Gender equality and quality of life –
how gender equality can contribute
to development in Europe.
A study of Poland and Norway

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"Qualitative Study of Gender Equality" (WP3)

Gender equality in debate.
Report from the focus group study on gender equality and quality of life.

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Introduction

The focus group interviews (FGI) study was conducted as part of the project "Gender equality and quality of life – how gender equality can contribute to development in Europe. A study of Poland and Norway" (GEQ) carried out by the Institute of Sociology of the Jagiellonian University in partnership with the Centre for Gender Research (STK) at the University of Oslo, the Chair of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Jagiellonian University Medical College and the Institute of Health and Society (Helsam) at the University of Oslo. The project received funding from the Polish-Norwegian Research Programme operated by the National Centre for Research and Development under the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2009-2014 in the framework of Project Contract No Pol-Nor/200641/63/2013. The Principal Investigator in the project was Prof. Krystyna Slany of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. The project website is www.geq.socjologia.uj.edu.pl.

The FGI study lasted from March 2014 to June 2015 (fieldwork: May 2014 to February 2015). It was conducted within the Working Package "Qualitative Study of Gender Equality" (WP3), the leader of which was Ewa Krzaklewska. The other researchers engaged in the study were Aleksandra Migalska and Marta Warat. Krystyna Slany additionally co-authored the chapter "Negotiating gender equality in the family…".

The report presents the results from the study, starting with a presentation of its methodology and a chapter describing the debates on the concept of gender equality. The general chapter is followed by the thematic ones, concentrating on family life, the labour market, pension schemes, political life and activism. While the themes selected for the report do not cover all the material gathered throughout the discussion, they represent the most important issues and challenges from the respondents' perspective.

Methodology of the focus group study

The aims of the FGI study were twofold. It constituted the essential qualitative input on the issue of gender equality and quality of life relations as a coherent entity and an important source of data on the theme. On the other hand, the study was a background enquiry for the survey study within the GEQ project. It aimed to depict the context for the survey research, as well as constituting a tool to elaborate and contextualise the overall topics and questions that are addressed in the survey

The starting point of the study, important for both the abovementioned study goals, was the notion of the **contestability of the concept of gender equality** (Verloo 2007; Krzaklewska 2014) – competing definitions of the concept can co-exist, along with misunderstandings and a negative attitude towards the topic, or at best a refusal to take part in such research, viewed as being linked to "gender ideology". The concept can also be contested as a political aim, as seen in debates on the need to introducing gender equality policies or in differing visions of what gender equality should be (Verloo 2007).

Furthermore, the current situation in Poland contributes to the **debates and controversies on the theme of gender equality**. The context of the research is the clash between some activities that constitute clear progress in the achievements of gender equality, opposed to the so-called "war on gender" and forces undermining women's rights. Among the policy interventions that we have been able to observe recently, and that support the idea of gender equality, are the introduction of quotas in political elections and the possibility of dividing parental leave between partners, as well as the introduction of an anti-discrimination policy (Warat 2014). Additionally, we can discern a change in attitudes towards family and work roles, which are becoming less traditional, especially among younger and better-educated people – partnership becomes the most desired family model (Antosz 2012). However, as described by Kowalska, Migalska and Warat (2014), in parallel with these changes, in Poland three other political/cultural forces seek to undermine and delegitimise women's rights: these are conservatives, populist nationalists, and the Catholic Church, calling for re-traditionalisation, the restoration of a "natural" social order based on traditional female and male roles. In fact, it was the Catholic Church in Poland which, in 2013, stirred up the debate on so-called "gender ideology"[1] – a new understanding of the concept was

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[1] It is important to mention at this point that in Polish gender equality is translated as *równość płci* (sex equality). Therefore, linguistically there is no immediate connotation of *równość płci* and "gender ideology", as it appears

produced, portraying "gender ideology" as dangerous, an enemy to the Polish family and specifically children, allowing a person to choose her/his sex, promoting homosexuality, paedophilia etc. (Graff 2014). This caused a lot of confusion and misunderstanding in public debate in relation to the concept of gender, but also to gender mainstreaming or gender equality. In response to this public commotion about the matter, the Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment, Minister Kozłowska-Rajewicz, published a statement on what gender is and what is not, suggesting that gender is a socio-cultural construct, not an ideology, as suggested by the Church. Eventually, the word "gender" became word of the year (Sierakowski 2014).

In the light of these discussions, **analysis of the theme of gender equality** seemed to be a challenge to the researchers, requiring exploration of the understandings and experiences of gender equality in different contexts and among various social groups. Are these public debates mentioned above echoed in Polish citizens' discussions and descriptions on the topic, and if so, how are these debates framed and reacted to?

Aims of the study

The main aims of the study concentrated on four themes:

Aim 1: Experiencing (in)equality: costs of and benefits from in/equality

The first aim of the study was to describe women's and men's experiences of gender (in)equality and their reactions to these situations. We asked in what contexts and life areas gender equality is articulated as an important dimension of experiences. And how might experiences of (in)equality impact the quality of life of women and men for Polish citizens?

We also wanted to explore the situation of **change in relation to gender equality**. What are the *equality triggers* [*wyzwalacz równości*] – moments or conditions that encourage individuals to introduce a change in relation to their position/situation as a woman or a man, or to negotiate gendered relations in the family or at work? Would these differ between women and men in the Polish context? What are the priority life domains where individuals try to introduce gender equality? In what moments of life or situation do women and men decide to implement changes in their lives or communities? Additionally, we concentrated on the potential or real consequences of such change. Is gender equality seen or experienced as more

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in English. This possibly explain the fact that the linkages between them did not occur immediately in the focus group. Only those participants who were more familiar with the whole debates raised the issue.

difficult or costly in some areas of life than others? What are the costs and benefits of gender equality in diverse areas of life, also including health and quality of life aspects?

As stated in the GEQ framework (Krzaklewska 2014), in addition to micro and macro perspectives we were interested in exploring the **importance of the meso level** (local activism, participation in organisations, social networks) in awakening sensitivity towards discrimination and inequalities. Is the local community an important area of gender equality, fostering who takes decisions and whose interests are taken into account at the community level, in a village, and in a neighbourhood? Can gender equality be manifested at the community level, and how?

The study additionally aimed to explore the dimension of gender equality in terms of **power and power relations**. How is power understood in relation to gender equality – what is power? Who has power over whom? What are the basis of power, power processes and effect of power in relationships, within couples, and among family members (Krzaklewska, Ratecka 2015)? And how is gendered power distributed across the micro, meso and macro level, in different areas and aspects of men and women's lives: labour market, family/personal life, law, politics, use of language, safety and violence etc.?

Aim 2. Participants' definition and use of the concept of gender equality

Secondly, the study aimed to explore what gender equality means for people in their daily lives, how it is understood, and whether it is a "stable" concept or its definitions change with time. How does gender equality as a concept "function" in people's lives – do they talk about, discuss, fight over, or reflect upon it (Krzaklewska 2014)? The study tried to capture the dominant notions and definitions of gender equality existing in Poland, as well as to examine its relations with other concepts, such as equality, fairness or sameness. How do the discourses of fairness and sameness co-exist with the concept of gender equality?

Aim 3. Attitudes towards gender equality

Third, the study aimed to capture the attitudes and opinions of different groups, trying to construct as wide an intersectional perspective on gender equality as possible, and grasp the differentiated patterns of achieving quality of life. We explored attitudes towards gender equality at different stages of life (young people, elderly), with different social capital, education, background, and among people who are and are not in relationships, single parents, divorced people or those whose relationships have broken down, activists, as well those who

take conscious actions to introduce varying conceptions of social change in their communities or/and within society (however, during some FGIs there were participants who referred to their individual struggle in terms of achievement of gender equality, e.g. as a re-arrangement of family life).

We had a special interest in "**pioneers of equality**" (Backhans et al. 2009) who act in opposition to traditional gender patterns or conservative social environment. Is this a case of an individual conscious decision, or a result of a long process of development or socialisation? What are the determinants that mobilise this process of changed attitudes towards gender equality?

In the light of debates on gender equality and the "war on gender", we also sought to capture occurring conflicts or tensions over gender equality or related policy interventions.

Aim 4. Vision of good society and development

Last but not least, the focus group interviews aimed to explore the vision of a good society. Is gender equality seen as an important element of people's vision of a good society? Is gender equality regarded as an important condition for social development? In what areas of life should gender equality be introduced, so as to improve the quality of life of women or/and men? To what degree is the social transformation towards more gender equality desirable or unwanted? And who is seen as a crucial actor in such a change – state institutions, individuals, communities, or organisations?

Rationale for the method

The aim of the focus groups was **to explore and describe the possible debates** on gender equality taking place in contemporary Poland. The method of the FGIs was chosen for its unique capability to bring to the fore new and important knowledge about the main themes in our study. The focus group situation gives a grasp of social dynamics while discussing the theme within a group but also between groups of participants (Maison 2001). Additionally, it is a method often combined with quantitative methodologies, supporting the creation of the questionnaire and interpretation of results (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007: 172).

While on the one hand focus group interviews as a method aim to explore "everyday" forms of communication and respondents' use of language to name particular issues and their hierarchy of importance of concepts, at the same time they create a very specific setting, which may differ from what is an "everyday" situation for the respondents. The focus group situation

is an event or a *happening* meaning "a conversation that, while prearranged and 'focused' by the researcher, remains a dynamic narrative process. Within the context, group members communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences on their own terms." (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007: 172). Therefore, it can allow a multivocal narration to happen, as it cannot be fully controlled by the moderators. Taking this into account, it is important to look at the specific interview situation and its group dynamic in the case of each FGI to understand the debate that is taking place. In this report, we therefore tried to describe the context and atmosphere of discussions in order to illustrate the impact of group dynamics on certain statements or opinions.

In this study we followed the strategy of capturing co-existing definitions and debates on the concept of gender equality by sharing with respondents the power to co-moderate the discussion and propose the themes that they consider to be important to discuss. While the overall theme was known to the respondents, that is, they knew that the study would be about gender equality, at the beginning of the interview we did not stress any particular understanding of the concept or areas to discuss (only later, at the end of the discussion, did we add questions chosen for a particular group). The moderators allowed the respondents to choose the themes that were important to them, to self-moderate the discussion and to decide by themselves if they wanted to switch to another topic or aspect of the discussed issues. This methodological choice resulted in the interviews taking a particular course, and influenced the type and quality of the data generated. This will be discussed further in this chapter, when some methodological dilemmas are considered.

Feminist methodology inspirations

Feminist methodology is a very broad and widely described area of social research. In terms of the place of focus groups within it, there has been significant and influential discourse developed claiming that FGIs are particularly "feminist-friendly", meaning useful for researchers aspiring to apply feminist methodology (Wilkinson 1998; Jowett, O'Toole 2006; Aanand 2013). Sue Wilkinson argues that FGIs are valuable in feminist research, presenting focus groups as above all creating a potential for providing those researched with a greater influence on the trajectory of projects and challenging the power relationships within the research context, questioning the undisputed dominance of the researcher (Wilkinson 1998). Others claim that this method gives an opportunity to create more egalitarian and less exploitative dynamics and can be consciousness-raising or empowering for groups

experiencing difficulties, and/or marginalisation in particular (Montell 1999). In addition, Wilkinson suggests that focus group studies have a more participatory character than used to be the case during individual interviews. In her view, feminist arguments for applying focus groups are about their potential for disrupting power relations within the research context by creating a greater space for participants to express their priorities than has traditionally been the case. This can subvert the imbalance of power between a researcher, who has the capability to decide on the design and direction of the project, and the research participants, who often have little control over the conclusions and theories drawn from their accounts. Wilkinson also regards the FGI method as a highly relevant way to "unpack" contested or taboo understandings of things by building a space for using the participants' own words to express a group common knowledge, co-construction of meanings and "critical consciousness".

Following this consideration, during the FGI study the main points and postulates were the guidelines derived from feminist methodology:

- Participants treated as experts on their situation – the research setting should give them a voice, space and the right to define final meanings.

- The researcher as a co-participant in the phenomena; exchange instead of getting information from.

- Experience of individual inequalities contributes to a critical knowledge area of coping and resisting strategies that can be shared with other participants and can contribute to empowerment on a group level.

The methodological dilemmas that arose as a result when designing and conducting the interviews will be discussed further after the presentation of the details of the study.

Interview scenario

The core scenario prepared by the GEQ team constitutes the "basis" for the further interviews. Each time the core scenario was adjusted to the characteristics of the group with which the discussion was being conducted. Specific themes to explore in view of gender equality (like young people's quality of life, gender equality activism, work, good life, family relations etc.) were chosen for each particular FGI. We decided on each occasion to change the main and specific topic of the discussion about equality according to the groups' assumed interests.

The core scenario consisted of the following parts:

- Good society – rules, norms and values: social development, equality and gender equality

- Situation of women and men in society: how can the quality of life of men and women be improved?

- Diagnosing (in)equality: areas of (in)equality, (un)equal relationships, life course experiences of inequality

- Social and cultural contexts of gender equality – discussing situations of inequalities using particular examples (stories)

- Pro-equality actions and policies

- Pro-equality attitudes.

Organisation of focus group interviews

Focus group interviews are a method which requires extensive organisational efforts, linked mostly to recruitment. The most common challenges concerning sampling are: persuading respondents to take part, finding a meeting time suitable for everyone, and last-minute dropouts with no chance of finding a substitute. Additionally, much logistical and practical preparation is needed, such as finding a comfortable, quiet, safe place to discuss, with good acoustics, accessible to all participants.

The process for each interview was as follows:

1. Recruitment (through a gatekeeper in the community, or by the researchers themselves)
2. Announcement to the participants (by email or phone, or through personal contacts)
3. Organisation of a place, booking a room, arranging snacks and drinks
4. Preparation of the FGI plan (adjustment of the core scenario to the characteristics of the group), including a preparatory meeting of researchers
5. Conducting the FGI (recording, taking notes, pretesting GEQ questionnaire, if applicable)
6. Short meeting of moderators just after the discussion to list the most important conclusions from the interview and observations on the group dynamics (first impressions)

7. Preparation of the researchers' note on the basis of the meeting of moderators (within a short time after the FGI)
8. Transcript of the FGI (verbatim).

Research sample

The sampling was based on such characteristics as gender, age, educational attainment, place of residence (cities, small towns, village, different districts in the city), socio-economic status, family situation, civic engagement, and pro-equality activities. Most of the interviews were planned to take place in a big city, due to the location of the university conducting the project, but we planned to go outside our location and conduct some interviews in different voivodeships or in rural areas. An additional aspect we decided to take into account during sampling was the group's origin (if it was created for the purpose of the research and participants had met only for the interview, or whether they had collaborated before, e.g. as members of an organisation) and acquaintanceship between participants (if they cared about their relations to each other and attended to the coherence of the group as a whole).

It was also planned for the ten FGIs to be conducted with diverse groups in order to ensure a multidimensional and multi-setting view on gender equality.[2] The main principles in the sampling were on the one hand to ensure diversity of standpoints, and on the other to endeavour to include voices from beyond the mainstream debates on gender equality in Poland, frequently taken from the perspective of dominance in terms of social, cultural, economic or political capital. The latter had important consequences in the research process, since to some of the research participants gender equality was not an adequately relevant issue and an important perspective for considering their experiences. This therefore posed a methodological challenge, according to the frequently assumed (and also questioned) stipulation to "not use focus groups when the topic is not appropriate for the participants" (Morgan, Krueger 1993: 13). In our study, we were aware of the fact that for some groups the issue of gender equality would be obscure, distant or a personal theme, while for the others it would result in high engagement and interest in conversation. But as we faced the need to capture the reception of gender equality as a social value, and the complexity of its functioning in terms of both attitudes and practices, we decided to investigate how gender equality works in different settings, including those where it is questioned, marginalised or simply not considered. Obviously, this entailed situations where the motivation of participants would be

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[2] This relates to the project theoretical perspective, see Krzaklewska 2014.

small (e.g. FGI_3), their preliminary attitudes would question the theme as not sensible or (in their opinion) not relevant to their situation (e.g. FGI_10), or, as occurred in a few FGIs, especially in gender-mixed groups, some of the participants (most frequently men) came out against the idea in general in a more or less direct manner (FGI_1, FGI_9). Among elderly people (FGI_9), this negative attitude of some men seemed to be for instance transformed into hostility and a confrontational approach towards female participants. However, in some FGIs, the participants' convictions of the low relevance of gender inequalities allowed us to recognise and discuss with them the foundations and background of these attitudes (e.g. FGI_5).

The second principle develops the previous one: as we wanted to gather opinions about possibly diversified conceptualisations of gender equality, we also needed to create spaces for those quieter voices that were taken from beyond positions of dominance in public debate. As stated in the applications, "FGI will be directed to the groups that have little say in GE policies and are not reached by specific GE interventions, groups of different social classes, experiencing social exclusion, underrepresented, e.g. rural women, entrepreneurs, people from lower social class, different categories of men." Therefore we also tried to go beyond the groups that are commonly researched within the gender equality theme (e.g. young mothers from urban areas) and conducted discussions with people experiencing different disadvantages, frequently not following rapid economic, legal and/or technological changes.

We would like to add a comment on women's and men's participation in the focus group. There are differing opinions on including both women and men in FGIs. On the one hand, such interviews aim to mirror/imitate social interactions or discussions in a natural setting, and it would therefore be rather beneficial to have both men and women in the interview setting, as gender equality is discussed and negotiated between genders. However, some researchers question this, saying that in topics where gendered experiences are to be discussed, we should rather choose groups which are homogenous, so only women or only men (Maison 2001). If there are both men and women, women may be intimidated by men, resulting in them having less of a voice. In our study, the majority of the interviews were conducted with gender-mixed groups, but there were also cases when the group consisted of only female (FGI_6) or only male (FGI 5, FGI_10) participants. On the one hand it was an opportunity to examine how the group dynamics and the reception of the topic of gender equality changed in such circumstances. On the other hand, though, it was mainly other reasons that shaped the group as such, e.g. the pro-equality profile of social activism was

decisive for the female feminist group, and the traditional type of social engagement of fire brigade members resulted in only men being gathered.

We should also consider the issue of the moderator – most of the interviews were conducted by female researchers: Ewa Krzaklewska (FGI_1 to FGI_9) with Aleksandra Migalska (FGI_1 to FGI_6) and Marta Warat (FGI_7, FGI_9). We engaged a male researcher, Bartłomiej Baryła, who conducted a discussion with a group of men from a fire brigade in a rural area (FGI_10) and also co-moderated the discussion with mothers and fathers with Ewa Krzaklewska (FGI_8).

Although our study aimed to picture the debates on gender equality in diversified groups, and include voices on the theme that may be excluded from the debate, while designing and conducting the study we were confronted with the fact that we would not be able to cover all the desired groups, and consequently viewpoints, due to the number of interviews, which was limited to ten. We therefore had to make several exacting choices while sampling, but we are still aware that it would be unjustified to claim that this overview is complete. We acknowledge several deficits and gaps, for instance in capturing the most conservative standpoints – we did not really grasp the stances of people motivated religiously or at least related to the Catholic Church, which is one of the significant players in public debates on gender equality. However, we maintain the principle that the proposed sample composes a valuable and comprehensive (although not exhaustive) overview of diversified attitudes and practices related to gender equality and its possible relations to quality of life. Moreover, our outputs sketch the potential constraints for such a framework, associated not least with the need for a more intersectional perspective on inequalities, taking into account social class, place of living, age, education and employment situation as characteristics of our respondents.

In the study we conducted **10 focus group interviews**, which took place from May 2014 to February 2015. Altogether about 80 persons participated in the discussions (from 6 to 14 per FGI). Below we describe in detail the composition of each FGI, the aim and focus of the particular FGI, as well as the group dynamics, in order to set a background for interpretation of the discussions that took place in each FGI. The researched groups were the following:

FGI_1: professionals

3 men and 5 women, 28-50 years old, from Krakow, in different family situations – there were parents among both women and men, as well as people living with a partner or

single, with a stable and sufficient economic situation and academic education. This was the first interview, during which the scenario and the course of the conversation alike were most structured. Thereby we wanted to explore how the different forms of the questions related to gender equality work, and how people react to a subject which could potentially be controversial. We wanted to bring together as diversified opinions as possible, but simultaneously to gather people with relatively common language to discuss things in order to avoid large differences in education and social capital that could lead to withdrawal from the conversation. Ultimately, the group turned out to consist of relatively well-educated people, professionals in different areas (e.g. media, art, architecture, economy, pharmacy etc.) who were quite well informed about gender equality issues, e.g. one of the participants declared herself as a feminist artist, while another man said that his partner was a feminist and that they had had many conversations on this matter. The majority of the people already had clear views on gender equality, which were negotiated during the FGI, while at the same time they had differentiated opinions. The latter was a characteristic of this group, which was one of the most confrontational in terms of negotiating diversified standpoints.

It is important to note that the majority of the methodological hints and directions (not ultimate decisions, as we agreed to develop and work on the methodology throughout the whole FGI study) were concluded after FGI_1 at the methodological seminar, and from that point were verified and adjusted to the individual subsequent groups.

FGI_2: students

A gender-mixed – with a predominance of women – group of first-year sociology students (the FGI took place at the very beginning of the academic year), approximately around the age of 20, and one slightly older woman studying sociology as a second degree alongside cultural studies (she sometimes tried to take over the role of leader in the conversation, asking questions etc.). The participants' interest in social issues and public debate related to their choice of sociology studies was definitely apparent during the FGI. They seemed to be motivated to speak from positions of "objective observers of social reality", most of the time avoiding talking openly about their own experiences. Our main aim in the interview was to capture the experience of young people who had come from different regions to a big city. Some participants came from smaller towns and villages, which was one of the main determinants of the group's diversity, for example as far their attitudes towards gender equality were concerned, and projected the dynamics and subjects covered during the discussion. We aimed to capture the perception of gender equality at the moment of entering

into independent life and making one's first adult decisions and life-choices, when gender patterns learnt at home are still vivid, but starting to be confronted and renegotiated.

FGI_3: young people with life difficulties

Young people, 7 women and 6 men, aged approximately between 18 and 25, living in a large city in southern Poland, facing difficulties resulting from their economically disadvantaged social background, with a low social capital and education at basic vocational level, particularly experiencing difficulties on the labour market. They were recruited as a group, being beneficiaries of a local NGO's project aiming at social and professional stimulation and activation of young people at risk of social exclusion. Thereby the group were working on a start-up together. The group constituted of people with different family situations, but the majority of them were still living with their parents (so in general, they were not economically independent), a few were in relationships, but probably not living with a partner. One woman was a mother of two children, and she was definitely the most active in the discussion. Our basic aim in this interview was to capture the life-course perspective on gender equality stratified by a specific social and economic background; that is young people with low social capital and thus without the potential opportunities that the students had, instead having experience of disadvantage. Since in the previous FGI with young people (the students) gender equality was a distant concept they discussed on rather a theoretical level, the question that arose was whether such a group that could potentially have been exposed to more structural inequalities would have greater awareness, as well as willingness to share their own experience of inequalities and/or discrimination.

FGI_4: women and men from a rural area

Initially the group consisted of 6 women and 3 men, but during the course of the conversation the number of participants was changing, as they left and returned. Therefore, most of the time there were 5 women and 1 man engaged in the discussion. The age of the participants was between 45 and 75. All of the participants lived in a village or around (in the rural area of a gmina/community in southern Poland). Some had spent their whole lives there, but others had moved as adults, after marriage. Among the participants were people of high social importance for the municipality: a village president, councillors of the municipality board, local entrepreneurs, the person in charge of the municipal library, and also those who had retired and did not hold a position, but were still active in the community. All of the participants were in some way involved in local initiatives – as members of local

organisations, engaged in various community services; a large part of the group was also actively involved in elections held the previous day: in campaigning, and working in committees. This clearly projected on the course of the discussion, e.g. the majority of participants were sleep-deprived, having spent the previous night counting votes, while on the other hand, since it was their first joint meeting after the voting, they were still driven by strong emotions regarding the results. The majority of the people had partners and children, and there were two married couples among the participants (the first was a couple aged around 50 – social activists and local entrepreneurs; the second were retired people around 70). One woman was a widow, and that fact evidently resulted in the group's more protective attitude towards her – the participants underlined her disadvantage and appreciated her life efforts. Additionally, the discussion was witnessed by a younger woman working in a library, who wanted to speak with us after the interview, feeling the need to complement the discussion with her own position. The aim was to explore gender equality in a rural environment, but during the conversation the notion of local engagement, as well as the generational change in attitudes to both gender equality and quality of life, were discussed as well.

FGI_5: young male activists

Six young men living in a small town in western Poland. The five younger men (19-25 years old) were activists in an NGO promoting multiculturalism, established first as a school multicultural club for pupils, then developed into an organisation founded for the implementation of projects funded through grants. The sixth person was their former teacher and the NGO leader, aged 36. The group constituted of people who knew each other very well, involved in common projects but with diverse occupational status (the leader and founder of the group was a teacher, some of the participants were completing secondary school, and a few were working: as an architect, shop assistants). Concerning the level of education: two participants had completed higher education, one vocational and three secondary education. None of them mentioned having a partner or being in a relationship; however, the projections and future plans for that sphere of life were an important area of discussion. Our preliminary aim for this interview was to explore the perspective of young men – activists struggling for gender equality as an important value (due to the themes of their projects, e.g. campaign against gender-based violence). We wanted to capture the experiences of men questioning traditional schemes of masculinity in their local community. Instead, this framework turned out not to be relevant for their activities, as anti-violence activity was not representative of their organisation's work. Nonetheless it resulted in an interesting discussion about their

motivation for being activists and gender equality as a challenge to be incorporated in their worldviews.

FGI_6: anti-violence women activists

Twelve women, members of a well-established NGO with an agenda to combat discrimination and violence against women. They all lived in a large city in western Poland. Their age varied from above 20, through persons who were young mothers or working women in middle age, until retirement age. The majority of the women were well-educated professionals: psychologists, lawyers, academic scholars, economists, social workers etc.; a few were still studying or just thinking about starting a professional career. Basically, the participants were volunteers in the organisation, having weekly shifts (legal, psychological counselling etc.) apart from their regular jobs. They had diversified family situations: a few had children and/or partners, while some had become independent singles (including single mothers), divorced or had not yet chosen to start a family. Their involvement in the organisation varied. Some were the founders (one of them – the current leader of the organisation – also turned out to be a leader during the conversation), and others had joined the NGO at different moments. In a few cases, involvement in the NGO was a result of various life perturbations, as they had firstly sought assistance (usually counselling) from the organisation and decided to engage afterwards. Our main aim during this FGI was to capture the dimension of activism with its perspective on the benefits and costs for the quality of life. We were interested in investigating the pro-equality character of their engagement and the differentiation of the motivations behind it, as well as the participants' experiences of dealing with gender-based violence.

FGI_7: recipients of social benefits

The group consisted of 4 women and 4 men. Their ages varied between 27 and 50, with one male participant aged over 60. The level of education was not higher than secondary – with 2 people with vocational education and elementary education – apart from women with a higher education degree. The participants were in a difficult financial and material situation. They were all recipients of social benefits, and one woman and one man were homeless (they used this term to describe no permanent registration of residence and living in rented apartments without legal address). They were recruited by social workers of the Municipal Social Welfare Centre, from which the participants were getting support. The participants were all living in the same, postindustrial district of a large city in southern Poland. The

selection of the group according to these criteria allowed us to explore the experience of individuals in an economically underprivileged situation, taking a life-course perspective into consideration.

FGI_8: parents

This group consisted of parents: 4 men and 5 women as interlocutors, and additionally two children and a woman taking care of one of them. The respondents had between one and four children of different ages: teenagers as well as very small children – two of the mothers were still not working due to recent childbirth and caring responsibilities. All of the participants were living in a large city in southern Poland; two men were foreigners who spoke Polish (the first was German, and had been living in Poland for a year, and the second was from France and living in Poland on a permanent basis). The level of education was diversified, and similarly the occupational status – among the participants were manual labourers, an IT specialist, a journalist, and people employed in services, such as a hairdresser etc. The participants were recruited through social media (Facebook) and contacts with kindergartens, primary school, and the social welfare centre. The leaflets were also left in "parent-friendly" places, e.g. a café for parents with children, a fitness club holding classes for pregnant women. The main aim of the interview was to capture the experience of parenthood and explore the transformation in the roles of both mothers and fathers. Also, we wanted to investigate the changing patterns of work-family reconciliation.

FGI_9: elderly people

A gender-mixed group with a male predominance: there were 6 women and 8 men. Although the interview was scheduled for a maximum of 12 people, two additional participants arrived and the researchers decided to include them in the discussion. However, in the course of the interview the number of participants turned out to be too large, obstructing the conversation's aim to ensure enough space for everyone to speak. All the participants were over 60 years of age, but among them were people in their 80s. They were all pensioners in different economic situations. The participants all came from a postindustrial district of a large city in southern Poland. Their marital status varied: there were single people, widows/widowers and married people. Their family situations differed too: a few participants mentioned that they were in constant contact with their children and their families, one women declared that she felt abandoned by her children, and a few female participants referred to being alone. One man had a significant physical disability, acquired as a result of an accident.

Some of the participants (especially females) were active in their local community: they were engaged in the local amateur theatre, also attending cultural and social events, sport or entertainment activities (such as dance classes etc.). Also one of the men (declared to be a recovering alcoholic) was actively engaged in a local association for the anti-alcoholic movement. The participants were recruited by the social workers of the local welfare centre. The main aim for choosing this group was to capture the life-course perspective and perception of equality and quality of life in old age. A further important goal was to gather the opinions of people who had experience of living in differentiated socio-economic and historical circumstances in Poland: the socialist era, the political transformation and the current times of liberal democracy.

FGI_10: voluntary fire brigade members

The group consisted of 7 men, and the participants' age was diversified: 3 were over 60 (including the leader – a commander of the fire brigade), one man was around 45, and 3 were aged about 20. They were all members of the volunteer fire brigade in their municipality – a traditional male form of social engagement in villages and small towns in Poland. All of the participants lived in the same urban-rural area, in a municipality close to a town but with a rather rural lifestyle. Their material situation was relatively good; they declared themselves to be self-sufficient economically. A few of them were still studying, but the majority were working, while two men were retired. Some of the participants had children, a few were married, one person lived in an informal relationship, and the younger ones were single. The participants were recruited by the commander, who, during a phone conversation undertaken to arrange the meeting, after being informed that the theme of the discussion was to be gender equality, expressed some concerns since he had "invited serious people". This FGI aimed to capture the dimension of the traditional type of male engagement in the local community and its possible impact on gender equality attitudes and practices. Additionally, our interest was to grasp the perception of masculinity among men from the rural area, more conservative in their views. A significant feature of this male group was also their engagement in voluntary fire brigade activities, together with their diversified age, which allowed us to recognise the importance of intergenerational transfer of values.

Variations of the group dynamics

Impact of the interview settings and group interest

When it comes to analysis of group dynamics during our interviews, a few different angles must be considered. Firstly, the moment of the interview as part of the group history, which significantly shaped the group approach not only to the announced subject but also to the situation of the interview itself with its particular circumstances. Importantly, we "caught" each group at a different and often significant moment of their group existence, and thereby it is important to mention their group interests behind the conversation. Some participants were not going to meet again later (FG1_1, 7, 8, 9), and the diverse manners of how that fact influenced the communication strategies in those groups will be discussed further. The rest of the FGIs were conducted with groups for which the interview took place during very specific circumstances in their group history. In FGI_2, the students were at the beginning of their existence as a group: they had only just met, with the prospect of further collaboration in mind, so the aim related to team-building was a priority for them and clearly affected the way in which they presented their arguments. They definitely avoided confrontations and/or conflicts, and their choices about disclosure/non-disclosure of information about themselves at that stage had to be considered. Similarly, the women and men in FGI_3 were participating together in a project within which they had plans to work in a common business in future. However, they had known each other longer and had already developed their own specific codes of communication, built on a confrontational and rude manner. As for the participants in FGI_4, the local elections that had just been held, in which they were profoundly engaged and upset by the results, were the reason for some of their tiredness and dispersion. However, their engagement in the imposed topic of discussion was slightly superficial; they tended rather to make use of the gathering that had been organised for their own group interest of post-election discussion, as well as for fulfilment of the clearly visible need for improvement in group morale after the failure of their plans. Likewise, the opportunity to meet as a group was an important motivation for the members of the organisations in FGI_5, FGI_6 and FGI_10. The male groups of multiculturalists and firemen referred to their group history of discussing various problems, emphasising such dimensions of group existence as one of their constituting priorities. Especially the participants of FGI_10 claimed that they often gathered and talked over their personal, family issues; during the interview, however, the atmosphere was slightly inhibited due to a perceptible hierarchical order and dominance of the worldview of the superior (the fire brigade commander). The women from the feminist organisation

underlined their satisfaction and enjoyment of the rare opportunity to see each other in a broader group and share their common views and experiences, expressing their sense of deficiency of such possibilities to sustain the bond. FGI_6 took place in the atmosphere of informal chatting, also emerging in the home-made food brought by a few of the women, as well as in the fact that the meeting lasted almost twice as long as expected.

Perception of the project aims

The way the participants perceived their own interest in taking part in the conversations seems to be closely linked to their consideration of the validity or importance of the research project's aims, also linked to participants' perception of the usefulness of such an effort and the project's possible impact on combating inequalities. Undoubtedly, many participants stated that they had come to the discussion out of interest or curiosity to explore what other people thought about this particular area, to confront ideas, or even some expected to learn about the issue from the moderators. In some of the groups participants were asked to reflect about the topic in advance, and some of them had prepared for the discussion by bringing notes, formulated their own questions for the discussion, or done a little questioning of their friends on the theme to gather more opinions, which might be concluded to show a belief that their input to the research might be meaningful (e.g. this happened in FGI_5, FGI_7, FGI_9). Nonetheless, there were a few participants who stated that they were participating to underline the importance of the discussion on the theme. Moreover, there were interviews, especially among groups more burdened by disadvantages (FGI_7, FGI_9) where the research project's potential "to make any difference" in their situation was questioned and doubted. On the other hand, among the young economically disadvantaged people in FGI_3, this presumable conviction of the whole conversation's senselessness in terms of its relevance or usefulness was accepted and not even questioned. This was clearly a consequence of a few determinants, e.g. they were in the middle of their working day and had arranged other activities running alongside, like preparing dinner, but at the same time, the group was strongly oriented towards an individualistic approach, "not relying on external help". Definitely, the moderators' attempts to motivate them by referring to the project's aim of including their voice in order to combine inequalities continued to be ineffectual, and the majority of the participants remained uninterested in the discussion or did not treat it seriously.

Co-operation patterns

Another angle, albeit not separate from the previous one, was the different approaches to cooperation demonstrated by the participants in the FGIs. However, we can assume that every group found their way to cooperate since the conversations took place, although the strategies of how to get through the discussion varied. We can emphasise diverse group dynamics that appeared in the process of our study. With the majority of groups based on sharing individual experiences and exploration of the theme with rather a learning approach to both the interview and others' views, in some of the groups we dealt with difficulties and conflicts. Gender equality as a theme appears to be an area of conflict between participants with different values. While we did not experience many radical confrontations during the focus groups, in the recruitment process there was an encounter with a school teacher who wanted to come and explain everything about "gender ideology" and why money should not be spent on researching such issues. There was also a conflict between the men and women in FGI_9, with elderly people. However, it must be admitted that the exacerbated atmosphere observed during that conversation was perhaps also a result of too many participants attending, due to unexpected show-ups, leading to a lack of sufficient time for everyone to speak and the necessity to adopt a more strictly moderated conversation manner.

The abovementioned learning approach was manifested on many occasions and came in different forms. Among the social care recipients (FGI_7), it occurred as a specific "supportive dynamics" based on sharing different experiences of disadvantage, but at the same time exchanging various forms of resolving problems caused by their deprivation (e.g. how to deal with courts in the case of alimony lawsuits, how to resolve legal obstacles related to homelessness). During that interview the participants discovered the similarity of the difficulties they encountered and started building a platform of common knowledge about coping strategies. Similar dynamics occurred among elderly people when they began to advise each other on housing difficulties; however, that was only possible after the male group of confrontation-oriented participants had left. Another form of learning from the situation of the interview appeared during FGI_8, among parents, who found mutually shared experiences of implementing gender equality within families and home duties to be particularly useful and inspiring. This would be exemplified by the concluding quotes from the discussion:

> F4: I am leaving with so many positive emotions! This world has changed so much, hurray! (...) So far, I haven't considered equality in terms of respect. I thought: respect rather as tolerance, so instead of [the term] tolerance there was respect. But now I have

realised that respect is related to both tolerance and equality as well. That in respect there is an element of aiming at everyone. And this is what I've learnt (...) So thank you for suggesting respect to me in the context of equality. It had never occurred to me.

F6: I wanted to say thank you to the colleague [towards another female participant, who had previously related her own experience of negotiating the division of home chores with her husband] since she's made me aware that indeed, I am... I want to do everything perfectly and only by myself (...) Now I will start to ease off with things and I will chill out, because I really like to have everything in order and do everything myself...

Mo: So there was also an element of group therapy here... [laughs] (FGI_8)

According to a degree of the groups' consensual attitude, one more aspect of dynamics must be considered, which is often brought up in literature (Morgan, Krueger 1993): focus groups' tendency to produce conformity among participants. The lack of proper discussion about the role of the Catholic Church in the Polish public debate and political decision-making process was one of the examples which emerged during a few interviews. One can clearly observe (e.g. among students or social benefit recipients) that when this topic appeared, bringing diversified views into discussion, the interlocutors tended to promptly withdraw from this potentially conflictual area. In the literature, methods are presented for how to prevent discussions from being limited in such a way and encourage the participants to contribute a wide range of opinions, also referring to "sensitive" topics. Obviously, during the conducted interviews we repeatedly reminded participants that their mutual agreement was not expected, and quite the contrary, the goal was to gather as many different opinions as possible, and each of them would be equally legitimised. By these means we wanted to create an atmosphere promoting pluralistic views on gender equality and encouraging participants to share their diversified experiences and feelings on a given topic. Paradoxically, however, these attempts might have resulted in the opposite effect. While in the majority of the interviews, the groups were oriented towards cooperation and exchange of views, the "anti-consensus" rule announced by the moderators might have prevented some participants from insisting on their standpoints in order not to confront other discussants. Perhaps if finding the common line had been seen as an aim, more negotiations would have emerged during the discussions. Instead, while that was not necessary, the participants perhaps refrained from bringing further arguments to defend their stances, as the rule was that every opinion is equally legitimate. Interestingly, it was irrelevant whether the group was composed of strangers or acquaintances, since while in the majority of interviews participants avoided confrontations and trying to persuade each other, exceptions occurred in both types of groups. On the one hand, the professionals in FGI_1 and elderly people in FGI_9 (both groups comprising people gathered

only for the occasion of the interview) represented the most negotiation-oriented and frequently confrontational communication patterns. Also, though, among the men from the multicultural club (FGI_5), different standpoints emerged which they confronted and attempted to convince each other of. However, in the latter group, composed of friends, the discussion remained at the level of clarifying and explaining the differences, and not triggering conflict. It is worth noting at this point that the group history, with its leader's acknowledged role as a moderator, [3] explains the development of specific patterns of pluralistic communication within the participating men.

Dilemmas concerning the position of moderator/researcher

The situations mentioned above depict the dilemmas related to the role and positioning of the moderators (who, with two exceptions – partially in FGI_8, and FGI_10 – were the researchers as well) in the course of the discussion. With regard to our study, the methodological concerns can be presented as three main points – formulated as methodological dilemmas. In each of the FGIs, the moderators navigated between the opposite ends of the dilemma to which the choice was always ambiguous and indecisive, remaining in constant deliberation, uniquely according to the specifications of each FGI:

1. **Co-participation versus observation** (to what extent the researcher's position in the study, their baggage of history, emotions, expertise and academic knowledge should be brought into the discussion, what was the impact of the participants' assumption of the researchers being pro-gender equality);
2. **Controlling discussion versus giving power to participants for choice of themes or timing** (who bears the final responsibility for the flow of discussion and fulfilling the FGIs' aims, who asks questions);
3. **Common view versus multiple perspectives** (choice between a safe space for sharing or a scene for negotiating concepts and sharing opposing positions).

The methodological discussion presented above refers to these dilemmas in many ways.

As we decided to avoid contributing and disclosing our own agenda in order to prevent the participants from having their standpoints suggested to them or being expected to reclaim ours, we chose to remain rather withdrawn from the arguments. However, the participants tended to have their own assumptions about our positions anyway. Moreover,

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[3] See the chapter on activism for more about the male activists group.

they sometimes expected us to share our opinions or present some scientific knowledge on the topic of gender equality issues (such claims occurred in FGI_5 and FGI_4). Nevertheless, we frequently felt that remaining silent and apparently transparent in some way stood in opposition to the feminist methodology requirement to undermine the researcher's position and co-participate and exchange information instead. With the cycle of interviews behind us, we stayed with constantly opened questions about the consequences of an act of sharing with participants the knowledge about various possible conceptualisations of equality or reacting to some of the participants' statements (e.g. how to react when the sexist joke is told? Should we wait for the group response first?). A question appears: how can one practically incorporate a co-participation perspective without dominating a discussion and leaving enough space to define meanings to participants? Ultimately the researchers/moderators aimed to remain rather in the position of observers, besides, for instance, briefly sharing our histories in FGI_5 or giving input at the time of the assessment of the whole conversation in some FGIs.

Giving participants as much space as possible to act in their own happening, in events on which they can have a strong impact and which they can steer and decide about the priorities of the discussion, had another consequence that should be remarked upon. It frequently created difficult situations, as we had to cease control of the interview and let the debate go by itself. This gave us a different set of data, which proved challenging for the analysis later on as not being so strongly structured as it would have been if we had intervened more in the flow of themes or arguments. This information of the group dynamic is critical for reading the data, and it is also a new and important aspect of the study.

Last but not least, a question arose about the degree to which consensus or confrontation of different views should be promoted. As discussed earlier, we decided rather to adopt the latter, encouraging the participants to contribute their points with no fear of being judged or challenged. Still, however, it is disputable whether antagonistic views would be more pronounced and defended if participants were motivated to establish a common position. Nonetheless, as collecting individual and diversified opinions instead of obtaining a consensual group standpoint became the rule we announced to participants in each FGI, during the process of analysis we tried to understand how this methodological choice determined the communication in each group and the data generated.

Gender equality – a concept in debate

The analysis of the focus group interviews indicates that **gender equality is a disputed concept, or "in debate"**– it is not a concept that has an elaborated definition known and accepted by all participants. As will be shown, the attitudes towards gender equality policy, possible interventions for its implementation and the vision of what gender equality should also differ among the participants. We witness a polyphony of opinions – gender equality is not univocally described nor accepted. Moreover, the debate on gender equality – its meaning, effects and elements, was not only present, but was also anticipated by participants. They seem to be more or less aware – possibly less within the disengaged groups – that different voices and arguments arise in the discussion on gender equality – these positions are often known to participants, and they have also already reflected on some of them.

The public debates on gender equality – also multifocal and polyphonic – taking place in Poland resonate in the discussions undertaken by participants, as will be seen throughout the chapters. The public debate somehow create a basis for some discussions – in fact, those topics that have received some public attention in recent years, e.g. discrimination of women in the labour market, are more often undertaken by participants. But it also appears that some themes are only "overheard" by participants, not resulting in more in-depth reflections on the mechanisms of inequality or its consequences. In many cases the participants refrained from voicing general opinions about the themes that they possibly know from public debates, such as political quotas and labour market segregation. This seems to reveal a lack of factual knowledge and a need for more informed debate (see e.g. the chapter on the political sphere). The theme of family relations was the opposite example, as it received much input from all of the groups.

Another reason why some themes emerge more often than others in the discussion was the extent to which participants linked their personal experiences with the notion of gender equality. For many participants, gender equality is **an obscure and distant idea, meaning not tightly linked to their daily practices, relationships or life histories**. There was a difficulty in the interviews in moving from more opinion-oriented discussion to narratives on one's own experiences. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the group processes in the FGIs differed (being learning-oriented, disengaged to more confrontational). Depending on specific group dynamics, in some of the interviews the point when personal stories started to be shared was reached relatively fast (e.g. FGI_7 or FGI_8), while in others the discussion remained also entirely detached from participants' lives (e.g. FGI_1 or FGI_2).

Gender equality, even though often distant as a notion, is **linked by the discussants to very concrete problems or situations**, some lived through by them or their families. We can also conclude that the discussion on inequalities between men and women triggered the discussion on other dimensions of exclusion and inequality, and stimulated a discussion on the conditions of good life. It also brought into the forum a **realisation of the intersectional character of inequality.** The participants realise that other characteristics, such as age, place of living, economic status, family situation and others, impact the situation of the individual, and cause discrimination, unequal treatment, humiliation and deprivation. They also stirred reflection on responsibly for the quality of life of men and women and the possible actors to be engaged in the process, reconsidering the role of the state.

It is important to stress that while most of the participants seem to be pro-gender equality, or in general statements claim their approval for the equal rights of women and men, there were moments that showed that there still exists **a lack of general consensus on what should be implemented under the agenda** of gender equality. This is due to diversified visions of a good life or gendered relations, differing set of values, but also possibly the lack of knowledge on mechanisms of selected processes. We observed ambiguous and contradictory opinions, indifference, the silence of some participants,[4] and a conviction of the negative effects of equality. No matter the differing opinions, however, it felt that the participants wanted to hear what other people's opinions are, confront the ideas and listen to others' experiences, even if they were aware of the possible differences in opinions and potential controversies of the theme. They wanted to learn from other participants and confront their positions.

At least for some participants, it seemed that there was **an apparent need for more space in public life to discuss gender equality and more factual knowledge on the issue in question**. At the start of the interviews, many people stated that they had come to the discussion out of interest or curiosity to explore what others think about this particular area, to confront ideas, or even some expected to learn about the issue from the moderators (e.g.

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[4] This lack of activity is hard to interpret. It may on the one hand be indifference to the topic, timidity – a lack of courage to speak in a group, not trusting the group or moderators, not sensing the relevance of the theme. One participant (FGI_1), who was rather silenced, told us that that this was not an issue he dealt with a lot in his life, yet he was rather negative toward the theme; another one (FGI_5) told us that he was learning from other people's stories, but he had heard that one participant (FGI_3) said the discussion was boring. In one case the mother with a child seemed to be busy with taking care of the child (FGI_8).

through a lecture they would listen to).[5] A couple of participants claimed that they were taking part in the focus groups to underline the importance of the discussion on the theme. The exception was the group with young people with disadvantages (FGI_3), where it was difficult to interest the participants in the topic – they did not seem to treat it as relevant in the form in which it was discussed, and there was a lack of engagement in the sense of active involvement in a discussion, with the exception of a few participants.

In search for a definition – between experiences and an abstract concept

The respondents link gender equality to diverse spheres of life – family, work, education, political sphere, violence, reproductive health and others – as well as to diverse conceptual dimensions: relating it to social norms, daily practices, life events, laws and institutions, power relations, the identity of women and men, and the conditions and effects of gender equality. In a large proportion of the groups, the respondents wanted to discuss multiple issues, and in conclusion they stated that there was no time to touch upon all the important challenges or topics, or to discuss them in-depth. This multidimensionality of the concept also caused confusion at times. The respondents were realising competing definitions of the concept, and different understandings, but they also had conflicting visions of how gender equality could be achieved, or to which aspects of life it is related.

The interviews also show that as gender equality as a concept may sound academic or formal, and lacking one clear definition, in most **interviews participants commenced a discussion by immediately referring to specific themes** or issues linked to gender equality, omitting general discussion on the concept, or cutting it short. Although from time to time general statements appeared, such as equal treatment or equal rights, these seemed to be an introduction to a more detailed discussion linked to a specific theme. This shows that arriving at an overall definition of gender equality is not possible, costly, or even not useful from the participants' point of view. This search for nuancing, noticing diverse life situations, claiming reservations, but also being attached to traditional gender order which may conflict with gender equality principles, in a way hinders arriving at one common definition of the concept.

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[5] A general problem in the recruitment for the FGIs was that the participants are those interested in the theme. To overcome this issue we tried to reach the groups that are possibly more hesitant, sceptical and able to voice their opinion in a certain space, e.g. with people they know and they feel safe to argue their worldview (e.g. FGI_3, FGI_4, FGI_10). In effect, we can say that the attitudes to gender equality were varied, thus representing quite a wide spectrum, but possibly missing strong opponents.

The discussions would usually go in the direction of more concrete examples of situations of inequality or equality, or opinions on policy or social interventions.

In some groups the **discussion moved on a continuum between, at one end, abstract notions, and on the other, concrete examples of situations of inequalities** or even proposals for policy interventions. In FGI_1, with professionals, there was an interesting tension whereby some of the participants discussed the concept on a more theoretical or abstract level (linking it to the concept of equality from mathematics or even molecular biology), and the others gave more exact examples of, for example, unequal treatment at work, or independence of women from men:

> *M1: I would consider equality only on a theoretical level, because there is no equality in our real world. (…)*
> *M3: In nature equality exists only on a molecular level, and everything above this level is not equality, so above this level, on the human level this remains an abstract idea. (…) For me listening to this all, this is abstract, just thinking about a normal society which is fully equal is not possible, as each of us is different, then we cannot be equal.*
> *F2: I agree!*
> *F3: But what does it mean on a molecular level?*
> *Mo: Please one at a time, let the others take the floor.*
> *M3: So… it is exactly the same… a water particle is always the same. Everything that creates [chemical] bonds…*
> *F4: But this is not what we mean… he wasn't thinking of such an exact comparison…*
> *M3: I know…*
> *F4: … so I don't know, this is [exactly the same] and so one and so one. This is not what it is about, sure, freedom is also an abstract concept… (…) but we are not talking in abstract terms, but simply…*
> *F2: We are not talking about every man being exactly the same and things the same, but about the acceptance of other persons…*
> *[a short conflict between F2 and M3 that we can talk on different levels, and he can talk at an abstract level as well]*
> *F2: I believed that we were trying to find a solution… so in this diverse society, so we can get along, but… ok, I am lost…*
> *F4: No, not taking a measuring stick and bringing everyone in line [wszystkich do metra wyrównać], that's not what this is about. (FGI_1)*

After this discussion, the group participants who declared more for gender equality tried to avoid theoretical debate, and directed discussion to more solution-oriented areas, linking it to more practical issues such as division of parental leave, trying to indicate that change is possible in some areas.

In the FGI with parents (FGI_8) the participants were somehow **situated between the theoretical notion of gender equality and very concrete experiences concerning**

inequality (mostly in family life). But in contrast to the above group, more confrontational and to which abstract notions triggered confusion, the group of parents reached the consensus through usage of more overall metaphorical concepts. On the one hand, the parents gave very precise examples linked to gender equality or apparent inequalities, such as labour market segregation, equal pay or unequal division of household duties. Throughout the interview, though, they continued to search for a more overall or embracing definition, irrevocably appearing to be more metaphorical. At the end, the respondents all tried to conclude what gender equality is for them (in most cases linking it to the concept of respect, which is described later). This need was introduced by a father:

> *M9: I will have a problem with the answer, as in the conversation I have had a problem with this equality, as we did not define it. Maybe you did as I was a bit late [laughter]. (...) Does equality means that we all start from the same line, or that we all need to finish at the same place at the same time. These are totally different things. I remember a conservative women, she had nothing to do with feminists. [she said] that there is no [equality] "equality is communism" [laughter] (...) For someone else equality means that everyone can try everything. We cannot say to nobody, you are such and such, this is your skin colour, this is your sex. This is something else, so I do not know how to describe equality. (FGI_8)*

This comment alone contains diverse ways of understanding a concept, but also illustrates conflicting attitudes towards this. The father links the concept to the principles of equal rights, to individual freedoms, tolerance, and equal access. Finally, in this group, we can see a way of dealing with the confusion. The **overall perspective on equality as respect was created** – the group moved towards a more general understanding of gender equality on which all agreed and which had a positive meaning (this is also a difference to the group described earlier, FGI_1). We can interpret this method as a way to bypass the differing views on concrete policies or solutions, e.g. how to divide household duties and as a way to reach a consensus over gender equality as a value. In the final round this is approved by almost all respondents:

> *Mo2: What is equality for you, also after this conversation?*
> *M3: Equality, as I was saying before, I would create a meta-definition of equality, so equality in respect to another person – a human being. If we respect them, no matter if this is a man or a woman, then there will be no difference, even cultural difference (...)*
> *F4: (...) Until now I have not thought of respect as linked to equality. Rather I was thinking of respect in relation to tolerance, so instead of tolerance-respect, now I think respect would go well both with tolerance and equality. Respect has this element in it that is directed to everyone, this is what I got from this meeting.*

M1: (…) So when it comes to respect, hmmm… tolerance, equality, the human person is a basis. You are a human, you are not a professor, you are not someone. You are a human being, I am a human being. Interesting debate. (FGI_8)

The last example concerns the process of the search for a definition as a way to undervalue the issue (in many ways similar to the position of interlocutors from FGI_1). In the group with young men (FGI_5), one of them at the start of the interview (the opening question) stated that he would need to know what the definition of gender equality is:

M1: The question is about equality between women and men. So how should I understand this question? How do I understand this concept? How do I understand equality between women and men? For example equality, so they can do the same as men, and men do the same as women, yes? (FGI_5)

His question was rather rhetorical or even confrontational. As he explains further, he does not feel the need to define the concept, as there are many more important issues for him. But this quote shows the frequent connotation of the concept of gender equality (but also equality as such) with the **concept of "sameness"**. This connotation, though, was usually mentioned only in the beginning, but consequently it was claimed that it is not what equality is actually about – as in the case of a female professional, who linked the concept of equality more to societal relations and freedoms:

F3: So, to my mind in the first place came such… expressions as… er… sameness [laughter], so they are the same, identical, but then I thought, that… er… this is not what it is about. I look at this more broadly, not only when it comes to woman-man relations, but more in general equality in society. (…) so in fact if as regards lack of equality it does not only refer to men and… and relations between women and men. So the notions such as freedom of speech, listening to each other come to my mind… I would go in such a direction. (FGI_1)

Yet the connotation with the concept of sameness is not unproblematic; in the case of men from rural areas it was also seen as a danger causing feminisation of men (i.e. men becoming too similar to women, which results in losing their masculine identity), while with the group with young professionals there were voices that equality is not possible as we are all different (which is further discussed later).

While a lot of debate seemed to be quite rationalised, we can also differentiate a more **intuitive approach to the concept of gender equality, realised by one respondent**. One elderly lady described it as a more intuition-based definition, which also notices the more contextual character of the concept: while it is not always so easy to say what the situations of equality are, one can "feel" what it is about:

F4: Here we have to say it, so it is not always this way, that equal means the same amount. We feel what this is all about, and we – as women – we need to fight. (FGI_9)

Co-existence of multiple understandings of gender equality

Gender equality is defined differently in different spheres. While these particular understandings and positions are discussed in detail in the chapters concerning each theme, the below table summarises (in a simplified manner) the notions that appear. In the family sphere, the most discussed in the FGIs, gender equality is mostly connoted to quality of relations between partners and the fair division of duties between them. However, not only is equal division of work in the household or in care mentioned, but co-responsibility for the private sphere is demanded. Interestingly, this also relates to the division of duties between partners after divorce and even siblings. Appreciation of unpaid work, meaning mostly care for small children, constitutes an important element of equality both in the family sphere and in the pension system. It lies in the difference approach, where the dual earner/dual carer model is not desired, but a compensation for and appreciation of care work executed by women. An additional aspect is related to relations between parents and children: according to the participants, gender equality demands treating both daughters and sons equally, in order to socialise them to a non-traditional, more partnership-based gender order. In the work sphere, gender equality is linked to the principle of equal treatment – equal pay and equal access to work and promotion. The discussion on political life concentrated on the one hand on the presence of women in governing structures and a quota system potentially supporting this presence, and on the other hand on being active and having an actual impact at community level, being organised and participating in activities. Concerning the pension system, besides the recognition of unpaid work, an equal amount of pensions for women and men was indicated. Additionally, the notion of power within decision-making processes was mentioned, with women striving to have their interests represented.

Table 1. Participants' working definitions of gender equality in different spheres

Sphere	Gender equality
Family	* Fair division of duties and co-responsibility * GE as communication, respect, negotiation between partners, dialogue, cooperation, understanding * Appreciation of unpaid work * Treating sons and daughters equally Context: labour market conditions, family policies, stereotypes/tradition
Education	* Access to education, lack of gender segregation * Education promoting gender equality Context: segregation on the labour market, stereotypes
Work	*Equal treatment: *Equal pay *Equal access to work *Equal access to promotion *Presence of women and men in managerial positions Context: neoliberal economy, stereotypes and family roles
Pension system	* Appreciation of unpaid work * Equal amount of pension benefit Context: right to pension, quality of life of elderly
Political life	• More presence of women in politics – equal participation, • Participation in decision-making processes Context: feelings of political alienation, protection of individual freedoms from state intervention

In the report we discuss one additional theme that appeared in the focus group interviews in relation to gender equality, which is civic engagement. Civic engagement was a second sphere where connections to gender equality were not immediate, although some of the groups (as discussed in the chapter on activism) related to activism as a sphere for creating spaces of social solidarity for women and men. Activism is also a way to empower women and men to change their own situation, as well as to strive for an impact at societal level.

Additionally, violence – an issue often raised in relation to gender equality – was marginalised in the discussions, and the gendered nature of violence was not claimed/noticed by most of the groups (besides the women activists engaged in support to the victims). The direction for striving towards more gender equality relates in the case of violence to the reduction of costs borne by women experiencing violence and efficient support of institutions and organisations.

To sum up, we can say that more domain-oriented conceptualising of the concept "brings" gender equality back to the real-life context. It ceases to be abstract, but becomes more tightly linked to one's life situation, and relates more strongly to quality of life of women and men.

Gender equality as a change in gender roles

The **notion of the social change** that has occurred in Poland was often stressed: the situation of women and men, their roles and the relations between them are changing. This process is felt to take place at a different speed in diverse environments, e.g. in rural and urban areas, in various generations – it is more often mentioned by people in older age categories who witness such changes immediately – and by both men and women (although their reactions to it differ). Some of them notice that this change surprised them while being very gradual and subtle but radical at the same time:

> *M2: I think that this equality has arrived so rapidly that we did not even notice it. It has all been changing gradually, and now it has all come about that we are almost equal with them. (…) We did not even notice, didn't feel it, it all happened so quickly. (FGI_10)*

In the focus group with men of the rural area (the fire brigade volunteers, FGI_10), the **notion of change was the first reaction** to the moderator's opening question. They mostly stressed the changing roles of women and their growing presence in spheres that were previously reserved for men (including volunteer fire brigades). Additionally, they noted a huge change in lifestyles between their mothers and their daughters:

> *Mo: Let's start with a question on which you can talk freely, and I can support you if needed. What is equality for you?*
> *M4: Equality…*
> *Mo: Equality.*
> *M4: **Before it was unbelievable** that for example, women could lead a company. And now women have larger and larger possibilities [given by law] and larger powers than men. Possibly, this equality is already here… that the woman before was… **it was never like that**, that she was equal to a man just…*
> *M2: It was similar with driving licences. If a woman had a driving licence, then "oh my God a woman behind the wheel! (laughter) and **now we have it a lot**.*
> *M4: Now women even drive trucks, buses. When I go to work in the morning, I see how a girl, maybe 25 years old, drives a public PKS bus.*
> *M5: Possibly this equality…*
> *M3: Even in the fire brigades it has already happened that girls… that at training you can meet girls, and they also normally go to fire callouts. (FGI_10)[6]*

Additionally, in the discussion above, one of the men remarked that women already have more opportunities and more power than men – pronouncing some fear about an apparent switch between women and men in power positions. This **fear or insecurity facing the change in gender roles also appeared among men** in other groups. As the participants stress

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[6] All emphases in quotations are added by Authors.

in the other parts of the debate, the changes in women's and men's roles can also have negative consequences: women lose respect, but also men become more feminised.

The **change was seen very strongly in the situation of women in the labour market**. The men from the fire brigade and the group of seniors noticed a change in women's roles (with more women not only fulfilling the role of the mother but also working) and their presence in activities and professions in which they previously did not participate. This was stressed most in groups with older respondents participating in the study (FGI-10, FGI-9). The latter quote stresses the impact of the change on men: the participant in the group of elderly people from a big city emphasises **the need for men to change their way of thinking**, underlining that it is men that need to adjust to the active participation of women on the labour market. This position differs to that of men from the village, who tried to keep a distance to it, while not openly opposing more active participation of women in the labour market. But their position is definitely not as pro-active as the attitude presented below:

> *M7: I would say this, we cannot compare between different women, as we now have women in professions such as bus drivers, we have captains of ships...*
> *F4: Pilots...*
> *M7: And they are really doing well in those professions. And before it was unthinkable, it was unthinkable! (nodding) (...)*
> *M7: (...) it is not like once, 30 years ago, that women were... had to stay at home and nothing else. (...) the wife was a housewife [*kurą domową*], we might say. You needed to give her money, bring money, and she took care of the child. She just did not have... you were outraged if she wanted to go to work or something like that, but now it's not like that any more. We need to switch our way of thinking, us men, we need to switch to a different way of reasoning. (FGI_9)*

The second sphere, noted in the above quotation, where change was strongly noticed was family. New family relations based on equality [*partnerstwo*] in most cases met with approval, with respondents declaring at least some attempts in the direction of its realisation (discussed in detail in the chapter on family). While the group of older men from the rural area was rather critical of the changes in family roles (FGI_10), the other group of village respondents (FGI_4) to a great extent cherished the change towards gender equality happening for example in the lives of their sons and daughters (e.g. they have seen many more men engaged in taking care for their children). In the focus group interview with young professionals (FGI_1), however, there was a discussion on whether the roles within the family have actually changed, and if fathers are becoming more engaged in child upbringing. Some participants were very positive, stressing the change that has occurred, while others remained more sceptical – saying that family relations are not changing very much with the prevailing

traditional division of duties. Similarly, a female student expressed the doubt that gender equality is not easily implemented even in the younger generation, who should presumably have changed their family norms. This leads to the conclusion that the speed of change as far as family relations differs, and there is also already a change seen in opinions showing more acceptance towards a partnership-based model of family life (this is also shown by survey studies, e.g. Antosz 2011):

> *F2: In my whole life there is a gigantic move in the direction of equality. This might be more difficult to assess to a young person, who was born in an equal world (...)... there is a huge, huge difference. (...)*
> *F2: It's already the case that the wife can go and play football, and the husband will cook lunch, and I think that….*
> *F4: This is not yet the case, and it won't be that way for a long time! (FGI_1)*

To conclude, it is important to point out that while change was strongly visible in younger generations, viewed as being more progressive, the impact was also seen, for example, in older generations. Not only did they use the categories of equality to talk about their past experiences (e.g. I was discriminated against), but one of the men claimed that the changing social situation as far as gender relations are concerned had led to reconsideration of his values and opinions. This was also noted by elderly women, who claimed responsibility for supporting their daughters and sons in their struggle for equality and themselves wanted to cherish active seniorhood (see more in the activism chapter).

The overwhelming burden of inequalities

The interviews actually concentrate very much on inequalities between women and men. The participants stress the persistence of inequalities in many diverse spheres of life, and talk about the moments of experienced discrimination (described in the subsequent chapters of the report). In fact, at the start of the interview with professionals, one woman wanted to find one area where women are in a better position than men, and could not point to one (FGI_1). In general, change is demanded in the lives of women, and should lead to elimination of diverse forms of discrimination and inequalities, which negatively impact mostly the quality of life of women. While this negative impact on women's lives is clear and not questioned, slowly it seems that there is an emerging consciousness that inequality is not good for the society as such, both women and men. Moreover, the elimination of inequality can improve the quality of life of both genders. The societal impact of the introduction of gender equality seems to go in the direction of an intersectional approach to inequality, where not only gender discrimination, but any form of exclusion should be eliminated.

One of the groups that most strongly voiced **the frustration with unequal treatment and deprivation** was the group of middle-age women and men on social assistance from a large city (FGI_7). While the discussions for some groups remained on a superficial level and detached from their life experiences, for this group gender discrimination, as well as discrimination on the basis of other characteristics, had been lived though, often resulting in deprivation and worsening of the quality of life. The group shared with each other personal experiences linked to discrimination at work, in searching for work, in education, in family relations, in institutions or in the judiciary system. Child maintenance appeared as a critical problem for assuring quality of life for them and the children they took care of, but other problems were also mentioned:

> *Mo2: You've already started to talk about equality between women and men in our country. Could you say a bit more here? What does the situation look like?*
> *F2: It looks very bad. Because Polish law is full of holes, and it does not deal with the important matter. You can omit the law. (...) what more? Stereotypes! And their reproduction. Supported by the Catholic Church. I am sorry but this is the fact. Stereotypes from the previous generations are passed on towards the next generations. We are practically living, in some homes, like people lived in the 50s! (...)*
> *F2: I'll put it briefly: maintenance is not executed, the debt is growing to 30 thousand or more. (...) my bailiff is hopeless. Thousands, millions of women in Poland have a problem with this as well. Who directs it, or who manages it so women can't get the money? (...) Men don't pay maintenance, they are unpunished, they run away with it.*
> *F3: How does equality look? I have to work in three jobs and my ex can avoid paying maintenance. He is happy, he does informal work and doesn't declare his income and the bailiff can do nothing to him.*
> *M1: He cannot do anything.*
> *F3: The debt is so big that I'll never get it back. (...) Who acts for equality? Who sits in courts? Who decided about it? Women or men? It goes up to the parliament.... Who decides that it is still like that? For years it's been this way.*
> *(...)*
> *F4: I tried to find work for years, after raising my children, I tried to find work. Employment offices are rather [fine]... but later it's a nightmare, if you don't have connections, you won't find work. (...) (FGI_7)*

On the other hand, the vulnerable situation of women and men in this group allowed them to see the gendered dimension of inequalities, e.g. on the labour market, and the difficult situation of women, e.g. after divorce (not being able to get maintenance), but the situation of men was also perceived as difficult. To understand the situation of these participants one needs to look beyond gender as a factor impacting one's situation – these participants were also vulnerable because of their economic standing, family situation, "homelessness" (lack of formal registration in the place of residence), the fact of being divorced, type of work (e.g. cleaner), proving the need for research of an intersectional character on quality of life. From

the perspective of many participants (especially in FGI_7), a fundamental factor limiting people's opportunities and thereby exposing them to structural abuse is **the lack of material resources defining one's socio-economic status**. Our interlocutors point to many situations when due to their lack of economic or social capital (having contacts and being informed) they experienced hardship, which they classified even as harassment from the institutions or legal procedures, which they called "insensitive to the human factor". Significantly, a similar receptiveness to discussing social disadvantages and the oppressiveness of the current socio-economic conditions were expressed widely among another group of elderly people (FGI_9).

It is worth considering the respondents' reports of a deficiency of a gender-sensitive perception of, for example, access to the political sphere or labour market situation as **a need for more intersectional formulation of questions about equality, inequalities and social injustice,** especially in terms of quality of life. Perhaps our interlocutors simply perceived such plain gender-based characteristics as insufficient and narrowing? Hence, their excursions from the imposed priority to gender as a ground for obstacles in good quality of life were often accompanied by their evident sensitivity to other premises of inequalities, such as age, economic status and resources, or any others.

Protecting individual freedoms

Gender equality was also discussed in the context of individual freedom. On the one hand, it means the removal of the barriers for individual self-realisation in diverse life domains. On the other hand, gender equality understood as a set of interventions was claimed to be seen as a threat to individual freedom of choice. We shall now discuss these two approaches. In the first approach, **gender equality will be achieved when a society offers individuals, both women and men, the opportunity to fulfil their own plans and dreams**, by removing the barriers preventing them from achieving their goals. Rejection of imposition of a gender role and recognition of the need for self-realisation was discussed by parents (FGI_8). They agreed, though, that existing discrimination still hinders, for example, free choice of a profession:

> *F2: One thing always occurs to me when I thinking about equality – to everyone according to the needs. Equality is not in equal treatment, but in **meeting these needs that we have, and we have different ones**. So I would rather go in this direction, so to everyone according to their needs.*
> *F4: I do not want to be a welder. I want to be a researcher, no matter if I am a man or a women, and I fulfil my need. **No one should impose my role on me, and this is my understanding of equality.** (...) I assumed I wanted to be a researcher, and that you want to work in this and that profession. But maybe in five years you would like to do*

something else. And maybe you could change it and decide to become a hairdresser.
[laughter]
M3: I think that many problems of people, very many unfulfilled expectations come from
the fact that male researchers and female researchers are people who may not be treated
in the same way. The same as a male locksmith and female locksmith. (FGI_8)

The group of young professionals (FGI_1) also stressed the importance of **acceptance of individual choices as a way to attain equality**. In the account of a young man, tolerance towards representatives of diverse groups is critical, but also freeing oneself from stereotypes or prejudice in order to allow everyone to follow their own choices:

M2: So I think this is a rather utopian, very general slogan. Equality as such is not
possible, but for sure it is possible to strive towards it, through reciprocal acceptance.
For example… let me give an example, maybe banal. (…) people of different faiths, so
if we accept this difference, so this would mean we are equal even if we have different
opinions. So similarly, the choice (…) who takes maternity or paternity leave. So, maybe
the woman would want to do it, as she will feel fulfilled in this. And this should be
accepted, this should not be judged (…) also the man can do it. So if we just accepted
our choices, then we would go in the direction… in the direction of equality, simply.
(FGI_1)

Giving freedom, and allowing people to choose their desired options, was also perceived as an important element of childrearing. Some of the sociology students (FGI_2) discussed the processes of socialisation as imposition of gender roles, and some of them claimed that giving freedom to children in their youth – in choice of clothes, toys, games, friends, and ways of behaving – is very important for achieving gender equality. This position was not commonly shared, as some of their colleagues argued that some stereotypes are actually true, or others that they are not necessarily bad; it seems that there was a common agreement that freedom in choice is important, regardless of whether one fulfils traditional or non-traditional role:

F6: As you said that boys help their father in the car garage and the girls are rather not
attracted to it, they prefer to help their mother in the kitchen. In my opinion, there is
nothing wrong that there are differences and that they are noticeable. Because in my
*opinion **we should not equalise it somehow**, for example drag a daughter to the garage*
*if she does not want to, **only because of equality**. (FGI_2)*

This individual possibility to realise one potential or act according to one's needs was also discussed by the group of young men (FGI_5), who discussed the notion of standardisation that may come when we start to impose new societal rules, e.g. those promoting gender equality:

Now everyone can do as they want, what they want, and this is OK, this is equality – we
should not define it – or again standardise it somehow. (FGI_5)

This position leads us to the second line of debate, linked to individuals' freedoms. Here, **gender equality is seen as the imposition of new rules or norms.** This was mostly linked to quota systems, which were rather criticised in many groups for being forced or even humiliating to women (discussed in the chapter on politics). But another example was suggested by the group of young men participating in grant competitions for projects of non-governmental organisations. They noted that the equal participation of men and women is imposed on them by the grant operator. Even if some of the discussants agreed that theoretically this is a good rule, it feels forced, and this is what they oppose:

> *M5: So for example in the projects we are doing, there is a principle that there should be an equal number of women and men taking part in the project. So this is imposing some artificial equality from the top. It should not be this way, so strongly. (...)*
> *M1: (...) and in theory in the project this is a good thing. It seems to me that this is good...*
> *M5: In theory, but not always in practice (...)*
> *M1: It should not be imposed, maybe just when they really need five men and five women, for example doing research on a certain topic. Then I understand it. But if this is a regular project, then it should not be a prescript. (FGI_5)*

They go further in reflecting the imposed character of gender equality, suggesting that while the traditional order was closely related to some sets of rules for women and men, imposing new standards or rules would lead to creation of new stereotypes. Therefore, in the line of discourse of individualisation – if we are for more individual choice and freedom, we as a society cannot impose on society new rules linked to gender equality. The choice of gender equality or choice of non-traditional roles must be free, for people to choose it if they desire it. Yet the young men claim that not everyone may like it, as they might be socialised to another way of living:

> *M6: In my opinion, each person should do as they like. We cannot just say, from the top, that there must be equality. As some people might not feel good about it, that for example they are distinguished somehow because of their gender…. (...) [it would need to change] their way of thinking, not that someone imposes it… top down, it needs to be equal. Not everyone would like it. If they learn some attitudes and some behaviours from their youth, then it is difficult to impose from the top that this is the law, and they have to admit that they are equal. (FGI_5)*

Gender equality as impossible to achieve

Gender equality was perceived as having limits, so in this way it can never be (or even should not be) fully achieved. **Biological or psychological differences were invoked as potential barriers or limits for gender equality**. The discourse of barriers was undertaken both by more pro-gender equality participants and those who were more critical. The former perceived

biological and psychological differences as hindering equal treatment of women and men; for the latter, the stereotypes about psychological and biological barriers appear as limiting or even fully hindering realisation of gender equality. Even if they agree that gender equality is an important societal aim, they believed that there are limits to it constituted by physical conditions, psychological competences ascribed to one gender. This would suggest that some division for women's and men's domains is justified, and may even prove effective:

> *M2: Equality, for me this means that both of them are equal. But it is not always possible that there is equality. For example, there are professions or jobs which are worse for women to do. As I always say, the fair sex, but weaker. So now it is actually the case that women want to be equal with men in everything. And we let them be equal with us. Still, I have my own opinion about this topic and I believe that women should not participate in all professions. I cannot imagine that we go to a fire callout, where a house is burning or something, and a women is participating directly in the fire-fighting. Because there are incidents, that this is really hard and unhealthy to a woman.*
> *Mo: Sure, but isn't it a matter of training? If the women were well trained, then…*
> *M6: This is a matter of physical strength.*
> *Mo: Strength....*
> *M2: So, for example, it is…*
> *M6: You need physical conditions and psychological ones.*
> *M2: Physical strength plays a crucial role, this is why there are men [to be more suitable]. But in medical activities, or all the rest, these more technical things, women can certainly participate. (FGI_10)*

Gender equality as a societal value – positive evaluations

It appears that while the respondents do not employ the notion of social justice, that of respect is a way to give a positive value to gender equality and to appreciate both women's and men's experiences. It appears as a way to replace the controversial concept with a notion that is not questioned, but that states the importance of equality as a societal value. While it can be seen as a way to avoid conflicts in the discussion, it is also a way to voice the fact that gender equality, in a general sense, is positively judged by participants.

Reference to the notion of "respect" appears in many different moments of the focus group interviews – the word "respect" was used more than 80 times (as a noun and verb). Respect was claimed to be a very important value for living with others and accepting them, and it is a value that children learn in the family from their parents:

> *F2: …Equality is very much linked for me to respect, isn't it? In general, I think if someone has some ideas in his/her head, is intelligent – and you do not need any education to be intelligent, then this person will behave as she/he should. (…) raising a child is important, how parents prepare us… [will teach us] how to respect other people, how to treat others. Parents teach these most basic things, and not… (FGI_3)*

A moment of discrimination or unequal treatment is referred to as a lack of respect (e.g. women are not respected on the labour market). Consequently, equal treatment is an indicator of respect. But at the same time respect appears to be a condition for equality – if you respect someone discrimination is not possible, or it would not happen:

F4: So a person wants to be respected among people. Be respected, have these opportunities, be able to earn it. This is great, if you can earn it – you work some years. So if you say that you have that number of work years behind you, this would be nice, for example, for being rewarded for these additional work years by some benefits. (FGI_9)

M3: Equality, as I said previously, should be defined more on the abstract level, so equality as respect for another person as a human being. So if we respect a person, no matter if it is a woman or a man (…) if someone is a good worker no matter the gender, she/he should earn the same. (FGI_8)

The word "respect" was also an element for building relations based on the value of equality (*partnerstwo*). Respect, along with responsibility, were cited as important elements for having gender-equal family relations (see more in the chapter on family). Nevertheless, there was a feeling among the researchers that this word was used in order to avoid conflict (as described previously regarding the interview with parents), or in a situation when respondents were looking for solutions that were more pragmatic, but at the same time more difficult to realise.

It is important to point out that in some interviews we asked first for connotations with the word "equality", but participants, knowing the general theme of the research, related it strongly to gender equality. Equality (*równość*) as such is linked to more abstract ideas such as: acceptance, tolerance, happiness, freedom, respect for others and their characteristics/choices, diversity, equal rights, equal access to voting or to benefits, equal treatment, independence, and love. Nevertheless, we can conclude that equality as a broader concept is less questioned and in general considered good, while gender equality raises more questions or "but's", so it receives a more ambiguous evaluation.

Negotiating gender equality in the family: gender roles in families and work-family experiences (with Krystyna Slany)

Introduction: Family as the most reachable sphere for introducing gender equality

The process of family construction can be analysed from the perspective of family studies. As acknowledged by Finch (2007), family is not a given, stable institutional entity, but should rather be seen as an on-going process of doing and displaying practices. Family members "do" families through practices linked to care, household work, balancing family and work, and free time. An analysis of practices allows us to see the sources of family success and its well-being, but also sources of conflicts or tensions and its resolutions. This perspective also reveals **the process of change within the family,** which can also be linked to the notion of gender equality. In fact, in our study the family is seen **as a critical area for gender equality** – where gender equality is practised in daily life, negotiated (between partners) and transferred (from parents to children). This was further proved by our study: **gender equality in the family is seen as a process** – it is negotiated, changed, argued, experienced, valued, observed, and worked on.

Family, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was the **most often discussed area in the focus groups**,[7] no matter the age, gender and socio-economic status of the participants (the below table presents themes that were raised during the discussions). Participants discussed relations between partners, but also with siblings, children and parents. In addition, they spoke of the situation of single mothers. Gender equality in the family was mostly discussed in the context of state support, as well as in others, such as the labour market.

Themes discussed when talking about gender (in-)equalities in the family:
- Unequal division of duties
- Relations between partners
- Value of unpaid work (care and household work)
- Treatment of children (daughters and sons) by parents (gendered or not gendered approach)
- Single motherhood (maintenance, involvement of fathers)
- Decision-making
- Management of finances
- Fatherhood
- Division of parental leave

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[7] It is worth noting that the participants in all the focus group interviews were interested in discussing issues related to the family, no matter whether it was they – which happened most often – or the moderators of the topic who raised them.

- Problems within families (addictions, violence, poverty)
- Satisfaction with relationships
- State-institutions-family relations

It seems that the participants' engagement in the discussions on gender equality in the family comes from the fact that for them this is a sphere where **one can take actions to introduce change**. They believe that transformation of family relations is not only within their reach, but also the direction of this shift depends on each person. They see themselves as having a range of possibilities to change the situation, even if at the same time they are aware of the structural and cultural barriers preventing them from achieving gender equality.

Gender equality and negotiating division of duties in the family

The division of duties is a prevailing theme that appears in relation to gender equality in the family. Although the perspectives and the ways of doing families differ between women and men, between rural and urban areas and between young and old generations, the division of duties is most often seen as a challenge, sphere of conflict or area for negotiation. Some respondents (especially those from small towns and villages, older in age, more often men) believe that the traditional model, where the man is a breadwinner responsible for the financial situation of the family and the woman is responsible for the family and household, is an arrangement characterised by a good division of work between two partners. It is seen as an established, tested system, or even a given, "natural" order. For other participants, such a division can be considered as good only if both parties (women and men) are comfortable with it. In this perspective, it is an individual choice if a family organises itself in a certain way, respecting the needs and expectations of each partner. Nevertheless, such a division is seen as resulting in a burden on women. As will be shown, in contrast to the traditional division there emerges a new ideal form of division of duties or couple relations – *partnerstwo* (we could translate this directly as relations between two equal partners). *Partnerstwo* is a word describing a relationship based on co-responsibility and the resultant equal division of work (related to both household work and care work).

Traditional division of duties in the family

From the perspective of gender equality, it is important to analyse how the participants spoke about traditional division of duties, meaning a situation when the man is mainly responsible for the financial security of the family, whereas the woman is seen primarily as a caregiver.

Indeed, one focus group in our research (the men from the small town, FGI_10) strongly opted for the gendered division of labour, arguing that the roles of women and men must differ due to physical predispositions but also due to different living conditions in the village (e.g. the need to chop wood). While they appreciate the participation of fathers in child care and agreed that participation of women in the labour market should be on an equal basis,[8] in their opinion the mother is the best person to take care of a child. They see her presence as especially relevant when the child is up to 3-4 years old – it is seen as her natural task to take care of him/her. The following quotes illustrates the preferred division of duties, indicating the sphere of women's work but also that of men's work:

> *M6: [women have] easier work, but more. It is known that we [men], when winter time comes and fuel is needed, go to the wood, chop it down, hack it (…). Girls have, you know, lighter work, but maybe more, because of the laundry and ironing, they have more to do than us. (…)*

> *M4: There is some work, chopping wood, for example, clearly it is more manly work. And you know, a girl has to do the ironing, fix some little things, sew. It is always about the hands. (…) The first three years the child is with his/her mum. The dad will never do as a mum, because a woman is actually more suited to it than a man. (FGI_10)*

These respondents see **no need to introduce changes in this division of work**. For them, it is better not to change anything in this situation:

> *Mo: But do you believe that it is possible to do something to improve this quality of life of women and men? To achieve more equality and better relations within marriage?*
> *M4: If we don't want to ruin it, it's better not to improve [touch] anything.*
> *Mo: So it is natural?*
> *M4: To be natural or just improve the good things further, not [trying to improve] the bad ones. (FGI_10)*

Similarly to the men from a small town (FGI_10), some young men in other discussion groups (e.g. FGI_5, FGI_3) also prefer a gendered division of duties – although they are willing to be more flexible about it. They argue that women could work if they want to, but their **main duty would be to take care of children**. In addition to this, they think that a woman should not expect a man to participate equally in childcare:

> *Mo: So you assume that in your model, your wife/partner in the future will not work.*
> *M1: I mean, I don't assume that she won't work at all, right? Because it very often depends on how many children you want to have and in what period of life you have those children, yes? (…). And it is also, when you meet your other half then you make arrangements somehow, but also… So I admit, she could work, but, but… I would like her to devote herself to the children in the first place. (…) (FGI_5)*

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[8] Please refer to the chapter about the labour market to find out more about gendered division of work in the labour market.

It is important to stress that the men from the fire brigade see the traditional division of duties as rather a fair division, even if men and women in the household have their sphere of duties. Similarly, in the discussion between men and women in the village (FGI_4), the traditional division of duties as enacted in the previous generation is perceived as more equally divided, with each person having a share of duties assigned to him/herself, even if the distribution was gendered. The respondents in the village noticed that this situation is changing due to transformations in the rural areas. Today, when there is almost no more agriculture or cattle in the household [*pola leżą odłogiem*], the division of duties has become unequal, with both men and women working outside the household but also being responsible for the household. The change from a rural lifestyle to a more urban one is a process that impacts diverse spheres of life, e.g. organisation of family life, relations between partners, the role of women and men in the household, and, as shown later, intergenerational relations:

> *F2: Nowadays, yes, (…) the husband [leaves] in the morning and he comes [home] in the evening. And the wife has duties: children, cooking, laundry and also going to work as well, right? She has more household duties for sure.*
> *Mo: Women, hm…*
> *F2: Taking care of children, no? When the husband comes in the evening… I speak from my children's experience, no? When he comes in the evening…*
> *F1: Tired…*
> *F2: Tired, exhausted. So… what duties does he have? He eats dinner, takes a shower, sits in front of the TV and takes a nap in the chair, no? That is the truth. (FGI_4)*

Additionally to the occurrence of a gendered division of duties, in the traditional family model the woman holds a very specific place. The woman is a manager who takes operational decisions concerning family life – in the literature this is referred to as managerial matriarchy (Walczewska 1999). On the one hand it links women to the sphere of the household, with little access to the public sphere. But on the other hand, as described by the women from the village, it gives them a feeling of ability and agency. They describe the women's ability to take care of many tasks and having skills in cooking and other traditionally womanly things as an ethos, something to be proud of. They are proud of being "*gospodarne*" (someone who is capable of using money, food and other resources carefully and not wastefully)[9] – a characteristic that is very much valued in agricultural societies:

> *F4: We should say how managerial we are, no? (…)*
> *Mo: Please say it.*
> *F4: Yes, managerial in every aspect, right?*

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[9] This feelings of being "*gospodarne*" (managerial) is also extended to the community – the close community is also an area which women take care of, which results in active participation of women in organisation of events, celebrations and presence in the public sphere. See more in the chapter about activism.

F3: We are traditional women, you know? We earn money, cook, make preserves...
F4: We are old-fashioned. [Home-made] preserves!
F2: We make preserves and we don't want anything to spoil.
F4: Yes, yes.
F2: (...) if we don't eat this today we heat it up tomorrow. We don't pour out, throw it away. The young: [they throw away] cans, jars. They can just buy it. (FGI_4)

Interestingly, the respondents describe themselves in **comparison to today's young generation** – that is spoiling things, not being able to cook or to make marmalade, and incapable of doing even simple things in the kitchen, like peeling potatoes. They observe a different lifestyle of their daughters' and sons' generation, which is also linked to intense working hours and heightened consumption (urban lifestyle). This change should also be interpreted in the process of change within rural areas, where certain skills lose their relevance – and these were the competences that were tightly linked to women's role. As a result, they evaluate young women on the basis of their household skills:

F3: So, so you know, all our children work and are overworked and we help those children, those grandchildren (...). But we taught our children everything. Because our mothers taught us to do so, no? And we passed it on to children. And now the current generation is…. completely different.
M2: That's right, yes.
F3: Listen, (...) when I saw those girls – in their twenties, they can't peel potatoes. (...) I was dismayed. Young people in their twenties can't [peel] potatoes… (FGI_4)

The discussion on the role of men as the main breadwinner indicates the **attitude towards unpaid work.** Care work, but also taking care of the household, are not perceived to have the same value as professional work. The study shows that the women expect general respect for their work. As seen in the below quote, the woman were described as "having free time" when the man was working, so it was not accepted that she was tired and needed some rest:

F2: Women's work at home is undervalued all the time. Men going to work think that they don't do anything: "what do you do at home? Sit all day long!"
M3: [that they] Watch TV.
F2: "And TV, neighbours, gossips…" It is not like that. You are right [gesturing to the male participant], you experienced how it looks like. It is like a treadmill, twenty-four hours. The mother has no sick leave, parental leave because of a child's sickness or from anything else. She is doing something all day long. That is why I ask all men, please appreciate that work. (FGI_7)

M2: (...) I wanted to use this example to direct your attention to the fact that a woman who for some reason is at home and raises children, does laundry, cleans and cooks is considered by men, also I am talking about stereotypes, as somebody who does nothing and.... her work is totally undervalued. Because who knows, maybe actually she finds fulfilment in this role, but this is a different discussion. (FGI_1)

"Partnerstwo" – relationship based on co-responsibility and equal division of duties

The contrasting vision of gender equality within the family is linked to the functioning of a relationship based on equal division of duties and co-responsibility of partners. This vision of organisation of family life assumes shared responsibility and shared execution of all family life tasks. It is contrasted with the traditional division, which assigns certain tasks to family members based on their gender, and may in fact result in unequal division, with most burden placed on women. The ultimate goal for many respondents is to reach a more or less equal division of work (related to both household work and care work), but also joint responsibility for the overall workload. To describe such a model of family relations, the word "*partnerstwo*" is used, which could be translated directly as relations between two equal partners (or an equality-based relationship).

The equality-based relationship was eagerly discussed in the group of parents (FGI_8). "Partnerstwo" was undoubtedly treated as an ideal, but there were different ways to understand and practise the concept. It was seen from two perspectives. The first is that of sameness, when two partners should more or less equally share the duties resulting from the fact of belonging to one family, mostly work and care. The second perspective of fairness assumes that partners share the responsibility and the duties, but the division of duties is negotiated between the partners. While some, mostly women, believed that both men and women should share the tasks equally, and that both men and women can equally take care of children or the household, others – many of them men – believed that the division of tasks can be done with some sensitivity or adapted to individual needs or characters. This does not necessarily mean that each person does half of one type of work, but that the workload can be divided based on who likes (or dislikes less) to do something. Much of the discussion was directed towards describing the participants' experiences – the two quotes illustrate both perspectives:

> *F5: Actually, the biggest problem is [trying to achieve] equality at home. In my home, for example, it's not as if I have to be in the kitchen, just no. In our relationship we have equality, my husband stands in front of the sink as much as I do. (…) when I went to work, some time has passed, this is when it started, that duties are divided strictly in half. (FGI_8)*

> *M1: So when it comes to division of duties, there was no fight. I am for cooperation and dialogue. (…) So when it comes to division of duties there is a rule or "lesser evil". Who dislikes something more, who is less willing to do something [laughter]. My wife does not like sewing (…) so I do it. As for cooking, sometimes she cooks, sometimes me,*

sometimes as an emergency, sometimes I have a whim. When it comes to social contacts, dealing with things by phone and so on, I don't like it and she does it. Don't know... I wouldn't want to say this is because of social roles, but rather psychological, psycho-physical conditions (...) as I say I am for equality. So when we go to visit our friends in the east of Poland, then you can see clearly. He sits at the table and he has to be served. So when we go there and I stay in the kitchen and cook kasha, then [I hear] "Men at the pots, what are you doing!?" This is ridiculous, for me it's ridiculous. (FGI_8)

It was stressed by parents that it is not only chores or care duties that should be shared, but also the responsibility for them: women should not assign tasks, but the partner should feel the responsibility for the household tasks. As the participants of FGI_8 argued, real equality can only be achieved when there is joint responsibility for childcare or household duties. As a female respondent described it, she does not strive for equality (equal division), but for co-participation [*współudział*] – she does not want to be a manager. Moreover, she also includes her children in her struggles for more co-operation and co-responsibility:

F4: (...) For some time I've been going and grumbling, "Oh my god, do I need to manage all this," and this has already been going on for three years. [and then] a revelation: "Look, I did the shopping". One loaf of bread and a bottle of oil. So after four years someone noticed that the bottle of oil was empty! So this is a process (...) I was really tired of having to manage five people and I am leaning towards change. So towards co-participation, not equal [division], as I like to cook and my partner can boil the kettle for tea. (...) I won't, for example, walk the dog in the evening, as I am cold and he would. I don't need to manage that. So... at a certain point we can exchange roles. (...)
I am fighting for more equal rights in my home, but I am fighting not only with my partner but also with my teenage children, and here the equality starts to be really unequal. I am tired of having to say what should be done and what it's important to do. I don't want to be a manager, but I dream (...) of everyone knowing what should be added to this family so it functions well. (FGI_8)

The concept of equality based on the notion of fairness and joint engagement, but possibly in different duties, was raised by a father, who claimed that he does not do many of the "female tasks" at home. This was met with negative comments from the other female participants ("is your wife happy?"), but he tried to defend this position, telling the other participants that his way of "dividing" duties is also fair, as it is built on communication with his partner:

M3: I do not do many women's things at home, but... I am "open", but...
F4: Women's [laughter].
M3: Okay, let's say; I don't for example iron, nor do I do laundry.
F5: Ooh!
M3: Terrible, now I'm going to be stoned. But my wife knows that I can do it if she is away. This is our sharing, not "equal" meaning that I iron and she irons. But she does this and I do something else, and this is building .....

F5: If you needed it, you would do it.
M3: Yes, it is built on reciprocal communication.
F2: And is your wife happy? [laughter]
M3: Yes, we talk openly. You prefer this, you prefer cleaning, and your husband cooks.
F8: Yes, and this is the most important thing.
M3: You don't have to clean together, you don't have to cook, you just communicated. You respect each other, you understand. This shows that equality is the most important thing. (FGI_8)

Equality in a partnership or family was also discussed by the students, although it seemed that contrary to parents, who mostly discussed their own family arrangements, students rather talked about their friends', parents' or grandparents' experiences, or about their own expectations towards future relations. The accounts therefore remained on a rather theoretical level. Among female students, the dominant group was that with high hopes for more "*partnerstwo*" in their relationships, even if as sociologists they continue to refer to stereotypes that may stand in the way of achieving this vision. Their approach was also rather based on the vision of sameness and sharing all kinds of duties between partners. Only one foreign female student and a male student opted for gendered specialisation in responsibilities – with the assumption that women are better in some things, and men in others. At the end of this part of the discussion, the female student stressed that it is women who need to take an active role in re-organising family life if they want more equal division of duties. It is the woman who is responsible for communicating her needs to her partner:

Mo1: So, how would you imagine such a situation of equality in everyday life, what would this look like?
*F1: Most of all this is about being partners [*partnerstwo*], so communicating [*dogadywanie się*], not that the man is the boss of the house, but depending on one's needs. (...) I would imagine that I would like to be an active professional and my partner as well. I would like to have children. But, so we would divide duties equally, both spend an equal amount of time with our children, and most of all do a lot of things together. Not to divide it in a way that you do this, I do that.*
F2: So I am just coming to the conclusion that my grandparents, from both my mother and my father's side – were really modern, as at their homes there were these kinds of relations and the same at my home the division of duties. (...) I observe it and I would also like to do similarly in my life, and this is fantastic. Not for the women to be responsible for everything, and then I would blame myself if something went wrong. But the equal division of duties. Once I clean and once you, we cook together, we take care of the children together and we work as well together.
F3: I also think so and it seems the best way, but I see that it is still not like this in Polish society and I think: why?
F2: Don't you think that women allow this model? Maybe men would even want to, but women don't know what they want? Because of the model, the women doesn't know how to reach to the man to make him help her in daily life. I think this is a matter of honest talk, honest declaration to a partner, not even about stereotypes, but this is the question of a relationship with another person... don't know how to say it. (FGI_2)

Some respondents talk a lot about **the "arrangement" that they have made between themselves** (they are able to work something out – *dogadanie się*) – the division of duties was negotiated and established between the partners. It was also a deal that was flexible and changing through the life course. In general it was based on co-responsibility and reciprocal support. Interestingly, such an arrangement was claimed mostly by the older generation (FGI_9). The question remains to what extent the negotiated arrangement was a fair or equal division, as a process of idealisation is likely to occur, for example among elderly respondents:

> *F1: [It is a] Matter of working out an arrangement between spouses (...) My husband and **I set up a very good arrangement**, we both worked. And when I was at work, if my husband came home earlier, then he started cooking dinner or something. When I came back earlier, I started. It wasn't like that that you have to do this, this, this, this, this because you are a woman. No. My husband always helped me. We are both retired now so we help each other. (FGI_9)*

> *F2: Even my husband when I go away for three days, he takes care of the children (...), but of course sometimes people comment: you have such a good husband, he stays with the children. But I say… why "good"? I do things I want to do, he does his things, he needs to go so he goes, I need to go so I go. (...) **I think it is a matter of working out an arrangement** and… (FGI_1)*

> *M6: I lived with my wife more than 50 years and each of us had their duties. We would **come to an arrangement** [dogadywaliśmy się] perfectly. I had to go for the children, feed them, put them to sleep, take care of everything at home. (FGI_9)*

This approach to duties relates to the **situation of individual adaptation** where the selected division of duties is based on common agreement and on constant communication ("just need to say it", "who likes what", "so each person feels good"). In the quotes above there are notions of agreement, compromise, and listening to the needs of partners. It seems that it is more important to be able to **communicate one's needs** and to practise an open style of communication:

> *F4: I believe that it is an individual issue how the duties are distributed in a family. (...) because the partners work out an arrangement between themselves, and when something doesn't suit somebody, you just have to communicate this. (FGI_2)*

> *F1: I think that a conversation is not enough, we need to talk to each other, but it is necessary to be able to listen. We talk, talk, forget that and continue [our errands], but it's necessary for the husband to be able to listen to his wife, and the wife to her husband and children too. Mostly, listen to what they say. (FGI_9)*

The groups who talked a lot about working out an arrangement related this notion to the quality of relationship as such. Many times the debate about gender equality within the family went in the direction **of discussion about the wider values that should characterise a good relationship – such as respect, understanding between partners, and reciprocal**

support. To the moderators, it seemed that "escaping" towards a very abstract discussion on respect or love steered the discussion away from the very pragmatic, and thus confrontational aspects of family life and trying to face the challenge of unfair division of work:

> *F5: Responsibility and respect are, for me, the two most important features for achieving consent, equality… (FGI_9)*

> *M3: In general I would sum it up as mutual respect, understanding and communication, for real and this is that meaning of equality that is a more "meta" [level]. (FGI_8)*

The notion of equal relations was also referred to by a single mother in the discussion with other parents, when the question of how to teach a child about co-responsibility appeared. When the argument about the life model is presented, she questions how this can be done if her daughter only watches her mother taking care of the house, whereas the father, her ex-partner, is engaged sporadically. The debate on the involvement of fathers (ex-partners) in childrearing is also very important in other groups, e.g. FGI_7, when women discussed the question of child maintenance and fathers' reluctance to support their children financially. This debate initiated by a single mother is an important one to follow up, trying to answer the question of how equality can be practised within other models of families, which start to be more common in the context of societal change. Again, the question arises of whose responsibility it is to push for equality, placing responsibility on the women:

> *F6: So what about single mothers? I am a single mother, and my child, my daughter sees that I do everything….*
> *F8: Yes, but you probably have a mother and a father…*
> *F6: My mother was also divorced and I also saw that my mother did everything – homework from school, she did it all, cooked, cleaned. (…)*
> *F2: … so equality appears here in a different way. So the equality, if there is any, relates only to paying maintenance. But not taking any roles even outside the house. Many men are happy with this role.*
> *M7: Not everyone. (…) [more discussion about the occurrence of divorces and engagement of fathers in childcare after divorce] (…)*
> *F6: I am a very strong women and I do not allow him [my ex-husband] not to take care of the child. If a woman allows this, as she does not care… [much noise, respondents all start to talk at the same time] If a woman gets offended "because he left me", (…) then it does not work. You have to be stubborn, he has to take care of the child and that's it. I need to go to work on Saturday and he has to come [and take care of a child] (…) We both have to take care equally. We are not together, fine. But from Monday to Friday I do it, so weekends are his. He has to do it. (FGI_8)*

Whose responsibility? Introducing gender equality in family relations

The analysis of gender equality in the family is related to the debate about **what is regarded as a private/public matter** and – most importantly from the perspective of our research – to

what extent public institutions or state interventions within the family appear as acceptable or not. As mentioned above, from the respondents' perspective, **the family is seen as a private matter: as a sphere of individual responsibility and intervention**. This approach to the family has further implications for introducing gender equality, as the participants do not perceive state or public institutions as ultimately responsible for and capable of supporting gender equality in the family. The only sphere where state interventions are seen as required and beneficial is related to the reconciliation of work and family life, which is an area that straddles private and public matters.

Women as actors of change

Women are seen as the most important actors able to but also mostly interested in introducing change within couple relations – transforming it in a more partner-based direction. A change towards more co-responsibility and equal sharing within families is seen **as impacted by the attitude of young women, who expect different behaviour from men**, which should allow both partners to work and equally fulfil household duties and childcare. However, many respondents note that **it is the woman who is responsible for achieving more gender equality.** It is the female partner's task to "configure" [*ustawić*] her husband, to tame him [*wytresować*], or to persuade him to introduce a more equal division of duties:

> *F8: I tamed [my husband], and I say that at the beginning it wasn't easy of course, because I tried to cook, I tried to do everything as every woman should. Because my husband was raised… (…) that he did not have to do anything. So at the beginning it wasn't easy but slowly we implemented [changes]. I said that at the moment I can't do certain things and it was setting up slowly. Sometimes my husband cooks or makes me sandwiches for work. It is wonderful. If necessary he takes care wonderfully of our child; ideal husband, as my friends say. But it required some work, and it required a change in my thinking… (FGI_8)*

Other female participants describe it directly **as an area of conflict, literally a fight between women and men.** As shown by the second quotation, this process may be lengthy and have no positive outcome:

> *F2: What about me? In my case yes, there is a **fight** for everything all the time. I take care of everything, I do everything and my partner works and this is his, as he believes, duty. (FGI_8)*

> *F4 Unfortunately, no, we did not succeed. (…) **I fought** for [changing our relationship] for a couple of years but we did not succeed... (…) I mean, I fought, not in the sense that we had arguments, not in the form of arguments (...) I just tried to explain that **I am tired too.** (FGI_7)*

The extent to which women may change men's behaviour differs. While some women believe

that they need to change the man's behaviour and way of thinking completely, others believe **that a subtle impact on the husband** suffices, as it can ease the woman's burden without making a revolution in the man's thinking (and possibly causing conflicts). This strategy to avoid conflicts within the family constitutes a barrier to gender equality, as the given division of work is not challenged (cf. Titkow, Duch-Krzysztoszek and Budrowska 2004):

> *F2: But I think that it also depends on the mother (…) the mother can configure the situation in family, so that some things are done by the father. I say that I have a husband who is, let's say, an old-fashioned man. So he believed that some things should be done by a woman but… let's say a skilful way of impacting the situation in the family resulted in us [taking care of] the children…. I won't say that he changed the nappies, but (…) a lot of the time he spends with children, or goes somewhere with them, to the museum, takes them for a tour, for a walk. There are situations when it is possible to engage the father too, even if he is not willing. (FGI_1)*

The **responsibility of women** to be the ones who should actually interfere in changing the relations in the family might have different causes. One of the most often quoted explanations refers to the fact that it is actually women who suffer the negative consequences of inequality, so it is in their interest to introduce change. While talking about the scope of the change in men's behaviour, the respondents referred to various indicators. Some of the respondents are satisfied if a father is responsible only for leisure time with a child, but others required greater involvement in care and household duties.

The role of men in introducing gender equality

As described in the previous chapter, women were seen as being responsible for introducing equality in the family, but also as more interested in introducing change. The **men were regarded as having less interest in change towards greater gender equality in the family**. As discussed in the group of students, some do not see direct or immediate benefits from more equal division of duties for themselves, nor for their relationships. The argument was also raised that women do not allow men to become engaged in childcare or the household, as they believe they can do it better themselves.

> *F5: We should emphasise this, [encourage women] that they fight for equality in their relationship. Because I believe they don't fight, I don't know what the reason is. It is sad. However men definitely feel less responsibility for example for the relationship, for the family. It is not cool for me. (FGI_2)*

While some respondents remained critical towards change, there were **men who openly opted for a more equal sharing of responsibilities in the family**. However, this understanding of equality in relationships was usually preceded by a critical event or situation that led to the realisation of the need for change. As described by the participants in FGI_1, a

man taking on the double burden himself soon appreciated the workload and tiredness of a person taking care of the home and children. At present he seems to be very engaged keeping the "double role", as he describes:

> *M4: I know what you are talking about, because I was like the man you [referring to a female participant] described [meaning not at all participating in household or care duties]. Exactly the same. I changed my attitude. My middle daughter was born, I took care of her totally – meaning in the night, changing nappies, my goodness!*
> *F4: But, but… you know, there must be something that makes you realise that… this change, the need for this change…*
> *M3: As I said you should have shut your husband in the house with children, so he did not go out and see how it is... (...) to see how exhausting this is, all this work everywhere, changing nappies, all the care for a child. (...) So then he realises how it is.*
> *Mo1: So I wanted to ask what made you... what happened to make you change your attitude?*
> *M4: I think that I understood the woman, that I truly loved my future fiancée at the time, [when I was taking care of our child when my wife was at work] (...) because this is very tiring. I wanted to experience it myself to understand what is going on in a woman's mind [when she takes care of a child full time]. And for real, the woman becomes tired, more aggressive and so on, there are tendencies for arguments (...) I went to work from morning to afternoon and then she went until 10pm. To be honest [pause for 3 seconds] it is some kind of gender equality. "If you want, I can change my attitude." (...) My wife likes – I say it once again – she likes, she likes to wash this and that. But my wife knows that I like laundry too, that I like cooking, that I like taking care of the children for real and this is it – the concept of a "double role". The weekend is for me. Full stop. I cook at home, I do laundry, I clean. Full stop. She has it all week long. Of course, I work hard too. I was waking up at three forty in the morning/night, believe me ladies, I was coming back home at half past nine, at half past eleven I was going to sleep, and the night with my daughter was waiting for me. I changed her nappies and I gave her a bottle and so on… (FGI_7)*

As discussed in the following subchapters, in many cases this change towards more equal relationships for men was triggered by either a relationship crisis or willingness to engage in fathering.

Socialisation. Reproducing roles or fighting for new ones?

The respondents paid a lot of attention to the **process of socialisation, which impacts on their own vision of a family model or the roles of the mother and father**, as well as to guardians of inequality (or guardians of tradition) which could hinder the positive effect of change within a family. This theme was thoroughly discussed in the focus group interview with students (FGI_2), who described the process of socialisation as a factor shaping **unequal division of work within care and the household.** The lack of change in the attitudes of the young generation towards more partnership-based relationships is "scary" to them. As the young female student observes, the traditional schemes – inherited from the previous

generation – are being reproduced by their peers. She stresses that in order to get equal relations one needs to fight – they are not taken for granted, but they need to be achieved with a struggle:

> *F1: (...) For me it is a little bit scary that we all strive for gender equality, but when I read some research for example about young married couples it turns out that circa 70% [of men] do not take care of the home. (...) For me those models are so deeply rooted, that a father is at work and a mother at home. It is sad for me that young people see it that way. Maybe I don't see it in my friend's environment, but sometimes I do. When I was living in a different town, with a couple, it was just the same – she cooked, cleaned and he couldn't even wash the dishes. So it is hard, and it is not only about household duties but also about raising children. But even now in relationships with no children, you **need to fight for it**. (FGI_2)*

As for **the cultural context, stereotypes were mentioned continuously as impacting the behaviour of men and women**, relations between partners, and modifying the positive change within a family. It was also noticed that women have internalised the responsibility for household and children, and they are not relieved from this duty even when they undertake professional work. The female participants were self-critical, noticing their own internalisation of such a model, which limits their potential choices:

> *F8: But thinking that a woman can do everything already limits you [as a woman]. This thinking exists within women. My girlfriends… I have a very close one, a great woman, a manager of a big internet site, an emancipated women (...) But she cooks, cleans, irons, all in all she does everything for her husband, because her husband comes tired [from work]. I am devastated. And she is so surprised that I tamed my husband so well. (FGI_8)*

Achieving gender equality in the family – gender equality triggers

The practices related to doing families are interesting not only because they provide information on the division of duties, but also because they pinpoint the moment of "awakening" of partners who realise that they would like to have more gender equality in their relationship. **Gender equality triggers** are for us moments or conditions that awaken the awareness of inequalities and that encourage individuals to introduce change in relation to their position/situation as a woman or a man, or to negotiate gendered relations, e.g. in the family or at work.

Work and double burden

The analysis of the focus group interviews shows that the important moments where there was a need to establish more equal division of duties appeared, firstly, **when women decided to**

go to work and, secondly, when the unequal division of duties between the partners in a family linked to household work, care and responsibilities was acknowledged. These two moments are often interrelated: entering the labour market often meant for women that they need to combine their professional duties with fulfilling unpaid domestic chores. For some female participants in the study it was a moment when they decided to **change the unequal division of duties and to involve their partner in household duties:**

> *F5: (...) From the time when I went to work the duties started to be divided strictly in half. It is not like some say, that men's feet are too big for them to be able to stand close to the sink, because I heard such arguments. I say "so stand sideways". (FGI_8)*

> *F4: That's why I am saying that it was easier then. After all, besides those needs. Emancipation gave women work but it also gave them excessive duties, because a woman had to be at work and at home. I sometimes protested that actually I can be at one of these places because two are too much for me, and I guess this was where my personal need to engage a man with household duties came from. (FGI_8)*

The double burden of women who need to both work and take responsibility for all the tasks linked to the household and care has a high cost for women. It deteriorates the quality of relationship with a partner, as well as limiting their leisure-time activities. This is why the moment when women started to lobby for equal division of duties relates to the feeling of exhaustion:

> *Mo: Because of this tiredness?*
> *F4: Because of this tiredness, that I would love to sit down and read a book after work. (FGI_8)*

Also in FGI_7, the overburden of women was noticed, mostly by female participants, who emphasise the costs of a situation when the woman is responsible solely for childcare and the household. They list: tiredness ("no moment of calmness"), feeling of isolation (no chance of leaving home, going for a family visit without children), psychological burnout ("going crazy", need to solve problems on her own), depression, no opportunity to take care of other areas of life (hobbies, friends), and last but not least problems with retirement (as they had no monthly fees paid into a retirement system while on child leave, which lowers their retirement money):

> *F1: That is really incredibly hard work, mostly psychologically. (...) All the time with children, all the time with problems and so on. (FGI_7)*

Nevertheless, **the costs of implementation of change in the direction towards more equality are put on women.** Men see themselves as "outside the process" – not being able to support women who "wanted" the arrangement that causes tiredness or exhaustion. Even when describing a positive example of a partner who supports his wife, the respondent uses the word

"sacrifice", indicating that his action is not a usual practice. Interestingly, the respondent corrects himself, but struggles to find a good word to describe the situation:

> *M2: My friend sacrifices himself for his wife… sacrifices… I used a bad word. But in general does everything so his wife… his wife feels better and so she can study. And during her travels to study he takes care of their child with pleasure and has absolutely no problems with that. (FGI_1)*

A woman activist from the feminist organisation (FGI_6) reported during the discussion an interesting comment concerning the double burden as expressed by her husband. In his opinion, the double burden that his wife is experiencing is a consequence of the gender equality for which women, her included, struggled. This position is reflected in her opinions indicating that the actual burden and responsibility towards change is placed on women solely and they are the only ones to bear the costs of it:

> *F7: And they [men say] "yes, but we came from work, we worked hard", [we respond] "and we also go to work and at work exploit ourselves somehow and come back home". (…) I go to sleep, yes, and my man has time for himself and I hear a statement like this: "but you fight for gender equality so what do you want?" I say that exactly about gender equality but not in terms of professional work and we both bring money home but that you after this work come and cook a dinner, clean, take care of the child, take care of the laundry, and not that it all falls on me. I managed to work out in my marriage that when I am working at my organisation once a week, when I get back my husband has made pancakes. [laughs] As this is the only thing my husband can make, he fries these pancakes every Wednesday. But normally, it's not the case when he comes home, maybe he could clean, or do the shopping. How so?! "You fight for gender equality, so work, who's stopping you?" This drives me crazy. (FGI_6)*

Building a better relationship – men's involvement trigger

While it is women who are most aware of the costs that befall them resulting from unequal division of duties, there comes a time when negative consequences also impact men's quality of life – e.g. the quality of their relationship. The story of a husband and a father presented below illustrates the critical moment when more equality means better quality of life for both partners, as it is necessary for a good relationship. The notion of joint and reciprocal support was exploited in this discussion with mothers and fathers, where men also demonstrated rather pro-equality attitudes:

> *Mo1: I am curious as to a father's opinion (…), did you have a moment when you realised that equality is important in your life? That it is something that should be taken care of in life?*
> *M3: Yes, because here I wanted to suggest that in many cases changes that appear in relations arise from some crisis situations, (…) from things coming to a head. I have to go out, a woman [says], I need to start breathing, I need to start doing something, and it arises from this. Your question… [was?]*

Mo1: Did you have a certain moment in life when you started fighting for this equality?
M3: Yes, [there was] a point where things came to a head [punkt kulminacyjny].
Mo1: But what was it?
M3: For example, a woman [who is] shut up at home. Because my wife didn't work for a while too. She stayed with the two children, when they were little. I was just working and she was shut up at home, the children were getting sick. And at some point it escalated so much that it was necessary to do something. Between us there were sparks or we had some discussions and even arguments. So it was necessary to do something. If we cared about being together, this relationship, the family, something needed to be done and it was a starting point for change (...). Because as it [the situation I had before] is may be handy, men are lazy [laughter].
F2: I really did not say that they are all like that.
M3: I am joking right now. But in a situation that doesn't need some fast [reaction], everyone functions, (...), there is no flashpoint to change anything, right? (FGI_8)

Clearly, an **improvement in relations between partners** was a reason for creating a more equal division of duties between the woman and the man (as described in the quote above). Successful negotiations towards gender equality are felt to be an **expression of respect and understanding** towards a partner:

Mo2: Did the division of duties in your marriage result from some long-term plan?
F8: No, I didn't plan anything like that. It just happened in a way. I have this kind of partner, my needs were changing…
F5: [A partner] that surrendered.
F8: He didn't surrender. Just my needs were changing, his needs were changing. We mutually adjusted to each other. Childhood experiences are indeed important, and, I don't know, this understanding of the other person. [Not assuming] I'm not the most important, the smartest and that's it. Respect, which you talked about, is important too. (...) (FGI_8)

Motherhood as a turning point in the life course of a woman

Becoming a mother is a particular moment within the **family life cycle whose impact leads to re-evaluation of one's priorities and values and may be a starting point for change within a couple**. Similarly, a few female respondents describe motherhood as having had a strong impact on their personal and professional lives. The story of a woman from a large city shows the consequences of the overburden linked to de facto single motherhood, and how difficult it is to get support from a partner. In this story the change that the woman wants to introduce in her family leads to disruption of the relationship and divorce, indicating that the struggle towards more equality may also have negative consequences:

F4: But, but… You know something must happen to convince you that [there is] a need for change. Because I for example was not fighting in the sense that there were arguments, but I tried to explain that I was tired too, that… being at home all the time is worse, I would prefer to go to work than all the time (...) day and night hang around with three children, when I was going crazy. I say, all the other things that needed to be done, you know, were done in the meanwhile, yes? But there was no moment of peace

practically. After a dozen months I just wanted to move out of the home, without a pram, without shopping bags, just to go out. And it was unattainable, it was unattainable. When I was going to visit my family, I always had one child with me, or even two children (…) And it was not accepted that I could go to my family for one or two days without children. (FGI_7)

Having a child changes women's life plans. As one female respondent describes it, she has "lost her life", and cannot take decisions as she feels limited in her choices:

F7: (…) when I gave birth to my child, it was a shock for me. I concluded that the TV lies when it says that mum is beautiful, with make-up, smiley, gets enough sleep and the baby smiles and sleeps all the time. It is not true, because there are different issues with little babies and I could not manage with it all. The baby was limiting me because I lost my life. I could not decide and do what I wanted. Very soon I started escaping from home. (FGI_6)

To begin with, this participant describes maternity as a difficult and challenging experience differing from its media image. She reflects on the myth of motherhood, not only revealing the bright side of having a child, but also admitting that it changes a woman's entire life. In her case, the experience of motherhood also led to changing her perspective on equality and feminism. Thus, maternity was not only a personal experience for her, but she sees it in a wider, cultural perspective which made her believe more in the importance of gender equality and the need to discuss it and act for it:

F7: (…) Actually, motherhood was a big experience for me, because I felt very limited, because I couldn't do anything without my child. Then, I also realised why feminists fight for gender equality, and that women are labelled [as mothers]. You gave birth, you are a mother, you must stay at home with a baby and you can't do nothing more. You can't have other activities than this, (…) time for yourself, because your husband comes and asks "everything's okay?" and goes away. He is not even interested if the child has eaten something or if it is swaddled. So it devastated me that parents do not differ besides the fact that a woman breast-feeds. And I realised why gender equality is so important and why we should talk about it and we should go for it. (FGI_6)

Becoming a mother not only influences the private sphere, but also has an impact on pursuing a professional career. This issue is discussed in more detail later in this report (chapter about the labour market), but we should note here that the reconciliation of work and family life is seen as a woman's responsibility, with state support. It is important to observe that the opinions on negative experiences with early motherhood were voiced in the female-only group, within which the respondent could possibly count on understanding and be able to speak more openly about her experiences.

Fatherhood as a turning point in the life course of a man

Willingness to change one's attitude and to pay attention to a partner was also seen as a benefit by men, who gained an understanding of their partner's situation and could become more empathetic. This is not the only crucial moment in men's histories which triggered off a change toward working for more equality in their families. Equally important for them was the moment of becoming a father. Men stressed more **contact with their children** as a direct positive outcome of more equal division of childcare. The ability to build bonds, to know their children more closely, to have emotional linkage to them.

> *Mo: But OK, let's get back to this marriage, with better equality in a sense that men can lose something. They can lose, but can they gain something?*
> *M6: Maybe contact with a child.*
> *Mo: Because you mentioned….*
> *M6: The family bond can be built, now a man is busy all the time, there is not such a thing, maybe if…. (FGI_10)*

The experience of fatherhood was also discussed among the male activists (FGI_5), revealing various standpoints and opinions. On the one hand, some participants believe that mothers should be primarily responsible for bringing up children. Others claim that both parents should be involved in child care. This problem is stressed by a man who had **had little contact with his own father** – this lack of close bond now means that he would like to build a stronger relationship with his own children. In this way, the respondent focuses on the costs of having a father who is not actively involved in a child's life, or most of the time practically absent. It is interesting that his story appears as a reaction to the position of another participant, opting strongly for the primary engagement of the mother in childcare:

> *M4: I can say with the example of my childhood and my current life. Because my mother raised me and did not work, so for some period of time only my mother was raising me. My father was going to work for 3-4 shifts, left morning, came back late, and he was not home. So, all this, let's say, basic information, all of it, all the knowledge and playing time, time of pleasures and time for studying, my mother spent this time with me. And I can say, it is still like this now (…) and we need to make up for this time, at the weekends, go somewhere with my dad (…) So I would like to, when I have a family, when I have a wife and children, I would like it to be more balanced from the beginning, if it's possible (…) it's best, if, let's say, the mother together with the father takes care of a child from the beginning, so somehow, this time is balanced, we devote it equally. So you don't get the situation that at the age of 18, 19 the child has to somehow make up some relations and make up time that, let's say, the father didn't devote. (FGI_5)*

And even if these young men see the early years of childhood as the ones when women would need to be most engaged, they foresee a **tighter engagement when the child is growing up**. While this is an attitude of caution, it still shows progress towards the closer engagement of

fathers in child raising:

M5: I actually approve of the mother playing a greater role, not, not the father, but from some moment [of a child's life] I would like it to be balanced (…) so this family relation is based on equality and friendship more than… I would like it to be, in a sense that it is more informal than official [so you can use informal forms of address]. So the first phase should be owned by the mother, and later on it should be balanced. (FGI_5)

This **higher quality of fatherhood** is often stressed when talking about gender equality within a family, but one also needs to see that this would raise the **quality of motherhood**. As listed previously, all negative effects of "de facto single motherhood" could be lessened (e.g. the burden of women, isolation, lack of feeling of co-responsibility). More equal division of duties allows women to remain professionally active:

F8: (As) maternity leave was shorter in those days, at some point I started to wait to go to work and divide those roles more. Meaning that a partner is more engaged, and this is depending on how the woman experiences motherhood. [for me] it is not the only role that I would like to sacrifice myself to. (FGI_8)

The change towards more gender equality in the family and a change in the father's engagement is potentially seen as a trigger to **change gender relations on the wider scale**. As described by one participant, the engagement of a father in raising a child can have a positive impact on the stereotypes of mother and father and can help **build a new masculinity model** – where a man can be seen as sensitive person, empathetic, engaged in caring and supportive to his partner.

M3: I wish it was such a healthy relationship, as rational conversation and the mutual care of a child who was just born might show that a man can be emotional, very sensitive that he carries a child on his chest, that he gets up during the night and that the woman feels that she can rely on him and he does not replicate this model typical of his grandparents that only the grandmother took care of the child and that the man was somewhere on the side and he did not participate. And then, he got older and he did not have the chance to participate in the life of a child as the child was grown up and he felt that he missed something. But the child is more… is closer to the father. A new reading primer shows a father who teaches his child, who is with a child. The Church claims that it is not the function of the father to be with a child, to do some homework with a child, because the mother should do it. (…) But the changes that [the father is more involved] can be felt by the woman, the man and the child, and everyone else around. And a more equal environment is created: in the kindergarten, when the ladies working there – or men, although there are few men working in kindergartens – that the father comes to pick up a child, that it's not always the mother. Also at school, that the fathers participate in parents' meetings or that a child also draws with their father, not only with their mother. In this way equality will happen in the family. That's it. (FGI_5)

The change towards more equal sharing of care duties was identified in the discussion – some respondents even called it "*moda na ojcostwo*" – **fashion for fatherhood** (although there were disagreements to what extent this is already a fact). The change is gradual, and it

is seen as rather starting, but it is visible on the streets, where fathers stroll with their children, or in school, where fathers become engaged in children's education (e.g. by participating in school meetings). It is observed both in the cities and in the rural area. This trend was in general applauded by the female participants, and, as seen in the second quote, it is a sign of change in the attitudes of men, who, as the female respondent (F2) notices, "have grown up" to appreciate the importance of engagement in child care:

> *Mo1: So here [you think] young men are rather willing to take care of children?*
> *F2: They take care a lot, go for a walk [with children], sure!*
> *M2: Yes.*
> *F2: I have a neighbour who walks with a pram an hour and a half every day.*
> *(...) F2: Walks, talks to her a lot, the child is two months old.*
> *F4: But it is nice… to see.*
> *F3: Beautiful! (FGI_4)*

> *F2: I am very sorry, so many dads go to [class meetings] that women will soon be in the minority…*
> *F5: They go, but did you notice that they speak less?*
> *F2: They speak a lot and have more courage and totally don't… absolutely don't go as if they are condemned to, because my wife couldn't so I come. They are very engaged, have a lot of ideas, have much more courage (…) I think that men are lucky that they are growing up to some things and that they are not ashamed of certain things and it is for real. It is not my idea and I believe that it is in every school and in society as a whole. (FGI_1)*

The costs of change towards more equality

The study shows that there can be a positive impact on quality of life resulting from the change from gender inequality to gender equality. In some cases the change reported by the participants was small – e.g. the father's involvement in weekend activities or doing basic shopping. In others it led to redefinition of family roles and women's and men's identities. However, not all attempts to develop more equal relations were successful and led to an improvement in quality of life. In some cases, the expectation that the duties and childcare would be shared equally by both partners caused a **lack of acceptance from the partner's family and friends as well as intergenerational conflicts**. As theoretically argued, gender equality needs to be backed by a gender-equal environment (Backhans et al. 2009) – the mismatch between attitudes of individuals and the context may hinder the effects on quality of life, causing conflicts, lack of support, and the feeling of not fitting in. In one case, negotiations for more partnership led to divorce, because of the different vision of the respondent (wife) and the family of the husband, who did not support this change and had a different vision of the partner's relations in the family:

*F3: In my family life, at the start, I tried to change something between us (...). In the period (...) when there were no children yet, I tried to establish equality, division of duties, and this started to work nicely. So: we both work, then we come back, you do this, I do that, and it worked great. But, **when we got married, the family appeared.** Not yet the kids, but family, for example my husband's family, and immediately his [the husband's] behaviour was different. End of the division of duties. What!? Cleaning!? How so!? This is so not masculine, maybe something else… and the friends of my husband, and family – so the stereotypes that you already listed here they all came back to life. Immediately there was a change in my spouse's behaviour and slowly it all started to fall apart… (FGI_7)*

It was often noticed that the previous generation had followed a rather traditional family model, and that the **intergenerational change** that now demands more equal relations between spouses is not often accepted by parents or parents-in-law. Those who try to introduce more equal relations **may encounter unwelcome or critical comments about their more equal behaviour,** as happened to one of our female respondents:

F7: That's why I'm not my father-in-law's favourite daughter-in-law, because I can say what I think, I'm able to involve my husband in the housework. When my father-in-law comes to dinner, my husband and I prepare dinner together. We set the table together, we serve the dinner together, he [my husband] serves tea and coffee. And my father-in-law does not approve of this equality. (…) he is very disgusted. (FGI_6)

It was also noticed that the attitudes towards gender equality and women's roles are not the same in different regions. The Podkarpackie region (Eastern Poland) was mentioned in two different FGIs as the one where changes are happening at slower pace, as its inhabitants have more conservative attitudes towards family roles.

The comments, based on normative expectations, also concern the mother's role; and women can encounter the **accusation of being bad mothers if they are not sufficiently engaged in childcare duties.** Yet the women who describe these stories distance themselves from them, indicating the inadequacy of such judgements:

F4: So this is at home and outside home, as I did not sew [buttons] for my [son], and he came home crying that twenty mums had done it for their sons, just I, just I the bad mother did not do it… (FGI_6)

F4: He works. I say that I work as well. No, he really works – he needs to rest. (…) What a bad mother. What was I thinking that I could just go out [without kids]. I have free days all the time! (FGI_7)

Men in favour of the traditional division of duties are sceptical about men taking over or sharing traditionally women's tasks. For them the change in the masculine model was not welcome, and was seen rather as a cost than a benefit. According to the young firemen, such a process can lead to **feminisation of men**, and changing men into "Justin Biebers", feminine boys lacking masculinity. According to the young men from a rural area, these men lack the

skills that men should have, e.g. being able to repair things at home. It appears that the young firemen may feel that the model of masculinity realised by them is losing relevancy, but they distance themselves from the model of masculinity that is being practised in the cities:

> *M7: [They are] like Justin Bieber.*
> *Mo: Meaning what?*
> *M7: Taking too much care how they look [*lalusie*], not men.*
> *Mo: That if there is more equality, then men…*
> *M7: If he does a more feminine job he doesn't become a man but… (FGI_10)*

Men also manifested **fear concerning the effect of taking leave on their financial situation or on the situation at work.** As reported by one of the participants (FGI_8), a friend had lost a job after taking paternity leave (two weeks in Poland), while another told the story of an employer's unwillingness to give him leave:

> *M3: The [paternity] leave is good. Me for example, if I take fathers' leave, I will be sure that I can sustain my family, e.g. that I can pay the bills, and I will have money from one month to another. That I will be sure that I can go back to my work (…) (FGI_10)*

The institutional and structural context of implementation of gender equality in the family
Labour market context

Participants see the strong links between the organisation of family life and the labour market, especially in the case of women. The situation of women at home impacts their participation in the labour market, but also treatment at work impacts women's situation at home. The situation of men was discussed only in relation to fathers' leave (described above):

> *F8: (…) how we treat ourselves at work causes difficulties, or facilitates in private life. If at work I am treated differently because I am a mother, this would impact how I am treated at home or how I am allowed to realise myself in regular private situations. (FGI_8)*

> *F3: This [daily life] is for me a base. Daily life, this is where it all starts. If in this sphere we do not try to improve, as a woman or a man [there will be no equality]. And, this is what later leads to different forms of discrimination at work, to consolidation of stereotypes and so on. (FGI_2)*

In fact, when asked what could be done for better equality at home, the group of participants who are receiving social benefits stated that there is a need for equal pay for women and men (FGI_7). The salary level is a basis of power relations between partners and then the organisation of family life, but also future quality of life (e.g. women would receive a lower pension as a result) (Krzaklewska and Ratecka 2014). As also described by the

participants in the group of professionals (see next quote), the salary level has an impact on the decision concerning the division of maternity leave:

> *Mo1: I have a question regarding family life. Because you are talking here about division of duties. That this is needed to have equality. Is there anything else, besides this division of cooking, cleaning, somethings else that is needed for equality? What is needed to feel in a relationship that this relationship is equal?*
> *M1: Maybe salaries, that they are equal.*
> *F2: Yes, work.*
> *M1: Work, salaries, so they are equal.*
> *F1: Most of all so there is opportunity [for a woman] to go to work similarly to a man, and most of all, so there are no such drastic salary gaps for the same positions at work.*
> *F1, F2: Retirement age.*
> *F2: Terrible, terrible.*
> *M1: Your [women's] retirement is really low… (FGI_7)*

The decision on who should take parental leave should also be considered in the context of earnings, higher unemployment among women and pay gap. This would mean that it is more likely that a woman will stay at home to take care of the children unless she has a better position at work and her salary is higher compared to that of her partner/husband. In fact, the economic conditions or situation at work (e.g. unemployment) could determine the choice more strongly than individual will. The last quote, from an elderly women from the countryside, shows this clearly:

> *F5: I had this situation at home that my mother had a stronger negotiation position, she was earning more than my father, which was quite unusual in those times and … so…. Rapid decision, my father earns less so he stays with the child at home. She earns more so she goes back quicker to work. And in this way I was brought up by my father as my mother returned to work quickly [after childbirth] (…)… today when I asked a similar question to my partner, he said: listen, I am eager to do so, but this is not financially reasonable. You get much lower benefits, or you get… your salary is much lower, so… even if we share it half and half, we will lose out financially, as… I earn more than you. (FGI_1)*

> *M2: (…) if a woman earns better money, then she goes to work. Simple and logical, it seems to me. (FGI_10)*

> *F3: For me, I had this situation. When [my daughter] was born, my [partner] almost… almost lost his job, and she was born, so what? He stayed with the child, did laundry and cooked. And you could get disposable nappies then, but we couldn't afford that. So, he – thinking economically – needs to wash nappies, if he stays home, doesn't he? So he did and cooked… (FGI_4)*

In case of health leave, when the child is sick the duty of care is immediately placed on the mother. This was described by a mother from the parents group – even if she indicates external factors, which is the father's work organisation, she says that there are no exceptions from the rule that it is her who is responsible:

F8: So in my experience, it is often the case that if a child is sick… this is maybe linked to my husband's work, he cannot postpone things, (…), so maybe for these reasons, all such situations requiring leave [to take care of a sick child] are fall me. (FGI_8)

Besides women's worse situation in the labour market, the change within the market as such is perceived as having a major impact on family relations. The notion of **overworking** – working very long hours, intensive character of work and tiredness linked to it – causes people to have less time for family relations, outsourcing the care to institutions:

M4: There will be no greater contact, because previously one worked 8 hours, even on Saturdays, but after 8 hours… and today one takes 10 hours, there are free Saturdays, and when there are free Saturdays and Sundays a wife and husband want to rest and that's it. No one wants to take care of the children. There are nursery schools, how many nurseries were there before? Now they want a nursery in every place and after a year they want a child to be taken to nursery and to have peace. I observe this and I see how it is. But, on the other hand, [before] even if men or women were at work for 10 hours they did nothing. They took care of trivial things for 10 hours. And now the [work] it is so busy/engaging, and additionally the computers. This is very tiring, more tiring than physical work. And me for example, I work near my home, I have my workshop, so I go home to have tea, and chat with my kid. Even in my workshop, I looked after my child, when my wife went somewhere, to the doctor or somewhere else. (FGI_10)

Quality of life also suffers from the **different organisation of work and lack of time** (especially in the younger generation of employees). There is a feeling of acceleration of time and lack of reservoirs of free time. Overworking, working late hours, unstable and irregular working hours cause tiredness which impacts later on the family relations, the ability to make use of free time or practise one's hobby, but also participation in the community life or civic engagement.

F5: I only work at night, and after coming back from work at night I do not go to sleep, I work full time. My husband also works nights now, every second night. So we are in this period that we always pass each other. He comes home, I leave. [we are] on the phone, [leaving] notes on the table… and even when yesterday he was home, and went to sleep as he was tired, he was irritating me! (FGI_8)

F3: My two children are already married, and I do not see them all week, so I would like them to come for dinner on Sunday. I would cook [then], otherwise there is no way to meet them, or talk, as they are… always in hurry. (FGI_4)

This heightened engagement in professional work is stirred up by **the importance of consumption**. The growing importance of money, new products and consumerism, raises the importance of work, which has a negative impact on family life and the position of women in the labour market. As the below quote illustrates, the involvement of women in the labour market is not because the family does not have financial security, but because of a need for excess material possession.

F4: I think that in general the times have changed a lot, and for example two days ago my granddaughter concluded that mummy has to work, otherwise daddy would be too much overburdened if she did not work, you see, and daddy would be too tired and the money is needed. Today we have different economic needs, a totally different world is surrounding us. We have overproduction and we want all these new products, not only the young. (FGI_9)

State support for parents

As for policy interventions, the respondents suggested and/or discussed **maternal/parental salary and payment of retirement benefits during unpaid care leave** [*urlop wychowawczy*]. The maternity/parental salary would mean a base payment for those mothers who decided to stay at home instead of going back to work and sending their child to nursery. This is discussed as a sign of appreciation of the mother's work, but it is also seen as an important element for assuring women's financial independence. Furthermore, payment of retirement benefits has been seen as an important mechanism guaranteeing women an independent pension when in retirement. Moreover, the salary would not be limited solely to mothers, but also be available to other persons taking care of small children full-time:

Mo: So I have a question to you. Because we discussed care at length, and we said this is hard work… So what do you think about the idea of a parental salary, for a mother or for a father who stays at home and takes care of the children.
M3: I'm in favour, I'm in favour!
F2, F3: Very good idea!
F3: I think that then all the preschool-nursery care and so on, the people would not rush with the children there, (…), they would just be very keen to use it [parental salary]. Only the financial motivation that women come back [to work] for example.
F1: And those in the worst situation are women who do not work at all and they are fully dependent on their husbands.
M4: Like my wife. She doesn't work. She needs to care for our child until the child is 3 years old. Nursery is too expensive, and also I was hesitant to send my children to nursery. (FGI_7)

Another point concerning the state support included the **availability of nurseries and preschools**, and **state's support for children** (children benefits), which would result in better financial condition for families. Interestingly, in the group of professionals the benefits would be spent to arrange paid care for children, while among the people receiving social benefits it would be spent on more basic needs:

F1: If there were a substantial benefit for families with children, so first of all, mothers who wish to do so (of choice) would stay at home with their children and there would be no financial problems. Or they could hire a nanny for children and go back to work. So in general there would be no problem how to share the duties, so that the mum has to be 100% mother, plus working mother, plus a cleaning lady and everything in one. And there would be people to help, simply as they would have money.

F2: So, there are plenty of families, at least among my acquaintances, my friends, practically all the women just went back to work quickly, and they said they preferred to earn and pay the help, nanny, than to sit at home with the child. I think I was the only one who stayed at home with the children. (FGI_1)

M4: (…) something has changed nowadays. But you need to have three children. (…) with one child, it is just a disaster for a parent. Yes. [Parental] leave is okay. We are able to get to know our children, and this is what life is about, so the father and mother raise the children well. But as I say, benefits for three children, this is OK, great, fantastic, you are able to survive. Vegetating, vegetating, so pay the rent, modest food, and it is difficult with the clothes and so on. You need to go to second-hand stores unfortunately and there… (…)
F1: But [benefits] are so much lower than during communism. During communism, each large family with many children got high family benefits. (…)
M4: [Now] this means 340 zloty from the City Council for three children, that's nothing.
F2: That is ridiculous. (FGI_7)

Concerning the changes within the labour market, one solution mentioned by a female participant was giving a woman raising children the opportunity to **work 75% for a full salary**. This solution is based on the thinking that women needs to do more work at home and with children, and allowing her to work less would save her energy, leaving her with more for her children:

F4: So women should have some additional benefits to the salary, and while not earning less working, for 75% for example, because she will always have more duties. (...) [Let me give an example] After a tiring journey, I was driving or my husband, he is tired and exhausted, but I made tea or coffee for them. Because a woman has something in her, these are her predispositions… she will find some energy. I think, that women [should work] half or 75%, and be able to be fulfilled professionally and at the same time raise and transfer [knowledge] to their children. (FGI_9)

This discussion on state benefits is also linked to the discussion on the labour market, as parental leave benefits are linked to the employment system – this is why elimination of precarious contracts was seen as very important, as at present they do not give the right to other social security entitlements (such as unemployment benefit, health leave or maternity benefit). Interestingly, this was more often mentioned by elderly people who are worried about the situation of their children and grandchildren than by young people themselves, who, raised in an individualised economy, do not expect such guarantees.

Conclusions

For achievement of the vision of "*partnerstwo*" and co-responsibility, the individual effort was seen as the most important for introducing change. Most respondents see the woman – who is the immediate beneficiary of the change – as the one responsible for realising this vision. But others note that it has to be an effort also made by men, who, when in a

relationship, also bear the responsibility for the well-being of their partner and whole family as such. Some respondents see the potential in the next generation and perceive it as a task of parents to educate children about gender equality and give them the right example as a couple. Not all the participants opted for an equality-based relationship. Among men, but also women from smaller villages and older people, traditional division of duties was perceived as more beneficial, and in the context of rural areas fairer.

The participants discussed the impact of the wider structural context on gender equality, and agreed that individual effort has to be backed by structural or institutional changes. The elements of this support for individual struggles to achieve more gender equality and higher quality of life demand: better state support and policy intervention; better situation on the labour market (less precarious contracts which do not give rights to parental leave or pension, elimination of gender pay gap) and a change in employers' attitudes towards undertaking parental leave.

One of the most interesting results stemming from the focus group interviews is the **negotiative character of gender inequalities in family life.** This shows that there is **a debate and conflictual situation over different family models and the costs and benefits of each of them.** A certain division of work is not given or taken for granted, but negotiated, commented upon, or defended. Even the inequalities need to be argued and rationalised – for example traditional division of tasks is discussed and its defenders have their own arguments (e.g. FGI_10, FGI_5). No longer is inequality "a given" concept which does not call for debate or confirmation, but even those who prefer not to change it need to find good arguments for its legitimisation.

Gender equality in the labour market – myth or reality?

Much discussion in the focus group interviews was centred on access to and participation in the labour market. This sphere is seen as central from the perspective of gender equality and quality of life. For many participants, gender equality in the labour market is an important value and a standard which should be met. However, while discussing this area in detail, they provide numerous examples of inequalities as well as few examples of individual attempts to tackle them, while positive examples of achieving equality are rarely mentioned. Due to persistent discrimination against women in the workplace, the participants focus mostly on women's involvement in the labour market, but they often referred to a broader context, pointing to the structural conditions shaping the labour market as well as the cost and benefits

of a professional career for women and men. They addressed problems such as horizontal and vertical segregation at work, the glass ceiling, the gender pay gap and the influence of parenthood on access to and position in the labour market.

The participants themselves do not question equal access to the labour market and equal income for women and men. Providing equal opportunities seems to them to be a foundation for good society as well as an undeniable direction for change. However, their opinions vary in terms of explaining why this is important and to what extent all professions should be accessible for women and men. For some of them, the decision to be involved in the labour market is caused by the economic situation; for others, it is a way of self-development and a sign of equality.

> *F3: Do you really think that only few women work today? Because it seems to me that few people can afford for only the man to work. We live in such times that both partners have to work because simply they cannot afford for only one person to work, they cannot afford it financially. (FGI_2)*

> *F4: Women should have the same rights in education, pay.*
> *F2: In employment.*
> *F4: In employment, in everything. (FGI_9)*

Another axis of looking at gender equality in the labour market is highlighted by a woman who points out that it is important for women to work because in this way they can be more independent: "a woman should have a few pennies of her own so that she does not have to ask [for money] for sanitary towels, tights, stockings, things like that, does she? Pocket money" (FGI_7). Regardless of the motivation explaining women's involvement in the labour market, this change also requires an adjustment on the part of men. As a male respondent admits, men have to recognise women's right to decide whether they want to pursue a career or be a stay-at-home mothers or carers, and should also learn how to accept their choices. The below quotation shows the shift from an unequal relationship to an equal one which happened over a respondent's life course:

> *M7: From my experience, 30 years ago when I was married and now, one year after I got married, you know, in the past, a wife was a housewife – "kurą domową" – you could say that. Money had to be given and she was looking after the child. Simply, she did not have… If she said something, a man was outraged that she wanted to go to work or something and now it's not like this. We have to move on, we men have to switch to another track of reasoning. (FGI_9)*

It is also important to note that contradictory situations were presented. In a few cases, the respondents refer to their friends or family's stories to discuss unequal relations between partners and demonstrate that women's participation in the labour market can be denied by

their partners. As one of the respondents admits:

> *F2: But with my sister, she was born in the 70s…The man closed her in a gold cage.*
> *M1: Oh God!*
> *F2: He told her: "you don't go to work, I will earn for everything". He is an electrician, puts those cables in other's houses so he earns well. She was housebound at the age of twenty-six. At home they have everything, three hundred thousand a month. Of course, in bank accounts, because not everything went into their hands. And what? She is 44 now and won't get any job. If her husband should find himself a new woman or die she is left practically with nothing. She hasn't worked even a year. And today she regrets that she didn't go to work, and she has to raise the children, has to stay at home. (FGI_7)*

According to the respondents, the belief that the man is the main breadwinner in a family and the woman is responsible for housework and childbearing places women in a private sphere, depriving them of autonomy and independence. It also has an impact on their social security – extended economic inactivity beyond care leave means a lack, or at least a lower level, of social and health security. Thus, in the cases described above, the costs of inequality in the labour market are higher for women than for men. On the other hand, the benefits that labour participation in the market bring to women are noticed in the respondents' opinions, but their approach is far from being uncritical. As one of the female participants notes (FGI_1), women's involvement in the labour market made them more independent but it did not necessarily lead to redefinition of their care and housework responsibilities (see e.g. Sarata 2011; Chustecka 2010). To describe women's position in the labour market she refers to the concept of "the grateful slave"[10] to reflect on women's role and position: their engagement in care and their professional career, and their impact on women's situation. In this context, introducing gender equality entails higher costs for women than for men.

The participants emphasise the positive changes in the labour market, such as providing new opportunities for women and men, narrowing gender gaps and progress in introducing an equality law and regulations. At the same time, they also discuss social and cultural barriers, pointing out that women's work is often unrecognised, unaccounted for and less paid, as well as highlighting that women remain in gender-stereotyped occupations. Due to cultural and structural obstacles, the process of empowering women and challenging the traditional role of the man as the main breadwinner might be more difficult, and the cost of gender equality might be higher for women.

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[10]The respondent mentions that the term was used by the Polish sociologist Henryk Domański, although she does not mention his name. She uses this concept as a general argument in a discussion (she puts it in its context) but does not provide a clear definition of how she understands it.

Occupational segregation in the labour market

While talking about participation in the labour market, the respondents stress the existence of horizontal and – to a lesser extent – vertical segregation. This issue was discussed in almost all focus group interviews, and the respondents presented a broad spectrum of opinions. Only a few participants in the study claim that the labour market is gender-neutral and that gender does not impact occupational choices. In their view, position and opportunities in the labour market depend on each person's skills, knowledge, qualifications and quality of work.

Horizontal segregation

The prevailing view among the respondents underlines that there is gender segregation in the labour market. The respondents can easily identify typical jobs of men and women, and they still see gender as a strong delineator of career choices. However, their opinions vary regarding the extent to which workplaces continue to favour only women or men. On a general level, they emphasise that jobs considered as feminised or masculinised are nowadays more open to the entry of women (in the case of male professions) and men (in the case of female professions).

> *F1: [Name of M2], there are occupations that are typically male, well, and there are also those typically female, well, but I'm not saying, because the guy might be... now a guy can be a hairdresser or a dressmaker, but... (FGI_3)*
> *M1: [...] at our [workplace] one lady became a welder. She wanted to earn as much as we do and decided to change it. Previously she operated a lathe and changed her mind and decided to become a welder and generally she works in this profession and is very good at what she does. Everyone knows that she has [inaudible] a little less than we do because, you know physical differences, safety regulations define your work and you just do it. So, I don't know, there are female drivers, previously we did not have them and now there are more and more in buses, trams, more and more you see. I don't know, in day-to-day life, in a car, no one wonders now whether it is a man or a woman. (FGI_8)*

The respondents are more willing to accept crossing the gender boundaries in feminised and masculinised occupations, and they are not in favour of sustaining strong gender boundaries, but gender segregation remains a problem since it restrains women and men from pursuing a career in a chosen field. As a result, women and men often continue to work along gender lines. This is caused, among others, by the fact that the change takes place very slowly: it is more visible in the general attitudes of people who in principle are more open to various career choices, whereas it is still difficult on an individual level, where a person has to cope with the cultural, structural or institutional constraints preventing them from following a career path determined entirely by their skills and qualifications. This situation is more difficult for women who have become aware of discrimination based on

gender at different stages of their career: upon entry to the profession, while applying for a promotion or after taking leave to care for children. Male domination in a profession may result in a woman postponing her career, or may even lead to their dismissal from work. As a result, the female participants in our study argue that gender equality has not been achieved yet:

> *F3: As for equality, it's... well..., I don't feel it. I don't feel it either in my professional life, as most positions are taken by men, or in terms of salary. (FGI_7)*

In sum, the segregation and unequal treatment of women and men in the labour market was noted during the focus group interviews, and the key factors responsible for both processes can be singled out from the discussion as follows:

- Biological/physical differences
- Maintaining a gender-divided career path in the education system
- The impact of stereotypes on the situation of women and men at work.

Biological differences

The participants in the focus group interviews explain the existence of horizontal segregation by emphasising the physical differences between women and men. They refer to different biological predispositions such as physical strength, as well as to difficult working conditions, to justify why women would not be the best workers in particular professions. Such an approach is especially visible among male participants from the fire brigade, who perceive horizontal segregation as a phenomenon that is positive and beneficial for women, as it protects them from heavy, physical labour. Regardless of the fact that they educate their own daughters to be able to work in both male and female professions, they would encourage them not to choose an occupation which requires physical strength and which is performed in hazardous conditions. However, for them this does not mean that women should be forbidden to follow certain professional paths, but rather that they should choose more comfortable spaces for their own good:

> *M4: We happened to have daughters so we want them to be able to do everything. Since their childhood we've tried to teach them to do male professions.*
> *Mo: (…) Are there any occupations your daughters might choose which you say no, you can't do it?*
> *M7: If they wanted to work in the mines.*
> *Mo: Well, in the mines, if they wanted to be a miner.*
> *M7: In the mine or steel works, do some hard work, (…). Few fathers would allow their daughters to work to death. (…)*
> *M3: The father wants the best for her.*
> *Mo: Well, but we want the same for a boy and for a girl.*

M3: Well, yes.
M4: Me, for example, I don't see a woman working as a butcher, a miner, steelworker. (...)
Mo: And in general, is it a matter of physical power that a woman could not [do it] herself, well, that it was harder for her, because...
M4: In the army, I can't see a woman loading a cannon… or being in a tank, I don't see it. Well, but I like women flying F16s. (...)
Mo: Well, women now serve in the military.
M2: And it's even quite a few, as you can see, there are many women in the military.
M4: Well, but for special operations such as on the front, to pave the way for others, women should not be there, because it's killing, so – no. (FGI_10)

Another argument used by the participants from the fire brigade refers to the efficiency in performing duties at work requiring physical strength. In their opinion, gender differences are visible in such professions as men are able to do physical work more quickly and better. Their standpoint is reflected in the following quotation:

M4: You know, in our professions, such as the majority of us have here, women don't work in these factories because this work is typically for men and you know, a man will do it better and faster and [because of that] he has to earn more.
Mo: But it is because of the physical strength that he earns better because...
M4: Well, because there are professions which require more strength, locksmith or carpenter...
M1: This work requires strength…
M4: These are difficult professions...
M2: Typically for men. (FGI_10)

It is significant that the participants in our study do not limit their explanation only to biological factors, i.e. that women are physically weaker than men, thus preventing them from pursuing a career in some fields. During the focus group interview with seniors, the participants acknowledge biological predispositions, but in their opinion these differences do not lead directly to the segregation in the labour market. According to them, occupational segregation can be seen as a sign of respect towards women who have different biological predispositions. In this way, they add another layer to their explanation: they acknowledge that women have different biological predispositions and they think that this should be recognised from a "moral perspective" (F2, FGI_9). Thus, the segregation in the labour market is perceived neither as a lack of equality between women and men nor as a discriminatory practice. To some extent, this approach resembles the opinion expressed by the firefighters and their protective behaviour towards their daughters. As a woman from the focus group interview with seniors admits,

F4: But there are also occupations in which men fit better and then let's not… because in the same way, a woman can move as many kilos and a man can move some kilos. Let's [define] that the equality is from the moral point of view, just out of respect and so

on and not just from the physical [predisposition]. [...] Equality [does not mean] that everything is the same. (FGI_9)

It appears that the opportunities and expectations have changed in the sense that the professions are not strictly defined as gender-typed, but the belief on what occupation is suitable for women and men remains strong. This has an ambiguous impact on the quality of life and well-being of women and men, although the participants in the study do not discuss it. They focus on mapping situations in which women and men are treated differently in the labour market and emphasise that the biological predispositions of women and men can create some constraints for accessing particular types of occupations. However, they do not go beyond that: they do not speak about the consequences of these practices, such as distress, low self-esteem and depression, or even withdrawal from the labour market (see European Commission 2009). Quite the opposite: they often speak about the advantages of gender segregation for women, perceiving this phenomenon as a way of protecting them. Interestingly, they do not reflect on the cost of working in dangerous conditions for men. Such segregation often causes health inequalities, as men tend to be exposed to more physical risks in workplaces, while women are protected by shifting them to more secure sectors of the labour market (European Commission 2009). Thus, men are more likely to report physical exhaustion and work-related health risks.

Education

One of the themes discussed during the focus group interviews was equal access to education and the role of education in shaping young girls' and boys' aspirations, preferences and choice of career path. This discussion overlaps with that on occupational segregation and stereotypes. The participants emphasise the importance of the area of study: even if both women and men have equal access to education, situations may appear where boys and girls, no matter their competences or even interests, may be discouraged from following an education track which is not typical for their gender. It is noteworthy that this problem was not discussed in depth, even among young people (FGI_2 and FGI_3), and our study provided only a few examples of the practices leading to unequal treatment of boys and girls at school. This problem is well illustrated by the story of a female participant who had to struggle with a teacher in order to avoid being placed in a "suitable" profession for young girls.[11] Her teacher did not take her competences or interests into account, but based the decision on sending her to a particular type of school on stereotypes and on women's culturally established career paths. After a

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[11]Note that this story happened around 30 years ago.

period of some turbulence and confusion, our respondent managed to follow the career path she wanted, but she encountered discriminatory remarks even in secondary school. What was striking in her story was that the expectations to follow a gendered career path was voiced by a female teacher who had had to follow similar path as hers in order to get her job:

> *F1: (...) I noticed at school – primary school – the division between a girl and a boy created by the teachers themselves. It happened to me when..., well, I was just about to finish eighth grade, we had to determine already in the first semester who would be going to which school and so on. So I wrote my type of school and the teacher [told me] to come with my parents (some laughter).*
> *Okay! So it started, that it made no sense at all, that I would not finish this school, this and that. My dad said to the teacher that it was my choice and why would you get in her way? Okay, we skipped, and I went to the school where I wanted to. In the second year of high school, a female teacher, who was teaching one of the electronic subjects, so she had also had to graduate from such a school as mine, [said] to me something like: "you, women to the kitchen and not to this school!" I said: "Excuse me, hello?! What type of school did you graduate from that today you're teaching one of the professional subjects? Why didn't you go to the kitchen?" (...) How can a tutor..., I mean a professor come out with something like that to a student? Women to the kitchen! (FGI_7)*

Women also reported that they experience being mocked or laughed at during their studies. A remarkable example was mentioned by a female activist (FGI_5), who talked about her law professor making discriminatory comments during his lectures:

> *F12: Well, I have to tell you that during our first meeting for our study programme, Professor [name of professor] came and looked [at us]. "There are too many women in this group, but we will deal with this, don't worry. Maybe you ladies will think twice. There are so many beautiful occupations. A hairdresser, a cook," he said. "You bastard," everyone must have thought, because this was the approach [to women's engagement in the labour market]. It was in 1974. (FGI_6)*

The study provides only a few examples of discriminatory practices in the education system. However, it is evident that it is not only studies that matter for the career path, but also the attitude of teachers and professors can create an additional constraint for undertaking untypical occupations. This cultural context shapes the opportunities in the labour market, and by leading young girls to choose feminised occupations may increase the risk of their poverty and social exclusion, as they would receive a lower salary. On a similar note, encouraging young boys to follow a traditional career path and choose typically male occupations may reinforce an unequal relationship between men and women in workplaces and in the labour market in general.

Stereotypes

The role of cultural norms and stereotypes in the labour market that emerges from the focus group interviews is seen as very complex. There is no doubt that cultural norms and

stereotypes matter: they influence the behaviour of both employers and employees, and can also be used as ready-made explanations or rationalisation of decisions to cover up the fact that they have been taken on other grounds.

Over the past decades, women have become well educated, but employers still associate them with qualities and social skills often perceived as feminine (Kobiety i mężczyźni na rynku pracy 2012; Kowalska, Migalska, Warat 2014; Płeć a możliwości ekonomiczne 2004). As a result, they are more likely to pursue a career which requires compassion, empathy, warmth, a high degree of verbal competences, understanding, a focus on people or acting under the influence of emotions, while men are seen as better suited for a job requiring authority, self-confidence, rationality or political game-playing.

> *M4: Trust, after all, as an accountant, trust is higher, you know.*
> *F1: ... I mean, a woman has better self-discipline. (...)*
> *F1: And let's say that women are more precise, and, let's be honest…*
> *M3: It's easier to call them and ask for [help]. (FGI_7)*
>
> *M9: For example, a man applied for a job at an insurance company dealing with car accidents, as he knew that they only employ women because they claim that someone who has just had a car accident would prefer to talk to a woman. It [talking to a woman rather than a man] would calm them down. This person would be less nervous. (FGI_8)*

The participants in the study claim, based on their own experiences, that these gender-based stereotypes have a great impact on the position of women and men in the labour market, especially in occupations perceived as typically male. They speak of situations in which women's work has not been acknowledged by the employer or client, or women were not employed at all or were forced to work under the name of a male colleague.

> *F2: From my point of view, as an architect, I must say, unfortunately, that there are some stereotypes. To give some examples, I met some customers, investors, and there was a problem. Because in general, men are always responsible for such things, even if they come with women, they trust men to a greater extent, because... well, all in all, I gave up and... and my husband, also an architect, deals with clients... I say that they are happy because they had a man in front of them and… at home… I did these projects and I have always been very ... amused that they don't know… I didn't complain about it, but nevertheless a woman did not arouse such trust when it comes to technical things. I think it's bad. I hope this is changing, although I do not see it yet in my profession. (FGI_1)*

When accessing and progressing in the workplaces, women still have to prove that they are able to work in masculinised professions. Not only do they have to face resistance in being accepted as qualified and competent, but they also struggle with masculine norms. As a result, they find it harder to develop their careers.

> *F1: Me, to give you an example, I've participated in various international fairs, in*

Poland as well, especially here in Krakow, I took part in several international fairs in [the district of] Czyżyny. They were lathe machine fairs, so rather related to a male occupation. And – I'm honest with you – on all the stands from Krakow I was treated as: a woman – she knows nothing about it; it's a waste of time talking to her… I was even told that there was nothing they could discuss with me. But on other stands, from other cities, it was even easy to notice among the staff, that all the stands had male and female [representatives]. But on the stands from Krakow, there were only men. Let's be honest, I have a male occupation. (FGI_7)

F1: I'm an electronics engineer but I also worked on lathe machines which are numerical or computer controlled, as one wishes. And to be honest, in these occupations, we [women] are in a worse position. They prefer to have men in these occupations. I myself have proved many times that I am able to do this job, I've proved many times that I'm even more precise than men. I even had interns… (FGI_7)

F4: Because it is quite important. When I graduated from the sculpture programme, you know, everyone starts thinking what to do next. And one might think of staying at the university. But I was aware that since I'm a woman, it might not work… It's not going to be accepted, something like that. That I'd have to give up because I'm in a lost position… in that sense. And I gave up and [then] I returned eight years later. (FGI_1)

The respondents quoted above experienced adversity and unequal treatment in their workplaces, but one of them (from FGI_1) still has a positive view on the career opportunities, as she believes that the situation will change for better, leading to the disappearance of stereotypes in the future and creating equal access to all professions for women and men.

The slow transformation of stereotypes also has an impact on the situation of men in the labour market. Defeminisation and demasculinisation of occupations leads to an end to male domination in particular professions, but also opens new career paths for them. The examples to which the majority of respondents refer are kindergarten and primary school teachers and nurses. According to the respondents, men are still underrepresented in these professions, but interestingly these differences are not a result of gender-based pressure, but are caused by lower salaries in feminised sectors of employment. This discussion among the participants of the focus group interviews shows that gender stereotypes are influential in determining women's position in the labour market, whereas other factors (especially financial) are also taken into account to explain the position of men.

M7: Maybe there are no men for this job?
M3: ...tutor in a kindergarten, teacher in a kindergarten.
F4: Like at schools, universities, in classes 1-3 there are only a few men.
F8: There are more and more.
F4: At schools, there are a few men but it is explained that his salary is low.
M7: This is true. (FGI_8)

The dominant framework of discussions on the impact of stereotypes focused on the

costs and benefits of the process of breaking them. Since these stereotypes are considered to be a covert form of constraint for implementing gender equality, it is more difficult to tackle them. It is interesting that in one of the focus group interviews (FGI_8), a male participant states that this form of unequal treatment should not be described as a discriminatory practice as many people use them in an unconscious way. However, in this context it is worth noting that people in general tend not to speak about discrimination, and they may not have the knowledge to define particular practices as discrimination (see Stypińska 2011).

> *M7: I think that the chances [for women and men] at work are different. My daughter studies in Scotland and she wants to work in film. There was a study in which many questionnaires were sent to employers with the same CV but with different names. It seems that [being a woman or a man] has a great impact. Thus, there are occupations in which women have lower chances. She [the daughter] thinks that this is true for her occupation. And it is not about rights, the rights are there, but when people choose a person to employ, they decide based on I don't know what, but partly gender is taken into account.*
> *F8: A belief that someone can be better at something.*
> *M7: I think it's very unconscious. I think this is a real problem in a sense of satisfying one's needs and very difficult to solve… because when you look at people.*
> *Mo: Access to occupations is on the one hand constrained by legal regulations, but on the other there is resistance from employers. We can look at these as two sides of the same [problem]…*
> *M7: No, because it is about unconscious resistance…*
> *Mo: Unconscious.*
> *M7: When you look at a person: "Well, I don't see it" but in fact you think that this is because she is a woman, but you don't realise that.*
> *Mo: So this is unconscious discrimination, when you discriminate against people without realising that.*
> *M7: I wouldn't say that this is discrimination, but rather unconscious.*
> *Mo: Unconscious unequal treatment.*
> *M7: Yes. (FGI_8)*

Vertical segregation

Apart from occupational segregation, the respondents talk about vertical segregation. This problem was not discussed in depth, and the arguments presented during the discussions referred to the underrepresentation of women in managerial positions and different style of leadership. According to the respondents, women are believed to work in professions which do not require skills or knowledge, since the top positions are male-dominated. This opinion is reflected in the following quotation:

> *M1: So, here there are no chances at all... There are some women that are promoted fairly high and so on, but most of them, as we look (...) most of them in the shops are women. (FGI_7)*

The participants define vertical segregation as discriminatory: women are not given

equal chances and opportunities in progressing with their careers, and continue to be underpromoted (Balcerzak-Paradowska 2004; Desperak 2009; Kobiety i mężczyźni na rynku pracy 2012; Kowalska, Migalska, Warat 2014; Lisowska 2014; Przybysz 2012).

Working environment

In the light of our study, there are indications that working to make gender relations more equal is beneficial not only for individuals but also for a company/institution or the entire work team. The respondents point out that diversified teams are more effective because women create a better environment at work based on lack of tensions.

> *M1: I am talking seriously, I will tell you something, because these firms, I had one huge one during the communist system, that was a state institution, situated fairly high, and we actually asked for every department to have women, because those tensions...*
> *Mo: Were relieved.*
> *M1: Were relieved. Seriously, it was horrible. And when women came... (FGI_7)*

This positive effect of having gender-mixed teams is contrasted with the performance of teams dominated only by men or women. In both cases, it was believed that the atmosphere at work is based on hostility, competition and lack of solidarity. The motives lying behind this behaviour are not always clear and unambiguous. According to the respondents, in male-dominated teams, it is almost expected to strive against one another to achieve goals, whereas women tend to compete with other women because they are seen as easier opponents than men.

> *F4: I work at a university where there are twenty men and five of us [women]... that is this equality... among the teaching staff (...) and this is the manly way of living based on the rule that life is a war and every interlocutor is an enemy and for example it bothers me a lot. I would like to talk with somebody as with a friend, right? That he falls over, I fall over (...) and it is easier, right? But there is a war [between us]. (FGI_1)*
> *F2: It is simply a competition, we need to admit that it [the competition] is there because it is easier [to compete] with a woman than with a man, and this is why one always looks for a weaker opponent. We know this rule. (FGI_6)*

In a similar way, the respondents suggest that women are jealous of other women's achievements at work. When a woman becomes aware of other woman's success or power, her feeling of security is threatened and her ability to cooperate declines. The need to prove to herself and to others that she is good enough may lead her to waste her time on envy instead of self-improvement. Thus, the lack of security and the constant need to prove one's own competence at work might be high for women, but it can also have a negative impact on the team dynamic and cooperation.

Mo: OK, so to finish this economic, professional topic can you recall or do you know a person, institution that is against women taking these roles, that does not like it and tries to make some arguments that women should after all play those traditional roles?
M4: I'm sure there are, but this is because of jealousy.
Mo: Jealousy?
M4: I guess those who are jealous. A logical, clear-headed [person would say]: if you want to do it, do it. A woman is also a human being. (FGI_10)

F7: But it is like that, because if you achieve some success professionally, pass an exam, are professionally promoted, have better earnings so then you lose your colleagues behind the wall and they are malicious in such a way as to only put enough water in the kettle to fill their own mugs and I have to run by myself with the kettle. So small malice so they can show me that I am different because I achieved something. There is no joy like "nice, I did something, I earned it" but instead you have this… (FGI_6)

One of the female participants presents the issue of female-dominated teams in a more nuanced way. She highlights that basing a company/institutions on "women's norms" or female leadership does not necessarily lead to more equal relations at work. In some cases, a female-dominated environment helps to develop women's talents and skills, but in others it may lead to competition and rivalry.[12] She also emphasises the constant struggle with her male boss. Interestingly, she redefines the conflict with her boss in positive terms, as a way of gaining her own independence, delineate borders and struggle with gendered stereotypes.

F5: I would like to add something about competition, because in my work place, because I had a lot of work places and for example when I was working in school that means in a feminised environment, that was amazing, this competition was very much felt. In a different place where I work with female teachers, psychologists and they are mainly women it is no problem, I feel understood there in the same way as here. With whom do I have a problem? With my male boss. At the moment I'm even thinking that it is even good that probably I have a conflict with him, some kind of arguments, I set him boundaries and I resist showing off with my blond hair and from going to work wearing a skirt, even though I do that and then I hear different comments about that. Then I have to explain it to myself somehow. (FGI_6)

In the respondents' view, the composition of a team is an important factor shaping the workplace culture and opportunities for employees to develop their skills and get promotion. However, these problems are not discussed in the context of social prestige or retirement scheme, but are rather seen as important for the current situation on the labour market.

Self-employment of women

Segregation based on gender also occurs on the basis of the type of contract and form of

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[12]The relations between women working together in various institutions/companies/organisations, as well as the competition between women in a professional environment, are discussed in the chapter on civic engagement.

employment. In this context, the participants discuss the paradox of the Polish case. On the one hand, Poland boasts that a great number of women are self-employed (see e.g. Lisowska 2014; Labour Force Survey). This is interpreted as an indication of their enterprise, success and way of pursuing a career. In reality, however, for a large percentage of these women self-employment is the only option available to them. Due to cultural and structural conditions, women are less likely to be offered an employment contract, and the unemployment rate is higher among women (see e.g. Trawińska 2010). In this context, self-employment among women should not be seen as their achievement but rather as a cost of unequal treatment in the labour market.

> *F2: This is in the same way as we talk about women's entrepreneurship, that we are proud as Poland that so many women run their small enterprises and that they are self-employed, that is our success and everyone boasts about it in Europe. But in reality, it is a testimony to our defeat, because most of these self-employed women have those companies because nobody wants to hire them on a full-time contract. These are only the nurses who were denied employment contracts so they could have a self-employed contract; they run their own businesses and pay for themselves. So I think that this would be true for half of those cases of self-employed women presented statistically. [Self-employment] results from discrimination, and not from supporting women's. (FGI_6)*

Engendering the labour market through language

Gender segregation in the labour market is also reflected in the language used to describe job titles.[13] This issue was raised in only two focus group interviews (FGI_1 and FGI_5), but it provides an interesting discussion on the stereotypes that occur, and are reinforced or weakened due to perceptions shaped by language. The analysis of the focus groups interviews reveals a few standpoints on gender-neutral and gender-specific language: in both FGIs there was no unanimity, and the participants presented different perspectives and opinions.

For some participants in the study, using gender-neutral or gender-specific job titles is neither related to the nature of the jobs, nor should it communicate who may be doing these jobs. In their opinion, job titles reflect only the responsibilities and qualification of a person, and using gender-specific names will divert attention from the scope and quality of the work to the gender of the person doing it.

> *F2: I would say, I mean, I will be honest with you, that for example, I am an architect... as anyone will tell you that this is an architect, I do not need to alter this to female architect [*architektka*], which I do not like, because an architect is a profession... a*

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[13]Polish clearly distinguishes masculine and feminine forms of nouns, pronouns and verbs (in the third person). Job titles are not gender-neutral, but typically have a male form. It should be noted that the researchers used gender-specific language.

profession and I do not need to differentiate whether it is a man or a woman. It is a job which I do, and what I notice is that it is just terrible that people are constantly guided by this gender instead of checking whether this person is a good specialist in a particular field… because this should be important, what this person can do and not just refer to: if this is a man, it will be better, if this is a woman, it will be worse. (FGI_1)

Other participants believe that using gender-specific job titles affects women and men, but in a different sense. To begin with, they see this debate as part of the broader problem of gender stereotypes. A male participant in the focus group with young professionals (FGI_1) points out that these stereotypes are reproduced and reinforced by language present in the media. In his opinion, the media has developed a "cult of male experts" (M2, FGI_1) instead of introducing both female and male job titles for the speakers. This "cult of male experts" not only removes female professionals from the language present in media (despite the fact that women are invited to comment on current issues), but also diminishes the trust for women performing their duties, as well as making it harder to use a male job title in feminised occupations. It is worth noting that this participant goes beyond the diagnosis of a situation, but also undertakes actions to change it. He boasts of using female job titles in a documentary film he made: while preparing the captions for the female speakers in the film, he suggested changing the male job titles into female ones. In a follow-up to this story, a woman participating in this focus group interview presented a similar story: she spoke about adding a female form to a male one in her project. For both of them, their actions were defined as pro-equality achievements, an example of individual strategy aimed at introducing more gender equality.

The third perspective on gender-neutral or gender-specific language present in the focus groups interviews was expressed by the participants who emphasised that the male form of job title is a standard description referring to both women and men.

F3: I played this down for a long time but it seems to me that this is significant that, for example, if I say that I am a female pharmacist or someone says that is a female computer scientist, this… it doesn't sound as serious as someone saying "Madam pharmacist" or "Madam computer scientist" or "Madam editor". I think… that there is something in our thinking, in a society that by attributing a male form, we give this job a sort of authority.
F4: Undervalued...
*M2: I wouldn't see this, what you've just said, here. (...) to describe women as spokeswomen or female graphic designer [*graficzką*] and so on… in our language, this is a kind of diminutive and maybe that's what happens, that we think in a less serious way…*
F3: Also we are not accustomed to this.
*F2: … and we are unaccustomed, it's also a fact, isn't it. But the same wording as though the words: female architect [*architektka*], female doctor [*lekarka*] and so on, this is*

something I do not know, grammatically a diminutive form, so maybe that's why too. (FGI_1)

The above quotations are just examples of what the respondents are speaking about. Clearly, the participants supporting this point of view feel uneasy with using gender-specific job titles, and they are opposed to this practice. They acknowledge that using female job titles is more harmful for people performing the duties related to this job than using male job titles to describe them. They claim that male job titles develop positive connotations related to authority, dignity and seriousness, whereas female job descriptions are not seen as well-respected words. Quite the opposite – they have negative connotations, and these jobs are recognised as inferior, with a lower status and lower rating, or simply undervalued. This perception of female job titles is also caused by the fact that in Polish these names are diminutives, causing biases against women. In this way, the language can be seen as a deterrent to gender equality. An even more crucial argument preventing people from using gender-specific forms is the participants' point that members of society "are not accustomed to this [using female job titles]". Using gender-specific names is a new practice in Poland, often marked by ties with feminism. Existing job titles have been perceived as gender-neutral, and as such they have not been questioned in the past; only with typical feminised occupations were the female forms used. This commonly shared practice of using gender-neutral (but in fact male) names may, however, reinforce the gender stereotypes created in the language. Ignoring female job titles might be seen as a symbolic removal of women from the work context. Moreover, the participants who are not enthusiastic about using female job titles do not recognise language as an important tool which can be used to change the social perception and gender-based stereotypes in the labour market.

Family roles

The moment when gender equality became important, or at least noticed, by some of the female respondents can be traced back to the period of pregnancy and bringing up children. Having family, and especially children, is one of the most significant factors accounting for discrimination or exclusion from the labour market for women. For an example of this, one should refer to the following quotations:

F5: During one interview I was asked if I planned to have a family. And they would never ask a man such a question. My partner is my age and he has never had a problem with changing a job, he has never had such questions. And this is natural for him that it's not their business whether he wants to have a family or not. He is a valued employee in the labour market. And I felt on my own that I'm not an attractive employee. And after some time, when I don't have grown-up children, in the back of their minds they think

that she would like to have a family and we will have some loss. She might take sick leave. (...) And this discrimination was even present in international companies with Swedish capital… the discrimination took place during the interview, but only because my interviewer was from Poland. Because when an English-speaking person came, such questions were not asked. (FGI_1)

F3: In the workplace, in searching for a job as well: "A woman? Three kids? No, thank you." Three kids – we have nothing to discuss. (FGI_7)

F1: It's about discrimination, when a person feels that he/she is discriminated against. When I had my second child, [I] took unpaid leave to bring up my child and then they fired me. At that moment, I felt so discriminated against. Well, a woman had a child and instead of helping me, they made me depressed. Finally, they took me back, but it took nine months because there was a reduction at my workplace and it happened that they chose me because I was on leave to bring up a child so "she should be fired". (FGI_9)

The family roles and family plans put women in a disadvantaged position while accessing the labour market as well as progressing at work. Firstly, having a family, or just being around the average age for starting a family, decreases women's chances of being offered a job. Women share their stories of being asked directly about their plans for children, despite the fact that the law prohibits it. What is important to note here is that none of the male respondents faced discrimination on the grounds of their family obligations, although a story of a man who was fired after taking paternity leave was mentioned (FGI_8).[14]

Secondly, the female respondents speak about being punished at work because of their family situation. As one of them admits, women are an easy target in the case of reduction or structural changes in their workplaces (F1, FGI_9 quoted above). The respondents point out that family responsibilities and an unequal care burden may lead to a situation in which women have to deal with negative attitudes from employers or supervisors, face difficulties in accessing the labour market, suffer from poorer pay, or even lose their clients, who are taken by their colleagues during their maternity/parental leave. They may also be passed over for promotion or even face difficulties when returning to work after maternity/parental leave. This unfavourable and unequal treatment has a significant impact on women in terms of their self-confidence, level of stress, sense of security as well as financial resources and career opportunities (see also European Commission 2009). As a result, they may search for occupational niches offering them flexible working conditions, even at the cost of income and professional development.

The focus group interviews revealed two standpoints on unequal treatment related to

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[14]A discussion on maternity, paternity and parental leave is presented in the chapter on negotiating gender equality in the family.

family responsibilities. One blames the employer for taking actions which lead to discrimination by treating caregivers (and potential caregivers) in a different way to other employees. To prevent such practices in a workplace, special regulation regarding the reconciliation of work and family life should be implemented.

> *F4: But you know what, there would be no such problems and these girls would not have to go on sick leave if it was simply better organised, (...), meaning if a woman... that there is no such thing that during job interview somebody wonders whether she wants to get pregnant or not in the future, it should not be a problem at all, right. (FGI_1)*

The other perspective the participants assume when talking about this problem focuses on the attitude of pregnant women, who from the very beginning of their pregnancy prefer to take sick leave even if their pregnancy is not threatened. This attitude causes a certain public image of women in pregnancy that impacts the attitude of employers.

> *F1: [Name of F5], but I would like to add something. Recently I read an article that we Polish women ourselves caused it. Because a woman gets pregnant on the second month, in the second month of pregnancy she is on sick leave even though there is nothing wrong with her. And that is why... why firms react like that.*
> *M2: But do you know why after two months they [women] go on sick leave? Because they take advantage of their sex... (FGI_1)*

As can be observed in the participants' narrative, women are presented as in need of support from either the employer or the state, or as those who abuse the welfare system. In the latter case, the participants blame both women for taking advantage of their situation (pregnancy) but also the state for not providing adequate support for pregnant women and female caretakers. Thus, the principal approach to greater gender equality in the labour market should refer to the measures challenging the traditional division of care and providing the reconciliation of work and family life.

Power and gender: sexual harassment and violence in the workplace

Bullying and sexual harassment are work-related forms of violence which are a significant barrier to progressing through the labour market and gaining a better quality of life. Tackling workplace violence is difficult, as this problem is still hidden and under-reported. These problems were barely present in the discussions during the focus group interviews, and were mentioned briefly twice in the context of the labour market. In the first case, during the meeting with women from the NGO (FGI_6), one respondent talked about unwanted sexual comments from her employer. She had encountered abusive behaviour from the chair of her company while negotiating a pay rise. In response to her arguments about her experience and qualifications, he only commented on her appearance to her direct supervisor.

F7: ...I went to my female boss, 30 years older than me, to get a pay rise and she says to me: "Go to the manager and work it out with the manager, if he gives you it I will not mind". But it was summer; I remember I was wearing some kind of short trousers, heels and some jacket. I went to him "Dear Manager, this and that argument" and he said "you have your own boss so go to her and work it out with her". I turned around and left, before I got to my office he called her and said "This young [woman] came to me, she has shapely legs," and that was the only thing he remembered from what I said. (FGI_6)

Sexual harassment in the workplace may happen not only to women, but also to men. The latter situations are less common – in our study such a case was reported once.

M1: For example a secretary was hitting on a friend [pause]. And it was so... unpleasant.
Mo: But why are you saying this is an opposite example?
M1: Because... she wanted to take advantage of [him]... and this guy said: that's the end of it [pause]. Indeed, he was called sexist. (FGI_1)

The problems of sexual harassment, verbal propositions or bullying affect women and men. They erodes the sense of agency, security and dignity, as well having an impact on interpersonal relations and being a violation of human rights. Gender-based violence in the workplace not only implies high costs for an individual, but also affects the working environment: the entire team may become less productive or creative.

Gender pay gap

Another issue that came out during the interviews is the gender pay gap. Not only do women predominate in lower-paid sectors, but also, due to hierarchical segregation, they are unlikely to get better salaries. What is perhaps more striking is pay discrimination between women and men working in the same positions. As the respondents admit,

F1: Women in managerial positions always earn less, even though they are in the same position as men. (FGI_2)
F1: It happened to me that I worked with these machines, I had an intern. After one year of work, everybody got a pay rise except me. (FGI_7)

The participants explained the gender pay gap by referring to a broad range of factors. First of all, they noticed a different approach among women and men to their salaries. In their view, women do not negotiate their salary offers and are reluctant to ask for a pay rise. This reservation is based on the assumption that women are less willing to take risks which may lead to higher profits for the company, as well as being unaware that they may negotiate their salary. Moreover, the respondents in our study refer to a "blame the victim" approach, by pointing out women's inability to confer with their employers to reach an agreement beneficial for both sides.

F1: When we talk about power you get a situation that men want more when you ask them about earnings, a man will demand more, and a woman less because men risk more. One may decrease his earnings a bit, but [even then] he will get more than a woman in the end. (FGI_2)

F4: Sometimes we are not aware of the fact that we can ask for something, demand something. I have all these personal matters at work and it turned out that two different designers have the same job description, they do the same. I would say that a girl does more, because she always ends up managing everything, and there is 700 PLN difference between their earnings. Not because the manager wanted that but because she did not even think of demanding a higher rate... (FGI_6)

The opinions quoted above clearly show that the pay difference is shaped by cultural expectations and norms. According to some participants, the social costs of asking for a better salary are much higher for women than for men. Women are afraid to advocate for a better salary because they are afraid that this would show them in a bad light as demanding, arrogant, ungrateful or aggressive. Moreover, they are team- or work-oriented, which means that they are focused on getting the job done and advocating for other team members, putting their own interests aside.

The pay gap is also explained by referring to a biological argument and stereotypes. In the respondents' view, employers often perceive their female employees as physically weaker, slower and less efficient compared to male employees. This image, however, does not withstand confrontation with reality. The discussion among the participants in our study reveals that women and men are approximately equal in their work performance when they have the same responsibilities and duties, but this is not recognised and acknowledged by the employer in their salaries. The influence of biological characteristics and stereotypes on salaries is illustrated by the following quotations:

M3: (…) it appears to me that sometimes – and it should be said out loud – that a woman's salary is lower because men often, or anyone in managerial position, are convinced that women work less professionally.

F4: That they are less focused.

M3: For example. Women are worse drivers, somebody might think.

F4: Exactly, stereotypes. (FGI_8)

According to the participants, women and men should receive the same pay if they do the same job and have similar experience and skills. The gender pay gap is seen as an unjust and unequal practice, and the only justification for different salaries for women and men is when they are given different responsibilities or have different work experience.

Mo: I have a question. Since we are talking about unequal treatment at work and unequal pay, should your employer take into consideration anything else than just responsibilities?

M1: In my opinion no. If there is such a position and such a job, the same work, the same pay. Position, work and that's all.
M3: You can do something better or worse. If someone is a specialist, he/she brings more money to the company than someone less active. A person can go to work and simply fulfil what he/she has to do and finish work without getting involved in the work and another person can become more involved. It may sometimes be worth recognising different work experience or activity etc. for the company's profit. (...)
M1: (...) the basic salary is a basic salary but the employer may give a bonus to anyone he/she wants to, to an employee who brings in more money. (FGI_8)

Among the solutions aimed at overcoming the gender pay gap that the respondents discussed is a regulation – or at least recommendation – on introducing equal salary which should be promoted among employers and managers (especially in the private sector). Such a solution is already partially implemented: the participants emphasise that there are some regulations regarding salaries in the public sector, and the employer has little power to offer bonuses and pay rise; the private sector, meanwhile, is barely regulated, which leaves great space for individual decisions. As one of the participants admits,

F4: And for example, my boss was convinced until he met me [that women may earn less] but not because I worked better but because I explained it to him, that girls... work diligently but less efficiently... oh in this manner... so as a result they should earn less, beside that...
Mo: He perceived them this way, right?
F4: Yes, and beside that, they earn for cleansing swabs, you know (...) because the man is the head of the family, so it is the man who should bring more [money] home. (...) and beside that, a man is more insightful, thinks more creatively, so he... uh... Ridiculous things happened like this, I don't know, my female friend just did project after project and her colleague at the same time was riding a bike in the hall, because this was the way he was working on a new idea, right. And [laughs]... and for my boss it was more valuable because this guy was supposedly thinking creatively [about his idea] and she was doing donkeywork. And because of this she was expected to get a little bit less, and he was expected to get more, right? (FGI_1)

The respondent touches in the discussion upon the main causes of the gender pay gap. Not only does she mention the employer's personal, subjective opinion based on gendered stereotypes, but she also refers to family responsibilities and the position in the family as an explanation for higher salaries for men. As seen in the above quotation, the man is still seen as the main breadwinner and the responsible head of the family, and consequently he is believed to have the right to a higher salary. Women's work is seen as a certain whim, a way of earning additional money to cover their own expenses, even if they share the responsibility for their families' financial security equally with men. In addition, women are seen through their role as mothers and carers: it is assumed that they "may disappear from work for several months" because of pregnancy and childcare (R9, FGI_8) or take sick leave many times. Thus,

the unequal care division and its impact on women's availability at work is also used as an explanation for women's lower salaries.

The respondents also refer to the possibility of opposing unequal practices. They talk about equal pay awakenings – a moment when women realise that their salaries are lower compared to their colleagues at the same levels of seniority or with the same responsibilities and qualifications. Discovering unequal pay may lead to actions such as rejecting a salary offer, quitting the job and looking for a better-paid one. On the other hand, these strategies might be difficult to follow due to power relations at work between the employer/manager and employee, as well as structural conditions (e.g. high unemployment rate, unstable labour market, lack of other work opportunities).

> *F2: For me it was very unfair, but… (…) he is the boss, yes, he sets the rules for salary etc., and actually she could have not agreed for this, yes, when he suggested a rate of pay. And then, I don't know, she has no work and looks for something else…*
> *F1: But what if she didn't get other [work]?*
> *F2: I don't know, I had no impact on things like that, right? The thing that I didn't like it, I don't know, I can tell somebody, but I don't know, nothing depends on me here. So he just stated that a woman has less physical strength than a man and because of that she is able to do less even though she does the same job…*
> *Mo: But, from your point of view, do you think that he, the boss, should have a right to… you know… so unfairly determine salaries?*
> *F2: In general… the boss always sets the rules, right? He presents a contract and presents what everything should look like and… if somebody agrees to this, that is how it must be… I believe that for me it would be unfair, right? If it was fair for her that's her individual choice.*
> *F3: That's nobody's business. (FGI_3)*

Developing the argument of the consequences of unequal salaries, the respondent elaborates on the unequal power relations between the employer (especially in the private sector) and employee, and the lack of institutional tools and mechanisms to diminish the gender pay gap. The employer is described as distant, unbound by regulations and focused on their own interests and financial gains. The working conditions are dictated by the employer: there is no space for negotiations, recognising employees' needs or resistance from employees (except for rejecting the offer). Strikingly, the employee is seen by the respondent as helpless even in a situation of discrimination, as the employer is believed to have the right to offer unjust working conditions. In this context, the vulnerability and limitations on an employee's agency are revealed, especially in the private sector: he/she may either accept the unfair and one-sided offer or look for another job. To follow up on the point made by the respondents, it could be claimed that the current economic system in Poland has led to a situation in which the focus has been taken away from the state or labour market as guarantees of just and equal

treatment of employees and shifted to an individual contract between employer and employee.

To summarise, according to the participants in our study, the gender pay gap is seen as an unjust and unacceptable practice. In this context, gender equality measures are seen as necessary to overcome cultural and structural barriers in order to provide women and men with good working and living conditions.

Gender equality in the labour market and quality of life: challenges and limitations

In the light of our research it is possible to claim that gender equality in the workplace has not yet been achieved, and women still face many constraints in the labour market. Horizontal and vertical segregation persist, although their extent has changed. Undervaluation of women's work and skills, an unsupportive environment, as well as the reconciliation of work and family life are the primary concerns for women. Gender biases are persistent in the educational system and shape the career prospects for women and men, especially in feminised and masculinised occupations. Gender inequality also concerns salaries not only between sectors and organisations/institutions but also within the same company/institution. In many cases women's skills remain invisible or undervalued, and their work is not reflected in pay structures. These problems related to the inequality of women and men in the labour market are described well by one of the respondents:

F10: Why and what actually make me realise that we should fight for equality all the time was some TV shows where it was presented that women in such and such a position, meaning it was a programme about discrimination of women in the labour market, earn from a third to a half less. It happens that they don't get promotion at some point, and I thought about myself in 2001 when the unemployment rate was high, and I was looking for a job but I couldn't get one and I thought that if I were a man I wouldn't have problems with finding a job, because I was educated, with work experience, because I started working when I was 18, I studied simultaneously, had a baby, I coped with life…. (…) I had such a CV at the age of 22 and nobody wanted to hire me, and of course that was a couple of years later, but I realised when I was watching this TV show that something was up. I started to realise that if I were a man I wouldn't be treated like that in this situation (…). Then I opened my eyes, and for real I thought I was a conservative, but now it turns out that I am a fighting feminist when it comes to ideas but… I mean I do want equality, not keeping men in the kitchen, although I can't cook [laughs], but when I go somewhere I don't want people to look at me "Oh! What a babe!", or something because I am in a dress and with nice legs. Usually other people look at me like that in an agency, or recently I experienced this when I was in the role of an expert and there was another girl with me and somebody said: "Oh! Two ladies!" or "Two girls". Then I said: "not two girls, but two, one of the two best experts in the field" so I can shoot this guy down like this right away and I know that this kind of situation could

happen every day. (FGI_6)

The discussion on the gender dimension of the labour market also revealed concerns about employment stability and unsecure work conditions which influence health, well-being and quality of life of female and male workers. Despite the fact that this problem has received more attention over the past few years, proper solutions have not yet been implemented.

For some participants, the experience of gender inequality in the labour market is also a moment which triggered their pro-equality actions. Despite noticing the cultural and structural factors causing different treatment of women and men in the labour market, their strategies for coping with this problem are usually individual. They believe that they are responsible for introducing changes: they should react to gender stereotypes in the workplace; they should try to introduce female job titles; they should ask for a pay rise. However, when discussing the situation of pregnant women on the labour market, one respondent claimed that "it [the labour market] should be better organised" (FGI_1), but this statement is not followed by a discussion on who should be responsible for implementing gender equality policies in the labour market. However, these actors are mentioned by the participants, but in an indirect way. To give some examples: a participant in the same focus group interview (FGI_1) admits that gender equality policies work better in international companies which have their main headquarters in countries interested in equal rights for women and men. Thus, one soon becomes aware that the employer should be responsible for work culture and organisation, so that inequalities between women and men are at least diminished. In the FGI with seniors, one woman noted that "there are no labour unions, right, such as they should be. And here, it would be [necessary] to start fighting to be respected" (F4, FGI_9). This respondent attempts to raise an important question about the role of the labour unions in supporting women in the labour market. This demonstrates that, apart from the strong individual approach expressed by the participants, according to which gender equality is seen through the prism of relations between the employee and employer, the participants demonstrate a demand for greater involvement of institutional actors to reshape the male model of the labour market.

In sum, the key factors that the FGI participants identified as preventing achievement of greater gender equality are perception of biological predispositions maintaining gender stereotypes related to the labour market in the education system, socialisation, stereotypes and different family roles. Work is not perceived only as a source of financial income necessary for living, but it is also a source of dignity, self-esteem and security. It allows citizens to exercise their basic rights and duties, improve their quality of life and empower them at the

level of family and community. Our study confirms that gender equality in the labour market should be justified from an individual rights-based equity perspective, emphasising social justice and human rights as the basis for a better society and economic efficiency perspective focusing on women as agents of economic change and transformation leading to social progress and growth.

To challenge the existing inequalities, the participants suggested several actions. First of all, in order to cope with occupational segregation, parity for women in masculinised professions and men in feminised professions may be introduced. As in the case of politics, this solution evokes conflicting opinions: some participants fully support this mechanism (also in the case of parity or quotas in managerial positions) but others are against it. In the latter case, the participants believe that it is not possible to increase the number of men or women by force, as they might not be well prepared or have sufficient skills to do the job. Both approaches can be illustrated by quotations from the focus group interviews:

> *M1: There should be a quota for men implemented at the moment when it comes to men in some professions that are… let's say, for example pre-school teachers. How many male pre-school teachers do we have? Let's take our MOPS [social help centre], I saw one man here (…) One man that I actually met yesterday, because I hadn't seen him before at all. So as for this [case], we can say that a quota should be introduced, so those men… But is it reasonable? Do all men have so much empathy so there should be quotas in some professions introduced by force? (FGI_9)*

> *F2: I am glad when my husband [stary] becomes the manager of a military museum and the first thing he does is to change the old scientific council so that there is parity. And when he can't find enough women so the scientific council is half men and half women, then he promotes a woman to be the chair of the scientific council or both [a woman and man to share this position]. And it makes me happy because I can see he has changed. (FGI_6)*

Another important problem which should be tackled is the persistence of stereotypes in education and the labour market. To challenge the existing image of female and male employees, untypical career paths and role models for young girls and boys should be promoted. Girls and boys should be given the opportunity to follow a non-traditional occupation path by, amongst others, being offered good vocational training.

The final area of recommendations is related to the gender pay gap. As mentioned in this chapter, gender equality and good society means decent work for just pay. Without changing the payment structure, it will not be possible to challenge the horizontal and vertical segregation. However, there was no unanimity among the participants as to how it should be achieved. While some claimed that the government should regulate salaries in public companies and institutions in order to guarantee equality between various groups, others

emphasise that employers – especially in private sector – should be given a free choice in managing their companies. This requires a review of existing policies related to remuneration. Secondly, the salaries in feminised occupations should increase to guarantee a good level of quality of life for women and men, as well as to encourage more men to choose these occupations.

Pension scheme, gender equality and quality of life

While discussing the areas of gender equality, the participants in our study pointed to the inequalities related to the pension system and social policy. These issues were not included in the focus group interview guide, but they were brought up by the participants, usually in response to a general question on the meaning of equality and important problems regarding (gender) equality in their lives. As a result, the retirement scheme was discussed in the FGI with people obtaining social help (FGI_7), economically active people from an urban area (FGI_1), parents (both mothers and fathers) (FGI_8), seniors (FGI_9) and male activists from the local voluntary fire brigade in a small town (FGI_10). Among the problems mentioned by the participants were: the amount of retirement benefits (pension), retirement age, lack of recognition of care responsibilities and voluntary work in the pension system, as well as involvement in local organisations and local life after retirement.[15] It is worth noting that these problems were discussed by people who are active in the labour market or retired. Strikingly, social class was not the most important factor varying the interest in these topics, but gender played an important role: the pension system was discussed more often by women than men. The participants spoke about their own individual experiences, but also expressed their concerns over the situation of their children and grandchildren. However, the social insurance system was also addressed by the firemen, who spoke about the lack of recognition of their voluntary work in the retirement system.

Analysis of the focus group interviews reveals two layers on which the problem of the pension system was discussed – micro and macrostructural. The participants talked about their own individual experiences, focusing mostly on the influence of the labour market and family practices on their pensions. Apart from the micro level, they also noted the macrostructural conditions shaping the social policy and pension system, as well as discussing the role of the state in providing security and a good quality of life to retired people.

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[15]Please refer to the chapter on civic engagement for a detailed discussion on the involvement of men and women in local communities and NGOs.

Development of the pension system in Poland

The pension system in Poland has to be examined with reference to current economic, social and demographic processes. The increasing average life expectancy, lower birth rate, emigration of young people and lowering of the ratio of economically active to economically inactive people, as well as changes in the labour market such as the precarious condition of work,[16] have led the Polish government to revise the pension system. The social security system introduced in 1999 was based on an obligatory "pay-as-you-go" principle managed by the state and a contribution based on private companies as well as an additional, voluntary contribution to private companies (individual pension schemes). In this three-pillar structure of the pensions system, the statutory retirement age for women and men varied: while men were expected to retire at age 65, women were allowed to retire at age 60. To solve the problem of growing public debt due to the increasing cost of the social insurance scheme as well as an unfavourable demographic situation, the government passed a new bill in 2012 (Ustawa z dn. 11 maja 2012 roku o zmianie ustawy o emeryturach i rentach z Funduszu Ubezpieczeń Społecznych oraz niektórych innych ustaw). One of the most important changes concerned the change to the retirement age. Since 2012, the retirement age for men and women has been 67.[17] According to the government, the aim of this reform was first and foremost to increase the number of economically active people, to lower the debt which would be paid by the future generation and to stabilise the financial situation in the social insurance system. It was also claimed that this reform would reinforce gender equality in access to retirement benefits (Wóycicka 2010). These new regulations were introduced gradually, but some of the participants in our study already referred to these changes. They found it difficult to believe that the situation of people in retirement (and especially women) might be improved by the new law. They also see that the law is not adjusted to the working conditions of the younger generations. As a result, they feel disappointed with the reform:

> F3: I'm a bit disgusted, there is discrimination, not by men but generally by the government. I mean… 40 years of work, I got a precarious pension[18] and what? […] I could have received a 100% pension. But the government decided differently and now I have to wait [until I reach the new pension age].

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[16]These processes are not unique to Poland; they are present in other countries (not only in Europe) as well. Moreover, the measures adopted in Poland in regard to changes in the retirement scheme are also similar to measures in other European countries.

[17]There are some exceptions to this regulation for particular occupations. More detailed information can be found in the bill on retirement.

[18]The respondent is on a pre-retirement pension, but she uses the term "precarious pension" to describe her own situation.

M3: This is still a good pension. It will be worse…
F3: I mean, I have a precarious contract now and I could have taken a regular pension but the government decided differently and I have to wait for it. And I feel disgust that after 40 years of work….
M6: Our children will not have it [the pension]. (FGI_9)

The participants in the study are frustrated by insufficient support from the state, which cannot fulfil its obligation towards citizens. The "right to pension" is often seen through the prism of the neoliberal economy and free market rule. On the one hand, the participants appreciate that there is a public retirement system which provides them – especially women – with their own financial resources to be independent from family members or institutions.

F4: But it seems to me that men and women of our age, they have pensions, no matter how high they are. Because it used to be very hard, women did not have pensions, women were dependent on men, because they did not have money. From time to time, they could sell some eggs or milk and had [money] for… Nowadays, it is so different in rural areas – we, our generation of women, we have our pension… No matter how high it is, but we have it and we can be independent from men. There is no dependence on men… (FGI_4)

On the other hand, they are aware that the pension system is based on their own contributions and, due to mismanagement in the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS), they might not be able to receive their social benefit. In their view, the reform in 2012 was introduced not to improve citizens' quality of life but to save the state funding at their expense, which was in fact also the government's argument. Thus, instead of the positive aspect of the new regulation mentioned by the prime minister, they emphasise the costs of the reform, such as a precarious pre-retirement pension for people who have reached retirement age according to the old regulation but are under 67 years old and not allowed a pension under the new regulation. Moreover, the participants complain about the lack of retirement policy adjusted to the new labour market conditions, and in most cases a lack of access to full-time contracts that give the right to retirement. They expressed their concerns about the situation of their children and grandchildren who, in their opinion, are unlikely to receive retirement benefits from the public system as they cannot find decent work or work on precarious contracts.

M3: It is important to deal with precarious contracts because they are terrible, they are like gangrene, especially for women. My daughter, especially since she gave birth, she hasn't had regular work. Part-time job here, quarter-time job there, or job based on a precarious contract. She works for a month, two or three and then she has no job. That's terrible. (FGI_9)

F4: (…) I think that my generation, our generation, we have pensions. I don't know how it's going to be in 15 or 20 years. I don't know, these women who are not able to work for their pension. (FGI_4)

Looking at the respondents' accounts, we can observe a narrative of nostalgia and

regret over the previous security and disbelief in sustainability of the pension system in the long term. The respondents emphasise that the retirement scheme functions in a different way, providing a different scope of support for three generations. They notice a positive change which happened when the retirement system was introduced for the first time, as it gives people financial support and independence when they are no longer capable of working. This would be true for the first generation of people who received pensions, whereas the situation is more diverse for the next generations. The respondents claim that people who have retired recently or who are entitled to use the retirement scheme and will be able to receive a pension based on the superannuation taken from their salaries might not be able to live a decent life upon retirement:

> F2: But if a person doesn't have, like our female neighbour, when she was left alone, unfortunately, she sold her house and she moved to [name of a city], she bought a flat because she says that she cannot afford…
> F3: Sure, these bills, you know…
> F2: Only one pension remains and that's all. She couldn't afford this. (FGI_4)

This situation will deteriorate for the next generations (people who are about to enter the labour market or who have just started their professional career), who will struggle with more severe economic hardship and its consequences for the retirement system.

Gender pension gap

The dominant theme in the discussions on the pension system focused on its financial aspects. For the majority of respondents the amount of the pension is the most crucial problem. It is noteworthy that this problem is important for both men and women, but due to the inequalities experienced by women in the labour market, it affects women more.[19] The structure of the labour market is changing, with a higher unemployment rate for women than men, lower average salaries for women and a gender pay gap, overrepresentation of women in less well-paid occupations as well as an increasing proportion of part-time and precarious employment, and interruptions in careers due to family obligations (Eurostat 2014; Kowalska, Migalska, Warat 2014; Lisowska 2014; Mały rocznik statystyczny 2014; Alternative Report 2014). These factors all have severe consequences for the pension level affecting women. Not only do they have a shorter period of contributions for the pension scheme due to career breaks or periods of unemployment, but also their contributions are lower compared to those paid by men, because of lower salaries. The gender pension gap is also caused by differences in life

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[19]Both men and women agreed during the focus group interviews that pensions received by women are lower compared to those received by men.

expectancy, as women tend to live longer than men and are expected to benefit from a longer period of obtaining pensions. As a result, they accumulate lower financial resources to be used for a longer period of time, which results in a lower monthly pension compared to that obtained by men. To put it simply, the gender-neutral pension system introduced in Poland reproduces the inequalities experienced by women in the labour market and in the division of care. It is not surprising that the participants feel strongly about enhancing social protection for people in a vulnerable position on the labour market by changing the revision of employment schemes and labour market policies.

Female participants address the lack of fairness in the redistribution of retirement benefits. Being unable to maintain their standard of living for some of them means that they have to either postpone retirement or continue working after reaching retirement age. In this context, women are often forced to work in the informal economy or on precarious contracts after retirement. It is worth noting that this problem affects various groups of women differently, especially penalising women with long breaks in their careers, lone women, female migrants or unskilled workers, to name but a few.

> *F4: I mean, if you take for example my mother... and my parents, well, you know, a woman in the socialist period... they [women] go to work and they do housework, so she works double shifts at the same time. Moreover, men's work was better paid, women's work was less paid, and altogether they did not have... my father is an electrician and my mother is an accountant so their salaries were not so different. But my father has a better pension, my mother has a lower pension, and due to that fact my father can now enjoy his time [stay at home] and my mother has to do additional work to get more money. This means that my father is independent and my mother to some extent is dependent because if she can't get additional money, you know, she would not be able to oppose my father. (FGI_1)*

The inadequacy of the pension system puts women in a situation of risk of poverty and dependency on other family members (especially husband/partner) or social institutions:

> *F3: (...) I've got 500 PLN of my pension, my son sends me 1000 PLN every month but I would prefer that he was interested: mum, do you... I'm disregarding "is it enough for you or isn't it?" but just to come once in a while, to see something. (FGI_9)[20]*

As other research shows (see e.g. Błędowski et al. 2012; Pączkowska 2002), lack of resources also has an impact on women's agency, as well as potentially leading to loss of health, lack of satisfaction in one's own life and, as a result, lower quality of life. Thus, an appropriate level of minimum benefits is crucial to prevent gender inequalities after retirement and poverty among retired people.

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[20]This quotation also shows the problem of loneliness of elderly people, who complain that their children prefer to send them money instead of spending time with them.

Another issue that comes out during the focus group interviews is survivor salary. This mechanism allows one to inherit a partner's pension after his/her death,[21] providing that the eligibility criteria are fulfilled. As one of the respondent admits:

> *M1: But I have to defend men. You [women] live longer, we live shorter. (...) I know that you don't receive the same pension as men do but you can get the pension from your husband. (FGI_7)*

This mechanism is important from the gender perspective: given the fact that life expectancy is higher for women and that women's pensions are usually lower compared to men's, women dominate among the recipients of this scheme. This possibility of replacing their own pension with that of their partner provides them with a higher income after retirement than they would get from their own pension. In this way, they are able to maintain their standard of living after their partner's death. On the other hand, however, this mechanism reinforces women's dependence on men's pension.

Inadequacy of the pension system: caring responsibilities and voluntary work

Among various factors, the most serious barrier for access to adequate retirement benefits addressed by the participants in our study is associated with caring responsibilities and voluntary work. Significantly, female participants talk passionately about the consequences of caring responsibilities and career breaks for their pension, while only one male group – the firemen – present arguments for broadening the way of calculating the contribution to the pension system by including voluntary work in the community. In both cases, the recognition of only paid work in the pension system was contested. For the participants, the retirement scheme is perceived through the prism of social justice and financial security, and they believe that both principles should be taken into account as the basis for the improvement of the current regulation. Despite the fact that the requirements for the new organisation of the retirement scheme were posed by the respondents, they did not present precise solutions for how these changes should be achieved and who should be responsible for their implementation.

From the point of view of gender equality, the recognition of care seems to be crucial. In the current model, family unpaid work and caring responsibilities are not compensated in a sufficient way by lowering the contribution paid to the Social Insurance Institution during

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[21]If only one person is entitled to the partner's pension, she/he may receive 85% of the benefit her/his partner was entitled to. For two persons, it is possible to receive 90% of the benefit, and for three or more persons, 95% of the benefit a partner was entitled to (http://www.zus.pl).

the period of care leave [*urlop wychowawczy*]. For the female participants in our study, basing the pension system on employment-based contributions alone should be extended to include periods of care. In this way, women with a limited employment history who have many career breaks due to care responsibilities could also receive proper pensions. The respondents complained that due to the fact that no compensation was granted for the period of care, they faced a dilemma over whether they should take parental and care leave to stay with their children, or return to work as soon as possible:

> *F6: Well, but you need to take into account the fact that women who worked and had children took maternity leave and later leave to take care of children; and the superannuation paid during the leave to take care of children is low. To get good money, to have 100% pension, I decided to take only maternity leave. (…) I returned to work after maternity leave because I could not afford [to stay at home and take care of my children]. (FGI_9)*

> *F2: I haven't worked long enough to get the pension, but this is not because of my sex, this is caused by other factors. My years which could be counted for my pension were taken away from me because I raised four children. (FGI_1)[22]*

Providing better pension compensation during the care periods would allow women to opt out of full employment without losing their contribution to the pension system. In the current system, the caring responsibilities and work-life reconciliation are perceived by our respondents as double-shift work which is neither recognised nor appreciated by the state. As a result, they are not reflected in social policies. The pension system is no exception here.

> *M6: It [childcare] is not taken into account at all. Giving birth or raising children, that is not taken into account anywhere.*
> *M1: This [childcare] is not counted for [women's] retirement, only how much they worked.*
> *M6: And for example there was a break...*
> *M1: Bringing up [a child] at home, these breaks, they are not taken into account at all, only [the time] they [women] worked. And these should be taken into account.*
> *M4: For example if [a woman] had unpaid leave up to three years, this should be taken together with the time she works. Just not to have longer breaks than these three years. Additionally, it should be included in the job seniority. You know, if she has three children and works 40 years and these [bringing up three children] happened during that time.*
> *M2: It's like we [men] were in the army for two years and this is counted...*
> *M1: The continuity of work. (FGI_10)*

> *F1: Let's be honest, you [lady] say, our law is not precise enough. What should women who have never worked do? Because they didn't have to? But they took care of home and children all their lives. This is also work, hard work. (FGI_7)*

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[22]Please refer to the discussion in Chapter "Gender equality – a concept in debate".

The above quotation shows that the respondents do not consider all types of unpaid work as worthy of recognition in the retirement scheme. During the focus group interview with seniors, the participants emphasise that only taking care of children should be considered a part of the retirement scheme, whereas housework duties should not be included in determining the level of pension. To complicate this problem even further, the labour market and retirement policies should also be seen in the context of the state's approach to providing institutional care, namely crèches and kindergartens. This issue was not discussed in detail in the focus group interviews in the context of retirement policies, but since it is an important factor influencing parents' (mostly mothers') decision on taking parental or care leave, it should briefly be presented here. According to the data, only 3% of children under 3 years old have access to childcare facilities, and 70% of children between 3 and compulsory school age are cared for in formal structures (UNICEF 2013; Barcelona Objectives 2013; Komisja Europejska/EACEA/Eurydice 2014). The lack of proper childcare infrastructure constitutes a significant barrier in implementing the gender equality dimension in the pension system as the responsibilities for caring for children and other dependant family members is put on women. Therefore, in order to build a just society, the approach to care must be changed. According to the respondents, caring responsibilities should be treated as an alternative and equally important way to develop retirement. However, to avoid the reproduction of gender stereotypes, the recognition of care in the pension system should be offered not only to women, but also to men.

The lack of recognition of unpaid work in the pension system was also discussed by the group of men who are volunteers in a local fire brigade in a small town. The analysis of their narratives shows two distinct – but to some extent analogical – pathways for approaching the relation between unpaid work and the pension system. There is a similarity in their account to the extent of women's unpaid work being unrecognised in the pension system.[23] As was mentioned in the previous part of this chapter, they acknowledge the gender difference in pension income due to the caring responsibilities of women, and recommended granting compensation for care periods. Their arguments resemble the ones mentioned in other groups: the importance of care work, the need to reduce the negative effects of care breaks on career development and problems with re-entering the labour market after leave for childcare or care for dependants. As they state, in order to build a good and just society, childcare and voluntary

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[23]It is worth noting that the discussion on lower pension benefits for women because of their care responsibilities was invoked partly by the moderator.

work should be valued and recognised. This is to do with, in the respondents' point of view, different treatment of citizens by the government: the citizens should not be treated as a source of income for the state, but the state should provide better conditions for retired people:

M4: Of course it should be regulated by the government and the government should ... why look at other countries (...)? Do it... In Poland, too little is done for the family, for a person, only toil, toil, and after retiring one should live for as short a time as possible.
M1: Not to pay anything or that nobody gets it [retirement].
M4: But this would be the time for us to live, really live. (FGI_10)

What was left unmentioned in other focus group interviews was the lack of pension entitlement for people doing volunteer work. The firemen built a parallel between the women's work and volunteer work. Possibly their own situation makes them empathetic to the situation of mothers responsible for care duties. In order to justify their view, they talk about their workload and the cost of being involved in local communities:

M2: Let us take a simple example from our fire brigade, which is not specific to our fire brigade, but to fire brigades in general [...] the head of the fire brigade has worked here for 45 years, or the treasurer. And not even an hour is counted [for his retirement]. At least one percent should be counted from the entire year.
M1: From participation in callouts.
M2: From callouts, from all of that, so that they could have some additional money. They devoted 45 years to others – this is a sacrifice because sometimes you need to leave your home. Once there was a flood and we spent the entire week on it. And no one paid us for it and additionally we had to provide food, drinks, clothes for ourselves.
M1: And one did not hear anything from people the…
M2: Well, this [our volunteer work] is not glorified anywhere and no one paid us even for a minute, no one counted it, and this is a typical example what the government should deal with, add a percentage [to the retirement]. (FGI_10)

The respondents point to the broader significance of volunteer work. On the one hand, they are willing to support the community, committed to their work, and ready to bear the cost of their additional work. On the other hand, they believe that their involvement in their community should be acknowledged and recognised.

Potential for change – policy recommendations

Our study clearly shows that the pension scheme must be seen in the broader context of other social policies as well as labour market policies. Moreover, the respondents in many focus group interviews linked the issue to the question of gender equality – for this was an issue impacting the quality of life of women and men differently. To reduce the gender pension gap it is not sufficient to analyse the pension scheme from the gender perspective, but an intersectional approach should apply. Thus, it is necessary to look at the situation of men and women from different age groups and generations, with different employment patterns or with

differing family situation. The measures adopted in the retirement scheme should be more responsive to the various scenarios experienced by different groups of people.

Our study pinpoints the following recommendations:

- Introduction of changes in the labour market policies which have an impact on the pension scheme: equal pension for equal work for men and women should be guaranteed and the gender pay gap should be at least reduced; improvement of women's access to the labour market and work-life balance strategies; implementation of better institutional childcare to support women's (but also men's) employment.

- Reduction in the number of precarious work contracts with no or limited social contributions by implementing better and more precise legal regulations and reinforcing the control of the employers by the State Labour Inspectorate (Państwowa Inspekcja Pracy); revision of policies on pension rights to guarantee retirement benefits for people working on precarious contracts or people with no continuity of employment.

- Revision of policies on pensions for periods of care: care periods should be fully counted (in terms of the amount of contribution) in pension schemes: the employment-based contribution and care-based contribution should be complementary.

- Revision of policies on volunteer work: volunteer engagement should be counted in pension schemes.

- Increase in the minimum pension to reduce the differences caused by the different career paths of women and men (overrepresentation of women in less valued sectors, women's lower and shorter labour market participation, lower pay for women, more employment breaks in women's careers).

- Continuation of the survivor pension scheme, which proves to be beneficial for older women.

Perception of gender inequalities in the political sphere

Gender imbalance in politics and under-representation of women in the sphere of politics and governance is a well-recognised phenomenon among academics and international development organisations (Kenworthy and Malami 1999; UN Women 2015). Similarly to the global trends, where the level of women's share of power in politics is still restricted, in Poland

women constitute a minority on the political scene, despite the endorsement of specific regulations such as quotas (see more: Fuszara 2007, 2009; Siemieńska 2004; Niżyńska, Fuszara, Druciarek and Zbieranek 2012; Warat 2014). Since the issue has shaped policies and informed public debate on gender equality in Poland, during our FGI study the topic of gender equality in the political sphere occurred likewise, mainly as a problem of women's participation in political institutions, as well as participants' attitudes towards adopting special measures, such as quotas, to promote women's participation in that sphere.

Gender imbalance in political power

In general, politics and politicians are perceived by the FGI respondents as distant and ineffectual, which prevents participants from referring extensively to this sphere in terms of their own life experiences. However, when it comes to gender inequalities discussed on a more general level, the gendered division of political power, and the idea that it is men who are actually in power, were pointed out. This idea occurred among students (FGI_2) during a discussion on controversies over the Polish parliament's ratification of the UN Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). The female participant expressed her outrage at the governmental authorities for ignoring women's interests in adoption of these regulations. She additionally suggested that the unequal proportions of women and men in political power are an obstacle to fostering gender equality genuinely:

> F1: I wonder who has real power to change something about gender equality. Only the authorities/government. So if we speak of political powers, in most countries and in this country they are in the hands of men. In the parliament they are in the majority, so I think that it is a case of power, when it comes to legal regulations aiming at gender equality. (FGI_2)

A similar opinion about gender imbalance in politics as resulting in maintenance of particular inequalities between women and men emerged in the discussion with social care recipients (FGI_7). The argument was introduced by a female participant, referring to the situation of single mothers having difficulties with receiving alimony from their ex-partners. Her criticism concerned men in positions of political power, finding them guilty of blocking gender equality, because they were protecting men's interest:

> F2: I'd like to add something about maintenance, if we are now talking about courts. It is a huge scam! We know exactly that all over the world, in many countries, who holds the reins of power? Who rules the whole thing? Who…?
> F1: The judiciary system.
> F2: The men! Men rule the world. They run everything, they cause wars, they… it is a pyramid model, isn't it? They are on top and rule everything. Let's see: who decides on

the maintenance system in Poland? Who establishes all of those articles, those regulations? And for whom are they favourable…? (FGI_7)

From the quotations presented above, we might draw the conclusion that some of the female participants from a few groups identified a mechanism of interdependence between the maintenance of gender inequalities and men's controlling political decision-making processes. At the beginning these opinions were unconvincing for the other interlocutors. But after precise discussion of the stories shared by women in the group of social care recipients about their court battles over maintenance, in the end the men agreed with the argument. The group concluded that areas of law and its practice existed where men were too influential while "the women are virtually in more difficult positions" (FGI 7, M4). The lack of female representation hinders inclusion of women's perspectives and experiences in politics.

Only one group – sociology students – noted that the exclusion of women from the political sphere is not a new phenomenon. They referred to examples from Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages to prove that politics has always been a male sphere and women have had to strive for their political rights. Interestingly, the students perceived this struggle as the point of departure for the broader claims concerning gender equality and women's rights. They consider gender equality as a long-lasting, expanding process of demanding women's rights that started from demands for political rights, next to economic ones:

M1: Men were more privileged, even in a reign or something, [people] held to "the oldest son" rule, which meant that if there was no male descendant a dynasty ended. The same applies to professions. Women even today, in some countries, can't work in some professions. For instance, in ancient Greece they couldn't participate in voting. Until the 19th and 20th century such possibilities for voting, for making decisions about power, for deciding who may sit in the council… women had nothing to say, and that's why this issue of gender equality affects women. It all started then, when women started to fight for their rights, and that's good. (FGI_2)

Women and men in politics – unexplained absence of women

Due to the recognised male dominance on the political scene, women's lower political participation was noticed in the majority of FGIs (1, 2, 4, 6, 5, 7, 9) as a measurable indicator of gender inequalities in politics. This reflection was frequently accompanied by a reluctance to define women's absence in politics as *gender* inequality, but instead indication of other mechanisms as its source. This reluctant approach occurred even in a group of local political activists (FGI_4) for whom this problem proved to be relevant and vital after the recent local elections. They noticed that the number of women in local government is decreasing, even if they are the most present group in community initiatives:

M1: Ah! At the previous elections for District Council, there were four…
F5: Four women.
M1: Four women, today there is one.
Mo2: For how many people?
M1: Fifteen.
Mo1: Fifteen.
M1: So it is, it is visible… It is known that this too…, but this is support of community, so…
F5: [Community support] For women... We are, kind of, ignored right now.
Mo2: Yes, but this is strange, because from what you are saying here [we can conclude that] women get the activities [in this village] going.
F2: Yes, that is a fact, right?
M1: Everything that happens in the community happens around the school, or around the dance group, or around the Rural Housewives Association, or around the church. And this is, we could say, five entities
(A conversation in the background) F4: Only two women candidates took part in local councillor elections. (FGI_4)

As the discussion further reveals, one of the female participants in this group had been a candidate in the preceding local elections and had not been elected. But even though a decreasing number of women in local government was noticed, as shown in the discussion above, the group tended to diagnose other reasons for her failure. Despite the researcher's direct questions about women's not being elected because of their gender, they were not keen to consider the gender aspect as relevant. Firstly they referred to changes in the electoral system concerning establishment of electoral districts and counting votes, which were a potential cause for her lack of success. Eventually, as a determining cause, personal considerations such as envy or greed were pointed out:

Mo2: But why do you think people vote like this? Not for… [women?]
F5: We don't know. I don't understand it.
Mo2: If there is for example some kind of… don't know… male solidarity…?
F1: No, it's envy and greed.
F5: Envy and greed, I would say.
Mo1: But…
F5: Don't know…
M1: This is not what it is about, listen…
F3: I am so shocked that she did not make it.
F1: And hatred…
M1: This is how politics works.
F1: And hatred! (FGI_4)

On these grounds, in response to women's absence in institutional politics, a pronouncement about the informal but genuine power of women who rule from behind is mentioned on many occasions. A proverb, often used within family life, is utilised to describe this relationship: "the man as the head and the woman as the neck who turns the head". The

proverb describes women's informal access to power and control through privatised channels, while being excluded from the formal, institutional power where men dominate:

> *M1: I think that here women are better off than men.*
> *M2: Exactly, yes!*
> *M1: Isn't it? [women's laughter]*
> *F2: It is visible, it is visible.*
> *F4: Thank you, thank you!*
> *F3: Better, of course better,* **because we are the head, we rule in the end.**
> *M1: Yes, sure.*
> *F5:* **No, now only men [rule] (…)**
> *F5: After those elections only men rule.*
> *M1: You can see that only men rule, so we don't know how it is…*
> *[women laugh]*
> *(…) M1:* **Excuse me, but activism and politics are two different spheres, I have that impression at least. That the ladies here are active, but you vote for somebody else for a politician.**
> *F5: It came out like that.*
> *F2: It came out awkwardly. (FGI_4)*

As seen, the female participants in the aforementioned quotations from FGI_4 noticed that the number of women in the Gmina (local regional) Council had decreased and that they were left out during the last local elections. Nevertheless, the women did not claim any need for deepening consideration on this situation from the perspective of inequalities based on gender. Even though one of the men pointed out a structural mechanism of women's exclusion from political power, the women taking part in the conversation seemed pleased with the statement on women's informal influence, and agreed to skip the issue and maintain the good-natured atmosphere of the discussion, even though it affected some of them personally.

In spite of the fact that the gender issues of political engagement in the described situation in FGI_4 were discussed rather reluctantly, this allowed the participants to deepen the conversation on gender anyway, especially as the evident defeat of a female participant might have exemplified. But when considering an overall view on the FGI study, apart from FGI_4, women's presence in politics was mentioned very fleetingly. It was often deflected into a broader discussion of the lack of women in different environments, which seem to be closer to participants' experience than politics:

> *F4: There is no [equality] and for a long time there will not be.*
> *F2: [interrupting] It depends on the environment we live in, I think… I suppose…*
> *Mo: Yes, it can vary.*
> *(…)*
> *F4: But what… political life… social life… there are fewer women everywhere. Fewer in the parliament, fewer in all those… everywhere less… for example…*
> *M2: Yes, out of fifty-two deputies elected to the European Parliament there are only ten women, for example.*

F4: Yes, a good example. Or like in my workplace, there are twenty men on a board of our department while there are five women only and those women…
*M2: Oh, **but there are only three men here, actually**.*
*F2: Well… It would be better if there was an equal number of women and men here. But… it is probably a case of… I don't know… **hopefully it is just a matter of bad luck**!*
*M3: But then, **the group is not representative! (FGI_1)***

Moreover, due to the participants' deficiency in the feeling of influence at the political or institutional level, they displayed a lack of interest and concern for politics except for complaining about bad governance or bad legislation. For this reason the gender factor, which had already been stipulated as distant and difficult to grasp, was more willingly discussed using convenient examples taken from the more "available" life spheres. Sometimes these attempts to pinpoint an issue somehow resulted in trivialisation of the topic, when trying to grasp something unexplainable. This is seen in the above quotation, where the political issue of quotas was shifted into comments on gender imbalance in other areas in the FGI group.

Besides the issue of trivialisation in this quotation, the course of the conversation alluded to above to some extent reveals a backlash reaction towards the problematisation of gender equality as a whole. The participant (M3), who manifests his objections to the entire discussion on gender inequalities as related to something "which actually does not exist" (as he refers to it earlier in the discussion), seems to cite the group's "lack of representativeness" to contest the whole problematic.

Reasons for female absence in politics – a lack of solidarity among women

As has already been indicated, the FGI participants often made brief, but substantial reference to the shortage of women in positions of political power. However, when this argument was introduced during the interviews, a joint agreement seemed to exist that ultimately this is "the will of the nation", since such a division of power remains a result of the democratic choice of people who vote:

*M1: So in my opinion, equality really should be… that women can do everything men do. But it doesn't mean that suddenly we submit the law that I don't know… that it has to be half men and half women in the parliament, does it? If there will be in the future, or even there will be more women… well it will just exist**, because the society wants that**. But I don't agree at all that it should be required, such equality, right? Just in order to get equality… because we somehow assume that **the elections are kind of democratic, and that there something like everybody votes for whoever they want, so… so this is like the society wants…** I don't know… [society] wants men for governing, right?* (FGI_5)

It is worth noting that, while this attachment to the rule of self-regulation and a tendency towards an attitude of "let society decide" is manifested, it is frequently followed by

a recognition that the political absence of women must be rooted in their own lack of solidarity. Thereby, women are to blame: they do not vote for other women, and that is evident proof that nothing could be done to solve this problem. As one of the participants in FGI_5 argues:

> (…) Given the fact that there are more women than men on Earth, well, then the women themselves voted for those men [who constitute a majority of politicians] so… [shrugs his shoulders]. (FGI_5)

Moreover, the motif of a lack of solidarity among women and therefore **their own responsibility for inequalities in political life** developed a few times into a view of women as being their own biggest enemies. The topic of **women not being supportive to each other** if they were to become successful and manage to climb to the top positions was discussed even among feminist activists. However, they problematised and analysed the issue critically, recognising **the mechanism of adjustment to male values in male-dominated areas** like politics:

> F2: So it is like this, this feeling of your own success (…) that a lot of women succeed in politics and this does not translate into providing support for other women, because if there are, for example…
> F1: Partly yes, because one woman [voivodeship] marshal. Two of them [women marshals] are in Poland and one here.
> F2: Marshal and deputy marshal.
> F1: But in the whole of Poland…
> F2: There is one.
> F1: Anyway I think that our marshal gives us enough support (…)
> F2: Ok, our marshal is great but for instance we have two female party leaders. Those are the women, they even know us perfectly but don't acknowledge us, because they believe… this happens in a patriarchy, we succeed and we won't support other women (…) there is this problem, nobody sees the need to support women in politics in the Lubuskie region anymore and this is not a topic for debates, why should it be? After all, women rule in the Lubuskie region. We have female marshals, two party leaders, so what we are talking about?
> F1: The voivode was a woman.
> F2: The voivode was a woman. We are doing well, so why are you saying that it is so bad? So this is this trap that if few women achieve real success, it translates to awareness [that we do not have any problem]. It happens at all levels and this is success and defeat simultaneously. (FGI_6)

A remarkable conclusion about the **tendency of women holding political positions to distance themselves from "women's issues"** was developed by feminists (FGI_6). They perceive this approach as a sort of falling into a trap for the struggle for women's rights. According to their view, female politicians' lack of solidarity and misrepresentation of other women's interests alike lead to the **failure of strategies for promoting women's voices in the political sphere**, as the general public see them as proof that gender equality has been achieved. Nonetheless, an interesting example of the female marshal of the voivodeship was

presented, who according to participants underwent **a transformation of gender awareness and learnt to include and represent women's political interests** after a few years of carrying out her role:

F2: But, for example, the female marshal transformed… her feminist awareness, because I remember her at the beginning of her career and she had no feminist awareness. One year ago, during the Congress [of Women] she said that we demand a change in the abortion law. I was personally shocked that she'd finally breathed it out. Especially as a few years earlier she would have not said anything like that, so she went through this awareness route. (FGI_6)

Additionally, in the group of feminists there appeared a declaration of an **affirmative, special standard for female politicians**. Respondents claimed that as an organisation they have a general rule of supporting women politicians, regardless of their political affiliation and agenda, or at least a rule of withholding disapproval in public:

But some women tried to settle here for a while to take advantage of us before the elections. We adopted the rule that in general we speak well about all women politicians regardless of their political party affiliation. We emphasise that women are in a worse situation and we emphasise their achievements but we don't allow them to take advantage of us (…). We very willingly approve of women, we don't criticise women in power (…), but we as well won't let them take advantage of us, because we see this cynicism of different female politicians who want to settle with us. (FGI_6)

Importantly, this point is presented by both men and women, but the latter in a few cases recognise deeper reasons behind not voting for female candidates, such as stereotypes or lack of institutional interventions:

M1: So when it comes to the parliament, women also have electoral parity and may also sit in parliament. I agree that there are more men in parliament, it is true. In Poland, there is a surplus of women over men, if I'm not mistaken, so it is strange that women do not vote for women. Because well… it is also not possible that only men vote for men, just because they are men also. So when it comes to elections it is a case of the people, the people themselves choose men, and women also have the right, for reasons of electoral parity and so on.
F1: But maybe this is a case of stereotypes? The way we perceive that – a man is going to rule the country better than a woman? There exists a belief that a woman will not cope with such a position. And a woman taking the position of manager always earns less [than a man], even if she is in exactly the same position.
M1: OK, but on the other hand, it is not only men who have those stereotypes. Women as well…
F1: Exactly, that is why women themselves also vote for men.
M1: OK, so it is not a case of the authorities that are to blame, but people are to blame, that they in general don't vote for women.
F1: OK, but only men now could have an impact to change that situation. Men decide whether to implement the law, whether to ratify European conventions that are going to foster legal regulations on gender equality, legal regulations related to quotas. It's about such legal regulations that implement gender equality literally, to really have it! So, my point is that actually men have that impact, because they have power. (FGI_2)

The issue of political quotas – not to be forced

An aspect related to gender equality in politics that emerges in the majority of the FGIs is the question of central regulations supporting women's political participation, such as political quotas. Specifically, almost every time when the issue emerged, the idea of political quotas for women was criticised in a specific manner. While the need for a presence of women in politics was not contested as such, the majority of the FGI participants argued that they opposed such a forcible solution. To exemplify this approach, the quotes from discussions among students and elderly people are presented below, but similar statements occurred in other interviews (interestingly mostly from men):

> *M: In my opinion it is not nice, this is very far-fetched, that some part of a party has to have a fixed number of women. In my opinion it is not cool, because there are women and they can try and when they turn out [to be interested in politics] they will be [participating in elections]. But there are those women who are not at all interested in [politics]. So I don't know what it is for, that if there is some kind of a [political] group, it has to have some minimum of women, because this is gender equality. In my opinion the fact is that there are things women like and things men like. (FGI_2)*

> *M1: You raised the issue of quotas at the very beginning [of our discussion]. I believe that there are two sides of the same coin, of the same aspect. I believe there is an issue of women's will [to be in politics], because introducing someone by force (...) is pointless. Because, even if we have, let's say elections and she is on the list and she is brought in by force, then she will do nothing, she will only be a poseur. So it is rather nonsense. Someone needs to want [it], if someone wishes for it and is able then [it makes sense] but not when it is divided by force. (FGI_9)*

Due to the generally critical attitude towards regulating equality issues by legal means, when discussing quotas in politics various **strategies of invalidating** an issue will be discussed. First of all, the quota regulations were called into question by appealing that equality cannot be imposed "by force", at the same time discrediting women's ("the top feminists'") struggle to introduce a more equal share of political power in Poland. One argument by a man in FGI_9 (with elderly people) is an example of this position, and, while his standpoint is presented below, the participants in some other FGIs (e.g. FGI_5, FGI_7) also frequently emphasised that there was a spectrum of far **more urgent problems to solve**:

> *M3: I think that our leading national feminists, here regional [feminists], are too much into women's rights. (...) The Prime Minister is a woman. Two ladies are running in the elections for president. If they are wise and appreciated then they get those positions. I would ease off, if I were a woman I would act differently so it comes on its own, and not [introduced] by force, I would not impose it.*
> *Mo2: But you are referring to quotas or to other issues as well?*
> *M3: Yes, I don't like those quotas either, it is important that somebody takes cares of "junk contracts" because it is terrible, it is a gangrene, especially for women, and here*

there is a range of issues around which to act. My own daughter has no normal job since she gave birth to her daughter over ten years ago. Half-time job here, one-quarter there, here civil law contract. She works one month, two, three and after has no job. It is dreadful! (FGI_9)

When glancing at the above quotation in terms of group dynamics, the actual participant's (M3 from FGI_9) general motivation to take part in a discussion must be considered. He had shown a hostile attitude, oriented confrontationally towards women and their claims for equality (which had been responded to by many objections from the female part of the group). When discussing quotas, he eventually chose a method of **closing a discussion over the issue** (inconvenient for him), by using an undisputable topic of social injustice and exploitation in the labour market, which had proved to be an important topic for everyone in the group.

Another argument used when discussing quotas is referring to **women's loss of dignity. It is humiliating to them if they are elected thanks to** special regulations, instead of trying to achieve success by means of their own resources, skills and qualifications. From a similar angle, the above quotations (from FGI_9) express a sort of reprimand to women, represented by feminists, who demand too much and cannot accept their place and should draw in their horns *(spuścić z tonu)*, since there certainly are some women on the political scene in Poland who have reached high political positions due to their competences and character traits.

Conclusions: A need for efficient knowledge and informed discussion

The presented spectrum of opinions about the insufficient presence of women in politics and attitudes toward quotas indicates a superficial, non-evidence-based understanding of both mechanisms of marginalisation of women in politics and the knowledge about the political quota system. Such incomprehension might be applied to the majority of participants, apart from the feminist-oriented ones (participants in FGI_6 and a feminist artist who participated in FGI_1). This makes it very clear that in order to formulate more substantial and developed opinions, one requires an awareness of why woman constitute a minority on the political scene and still face various obstacles, despite the adoption of regulations such as quotas. In many other cases, gender equality in political life, exemplified mainly by the theme of quotas, was used to distance oneself from an issue or to emphasise one's doubts about its "enforcement". Frequently those discussions had no reference to the actual procedures and praxis of political quotas in Poland and were very misinformed, as well as opening up the participants' various concerns and fears of having their individual rights taken away by some central regulations. Thus, it is legitimate to conclude that, in order to foster gender equality in the area of political

life, a crucial need exists for greater transparency and information about the procedures undertaken, and on the other hand raising social awareness about the structural mechanisms of reproduction of gender inequalities in the political sphere.

As elaborated earlier, perception of equality as an excessively abstract standard taken from an "ideal world" enables people to regard it as unachievable; therefore all the struggles for introducing equality centrally or implementing and promoting it by political means tend to be seen as artificial and redundant. Additionally, "enforcing" gender equality in politics by regulations such as quotas was criticised as threatening free choices and individual freedoms. On the other hand, in FGI_1 there appeared a voice of a female participant, a feminist artist who also underlined the significance of some central, legal regulations at an institutional, political level, and in the end her arguments led some other participants to join her as allies.

Civic engagement – gender equality from the perspective of social activists

As our research purpose was to study the understanding and functioning of gender equality in different contexts and among various social groups, emphasis was also placed on the exploration of the sphere of social activism – the meso level[24] of people's social existence. We wanted to investigate the importance of this engagement within local communities, non-governmental organisations, participation in social networks etc., in terms of its impact on sensitivity towards gender inequalities. Therefore, our study was composed of recognising and comparing gender equality attitudes and practices among community-level groups of activists, on the basis of a few differentiations. The chosen groups differ in terms of gender (male, female and heterogeneous groups), the environment of their activity (big city, small town, rural area etc.), their views on social development (more progressive or preservative), their pro-equality attitude, and the type of their engagement (volunteer, professional, political, educational, supportive etc.). When in the course of the study we realised the importance of gathering and comparing (in contrast with the groups which were created only for the purpose of taking part in the FGI conversation) the voices of groups that had been "naturally" established earlier, the activists among them are those with the aim to benefit their community – existing NGOs, voluntary groups. These group members were going to meet and work together in the future, and moreover they frequently maintained close, friendly links with each

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[24]In our analysis the meso level of social experience indicates a civic sphere, such as relations and activities among community or within an organisation. This falls between the micro level of an individual and their social setting (e.g. family life) and macro-level influences of society, nation, state etc. (see more in: Krzaklewska 2014; Babbie 2010).

other, which definitely influenced the group dynamics and the atmosphere of the conversations.[25] Eventually, during the whole FGI study, four group interviews with activists were held. This gives us a scope for recognising the diversified range of attitudes towards gender equality. The groups were as follows:

A. Local activists from a rural area, both women and men
B. Group of men concentrating around issues of multiculturalism from a small town
C. Female members of a feminist anti-violence organisation from a large city
D. Male members of volunteer fire brigades in a village.

The analysis will be divided into two main parts. In the first, the specificity of the four groups of activists are presented, including especially their aims and motivation for civic engagement. Further, a few aspects of the civic engagement that emerged during the discussion on gender equality are covered. The considerations closing the chapter deal with the issue of cost and benefits from civic engagement, on the basis of feminist activism. However, regarding the main part, it must be mentioned that the perspective of gender equality or inequalities was not always relevant for the participants to describe their commitment and the goals they wanted to achieve as activists. Due to this, as well as because the sample was limited to four cases, the chapter provides a kind of mosaic of issues related to gender equality, not a coherent whole. This is why the following analysis should be considered as exploratory and inspiring to ask further questions, rather than as a comprehensive study of the gender perspective on civic engagement in Poland.

Four cases of engagement: aims, motivation and circumstances of the discussion

Case 1: Political and social activism in the rural area (FGI_4)

The first type of activism was rooted strongly in the goal of promoting local community development and creating the conditions for it. As we were informed by the participants at the beginning of the FGI, we were having a conversation with "the upper crust", "just the elite", "the best people in the village", who were deeply devoted to their local community service and development without any claims for individual material benefits. The different participants in the discussion were trying to outdo each other in mutual praise and exchange of merits for the local community. Definitely, the group was driven by the priority of protecting its cohesion, which was why during the discussion there was such an evident need

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[25]For more on the group dynamics see the chapter on methodology.

to express its social significance and appreciation for its members, as well as a pride in being an activist committed to one's own neighbourhood. What was also characteristic of this group was the participants' evidently and explicitly articulated local patriotism. This was manifested both in indirect declarations about the uniqueness of the village and its dwellers as the only and the best place to live and in the group's extreme excitement and strong turbulences that had been triggered by the disappointing results of the first round of local elections held just a day before. Moreover, the elections were an issue that dominated the whole conversation and its trajectory, posing a challenge for keeping participants' attention on the theme of the interview. But at the same time, these distractions indicated the extreme importance of local community issues for the participants. They explained that "it is a case of life or death" or "our to be, or not to be", when repeatedly leaving the place of the interview to resolve some electoral-related issues urgent for them. A few respondents seemed to be genuinely despairing and embittered due to a discrepancy emerging from the results of the voting, between their vision of the local governance and that of the rest of the inhabitants. The participants seemed to be alarmed that such a possible political order would hinder their activities and further work for the community development. Besides, among the interlocutors was a woman who was a candidate for the Municipality Board (of which she had previously been a member), but she had not passed the first round of elections, which the whole group saw as outrageous.

While the theme of the just-held elections became a priority to discuss and politics took centre stage, it is clear that the participants' political activity was inseparably linked with social commitment. The majority were associated with some local organisations, e.g. the Rural Housewives Association or sport clubs, or they themselves were running such units (for example a local traditional folk dance group that seemed to be the pride of the whole region). They were all in accordance in emphasising that by working in different areas, they complemented each other, working together for the good of their village and municipality. This can be seen in the below quotation, where one of the female participants (the one who lost the elections) refers a good life to her attachment to the village and the significance of social engagement for the community alike, immediately approved by others:

> *F5: Hmm, a good life? From my point of view, a good life is exactly that [community involvement]… when people have a chance to do that if they like… the ones who are ambitious and they don't do it for money, they do it for their community, for other people (…) I was born here, I am from here and I am really the last person who would wish ill on this municipality. I have always been for this municipality, I have fought for many things for it. Many people can confirm that!*
> *F1: And you still fight!*

F5: And I will continue to fight all the way, until my last resources! (...) There are fantastic young people here [name of the village]. They can do great things. I really admire working with young people and sharing with them all the things I also got as a young girl (...).
Mo1: So that engagement is crucial for you…? To lead a good life?
F5: Oh yes…
F4: Exactly! Involvement in people's matters. (FGI_4)

Case 2: Multicultural diversity activism in a small town (FGI_5)

The second group of activists that we interviewed is a group of young men from a small town in the western part of Poland. They are gathered in a "club for multiculturalism" that was initiated a few years ago by a teacher (who is now the group's leader) as a school group of pupils interested in multicultural and pro-tolerance issues. The participants were relatively young, from those who had just graduated from high school to young professionals, including the leader, who was the oldest. They had conducted a few projects together devoted to multiculturalism, social and cultural diversity and international exchange. One of the participants explains his motivation by saying that he recognises a need for combating stereotypes and social inequalities and would like to contribute to a change in the limited way the people in his own community think:

M4: Why? Because in my opinion in our municipality, in Poland in general, likewise in the whole world there is… there are many views on that topic, many stereotypes. And there is a need to somehow… I don't know… somehow make those people aware, those who let's say… think stereotypically that… let's say some group has no rights or has less rights. In my opinion we need to somehow inject it [such awareness] into them or convince, or at least try to convince them. To at least be sure that you've tried. To somehow bring some diversity, to prevent [people's way of thinking] from being so stereotypical. (FGI_5)

The main reason why this group was invited to take part in our study was the fact that they conducted a project dealing with gender-based violence in their town. We came to them with an agenda to explore the phenomenon of male anti-violence activism and thereby to expand on the circumstances of pro-gender equality activism from the perspective of men from a small town. Once on the ground, however, it turned out that the motivation of gender equality was rather distant and not very engrossing for them, and they were more eager to give other reasons for their activity, such as gaining international experiences, the possibility to learn more about different cultures and bringing that perspective to their local environment. Though this did not mean that they had nothing to say on the topic of gender equality, clearly they did not perceive it as principally relevant to their engagement.

In turn, an important feature of this male engagement was the strong learning character of the members:

M6: When I was starting [to be involved in joint projects], I was beginning high school. Then, there existed for me only the world which I could have experienced on my way from home to school etc. But since I started to collaborate within these various projects, my eyes have opened to the whole world… If I didn't take part in all those activities, I wouldn't have got to know all different cultures, different types of people. I would think only stereotypically in terms of how everything works only in my local environment, where, you know, I mostly have friends similar to myself. But now, when I met different people, I've changed my way of thinking about others, who I meet every day. Otherwise, I would only perceive the reality around my own sphere, which I've known since the beginning. So, I broadened my horizons and it gives me the motivation to share it with others. (FGI_5)

The above quotation shines light on a dominant aim for this group, where **self-development rather than social change is a motivation (to act)**. Apparently, this was rooted in the genesis of the club as a group established for pupils, as well as being manifested through the participants' narratives and the dynamics of the discussion. The majority of the participants referred to their projects in terms of broadening their horizons and obtaining new possibilities, and likewise this was the framework for them to reflect on the meaningfulness of their involvement. Moreover, this character of the group was fostered by the leader, who had played the role of a guardian creating opportunities for younger men to develop themselves in safe conditions since the beginning of the club. He also presented the same approach during the FGI, where he endeavoured to leave a space for discussion to the younger men. The multicultural club therefore seems to be a kind of incubator for learning how to plan, manage and financially steer professional projects, to attempt to take more and more responsibility. The members of the group repeatedly pointed out that under the watchful eye of their tutor (who had been gradually withdrawing from the control and decision-making position), step by step they had gained bigger and more responsible tasks, as well as broadening their worldviews. The example quote below underlines the focus on individual progress in competence acquisition, while social goals are not mentioned in the participant's story:

M4: So, what prompted me? Well, actually we internally, we used to have such discussions, let's say, a movie night or something and there was this meeting during which we all discussed the possible goals for the club. Whether we catch some profits or we give something from ourselves. Well, it came out worse or better, but I think the conclusion was at the beginning, we were focused on… I don't know, for some… something like work for equality, some helping others, doing something, something for others. But you know, when we entered this club, we heard from others, I don't know… that there are some trips abroad, that you can go somewhere, see something, to get to know something else, to take part in something. And with the passage of time, as we have developed, as we got more and more involved in it, well, we stopped thinking like:

"OK, we will go somewhere, we will have fun", but also we are going to give something, we can show something to someone, we can teach someone. (FGI_5)

Case 3: Feminist organisation from a large city (FGI_6)

The next group of activists were female members of an anti-violence organisation from a city in the western part of Poland. The participants' age ranged from their early twenties to retirement age. Their family status varied – some declared that they were single with or without children, while a few referred to living with a partner. From the beginning, the interview was informal, even friendly in nature, and it was apparent that our interlocutors treated the interview as a social event allowing them to meet. This was desirable but deficient among members of organisation due to their lack of time and the overflow of obligations.

Clearly, in the course of the conversation a power structure among the participants was shown, with a strong and charismatic role of the leader and founder of the NGO, who tended to in some way "keep an eye on the agenda of the discussion". She tended to be the first to talk and dominated discussion, frequently complementing the previous speakers' statements, and sometimes even restoring her colleagues' narratives by giving her own explanations or views on things related to the discussants' personal experiences and opinions. Our impression was that she had a maternal attitude towards the members of the organisation, as though she felt she had raised and formed them. Even if we tried to limit her influence somewhat, that balance of domination seemed to be a grounded practice, and the rest of the women always left her space to speak.

As the basic form of their activity, the participants emphasised support and counselling for women experiencing gender-based violence. But in the course of the organisation's development, their operation has expanded, and, apart from the counter-domestic-violence-core of legal and psychological advice, today they engage additionally in antidiscrimination education, advocacy for both women's and men's rights when they face structural discrimination (according to their narratives – mainly from institutions like the police, courts etc.), and many other fields. From a group of "girls who wanted to have a nice time by sharing "foolish theories about books" – as one of the participants recalled their primary interest in feminist theory and literature – over the years they had become a well-established feminist organisation, politically strong in their region and whose voice is considered seriously within local authorities. It is important to highlight, as it was repeatedly referred to during the discussion and is reflected in the words of the leader, that "(…) our beneficiary is a person who needs help, and it's not the case that we do cleaning and repairs in her/his head". This

claim for a more pragmatic and result-oriented view of the impact they have on the recipients' lives was mentioned many times, and by the majority of the interlocutors. They underlined a focus on particular people's perspective, which the organisation members recognise as distant from "the feminist agenda of raising awareness of inequalities caused by the patriarchal system" (quoted by participant F2). They also remarked that the change of consciousness (if ever) would come afterwards, and was not a priority:

> *F2: Our concern is to help. So, we don't announce that we help people who experience discrimination, because there are not many of those who describe their situation as one of gender-based discrimination. We say that first of all we help those who are the victims of crime and violence (…) and when those people come we don't work to raise their consciousness, there is no time for that! Instead we try to change their lives. Just to explain to them that their situation, that they are abused because of their gender, that gender inequality exists. Good luck in explaining to a woman who comes to change something in her life because her husband beats her that… "well, [modulates her voice in an academic manner] it stems from centuries of cultural restrictions". That is a waste of time for her, she is only interested in changing her everyday life experience. So, here we rather follow that path. (FGI_6)*

Identification with the feminist movement was another interesting theme of this conversation. Some of the women revealed that they would not fully label themselves as feminists. Although such standpoints were declared to be accepted, the reassurance on this matter was followed by jokes that their colleagues were simply not aware of the fact of being feminists, as they had not had their "feminist defloration" yet. The term was a part of the group's culture and used (mainly by the leader) for naming the experience of gender inequalities causing one's recognition of oppression mechanisms in society: "We call it 'feminist deflowering' [defloracja feministyczna]– meaning 'losing one's feminist virginity', when someone gets to know that this is no longer any ideological talk, but a real experience that happened, the experience of discrimination".

While narrating on their motivation to act in the NGO, many women referred to their individual life paths leading them to gender equality activism, and they definitely enjoyed the opportunity to share their stories with each other. Many models emerged that triggered a pro-equality attitude and demands to question traditional gender schemes and a critical perspective: some referred to the need for a supportive community (e.g. to find a legitimation for not being a perfect young mother), while a few pointed to the need to do "something meaningful" when their children had moved out of home. An important and repeated pattern was related to a transformation from being the organisation's beneficiary (who has experienced an abuse or violence and got support from other women) into a person who returned, motivated by gratitude, and the will to share their experience of "revival" to help other women in a similar

situation.

Case 4: Traditional voluntary firemen's activism in a village (FGI_10)

The fourth group that was chosen particularly because of its civic engagement was that of men from a volunteer fire brigade in a rural area. While the aforementioned multicultural activism of young men at least in some ways deals with progressive social goals, e.g. implementing more open-minded and unbiased attitudes among society, the fire brigade's voluntary service (VFB) is a long-established and the most widespread[26] form of men's activism in Poland, with a rather conservative worldview and definitely traditional goals. The participants in FGI_10 were men of diverse ages, which is also reflected in the demographic structure of VFBs in general, where conventionally a hierarchy based on age and experience exists and young men climb to the top by learning from the more experienced. Diversity also applies to the family status of the participants: some of them were married and had children and grandchildren, some (mostly younger ones) were single, and one lived in an informal partnership. Similarly to the previous male activists group, a distinguishable leader was present. But in this case, due to his formal superiority as a commander, his dominance and influence on what was said was indisputable and unequivocal. Thus, it might be assumed that the commander's traditional view on gender relations could have prevented the rest of the participants from expressing less traditional beliefs and standpoints, especially as it might be observed that the younger participants were definitely more superficial in their answers and avoided relating to their private experiences.

Our purpose in this case in particular was to explore male activism in its traditional form: how in this context of a rural way of living and traditional patterns for gender roles, gender equality is perceived and practised in the area of community. Taking this angle into account, we wanted to recognise how the participants responded to the social change regarding gender norms and practices in their own field, since participation of women in the fire brigades is becoming more widespread all over the country. Some units allow girls and women to join the VFBs, but oftentimes according to different principles than men – they usually have other

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[26]The first organised units of fire brigades on Polish territories, the precursors of the current VFBs, were created in the second half of the nineteenth century, and from that time have become a common form of local engagement of men, especially popular in rural areas, resulting in almost 16,000 units all over the country today. VFBs operate according to the same legal regulations as other non-governmental organisations, being specifically intended to fight fires, natural disasters and other local threats, incorporated into the National Firefighting System and cooperating with the State Fire Service on its tasks. Importantly, VFBs have developed as local centres for development of communities and are usually involved in wider cultural and educational activities. Many units have their sports sections, theatre companies, orchestras, and community centres, as well as cooperating with many local associations with different aims.

tasks. Therefore, the FGI_10 participants' opinions and the readiness to face such a change in their community are significant indicators of gender equality functioning in the sphere of practices, discussed further in this chapter. It would emphasise the extent to which the new (non-traditional) patterns for division of gender roles are being incorporated into the local shape of civic engagement. Due to the diversified age of the group members, it was especially interesting to investigate if an evolution of gender norms and related practices can be observed: if different generations would present a common platform for the issue, or differ and negotiate views?

Introducing the gender perspective into civic engagement

While among feminists, gender equality references were essential and easy to refer to when describing their experience as activists, in other cases the perspective on gender inequalities was distant, and sometimes difficult to bring out. If the groups were eager to discuss gender equality, especially the roles of women and men, they were seldom (apart from FGI_6) perceived in relations to activism and their own civic engagement. During the FGI_5 with young men from the multicultural club, a suggestion even emerged that the gender perspective is restrictive for their activities due to the additional requirements of equal participation of women and men in the projects. The participants perceived this as artificial, senseless and imposed "by force", and pointed to the consequence of the gender factor determining the choice, at the cost of the people in their community who genuinely needed or were qualified to take part. They all agreed, however, that the recommendation to try to incorporate women and men equally would be advantageous, but only of it were not forced.

In the gender-mixed group of women and men from FGI_4, a specific insensitiveness to the gender factor appears in view of the combination of political and civic engagement. It is worth noting, though, that the division of gender roles within activities for women and men in the village was traditional, with women taking care of community services. During the discussion there were no visible demands for a change to this situation of traditional divisions. What was characteristic of their narratives was the perception of a strong need to introduce the local community as gender-equal, with both women and men having a part to play. Nevertheless, the evident significance of women was proclaimed in both the political and the civic local scene:

> *Mo2: (…) so if we could talk about that engagement in community life and about the situation of… if women here [name of the village] are more active, or men?*
> *F1: Women.*
> *M2: Yeah, the Housewives' Association.*

F4: Oh yes, definitely the Housewives Association.
F2: So, first of all, there is this Village Housewives' Association. So there are rather older women… and men actually are not really engaged in anything…
F1: However…
F3: But firemen?
F2: Well, OK, so the firemen too, they are active in a way, or here X. [name of one of the male participants] is active in the sport club.
F2: So, the men are also engaged!
(…)
F3: Ah! And that director [name of the man]. Now, how active is he!
F2: Oh yes, Yes.
*F2: Well, so they **[the men] are active indeed! And [the women] just join them**.*
*F2: **Or they join us!***
*F2: OK, **or we initiate and they join us**.*
*F2: **Exactly, they join us.***
*Mo1: So, one might say that the **women drive the community activities in the village**? The ones that are sitting here at the moment?*
M2: Oh, yes, yes… [women laugh]
F2: Well… yes.
Mo1: And you [asking the male participant] when you observe the situation, you can see that actually the women are leaders in this village?
M2: Well, exactly. That's exactly what I would say.
*F2: **In the village and at home alike!** [laughs]*
M2: Sure!
F3: Of course.
F1: Yes. (FGI_4)

Looking through the above conversation, it became evident that even though at first the women as a group appear to be obviously the most active in a village, after a while there appeared a need to reduce this gender imbalance and appreciation of men's role as well. The group immediately found adequate "male fields" of engagement and community services, and were united in concluding that a cooperation and complementarity exists between the genders in their village. This again indicates the group's special effort to maintain its cohesion that resulted in women's withdrawal from the positions of power, or at least to mitigate this impression. However, the dominant role of women as initiators of local community life appeared to be negotiable and important for at least some of the female participants. Perhaps if the group had been less focused on the common goal regarding the elections, which had resulted in "dynamics of joining forces" in the discussion, they would have been less consensual, and the tendency to negotiate different standpoints would be stronger.

According to the multiculturalists' references to gender equality issues, the crucial role of the leader of the group must be noticed, with his role to educate/bring in more of an equality perspective. In relation to his aforementioned role of the "withdrawn but guarding" leader, a specific group dynamic emerged during the FGI. Certainly the leader (M3) was mostly

oriented in favour of gender equality, and since he noticed that we anticipated a particular image of this group and its members' motivations to act, he therefore strove to fulfil it even partly by repeatedly giving the other participants a hint of an equality perspective, as well as supplementing their contributions with the equality context:

> *Mo1: So have you run any other projects related to the equality perspective? You started listing… what was referring to equality?*
> *M3: [name of other participant], you participated in this project on Polish and Jewish cooperation?*
> *M6: Yes, yes…*
> *M3: It was in 2000.*
> *Mo1: So, what was it?*
> *M6: Well, it was about, well… well about some… historical… points…*
> ***M3: No, but according to equality! In the sense of human rights and that we met the people who indeed had that experience [of the Holocaust] in their families, didn't we?*** *All those aspects of tolerance and equality, not only on the basis of gender, but because there are so many different people around us, yes? There were Jews, Christians, even the Druze (...).*
> *M6: I participated only in this one project. Well to speak about the equality perspective in this project, well in my opinion…(...) well equality… equality was based rather on this religious aspect, We wanted to show that there shouldn't be any barriers, limiting us somehow… that we are simply the same people and who believes in what and who has what worldview is of no importance.*
> *(...)*
> *M1: So, such a meeting lasts a week, there are a lot of workshops then, but all the time there is common prayer organised, every time by another religion in order that all other religions might take part.* ***But, but… well, such a… the spirit of such a meeting is… in my opinion really… really…,***
> ***M3: Pro-equality.***
> ***M1: Pro-equality.*** *(FGI_5)*

Similarly, in the case of their combating gender-based violence project, with which we were mostly interested, the leader eventually decided to abandon his position of giving priority to younger participants' voices. As often as our moderators pushed to deepen the topic, we got no relevant answers during the course of the interview; by avoiding or propounding strategies of more important issues, the leader took a more prominent role in the debate and explained the details of the project by himself. This brought a much wider and informed perspective on the issue of gender inequalities, uncovering his broad knowledge on the mechanisms of violence against women, but this standpoint was definitely not shared among the members of the group as a whole.

Transformation of gender relations at meso level: obstacles and bridges

It is interesting that the civic sphere frequently appeared in the FGIs as an area of increasing

change regarding relations between women and men. The engagement creates a space for development of close bonds of inter-gender cooperation, but based on different rules than those developed within the private, family-life sphere, at the micro level. From this point, the example of the firemen would be useful to indicate the challenging character of such transitions. Their conservative approach towards social changes related to the growing participation of women and girls in voluntary fire brigades were an important factor in their attitude towards gender equality. Significantly, while they literally articulated their approval for this process in general, they tended to became more conservative if the situation were to be encountered within their own brigade:

> *Mo: Ok, I've read that there are more and more women in fire brigades, in the police, in the border guard. And that they also go on callouts [fighting fires]. But what if it was like this here?*
> *M4: Well, maybe it would not be bad… We just take the line that that it was not necessary so far, well maybe it is going to be changed in the future. But… there are so many other activities for women instead, so many various associations, initiatives. So they are needed. Even I myself have got my wife or daughters involved on many occasions to help us with some fire brigade ceremonies. (…) But the second thing… I think that just for the fire drills and so on, they can be fit for, but not for the real action. It is better for women to do some other things.*

While it is discussed in the chapter on the labour market, from the perspective of favouring horizontal segregation of women and men, this is still a significant claim for similar separation in the meso level of civic engagement within the community. It seems to be meaningful due to the fact that both areas of social activity go beyond the private sphere of family relations, where, however, there were clear, traditional scripts for different types of inter-gender relations. The meso level might seem undefined and unclear from such an angle, all the more from the point of view of the major transitions in gender norms and practices observed in the last decades; this was reflected especially by the older participants in our study. Whereas within families the implementation of changes appears optional for the participants, as it remains in the sphere of private choices and individual negotiations, beyond the private sphere of family life, it seems to be more unavoidable. And since there are no clear prescriptions for non-traditional gender relations, the participants prefer to hold to the well-known social order that is proven to work. We should note, however, that the postulate of the aforementioned separation of female and male roles tended to be expressed mainly by male participants, and thereby emerged among the members of VFB in the context of potential women in their unit. Tellingly, after spending some time discussing the "official" reasons for their doubts, such as women's lack of physical strength, and the urge to protect them as they

are also less psychologically resistant to people's misery that firemen witness, [27] they eventually revealed their real fear of closer relations with women in the situation of high mental pressure and tension during callouts. Regarding this situation of a lack of scripts, and therefore concerns related to the unpredictable consequences of the presence of women beyond the family (where inter-gender relations are legitimised), when asked directly by the moderator how they would react to girls in their team, they invoked the argument of sexual connotations:

> *M2: And what is more… but we are not going to mention everything that is not appropriate in this (...) because there are some facts… everything is all right when they are young [girls]. But when they grow up, and something grows here and there then afterwards… sometimes it may cause problems because then there is… it's like when there are five men and three women well… it would be a problem. [laughs]*
> *M1: And go for a callout then…*
> *Mo: But why? Would it be disturbing, during callouts?*
> *M2: Well, maybe not exactly during a callout but afterwards, maybe there would be something….*
> *M1: Well, where did that happen? That for example, after one callout two [women] were pregnant, after only one callout!*
> *M4: But not with the firemen?*
> *M1: With firemen! After the callout there was... (...)*
> *M4: It is different in such professions as the police force, the army or the fire brigades. Well, there is a different role, eight hours working, **someone is on supervision all the time**. A volunteer is different. There is a callout, it can take all day, you need to eat on the way and… and sometimes after that action, after all, there is a need… not to beat around the bush… sometimes you need to drink [alcohol].*
> *M2: To relax.*
> *M5: Alcohol is best for relaxing.*
> *B: Well, but women also drink alcohol (laughs).*
> *M2: **But the problem is that there is a man, a woman and vodka, and then well… you know… you can lose your mind** [może być rozum krótki]*
> *M5: ...while you have a little child at home!*
> *M2: So it could go many ways...*
> *M3: Well, it happens, but you can't approach it as women being terrible [nie można podchodzić, że to kobieta jest straszna].*
> *M2: We know it very well in our team, that **we are here men here… and I think, well that should stay this way**. (FGI_10)*

On the other hand, there is an interesting difference when comparing the group of firemen and the quotation above with the previous group of multicultural activists, where the sphere of civic engagement was seen as a space for building bridges and practising cooperation between women and men and different generations as well:

> *M1: Well, in the dancing group there were older people mixed with the young, so they do it together, even this association, the Rural Housewives Association… women*

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there… they are in their seventies, eighties and they were dancing together with those schoolboys.
M4: And those Housewives… they became some of our… well in some way our group of… well they are considered here as a group who are really keen to cooperate. So if we have some project (…) it is easier with them… those Housewives are happy to engage and happy to help us. If they can only… …)
Mo2: So, it was a kind of exchange between generations?
M3: Yes, yes! (FGI_5)

A similar perspective on social work at the community level also appears in the interview with elderly people (FGI_9), where one of the men, from his experience of being a member of an organisation for alcoholism prevention, recognises a sphere of activism within the community as **an area of alliances and good partnership between men and women**. He elaborates on his own experience, when he had to break his earlier beliefs about women's place in society and developed a new, non-traditional attitude to co-participation and mutual partnership with women on professional grounds:

M7: There is a majority of women in the management [of the organisation] as well as in the club, so for me, cooperation with women works really well, wisely first of all. Because it is not like it used to be 30 years ago, that women only had to stay at home, nothing more (…)
First of all, I can really get on with women, while with men I wouldn't. Not with everyone, of course.
When I organise a meeting of the management, even if I would really like to do something, but one of the women will suggest something else then… you know what? I rethink it, and I usually admit she is right, and I think… this is how it works… You have to seek a consensus with women. You can't simply bring them down (…)
But you need to work with women, like I do. I've worked with women for 10 years. So I really don't take offence when someone reprimands me, a woman, that I don't behave. Even if I first say "get away from me", after a while I can apologise to her, saying "you're right", because I rethought it. (FGI_9)

Moreover, the participant (M7) presents a transformation he came through in his life, from a man who was an alcoholic and had left his wives a few times, to a person actively engaged in the anti-alcoholism movement and dealing with women experiencing domestic violence. He claims that this everyday witnessing of the harmful consequences of gender injustice, as well as the experience of co-working with women, has given him a "different way of thinking" and an emerging sensitivity on inequalities based on gender:

M7: We [men] need to switch to a different way of thinking! (…) I did not understand it before, but now I do. Although it was a long path, my dears, that learning that women should be in first place, that you have to appreciate them…(…) Now, just as I began to sober up, I realised that there were a lot of women I'd hurt. And I admit it, even among us all gathered here. (…) That is why I now have a different approach to women, due to what I've gone through in my life. (FGI_9)

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Civic engagement creating enclaves of solidarity

A similar perspective on civic engagement as a sphere enabling building of alliances and solidarity among social groups in contrast to the professional or public sphere at the macro level occurred in FGI_6, among feminists, but in reference to relations between women. The participants recognised and discussed in broad terms the problem of the patriarchal system of oppression based on the principle of competitiveness, where women do not support each other because of the "slave strategy within the patriarchal system", as one of the women – the leader of the NGO – called it. Further, the same participant diagnoses the problem:

> *F2: Women agree to the patriarchal rules: when you want to eliminate the opponent, the weaker opponent is always another women [rather than a man]. For this reason, women compete with other women, and not with men. Because then there's some possibility that they could win this competition. So, we can observe it. We can observe it in our professional careers too. But in [organisation's name] there is no competition, even for who the leader likes the most, no way! [laughs] (FGI_6)*

Nevertheless, while they underline that in their organisation among members such an attitude does not exist, and moreover they work intently on counteracting this, their general view based on the experiences (recounted with plenty of examples from the majority of participants) from beyond their organisation might be exemplified by a quote taken from this conversation:

> *F4: It is a fact that, if so, women are always even worse [than men] (…) Here it is completely different, but in everyday life it is common that a woman likes it when another woman looks worse, does not get promoted and any [worse] thing happens to her. (FGI_6)*

However, it is crucial to underline that the feminist organisation members saw their own group as a space and a tool for creating an enclave of female solidarity, surrounded by the hypercompetitive circumstances of life these days, oppressing especially women due to their weaker starting positions. Significantly, this approach was also confirmed among the male multicultural activists (FGI_5), who related to their engagement in the multicultural club as a sort of island where different values are shared from those operating elsewhere:

> *M4: It is a great pleasure for me just to simply do something for someone else. To meet let's say, someone's needs, to make someone pleased. Instead of these only tearing, tensions and getting profits from all these (FGI_5)*

A further inquiry should be followed to investigate the processes of exceeding the framework of individualistic alienation and self-reliance resulting in deficiency of solidarity and social bonds through civic activism and community-based engagement.

The altruistic approach: tensions between voluntary work and being funded

When the multiculturalists were asked about their motivation for conducting their projects, the issue of financial profits related to their engagement emerged as a sort of challenge for them to be explained and justified. A few participants chose to clarify why they had gained some profit from their undertakings, appearing almost embarrassed by that and in need of appreciation. One of them, for example, explained how he had become a project coordinator by stressing the precedence of altruistic motives, and the non-profit origins of the group's activities. This topic of considering their motivation as altruistic or not re-emerged a few times in the whole discussion, and was concluded by another participant, who nonetheless admitted that their reasons for engagement in tolerance and social diversity promotion were not only altruistic but also accompanied by two other aims. He emphasised both individual development and getting professional experience in conducting projects, as well as acquisition of funding that is allocated to projects related to social diversity. He also suggested that if there were no programmes promoting the aforementioned directions, they might probably have done something else:

> *M1: I think rather sadly about these issues [of the reasons for the group activity]. Looking at this in a more realistic manner: those are projects organised by X [the name of the leader]. He was the oldest, he knew how to get funds for it. And now… to be honest the subject matter usually resulted from the fact that some organisations allocated some funds for particular issues. And this is what we must admit to each other, right? (…) So we did a project for elderly people, because the funds were bigger. Unfortunately, this is the strategy… For better or worse, you must fall into line somewhat in this case. In fact, the subject is not so important. If it were in some other subject, but with similar rules, I would also be interested. And people know that there is money in this, that is why. And of course sometimes, after the first, second project you can… your eyes may open and then you can notice that actually it is a really interesting issue. (FGI_5)*

The tendency to underline philanthropic orientation was also relevant for the local rural activists, where it was also expressed by one of the women as a protest against accusing her of achieving financial benefits and "growing rich" through charitable activities, as she perceived local community opinion:

> *F5: If there is someone who runs their own enterprise for sixteen years, has a [folk] group for fifteen years... After all, we have already made the money we wanted to make in life. I really… if I really wanted to keep it for money… then this folk group would no longer be there. The fact that we have our business is also so the team can exist! Because costumes, everything… practically we are funding this, giving our own money, because it is our passion! Because of the love of folklore ... (…) and it surprises me that people may perceive it differently: she has so much money, but still not enough for her, so she goes [to get more by volunteer activity]! I started this not to make money, but in order*

to change something in here, to make some improvement!
F4: This is such a stupid mentality of the people. (FGI_4)

As we can observe, the tensions between volunteer motivation and being compensated for the work one has done tend to be a valid issue, causing lively debate. What seems to be interesting from the gender perspective, though, is the presumable pattern that usually female participants are more attached to the idea that their civic engagement is for the purpose of change and were not expecting any profits, while men more often emphasised financial or at least compensatory feedback from outside, from the public or self-development benefits. To illustrate this, a comparison might be made between the feminist organisation, consisting exclusively of women, and the voluntary firemen and multiculturalists. In the former situation, a rule operated about the voluntary character of the NGO members' work in general, and thus conscious consent had been required from any person joining the organisation. The women stressed that even though there were sometimes projects that got funding, no member would be able to live off them, and they all had their main jobs elsewhere as a source to live from; moreover, during interviews before joining the organisation, potential volunteers are forewarned about this. Women thereby seem to be more capable of accepting the deficiency of material gratitude for their work and finding their compensation in attaining social goals. In the discussions with both the multiculturalists and the firemen, meanwhile, the consideration of getting more individual gains was stronger. The difference between the male groups is meaningful, though, because the young men from FGI_5, who received payment for their activities from time to time, perceive it at least as a possibility, while for the firemen their commitment is presupposed as solely a volunteer path. This is why among the voluntary fire brigade members a sort of bitterness and resentment appeared, related to the lack of gratitude for their long-life community service, or at least positive feedback from the outside: "(…) and yet one heard no good word from the people! (M1, FGI_9)", in other words a desire for social, not necessarily material gratification, recognition and credit of trust in their local community, expressed also by women from FGI_4, quoted above. On the other hand, the feminists' case contributes a different view on the issue, as the women from FGI_6 acknowledge that their activity frequently put them into unpleasant circumstances and they encountered a lot of harmful stereotypes, but they treat this as a cost of the change they are struggling for and look for appreciation rather within the group and with each other.

Generational change – impact on civic engagement

Considering a few different examples of social activism during our FGI study which enable

us to make comparisons, we can notice the importance of a generational change of patterns for social/civic engagement. Reflection on age as a dimension of activity emerges in the narratives of our participants representing both more progressive (FGI_5, FGI_6) and more traditional (FGI_4, FGI_10) types of activism. As the complaints about "youngsters these days" were a noticeable theme for elderly participants of the interviews in general, when it comes to activists this pattern was relevant rather for the traditionally oriented ones. The firemen and rural housewives activists from FGI_4 alike described a critical change within the young generation, which was no longer willing to be involved in local community life. The former elaborated on today's young people's calculation and lack of selflessness:

> *M4: Well, they had some 7 years old, older girls as well, but what has happened? They just run away… They have an orchestra, so they catch them [young people] rather for the orchestra than the fire brigades. Because they can see… well, young people are more calculating than we are. We… well we didn't care about money and so on. But today's young person [asks]: am I going to get something out of this or not? So, you need to have something for them all the time, some St Nicholas Day event to encourage them, or to organise a trip, or a camp etc. (FGI_10)*

The above argument was also relevant for the participants in FGI_4, where additionally the complaint over the mismanagement and laziness of young women and girls in their community was raised. According to the participants, it characterises the young generation in general, since "(…) it is no longer in their blood (F2, FGI_4)", but during the whole discussion, a noticeable misbalance could be observed in condemning girls as lazy more than boys. It is important to add that similar complaints did not occur among the more progressively oriented groups, where recruitment and arrivals of new volunteers were not a significant problem; sometimes, among feminists, just the opposite: they reported they had too many. This might lead to the conclusion that, especially among younger generations, other patterns of social engagement occur than those proposed by traditional groups, and other expectations are presented. Perhaps different possibilities for translating the traditional and the "NGO-rooted" activities into experiences required on the labour market should be considered as well, as the reason for less interest of younger people in traditional groups. Obviously, the deficiency of young people is seen as problematic, since for such groups an intergenerational continuity and transfer of their social mission used to be a key value, as the firemen point out:

> *M2: It must be continuity!*
> *M4: Because our brigade has lasted for over 30 years. So indeed, a generation has gone through. And in order to prevent this from disappearing, I suppose they will continue this how it goes. But there must be a fascination with this. When someone is not fascinated, we won't hold him by force. Because if someone doesn't feel he fits here, in our company, it is a sign that nothing will come out of this. This is my colleague who*

trains young people.
M6: Yes, there is a huge problem with the young people. When I was their age, it was something different. Now, they only open their computer and…well, you simply have to encourage them (…) encourage them really, because if not, none will come, while they prefer to sit in front of the computer. (FGI_10)

In relation to the earlier considerations regarding women's participation in fire brigades, however, we should note that in the above quotation the participants refer to the encouragement of young men, not mentioning female volunteers. Yet we can observe that, though aware of the diagnosed crisis of mobilisation of young people, the firemen remain sceptical and disapproving regarding female participation. Notably, generational differences in views on this ongoing social change did not appear during the discussion. The issue of women's participation was not negotiated between the older and younger participants, and all the standpoints presented were rather conservative. However, taking the group dynamics into account, where the dominance of the brigade's commander was incontestable, this might have prevented younger men from expressing other viewpoints. As the moderator of the discussion observed, the younger firemen seemed to be withdrawn regarding input into the discussion.

The impact of engagement on the quality of life – the case of feminists

The perspective on the influence of activism on the quality of life in terms of benefits and costs was discussed broadly during FGI_6. The members of the anti-violence feminist organisation pointed to the advantages of their activity, as well as, on the other hand, sacrifices and harmfulness. The latter involved both the psychologically heavy costs of being indirectly affected by experiences of abuse and violence of their recipients, and being stigmatised as "feminist".

Among the benefits, the women firstly underlined the community bond and support they received from the group. During the discussion they repeatedly emphasised a crucial meaning of their membership in the NGO for their identity. They also praised the occasion of the interview as finally offering time for them as a group. They were genuinely pleased to have the opportunity to tell each other about their paths to become an activist, to gather and exchange experiences and find similarities in their stories.

Another important profit the feminists indicated is related to the general lack of the intergenerational interaction and support between women these days, which they recognised. Participants fondly referred to a sort of traditional, but no longer existing and irretrievable, pattern of interchange of life experience within the community of women. But more

importantly, they found their organisation as a kind of replacement, where reconstitution of such a space for transferring life experience is possible:

*F2: Indeed, there was such moment in [organisation's name], when the youngest [name] was 19 and the oldest [name] was 70 (...) And it was kind of sharing that life experience. [Name] would say: but what are you doing, girl? What are you doing with your life? So I would say, it was a place where **we looked for such intergenerational women's wisdom**, kind of quasi-family. Once upon a time, granddaughters met their grandmothers, met their aunts and they could talk about women's issues. And it happened that [organisation's name] began to fulfil that need, on the personal level. You could chat about your life perspective with someone who thought in a similar way and you could check if you were dealing with things the right way. (FGI_6)*

According to our participants' narratives, the individual transformation towards recognising the need for deepening bonds among women occurred due to various reasons. For one of them such a moment was the birth of a child, when she discovered the inadequacy of media images of smiling, calm and relaxed mothers with a new-born child. As she stated, among the community of other women she had found support in not being perfect. As mentioned before, a few others had joined the organisation when their children grew up and moved out and the women were looking for a new spaces for feeling needed. Some wanted to share their experience of resolving life difficulties and help other women to find their way out of the crisis. But every time, their joining the organisation was inseparably related to fulfilment of their vision of having a meaningful life.

Another consequence of their activity, indicated by the participants of FGI_6 as beneficial, was related to high mutual trust among the group and unique straightforwardness enabling them to communicate on a very deep level, which the participants found uncommon and priceless:

F7: It is great that we talk to each other just straightforwardly. That we don't equivocate things, don't make any buffers, don't struggle for words to sound pretty. It should be just as it is. If it should be cut, then we cut it. And if something should be said to get a point across, to leave a person stunned, then here is the place where you can count on such complete honesty. (...) Sometimes it is very tough, but it is good, it is sobering again. And then, one already knows how to deal with the problem. (FGI_6)

In this regard, the participants also underlined the great significance of discovering the similarity of women's life stories, the common ground of the obstacles and traumas they had to undergo:

F2: (...) suddenly it appears that you have the same stories and that everyone has a similar experience. Like I sometimes sit with [name of another participant] and we wonder if by chance we have the same husband [laughs]." (FGI_6)

Therefore, the participants claim that it gives them an empowering belief that together

they would be stronger, capable to struggle effectively towards change on an individual, relational and also structural or institutional level.

In the aforementioned context, we see emerging at once the community function to collectively find solutions on individual level, but at the same time to collectively work through the trauma and then collectively hit upon structural inequalities and obstacles such as gender-based violence mechanisms. As the leader of the NGO concludes,

> *F2: But our experiences that we have individually later transform into projects. When I was a victim, a potential victim of rape, then we did the first project. When girls come with a difficult experience of motherhood we do a project supporting women in postpartum depression. So it is in this way that we translate our individual experiences into something (...). So we self-analyse and we analyse our needs and the needs of our beneficiaries. This is why all the time we are adjusting. And this is the power of our organisation, that we are flexible and we try to surpass our limitations. (FGI_6)*

Next to discussing the positive aspects of their activity, the FGI_6 participants narrated a great deal about the costs they simultaneously face. One of the biggest is related to the psychological burden that occurs with dealing every day with cases of abuse, violence and discrimination. The need to offload was also reflected in the course of the discussion and its dynamics. While we asked questions about participants' own experiences, they repeatedly returned to their recipients' stories, and had a strong need to express the emotional difficulty in accompanying the particular cases.

Coming to the costs of the engagement, the participants refers to existing stereotypes and hostility towards the feminist movement and gender equality activism. One of the interlocutors narrated a story about her doctoral dissertation thesis defence, when she was warned by her supervisor not to disclose her engagement as a feminist to the commission, because it might be harmful for her. Another participant spoke of a situation when her friend's husband had removed her from the house when he had learnt of her bringing some leaflets related to one of their organisation's projects. In another case, a participant who works as a lecturer spoke of a student of hers who had left some hate-speech posts about her on a social networking site:

> *F2: Maybe sometimes I can change someone, but also by the fact that I reveal myself [with my feminist worldview], I can cause someone to hate me. Due to his various experiences, due to his prejudices… and maybe he just never passed [my exams] and that's why he hates me? I never know how it works. (FGI_6)*

Conclusion

To conclude, the area of social and civic engagement as it appears from our FGI study turned out to be diversely related to dimension of gender, depending on many factors such as

motivation, type of activism, traditional or progressive vision of social development, as well as the interlocutors' gender, age and place of living. The connections between activism and extending gender equality spaces in both the individual and the group perspective seem to be evident in the case of particular groups, while less apparent with others. For example, the feminist organisation members (FGI_6) refer at length to how involvement in the women's community and collective actions against gender discrimination empower them firstly on an individual level – by enhancing their self-esteem and assertiveness – and then how they impact and redefine their private and professional relations, and finally how they enable them to raise political claims opposing the structurally embedded inequalities that women experience. Similar opinions are shared by some of the elderly people (FGI_9), where the women underline the role of being active and having an actual impact on what is going on in their social environment on the one hand, as well as even mentioning that in order to increase women's influence on their situation, a labour union of all women should be established. Therefore, many female participants perceive social engagement as a tool for empowerment, and a possibility to go beyond the private sphere traditionally assigned to them, and thereby the meso level must be considered as a space for social change to arise.

On the other hand, according to our study, the influence of engagement in civic issues on sensitiveness to gender equality appears ambiguous in the case of male activists. Among the firemen, opinions on gender equality remain comparatively conservative, while they also tend to suggest a rather traditional division of duties in the sphere of gender practices. Moreover, this corresponds with the opinions and experiences of the male group of younger NGO activists (FGI_5), who also did not find the gender perspective and grounds for gender inequalities especially relevant. This might be explained variously; however, it certainly requires further investigation; perhaps in the case of men, the empowering influence of agency at the meso level may comply more with their positions within other life spheres, so there would be no need for redefinition or questioning of the existing social order of gender roles. The depicted hypothesis may be supported by an argument given by one of the male students during FGI_2 to explain the deficiency of males committed to equality objectives. As he points out, pro-equality activism is actually against men's interest, since men would rather lose on equality. This is indeed the case of women, who are the ones that have a lot to fight for. However, to paint the situation in a more positive light, we can hail the position of men from the pensioners group (M7, FGI_9) as an example of male transformation towards critical consciousness on gender inequalities that could be triggered, or at least amplified, by social engagement. Nevertheless, we did not manage to get opinions from less traditional male

activists (e.g. male feminists), which would enable us to broaden the analysis of male pro-equality attitudes.

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