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## **SOME AMERICAN, POLISH, GERMAN, CZECH AND SORBIAN PROVERBS ABOUT A WOMAN'S PLACE AND THEIR HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT**

**Abstract:** This paper will concentrate firstly on American and European culture in the 19th and 20th centuries to illustrate the cultural context in which proverbs about women were used, which refer to the following themes: women's work, a woman's place is in the home and a woman makes a home, a man needs a woman, and smart women were then put to use. The main aim of the article is to show briefly the correlation between the history and culture of women in the U.S.A. and in Central and Eastern Europe (where the German, Polish, Czech and Sorbian languages were used) and the position of women in some American, German, Polish, Czech and Sorbian proverbs. The language material of this article is confirmed by statements from women who lived in the nineteenth century and also with scientific publications about women's place in society until now.

**Keywords:** proverbs, woman's Place, women's work, American proverbs, German proverbs, West Slavic proverbs

### ***1. The Aim of the Paper***

The history of women is full of changes and for many centuries life was easier if one was born as a man rather than as a woman. Although today the female sector of society has equal rights, there

was a long period in which this was not guaranteed. This paper considers proverbs and the way they depict women. As proverbs were very popular in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century this paper will concentrate firstly on the American and European culture of this century and those previous to illustrate in which cultural context they were then put to use. The main aim of the article is to show briefly the correlation between the history and culture of women in the U.S.A. and in Central and Easter Europe (where the German, Polish, Czech and Sorbian languages were used) and the position of women in some American, German, Polish, Czech and Sorbian proverbs.

## ***2. Research Interest***

We could say that there are two histories: the first is the history that we know, which is about wars, presidents and prominent people, who changed the world, but there is another history – the history of the women who didn't have such remarkable positions and stayed home taking care of their men and children. For many centuries, women lived in a male-dominated society and were forced to belong to subordinate categories together with minorities such as Latin Americans or indigenous Americans. At a certain moment in history, they didn't agree to fulfill this role. But when the debate about how to create a more just society began, there was no consensus concerning the definition of equality. The equality of result (the evening out of economic, social and political power) wasn't an objective of most Americans. Many of them wanted equality of opportunity, which means only equal chances (Mauk and Oakland 2000: 86).

From 1608 till the mid-1800s a woman after marriage existed in law only through her husband. She was economically dependent on the man (she couldn't, for example, own property). She shouldn't have a good education or show interest in politics. This insignificant position was supported also by the church (Mauk and Oakland 2000: 87–94). One of the leaders of the women's right movement in the U.S. – Elisabeth Cady Stanton – represented the opinion that the Bible (in the way as it was taught by the American church) was spreading misogynous behavior and attitudes (Mieder 2014: 103–117).

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some American women started to strive for better education and more independence from men. They realized that the female's subordinate position could be changed. But still many male politicians didn't want to accept that women wanted to have much more of a say in social life than they had before. For example, Thomas Bernard (who was the Governor of the state of Massachusetts) had advised women to stay in their current situation and cherish their extraordinary position in a human society: to be active as mothers and wives (Bragdon, McCutchen and Ritchie 1994: 258).

The situation changed considerably in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, Lucretia Mott and Elisabeth Cady Stanton led the first convention about women's rights. Soon women started to work as teachers, nurses and in offices but they still couldn't vote till the end of the nineteenth century (in some states) or at the beginning of the twentieth century (in other states) (Mauk and Oakland 2000: 87–94).

Proverbs, through their popularity and special role as a sentence which expresses wisdom in a concise, short form could have an impact on the listeners (Schindler 1993: 52). Elisabeth Cady Stanton herself often used proverbs in her speeches, for example (Mieder 2014: 35–52):

(1) am *Woman is the weaker vessel.* (1 Peter 3:7; Mieder 2014: 41).<sup>1</sup>

(2) am *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (golden rule).* (Matthew 7:12; Mieder 2014: 41).

(3) am *All men are created equal.* (Mieder 2014: 43).

(4) am *Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.* (Mieder 2014: 43).

But even when women could already use their permission to vote, not all of them had a political consciousness. The wife of (at that time) the future president of the USA, Eleanor Roosevelt

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1 The stereotype of women as “weaker vessels” was popular in European culture since medieval times and also established through the opinions of philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, who wrote that the main trait of men is self-sufficiency and woman, sensibility (Bogucka 2005: 143–144).

who very actively worked for the benefit of women and children wrote in 1928 (Roosevelt 2010: 107–108):<sup>2</sup>

Women have been voting for ten years. But have they achieved actual political equality with men? No. They go through the gesture of going to the polls; their votes are solicited by politicians; and they possess the external aspect of equal rights. But it is mostly a gesture without real power. With some outstanding exceptions, women who have gone into politics are refused serious consideration by the men leaders. Generally, they are treated most courteously, to be sure, but what they want, what they have to say, is regarded as of little weight. In fact, they have no actual influence or say at all in the consequential councils of their parties (Roosevelt 2010: 108).

Initially they were not admitted as members of many unions for skilled workers, but after World War II many more women started to work. In the 1960s there loomed a new woman's movement and from the mid-1970s women had equal pay for equal work and access to higher education (Mauk and Oakland 2000: 87–94).

### ***3. The background of the research***

There are many publications on women's issues in proverbs. Proverbs about woman were written about in the English language by, for example: Mieder (1985), Litovkina (2019), Rittersbacher (2002) or Rani and Ranhja (2020).

Information regarding proverbs in the Polish language can be found in texts from: Balowski (2001); Długosz (2000); Gwuzd-Mizerová (2008); Jagielska (2004); Jędrzejko (1994); Krzyżanowski (1960); Perlińska (1996); Piotrowski (1997) and others.

A vision of women in German proverbs can be reconstructed based, for example, on the works of: Bebermeyer (2002); Breiner (1996); Daniels (1985); Glenk (1999); Hufeisen (1993); James

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<sup>2</sup> Original Source: Eleanor Roosevelt, "Women Must Learn to Play the Game as Men Do", *Red Book Magazine*, 50 (April 1928), pp. 78–79, 141–142, available via The Eleanor Roosevelt Paper Project at <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/documents/womenmustlearn.cfm>, retrieved on 1 June 2019.

(1982); Pilz (1998); Seiler (1922); Mieder (1992), Trokhimenko (2004) or Helliger and Bußmann (2003).

Czech proverbs were written about by Schindler (1993) or Zachová (2008).

Information on how women are depicted in Upper and Lower Sorbian proverbs can be found in the dissertation and articles by Gardoš (1965; 1967; 1979; 1982) and in articles by Nedo (Nedo 1961/1962; 1966) or Hose (1994; 1990).

There are also texts (or fragments of texts) which compare proverbs about women in two or more languages: Al-Jamal (1997) Arab and German; Coseriu (1979) French, German and Romanian; Koniuszaniec (1999) and Gondek (2007) – Polish and German; Kuusi (1985) – Finnish and Owambo; Majapuro (1996; 1999; 2001) German and Finnish; Pelletier (1996) Polish and French; Piirainen (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2001, 2004) German and Dutch idioms (including proverbs); Samper (1997) – Latin American; Schipper (1996; 2006) – proverbs of many languages in their cultural context; Stantcheva (2007) – Bulgarian and German; Veneday (1842) – French and German; Wyżkiewicz-Maksimow (2012) – Polish, Serbian and Croatian; Yao-Weyrauch (1990) – German and Chinese; Zachová (2008) – West Slavic proverbs contained in the Čelakovský collection.

There are also many works dealing with the topic proverbs about women in other languages, for example Icelandic (Spiess 1991) or African languages: Igbo (Nwachukwu-Agbada 1989; Opata 2000), Yoruba (Yusuf 1994; Opata 2000), Idoma (Amali 2000); Fon (Dogbeh 2000).

The most popular publication dealing with proverbs about women around the world is the work: *Never Marry a Women with Big Feet. Woman in Proverbs from Around the World* by Mineke Schipper (2006).

#### ***4. Women in the proverbs of the world – conclusions from the research***

By analyzing proverbs about women coming from different languages and cultures, we come across many linguistic expressions that assess women directly or indirectly negatively, regardless of their age, social position or profession, while in the case of

proverbs about men it does not occur to this extent. Women are judged as bad or inferior to men (for example, as incomplete, imperfect creatures, requiring a man to look after them) on the basis of their gender identity. By examining this topic in many cultures, we find evidence that it is so not only in the English, German, Polish, Czech or Sorbian languages, but also in most of the world's languages, as confirmed by the scientific research mentioned below.

Writing about the proverbs about women in English culture, Wolfgang Mieder noticed that almost every proverb given in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* portrays women in a negative way (Mieder 1985: 273). American proverbs can also be considered misogynistic (Mieder 1985b: 129).

The way women are portrayed in German proverbs is a "male subject". One of the experts in the field of German paremiology wrote that the authors and users of proverbs about women are men (Röhrich 1989: 357–370). Only in a very few proverbs about women are they positively depicted (Seiler, 1922: 351). The same opinion is represented through E. Jędrzejko, who emphasizes that in Polish proverbs all women are described as changeable and prone to betrayal and lying, especially towards old husbands over whom they are trying to rule. Polish proverbs stabilize a relatively small set of traits attributed to women, limited to qualities and vices that are important mainly for family life, and partly also for social reasons (Jędrzejko 1994: 163). Also in Czech proverbial literature do we find the opinion that the image of women in Czech proverbs is influenced by a society with a patriarchal system, where the belief is that women are inferior to men (Zachová 2008: 284). Sorbian researchers write that the proverbs of this small Slavic nation show women mostly negatively. They are only positive if the women depicted can fulfill their duties to families and men (Gardoš 1965: 213; Gardoš 1966: 85; Hose 1994: 54–56).

Considering the issue in the broader context, it can be noted that women represent similar negative features in proverbs around the world. Even in the case of German and Chinese cultures, women were described in proverbs in many ways in a similar way: as talkative, ambitious, changeable, and incapable. There were, however, differences in the presentation of

positive features. For example, some German proverbs, unlike Chinese, defined a woman as wise, joyful, thrifty, and respectable (Yao-Weyrauch 1990: 154). It is worth noting that there are cultures in which the woman is described in proverbs in an overwhelming number of statements in a positive way – for example in Icelandic proverbs (Spiess 1991).

In turn, the proverbs in Phon cultures are extremely misogynistic. They judge the woman as cheating, lying and materially focused. Many proverbs in this culture negatively depict old women, especially mothers-in-law (wife's mother). Young women are advised to keep their virginity, and older women to be faithful to their husband (Dogbeh 2000: 91–99). An elderly woman is also negatively assessed in the proverbs of the Igbo language (Nwachukwu-Agbada 1989: 75–89). The analysis of the above-mentioned articles on the proverbs of African languages allows the conclusion that even in closely related cultures, differences between the way women are represented in the proverbs may be significant. Amali describes the positive image of a woman present in the proverbs of the Idoma language (both Idoma and Yoruba are spoken in one country – Nigeria) (Amali 2000).

### ***5. Sources and methods***

The basis for this article will be the American-English proverbs about women from two collections (Kerschen L. 1998; Mieder W., Kingsbury S. A., Harder K. B. 1992) which refer to the following themes: women's work, a woman's Place is in the home and a woman makes a home, a man needs a woman, and smart women. German proverbs quoted in this text come from the collection of K. F. W. Wander (republished 1964), Polish from many sources, but the most important is the work of J. Krzyżanowski (1972), Czech from the collection of F. L. Čelakovský (2000, republished) and Sorbian from J. Radyserb-Wjela (1997, republished).

The language material is confronted with statements from women who lived in the nineteenth century and also with scientific publications about women's place in society till now.

A very interesting aspect of paremiology is the comparative research that makes it possible to see the differences between proverbs in different languages and cultures. In this paper, some similarities between proverbs in American-English, German, Polish, Czech and Upper Sorbian are shown. In some cases, there are also remarks about the modern-use or adaptations of proverbs about women.

The choice of these particular topics is justified through the socio-cultural context. Women's work and being devoted to home were actual themes of the women's movement in the U.S.A. Education leads to better work opportunities and therefore it is connected to previously mentioned topics. The need of a man to have a woman who supports him is also an extension of the topic "A woman's Place is in the Home".

## ***6. Women's Work***

Women always worked but usually their jobs were not so spectacular as the jobs of men. They were not emperors, warriors, or merchants. They were at home and were bringing up their children, taking care of the men's belongings, cooking, sewing, and weaving. For this reason, their work was imperceptible to many men (Miles 1989: 150)

The principal function of a woman was to satisfy and amuse her husband. Already the Church Fathers and religious writings ordered women to see in their husbands, godlike people to whom they must submit (Anderson, Zinsser 1988: 27–28).

Two following citations show the opinion that a man is the master of his wife and should be treated with great respect. The wife should not expect him to show her his affection or interest, particularly when he is tired. The wife's obligation is to accept the subordinate position in the marriage and support the man as the head of the family.

A sensible woman, to preserve the peace and secure of the affections of her husband, will often sacrifice her own inclinations to his: it may be her duty – it is always to her interest (...). (Lanfear 1824: 65)



(...) man sometimes returns home, at stated hours, wearied in body, exhausted in spirits, and not unfrequently irritable in temper. At these periods, patience and forbearance on the part of the female are peculiarly called for, and woe be to the imbecile and hapless fair one who, unaccustomed to think or act for herself on any occasion, however trifling, continues to tease her peevish lord with idle questions or petty cares, and then adds to his ill humour by fruitless complaints of his want of attention to her and to her concerns. (Lanfear 1824: 65)

She could perform this role, for example, by caring for the household. The man made the orders, but the woman was in charge of their enforcement. Also, very wealthy women were occupied with such activities as sewing, cooking, spinning, and weaving. There was a belief that idleness should be avoided, otherwise women would become depraved. We can find such an opinion, for example, in the "Instruction of a Christian Woman" by Juan Luis Vives, which was written for Catherine of Aragon as a mother's handbook after birth of her daughter Mary Tudor (Anderson, Zinsser 1988: 27).

Many believed that idleness could lead females to mischief, but women who had a lot to do will not try to cheat their husbands. Such a conviction is depicted in the following proverb:

(4) am. *Keep the ladies busy and that keeps them out of mischief.* (1908; New York; South Carolina) Ker 84.

In the difficult conditions of the West of the U.S.A., the women had to work very diligently. In the American Colonies wives had many duties: they were typically engaged in housework, taking care of the garden and the children, and writing letters to the family (Miles 1989: 151). Their work was hard and endless. They had to accomplish many different tasks in a short time, like feeding the baby, cooking, baking, and cleaning the house (Miles 1989: 152).

This situation is depicted in the proverbs:

(5) am. *Man works from sun to sun, but woman's work is never done.* (1570; New York, North Carolina) Ker 84.

(6) am. *Woman at her housework: that's what women are for.* (Mexican-American) Ker 85.

(7) ger. *Froensarbeit is behenne, nümmt aber nimmer 'n Enne* [Women's work is done quickly/fast, but there is no end to it.] Wan 1141.<sup>3</sup>

Czech and Sorbian equivalents are:

(8) cz. *Ženské dílo a ženská řeč nemá nikdy konce.* [Women's work and women's speech never end.] Č 476.

(9) us. *Žonineje roboty w domje žadyn kónc njeje.* [Women's work at home is never ending.] W 509.

The men who were working outdoors started at dawn and stopped when it got dark. For women who were working at home and could use artificial light their work was never finished, because they could still do something after the sun set. They could spin or sew by the light of a lamp or a fireplace (Miles 1989: 153).

It has to be mentioned that the black women in America were in a much worse situation than white ones. Till the end of the Civil War, they were working as slaves, and when the black families were already free, they understood that without women's work the family would not survive (Evans 1997: 119–121).

There are also other proverbs about women's diligence:

(10) pol. *Białogłowa ma być: rano nabożna, w dzień – pracowita, mądra – u stołu, zawsze – ochędzożna, miła – w pokoju.* [Women are supposed to be: devout in the morning, during the day – diligent, wise – at the table, always – orderly, nice – in the room]. N 79.

(11) cz. *Nechval ženino tilko, ale chval její dílko.* [Do not praise a woman's shirt, but her work.] Č 473.

(12) cz. *Touto pěknou přípovídkou činívají hosté přání ženichovi a nevěstě. Jinak i taktó se nevěstě přává: Bůh dej, zdrává byla jak ryba, čista jak voda, vesela jak jarní doba, pracovita jak všechna a hojná jak země svatá.* [The guests tell this beautiful story as wishes to the groom and the bride. Otherwise, the bride is told

3 All English translations from German, Polish, Czech and Sorbian proverbs quoted in this paper are the translations by the author of this article or Wolfgang Mieder.

that she may be healthy like a fish, clean like water, cheerful like spring, hardworking like a bee and generous like the Holy Land.]  
C 460.

(13) us. *Pěknou dušu z pilnej ruku, to mudry hólč we holcy pyta.* [A wise boy looks for a good soul with a diligent hand in a girl] W 169.

(14) ger. *Die Hausfrau hat fünf K zu besorgen: Kinder, Kammer, Küche, Keller, Kleider.* [The hostess has five c's to take care of: children, a cubby hole, a cookhouse, a cellar, and clothes.] DF 153.

(15) ger. *Wer eine schöne Frau will haben, suche sie Sonabends. (bei der Arbeit) zu Hause, aber nicht Sonntags beim Feste aus.* [He who wants a pretty woman, looks for her at home on Saturday evening (at work), and not on Sunday during the holiday.] Wan 1136.

(16) ger. *Ein Mädchen, das nichts thut, hat einen schlimmen Muth.* [A girl who does nothing is full of bad thoughts/intentions]. Wan 312 III.

(17) ger. *Ein Mädchen muss nach einer Feder über drei Zäune springen.* [The girl has to jump over three fences for one feather.] Wan 312 III.

## 7. *Angel at Home*

According to the ideal of the “True Woman” or “True Womanhood”, which existed in nineteenth century America, females were born to keep up morality at home. They should be interested mainly in giving birth to children, their upbringing, taking care of the family and cooking. They should protect religion at the time of industrialization and social changes. There was a belief that women are more physically and emotionally fragile than men and therefore they should avoid every effort and irritation. They needed to be protected by their fathers, brothers, and husbands. It is better for them to stay at home and not to be involved

in social activities in order to be healthy. In the upper class and middle class married women could use the financial status of their husbands and live in luxury spending money earned by their spouses. They were also accustomed to such a situation and saw their goal in upbringing children to make them successful descendants of the family.

Also, after this period, when women had already started to work in the offices, they could find only lower-position jobs like that of a typist. Those who were publicly engaged constituted a minority and were not accepted by everybody. We should note that the expression “public man” is unambiguously positive and means a man who works or acts in public. The term “public woman” has more meanings and one of them is “prostitute” (Cruea 2009: 188–196).

In the proverbs quoted below we can see how positive the stereotype is of a homely woman who spends most of her time at home, taking care of her family. This stereotype is also present in German, Polish, Czech and Upper Sorbian proverbs. A woman is compared to a cat spending a lot of time inside. More literal is the comparison with the chimney. That is the part of the house which can't be removed from inside. Otherwise, the house will collapse. The comparison of a woman and a cat, and of a man and a dog exist also in German proverbs.

(18) am. *A woman, a cat, and a chimney should never leave the house.* M 665.

(19) am. *The men and dogs for the barn, the women and cats for the kitchen.* (California) Ker 84.

(20) am. *A woman's place is in the home.* (1844) Ker 85; M 666.

(21) ger. *Die Hausfrau darf nicht sein eine Ausfrau.* [A housewife cannot be an outside woman]. DF 149.

(22) ger. *Das Weib und der Ofen sind Hauses Zier.* [Women and stoves are decorations of a house.] DF 149.

(23) ger. *Frauen und Katzen gehören ins Haus.* [Women and cats belong to a house.] Wan 1123.

(24) ger. *Das Weib gehört ins Haus, der Mann muss hinaus.* [The woman belongs to the house; the man has to leave it.] Wan 6 V.

(25) ger. *Eine häusliche Frau ist eine schöne Frau.* [The housewife is a pretty woman.] Wan 1117.

(26) ger. *Eine Frau ist am schönsten daheim.* [A woman is most beautiful at home.] Wan 1114.

(27) ger. *Der Mann gehört in den Rath, die Frau ins Bad.* [The man belongs in the council, the woman in the bathroom.] DF 137.

(28) ger. *Brave Hausfrau bleibt daheim.* [A good housewife stays at home.] DF 149.

(29) pol. *Niewieście siedzieć doma przystoi.* [Women should stay at home]. N 620.

(30) cz. *V klecech ptáčátka, a v domech děvčátka.* [Birds in cages and girls at home]. Č 496.

(31) cz. *Drž peníze v temnotě, a děvče v těsnotě.* [Keep the money in the dark and the girl in the dough.] Č 496.

(32) cz. *Dobře je, když každý o panně slyší, ale nekaždý ji vidí.* [It is good, that everyone hears about the virgin, but not everyone sees it.] Č 496.

(33) cz. *Vídaná panna měděná, a nevídaná zlatá.* [Virginité of body only has meaning where there is virginité of heart.] Č 496.

(34) us. *Šewc dale kopyta njechodź, ani dale kudžeze žona.* [A shoemaker goes not far away from an anvil, a woman goes not far away from home]. W 227.

The last one of these three American proverbs has an anti-proverb, which came into being during an election campaign, in which a woman was a presidential candidate. The traditional form *A woman's place is in the home* was changed to *A woman's place is in the house*, and it was written on the back of a picture of the White House (Mieder 1985a: 275–276).

Another proverb emphasizes how important a woman is for the home. The superior role of the female as a person who is the foundation of the family was for many centuries taken for granted. The proverb quoted below shows the idea of “Real Women” who are more morally advanced and play a leading function in social life:

(35) am. *Men build houses; women build homes.* (1938) Ker 84.

Although the ideal of “True Woman” was very conservative, it became the origin of feminism. Women should be “Angels at Home” and support their men. They believed in their own moral and religious superiority over men. Many housewives were engaged in their church because it was an extension of their role. As a moral example they should act against the prostitution and alcoholism which plagued their weak fathers, husbands, and sons (Cruea 2009: 188–189).

The following proverb shows that a woman's role was meant to be only a support for a man for without her help he could not be successful in life:

(36) am. *Behind every great man there is a great woman.* (Mississippi). Ker 83.

It is interesting that this proverb is well known and it is used also in modern times, for example in a commercial for the brand Pierre Cardin, where we can find an anti-proverb “Behind every great woman, there is a man” (Mieder 1985a: 275–276). This anti-proverb is one of two most popular American anti-proverbs dealing with the topic of women (The second one is “A man is as old as he feels, [a woman as old as she looks]”) (Litovkina 2019: 42–43) and has many variations like:

(37) *Behind every successful man is a wife who tells him what to do, and a secretary who does it.* (Litovkina 2019: 43).

(38) *Behind every man who lives within his income is a wife who doesn't.* (Litovkina 2019: 43).

(39) *Behind every successful man is a wife who takes much of the credit, and a government that takes most of the cash.* (Litovkina 2019: 43).

(40) *Behind every successful mason is a dedicated wife and incredulous mother in law.* (Litovkina 2019: 43).

(41) *Behind every famous man there's a woman – telling him he's not so hot.* (Litovkina 2019: 44).

(42) *Behind every successful man is a woman – who hasn't enough closet space.* (Litovkina 2019: 45).

(43) *Behind every successful man is a woman complaining she has nothing to wear.* (Litovkina 2019: 45).

(44) *Behind every successful man is a woman who makes it necessary for him to make money.* (Litovkina 2019: 45).

The ideal of the “True Woman” who is devoted to living at home changed during the time of the Civil War when women were obliged to work in the positions of men who went to fight. There was also a high demand on medical personnel – nurses and volunteers. At this time, the attitude to women changed. They were no longer fragile and trying to support weak human beings. They were working in the same or similar positions as men, and they performed their jobs as well as their male colleagues. At this time the ideal of “True Womanhood” changed to “Real Womanhood”. From now on women could work to earn money for their own self-sufficiency, had more independence and were encouraged to go in for sports for the sake of their health. From the viewpoint of “Real Womanhood” females were biologically equal to men or in some contexts even superior to them. The new fashion reflected this change – without corsets and heavy dresses. Thanks to this change women could cherish more comfort in movements (Cruca 2009: 190–191).

## 8. *Smart Woman*

Although even before the twentieth century there were men who preferred well-educated women (like, for example, Sir Thomas More who wrote that a man should find a woman who is cultural or capable of being educated) there was a popular belief that woman should not be smarter or better educated than her husband. She should aspire to be a good associate for a man, but not to be equal with him. The education of woman had two objectives: to give her the possibility to manage her family in a proper way and to be intelligent enough to chat with her husband without boring him. Her duty was to accept the authority of her spouse in all issues (Anderson, Zinsser 1988: 27–28). This opinion is depicted in the following proverbs:

(45) am. *A man doesn't want a woman smarter than he is.* (North Carolina) Ker 84.

(46) am. *A wise woman never outsmarts her husband.* (Kansas, New York) Ker 85.

(47) am. *A mule that whinnies and a woman that talks Latin never come to any good.* Ker 84.

(48) am. *The noblest sight on earth is a man talking reason and his wife listening to him.* (Texas) Ker 84.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the ideal of “True Womanhood” was popular, in the U.S.A. middle-class girls were educated in religion and basic knowledge, which should help them to teach their children. Many people thought that a female who was intellectual couldn't be a “true woman” because at that time it was believed that emotions were more feminine than the mind (Cruea 2009: 188–189).<sup>4</sup>

In the high society in England, the USA and all other western-culture countries it was popular to educate young girls in

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4 This belief was popular not only in the U.S.A. Well known European philosophers like Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm von Humboldt or Friedrich Hegel also wrote that woman's soul is more emotional than man's soul which was created for logical thinking (Bogucka 2005: 141–144).



French, music, dance and art. This form of schooling was known as a pass to the world of rich and cultural families. A deficiency in this respect could make it difficult for a girl to marry a descendant of a privileged family<sup>5</sup> (Cruea 2009: 188–189). But this ideal was not popular in middle- and lower class-families.

In the following quotation we will find the opinion that for a woman it is very important to have practical knowledge, which helps her to be a good housewife. Such intellectual activities like learning languages, to play instruments or to paint were, according to this author, unnecessary:

Boarding school girls, more particularly those who, when at home, have been spoiled by flattery, are apt to be unduly vain of their school learning, and frequently fancy themselves superior to those who are not only older, but better informed on every subject of importance, than themselves: this error, originating in the ignorance and presumption of youth, is unfavorable to future improvement. (...) A young lady may have been highly educated, and yet be deficient in real knowledge; be very accomplished and at the same time destitute of every useful, amiable, and domestic quality; she may be able to read French and Italian, paint, draw, play on various instruments, write a delicate hand, and edit an elegant epistle (...) without knowing properly how to manage a family, instruct her children, or direct her servants; in short, without possessing either energy of mind or stability of character (Lanfear 1824: 26–27).

Later, in the time of “Real Womanhood”, the attitude to knowledge in a woman’s life changed. Girls were encouraged to learn to find an intelligent man and to be a proper partner for him. The well-educated woman was also able to work and earn money, if there was a need to support the family. Education was meant to fight depression and idleness (Cruea 2009: 192–193).

The fact that there was a negative assessment of women’s intelligence in the twentieth century could be explained by referring to the views about the nature of both sexes popular since the previous century. Evolutionary biology from the times of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and Charles Darwin (1809–1892)

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<sup>5</sup> In the opinion of Caroline Bingley from Jane Austen’s *Pride & Prejudice* it’s the most important part of female education (Austien 2019).

recognized that the relationship between the sexes was not complementary but based on domination and submission. The privileged position of men in society was the result of natural selection (Bock 2000: 125). The nineteenth-century thinker August Renner believed that the female soul felt more strongly but was weaker than a man's. Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Hegel also wrote about female affection (Justus 1979: 20). Wolfgang Friedrich Hegel believed that a man's area of activity is outside the home, while a woman is supposed to spend time nurturing the home. Immanuel Kant, on the other hand, argued that science kills beauty in women and thus harms them. He added also that they are not and never will be equal to men (Bogucka 2005: 141–142).

The alleged lack of logic in the behavior of women served as an argument confirming the necessity to subordinate them to the power of men, also resulting from the Christian tradition<sup>6</sup> (Justus 1979: 20). It was widely believed that some sciences (like mathematics) were not suitable for girls because the female mind cannot comprehend them. The view that knowledge is less useful in the life of women were sometimes propagated by women themselves (Lisak 2009: 301–305).

These views are reflected in the proverbs below:

### 8.1. *Women are not intelligent*

(49) pol. *U kobiety włos długi, a rozum krótki*. [A woman's hair is long and her mind is short]. N 89.

(50) pol. *Białogłowie pstro w głowie*. [Women are silly]. N 80.

(51) pol. *Ile białych wron, tyle mądrych żon*. [How many white crows, so many wise wives/women]. N 955.

(52) pol. *Babski rozum wart niucha tabaki*. [A woman's mind is worth a snuffle]. N 33.

(53) cz. *Dlouhé vlasy, krátký rozum*. [Long hair, short mind]. Č 472.

<sup>6</sup> The creation of man (Genesis 2, 21–24); the curse of original sin (Genesis 3, 16).

(54) us. *Žónske maja dołhe włosy a kuše mysle (kuši rozum).* [Women have long hair and short brains.] W 313.

(55) ger. *Die Frauen haben langes Haar und kurzen Verstand. Wan 1108./ Weiber haben langes Haar, aber kurzer Sinn.* Lat.: *Sub longis tunicis, brevis est animus mulieris.* [Women have long hair and short brains.] Wan 45 V.

(56) ger. *Die Weiber haben einen Witz mehr als die Gänse; wenn's regnet, gehen sie in Trockene.* [Women have one sense more than geese; when it rains, they go where it's dry.] Wan 11 V.

### 8.2. *Women can not think logically*

(57) pol. *Niewiasta na zle – rozumna, pamiętna, na dobre – głupia, zapamiętliwa.* [A woman for bad – intelligent, memorable; for good – stupid, passionate]. N 618.

(58) ger. *Den Frauen ist das Beste zu schlecht und das Schlechteste gut genug.* [For women, the best is too bad and the worst is good enough]. Wan 1106.

(59) ger. *Die Frau und die Kuh sucht sich das schlechteste aus.* [The woman and the cow choose the worst]. DF 9.

### 8.3. *Women's advice is mostly not good*

(60) pol. *Po radę do baby, a przez nią do czarta!* [Ask a(n) old woman for advice and you will go to hell.]. A 8;

(61) cz. *Ženská rada bývá jen někdy dobrá.* [Women's advice is only sometimes good.] Č 473.

(62) ger. *Frawenrath ist gut, aber nicht allzeit.* [Women's advice is not always good.] Wan 1143.

(63) ger. *Frauensrath und Räuwsaat gerött man alle säber Jahr.* [Female advice and raw seed bear a good crop only once a seven years.] Wan 1143.

On the contrary old women were considered very clever and able to outsmart even the devil, what is reflected in the proverbs:

(64) am. *Where the devil can't go, he sends his grandmother.* (Alaska) M 148.

(65) am. *A woman knows a bit more than Satan.* M 666.

(66) pol. *Gdzie diabeł nie może, tam babę poszle.*  
[Where the devil can not, he will sent the old woman]. N 35.

(67) pol. *Na współce z babą i diabeł źle wyszedł.*  
[In the dealing with an (old) woman, the devil came out badly]. N 40.

(68) pol. *Diabła baba oszukala.*  
[(Old) women have deceived the devil]. N 34.

(69) pol. *Kobiety, jak zechcą, to i samemu diabłu dadzą radę.*  
[Women, if they want, can outsmart the devil]. N 88.

(70) ger. *Die Frauen sind über den Teufel.*  
[Women are better then the devil]. Wan 1109.

#### 8.4. Proverbs about wise women

(71) am. *A wise women is twice a fool.* Ker. 85.

(72) am. *A wise woman never outsmarts her husband.* (Kansas, New York) Ker 85.

(73) pol. *Mądry to ptaszek niewiasta, nie da się tak łatwo złowić.* [Woman is a wise bird, not so easy to catch] N 617.

### 9. Summary and conclusions

The language material which is cited in this article shows that women in American and Central European proverbs were depicted as diligent and very important persons for their families and husbands but not necessarily as persons well educated and

intelligent. This is a result of the situation for women in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For a long time, women weren't profoundly educated. Most of them could learn only what was necessary for the household like cooking, sewing, weaving. The men had the best positions in the society, but women had to stay at home and support their husbands. They also had to take care of other people and be very compassionate and emotional. Without good education, they couldn't have a leading position in politics or other socially privileged roles. This situation manifests itself in many proverbs, which emphasizes the fact that females are emotional, warm, and supportive human beings.

Also, many proverbs depict the diligence of women who had to live in very difficult conditions. They had to take care of children and husbands and do all the housework, when men had finished their duties. Women of all social classes worked at home. Even those who were very rich and privileged had their occupations and duties. Although they were active and worked hard, their work was invisible to many men or regarded as not as important as the men's work.

In the proverbs, which were very popular through the nineteenth century, in times when not every person could afford to be a participant of high-culture through reading books or newspapers, the stereotypes about women manifest themselves, which are consequences of women's subordinate position and lower education status. In a few modern anti-proverbs, it is visible that this view is changing. A good example for this thesis is the proverb "Behind every great man there is a great woman. (Mississippi)" and this modern anti-proverb "Behind every great woman, there is a man" (Mieder 1985a: 275–276). This pair shows how stereotypes are actually changing: through the nineteenth century, women were beautiful, warm, and emotional "Angels at Home", who had to – as the main goal in their lives – support their husbands, children, and other people who needed her good heart. At the end of the twentieth century, when women could already reach privileged positions in politics, science and economics, there was also a place for strong and competitive women who were supported by their husbands. This proves the fact that some American and European proverbs about women depict the cultural and historical background of American and European life until the twentieth century.

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### *Abbreviations:*

- A – Adalberg, Samuel. *Księga przysłów, przypowieści i wyrażen przysłowiowych polskich*, Warszawa: Drukarnia Emila Skińskiego, 1889–1894.
- am. – american
- Č – Čelakovský, František Ladislav. *Mudrosloví národu slovanského ve příslovích. Připojena je též sbírka prstonárodních českých pořekadel. Uspořádal F. L. Čelakovský*, Praha: Lika klub, 2000.
- cz. – czech
- D – Dobrovský, Josef: *Českých přísloví sbírka*, Praha: Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1963.

DF – Reinsberg-Düringsfeld, Otto von: *Die Frau im Sprichwort*, Leipzig: Olms Verlag, 2013.

ger. – german

Ker – Kerschen, Lois. *American Proverbs About Women. A Reference Guide*, Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood, 1998.

N – Krzyżanowski, Jan, editor: *Nowa księga przysłów i wyrażen przysłowio-  
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M – Mieder, Wolfgang, Stewart A. Kingsbury, and Kelsie B. Harder. *A Dic-  
tionary of American Proverbs*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University  
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pol. – polish

us – upper sorbian

Wan – Wander, Karl Friedrich Wilhelm. *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon. Ein  
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W – Radyserb-Wjela, Jan: *Přisłowa a přisłowne hrónčka a wustowa Horn-  
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