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The Challenges of Becoming a Woman

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Extremely rapid pace of changes taking place in the modern world, the need to perform by both women and men many different tasks, the disappearance of the traditional allocation of marital and parental roles, as well as too much, often inconsistent or even contradictory information give rise to difficulty in understanding ourselves and our surroundings. All of the foregoing also makes hard finding a peaceful and welcoming place in the world for both one's personal development and supporting others on their way. The need for the woman's effort on the way to fully implement her life vocation is of particular importance. Development of femininity is understood by us as acquisition of abilities at subsequent stages of life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, by a female to gradually fulfill tasks associated with these phases and to overcome any crises emerging during them. The purpose of development is to achieve progressively higher level of unity in all key dimensions of woman's life: biological, psychological, and spiritual. The Holy Father Francis in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* on Love in the Family refers to the final report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis (Vatican City, 24 October 2015). According to the pope, it needs to be emphasized that "biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated."¹

¹ THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* on Love in the Family. Kraków: Wydawnictwo M, 2016. English translation quoted after:

A human being is generally born with a certain sex, the features of which gradually develop in ontogenesis. In modern psychology there are multitude of trends describing, explaining and indicating the possibility of stimulating human development. Each of them to a greater or lesser extent, emphasizes the role of certain factors — biological, cultural or one's own activities in individual development. Multiple and diverse standpoints in this regard, however, lead to the common conclusion that the process of becoming a woman needs, on the one hand, the personal involvement of a woman in her personal development and, on the other hand, undertaking activities by her external environment. The latter should encourage the fulfillment of her tasks that would, in turn, bring individual and social benefits.

The basis for the engagement in personal development is to have a sense of purpose in life. Development — according to humanist image of man — is understood as transcending the current state, including the activation in the course of living of the innate intellectual potential and the innate capacity for creativity, freedom, and love. That said transcending is done essentially by means of two processes: integration and disintegration. Integration gives one a sense of satisfaction, happiness, well-being, and fulfilment. Disintegration gives rise to frustration which might result in pain, suffering, distress, anxiety, apathy, passivity, but also rage, anger, and the desire to change the situation radically. The individual's reaction to frustration — discouragement, withdrawal, or taking active steps towards solving the pending problems depends on three factors: perpetuation of the innate hunger for growth, the ability to make effort, and the opportunity to observe and emulate positive models of coping with frustration by the people around oneself.² To these three factors the fourth should be added — self-image, with biological sex being a fundamental part thereof and the major factor in organizing the experience of the individual. Currently, there is a tendency to oppose *sex* as a limited set of innate, structural and physiological features associated with reproduction, with the concept of *gender* covering all complex attributes that are culturally assigned to men and women, “characteristics and behaviour seen in a given culture as appropriate for a man or a woman,”³ and also characteristics associated with sex that a person sees in themselves. Supporters of using the term *gender* tend to separate biological differences from social ones, moreover, to weaken the influence of the former on the

POPE FRANCIS: *Amoris lætitia*. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016, p. 45.

² K. DĄBROWSKI: *Trud istnienia*. Warszawa 1986, pp. 19—36.

³ L. BRANNON: *Psychologia rodzaju. Kobiety i mężczyźni: podobni czy różni*. Gdańsk 2002, p. 34.

development and functioning of a person in different social roles at different stages of life. The distinction made by them ignores the purpose and meaning of the development understood as the pursuit of inner harmony and living in harmony with others; it is also incompatible with the fundamental factors of the development, which are not mutually exclusive but rather reinforcing one another.

Each human being is permeated by sexuality. Sex that is a major factor shaping the life of man, shaping a person, in the biological, psychological and spiritual field, a woman and a man.⁴ Both a woman and a man must be involved in their own development to follow the path leading to attaining the highest possible level of development.

Erik Erikson identified eight stages of human development during which consecutive tasks are carried out and subsequent crises are overcome.⁵ The first four stages occur during one's childhood. In infancy, the child develops basic trust in others through physical and emotional intimacy and regular contact with parents or legal guardians. When a child's need for affiliation cannot be met, they can become a person who lacks confidence and trust in others. The main task of the second stage, that is, early childhood development (2—3 years of age), is to achieve autonomy and self-control. Children at this stage of life already possess a sense of their own sexual identity, and this has an impact on their thoughts, feelings, behaviour, self-image and also on the perception of and thinking about others, for instance, about other persons' appearance. The sex is one of the first social categories recognized by children.⁶

The third of development stages is a play age (4—5 years) conducive to growth in initiative in action, purpose orientation and in shaping a sense of guilt and shame. Children younger than 5 resist interactions with children of the opposite sex. A child during this period may suffer rejection and restraint from adults in the form of limiting his/her activity and not responding to spontaneously asked questions, including questions regarding their appearance in the world. Moreover, the child can receive signals from the surrounding decreasing or depreciating the importance of sex, which can favour withdrawal, hinder initiative; form blockages in asking questions, and interfere with the formation of self-image and gender identity. During the fourth phase of childhood development — the school age (6—12 years of age) a sense of their own competence, diligence is formed

⁴ Kościół a problemy etyki seksualnej. Komentarz do Deklaracji Persona Humana. Warszawa 1987.

⁵ E. H. ERIKSON, J. M. ERIKSON: *The Life Cycle Completed*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, pp. 55—82.

⁶ B. WOJCISZKE, *Kobiety i mężczyźni: odmienne spojrzenia na różnice*. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2002, p. 51.

in the child, above all, the child begins to realize that they have multivalent (multi-dimensional) personality. School age is a period in which the child seeks to be a member of a peer group composed of individuals of the same sex, especially in the early stages of school education.

The described stages of the child's development require first and foremost the presence of parents, legal guardians and, over time, teachers and their involvement in shaping a given child's psyche, their sexual identity and self-image. During childhood, it is important to provide children not only with milk — E. Fromm wrote⁷ — symbolising the ability to satisfy physiological needs, but also with honey, which is as an expression of the love of life — an essential factor in shaping the child's correct attitude towards themselves and others with respect to their own sex. The nature of relationship, especially between mother and child, depends on how she understands what it means to be a woman or a man. This understanding will mark her attitude towards the child's sex, appearance, behaviour, and also will shape the attitudes of girls and boys with respect to adults of both sexes. Expectations towards a child expressed by his or her parents regarding the child's behaviour, personality traits and skills, labelling a child, signals sent by the mother or another woman close to the child referring to the latter's experience of satisfaction or the lack thereof in relation to the implementation of tasks and responsibilities, which became the child's share, may stimulate or interfere the gender identification process in boys and girls. The external factors which may jeopardize the child's proper development in the early and intermediate stages of childhood, include: lack of intimacy, safety and exclusivity of relationships with significant people. During the school age, in turn, the risk factors are: the labelling of the child by parents and teachers, negative image of a parent of the same or opposite sex, being rejected by or isolated from the peer group (particularly of the same sex). Comparing oneself with others, educational failure, lack of acceptance by peers, abnormal behaviour of parents in the form of excessive demands, avoiding contact, parent's dissatisfaction with a child's sex, aggression — all of the foregoing factors may give rise to a sense of inferiority, inadequacy and instigate fear, which could lead to isolation from others, self-harm, or aggression directed towards peers.

The child takes pains to develop him or herself to the extent that they are allowed by their significant others. It is responsibility of the said significant others to support the child's development. These people should not hinder children's natural curiosity of the world, their desire to explore it. It is important to provide positive models which children can emulate and identify with.

⁷ E. FROMM: *The Art of Loving*. New York 2013, pp. 37—41.

Being involved proactively in one's own development is an important characteristic of adolescence (13—18 years of age), during which the essential developmental task is to construct one's own identity through insight by seeking answers to, for example, the following questions: Who am I? Who am I becoming? What do I aspire to? What is important to me? What are my passions? How do I see myself in terms of my physicality? What does it mean to me to be a woman? Am I faithful to myself? What is the image of a partner I develop in my psyche?

Building identity involves two stages. At the first stage — *the exploration* — one's own resources and the environment and the nature of the relationship I vs. other people is recognized, one sees oneself in the so-called mirror of society (“How people see me?”). At the second stage — *the commitment* — the person becomes responsible for their decisions, gets involved in the implementation of tasks set out by themselves. Adolescence has its origin in physical, biological, and physiological changes designated by sex and closely linked to changes in the emotional sphere, and ends with mental and moral changes, forming the world of values and attitudes towards responsibilities. The features of the girl's growing up are:

- developing both emotional and cognitive empathy (to a much greater extent than boys);
- as a consequence of the girl's relational concept of self, girls seek relationships with others, most of all, to share their feelings, to establish intimacy and closeness;
- acquiring knowledge pertaining to communication with others, again more often than it is encountered in boys;
- growing need and adroitness at listening to the interlocutor;
- development of an emotional need to receive and experience support from others.

Potential risk factors in the adolescent development of femininity are:

1. Lack of self-acceptance coupled with a deficit of acceptance experienced from others, or even worse — dealing with denigrating, offensive, vulgar language and behaviour; situation in which a girl's virtues are not recognized and — quite the opposite — her flaws are repetitively pointed out. It is worth emphasizing that self-acceptance has its origin in the experience of being accepted by others. Acceptance can be expressed in various ways, for example, through unconditional recognition: “I'm glad that you're here,” or conditional recognition worded, for instance, in the following way: “I'm happy that you've performed this task so well.” Situations when an adult tells an adolescent girl “You are a good-for-nothing” or ignores her should

be considered as significant mistakes in the upbringing process. Indifference to a girl's behaviour is the emotionally most hurting form of the lack of acceptance. Acceptance can be also communicated through warm gestures and accompanying an adolescent girl silently. Acceptance experienced from significant others allows one to discover and utilize one's potential, it encourages, gives strength and self-confidence. Lack of acceptance fosters or reinforces low self-esteem, which plague the adolescence anyway, for example, by the girl's unacceptance of the biological and physical changes she undergoes or through comparing herself with others, as well as through the discrepancy between the real and ideal self-image.

2. Hunger for intimacy that could result in establishing reckless heterosexual relationships, in "emotional dependence."

3. Loneliness, which may be determined by situational factors, for example, difficulties experienced in daily life; existential factors — discrepancy between the values cherished by a girl and her surrounding, perceiving the environment as hostile and not understanding and empathetic enough; developmental ones, for example, focusing on herself and passivity or unwillingness to enter into interpersonal relationships with others; educational ones, for instance, creating by parents and teachers communication barriers in the form of being judgmental, jeering at the girl, using threats, dictating solutions, and downplaying problems signalled by her.⁸

4. Lack of positive role models, both female and male, in close surrounding, for example, lack of mutual respect between the parents, relatives, friends, unsolvable conflicts unfolding between the parents, mother's or other women's difficulties in reconciling careers with family life and maternal responsibilities, general overburdening of women with household chores, an absentee father, witnessing different types of addiction. All of the foregoing factors can interfere with the process of developing girl's identity, which includes gender identity, and hinder positive evaluation of responsibilities associated with roles performed in adulthood.

5. A negative image of female roles shown in the media or the image of a woman excessively focused on accomplishing professional tasks in the absence of models of women involved in marital and family tasks.

6. Mental disorders such as depression, anorexia, or bulimia. Depression during adolescence may take a various forms, the most benign of which is dejection characterized by deep sadness, not noticing the good aspects of life, neglecting daily duties, negative self-esteem, pessimistic assessment of the future. Dejection may be also a reaction to the difficulties faced by a girl. A teenager affected by the depression disorder feels

⁸ Cf. Z. DOŁĘGA: *Samotność młodzieży — analiza teoretyczna i studia empiryczne*. Katowice 2003; Th. GORDON, *Wychowanie bez porażek*.

sad, desperate, deprived of the joy of life, tearful. She loses appetite, interests, her mental capacities such as memory is weakened, she experiences difficulties in concentrating, her school grades get worse. An adolescent girl with depressive disorders for a permanent specific period of time is in a state of low mood, irritability, motor and mental inhibition, has difficulty concentrating, lacks her vital energy, experiences a sense of guilt, worthlessness, is withdrawn or excessively agitated, stops taking care of her appearance. Symptoms of depression are twice more common in girls than in boys, they also exacerbate with teenager's age. Another of the above-mentioned disorders — anorexia — is characterized by distorted body image, refusal to maintain body weight at a normal level, an intense fear of gaining weight, often amenorrhea, for example, while bulimia is characterized by alternating periods of bingeing and purging (forced vomiting, taking laxatives and diuretics sometimes accompanied by excessive physical exercises or fasting). Women represent 90% of all people who suffer from anorexia or bulimia.⁹ These disorders can generate difficulties in the development of femininity or stem from them.

What can an adolescent girl do to further her own personal development? It is worth noticing that adolescence is the time of formation of internal autonomous morality, initially characterized by adherence to moral principles, or internalization of rules, principles, their literal wording (between 12—15 years of age); later by the moral rationalism (between 15 and 18 years of age), for which it is appropriate to understand the “spirit” of standards and be able to ponder both motivation of actions and their more or less desirable consequences. An adolescent girl should therefore be involved in learning about the world of rules governing social behaviour, including — behaviour in relations with persons of the opposite sex, bearing in mind the consequences of such behaviour for herself and others. It is important that she gets involved in activities for the sake of her own development as well as remain open to the needs of others. Many people at this stage of life assist others, for example, in the form of volunteering. Friendships established and deepened at this stage of life are conducive to deepening empathy, strengthening self-confidence, discovering talents, accepting biological changes, coping with the “explosion of hormones.” Health disturbances during this period necessitate treatment, which is not easy, because teenagers often deny the occurrence of symptoms in themselves and resist the help offered by the environment.

⁹ B. WOJCISZKE: *Kobiety i mężczyźni: odmienne spojrzenie na różnice*. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2002, pp. 317—318.

Adulthood becomes the real challenge to engage in one's own development. In the early adulthood (18—26 years of age according to E. Erikson, 18/20—30/35 according to the classification adopted in the Polish developmental psychology¹⁰) the essential developmental tasks are: the achievement of ability to love without losing the sense of one's own identity, the pursuit of intimacy, the acquisition of the ability to get to know oneself and other people, respect for others, sensitivity to their needs and taking care of them and engaging in activities. This is a period of taking up a job; many people establish a family at this time. This requires of the young — including women — a thorough identification of developmental potential, setting priorities, the ability to combine responsibilities belonging to different roles. The following grow in importance: the role of one's own image of and the role of the man in marriage and expectations of the spouse. An important role is played by the need to adopt a new lifestyle taking into account the rhythm of family life, the rhythm of work, as well as maintaining relationships with family of origin members, with friends. The opposite of the desire to unite with others is a desire for independence and isolation.

The risk factors for developing femininity in the phase of early adulthood, in turn, may result from:

- psychological dependence of the woman on a parent — more often on the mother — defined as the syndrome of not cutting the umbilical cord, which is reflected in remaining in a too close relationship with the mother at the cost of time and the quality of the relationship with the husband, in discussing by the woman decisions about her own marriage and procreative family with a parent and not with her husband, in changing under the influence of a parent arrangements made earlier with her husband, and in expectation and demand from the spouse to accept the rules and principles of coexistence determined by a parent or both parents;
- faulty ideas about the marital, parental, and professional role, both hers and her husband's. That defectiveness is often associated with the difficulty and sometimes inability of a woman to undergo a reflective evaluation of role models acquired in the family of origin and aiming at emulating them, while at the same time forcing husband to adjust to her expectations and meet her requirements;
- conflicting demands of different roles, which is conducive to growing dissatisfaction from the marriage relationship, contacts with children, from work, as well as initiating interpersonal conflicts. If a young woman cannot effectively solve them — which requires a dialogue,

¹⁰ A. BRZEZIŃSKA (ed.): *Psychologiczne portrety człowieka. Praktyczna psychologia rozwojowa*. Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2005, p. 9.

- mutual understanding, and sometimes to revise the existing views on the validity for her of the tasks associated with each of the roles performed by her — it happens that she decides to break off marital union;
- improperly developed self-esteem, based on essentially erroneous attitudes shaped during upbringing; attitudes which were experienced by the woman during her childhood, marked by domination, parents' hovering over or rejecting her, implying the strengthening of the sense of low value, imperfections, deepening lack of faith in her own abilities, excessively sensitising to the public opinion. In the life of an adult woman this can result in passivity — not taking activities adequate to her possibilities, the submission to others, sometimes including dysfunctional husband (e.g., using physical and psychological violence towards his wife and/or children, abusing alcohol, or addiction to gambling or the Internet). A religious or social obligation to carry out marital obligations hinders a woman with low self-esteem from courageously defending her own opinion, taking decisions in difficult situations, decisions allowing to restore the woman herself as well as the members of her family's physical and mental health, and in the longer term — let her derive satisfaction from performing developmental tasks of the adult phase of life;
 - inability to cope with stress, which is reflected in the tendency to perceive and evaluate new phenomena, changing circumstances, primarily as stressful, and not, for example, as positive or neutral from the viewpoint of the current life situation of the woman. The perception of changes as stressful is not, however, a decisive factor in the process of dealing with them. Coping methods depend on whether or not a new phenomenon in the subjective assessment seems harmful — a loss, a threat, which is nothing but an anticipation of harm — or as a challenge.¹¹ Each of the foregoing ways of assessment triggers other coping resources. The first two are conducive to building up anxiety, fear, anticipation of failure, defeats which can lead to passivity, isolation and withdrawal from difficult situations, and the last mode of assessment favours taking by the woman remedial measures towards solving specific problems or difficulties;
 - views on femininity and masculinity promoted in the media, where viewers may come across a lack of respect for women's role as wives and mothers.

So what can a woman do when she wishes to become consciously involved in her own personal development during the early adulthood period?

¹¹ J. TERELAK: *Psychologia stresu*. Bydgoszcz 2001.

1. Boldly achieve independence, strive for self-determination, without prejudice to closer ties intimate in marriage or to closeness with children.
2. Make choices and life decisions with regard to the future-oriented perspective. She cannot focus on here and now without anticipating the consequences of her current decisions for her personal development and the position of her loved ones in the future.
3. Develop sensitivity to the needs of others. Early adulthood undoubtedly favours focusing on personal development, which is connected with undertaking novel roles. But it is important to remain sensitive to the needs and expectations of others. A lot of women in early adulthood continue to obtain education, which requires from family members an adjustment to the way of life of their wife and mother. The woman should appreciate the effort of her loved ones in promoting her development and taking over the duties which she cannot perform during that time. It is worth for her to get involved as well — within her time restrictions — in helping the close ones in their development.
4. Reflect critically on stereotypical perceptions of the differences between the man and woman, among other things, in terms of marital and parental roles, and look for information that would help in establishing such a perception and assessment of these roles, so that it becomes possible to achieve a sense of fulfilment in their performance, taking also into account the benefits for the other members of the family. These benefits will depend on the marriage pattern adopted by the spouses. In the scheme of *friendship* traditional roles are maintained, the obligation to cultivate love lies with the woman, the man develops personal interests, the relationship is stable. In the scheme of *independence* each of the spouses focuses on personal development, strives for autonomy, no one is responsible for maintaining the relationship that is unstable. In the model of *interdependence* personal development of spouses is possible, both are responsible for maintaining the relationship, the couple cooperate with each other, the relationship is stable.¹²

Only the last of the described models gives a chance for the full development of each of the spouses, for mutual enrichment, respect and generous sharing of common goods.

Adulthood — according to E. Erikson, a period between 26 and 40 years of age (in Polish developmental psychology it is the first half of the period of middle adulthood that begins at 30/35 years of age¹³) — is

¹² F. M. CANCIAN, quoted after L. BRANNON: *Psychologia rodzaju. Kobiety i mężczyźni: podobni czy różni*. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2002, p. 293.

¹³ A. BRZEZIŃSKA (ed.): *Psychologiczne portrety człowieka. Praktyczna psychologia rozwojowa*. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2005, p. 9.

mainly characterized by resourcefulness and creativity. This is the time of professional promotions, achieving a high level of professional maturity, running a household, time of taking care about the fate of the child or children, of social and civic activities, and supporting the elderly in their struggle with the challenges and difficulties of everyday life. It is also a period of stabilization of the marital and family situation of many spouses. Stable relationships are characterized in that that three elements highlighted by Robert Sternberg of tripartite theory of love are present in them: closeness, passion, and commitment.¹⁴ These three elements make love of the spouses fulfilled. Furthermore, lasting relationships are characterized by a consensus of attitudes and value systems of both. For most women the benefits from performing many roles outweigh the negative experiences. Women satisfied with their marriage attain a higher level of life satisfaction and happiness. In the adult stage of life, however, stagnation may occur as a result of acquiring the conviction that little has been left to achieve, that many things cannot be changed.

What risk factors for the development of femininity may occur in the phase of adulthood? The following are noteworthy:

1. Inability to combine the tasks associated with many roles. A multitude of tasks, although they are frequently carried out in a habitual, efficient manner, they are, however, conducive to building up a sense of fatigue, not fulfilling the tasks, the sense of time passing too quickly.
2. Difficulties at work that may result from the rapid pace of change, the need to carry out new tasks, or even professional reorientation caused by the danger of unemployment.
3. Problem behaviours of children, usually adolescent by that time, and therefore striving for independence, which she is not always able to understand and accept. Sometimes children suffer from poor health — both in the physical and mental sphere — or struggle with different kinds of addictions. These problems require maternal vigilance, tact, discreet kind of attentiveness and directing the child. Inability to cope with new challenges may pave the way for the strengthening the conviction of failure in the maternal role, failure in bringing up children.
4. Inability to cope with frustration, which can lead to disturbances in the area of physical and mental health, deterioration of relations in the system of marriage and family, in the work environment, lower frequency of contacts with friends, escalation of the feeling of being misunderstood.

The effort of development in the aforementioned phase of adulthood requires from the woman:

¹⁴ F. M. CANCIAN, quoted after L. BRANNON: *Psychologia rodzaju...*, p. 293.

1. Reorganizing in terms of setting priorities. It is important for a woman to find and engage in the activities which can be a source of energy and positive experiences. Actions performed with passion, requiring “immersion” and devotion to them are of greatest significance — regardless of what areas they concern.
2. Harmonious planning and implementing of personal, community and professional goals. It may become necessary to develop such a transactional model in the family, according to which the household will be gaining when members of the same household specialize in their duties and exchange with one another tasks planned for implementation. The community will work effectively when the spouses — as well as children or other persons living together — undertake the implementation of these tasks, which bring maximum benefits to the whole community;¹⁵
3. Seeking social support in dealing with problems. It is extremely important for a woman to have the opportunity to benefit from wise, benevolent support — both non-professional (it can be given by a trusted person in the family or outside the family circle) and professional — in overcoming certain difficulties. A husband could play a very beneficial role in the process of support. A frequently encountered problem in the situation of a woman who comes for the advice of a specialist — for example, to a family counsellor in the family life counselling centre — is the difficulty to persuade the husband to participate in such a meeting; the husband treats the wife as a delegate for the treatment, the only family member in need of assistance.

The main developmental task of maturity — the last phase of development in the concept of E. Erikson (starting at the age of 40, and according to Polish periodization of development this is the second half of the period of middle adulthood and late adulthood — over 60/65 years¹⁶) — is to achieve ego integrity, that is, life wisdom. In this phase some people rise to the top of personal maturity called by Professor Kazimierz Dąbrowski — the creator of the theory of “positive disintegration” — a form of secondary integration. A person at this level experiences secondary harmonization after passing through phases of breakdown and internal and external hardships. They stand as an autonomous, genuine, responsible individual, aware of their own identity, empathic, having shaped interests and abilities, implementing both their personal passions and being able

¹⁵ Blau and Ferber 1986, following A. DIJKSTRA, J. PLANTEGA: *Ekonomia i płęć. Pozycja zawodowa kobiet w Unii Europejskiej*. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2003, pp. 47—49.

¹⁶ A. BRZEZIŃSKA (ed.), *Psychologiczne portrety człowieka. Praktyczna psychologia rozwojowa*. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2005, p. 9.

to establish rewarding relationships with others, accepting their own lives, targeting energy on new roles.¹⁷

This period may also contribute to the woman's despair due to:

- lack of personality integration resulting in an inability to deal with the losses arising out of the loss of valued relationships — with a spouse, generational family, children;
- changes in relationships with others arising, for example, from children leaving home and that may predispose the empty nest syndrome, or from ceasing to work professionally;
- lack of achievements in life, a negative balance of life;
- health disorders implied by, for example, hormonal changes (menopause);
- persistent inability to cope with stress;
- negative — defensive or hostile — attitude towards her own old age;
- limited access to health care;
- lack of acceptance of the final phase of life.

Taking up by the woman an effort to develop herself in the mature stage of life requires:

- adopting of a positive, constructive attitude towards the process of internal and external changes;
- treating oneself with small and larger pleasures, enjoying life;
- getting interested in the outside changes;
- taking measures to promote health;
- surviving mourning and reorganizing life after the loss of close ties;
- reasonable time management through various forms of activity, for example, building relationships with others, especially with younger people, for instance, grandchildren, engaging in religious activity, in helping others, attending classes at the University of the Third Age.

The path towards a mature personality usually goes through a series of various traumatic experiences. Unfortunately, not all women find themselves on this difficult way of life. It happens that painful experiences are an obstacle, sometimes insurmountable by a woman struggling with them. They can result in impaired mental and somatic health. Moreover, a woman can suffer from different personality disorders that prevent her from taking and fulfilling daily tasks in different areas of her activity. Among personality and mental disorders most frequently occurring among women compared with men, the following are observed:

- a dependent personality characterized by passive subordination to the environment, passive reliance on others and shifting one's own responsibilities for life decisions to them, an excessive fear of abandonment

¹⁷ K. DĄBROWSKI: *Trud istnienia...*, pp. 60—111.

by the close ones and loneliness, a sense of insecurity, helplessness, powerlessness, incompetence, submission to wishes and needs of other people, avoiding difficulties and withdrawing from already made decisions and commitments, low activity, lack of initiative and independence, fatigue, low levels of coping with everyday life difficulties and experiencing frequent frustration;

- an emotionally unstable personality characterized by a tendency to impulsive actions, uncontrolled emotional outbursts, an argumentative, volatile and unpredictable mood occurring regardless of the circumstances;
- the histrionic personality disorder — manifested by shallowness, theatricality of feelings, exaggeration in emotional expression, rapid mood swings, outbursts of anger, a tendency to dramatize, a selfish attitude in relationships with others and the need for strong excitement and novelty;
- an immature personality, whose characteristics may occur in different spheres: in the emotional sphere the following are noticeable: lack of ability to love, to open up to others, lack of empathy, subordination of the intellect to the impulses coming from the primary excitement, a desire for immediate gratification, a sense of entitlement to express emotions openly, inability to achieve emotional balance, a tendency to fantasize, childishness; in the sphere of social and moral development self-centeredness is observed, disregard for the principles and rules of conduct in social relations, a tendency to use lies, to laziness; in the sphere of attitudes towards responsibilities a preference for ludic life style dominates, lack of compliance with the commitments made, such as, for example, lack of care to secure the closed ones' physical and psychological safety and basics of material existence;
- agoraphobia — fear of open spaces, crowds, where it is not possible to get help quickly and from which it is difficult to retreat;
- depression, where core symptoms include — marked loss of interest or pleasure in activities that are normally pleasurable, lack of emotional reactions to events or activities, apathy and low energy levels, feelings of helplessness and guilt, loneliness or withdrawing from friends and family, sleep disturbances, psychomotor retardation or agitation, loss of appetite, weight loss, loss of libido, suicidal thoughts and feelings;
- neuroses — mental disorders of a varying syndrome of symptoms, the image of which is composed of: somatic disorders (e.g., of sensory systems, headaches, breathing difficulties, sexual disorders), cognitive disorders (e.g., motor and thinking obsessions, difficulty concentrating, emotional disorders (unspecified unrest, sudden bouts of anxiety, apathy, lack of motivation, irritability, insomnia, inability to experience pleasure).

The aforementioned disorders not only result in difficulty or even impossibility of carrying out various tasks by the woman, but also create a lot of problems for the people with whom she is in a close relationship. It happens that these people, despite experiencing discomfort in relations with a woman with disturbed health or abnormal personality, try to make their best to fulfil their duties and at the same time to help the woman. Sometimes, however, these people — husband, children, other loved ones — are helpless when faced with a difficult situation it puts the entire family in and, as a result, they are compelled to leave the woman.

However, if we venture to assume a positive vision of the woman's personal development, and it is (statistically) reasonable, it should be expected that at some point in life she will be able to achieve harmony with herself and others, experience a sense of fulfilment, satisfaction that comes along with it and from implementing acknowledged moral values, from the opportunity to develop personal talents and exploring them with others, from an optimistic attitude towards life, from the ability to forgive mistakes of herself and of others, from effective coping with difficulties and adversities that life brings. Yet, no woman lives in a social vacuum. It will be easier for her to follow the path of development, when she receives support from the people in her family and professional circles, and from friends. It is important that this support takes the form of benevolent interest, understanding needs signalled by the woman, respecting her dignity. Appreciation by others of the woman's effort, both in her personal development as well as in actions for others, plays an important role in the process of becoming a woman.

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STANISŁAWA MIELIMĄKA, MICHAŁ MIELIMĄKA

The Challenges of Becoming a Woman

Summary

Reflections on the challenges of development of the woman's personality have been included in this article. The contemporary model that differentiates sex and gender has been described. Some doubts about the validity of this model have been clearly voiced. In the process of acquiring abilities to cope with various challenges in the life of a woman, the role of integration and disintegration processes has been underlined. This development has been described using phases introduced by E. Erickson (including tasks and developmental crises characteristic for this model). In each phase coping strategies available for a woman to undertake while dealing with everyday tasks have been described. Sometimes the disturbances in personality or psychiatric disorders impede or even block the realization of developmental tasks in the adult life. A brief description of the disturbances that have higher prevalence in women has been provided. In the last part of the article characteristics of a woman with mature personality have been outlined and discussed.

STANISŁAWA MIELIMĄKA, MICHAŁ MIELIMĄKA

Les défis de devenir une femme

Résumé

L'article constitue une réflexion sur la difficulté du développement de la personnalité féminine. On commence par la différenciation de notions actuellement propagée: sexe (*sex*) et genre (*gender*) en signalant les doutes quant à la justesse de cette différenciation-là. Dans le procédé où la femme acquiert — aux étapes subséquentes de sa vie — les traits qui sont typiques d'elle, on a souligné le rôle des processus d'intégration et de désintégration dans son développement personnel. On a décrit ce développement à l'aide des phases distinguées par E. Erikson, y compris les tâches et les crises développementales qui sont caractéristiques d'elle. Dans chacune des phases, on a indiqué des activités que la femme peut entreprendre dans le but de surmonter les difficultés rencontrées dans

la réalisation des devoirs quotidiens. Il arrive que certains troubles de la personnalité ou ceux concernant la santé psychique perturbent ou même empêchent la réalisation des tâches développementales à l'âge adulte. On a démontré et brièvement décrit ces troubles qui apparaissent plus souvent chez les femmes par rapport aux hommes. Dans la partie finale, on a esquissé la silhouette de la femme ayant une personnalité mature.

Mots clés: femme, difficulté, phases et risques développementaux, personnalité mature et perturbée

STANISŁAWA MIELIMĄKA, MICHAŁ MIELIMĄKA

Le sfide del diventare donna

Sommario

L'articolo è un tentativo di riflessione sulla difficoltà dello sviluppo della personalità femminile. Inizia dalla distinzione, promossa nei tempi contemporanei, dei concetti di sesso (*sex*) e genere (*gender*) con la segnalazione dei dubbi sulla fondatezza di tale distinzione. Nell'acquisizione da parte della donna delle caratteristiche a lei proprie nelle fasi successive della vita è stato sottolineato il ruolo dei processi integrativi e disintegrativi nello sviluppo personale. Tale sviluppo è stato descritto con le fasi individuate da E. Erikson con i compiti e le crisi evolutive caratteristici dello stesso. In ciascuna fase sono state indicate le attività che può intraprendere una donna per superare le difficoltà incontrate nello svolgimento dei compiti quotidiani. Talvolta succede che alcuni disturbi della personalità o disturbi della salute mentale interferiscono o addirittura impediscono la realizzazione dei compiti evolutivi nell'età adulta. Sono stati indicati e descritti brevemente i disturbi che si verificano più frequentemente nelle donne rispetto agli uomini. Nella conclusione è stato tracciato il profilo di una donna dalla personalità matura.

Parole chiave: donna, difficoltà, fasi e rischio dello sviluppo, personalità disturbata e matura