

# ***Becoming* a Feminist. Ways of upbringing and socialisation in the family and education. Polish perspective**

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## **Abstract**

The presented text is an attempt to describe the process of “becoming” a feminist. It is also an attempt to answer the following questions: what determines being a feminist, and is every woman a feminist? What impact do the family and education have on the process of becoming? The main thesis is that the process of “becoming” a feminist is determined by the environment and primarily through strong relations with the Other. Analysis was conducted on auto-narrations of women, Polish women declared feminists, who describe their path to “becoming” a feminist in the book “Feministki. Własnym głosem o sobie” (Feminists. In their Own Voice – translator’s note: own traslation), edited by Sławomira Walczewska.

## **Keywords**

Narration, feminism, femininity, culture, “becoming” process

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## 1 Introduction

“Nature does not define woman: it is she who defines herself by reclaiming nature for herself in her affectivity” (De Beauvoir, 2014; translator’s note: own translation)

“A woman is merely a bridge, an intermediary between the powers of nature and culture (i.e. man). A feminine creature constitutes chaos and the gates of hell. She is the stealer of semen” (Janko, 2012, p. 63; translator’s note: own translation)

My objective is not to provide an in-depth description of what feminism is nor to describe the transformation which women’s movements have undergone with respect to the second and third wave of establishing feminism throughout the world. I am primarily interested in the relationship within families and in the mechanism of “*becoming*” a feminist. Why “*becoming*”? The accepted formula of *becoming* is a category established by Simone De Beauvoir. In her book “*The Second Sex*”, in the chapter titled “*Childhood*,” she writes: “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (De Beauvoir, 2014, p. 319). According to this sentence the act of becoming is determined by social and cultural processes, including internalised socialised stories. This of course is not the rule. Being/becoming a feminist may also be determined by the situation in which a person functions, her lifestyle, as well as significant Others, who influenced the shaping of femininity, including the so called “*feminist identity*” (Titkow, 2005, p. 37).

## 2 Content Analysis as an Exploratory Method

Qualitative content analysis (Nasalska, 1982) was conducted in order to establish the most important general trends in the situation of “*becoming*” a feminist. In her analysis of the content, Ewa Nasalska lists three features of qualitative content analysis:

1) analysing not only categories which frequently appear in a given text but also those which occur rarely and are important for given content; 2) taking into account the context of the content in which the analysed categories occur; 3) taking into account the circumstances in which a given statement was made (Nasalska, 1982, p. 61) (Translator’s note: own translation).

Analysis was conducted on twelve women’s auto-narrations (two women were interviewed by the author (Ten women were asked to participate in the study and only two responded. I would like to express my gratitude for their help and involvement in responding to the questions.), while ten stories come from the book “*Feministki. Własnym głosem o sobie*”, in which women describe the process of becoming feminists, i.e. key situations in their experience and the experience of feminism. The participants also had direct or indirect impact on the shaping of feminism in Poland. According to the editor of “*Feministki. Własnym głosem o sobie*” the sample of women (10 participants in the project

“Feminisms of the World”) “was not meant to be representative, although the purpose was to show the discourse in its diversity” (Walczewska, 2005, p. 18). The research was conducted in the form of an interview, during which the women were recorded and then their statements were transcribed. These transcriptions were then subject to “smoothening their roughness in order to make reading more accessible, without changing the structure of the statements or correcting in which the participants of the project expressed themselves” (Walczewska, 2005, p. 18). The sample included two respondents who are representatives of professionally active women and members of the Women’s Council, an advisory body to the president of Slupsk. These participants were interviewed by the author of the study.

Content analysis was conducted in the following manner. First short notes were taken on the margins of the available feminist narratives. The next step was to distinguish the types of information presented in the analysed narratives. The following stage consisted in categorising the subject of the analysis and in determining the main categories important for the purposes of this text. Each narration was treated in the same way. From the presented narrations, the author managed to extract the following categories: the history of women in their families, childhood, family home, Others – significant people who influenced the shaping of a “feminist identity” and the so-called feminist revelation (term adopted from Walczewskax.

### 3 What Does Becoming a Feminist Mean?

There are many myths surrounding feminists. Debates on the topic are still an element of political conflict. This was well described by Agnieszka Graff in her book titled “Świat bez kobiet. Płeć w polskim życiu publicznym” (“A World Without Women. Gender in Polish Public Life” – translator’s note: own translation) (2001). In the chapter “Dlaczego nikt nie lubi feministek?” (“Why No one Likes Feminists” – translator’s note: own translation) Graff writes: “A feminist should hold a knife between her teeth, talk about the fall of family, a hundred orgasms and at least two clitorises, and about the feminist plot to castrate men. A feminist has to be obnoxious and her every word should reaffirm what everyone already knows, i. e. that no one likes feminists” (2001, pp. 208–209).

Why else do we dislike feminists? Graff states that “no one likes us because we’re ugly, frustrated and full of venom, we don’t shave our legs, we hate men, and apart from that we lack logic, women’s intuition and common sense” (2001, p. 209). In her book Graff refers to the novel “Nigdy w życiu” by Katarzyna Grochola, which contains the following fragment: “a feminist is an unfulfilled woman who always wears trousers, and who can only envy feminine women their femininity, while she herself does not pay attention to her views or appearance” (Graff, 2001, p. 228, after: Grochola, 2001, p. 88) (translator’s note: own translation). Such an image of feminists lies at the base of the question the women

were asked during the interviews, i. e. what they think of feminists, who feminists are, and what makes one become a feminist? The first woman provided the following explanation of who a feminist is:

*I believe that a feminist is a woman who believes that men and women have equal rights. However, I have come across an opinion (which I disagree with) that only those women who fight actively (lethal weapons are a must) are feminists. Those who act "against" men (Agnieszka, age 48).*

The second interviewee stated the following:

*Every woman, well almost every woman I know is a feminist, though sometimes they do not know it yet [...] and the word, similarly to gender and LGBT, still has strange connotations in many communities. These of course, result from a lack of knowledge. If we take advantage of the privileges earned by our great grandmothers, our grandmothers and our mothers, such as access to higher (third-level) education, the right to vote, and the ability to work in any profession, I can't understand how we can deny the ideals or the social trend – whatever we want to call it – which simply provides equality, freedom of choice or the right of self-determination to women. I believe that being a feminist means self-determination, and living without cultural or religious restraints. It is a partnership in relationships and an equal voice in every discussion. It is freedom. We often encounter stereotypes, e. g., a woman who does not work professionally and does not earn money is not a feminist. I know women (not many, but nevertheless) who consciously chose to live this way. Is this also an instance of freedom of choice and self-determination, a "social" "contract"? (Małgorzata, age 56).*

The presented statements highlight the categories of equality and freedom, the two key values that people around the world "fight" for. This invites consideration of a new vision of femininity, which would also serve as an instrument to eliminate fears of becoming a woman, which result from social pressure on women. Janko writes "[...] why do I also have to be THIS!!! I even thought of wrapping her [breasts] with tape. But I still felt the inevitability of fate" (Janko, 2012, p. 47) (translator's note: own translation). She goes on to write: "I'm so scared of being a woman: Being a Woman. Please, God, I don't want to be a woman. I'm terrified of being a woman ... God, let me remain a nobody whom no one sees, just for a little longer ..." (2012, p. 51). A feminist approach, as a cognitive value, constitutes an awakening to change the current state of knowledge and to achieve transformation. This is beautifully phrased by Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland*: "Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise" (Carroll, 2004, p. 76).

Jaworska-Witkowska writes:

Becoming oneself as a constant process of infinite identity which is not supported by a name, in a constant identity Alice comprehends in yet a different manner: "Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up; if not, I'll stay down here till I'm someone else" (Jaworska-Witkowska & Kwieciński, 2011, p. 297, after: Carroll, 2004, p. 20).

Another category revealed in the analysis is independence, understood according to Lucy-na Kopciwicz (2003, p. 208) as liberation. An independent woman "has certain elements

which are unfeminine: self-confidence, feistiness, independence, assertiveness, courage, facing danger (a masculine type of “confrontational” power), and most importantly a relative freedom of femininity from male-centric references” (Kopciewicz, 2003, p. 208). Positions of thought in reference to the above-mentioned categories also highlight changes in the linear character of the approach towards femininity.

### **3.1 Herstories – The Family**

Most of the stories highlight the women’s family history, which influenced their process of “becoming” a feminist. Women who fight and who display bravery have an impact on history. The statements presented below refer to categorised statements, which in turn constitute the proper context of understanding the conducted analyses.

Thus, we perceive feminism as:

#### 1) a source of strength

[...] I found a woman who is 94 and lives in Warsaw. She told me the history of the members of her family who were killed. There were two women – one was a member of the anti-German resistance who was brutally killed in Pawiak (translator’s note: a prison used by the Gestapo during the German occupation of Poland). The other woman was shot in a street in Warsaw. She was pregnant at the time ... Their fate was terrible, but the knowledge that they were so brave and that I had support from women in my family gave me strength. Both the women who fought in the war, and those who hid somewhere and later began a new life here in the Recovered Territories, in extremely difficult conditions, were courageous. Finding the women from my family and learning about their lives is very important to me. By contrast, my father seems very disappointing (Tarasiewicz, 2005, p. 25).

The stories contain unfinished chapters of searching for oneself through the prism of the stories of other women. An attempt at finding one’s identity and constituting oneself as a whole.

#### 2) source of representation

There is one more thing I have to mention – the role of women and of female friendships in my life. It is the final, most serious, and most profound stage in feminist education and a time of maturation (Iwasiów, 2005, p. 178).

### **3.2 Childhood and Family Home**

Another category is childhood and family home. Even if the women’s narrations do not describe childhood as a developmental stage in a positive sense, its content certainly influenced the process of “becoming” a feminist. Below I would like to present narrations which belong to the presented category. The author highlighted certain parts intentionally because they indicate the women’s narrative context.

We can certainly notice a specific tendency to construct a feminist identity connected with growing up at home with or without men – fathers, who play a key role in the process of “becoming”.

### 3) A world without men

Ever since I remember, there were no men in the lives of my grandmother or great-grandmother, while my mother had a brief relationship with my father. I am the result of that relationship. My father left Poland and I haven't seen him for over ten years. I was raised by three women, who had traumatic experiences, who were very lonely, and for whom the post-war reality was very difficult and terrifying (Tarasiewicz, 2005, p. 23).

I grew up in such an environment, and I believe that it had a tremendous impact on me. I did not know men in my immediate surroundings. Even during my parents' brief relationship my father studied in another city, and I spent my entire time with women. Perhaps I did not sense that a man is necessary, e. g. to provide for the family (Tarasiewicz, 2005, p. 23).

As for my spiritual or intellectual development, there was no man present. Only a romantic vision of my father who sailed away as a hero (Tarasiewicz, 2005, p. 23).

### 4) The family as an anti-world

Our family was a strange place, an anti-world, though it was pleasant to be in it. We were free from any pressures [...]. My brother, mother, grandmother and I spent a lot of time with each other, talked a lot, and practically had no demands of each other (Lipowska-Teutsch, 2005, p. 61).

### 4) I, the oddity

As for my family, its influence on me and on my feminism was primarily to go in a different direction from what was set out for me. I have three younger sisters, aged 23, 15 and 11 years old. In my family, I function as a more or less harmless freak. For my parents, especially for my father and his second wife, a feminist is a frustrated woman who hasn't found a man (Gruszczyńska, 2005, p. 151).

Another statement comes from a woman who had great support from both of her parents and had a lot of freedom.

### 5) Freedom to act

At home, I always received support and I almost never fought with my parents. My parents never forced me to do anything, for example, I didn't have to play the piano. Actually, I regret not having learnt to play an instrument, but that was how it was – if I didn't want to do something, I didn't do it, and my parents didn't force me. I had a lot of freedom to act and to shape my identity (Regulska, 2005, p. 85).

The next narration belongs to a woman whose parents raised her as a woman who works professionally who has abilities and possibilities to act in a creative manner.

### 6) Excerpts from home (term borrowed from Jaworska-Witkowska (2011, p. 179))

Parents played a crucial role in my upbringing. I wasn't raised as a poor, sick person who needs to be taken care of, who can't manage, who is frail and can't do certain things because of that. I think they actually went too far in the other direction, explaining to me that that's how it is, you have to put it behind you and function as best as you can (Regulska, 2005, p. 86).

My home [...] shaped my identity by treating me not as a future wife or mother, but as a professional woman, a woman with interests and abilities which should be developed (Regulska, 2005, p. 87).

Sometimes the difficult situation of divorce can induce one to begin searching for oneself. A sad childhood, responsibility for the parents.

### 7) Family as a source of suffering

[...] the issue of gender did not exist as a problem in my imagination until my parents' divorce. [...] I had a terribly sad childhood. I was a terribly sad girl. Some years later, many people told me that I was a sad-faced, serious, contemplative child responsible for the fate of the world. I simply felt responsible for my parents' marriage, and that overwhelmed and saddened me (Graff, 2005, p. 91).

[...] a childhood deprived of warmth left its marks. I know that I can't deny my mother's love for me because I think one has no right to do that. Those are very private, individual issues, and I think that she loved me in the way she was brought up to do. My rigorous grandmother couldn't have raised my mother differently (Titkow, 2005, p. 47).

My mother was my only biological parent, and I was in a state of a long emotional entanglement with her, in a terribly negative sense (Umińska, 2005, p. 129).

According to Monika Jaworska-Witkowska "raising daughters in a patriarchal mechanism of sense regulation, in a claustrophobic sphere of feminine desire, first requires the (self)raising of mothers. A mother who feels proud of her womanhood and who uses her anger in a creative way, will not become the torturer of her daughter. She will understand her desires, her needs and her rebellion [...] we still do not know as much as we should to prevent our children from falling away from the area of our conscious and mature responsibility" (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2011, p. 192).

A difficult childhood, interwoven with female independence and a father who believes in the ideas of femininity, such as independence and work.

I shouldn't be asked that question. "Warped" childhood. I was surrounded by remarkable, independent women – a suffragette grandmother, a mother who pursued various passions, scientists, etc. A father who always told me that "the sky is the limit," and who kept repeating until his death that I can be whoever I want to be, as long as I'm not dumb ... And that you have to work hard on yourself, read, study, and be open. Then the strength that is in you will allow you to be free and independent and make money. Today, from the perspective of a mother of adult children, including a daughter, I'm convinced that the family environment has tremendous influence on our attitudes, worldview, and our attitude towards the world. It is fundamental (Małgorzata, age 56).

Others – Significant People Who Influenced the Shaping of a "Feminist Identity" (Feminist identity – a term borrowed from Anna Titkow). In the content analysis of the statements made by the women we can see the role of the so-called Other, who played a significant role in forming and shaping feminist attitudes. Each woman talks about a person who is especially important. Sometimes the Others are important figures of the scientific world, sometimes a female friend from university, sometimes their neighbour or mother. Thus, the first initiatory event, i. e. meeting the authority figure, seems of key importance.

## 8) Female symbiosis

*I can refer only to myself – I felt I'm a feminist after "my first" Women's Congress in Warsaw several years ago. This attitude, emotions and worldview were awakened in me by Professor Środa and then by Professor Platek. The rhetoric and argumentation presented by these female scientists appeal to me. It was only "after" this that I became aware of the relations within the family and started consciously identifying them in this (feminist) vein. (Agnieszka).*

My friend Ewa played an important role in my life. I met her in my first year at university. My first area of study was Polish philology. I wasn't even seventeen when I took the entrance exams. I met her on the first day of the exams. She was a beautiful, happy, incredibly interactive person [...] (Lipowska-Teutsch, 2005, pp. 61–62).

An important event was meeting a certain lady who tried to take her own life after a long period of being persecuted by her husband. She was a catholic from a rural community who suffered from persecution, violence and humiliation, without end or protest, in silence and in solitude. She believed that if she fulfilled all her duties as a mother, wife, and catholic, and that if she bore her cross, she would be rewarded after death [...]. She tried to take her life by drinking a corrosive substance. She wanted to die but not right away because she wanted to confess and be absolved from her sins, so as not to go to hell. She went ahead with her plan and died in agony. This terrifying story motivated me to do something (Lipowska-Teutsch, 2005, pp. 55–56).

I got a feminist's phone number and I remember writing it down under "f" in my planner. I visited Bożena and suddenly I felt immense relief and a sense of being at home. [...]. Thanks to Bożena, and later to my friendship with Kazia Szczuka, being at home in feminist thought and accepting my Jewish identity were somehow combined (Graff, 2005, p. 98).

my conscious contact with feminism began through Ewa Farnus, my friend from university (Limanowska, 2005, p. 111).

### 3.3 Feminist Revelation

Every event has its beginning. There is always a turning point, a moment of initiation, an existential crisis which coerces us to take some course of action. Issues related to the feminist "revelation" also had their beginning. Analyses of narrations showed that in one case it was emigration, in another health, and in yet another it was sheer chance.

## 9) Existence

My feminism emerged through the experience of emigration (Regulska, 2005, p. 78)

Another element which shaped me as a person and made me sensitive to otherness is my health. [...] This certainly shaped my identity as a fighter, a tough person who knows that there are no boundaries or obstacles, and if such obstacles occur, you just have to come up with ways of overcoming them (Regulska, 2005, p. 86)

I was close to never becoming a feminist. When I think of myself in high school and of my opinions at the time, I realise that only an accident prevented me from ending up as an extreme right-winger, completely certain that only I am right. I could just as well have proven myself there and be sure that



it is the right option. My sense of social justice probably comes from reading *Winnetou* (Limanowska, 2005, p. 120).

Feminism, in my case, began in an ostensibly purely intellectual way (Umińska, 2005, p. 133).

## 4 What Now?

Feminist values emerge in the process of socialisation, identification, as well as acculturation and generational transfer. Thus, according to Ostruch-Kowalska (after George Herbert Meade) experience “has significance [for, J. R-P] the social formation of one’s ‘self.’ According to this theory identity is not something ‘given’ – it is bestowed in acts of social recognition” (Ostruch-Kowalska, 2003).

### 10) Extensions as Impulses

In the case of my son, I’m raising him to respect women, women’s rights, human rights and to be tolerant of others (Tarasiewicz, 2005, p. 33).

I think that I will discretely support my granddaughter in her independence, though it seems that she has an excess of it, and that no one imposes restrictions on her (Titkow, 2005, p. 51).

I consider myself a feminist – says Zosia’s mother. – Feminism is a life philosophy which says that women can do what they want, that they have a right to self-determination, and to feel good about their choices regardless of what they are. When Zosia said that she didn’t want to have children, I realised that respecting my daughter’s choices meant that she may want something different than I do (Manthey, 2017).

My daughter learnt about feminism at home. We often talked about it at the table. She learnt that she should make decisions about herself and that she can do it [...] She also had difficult relations with her father, which remain complicated to this day (Regulska, 2005, p. 88).

## 5 Conclusions

In the presented content analysis, I managed to distinguish the following categories: the history of women in their families, childhood, family home, Others – significant people who influenced the shaping of a “feminist identity” and the feminist revelation (term borrowed from Walczewska (2005)). Each of the presented categories is a collection of stories of women’s experiences on the road to “becoming” a feminist. The presented narrations turn out to be a representation of complex emotions, which allow us to consider the process of becoming a feminist. Such consideration makes it possible to perceive the variant of freedom which appeared in each presented narration. Each woman experienced an internal metamorphosis, a transformation of the “training of invisible, toxic” (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2011, p. 192) methods of education. The eponymous process of “becoming” a feminist was derived from the narrations. This also indicates a type of “awakening

integrated with experience” (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2011, p. 198). A reflection on the issue of becoming a feminist may become crucial to psychological, sociological and pedagogical reflection, for it is tied to the issue of becoming aware of one’s possibilities, and one’s potential. The process of “becoming” is also a process of connecting two worlds: being and not-being a feminist. This relationship is important due to a possible confrontation between the poles of identity. I believe it is also important due to the fact of establishing new paths of cognition for the understanding of what feminism is and who feminists are also in the educational perspective.

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