

Maria Bogucka

GENDER IN THE ECONOMY OF A TRADITIONAL AGRARIAN SOCIETY: THE CASE OF POLAND IN THE 16th–17th CENTURIES¹

In this study the term gender will be perceived as a form of social relationship, both affecting the economic change as well as resulting from it. The last decades have shown the necessity of rewriting the history from the perspective of social gender interaction. It could not be done without the analysis of the economic situation and its changes in the context of gender as an important factor shaping social structures.

The case of Poland in the 16th–17th centuries could offer an especially interesting field of research because of some characteristic traits of its development. The urbanization of Western Europe in the early modern times resulted in the quick rise of demand for food on international markets. Poland, an agricultural country, ruled by grain producing nobles became in the 16th–first half of the 17th century a granary of Europe. The market economy and the new methods of capitalistic production, however, had not emerged on a larger scale in Poland. Polish towns, although numerous, were small in size and weak; because the noble manor needed labour to produce food for export, peasants were forced into second serfdom. On the threshold to modern times Poland — a peripheral area of the European world economy — remained a traditionally agricultural country with manorial system based on serf labour and with hierarchical society dominated by the gentry². The

¹ The study was prepared thanks to the grant from KBN (State Committee for Scientific Research).

² See: J. Topolski, *Sixteenth Century Poland and the Turning Point in European Economic Development*, in: *A Republic of Nobles. Studies in Polish History to 1864*, ed. J. K. Fedorowicz, Cambridge 1982, pp. 70–90; I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, vol. I, New York 1974, esp. pp. 300 ff., vol. II, New York 1980, esp. pp. 128 ff.; A. Wyrobisz, *Economic Landscapes. Poland From the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century*, in: *East–Central Europe in Transition. From the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century*, ed. A. Mączak, H. Samsonowicz, P. Burke, Cambridge 1985, pp. 36–46; L. Żytkowicz, *Trends of Agrarian Economy in Poland, Bohemia and Hungary from the Middle of the Seventeenth Century*, *ibidem*, pp. 59–83.

great role of the family as production unit remained unchallenged till the end of the 18th century.

The great movement for religious reform had touched Poland in the middle of the 16th century only for a short period. Poland remained a catholic country, with convents (the alternative to the marriage offering to some women the possibility of escaping life under male dominancy and of constant childbearing), with the veneration of many female saints and with the great cult of Virgin Mary who in the middle of the 17th century was proclaimed Queen of Poland. All this affected the gender relations in Poland and was at the favour of woman's image in the mass-scale mentality. The ambivalent results of Reformation on women's situation are underlined by recent studies³; older works, however, expressed rather opposite views, affirming that the positive evaluation of marriage and of women as wives as well as the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers improved women's status⁴. Poland's experience supports rather the hypothesis that Counter — Reformation, in spite of the subordinate position of women in the Catholic church, resulted to some extent in the development of female prestige.

Patriarchalism, however, was the foundation of the old Polish world structure⁵. The family, dominated by father and husband was the basic social unit in all social groups. It is not easy to define the woman's position in the Polish family as well as in general — in the old Polish society. The conclusions drawn from old Polish literature may be misleading, for this literature was strongly permeated with misogyny. The Renaissance emancipation movement then in progress in the whole of Europe, was barely noticeable in Poland. The exception was Andrzej Glaber, who demanded that women be given access to education, arguing that intellectually they were not on a lower level than men. This writer from Great Poland asserted in the 1530s that men were afraid "lest women should overtake them with brain power" and were therefore against educating them. "But why should these poor creatures be spurned and treated as more ignoble creatures than men?", asked Glaber. According to him, on the contrary, "the girls' constitution is very subtle and their ability to learn and understand all things is sharp and quick"⁶. But another writer, more famous, Andrzej Frycz —

³ See: Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household. Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg*, Oxford 1989, *passim*.

⁴ R. Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy*, Minneapolis 1971; S. Ozment, *When Fathers ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983.

⁵ M. Bogucka, *The Foundations of the Old Polish World: Patriarchalism and the Family. Introduction into the Problem*, "Acta Poloniae Historica", vol. 69, 1994, pp. 37–53.

⁶ Quoted after M. Bogucka, *Nicholas Copernicus. The Country and Times*, Wrocław 1973, p. 142.

—Modrzewski, declared himself as determined anti-feminist. Chapter XXI of the book *On Customs* in his work *On the Improvement of the Republic (De Republica Emendanda)* has the significant title: “Women should not meddle in public affairs”. This is a brief but terse chapter. “It should be brought about that women, whom God has put under the rule of men, are not admitted to public affairs” — says Frycz. “Shame on those men who, while regarding themselves worthy of public dignities, never do anything but at the suggestion of women... There is no doubt that women are born for the spindle and he who has painted Venus trampling a tortoise indicated thereby that they should be vested with concern for household matters, not public ones”⁷. Polish nobles, whose way of thinking was similar to that of Frycz’s, sincerely hated the queens who like Bona in the 16th century and Marie-Louise in the 17th, instead of carrying charitable works and absorbing themselves in prayers, as tradition would dictate, wanted to push through reforms of the state and interfered in politics in order to strengthen royal power. The fact that both queens were foreigners (Italian and French) naturally only increased the nobility’s dislike. The last representant of Jagiellonian dynasty, Anna, was elected in 1575 King of Poland only when she promised to renounce all her family estates to the Republic and decided to marry Stephen Bathory, who was to rule the country. Her own role in the government was never envisaged.

Marriages were usually contracted without the girl concerned being asked for consent; it was not until she was a widow that a woman acquired a sufficiently independent status to take decisions concerning her fate. The noble woman as a widow was becoming the ruler of her deceased husband’s fortune as well as the guardian of the children till their maturity⁸.

The wife’s situation depended to a great extent on the dowry (the marital dot or the so-called portion) she had brought into her husband’s house and on the family she was descended from (preference was given to marriages between persons from the same social strata)⁹. The only daughters of rich families were in great demand on the matrimonial market for they often brought their husbands large landed estates. Women’s right to inherit landed property was, however, not clear enough in the Middle Ages¹⁰. In the early modern period the rights of daughters were limited to 1/4 of the Immobilien

⁷ A. Frycz-Modrzewski, *O poprawie Rzeczypospolitej (On the Improvement of the Republic)* Warszawa 1953 (first published Cracoviae 1551), p. 193.

⁸ J. Bardach, *Historia państwa i prawa Polski (The History of Polish Law and State)*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1966, pp. 282, 285.

⁹ M. Bogucka, *The Foundations*, p. 43.

¹⁰ See M. Koczerska, *Rodzina szlachecka w Polsce późnego średniowiecza (Noble Family in Poland in the Late Middle Ages)*, Warszawa 1975, pp. 42 ff.

inheritance, while 3/4 were reserved for sons¹¹. As a rule therefore the son or sons were given most of immovables, while the daughters received smaller or larger dowries consisting mostly of movables¹². These comprised cash and silver, jewellery, clothing, bed and table linen, furniture. This was the practice not only in noblemen's but also in urban families (the son usually received the house and allotments, while daughter cash and various movables), and in peasant families, in which the dowry usually consisted of livestock (a cow, a calf, a pig, sheep, hens etc.) as well as clothes and various household utensils. As if in return for the dowry the husband offered the newly-wed wife a counter-gift (Lat.: *dotalicium*). In richer circles the *dotalicium* (sometimes called also morning gift, Polish: *wiano*) was secured by the settlement of some of the husband's property on the wife as the so-called jointure (Lat.: *reformatio*). Often it was listed in a document entered into the court records as a safeguard against later dispute. After the husband's death his widow was entitled to take over this part of her deceased man property before the settlement of other inheritance claims.

The situation of a married woman was better in noble circles than in urban milieu. Noble woman had the right to rule her estates as well as to take the legal steps before the court; in the 16th–17th centuries, however, her ability to proceed before the court in her husband's absence became in some counties limited. To sell her landed estate a wife had to have her husband's consent; on the other hand in most cases husbands selling their property made this act endorsed by wife too¹³. In towns the situation of women depended on the kind of law enjoyed by the city. In towns under Chełmno law the marriage was based on the principle of full community of possessions, what meant that wives were more subjected to their husbands, who managed to hold their power over the whole of the conjugal fortune. *Ius municipale Magdeburgense* seemed to be more kind to women. Especially the rights of a woman to her goods and valuables brought to the future husband's home (dowry) were protected. The dowry could, for instance, not be seized for the debts made by husband and after his death would return without any harm to the widow¹⁴.

¹¹ J. Bardach, *Historia*, vol. II, p. 274.

¹² *Ibidem*, vol. I, pp. 282, 285, 343, 491.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ M. Sędek, *Instytucje i praktyka prawa chełmińskiego w Warszawie w XV w. (Institutions and Practice of the Chełmno Law in Warsaw in the 15th Century)*, in: *Warszawa Średniowieczna*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1975, pp. 227–234; *ibidem*, *Czy uprawnienia majątkowe kobiet w Starej Warszawie odpowiadały zasadom prawa chełmińskiego? (Did the Actual Economic Power of Women Correspond to the Chełmno Law in Old Warsaw?)*, in: *Warszawa Średniowieczna*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1971, pp. 135–148.

However, it was not only the material and legal situation that determined a woman's position in marriage and in the family. Much depended on the husband's character, and especially on the character, energy and wisdom of the woman herself, on the role which she succeeded to win in the family. The result varied very much. There were many marriages ill — matched because of age difference (young girls married to old men) or character discord. In records one could find many cases of wives being maltreated by their brutal, sadistic husbands, wives who were too weak to resist such practices¹⁵. But there were also scolds and drinking women who were a plague to their husbands and made married life a nuisance¹⁶.

The type of woman known in all Europe as *virago* or *femme forte* or *mujer varonil*¹⁷ emerged also in Poland. This type has many representatives especially in the 17th century, like the famous Mrs. Dorota Chrzanowska, who defended the fortress at Trembowla against the Turks or Mrs. Teofila Chmielecka, who fought bravely against the Tartars at the side of her husband¹⁸. The old Polish society respected and loved strong, courageous, energetic women. This is what the diarist Marcin Matuszewicz wrote with admiration in the 18th century of Helena Ogińska, the Wilno voivode's daughter: "a beautiful and wise lady, of such great strength that she was able to break a horseshoe with her hands"¹⁹. Many husbands asked their wife's opinion before taking a decision and some not only respected their spouses but were even a little afraid of them. In the house of the famous hetman Jan Karol Chodkiewicz (early 17th century) it was his energetic spouse who held sway while the old soldier, as is evident in his letters to her, did his best not to offend or anger his dearest Sophie²⁰. The most common kind of relationship in a marriage, however, seems to have been in old Poland a partnership, based on mutual respect and trust²¹.

Theoretically, it was housekeeping, care of the pantry and the dairy production, the poultry—house and the garden that was the woman's domain. The women's traditional occupations also included spinning, weaving, sewing and adorning clothes, bed linen and table—cloths with embroidery. But in fact, a woman's world was not so restrained in practice.

¹⁵ M. Bogucka, *The Foundations*, pp. 40–41.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ See M. Mc Kendrick, *Women and Society in the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age. A Study of the "Mujer Varonil"*, Cambridge 1974.

¹⁸ M. Bogucka, *The Foundations*, p. 41.

¹⁹ M. Matuszewicz, *Diariusz zycia mego (The Diary of My Life)*, ed. B. Królikowski, Warszawa 1986, vol. II, p. 315.

²⁰ M. Bogucka, *The Foundations*, p. 42.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

The woman's main occupation was the upbringing of children; women were expected not only to look after them but also to shape their character and mind. The mother brought up not only her daughters but also sons; it was not a custom (as it had been in the early Middle Ages) to put the boys under the father's exclusive rule and care when they were seven years old. Despite the patriarchal structure of the family, mother's influence on the children was great in the old Polish home. It was the mother who was their first teacher; it was she who indicated and explained the secrets of life to them, formulated interdictions and commands, and introduced them into the world of norms and principles governing the society. The noble woman also played an important role in contacts between the gentry's manor house and the peasant; she was the person to whom they came for help and advice, she looked after them when they were ill, she taught them and settled small disputes, and she was frequently an intermediary between the serfs and their lord.

A serious handicap for women was a rather difficult access to education. Only girls from the most privileged noble and urban families were attended by a private tutor, while others have to be satisfied with their mother's teaching. A small part of girls were fortunate enough to attend a convent school or a private school for girls existing in some larger cities. The result was the great share of illiteracy among women. According to the recent studies in the years 1575–1580 in the city of Cracow 50–67 per cent of men but only about 20 per cent of women were able to sign a document²². In the 30's of the 17th century the number of literate women went, however, in Cracow up to 36 per cent or even more²³. More literate were probably women from the noble strata, but the lack of research does not allow to give some more detailed estimation. We do know, however, that many of noble women conducted quite a large correspondence (letters of women from the 16th and 17th have survived). Their mental horizons were of course limited, with matters of the household, the family and the neighbours playing the dominant role, but they were also interested in the outside world and felt the need to gather information on it or even managed to travel (visits to relatives, pilgrimages).

It should be stressed however, that women's position in the Polish early modern society was shaped before all by economic factors. Paradoxically it was the backwardness of the Polish economy, its lagging behind the new

²² W. Urban, *Umiejętność pisania w Małopolsce w II połowie 16 w. (The Knowledge of Writing in the Little Poland in the Second Half of the 16th Century)*, "Przegląd Historyczny", 1977, no 2., p. 245.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

forms and trends developing in Western Europe, that resulted in the large possibilities of women's economic activity. In her famous book on working women Alice Clark underlines the bad effects of the development of the early capitalism on women's situation²⁴. The shift from the household as a productive unit to manufacture and factory as well as the professionalization of work resulted in the marginalisation of female labour and in the decline of the female ability to support the family with some substantial income. The survival of the wife and children began to depend exclusively on the earnings of husband and father, what resulted in the growing contempt for woman's unpaid work in the household.

The book of Alice Clark was very much discussed and criticized in last decades, but some of recent studies confirm her observations²⁵. The work of A. Clark throw also a light upon Polish situation in the 16th–17th centuries, the situation which could be perceived as an antimodel of the capitalistic development. In the agricultural country (almost 90 per cent of the population of Poland were people engaged in agricultural pursuits, because even town-dwellers owned gardens and cultivated fields), with traditional system of production focused on the household, with weak market economy and the overwhelming role of unpaid serf labour, the gender relations were shaped to the great degree by the traditional economy. It is after all not only the case of Poland. Almost 20 years ago S. C. Rogers found some interesting traits of development of male–female relationship in a traditional agrarian society in France. She namely found, that the division of labour and tasks in peasant households is more functional than hierarchical or connected to the prestige and that women have here great influence on decisions and control of family matters²⁶. Similar observations were made by M. Segalen²⁷ who stressed an equipollence in division and distribution of roles and tasks between males and females in French peasant households, which seem to be organized on the principle of the partnership rather than on the subordination.

²⁴ A. Clark, *Working Life of Women in the 17th Century*. London 1919.

²⁵ See C. Ubrich, *Unartige Weiber. Präsenz und Penitenz von Frauen in frühneuzeitlichen Deutschland*, in: R.van Dülmen (ed.), *Arbeit, Frömmigkeit und Eigensinn. Studien zur historischen Kulturforschung II*, Frankfurt a.M. 1990, pp. 29 ff.

²⁶ S. C. Rogers, *Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance: A Model of Female/Male Interaction in Peasant Society*, "American Ethnologist", 2 (1975), pp. 727 ff.

²⁷ M. Segalen, *Mari et femme dans la société paysanne*, Paris 1980.

In early modern Poland the backwardness of the economy resulted in the still central role of the household as a productive unit, in the countryside (both in the noble manor as in the peasant farm) as well as in towns (close connections between the household and workshop or a trade enterprise)²⁸. In this situation the female work was of great importance in many fields. The serfdom, which dominated the countryside, meant that unpaid labour performed both by male as well as by female serfs was the basic factor for the noble manor existence and its productive ability. The average population density was in Poland barely 6–7 persons per 1 sq.km and its increase was rather slow. Therefore every pair of hands, especially in the situation of low technical level of agriculture, had a great value. Because of lack of research we do not know how was shaped the sex ratio in the Polish countryside in the 16th–17th centuries. But it seems, that because of the lesser female mobility as well as longer life expectancy a slight surplus of women could be expected (in spite of their great mortality during childbearing). Especially after wars and Cosack's uprisings in the middle of the 17th century this surplus should have been more accentuated. The big demand for workers and the great importance of female labour could be used as one of explanations for the lack of mass-scale witch-hunting and witch persecution in Poland. On the contrary to the neighbouring countries e.g. Germany, only very few witch trials took place in early modern Poland²⁹.

The old Polish literature³⁰ describes largely the female tasks in running farms and manors. Those tasks differed according to the social status (noble woman, peasant woman) as well as according to the civil status (unmarried girl, wife, widow). Mistress of the manor had under her full control servants, especially female ones; she was responsible for cattle breeding (especially cows) and poultry rising, as well as for the manufacturing of the dairy products. The selling of milk, cheese, cream, butter as well as of chicken and eggs, often very profitable business, was entirely in female hands³¹. The gardens and orchards, including the growing of medicine herbs, was also the female responsibility, as well as the first aid and help in the case of illness. The housekeeping — cleaning, washing, making preserves (very

²⁸ M. Bogucka, *Die städtische Familie in Polen während des 16. und 17. Jhs.*, in: *Ehe, Liebe, Tod*, ed. P. Borscheid, H. J. Teuteberg, Münster 1993, pp. 233–244.

²⁹ J. Tazbir, *Hexenprozesse in Polen*, Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, vol. 71, 1980, pp. 280–307.

³⁰ J. K. Haur, *Białogłowskiego gospodarstwa powinności (Female Household's Duties)*, in: *Staropolska poezja ziemiańska. Antologia*, ed. J. Gruchala, S. Gizeszczuk, Warszawa 1988, pp. 305–306.

³¹ A. Izydorczyk-Kamler, A. Wyczański, *La femme et l'économie rurale en Pologne aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles*, in: *La donna nell'economia secc. XIII–XVIII*, ed. S. Cavacocchi, Prato 1990, pp. 275–282.

important task because it provided the family for the winter), cooking meals — traditionally constituted the female domain. The type of involvement in all those works depended on social status enjoyed by woman. Women of petty gentry had to work in person, while the mistress of big manor in the middle class gentry or in rich nobles' milieu would control only the work done by servants and supervise their activities.

Very often noble women transgressed and enlarged those traditional fields of female activity and took over the whole of the running of manorial estates. It was the case of widows as well as of those wives, whose husbands were sickly, or drunkards, or too much involved in public affairs. Such involvement resulted in frequent man's absences from home in order to attend the regional gatherings of nobles (dietines), the General Seyms, the courts of justice (to carry out own actions as well as to take part in sessions as member of courts and tribunals). Many nobles travelled eagerly abroad or simply enjoyed social life visiting distant family members or friends. In the rich milieus they were hired managers (economics) who took the responsibility of running the estate in absence of its lord. In the middle class and among poor gentry it was usually the wife who took over the general management of manor and became a real head of the family, responsible for its existence and prosperity. In most middle and poor families women had therefore great influence on settling family matters. The field of action depended on the woman's social and financial status, being usually enlarged on the bottom of the nobility's hierarchical ladder³².

Women's economic activities among peasants were very large too. Not only did the peasant woman the housework, attended the garden, took care of cattle and poultry, brew beer, gathered herbs, wild fruits as well as dry twigs, but she should spin wool and linen, weave them into cloth, make dresses for the whole family³³. Often it was she who attended weekly market in the closest township in order to sell eggs, chickens, butter, cheese, home made yarn. It means, that cash for peasant's household was in great part provided by women. The task of women was also to produce a significant part of the rent in kind due to the lord of the village. Peasant women worked also alongside men on the fields, especially during harvest times³⁴. They had to share the work due from each peasant farm to the manor; as it was often the obligation of three, four or even more working days weekly, not only

³² M. Bogucka, *The Foundations*, p. 44 ff.

³³ M. Bogucka, *Staropolskie obyczaje w XVI–XVII w. (Polish Customs in the 16th–17th Centuries)*, Warszawa 1994, pp. 136 ff.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

men but also the women of the family had to participate in it³⁵. The common serf's harsh fate contributed to the blurring of gender's differences.

There is a great deal of evidence in sources that countryside women — probably widows — acted often as heads of the peasant farms and could keep such a position for many years³⁶. Often they developed large economic activities leasing fields, meadows and lakes, borrowing and lending money, keeping mills and inns etc.³⁷

The scale of the use of hired labour was in the Polish countryside rather small, but they were paid workers and paid servants both in the noble manors as well as in rich peasant farms; among those hired hands women are estimated as one half³⁸. They were mostly young girls from the region, trying to earn some money and to save them before getting married. As their wages they received food and shelter (60–80 per cent of the earnings) but also some clothes and cash. We have data concerning wages paid in Polish *grosz* (penny) to female servants (young girls or older women, probably widows) in royal manors in Cracow and Sandomierz districts in the Little Poland³⁹.

Cracow district

Years	1530–1549	1560–1588	1611–1636
Cook	—	40	37
Servant	36	41	66
Manager	66	100	88

Sandomierz district

Years	1529–1546	1564–1569	1611–1629
Cook	23	28	16
Servant	31	42	52
Manager	48	65	130

Some rise of wages resulted from the inflation and deterioration of *grosz* (decrease of the silver contents in coins)⁴⁰ therefore is not of interest to us. More significant for our topic would be the comparison of the level of female

³⁵ *Historia chłopów polskich (The History of Polish Peasants)*, vol. I, Warszawa 1970, pp. 264 ff.

³⁶ A. Izydoreczyk, A. Wyczański, *La femme*, p. 278. See also A. Wyczański, *Uwarstwienie społeczne w Polsce XVI w. (Social Stratification in Poland in the 16th Century)*, Wrocław 1977, pp. 183–191.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ A. Izydoreczyk–Kamler, A. Wyczański, *La femme*, p. 279.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 280–281.

⁴⁰ *From 0,695 gramm in 1580 to 0,27 in 1630*, see J. Pele, *Ceny w Gdańsku (Prices in Gdańsk)*, Łwów 1937, pp. 2–4.

wages with the wages of male workers — the difference is estimated at 20–30 per cent in average to the women's detriment⁴¹. Female manor's managers received usually only 1/2 of the male wages⁴². It shows that in this sector of economy, which was shaped by the free market and hired labour principles the female discrimination was more accentuated than in the traditional serfdom economy.

Female workers, especially female managers of manors — were appreciated by employers. In Sieradz district (Great Poland) in the middle of the 16th century there was a rise in number of female managers ruling whole manors⁴³. In the year 1541 from 10 manors under research 3 were run by women, in 1543 from 12 manors — 4, in 1546 from 8 manors 5 were run by women, in 1565 from 12 manors 9 were run by women⁴⁴. Probably economic effects were better when a woman was taking care of a manor than when a man was managing it. Women were often developing cattle breeding and dairy manufacturing on a larger scale than men. In the same time female wages were, as we had seen, lesser than male wages⁴⁵. Therefore the best Polish expert on agriculture in the 16th century, Anselm G o s t o m - s k i, advised to hire an experienced female rather than a male manager for running a manor⁴⁶.

Similar active economically were women in towns. Here too we have to look at the sex ratio first as an important factor shaping gender relations. This ratio is rather difficult to establish because of the lack of demographic research. The older scholars supposed that a surplus of women existed in big cities during the Middle Age as well as in the 16th–17th centuries⁴⁷. Some recent studies however, put it in doubt⁴⁸. We could risk a supposition that in the big city of Danzig, an extremely active harbour with a constant influx of immigrants⁴⁹ the male population would exceed in number the female group. The question is more difficult to answer for Polish capitals — Warsaw and Cracow. The high death rate among young women giving birth (some scholars think it resulted in the shorter life expectancy for

⁴¹ A. Izydorczyk-Kamler, A. Wyczański, *La femme*, p. 81.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ A. Wyczański, *Kobiety kierowniczkі folwarków w starostwie sieradzkim w XVI w.* (*Women Managers of Manors in Sieradz District in the 16th Century*), "Zapiski Historyczne" vol. XXI, 1976 no 3, pp. 41–49.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ A. Gostomski, *Gospodarstwo* (*The Housekeeping*), ed. S. Inglot, Wrocław 1951, p. 94.

⁴⁷ See E. E. Ennen, *Frauen im Mittelalter*, München 1984, pp. 141–147.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ S. Gierszewski, *Obywatele miast Polski przedrozbiorowej* (*Citizens in Polish Cities Before Partitions*), Warszawa 1973, p. 55.

females than males in those times⁵⁰) as well as the high number of *clerus* among town's population⁵¹ allow us to assume rather superior number of men in Warsaw⁵² and in Cracow. But in small towns the situation could have been quite different.

Another factor moulding women's situation was the level of the economic development of the city. The average earnings as well as the demand for labour on the city market were shaping the situation of many women from lower strata of the urban society, either allowing them to stay at home to perform household duties only or pushing them to seek some work outside. In Danzig e.g. where in result of the spectacular growth of trade and crafts and the development of the early capitalism⁵³ the household as production unit began to loose its monopoly and the demand for hired workers was expanding, the woman's work outside the household became in the 16th–17th centuries a necessity⁵⁴. In other Polish big cities, in Warsaw and Cracow, the request for woman's labour outside home was limited because of the weaker development of local industry and trade⁵⁵. Similarly looked the situation in small towns.

The lack of education as well as an inferior legal position (in Polish towns women were regarded as persons without full civic rights and could not act unaided in courts of justice⁵⁶) were a serious handicap to women as the big trade and banking are concerned. Very few women were engaged in the large international exchange as well as in big credit operations; I have found almost no traces of female foreign trade in Danzig or in Warsaw⁵⁷. Some widows seem to run their late husband's affairs in Cracow, but probably on a rather modest scale⁵⁸. On the contrary — the petty trade and all sorts of peddlery seem to be the predilected territory of female merchants and

⁵⁰ See U. M. Cowgill, *Life and Death in the Sixteenth Century in the City of York*, "Population Studies", vol. 21, 1967, pp. 61–62.

⁵¹ See M. Bogucka, *Warszawa w latach 1526–1720 (Warsaw in the years 1526–1720)*, in: *Warszawa w latach 1526–1793*, ed. A. Zahorski, Warszawa 1984, pp. 15, 192; J. Bieniarzówna, J. M. Małeckki, *Dzieje Krakowa. Kraków w wiekach XVI–XVIII (History of Cracow. The City in the 16th–18th Centuries)*, Kraków 1984, pp. 262 ff.

⁵² See C. Kukło, *Rodzina w osiemnastowiecznej Warszawie (The Family in the City of Warsaw in the 18th Century)*, Białystok 1991, p. 73.

⁵³ M. Bogucka, *Gdańsk jako ośrodek produkcyjny w XIV–XVII w. (Danzig as a Centre of Production in the 14th–17th Centuries)*, Warszawa 1962, pp. 7–165.

⁵⁴ See M. Bogucka, *Women and Economic Life in the Polish Cities During the 16th–17th Centuries*, in: *La donna*, pp. 185–ff.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

hawkers, what resulted in the female domination of this field of exchange⁵⁹. Especially the selling of food such as poultry, eggs, butter, fish, flour, grits, vegetable, fruits, was almost a monopoly of women, who because of their household keeping experience were experts on those goods⁶⁰.

The same could be said about the small credit operations and usury. Many women from the middle or even poor strata of the urban population were specialist in various forms of lending small sums of money, acting mostly as pawnbrokers⁶¹. They were single women — widows, as well as wives of small merchants and craftsmen, who tried to provide their families with some additional income⁶².

Women's activities played also an important role in the development of crafts. It was a long medieval tradition that in many workshops master's wife as well as his daughters worked as part- or full-time helpers; on the verge to modern times in big urban centres it became a necessity because of the quickly rising demand for manufactured goods. The guild's attitude toward women remained, however, ambivalent. On the one hand the guild's authorities were keen to help artisans to improve their productivity without breaking old rules on the size of workshop (that is using wife's or daughter's help instead of hired labour), on the other hand cheap women's work was regarded as competition for men. Therefore the large rights of wives and daughters of bookbinders in Cracow allowing them to work in workshops of their fathers and husbands and even to be employed by other masters were little by little limited in the 17th century⁶³. The articles of weaver's guild in Cracow already in 1532 prohibited to use in workshops wife's help⁶⁴.

Yet only few guilds were openly denying the membership to women; it was, however, usually reserved for wives of late masters as a sort of providing for bereaved families. A woman who was not a widow of the late master and yet belonged to a guild was in most Polish cities an uncommon phenomenon. We have, however, some proofs, before all from Danzig, where the economic growth generated a special conjuncture for industrial activities, that same guilds (butchers, basketmakers) were accepting female members⁶⁵. Articles of the shoemaker's guild from Danzig (1580) let us

⁵⁹ A. Karpiński, *The Woman on the Market Place. The Scale of Feminization of Retail Trade in Polish Towns in the Second Half of the 16th and in the 17th Century*, in: *La donna*, pp. 283–292.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ M. Bogucka, *Women and Economic Life*, pp. 190–191.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ J. Pachonński, *Zmierzch sławetnych (The Twilight of the Old Burghers)*, Kraków 1956, pp. 161–162.

⁶⁴ M. Bogucka, *Women and Economic Life*, p. 191.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 192.

suppose that a daughter of a master could become a member of the corporation⁶⁶. Articles of the hammersmith's guild also from Danzig (1576) stated that a woman could be a member of the fraternity on the condition that she will marry a hammersmith⁶⁷. In some small towns the practice to allow women to obtain guild's membership was probably more frequent. In the small town of Ostrołęka in Mazovia the membership of the guild of merchants and brewers was open to both men and women; the guild's charter stated (1622) that all members of the guild, without any regard to sex difference could trade, brew beer and sell alcoholic drinks; the only condition was to be a married person. Only "rascals" of both sexes were to be excluded from the fraternity⁶⁸.

In many guilds (Danzig, Cracow, Warsaw as well as small towns) widows were allowed to run the workshop after their husbands' death two, three or even more years (sometimes till the majority of the children or until the second marriage)⁶⁹. It resulted from the guild's natural concern about the welfare of the dead members' families.

The reluctant attitude toward women does not mean that female work was not appreciated and used in the industrial production. We had already mentioned the help usually delivered by wives and daughters in many workshops in Danzig, Warsaw, Cracow. The female strangers were also hired because one could pay them less than men were to be paid and because manpower in some cities was not easy to find. The textile industry in Danzig in the 16th–17th centuries was based to great extent on women's labour⁷⁰. Women were working also in the dressmaking, in breweries, bakeries and other food-producing shops⁷¹. Many women worked in Danzig very hard as extra hands in the building- and transport-trade, in metal workshops as well as in woodworker's shops⁷². The carpenter's ordinance from the 15th century forbade to use females except for help by woodsawing (!) as well as by giving a coat of paint or of varnish⁷³.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ Z. Niedziałkowska, *Ostrołęka. Dzieje miasta (Ostrołęka, the History of a Town)*, Wrocław 1967, pp. 68–69.

⁶⁹ M. Bogucka, *Women and Economic Life*, pp. 192–193.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

The large field of female activity in both large as well as small cities were the production and retail of alcoholic drinks and the innkeeping. Domestic service was also in towns in 80–90 per cent a female occupation⁷⁴, because it was cheaper to have a servant woman and the supply of females was higher than supply of male servants⁷⁵.

Conclusions:

Because of the traditional structure of the Polish economy in the 16th–17th centuries women had large possibilities to be economically active in many directions. Their opportunities for action seem to have been especially large in the countryside. In order to survive in the conditions of serfdom, gender relations among peasants had to lean more on solidary collaboration than to be shaped by struggle for domination. Probably more competitive were the gender relations among nobles, but even here the role of female work and initiative in running manors resulted in the importance of women's position in many families. The most complicated was the situation in towns, especially large ones, where the development of early capitalism and of free market economy resulted in the sharpening of the male–female competition in the several spheres of economic life.

⁷⁴ A. Karpiński, *Żeńska służba domowa w miastach polskich w XVI i XVII w. (Female Domestic Servants in Polish Towns in the 16th and 17th Centuries)*, in: *Nędza i dostatek na ziemiach polskich od średniowiecza po wiek XX*, ed. J. Szteyflo, Warszawa 1992, pp. 41–61.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

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