving a complex reality, which enables looking at various phenomena in a multidimensional, unconventional and creative way. One of such thriving and effective new trends in social work is empowerment, often defined as "the process of personal, interpersonal or political reinforcement that enables individuals, families or communities to take action to improve their situation" (Duranowski 2013). According to these assumptions, empowerment should be treated as the opposite of powerlessness, as it signifies an active attitude of "change and participation towards self-responsibility and self-determination" (Szarfenberg 2013). The aim of this article is to present the assumptions and principles of empowerment as a new trend in social work, particularly with regard to women, who are a special category of social welfare recipients.

## 1. The assumptions and objectives of the empowerment

Empowerment in social work is also defined as a practice that assists clients in finding access to inner force (motivation) that allows them to influence their lives as well as their place in the community in a social, economic and political context (Lee 2001). In the literature of the subject there is a distinction between the two dimensions of empowerment - individual and structural one (Szmagałski 2006):

- (iii) Individual dimension refers to activities aimed at increasing a client's control over her life by enhancing self-esteem, gaining knowledge and acquiring new skills;
- (iv) The structural dimension refers to the functioning of structures and social institutions that are designed to bridge the barriers and eliminate obstacles in social environment.

Empowerment can be achieved either through micro-scale activities such as: self-help groups, networking, consciousness-raising groups, local social projects, educational and charitable projects as well as macro-scale measures. As far as the latter are concerned, one should mention community organizing in order to gain influence over the decisions made by local or regional authorities in the field of social policy or legislation. Empowerment, in both cases, is closely related to a group process, in which an individual becomes aware of his or her own position and acquires critical consciousness (Duranowski 2013).

At the core of empowerment there is an incentive for efforts which should aim at overcoming helplessness, exclusion and injustice resulting from inhibitive social relations. This is a method of education and awareness raising that is attained during the process of group support (Artymiak, Rynkowska 2014). The concept of empowerment is now widely used in social welfare with regard to different categories of clients, including women. The beneficiary's rights correspond strictly to empowerment principles, the most important of which include: 1) respect for the client's autonomy and boundaries, 2) respect, an attitude of appreciation, and a social worker's competence that enables a relationship based on trust and empathy, 3) providing a client with the access to information.

The most important objective of a social worker is to trigger the situation, in which the client regains self-confidence and the ability to perform tasks that stabilize his or her difficult position. A significant role in many aspects of social work based on the empowerment is attributed to a reinforcing dialogue, which is a special manifestation of information exchange and reflection. Social workers, seeking to empower their clients in accordance with a strengths-based approach, help them define goals they would like to achieve in their lives. Properly developed techniques of working with clients, such as learning to take small steps towards change, as well as recording every smaller and larger achievement of the client, are very helpful in setting out the goals of a person or a family whose problems are so grave that they feel totally overwhelmed by them. The emphasis in this new approach is primarily on the present situation and the future, although the past is not completely disregarded, since talents and resources that could have been forgotten may be extracted from it (looking for exceptions, precedents).

It is also worth emphasizing that the idea of social work based on client resources is developed by M. Prickson. The concept assumes that clients should be characterized not only by their deficits, problems and disorders, but also (or above all) their talents and strengths, valuable aspects of personality, good character traits, helpful people around them and a rich array of experiences to draw from. Examples of client resources are listed by M. Karlińska-Nehrebecka: education, employment; family; hobbies; talents; character traits; skills; ways to cope with problems; life experiences (including the negative ones); people around them; existing and fictional characters; books, movies, music; well-performed tasks and the failed ones; successes and failures; material possessions (Karlińska-Nehrebecka 2016).

The most important principle of this approach is the so-called usage. Resistance, trauma, deficiency, symptom, experience, habit, fantasy are all resources, because everything the client brings can be used in the change process, e.g. women experiencing violence who decide to get divorced or free themselves from a toxic family or relationship.

## 2. Gender as a factor contributing to social inequality

Gender is one of the factors affecting the organization of social life. It defines roles, duties and determines creating perceptions of individuals and stereotypes. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to describe contemporary society without taking into account gender perspective. Gender is the main cognitive category for understanding social reality and the relationships between men and women. It enables understanding how sex relates to economics, culture, politics, how it is created by society, reflected in the division of responsibilities and how it affects the definition of what is female and male (Slany, Struzik, Wojnicka 2011).

Social division based on gender difference has become apparent and increasingly meaningful in modern societies. Regrettably, it has contributed to noticeable deterioration in women's situation in many dimensions of social life. Women face a higher risk of exclusion due to more frequent experiences of long-term unemployment, poverty, domestic violence, job discrimination and disproportionately lower levels of their participation in public life (Tarkowska 2005). Many studies and statistical data indicate that women are worse off in the labour market: 1) they are paid less than men 2) they are more likely to be employed on a part-time basis 3) they have lower employment rates 4) they tend to do menial jobs 5) they usually hold low positions in their workplaces.

In 2015, women's gross hourly earnings were on average 16.3% below those of men in the European Union. Across Member States, the gender pay gap varied by 21%, ranging from 5.5% in Italy and Luxembourg to 26.9% in Estonia (Eurostat 2017). The lower relative wages of women create a vicious circle in which the wage gap encourages more women to perform unpaid work within the household, resulting in greater absence from the labour market, which in turn, leads to lower pay and lower pension (EIGE 2016). Although women have entered the labour force in great numbers, their working hours constitute a fundamental difference in their participation in the labour market compared to men. The proportion of the EU-28 workforce in the age group 20–64 years reporting that their main job was part-time was 19.0 % in 2015. The incidence of part-time work differs significantly between men and women. Just under one third (31.5%) of women aged 20–64 who were employed in the EU-28 worked on a part-time basis in 2015, a much higher proportion than the corresponding share for men - 8.2 % (Eurostat 2017). Across the EU-28, the gender employment gap was 11.6% in 2015, meaning that the proportion of men of working age in employment exceeded that of women by 11.6 %. The gender employment gap varies significantly across Member States. In 2015, the lowest gap was reported in Finland (2.1%), followed by Lithuania (2.4 %). At the other end of the scale, five Member States recorded a gap above 15%: Czech Republic 16.6%, Romania 17.5%, Greece 18%, Italy 20% and Malta 27.8% (Eurostat 2017).

Moreover, what can be noticed in the labour market is gender-based employment segregation, which involves unequal representation of women and men in different areas of professional activity. This unequal representation acts to the detriment of women and is expressed in horizontal and vertical segregation. Horizontal segregation refers to more limited career opportunities for women, compared to those for men. Vertical one, on the other hand, relates to women holding predominantly menial, ancillary posts. Women tend to have a very low representation in jobs involving political power or capital control, and at the same time they predominate in low-complexity occupations (EU 2014).

Data from 2016 show also that women still account for less than one in four (23.9%) board members in the largest publicly listed companies registered in EU Member States. The shortage of women at board level also limits the prospects of women leading companies. In 2016, just 7.7% of board were chaired by women, and in six countries (Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal) not one of the companies covered was chaired by a woman. At the top executive level, women were even less well represented, accounting for only 5.7 % of CEOs. Key financial institutions at both EU and national level are largely run by men. The 25-member Governing Council of the European Central Bank includes just two women (8.0 %), and in national central banks women held just one in five (20.1%) key decision-making positions (EU 2017).

Gender-based economic inequalities can also be observed at a later age. Women's lower salaries contribute to their lower pensions. Inadequate pensions are more common for women than men as women's lower earnings, higher concentration in part-time work and greater gaps in their careers due to caring responsibilities often mean they build up fewer pension contributions during their working life. Many women (especially older women who have not had formal employment during their lifetime) can rely only on survivor benefits, which depend on the level of the pension of the former spouse. In 2014, the average gender gap in pensions in the EU was as high as 40% (EU 2016).

Violence against women exists in every society, and encompasses different forms of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. However, despite its scale and social impact, it remains largely under-reported and relatively under-researched in key areas. According EU-wide survey, which was based on interviews with 42,000 women across the 28 Member States of the European Union, gender-based violence disproportionately affects women. One in three women in EU (33%) has experienced physical and/or sexual violence since she was 15 years old. Out of all women who have a (current or previous) partner, 22% have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner since the age of 15. One in 20 women (5%) has been raped since the age of 15. Incidents of violence against women are seldom reported to the police and other services. One third of victims of partner violence (33 %) and one quarter of victims of non-partner violence (26 %) contacted either the police or some other organisation, such as a victim support organisation, following the most serious incident of violence. For about a quarter of victims, feeling ashamed or embarrassed about what had happened was the reason for not reporting the most serious incident of sexual violence by a partner or a non-partner to the police or any other organization (FRA 2014).

A difficult situation of women is also associated with lone parenting. The population and housing census shows that families composed of lone parents (either a single mother with children or a single father with children) accounted for 16% of the total number of families in the EU-28 in 2011. These were predominantly lone mother families, as they accounted for 13.4 % of all families, compared with 2.6 % for lone father families (Eurostat 2015). Single parents (mostly mothers) with dependent children are at the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion. The household structure has a significant effect on the total household disposable income. In the case of single-person households with dependent children, 47.8% were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with only about two in every ten (18.2 %) of households with two adults and two dependent children (Eurostat 2016).

The feminization of social exclusion in the micro-scale of a family and a household is linked to the unequal distribution of household chores and duties between the two sexes. Money management and controlling expenses seem to be an important issue, too. Empirical study conducted in Poland in recent years shows women as pillars of poverty facing households. In such families, it is usually women who are responsible for managing the limited finances so that they satisfy their basic needs, which usually involves working out various survival

strategies, often time consuming and tiring (and sometimes even humiliating). Women also take on almost all household duties and chores. What poverty means for women then is usually more duties, more responsibility and less time (Tarkowska 2005).

Women's share of unpaid work: more hours, more intensive and more regular Progress towards economic independence is usually gauged by the employment rate, but also by the number of paid working hours, which better reflects work intensity. Men spent 39 hours of paid work per week on average in the EU, whereas women spend 33 hours in paid work. In contrast, they do the lion's share of housework and care: working women spend 22 hours per week in unpaid work, while working men spend fewer than 10 hours. However, there are marked differences between countries (EU 2017).

### 3. Social work taking into account women's empowerment

The empowerment and feminist perspective has recently begun to appear or be taken into account in social work with regard to the situation of women in the society. It questions the norms and principles of social order in which women have less access to important social resources and experience discrimination in the labor market, in economic and political spheres. The feminist perspective in social work focuses on the development of women's potential and the properties of their milieu that support or inhibit their self-determination as well as the scope and forms of social participation (Leader, Klimaczak-Ziółek 2013).

Feminist perspective in social work refers to many areas: 1) institutional- which involves analyzing the functioning of traditional social work in relation to science, education, medicine, power and various social institutions, and when this analysis leads to reconstructing the foundations of the social system based on the predominant model of "male breadwinner"; 2) structural- when a gender-based social ladder is apparent, when overrepresentation of women in marginalized and socially excluded categories occurs and non-participation in redistribution of socially-valued resources is evident; 3) organizational- when professional patterns and management culture are analyzed with due attention given to the specific nature of the feminized industry - low-paid and low in prestige; 4) discursive- when we can observe the implementation of a pseudo-neutral language of official documents specifying the rules governing the profession of a social worker and the role of a client with the clichés of stereotypical conceptualization of masculinity and femininity (Wódz, Klimaczak-Ziółek 2013).

Women-oriented social work should take into account: 1) understanding that social, political and family contexts have a major impact on women's problems; 2) recognizing the limitations of women in personal, family, economic and public spheres; 3) insight into women's approach in problem-solving methods; 4) understanding that what is personal (e.g. marriage, motherhood, raising children) is also political 5) awareness of a woman's life cycle, i.e. the impact of menstruation, puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause on problems and interpersonal relationships in her life cycle 6) appreciation of close relationships with women as a source of special support (Gawecka 2013).

More and more studies prove that there are social problems affecting women more often than men. The literature on the subject refers to the feminisation of poverty, unemployment, migration and lone parenthood. The fact that some of the problems are experienced mainly by women makes them more women-specific in nature (e.g., the way they perceive themselves and their problems, patterns of action). This is due to the mere nature of being a woman - the fact that they give birth to children, are worse off in the labour market, economically dependent on men and physically weaker. A classic feminist narrative in social work practice treats a woman as a victim of male domination. This experience can become a common ground between female social workers and female social welfare clients. A typical client of social welfare in Poland is a woman who often represents her family and children. Statistical data show that women

account for 80% of social welfare clients. It is related to a greater responsibility of women for family and children. In addition, women are more likely to suffer as a result of difficult situations brought about by man. The problems such as alcoholism, violence, family abandonment and crime tend to be caused by males rather than females, whereas the consequences of these problems are usually suffered by women and their children. Social support practice reveals that women show greater commitment to family matters and determination to change when compared to men (Biernat 2013).

One of the trends in women empowerment is its greater radicalization by perceiving it as "adopting specific strategies to reduce, eliminate and reverse negative attitudes, held by strong groups in society, which may affect certain individuals and groups" (Payne 1991: 229). Empowerment is seen here as a shift in power relations in the society, but its objects are not only the victims but also a social system created by those in power (Granosik, Gulczynska 2014).

The essence of women empowerment is striving to make a person or a family look at themselves and the surrounding reality from a different perspective, which is supposed to help them see and recognize their strengths, skills and abilities, so that they can begin the change process. A social worker accompanies clients in reorganizing their lives. According to empowerment theory, a client perceives herself as somebody in a difficult life situation, but also someone who has hidden and unused potential to change her life so as to become a self-reliant individual (Krasiejko 2010). Principles for women empowerment in social work are based on several assumptions: 1) Empowerment is a process based on cooperation between a female client and a social worker; 2) The process of empowerment involves perceiving the client as a competent person with the appropriate capacity to overcome a difficult life situation; 3) Competence is acquired through life experiences; 4) Individuals should actively participate in their empowerment, define their own goals, means and results; 5) Empowerment is linked to availability of resources and making the most effective use of them; 6) Empowerment is achieved by simultaneous personality development and socio-economic progress (DuBois, Miley 1999).

Empowerment of women means enhancing their abilities to take control of their own lives, defining their needs, drawing up action plans, and seeking support from their milieu, community, and state. In general, women's empowerment assumes changes in the division of labour and the society, revision of traditional belief systems, and last but not least, transformations in the areas of responsibility connected with gender roles created by the society (Chege 2010).

## **Conclusion**

Social tendencies show that women are increasingly experiencing social problems and are the primary recipients of social welfare. Implementing empowerment concept in assistance offered to an individual or a family facing problems allows them to see their assets and hidden strengths, which may ultimately change their difficult position. Introducing empowerment principles into social work, especially with regard to women, should first of all lead to the stimulation and enrichment of their individual and collective subjectivity, which means developing their autonomy, stimulating activity, as well as creating conditions for self-realization and being themselves.

Women empowerment refers to increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal strength. Its aim is to ensure equal-right to women, and to make them confident enough to claim their rights. Empowering women as economic, political, and social actors can change policy choices and make institutions more representative of a range of voices. Empowering women to participate fully in economic, social and political life is essential to build stronger

economies, achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and communities

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