

WORK, GENDER, AND THE LAITY: NORMS AND THEIR REPRODUCTION IN THE CHURCH

KATARZYNA LESZCZYŃSKA, *PŁEĆ W INSTYTUCJE UWIKŁANA. REPRODUKOWANIE WZORCÓW KOBIECZOŚCI I MĘSKOŚCI PRZEZ ŚWIECKIE KOBIETY I ŚWIECKICH MĘŻCZYŹN W ORGANIZACJACH ADMINISTRACYJNO-EWANGELIZACYJNYCH KOŚCIOŁA RZYMSKOKATOLICKIEGO W POLSCE*

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With the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church turned towards lay people. At least theoretically, such people were to play an important role in renewing and updating (*aggiornamento*) the Church organisation and community. What is their status at present? What is the actual position of lay women in the Church? Katarzyna Leszczyńska's book *Płeć w instytucje uwikłana* [Gender entangled in institutions], which was published in 2016, contributes to answering these questions.

The subject of the book is the reproduction of gender patterns by lay men and women working within the structures of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. As her research problem, Leszczyńska asks how the employees of the Church's administrative and evangelising organisations present the norms of masculinity and femininity, what have been the experiences and activities of the respondents in the gender context, and what strategies they adopt to deal with the divergence between the models and

their daily experience and practices. This last question is also associated with a query about the kinds of gender models that are reproduced by the Church's lay employees. Leszczyńska analyses data collected during in-depth interviews concerning these three questions (the perception of norms, personal experiences, and reproducing norms and harmonising them with practices and experiences). The theoretical bases of the work are concepts from the field of gender studies, new institutionalism, and social agency.

/// Gender and the Church as Elements of the Public Discourse in Poland

In Poland, the subject of gender and the Church arouses not only media discussions but also the interest of artists and academics. Gender has become an important category in speaking of discrimination (for instance, in regard to employment and pay), human rights, or abuse. Mention might also be made of the debates on public policy in regard to the care of small children, where the category of gender plays a significant role, or the discussion of feminine forms in the Polish language, which has been particularly prominent in the media in Poland in recent months.

In terms of equality of the sexes, Poland comes out poorly in comparison with other European Union countries: according to indicators of the equal rights of the sexes prepared by the European Institute for Gender Equality, Poland is in twenty-fourth place in the EU (out of the then twenty-eight member countries).¹ The voice of women in the Polish public sphere is strong, however. In 2016 a new initiative on behalf of women emerged: Polish Women on Strike. It began as a protest against making the law on abortion more restrictive. It is worth adding that the Polish initiative gave rise to International Women's Strike.²

The Church itself is an important subject of debate in Poland. According to Pew Research Center, 87% of Poles consider themselves to be Catholics (Pew Research Center 2017: 52). In addition, 64% of the country's citizens claim that being a Catholic is very or moderately important for truly being a Pole (ibid.: 12). The Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) conducts research concerning Poles' appraisal of the position of the Catholic Church in Poland.

¹ Data of the Gender Equality Index for 2019 (from the year 2017): <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019>, accessed 8.12.2019.

² See more at International Women's Strike, <http://parodemujeres.com/>, accessed 28.12.2019.

The proportion of those who considered that position to be good remained stable at above 50% in the years 2013–2018. 2019 was the first year since 2013 in which the rate fell below that level: in May it was at 48%; in June it returned to a level above 50% (53%); and it fell again in July to 48% (CBOS 2019b: 17). The problem with the Catholic Church in Poland most commonly indicated by the respondents was paedophilic behaviour by members of the clergy (60%). In second place was the Church's engagement in politics, which was indicated by 37% of respondents (CBOS 2019a: 3).

In her book, Leszczyńska addresses both questions, which are prominent, controversial, and simultaneously very important on account of their continual presence in the public discourse in Poland. In studying gender and the Church organisation she adopted an intersectional approach, and this is one of the good points of the work. She thus produced an in-depth scholarly study, and her findings not only clarify the position of lay women in Church organisations, but she also shows the universal mechanisms that create social norms.

/// A Book on Gender, Institutions, Work, and Lay People

Leszczyńska's book can be divided into four parts, although she does not introduce such a division. In the first, which is composed of three sections, she outlines the theoretical background of her research. The second portion of the book is a single chapter reconstructing the Church's narrative on gender on the basis of the formal rules prevailing in the Church. The third part, which is also one chapter, is a description of the research methodology used. The final, fourth part, comprising chapters six through nine, is an analysis of the empirical material.

The title of the book seems to refer to another work in the area of gender studies: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler 1990). In the title of Judith Butler's book, gender appears as the active and creative side, while in Leszczyńska's title it is the opposite – it appears passive and created. From the book we know that Leszczyńska is sceptical about the premises of "Butlerite" feminism and therefore the title might be treated as an expression of her attitude towards that current. In appreciating the work of both authors, I will allow myself yet to read both titles as indicative of the ubiquity of gender and the possibility of its appearance in two different roles: active and passive. Gender can entrap and subjugate

an individual and at the same time can itself be dominated and shaped by people and their institutions.

There are not many publications that discuss the reproduction of gender models. There are more works concerning the reproduction of social structures in general. The small collection of the former includes articles by Tatiana Barchunova (2003) and Beverley Skeggs (1988), and now this book by Leszczyńska.

Leszczyńska shows that both men and women reproduce gender roles and rules, and thus they contribute to preserving models of femininity and masculinity, while acts of subversion or transgression – that is, of resistance and change – are rarely attempted. *Płeć w instytucje uwikłana* is also a publication devoted to institutions, which are understood as social rules made present in actions. For Leszczyńska, gender is one such institution. Furthermore, she writes about the usefulness of new institutionalism in studying gender and, more broadly, the usefulness of the institutional approach to gender, as an alternative to identity concepts. She additionally tries to define the place of the gender category in religious studies.

The study was conducted in an unusual place, and its participants are also out of the ordinary. For her research, Leszczyńska chose a group of lay people who declare their ties to the Church and religious faith. Her respondents work in institutions of the Catholic Church, which is treated here as an employer. The interviews were conducted in the workplaces of the respondents. The *genius loci* and the lay status of the respondents recur repeatedly in the book as a background to the narrative about gender. Thus the book can be considered a sociological account of lay people in the Church, while it also throws light on working conditions in Church organisations and the relations that exist there.

/// Norms, Experience, and Agential Reproduction: The Research Findings

Leszczyńska conducted fifty individual in-depth interviews with lay employees of fifteen diocesan curias (for instance, the secretariats and offices of curias, departments, committees, episcopal courts, and media belonging to diocesan information organs) and entities of the Polish Bishops' Conference (for example, secretariats, councils, and commissions). Thirty-one women and nineteen men, who were specially selected, participated in the qualitative study, which was conducted in the years 2012–2013.

In the empirical part, Leszczyńska first relates what the respondents themselves understand by “being a woman” or “being a man.” It emerges that femininity and masculinity are subjected by the respondents to essentialisation and naturalisation. This means that in their consciousnesses, there is a binary division into men and women, and the source of male and female traits is nature. A human being has no influence over these traits (Leszczyńska 2016: 189–190). Femininity is associated chiefly with emotionality directed at another human being, and thus is characterised by, for instance, empathy or love. At the same time, the respondents emphasise that women experience emotion intensely, which is manifested in effusiveness or anxiety. Masculinity, on the other hand, is connected with rationality, action, and individualism (Leszczyńska 2016: 190–193).

Regardless of their gender, the lay functionaries of the Church in their understanding of masculine and feminine roles remain in accord with the teachings of their employer and adopt the Church’s point of view.³ For instance, the women consider that men are by nature more proper persons to fulfil important roles within the Church (as deacons, administrators, ministrants, or curial specialists). Only when there is a lack of men can women be delegated to fulfil such functions.

Leszczyńska explains the state of affairs as follows: “The conditional acceptance of women in the Church administrative structures, with the simultaneous distancing from femininity in various Church functions, can be explained in terms of gender queues (*labour queue theory* [emphasis added])” (Leszczyńska 2016: 210). In my opinion, this conclusion is too far reaching. I sense that the views and practices revealed during the study can solely be considered an empirical reflection of gender queues, whose existence is noted in labour queue theory. An explanation of the “conditional acceptance” of women’s fulfilling important roles in the Church would be an answer – which Leszczyńska does not give – to the question of why this occurs.

The author’s analysis of the respondents’ experiences reveals the partial mismatch between those experiences and the models in the respondents’ consciousnesses. For example, not all the women had managed to fulfil the model of a woman as a housewife, caring for her husband and children. The stories of curial specialists’ experiences of being overworked, because

³ Leszczyńska reviews the Church’s teaching on gender, and not solely the roles of men and women in the Church, based on her own analysis of Church documents (the Catholic Code of Canon Law, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, papal encyclicals, the letters and documents of the Polish Episcopate).

as unmarried women they are given extra, after-hours tasks to do, are also interesting. This type of story shows that an institution whose model of femininity is based on being a wife and mother, paradoxically does not give singles the opportunity to begin following that model.

The Catholic lay people, when faced with the disparities between their own experiences and the models, try to justify those disparities, to legitimise or overcome them. Leszczyńska interprets their methods of dealing with a contradictory situation, as revealed in their narratives, in categories of gender strategies. Their strategies involve various practices in which Leszczyńska sees primarily a reproduction mechanism.

She does not exclude the possibility of the transformative potential of the strategies but she assigns it lesser importance: “In these strategies, I am looking first for various practices directed at maintaining the normatively interpretative imaginative models, and then, in second place, for practices that can be read as transforming those norms or freeing them” (Leszczyńska 2016: 266).

However, in both cases, those practices have an agential nature. “I interpret these strategies [...] in categories of reproducing the practices of models of femininity and masculinity, perceiving in them an agential potential, seeing in the lay people actors participating in creating gender rules and not solely their passive recipients,” writes Leszczyńska (ibid.: 265). Intuitively, we might associate agency rather with transformation than with stabilising the existing order. In Leszczyńska’s opinion, though, the activities of individuals maintain the norms and models, and in this way the maintaining is agential. Agential actions need not be reflective or intentional (ibid.: 85–86). Individuals need not know that they are causing something to happen.

Leszczyńska’s position is not obvious, as she emphasises herself (ibid.: 82–85), but similar ideas can be found in the existing literature. This position is part of the debate on the conditions of agency, which oscillates around the following questions: (1) are actions agential only if they are directed at changing the status quo?; (2) are actions agential only if they are reflective and intentional?

Some authors link agency with intentionality, reflexivity, and opposition to the status quo. In what is probably the only collective work on the Polish market devoted to the sociological category of agency (Mrozowicki et al. 2013), we can find these connections simply by looking at the table of contents (there are numerous references to reflexivity in the titles of the works). Leszczyńska mentions the work of Butler, or, in Poland, of Magda-

lena Nowicka, as examples of understandings of agency that are contrary to her own (2016: 82).

On the other hand, Anthony Giddens, for instance, offers a view of agency that is closer to Leszczyńska's: "For Giddens, structure and agency imply each other. Structure is *enabling* [original italics], not just constraining, and makes creative action possible, but the repeated actions of many individuals work to reproduce and change the social structure" (Giddens & Sutton 2014: 56). Apparent passivity and repetition can thus be agential. Agency consists here in both reproduction and in changing the norm. The cited portion of Giddens and Sutton's work evokes one further problematic question concerning agency – its status in regard to the social structure – which was addressed by, among others, Pierre Bourdieu, Margaret Archer, and Anthony Giddens (*ibid.*: 52–58), Adam Mrozowicki (2010), and Agnieszka Trąbka (2016).

From a cursory review of the sociological literature in both Polish and English it can be concluded that a view of agency as an action which is not necessarily subversive or transgressive and need not be intentional is slowly gaining in popularity. Such a view is held by Leszczyńska, by the above-mentioned Giddens, by Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998), and also by Laura M. Leming (2007).

/// Intersectional Insight into the Reproduced Institution, or, on the Methodology of the Work

One of the very good points of Leszczyńska's research is its theoretical basis and methodology, which might be used in university courses as model examples of the qualitative research process. Leszczyńska's research process did not involve the automatic application of some template. On the contrary, she shows how to formulate and apply an appropriate methodology, to conduct the research process to its conclusion, to indicate the drawbacks and difficulties involved, and at the same time to write a good book.

The publication could thus be a good supplement not only for academic courses in research methods or the conduct of projects but also for (self-)education in academic writing. Several of her methodological and conceptualising actions and steps are worthy of emphasis: (1) the conceptualisation of gender as an institution; (2) departure from the assumption that the institution of gender is reproduced, and not the structure or the social order, by means of gender; (3) the use of an intersectional perspective; and (4) non-involvement in the meanders of grounded theory.

Gender as an Institution

Leszczyńska bases her analysis on the theoretical framework of new institutionalism, which differentiates institutions from organisations. The use of the term “institution” in the book refers to gender, not to the Church, which, in the paradigm of new institutionalism, instead of being an institution should rather be given the status of an organisation (see Jessop 2001: 1220). It is the institution of gender and not the Church organisation that is the main subject of the analysis. In adopting the institutional paradigm and the definition of an institution it has shaped, it is possible, in Leszczyńska’s view, to overcome the practice of treating gender exclusively as a system of oppression and to recognise it as a socially created institution (2016: 36). Gender would be, as she writes herself, the normative context of activities which could simultaneously be shaped by social actors (ibid.: 35). In essence, the institutional approach allows Leszczyńska to conceptualise gender innovatively: not as oppression, but contrarily, as having agential potential (on the subject of the category of agency in Leszczyńska’s book, see above).

Premises about Gender Reproduction

In contrast to the authors of certain classic works (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Giddens 2001), Leszczyńska draws attention to the process of reproduction of a particular institution and not a social structure (which depending on the author is understood slightly differently but primarily as a system of distances and social hierarchies). Her approach may seem slightly similar to that of Giddens, in which human practices play an important role in reproducing the social structure. Giddens (2001) devotes considerable attention to the creation of the practices themselves, but he simultaneously points to the influence they have on shaping structures (of the system).

Leszczyńska does not investigate the role of gender practices in creating structure and order; she stays at the level of analysing the process of creating the practices or institution (depending on the nomenclature adopted). This seems to be a less common approach in the sociological literature than analysing the creation of the structure. The adoption of such a research conception is closely related with Leszczyńska’s other method, that is, the above-mentioned conceptualisation of gender as an institution.

Intersectionality

The creator of the concept of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw, defines the intersectional approach as “methodology” in one of her articles (Crenshaw 1991: 1244, footnote 9), thus Leszczyńska’s use of the category should be considered to be a methodological procedure. In interpreting Crenshaw, Justyna Struzik explains the sense of an intersectional analysis in the following manner: “an intersectional analysis [...] emphasises the necessity of taking into account the many social categories that are basic for the shaping of identity in reflecting on roles, experiences, or social practices” (2014: 237).

Kaja Zapędowska-Kling adopts a very similar understanding of intersectional analysis: “An intersectional analysis assumes the interpenetration and simultaneous mutual influence of various social categories [...]. The essence of an intersectional analysis is simultaneously taking account of the many variables that, overlapping and interfering with each other, form individualised biographies and, it follows, an individualised social risk” (Zapędowska-Kling 2017: 22). Elsewhere, we find the statement that “An intersectional analysis involves the parallel analysis of multiple, intersecting sources of subjugation/oppression. It is based on the premise that the influence of a given source of subjugation could vary depending on its connection with other potential sources of subjugation (or privilege)” (Denis 2008: 667). We can thus see that even though the idea of intersectionality is used in various contexts (for instance, identities and experiences, social risk, relations of subordination), it serves to clarify the role of connections between socio-demographic traits and their being taken into account in research.

Leszczyńska’s use of the concept of intersectionality was in itself unusually fitting. The mechanisms situating lay women in the Church structures are better described by diverse socio-demographic categories and by the lay women’s experiences in combination rather than individually.

In the study, what most strongly seems to condition the position of a given Church employee is gender and belonging to the laity – viewed intersectionally, of course, with the mutual connections. Those connections become visible in Chapter 6 and in part of Chapter 8, when Leszczyńska describes the earnings of the Church’s lay employees, both men and women, and their location in positions of power (2016: 241–254). These passages show that the small proportion of women holding important Church

functions may not be conditioned solely by gender but also by belonging to the laity.

However, according to Leszczyńska, the intersectional connection becomes visible in another place: “at the meeting point of position in the structure, age, and family situation” (ibid.: 226). Although age or family situation could indeed condition the experience or situation of women in the Church structures, the mutual interaction of these socio-demographic categories does not emerge from the research material as distinctly as the connection of gender with belonging to the laity. That connection could have been brought to the foreground, because in reality it is the leitmotif of the book. The title itself reveals that the book will be about lay people in connection with their gender.

Nevertheless, a clear indication of the intersectional relation of gender and status in the Church is only to be found in the portion in which Leszczyńska discusses formal norms and legal arrangements (ibid.: 121). In many places, the intersectional connections become visible, but they are left without commentary. Readers who are not acquainted with the category of intersectionality might not be aware of them. It would seem, therefore, that the potential of an intersectional analysis was not fully utilised.

The Problem of Grounded Theory

In analysing the research material, Leszczyńska freely refers to the theoretical concepts she adopted before the study, and also to others, which she did not mention earlier. In this regard, her work seems at times to be an example of the use of grounded theory, and yet it is not. Leszczyńska explains in detail that the methodology she adopted was the result of a synthesis of two models of “understanding the social experiences” of people: from outside (from the viewpoint of the observer) and from inside (from the viewpoint of the group).

Two different theoretical-methodological approaches are associated with these models: the deductive and inductive, respectively (grounded theory can be placed within the inductive approach). Leszczyńska’s approach is neither purely one nor the other, but a synthesis of the two. She departs in fact from certain theoretical premises but at the same time she creates new formulations of a theoretical nature and modifies the premises in response to the data obtained during the research process (see ibid.: 130–131).

“I note, with some concern, that ‘grounded theory’ is often used as rhetorical sleight of hand by authors who are unfamiliar with qualitative research and who wish to avoid close description or illumination of their methods” – thus Roy Suddaby (2006: 633) expresses his dissatisfaction with an overly trivial treatment of grounded theory. In this light, Leszczyńska’s awareness of the sense of grounded theory and reluctance to describe her own research by that term is indubitably one of the virtues of the work.

/// What Else? Other Strong and Weak Points of the Work

The book contains many other interesting theoretical or methodological categories in addition to those mentioned above (the patriarchal dividend, Erving Goffman’s phenomenological framework concepts, Alfred Schütz’s typification, and the idea of gender domains). There is no room to discuss them all. I will just mention a few of the book’s other advantages and drawbacks, which fall outside of research methodology: the author’s critical thinking about theory and her openness in describing how the work arose (these are advantages), and the work’s apychologism (a defect).

Leszczyńska’s critical thinking about the state of theory and gender studies research is undoubtedly one of the strong sides of the book. In Leszczyńska’s opinion, the limitations of gender studies concepts to this time appear in their weak link to general sociology, excessive empiricalisation, and the perception of gender relations in religious institutions solely in categories of oppression, the authority of men over women, and the marginalising situation of women in society.

In addition, as Leszczyńska writes,

In my perception these concepts [she precedes the statement by a reference to the concepts of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler], which are applied on the basis of traditional studies of social orders, such as religions and the people within them, provide grounds for a paradoxical androcentric perspective, reproducing the conviction of one correct model of emancipation and liberation, namely, the individualistically understood subversion of gender norms, that is, exclusively from the viewpoint of values identified with stereotypical masculinity (2016: 223).

The criticism itself could, obviously, be criticised; nevertheless, questioning the premises of what sociological circles consider to be mainstream

premises of gender studies must have cost Leszczyńska some effort and required some courage, and furthermore, it constitutes a departure point for a wider debate about the justifiability of those concepts.

Leszczyńska makes another brief and thus modest comment that is not precisely critical but is similarly valuable from the academic standpoint: she notices that in light of the approach she adopts to institutions, gender, and their social reproduction, the traditional definitions of the Church proposed by writers of classic works on the sociology of religion (Joachim Wach, Günter Kehr, Ernst Troeltsch) may have become out of date. They emphasise the weight of formal norms, “the role of Church functionaries, centralisation, and hierarchisation” in constructing these definitions, and they omit the importance of actors which fulfil subsidiary functions in the Church understood as an organisation and institution (ibid.: 144).

Another advantage of the work is that Leszczyńska does not smooth over the difficulties she met during her research process and in compiling the book. She writes, for instance, about ethical questions, including the issue of double loyalty (towards the respondents and scholarship), relations with the respondents, the anonymisation of data (ibid.: 148–152), or the possibility of overinterpreting the respondents’ statements (ibid.: 298). She is also not uncritical in regard to her own methodology (ibid.: 298–299).

As to defects, Leszczyńska warns readers, for example, that she does not perceive the single women’s “familiarisation” of work in the Church structures as a need resulting from a single life, where work would be a substitute for a household and family ties. She treats it rather as a strategy for “achieving conventional femininity” (ibid.: 277), by being warm, pleasant, and interested in the other employees and in the workplace. But why should one exclude the other?

Moreover, during reading I wondered how much the statements and convictions of the respondents are psychologically conditioned. I will cite the remark of Agata, a participant in the study: “my ideal would be a fellow who would say ‘I said so and that’s that.’ I would be able to submit to a just authority. And for me, a guy is a guy. A father, someone responsible, who does what he says he’ll do” (quoted after Leszczyńska 2016: 212). This method of shaping the ideal of masculinity by women did not appear particularly often (at least in the statements quoted by Leszczyńska it was not visible). Nevertheless, Agata’s statement inclines the reader to think about individual factors (personal experiences, deprivations, or identity dilemmas). Leszczyńska, however, does not refer in the book to possible

psychological explanations, which is a lacuna in an otherwise well-framed theoretical and methodological framework.

In the book, we certainly do not find a catalogue of models that are reproduced and those that undergo modification due to the actions of the respondents. Such information might be extracted from the interviews quoted, but no summary is given that would synthetically answer the question of what models are reproduced. From the Conclusion it would seem solely that the gender models functioning in Church teaching and at the same time largely characterising Western society are reproduced (Leszczyńska 2016: 293).

In reading the book I had the impression that we do not learn what gender models are created by the respondents but rather we better understand the processes of the reproduction of norms and gender rules. It might be learned, for instance, at what stage of dialogue with the norm the gender models are created, at what stages there is potential for their negotiation, and about the non-obvious meaning of agency (agency need not be connected with reflexivity).

The book is worth reading, especially if the reader is a person interested in the subject of gender, work, and the Church. It is understood that drawbacks are unvoidable, but the book has many advantages: an interesting, mature, and appropriate methodology, an intriguing and little-studied research problem, and a critique contributing to the discussion on the subject of theoretical and methodological gender and feminist studies. Leszczyńska's research methods are good enough that the book could be used for teaching, and her conceptualisation of research and analysis of the interviews aptly shows the mechanisms by which all kinds of social norms are created, not solely gender ones.

Leszczyńska managed to collect a significant amount of research material and to submit it to multidimensional, appropriate interpretation, even though the subject is difficult and hard to research. During analysis it is possible to assign people meanings they did not intend, to overinterpret answers in the context of theory, to let one's own experience deform the analysis, or to meet with silence on the part of the respondents and not obtain the minimal confidence necessary to discuss topics that might be sensitive for them. Thus all the more homage is due to Leszczyńska for having undertaken such research and for publishing it in the form of a very accessible book.

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