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From “housewife” to independent woman.

Stereotypization and self-representation of Polish women
in the Netherlands.

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For my mother and Roy,

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Introduction

Polish women immigrating to the Netherlands are in disrepute, sometimes being perceived as women who marry men in order to improve their social and economical status, at other times as sex-workers or women who are easy to approach and venal. In many circles, they are also perceived as family- and home-oriented women, who follow the traditional roles and happily complete their domestic duties. In addition, the recently increasing economic crisis in Europe caused an enhancement of the popularity of rightist and nationalist ideas, which could have a bad influence on people's opinion of Polish immigrants in general. As a Polish woman with a Dutch boyfriend, immigrating to the Netherlands, I was determined to meet female compatriots who were in a similar situation to me. My curiosity about the tenaciousness of common stereotypes towards Polish women led me to take up this study.

The group of female Polish migrants that especially called my attention were Polish women who were in relationships with Dutch men. It was not only because I myself have a Dutch boyfriend, but most of all, because those Polish-Dutch relationships seem to invoke unusually huge controversy among Dutch society and, especially among Polish immigrants. My research question is how Polish women refer or react to the stereotypes that are labelled on them. I will examine whether Polish women are the victims or the agents in the process of constructing these representations. The results of my research will show how much impact the stereotypes concerning immigration have on the way Polish women represent themselves. The study shed some light on the coping strategies of the recipients of these stereotypes.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I will present the theoretical framework of my research, based on the literature belonging to the various disciplines, such as cultural anthropology, gender studies, sociology or human geography. The extended range of the supporting theories will provide a better understanding of the data presented in this thesis. In Chapter 2, I introduce the readers to my informants, the research settings and the methodology I used to obtain process the data.

Chapter 3 is the first ethnographic chapter. It will introduce the reader to the images and stereotypes of Polish women I came across during my research. Although many of them were negative, I tried to prevent my emotions from influencing the argumentation. I will use an analytical style to present my findings by showing the diversity of the overtones and types of images and stereotypes. Chapter 4 will present the logic of stereotyping according to different sources (visual data, date portals and internet forums) and various opinion groups (foreign men, Dutch people, Polish people, Polish women). I will introduce the readers to the nature of the

stereotyping and to the conditions under which this takes place in the different media. In the last ethnographical chapter, I will show the self-representation of female interviewees in the face of the stereotyping. It will reveal the way in which they talk about the stereotypes commonly labelled on them, and to the alternative approaches, which they found aspiring during their immigration.

Chapter 1: Theoretical and analytical framework

1.1 Status, roles and stereotypes of Polish women in Poland

I will start my theoretical introduction with a historical and socio-cultural background of the status and roles of Polish women in Polish society and in Polish families, where the stereotypes are significant factors. According to Gina Buijs (1993), we should make a distinction “between status and roles at the level of ideology and status and roles in practice as the two do not always coincide” (Buijs 1993, 10). A good example is the ideology generated by socialist politics that emphasized the important role of women in the reconstruction of the Polish nation after II World War, while access to high decision-making positions was limited for them (Buijs 1993). It is therefore important to investigate briefly the realities in which women were living in Poland during the time of communism (1945-1989) and the time of transformation (1989-2009).

Several scholars (Titkow, Rochon and Grzybek) envision the change of the political system in Poland as not very positive for women. In spite of the transformation of the system, there was noticeable continuation of “symptoms of *unfinished democracy*” (Titkow 1998, 27). In this article, Anna Titkow claims that the “120 years since independence have been a difficult period for women and have created a social genotype in attitudes and behaviour” (Titkow 1998, 24). During the partitions of Poland (1772-1807), it was demanded from women that they should be willing to sacrifice themselves in order to bring up their children as pious patriots (Titkow 2007). They acquired a new label, which included the symbol of Mother-Pole. Although this idealization of woman had strengthened the national resistance force, it created such strong ties between family and nation that women’s emancipation from the traditional dependency on the family seemed to be equivalent to a betrayal of the nation and apostasy of the church” (Titkow 2007, 51). As a result, attachment to family life is a constitutive feature of the Polish national identity, next to patriotism and religiosity (Regulska 1997).

In turn, during the time of communism, women were encouraged to work in typical male sectors like the building trade or technical operations. This kind of forced emancipation was associated with the slogan of national reconstruction of Poland. In addition, it did not include women’s abandonment of traditional family dependencies (Titkow, 1998). According to Bożena Umińska-Keff, the liberation from communism paradoxically entailed liberation from the ideals of women’s emancipation (Rochon and Grzybek 2009, 9). In practice, after 1989 civil activity of Polish women faced limitations: they experienced the feminization of poverty and mass unemployment, being seen as “a worse category of employees”, who should be responsible for

taking care of children and the household; they were “excluded from participation in power and relegated to the private sphere” (Rochon and Grzybek 2009, 7). The identities of Polish women were created in various ways in different times and regions of Poland (Titkow 2007). However, certain media in Poland continuously present women as the stereotypes of caring mothers, housewives, and objects of desire (Kay 1997).

According to Regulska (1997), after World War II social and cultural changes in Poland came independently from the moral changes in Western Europe. The author mentions that during the communist era, women’s professional work became a social norm and the source of their high social status. There are a couple of reasons for the massive participation in professional work by Polish: “the need to provide the income for the family, rapid process of industrialization of the country requiring large manpower, and a new ideology of encouraging women to economic activity” (Regulska 1997, 52). New strategies and values concerning the model of marriage resulted from the women participating in professional work, and were imposed by external conditions. The research of Regulska (1997) shows that the partnership model of marriage becomes more popular in Polish society, especially among people in big cities and with a higher educational background. The partnership model is understood as having an equal participation of the spouses in their professional development and the domestic sphere.¹ The table² below shows percentages of families that realize a traditional (1), inverted (2), mixed (3) and partnership (4) model of marriage.

Table 1

Which of the following situations describes your family?	CBOS
1. Only husband works, earning enough money to fulfil the family needs; wife looks after the house, raises the children etc.	30%
2. Only wife works, earning enough money to fulfil the family needs, husband looks after the house, raises the children etc.	5%
3. Both husband and wife are working, husband spends more time for his professional work, wife besides working look after the house, raises the children etc.	29%
4. Husband and wife spend roughly the same time on work, both equally look after the house and raise the children	33%
5. Neither husband nor wife work	2%

¹ Noticeable that the most of the male informants of Regulska, preferred the traditional model of family, thus the model of multigenerational family based on the authority of the father (Regulska 1997).

6. Hard to say	1%
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The relation between the partnership model of marriage and the self-development of women is very close. Titkow (2005) use the metaphor of the „glass ceiling” which describes the invisible barriers that obstruct women from reaching the highest levels in their careers. These barriers are “created by stereotyping opinions on women (resulting in being coerced into traditional roles), by women being limited to motherhood (which commonly entails an unequal division of responsibilities in the family) and, finally, by the way in which women define their strengths and weaknesses.” (Titkow 2005, 32). According to Titkow (2005), Polish women are still under the yoke of unpaid work (caring for house and children) at the cost of their professional and personal development. There are, however, changes in the cultural model, namely the occurrence of “assertive” women with high social positions, who do not perceive the caring activities as a “duty” or a “necessity of life” (Titkow 2005, 33).

1.2 Women on the move, transmigration and marriage-scapes

The other important factor in the lives of my informants is migration, a process that entails many social, cultural, economical, and political changes on an individual as well as on a global level. Anthropologists used to take up the “bottom-up perspective” to observe how the people react to global processes. Düvell and Vogel (in Karczemski and Boer 2010) distinguished four different types of migrants: return-oriented migrants, emigrants, transnational migrants and global nomads. The term “transmigrant” developed by Nina Glick Schiller (2003) describes persons who “live their lives across borders, participating simultaneously in social relations that embed them in more than one nation-state” (Glick Schiller 2003, 105). Essential to the concept of transmigration is the multiplicity of engagements of mobile subjects in their home and host societies simultaneously. They keep strong economical, personal and political ties and show their loyalties to both (or more) nations.

The concept of transnational migrants corresponds with Morokvasic’s migrants “settled within mobility” (Morokvasic, 2008). She presents the transnational practices of Central and Eastern European women (including Poles) from the context of post-wall migration. The author claims that “Rather than trying to immigrate and settle in the target country, they tend to settle within mobility, staying mobile as long as they can in order to improve or maintain the quality of life at home” (Morokvasic 2008, 9). According to Morokvasic (2008), mobility has a specific significance for women, who have been historically associated with immobility and passivity,

and very often were morally stigmatized. The post-communist transition increased female migration in Europe, as the women were the first to lose their jobs in the process of economic restructuring (Morokvasic 2008). The author noticed that because they experience de-skilling and have less access to training schemes adjusted to the labour market demand, they turn to jobs in the informal sector as domestic helpers or caretakers, or engage in trading and prostitution. According to Morokvasic (2008), although transmigration can be empowering and it can challenge established gender norms, it can also lead to new dependencies and reinforce existing gender boundaries and hierarchies, as in the case of trafficked women.

The relation between migration and family is important to mention in this thesis, because it relates to the new qualities, standards and possibilities that the migrants meet in their new country. Moreover, they may represent themselves on the base of the new conditions. Like Polish women, the Malian conversation partners of Barten (2009) build on these conditions in the process of establishing their position in the host society. According to this author, the migrant's freedom "springs from agency, from possibility, and not from impossibility and marginalization" (Barten 2009, 91), or stigmatization - as may be the case in Polish women. According to Barten, the family is a "changing entity, a dynamic process" (Barten 2009, 89). The author noticed that migration entails visible changes in the individual's life, such as in sexual values and behaviour, in the practice of marriage and in relations within the family. The strong relations in the multigenerational family represented by her informants before migration loosened, while qualities such as individualism and consumerism increased (Barten 2009). In addition, the differences in gender roles in the host and home countries may differ, which can affect everyday interactions with the partner, as was the case with the Polish brides interviewed by Polek and Schoon in 2008. The movement from patriarchal to more egalitarian social relations in the Netherlands was meaningful to many of the Polish women.

The set of concepts significant for my research concerns cross-cultural marriages in the perspective of stereotyping. According to Nicole Constable (2005), international and translational marriages are best understood as "marriage-scapes": marriages that are "shaped and limited by existing and emerging cultural, social, historical, and political-economic factors" (Constable 2005, 4). This notion concerns the "categories of desire" (term of Pflugfelder, in Constable 2005) that reflect and are propelled by fantasies or imaginations of both spouses about their gender, sexuality, tradition, and modernity (Constable 2005, 7). The best explanation of the notion of "marriage-scapes" is provided by the study of American-Asian marriages of Nicole Constable (2005). She shows that Western men expect "traditional" roles and qualities of Asian brides, and have some less openly expressed ideas about these women's erotic sexuality, while

the Asian women expect Western and other foreign men to have a modern outlook, to be professionally in a position of power, and to be attractive (Constable 2005). Constable states that Western men may go into cross-border marriages because of presumed values and qualities of foreign women in comparison to local ones, because of their demographically limited opportunities for finding a wife or because of their low position on the local marriage market (as they are disabled or poor). Ultimately, both spouses may be surprised that these stereotypes do not correspond with reality and it occurs that assumptions of “traditional” or “modern” values are mistaken.

Constable (2005) questions whether cross-cultural marriages are usually about hypergamy, as is often assumed. According to the Dictionary of Anthropology (1997), hypergamy “is the practice of women being married ‘up’ in social status” (Rhum 1997, 254). Constable’s research shows that the women are not always poor and the men are not always rich and educated. Furthermore, women do not always marry Western men who are higher on the socioeconomic ladder, so they do not always marry upwards socially and economically (Constable 2005). According to Sonja Luehrmann (2004), who researched internet matchmaking in Russia, women seek foreign husbands, because local men are no longer eligible for them. The author sees the reason for this phenomenon in the disagreements over gender roles between men and women that originated under the changing conditions of post-Soviet Russia, such as increasing education of women. Both authors (Luehrmann, Constable) argue that women who marry foreign husbands are not passive and desperate as if the stereotype of “mail-order brides” presents them - as victims of the poverty or human trafficking. On the contrary, Constable criticises “the notion of wives as simply objects of exchange, and highlights instead women’s agency in relation to wider structural constraints” (Constable 2005, 13).

1.3 Polish-Dutch marriages

The stigmatisation of “women on the move” (Morokvasic 2003) and the common belief of their hypergamy (Constable 2005), fuelled my concerns about the image of Polish brides in the Netherlands. According to Harmsen (1997), Poland is one of the main donor countries of brides in the Netherlands. Statistics show that “the number of married women born in Poland, Russia, Thailand, the Philippines, Brazil, Colombia and the Dominican Republic living together with a Dutch husband is much higher than the number of men from these countries living with a Dutch wife” (Harmsen 1997, 1). According to Karczowski and Boer (2010), in the late 1990s, one of the reasons Polish women emigrated to the Netherlands was to get married to Dutch citizens. As it follows from Harmsen’s statistics, of the 6500 Poles in the Netherlands, 4800 are Polish

women married to Dutch men. On the list of *Dutch-born husband and foreign-born wife*, Polish-Dutch marriages - whereby the woman is Polish and the man is Dutch - are in the fifth position (after Indonesia, Germany, Belgium, United Kingdom and Suriname).

The research of Polek and Schoon (2008) leads us to assume that Polish women do not “marry up” in social status, at least not in the Netherlands. The overall life satisfaction and the occupational adaptation of Polish women in the Netherlands did not depend on their marital status (Polek and Schoon 2008). “Demographic characteristics such as age, age of immigration, length of residence, permanency of stay, education and occupational status” (Polek and Schoon 2008, 361) rendered better predictors of Dutch identity, fluency in Dutch and psychological adaptation than the whether or not the women were married to Dutch men.

1.4 Self-representation

The opposite action to stereotypization and stigmatization is the creation of a self-image. However, self-representation is not always the same as self-perception. According to Berger (1972), self-perception of women conforms to the image others have of the women. In other words, he states that the way a woman see herself is an imagined vision of herself as seen by others. According to Berger (1972), social appearance of men and women differ, “not because the feminine is different from the masculine, but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the women is designed to flatter him” (Berger 1972, 52). He states that the women have to survey everything they are and do, because the way they appear to other people (men) is of crucial importance for “what is normally thought of as the success of their lives” (Berger 1972, 46). When women see themselves being looked at, this makes them an object in their own eyes, they objectify themselves. The object they look at is their own sight. It seems to be a circular process, because the women represent themselves in the way they want to be treated by others, so when others look at them in a certain way, they (the women) begin to perceive themselves in this way as well. This concept will help us understand the way Polish women represent themselves (or how they want to be perceived) in the face of the stereotyping.

Polish women - as well as other immigrants - have to confront the new values and cultural models they come across in their new home country with those they were raised in. Ultimately, they need to choose which of these they want to follow, or decide to create new mixed values and models. According to Buijs (1993), the links with their society of origin may be viewed by women in a positive as well as a negative way. They may emphasize these links, emphasizing the distinction from the host society (like baking their own bread or wearing traditional clothes), or reject and redefine their old roles in the perspective of the new context

(Buijs 1993). However, according to Gale (2007), the strategies women use when negotiating unstable situations can result in the creation of completely new, different identities (Gale 2007). As these identities result from multiple relationships, women shift between them according to the situations they find themselves in.

If people may create their own identities and present them to others for personal purposes and reasons, they may simultaneously commodify them. According to Kopytoff (1986), there is a conceptual separation with regard to people and things in the commoditization process, whereby people are seen as “the natural preserve of individuation (that is singularisation) and things as the natural preserve of commoditisation” (Kopytoff 1986, 84). Kopytoff sees the roots of this separation in classical antiquity and Christianity and notices it became crucial in modern Europe. The boundaries between “humans” and “things” become more fluent nowadays and are the core points in discussions about matters such as abortion, artificial insemination, surrogate pregnancy, or egg donation/selling. However, Alexis Celeste Buntén (2008) shows that the process of peoples’ (self-) commoditisation may come up in apparent situations. She developed the term “commodified persona,” which is an individual’s or group’s alter-ego presented to other people in order to gain economic benefits. It “can be broadly defined as a set of beliefs and practices in which an individual chooses to construct a marketable identity product while striving to avoid alienating him- or herself” (Buntén 2008, 381). The “self” and the “commodified persona” are still two separated identities, whereby only second one may be objectified.

Overview

The theoretical chapter introduces the reader to the main direction of the thesis, namely the stereotypization and self-representation of Polish women in the Netherlands. It was inevitable to mention the historical and socio-cultural background of their statuses and roles as well as the context of (trans)migration and cross-cultural marriages, in which they are embedded.

The stereotypes of family- and home-oriented Polish women are closely connected with their national and religious roles. They were expected to bring up their children as religious patriots and to protect the hearth and home. As a result, women’s “emancipation from the traditional dependency on the family seemed to be equivalent to a betrayal of the nation and apostasy of the church” (Titkow 2007, 51). Communist ideology forced them to take up all kinds of jobs, although it did not relieve them from their domestic responsibilities (Titkow 1998, Rochon and Grzybek 2009). The ideals of emancipation disappeared after the national transformation in 1989, when many Polish women lost their jobs, being perceived as unsuitable to work in high positions or in sectors that are seen as typically “masculine”. Their place was at

home with the children. However, according to many scholars (Regulska, Titkow), Polish women begin to appreciate the partnership model of marriage, whereby both spouses take equal responsibility for home and children and their professional and personal development is equally important. A new type of woman is appearing – young, educated, successful and “assertive” (Titkow 2005).

The stereotypes concerning “women on the move” were also discriminative. Women were always perceived as passive and immobile (Morokvasic 2008) or as victims of human trafficking (Constable 2005). In fact, women became very active and independent actors. In addition, their mobility became the subject of scholars examining changes in family structure (Barten, Constable) and identity (Glick Schiller and Levitt). The concept of “transmigration” (Glick Schiller and Levitt 2004) and migrants “settled down in mobility” (Morokvasic 2008) describe the contemporary conditions of persons “hanging” between two (or more) cultures, by the new and left-behind responsibilities as well as different mentalities, cultural schemes and qualities. In addition, cross-cultural marriages are commonly perceived as the gateway to woman’s hypergamy, as it is also in the case of Polish women.

The concepts referring to self-representations show that the “self” may be presented (or not) by persons for different reasons. Berger (1972) states that women represent themselves in the way they want to perceive themselves. This is because their self-perception is the mirror-image of the perception by other people, so when they show what they are or what they do to men, they expect to be perceived in such way by them, and thereby also by themselves. The identities of people may be shifted according to different situations and for various purposes (Gale 2007), for instance in order to show their attachment and loyalty to a certain culture (Buijs 1993). Furthermore, a person or a group of people may create a “commodified persona” (Bunten 2008). Still, however, they try to avoid loosening the “self”. I hope the concepts will help to understand the way my informants represent themselves in the face of stereotypization and migration.

Chapter 2: Research setting and methodology

2.1 Methods and research setting

I used this qualitative research in order to gather an in-depth understanding of the process of self-representation of Polish women in the face of stereotypization. During three months of ethnographic fieldwork, I used several methods, such as internet surfing, online chatting, posting on internet forums, discussing via e-mail or common internet communicators (such as Skype or Facebook), using open-question survey and conducting in-depth ethnographic interviews.

The internet is a space where images and stereotypes live their own lives. People may freely present their knowledge, express opinions and share experiences, discussing them with others. The freedom of the internet was its strength and the main reason why I decided to conduct an internet investigation. It seemed to be a great space of flowing of also those stereotypes that would be never possible to pick up in the “real-life” interactions. The other setting of my research, next to the internet, was the Netherlands. The choice of this location of my research was pragmatical and it resulted from the choice of following the Master’s study in this country, and indirectly, from my choice to chase my Dutch boyfriend.

2.2 Research idea

Before I came to the Netherlands, I did not know anything about Polish people living there. Very soon, I noticed they do not have a great reputation, especially Polish female migrants. It was my mother who first informed me about the stereotypes concerning Polish women living in the Netherlands. She had found some information on Polish internet forums. I was becoming concerned about what people may think about me, knowing that I am a Polish. As an immigrant, I still try to present myself to the new society from my best side, so I would certainly been very frustrated if I was labelled and assessed in advance. I decided to meet other Polish women and get to know their stories. According to the stereotype, I should expect poor, low educated and desperate women who improved their social and economical status by their marriage to a Dutch man - women who follow more traditional gender roles and are less emancipated than their Dutch counterparts. Although I have a Dutch boyfriend and I came to the Netherlands for him, I do not feel I have something in common with these images of Polish female migrant. I was very curious what kind of women I would meet. In addition, I was really hoping I could make some friends and that our common situation would make us closer to each other.

2.3 Informants

I can distinguish different types of informants and it will not be a simple division separating internet users from the Polish women whom I met personally. Among internet users, there were persons who posted their opinions on the internet forums in the past as well as those with whom I chatted on-line, exchanged e-mails or discussed on the forums. Furthermore, some of the internet users agreed to have a real-life conversation or to fill in the questionnaire. The general division of my informants should be made in accordance to the core concepts I discuss in the thesis – stereotypization and self-representation.

The informants whose entries and messages provided the majority of the data for the examination of the stereotyping were internet users. Those, with whom I discussed online (by chatting, posting on forums or sending e-mails), were always aware that I am a researcher and they were informed about the topic of the study. To examine the stereotypization and distinguish the main stereotypes about Polish women, I visited several foreign, Dutch and Polish dating sites (fdating.com, russiancupid.com, lexa.nl, polishhearts.nl, we-dwoje.nl), Dutch internet portals (fok.nl, altijdwat.ncrv.nl), Polish-Dutch websites (wiatrak.nl, polonia.nl) and forums where Polish people discussed their life experiences (niedziela.nl, e-holandia.info, wiatrak.nl). The finding criteria of these sources were the keywords such as “Polish women” written in two languages: Polish (*Polki/Polskie kobiety*) and Dutch (*Poolse vrouwen*). Later in this thesis, the reader will be introduced to the specifics of certain sources and the reasons why I chose to use them.

The concept of self-representation of Polish women in the face of stereotypes and migration was examined through ethnographic interviews, open-question survey and online discussion with Polish women on wiatrak.nl. It was important for me to find Polish women living in different parts of the Netherlands. I tried to avoid the situation in which women come from the same region of Poland, or have similar professions resulting from the same job opportunities, or live in the same regions of the Netherlands. I was rather looking for a differentiation of women’s backgrounds and living situations. Ultimately, I met 20 women personally, while 6 of them were not belonging to the target group of conversation partners, as they were never in a relationship with Dutch men.³ In addition, 3 women filled in the open questionnaire and 16 took part in online discussion on forum wiatrak.nl⁴. 17 women that

³ One woman was a single looking for Polish man, two were a lesbian couple, one was an elderly woman who I met in the train who came to the Netherlands to earn some extra money, and two were in a relationship with foreign men. Although their utterances are not presented in this thesis, our conversations helped me to distinguish the characteristics of the target group of informants.

⁴ Five of the women taking part in online discussion were also my conversation partners.

participated in research constituted the target informants in the research of self-representation⁵. Five of them were in their twenties, seven in their thirties, four in their forties, and one woman was over fifty. Most of them met their partners by chance, while they were already in the Netherlands and working there. As they usually underline, mutual love was the reason to settle down in Holland.

The internet occurred to be the best tool for finding conversation partners. I visited several websites, such as grono.net, nasza-klasa.nl, facebook.com, polishhearts.nl, wiatrak.nl, e-holandia.info and niedziela.nl. I created personal profiles, in which I briefly described my research ideas and expressed an interest in meeting Polish women. In addition, I posted information about my research on the polish website wiatrak.nl by which I intended to entice women to contact me and begin an online discussion at the same time. Indeed, 10 of my conversation partners contacted me after they read my note on wiatrak.nl. Apart from this, I contacted the several institutions (ToP, Dom Polski) and the editors of certain websites (cudzoziemka.nl, polonia.nl) in order to find informants. As a result, I succeed in finding 3 informants. I tried to search Polish women also via Skype, but only a few answered me, and ultimately 3 of them expressed a willingness to make an appointment. I tried to meet every woman who contacted with me personally, however, after travelling throughout the country, this became a financial burden for me. Then, I applied a survey based on the same questions I asked during the private meetings and sent them by e-mail to the women who agreed to take part in the research.

2.4 The logic of construction

I arranged the ethnographical chapters of this thesis according to the chronology of phenomena that occurred to me as a Polish female immigrant and researcher at the same time. First, when I came to the Netherlands, I was informed about different stereotypes of Polish women circulating among Dutch people as well as Polish immigrants in the Netherlands. In the very beginning, the reader will have an opportunity to put him- or herself in the position of Polish women, as he or she will be attacked by multiple images and stereotypes about Polish female migrants. Next, the reader will be introduced to the logic behind the stereotyping that is linked to the condition of certain media. Thereby, I will try to show the main characteristics of the operation of stereotypes within certain media sources. Furthermore, I will examine a self-representation of Polish women

⁵ 9 of them were the wives of the Dutch men, 2 were preparing for marriage, 2 were living in a legalised partnership, 3 had Dutch boyfriends and one woman was the widow of a Dutch man.

in the face of stereotypization, where the condition of being an immigrant is a significant factor. Ultimately, the reader will get to know the new strategy in dealing with stereotypes.

Chapter 3: From images to stereotypes

There are many different images and stereotypes of Polish women living in the Netherlands. They are very often recurring, but can also be contradicting or overlapping. The stereotypes function as the main factors in self-representation of Polish women. Women refer to them and react to them in a unique way. Therefore, the presentation of the stereotypization in the present chapter and in Chapter 4 is important in order to understand the unique strategies of my informants. In this chapter, I will present a selection of the components comprising the images and stereotypes of Polish women that appeared to me during my research. I will group them together into categories such as family, sexuality, and character. I hope this will create an overview of the contexts in which the Polish women are embedded.

First, we need to discriminate between images and stereotypes. In Psychology, images are understood as mental representations of something previously perceived, in the absence of the original stimulus. They are the ideas of something or somebody. An image becomes a stereotype, when one “ascribes characteristics to people on the basis of their group memberships” (Oakes et al. 1994, 1). Images and stereotypes appear in various circumstances and are conveyed verbally, through written text or visually.

As it will occur later, many of my informants were aware of, and in our discussions referred to, the stereotypes labelled on them. Therefore, an examination of the self-representation of Polish women would not be possible without elaborating on the common stereotypes. I decided to separate the representations from the description of spokespersons. This was because I developed the notion of the influence of the purposes, perspectives, knowledge and interest of the spokespersons in the next chapter, describing the operation of the stereotypization in certain media sources. The investigation of every single purpose of the image appearance would probably disorient the readers and, additionally, I would commit a generalization by ascribing certain images and stereotypes to certain groups of people, instead of presenting the contexts they arose in. The images and stereotypes would overlap and repeat, so, in turn, it would be very hard to point them out.

I will not present the data in order to support or overthrow images or stereotypes of Polish women. Despite my deep involvement in the topic, I will try to present various visions of women objectively, focusing on their logical ordering. The structure of this chapter is based on the ordering of the main representations (images and stereotypes) of Polish women in relation to

each other, according to their overtone and character. I use evidence from various sources (internet sources and interviews).

3.1 Family

The first category that I will present in this chapter is the family. This incorporates aspects of family relations and the roles and responsibilities of women within the family. Because they are closely related to economic aspects, it was sometimes difficult to separate these two categories. As the reader will notice later, in the chapter on self-presentation of Polish women, the category of domestic labour is presented completely separately.

Informants who appeal to the category of “family” were foreign men whom I met on the dating site f.dating.com, Polish women who signed in on the dating site wedwoje.nl, the female and male users of Polish internet forums and my female conversation partners. Although most of the images presented in this context had positive overtones, they were not necessarily perceived as positive by my conversation partners.

During my fieldwork, it became apparent that Polish women are very often perceived as being obedient wives who perform domestic duties and take care of their husbands. A female informant told me what opinion her husband had about Polish women at the beginning of their partnership.

Karina P-B. (33): I noticed that my husband had an idea about Poland that a husband sits at home, let us say, and woman is at his beck and call. The women do everything at home, like cleaning and cooking, while he provides for everything, such as sandwiches... (...) The husband is the head of the house, does not need to do anything and the woman is always on call. (March 2012, interview)

The stereotype of “the obedient wife” is embedded in the subject of the dependency between partners. Many Polish informants actually agreed that Western European (including Dutch) men appreciate the attributes stereotypically projected on Polish women: “a good, quiet, subordinate Polish wife is a real treasure for a Dutch man” (Sylwina, February 2012, wiatrak.nl). Indeed, the foreign (mostly other than Dutch or Polish) men I chatted with on the dating sites prefer a traditional division of roles in a relationship, whereby the woman is the one who completes domestic duties. The following man belongs to this group.

Daviddusud: I would like her to know how to listen, that she loves the children and takes care of the house with my good help. If she wants to work, no concerns (marigolds). I would like her to know how to cook, especially Polish [food]. If I am able to, I will help her as best I can. (February 2012, fdating.com).

Daviddusud (40) from France imagined his future wife as a person who “knows how to listen”, who will be dutiful or empathic. He generated his expectations in accordance to the stereotypical

role of the “proper wife”, who will take care of the children and the house. A couple of times he underlined the fact that he is ready to help his future wife in the realization of domestic duties that only endorses his assurance of the woman’s place. As the reader might have noticed, the next vision of Polish women came up automatically. The stereotype of a “housewife” appeared very often and its overtone differed between the speakers. All foreign men met on the dating site *fdating.com* perceived it as a positive, valuable image. In addition, some women that I talked with, perceived it in a positive way:

Karina D. (34): For example, my [Dutch] husband’s sister does not cook at home, maybe only pizza, something like that. She does not cook or take care of the house. It is unlike in our house: nice, warm, clean. (...) This younger generation of Dutch women is emancipated somehow, isn’t it? (...) Polish women rather keep caring of the house and the children somehow. When they already have the house and the children, even though they work and are financially independent, they are still the landladies all the time, aren’t they? (March 2012, interview)

Karina D. is one of my informants who expect appreciation from her Dutch husband for her work at home. When I met her, she did not work, because she had two small children. In addition, she took the responsibility for the domestic duties. However, she would like to go back to work when the children are older. When she compared Polish women with Dutch women, the domestic role of a woman was definitely positive. However, when Karina talked about her own relationship, she mentioned her dissatisfaction at the lack of her husband’s involvement. The importance of the appreciation of a woman’s work at home will be developed in Chapter 5, where the self-representation of my conversation partners will be discussed.

Some of my informants noticed that when they meet liberal approach among their female compatriots, foreign men might appreciate the attributes that are stereotypically projected on Eastern-European women. Gerd, a 49-year-old man from Germany, who presented Polish women in contrast with his vision of German women, provides the example. I chatted with him on the dating portal *fdating.com* and I asked him what he thought about Polish women. Even if he did not present his imagination of Polish women directly, he presented them indirectly by explicating what German women are not.

Gerd: I know some Polish women. They are interesting. Therefore, I am also searching for a Polish woman.

Kasia: What does it mean, “interesting”? Why do you search exactly a Polish one?

Gerd: I would have no German woman. German women are not interesting. You can only talk about their work and about how bad everything is. (February 2012, *fdating.com*)

We may conclude from his statement, that he perceives Polish women as less emancipated than his female compatriots. German women talk about their work, as it is an important domain of her

life, while Polish women do not, because they do not work or it is not so relevant to talk about⁶. Furthermore, German women complain, “about how bad everything is”, while Polish women do not, because they are always satisfied with their lives or may not want to change it according to their own desired mode. When I was chatting with Gerd (49), I had the feeling that he thought that Polish women show their satisfaction in relationships with foreign men and adopt conservative roles.

As the home is connected with the family, Polish women being perceived as “housewives” are seen as more family-oriented than Dutch women.

Joasia84: Concerning Dutch men looking for wives in Eastern Europe, I think that it is because they prefer women of other nationalities. I heard opinions that Dutch women are not so family-oriented and hard working. Thereby, they [Dutch men] want Polish women, who are known for their working hard, being family-oriented and honest. (...) A native Dutch man told me about those Dutch women. (July 2008, wiatrak.nl)

According to my informants, Polish women not only take care of their husbands, but also of their children, taking responsibility for their upbringing, care and all formalities. Some of my conversation partners noticed that the strong relations also remain between elderly people and their adult children: “In Poland we live more for the family, for the children. Here [in the Netherlands] everybody lives for themselves.” (Karina D.) Karina D. told me that people should not live only for their children. She shared with me her feelings of being burdened by her parents’ anticipation of her visit. In this sense, the image of the Polish mother has a negative overtone. However, many of my conversation partners perceived the caring mother as a positive figure, taking their caring attitude as an advantage or even a necessity.

Many voices - male or female, Polish or foreign - connect the role of wife with the role of mother. It seems to be such a natural combination that sometimes both are mentioned in the sentence at once. Many descriptions of Polish women as wives and mothers present them as ones who provide and protect the hearth in a family house. Many foreign men expressed the willingness to have a Polish wife who will be a caring mother for their children at the same time.

There also appeared a figure of the Polish woman who is already, at the time of emigration, a mother with past experiences and who is looking for a “better chance” abroad.

Wiatrak: In this group there are many “women with a past”; from broken marriages, above their thirties, with two children aged 6-14, desperately trying to arrange their life anew, a better life, a new life in the new world. These women do not notice how big mischief they provide to their adolescent children. (July 2008, wiatrak.nl)

The image of the Polish woman looking for a “better life” occurs very often. Sometimes it is a mother, as it was described in citation above. Other time it is a young woman who is following

⁶ I presented my own assumptions, realizing that there may be more possibilities.

her Polish or Dutch partner. It is also very difficult for me to fit this image to the concrete context, because the “better life” that she is looking for is perceived differently. It can be just a better-paid job, but also a rich boyfriend who will be able to support her. Nevertheless, it can be also a better education, a true love, a tolerance or a fair law that gives the feeling of a better life in the Netherlands.

To summarize all presented components of the image of Polish women concerning family, we can distinguish a few of them. Sometimes they combine one with another, so it is hard to separate them. There is an “obedient wife” taking care of the husband, and there is also a wife who takes care of house by cooking and cleaning,— a “housewife.” In addition, there is a wife who is, at the same time, a mother. It seems to be very natural colligation, as Polish women are perceived as being family-oriented. These three components present the stereotypical and conservative female gender roles that are often contrasted with the liberal approaches of Western-European women. Therefore, the next image presents Polish woman as following conservative roles. Another component is a mother looking for a “better life” in the Netherlands. However, it is very hard to say unambiguously what people mean by speaking of “better life”, as it can refer to economical or social aspects.

3.2 Sexuality

Sexuality is the next context in which Polish women are embedded. It embraces elements connected to the appearance and bodiliness of Polish women. Informants who embraced Polish women in the sexual context in a negative way were mostly Dutch male users of the internet forum fok.nl. In addition, many Polish internet users (male and female) referred to the negative stereotypes. The positive overtone of the images presented in this context (especially the image of feminine Polish woman) came mostly from the female Polish informants. Just like the stereotypes presented in the context of the family, they are very often ambiguous. However, the first stereotype I will present in this sub-section will never have a positive overtone, as it refers to the unmentionable occupation – prostitution.

Many times, I have read on Dutch internet forum fok.nl that the users wrote about Polish women as sexual objects, using pejorative words such as *wijf* or *sletje*, referring mostly to the external appearance and attitudes. One of the Polish informants noticed:

Wiatrak: there is also a fact that Polish women do not have good reputation and respect among Dutch people that only prejudices their status (...). Please, type in Google browser words such as *Poolse dames* [Polish ladies]. As the results there will occur websites that offer *Poolse Dames te Koop Aangeboden* (Polish ladies for sale) or *Nieuwe betaalbare poolse dames* (new affordable Polish women). For a comparison, please type *Duitse dames*

(German ladies), *Hongaarse dames* (Hungarian ladies), *Franse dames* (French ladies). I will also add that 30% of women in Dutch prostitution come from Eastern Europe – luckily without specifying from what country and how many women this entails. (July 2008, wiatrak.nl)

This post was published in internet in July 2008 on the Polish forum wiatrak.nl. I was curious if there were some changes in results of searching *Poolse dames* in the Google browser. I also typed these words and my outcomes were a bit different. There are not offers for buying Polish women any more, but many links to dating sites, such as russiancupid.com, online-dating-ukraine.com, single-baltic-ladies.com or we-dwoje.nl. It seems that a representation of Polish women on the internet changed from forms of very direct offers promoting prostitution to relatively innocent profiles on dating sites.

Sometimes it happens that even within a new Dutch family (new for a Polish woman who is in a relationship with a Dutch man) is somebody who has negative prejudices about Polish women. These opinions may cause upsetting results and falling out within family, for example like in a case of Jan and Karina:

Karina D.: Due to the fact that Jan [husband] is the youngest of the siblings, he was always a “little Jan” (...) Suddenly I appeared (...). He was travelling to Poland all the time and they [sisters of Jan] lost him day-to-day and this probably overwhelmed them. Moreover, later on, it happened something very bad. He was so frustrated that during some confrontation they called me a Polish prostitute. Jan get very mad. He demanded an apology. They never wanted to apologize. He said that if they do not apologize me he will never talk to them again, and they never said sorry. (March 2012, interview)

Karina admitted later on, during an interview, that she does not blame people who judged her in this bad way, because their knowledge about Poland is only based on these prejudices.

Next to the image of a prostitute, Polish women are very often perceived as those who are easy to approach. One Dutch man on the dating site admitted: “I don’t know any Polish women, but I know there is the stereotype that they are easy to approach” (Anonym, April 2012, fdating.com). As he stressed, it is what he heard about Polish women. Another internet user noticed however, “a lot of Eastern European women have enough of it that Western men think that they are easier to get” (Halcon, April 2011, fok.nl).

The external appearance of Polish women is the next element included in the context of the sexuality. On the Dutch forum fok.nl, for instance, there was a discussion about the appearance of Polish women. Male users compared it sometimes with a look of Polish men or even Dutch women. Many of the posts where negative, as the users spoke about Polish

women as sexual objects. Most of them referred to their physical features⁷ or clothes: “I saw yesterday evening a group of Polish chicks in sexy dresses with high heels (...)” (MrVanBraun, July 2011, fok.nl), “[Polish] bitches can be extremely beautiful, but men are the oddments of Chernobyl” (Vervelen.d, November 2007, fok.nl), “Indeed, world of the differences over there [in Poland]. Unkempt guys, with a smell from here to Tokyo, all bare, and clothing taste from year 0, in contrast to the ladies there” (SolidArt, November 2007, fok.nl).

Also among Polish people, there are discussions about the external appearance of Polish and Dutch women. These descriptions, however, do not contain that much of sexual overtone in comparison to the discussions presented above.

AnkaL: I was invited on Holly Communion of the son of the sister of M. to the church and then to house. I thought, I have to wear according to the event. I took shirt, jacket and black skirt, high heels of 5 cm. Normal, in my opinion. Before leaving my M. mouldered, that we do not suit to each other, so I ironed another pants for him. In church, I was a bit shocked. Like me, some jacket, there had only a few people – and they were ONLY grandpas and grandmas. (...) So Dutch concept of elegance is a little bit different. (October 2007, niedziela.nl)

The citation above shows Polish women in a better light than the Dutch women. However, this relation might be inverse. Sometimes Polish women’s approach to their appearance is criticized, as it is said that they go over the top with the make-up, extravagance and revealing clothes. The differentiation of the approaches of Dutch and Polish women to the appearance I will present in the chapter 5.

The next component of the image of Polish women is their femininity. A large amount of my Polish female conversation partners and internet users noticed that Polish women look, but also behave more feminine than many Dutch women.

Gochna H: the Dutch women do not do anything special (probably there are exceptions) to emphasise female strengths in their appearance... and despite that they become the wives of quite good guys... how are they doing that? They do nothing while they have what they have. (October 2007, niedziela.nl)

Many times Dutch women are perceived as unkempt or/and having bad attitude, while Polish women as “taking a role of women seriously” (mymoodfentje, November 2007, fok.nl). However, the perspective may be inversed, again. The opinions according Dutch women (who pay less attention to their appearance than Polish woman) are partly derived from an assurance of their emancipated approach. Dutch women are seen as those who are oriented towards their

⁷ There was a photo of Ewa Sonnet (a Polish glamour model and pop singer) attached to two online discussions on forum fok.nl. Many users expressed their amazement of her physical assets (big breasts) and thereby a will to meet some Polish woman for sexual purpose.

education, career and self-development, rather than family and house. This is a therefore positive approach. Due to the controversy resulting from the different perspectives towards femininity, I will develop this subject later on, presenting the data gathered from the ethnographic interviews.

The components of the image of Polish women in the context of the sexuality refer to their appearance and bodiliness. Firstly, negative vision is definitely a stereotype of the Polish prostitute. Next to this, Polish women are perceived as those who are easy to approach. According their appearance and femininity the visions are ambiguous, showing Polish women sometimes in a positive light, other times in a negative light. In the case of these two components, Polish women often contrasted greatly with Dutch women.

3.3 Character

The last wide context, which I decided to present in my thesis, embraces the descriptions of the qualities and features distinguishing Polish women. There are negative and positive characteristics of Polish women that I came across during my research. Informants who referred the most often to this context were male Dutch users of the portal fok.nl as well as Polish users of the portals such as wiatrak.nl, niedziela.nl or e-holandia.info. Usually the features presented in this sub-section referred to Polish women being in, or wanting to be in, a relationship with Dutch men.

I noticed that, among both Dutch and Polish people, Polish women are mostly perceived as women who want to improve their social and financial situations:

Supersoep: Polish women are more “looking for” somebody [than Dutch women]. This is my opinion. This also makes them easier [to approach]. However, I also think that they want a man who has some success. (April 2011, fok.nl)

MK: I met too many times female compatriots who had married for money. My experiences and viewpoints in this case are unfortunately based on general opinions of Dutch men and on my experiences and observations as well. Of course, it does not mean that all Polish-Dutch relationships are sell-buy agreements (February 2010, wiatrak.nl)

The last statement presents Polish women as materialists. There are many similar statements, based on public experiences and “general opinions.” However, some of the Polish women that I have met during my research talked about their personal hardships concerning prejudices prevalent among members of their new, Dutch families.

Karina D.: I remember the first moment when I was talking one-to-one with Jan’s [husband’s] sister and she... I do not know, I cannot remember good, but she said something that Jan has to earn money now and save money. She kind of wanted to send me word that I should not spend his money, or something like that. I remember that I thought by myself: “you think that I came from Poland so I am on the lookout for his money, for his millions that he does not have.” (March 2012, interview)

According to Karina's confession, she felt that she had been judged on the basis of strong prejudices. Even if she maybe understood the intentions of Jan's sister wrongly, the prejudices existed in their own mind.

The materialistic attitude connects inextricably to another characteristic of Polish women that occurred to me during my research and it is bribery. A good example of this viewpoint is a short story posted by SYCO, one of male Dutch internet users.

SYCO: I had small stops in Poland. I can hear it is a paradise for many of us. You just have whiskey in your hands and they [Polish women] make the best moves around you. Later in the evening, I was sitting with three chicks around me, but ultimately I did not want even one of three in my hotel room. (November 2007, fok.nl)

Because whiskey is one of the most expensive alcohols, it is linked to the wealth of its drinker, apparently in Polish women's opinion and for SYCO himself. Women who he has met in Poland showed their venal attitude towards him by seeking his attention, and it was because their alleged assumption of his wealth. This situation seems to have two sides. On the one hand, Dutch men realize exactly what tricks they can use to entice Polish women, and on the other hand, there are the Polish women who allow themselves to be enticed.

Therefore, I distinguish another characteristic of Polish women that I have concluded from many opinions I came across during my research. This characteristic is craftiness, which is tightly connected to the two previous characteristics. It is said that in order to gain their aims, Polish women may cheat and deceive their partners.

Marzena: It is very often that a Dutch man who meets Polish woman does not know what he deals with. It is because, let's not suppress it any longer, these women put masks for the sake of ensnaring man. Hence, guys sometimes think they purchase universal, nice and unique commodity that desires children, cooking, cleaning, weekend trips (read: man does not have to spend much money) and in addition, it is a sexual volcano. Unfortunately, after while the truth will out. (July 2008, wiatrak.nl)

There are also posts, in which male internet users (fok.nl) refer to the bad experiences they or their friends had with Polish women. "(...) [she has] a residence status quickly, money from man and [she] does not do anything by herself, and then, after couple years, their relationship is broken and [she has] more money in [her] pocket" (M42, July 2011, fok.nl), "Watch out! I also knew someone who had a Polish wife. He lost everything: the house and money. Whores are sneaky" (dodge, July 2011, fok.nl), "Oh, this happened also over here. Before I had a Polish girlfriend it was going fine." (osm, July 2011, fok.nl)

The next characteristic I would like to present is a more positive and sociable attitude. Many pubs and clubs were adverted in the answer of the question "where Polish women can be

found in the Netherlands” asked by one of the internet users on the forum fok.nl. Other time somebody posted:

ExtremePain: [Polish] women are much more sociable and [Polish] guys are walking with shago mouth and they are less good to have as company. And they are already drunk at 18:00, which will also not help them. (November 2007, fok.nl)

The above opinion about Polish women was presented by showing them in contrast with Polish men. This form of presentation occurred several times on Dutch forum fok.nl. Drinking alcohol, which I also ascribe to sociable attitude, is also mentioned a couple of times. One participant on an online discussion noticed that “most of Eastern European women who live over here [in the Netherlands] are coming from the rural areas and they indeed drink there a lot” (Halcon, April 2011, fok.nl). The “sociable (drunk) Polish woman” may be also a negative vision. Especially if, instead of taking the perspective of people who are looking for company, we put ourselves in the situation of Polish women. In addition, the “drunk” and therefore “bad” Pole has existed as a stereotype for long time already. On the Polish forums, there are many discussions on this subject. People comment how the Polish nation is perceived by Dutch people and they usually agree that drunkenness is a problem among male polish workers. However, they also noticed that there are a lot of generalizations made by Dutch people, whose drinking culture differs from the polish one.

The context of the character of Polish women consists usually of the negative images. For instance, there is a vision of a “materialistic woman” who wants to improve her social and financial situation by marrying a Dutch man and the image of a “venal” or “crafty” woman. Those three images are very often united, and expressed in the sexual context. The vision of a “sociable Polish woman” is more positive but as it happens with many images, it has also a negative overtone when is associated with alcohol abuse.

3.4 Other images and stereotypes

It is also significant to mention the contexts in which the Polish women were not discussed by my informants or those that appeared in a small way. One of them was religion. I did not find any discussion among Dutch internet users in this subject or any sign of the classification of Polish people according to their religion. In turn, on the internet forums of the Polish immigrants appeared some topics concerning the division of Dutch people on the Calvinists and Catholics, and the impact of this division on the Dutch society. I found definitely more religious aspects among Polish than Dutch sources. I was actually surprised with their limited appearance, as the relation between Polish culture, national consciousness and the Catholicism is very strong

(Kabzińska 1996). For instance in Belarus, the recognition of Poles is according to religion (Kabzińska 1996). The other context that was not taken up much often was history. I found most of information about the history of Polish-Dutch history on websites dedicated to Polish immigrants. Especially the participation of Polish soldiers in fights of national deliverance of the Netherlands during II World War was emphasized. The exclusion of the religious and historical context in Dutch sources, and their limited appearance in Polish sources, may attest to the small importance of those contexts in every-day life.

The other context that I did not present in separate subsection concerns economy. In the Netherlands, Poles are mostly perceived in a context of the work. According to Jaco Dagevos (2011) from Social and Cultural Planning Office, there are 77,000 Poles registered in the Municipal Personal Records Database (GBA), whilst the real amount reaches to around 150,000 (what is explained by the presence of seasonal migrants). Recently there has been a big controversy about Polish people within Dutch society and opinions about Polish workers are divided. In the context of economy, Polish people are described without distinguishing their sexes. I can only conclude that many people colligate also Polish female migrants with the images of Polish workers. The positive vision is of a “good worker”, appreciated for his/her hard and precise work. The fact that some media show the problem of the exploitation of Polish workers by the Dutch companies itself creates a positive image. The rest of the images and stereotypes are negative. Polish workers “stealing” jobs, unemployment Poles “stealing” financial and social benefits and drunk and noisy workers are the elements of the general image of “unwonted Pole.” The economic aspects of Polish immigration found their way into politics and they are very often magnified and used in order to gain a support. I describe only shortly the contexts of religion, history and economy, because not much of my conversation partners referred to them or they were not predominant.

Overview

The aim of this chapter was to present the main images and stereotypes of Polish women that appeared to me during my anthropological research conducted in the Netherlands. I tried to show the visions of Polish women in an analytical way, distancing myself from my own emotions on the subject. I presented all possible overtones of the images and stereotypes and different points of view that changed the character of the visions significantly. While negative ones came mostly from the foreign or Dutch informants, they also came from Polish informants quite often.

I grouped the images and stereotypes in four subjective contexts: family, sexuality, and character. In the first context, there are the visions such as “obedient wife”, “housewife”,

“family-oriented Polish woman”, “caring mother” and “mother looking for a better life.” Under the subject of sexuality, there appeared a “prostitute”, “woman easy to approach”, “woman paying attention to her appearance” and a “feminine Polish woman.” The context of the features and the qualities of Polish women presents them as materialistic, venal and crafty, but also as the “sociable women”. As the reader probably noticed, most of the images and stereotypes presented in this chapter have ambiguous overtone. They also appear (repeatedly) in different contexts, very often overlapping or contradicting. In the next chapter, I will present the reasons for this and explain the operation of the images and stereotypes in certain internet sources.

Chapter 4: The logic behind stereotyping

After laying out the most common images and stereotypes, it is relevant to present the logic behind stereotyping. In this chapter, I will show that the purpose, the contexts, and the level of people's involvement influence the overtone and the type of stereotypes they use. The choice of the sources that I use to present my arguments is determined by their popularity in Dutch or Polish-Dutch society as well as the possibility to confront various images. Most of the sources used for this research are internet sources. The internet gives average people the possibility to express their own opinions or experiences freely – visually, orally or by typing. It is a space where they can exchange these with the opinions and experiences of other users.

The internet is one of the global media sources, which sustains the stereotypes among people. However, I do not examine the media discourse. People usually ascribe many opinions and actions to such an abstract entity as “media”, but they forget that one of its “most prevalent messages is that we are the media” (Lester 1997, 1). In this chapter, I will present the way in which people use the stereotypes when they communicate via internet. Thereby the question is not what “media” generates but what average people present by means of these media, in this case by means of certain internet sources. In addition, besides presenting the logic of stereotyping, I will also try to show some of the contexts from which the stereotypes appeared to me - the stereotypes that I came across after my arrival to the Netherlands and opinions I had to tackle myself.

In order to write this chapter, I undertook an external and internal criticism. External criticism helps to determine whether the source material is authentic and establishes in what conditions and by whom they were created. In turn, internal criticism helps to determine the accuracy of the meaning in the source material, establishing authors' motives and trustworthiness of the statements. As the external criticism refers to the creation of the source material, the internal criticism pertains precisely to its content. According to Berg and Lune (2012), the issues of these two types of criticism are essential for “ascertaining the quality of the data and, in turn, the depth of the interpretation or analysis” (Berg and Lune 2012, 316). Especially important for my thesis was the internal criticism, as I will try to estimate the deeper level of meaning of people's statements and opinions. I need to stress that it was never the goal of my research to find the true origins of the certain images and stereotypes. The analysis of the stereotyping will help to understand the ways in which Polish women refer to the images and stereotypes.

4.1 The purposeful recurrence of the stereotypes. The artistic vision of “*De Poolse bruid*”

After couple weeks after my arrival in the Netherlands, I was asked if I had seen a movie “*De Poolse bruid*” (1998). I had never heard about this production before, so I decided to watch it with my analytical eye. I can only surmise what influence this movie has had on the imagination of Polish women about how they are viewed by Dutch people. Taking into account that there is only one feature film concerning Polish women that I know of and the fact it was acclaimed to be one of the best Dutch movies of that period, one can assume a wide Dutch audience knows it. The image of Polish women presented in this movie may be recognizable for many Dutch people. An analysis of this movie is inevitable, as its meaning and storyline are completely different issues that should be separated.

The movie starts when Anna flees the brothel to which she has been taken under false pretences. A farmer, Henk Woldring, finds the exhausted and battered woman. He picks her up and gives a safe place in his own house. Anna remains there and in return for her rescue, she takes care of the household. She brings liveliness into the house, and also into Henk’s heart. We can observe the study of a growing, fragile and silent love painted against the background of the poetic, flat landscape of the Groningen region. Unfortunately, the past is chasing Anna. Ultimately, Henk helps her again and retrieves her from the pimp.

The goal of the director of the movie, Karim Traida, was to present the story in a poetic and intimate atmosphere. He decided to skip many dialogs in favour of the psychological development of the main characters which, next to the beauty of Groningen’s landscapes in the background, was most appreciated by the Dutch audience. While Traida’s vision is artistic and it should rather be criticized by other disciplines than anthropology, I will focus on the very logic behind the storyline.

After the movie was brought out, Kees van der Hulst, the author of the scenario, decided to distance himself from the production. This was because Traidia’s had reduced so many of the dialogs without informing the screenwriter. I could not find any information about Kees van der Hulst’s inspiration for creating this story in general, or choosing a Polish woman as a main character in particular. However, the storyline of a Polish woman being taken to a Dutch brothel might come from the real dramatic histories that were especially heard in the 1990’s and at the beginning of 21st century. I am sure the choice of the nationality of the main character was not random. The woman and the man presented in the movie could not come from two completely different cultural circles, because their relations would be more complicated and the cultural differences more visible. They both represent traditional values and thanks to this, there is mutual understanding.

The overtone of the image of Polish women presented by this movie is rather positive, referring to the themes of family and sexuality. Primarily, the relationship between Anna and Henk is based on a simple agreement: he gives her a place to live and she takes care of the house. She cooks, cleans and irons, and protects the heart and hearth of the house, thereby representing the stereotype of “a good wife.” The man plays the role of protector while the woman takes on the role of carer, exactly as in the typical traditional model of the family. Warm feelings between Henk and Anna, as well as the viewer’s sympathy for both characters, arise gradually. The morally bad image of a prostitute was smoothed in the movie by the fact that Anna was deceived and forced into prostitution. This made her a victim and thereby a positive character. In addition, the director created the intimate, poetic atmosphere that carried the main characters and their relationship to the level of perfectionism. As a result, he created the image of a relation that *should* be desirable and valuable. Nevertheless, if we look more critically at the role of the woman in this movie, we notice that she is a type of dependent woman, who should be rescued and protected by a man.

An interesting comparison of the fictional character from “*De Pools bruid*” of 1998 is Ksenia, an authentic person, who particularly interested the audience with her presence in the program “*Boer zoekt vrouw 2011*.” The program breaks the record of popularity in the Netherlands and is based on the English program “Farmer Wants a Wife.” In each season of the show, a few farmers (men and women) choose their prospective partners from among five male and female candidates. The program is probably very popular because it is a response to the growing number of farmers in the Netherlands, for whom it is difficult to find a life partner. It shows also *real* people with *real-life* reactions to the situations they are put in. In addition, life on the farm is presented as rather romantic, with old-fashioned family values, and traditional Dutch food.

The fact that one of the farmers, Marcel, decided to choose a Pole, Ksenia, invoked an incredible interest, especially among Polish immigrants in the Netherlands. Even before the broadcast of the final episode, the information that they already lived together in one house was released on Twitter. It was quickly taken up by the internet and newspapers. The choice made by Marcel was also announced in the Polish media. It is difficult to pinpoint what sparked such strong emotions among the spectators. On the one hand, it could be an interest arising from the appearance of a Polish woman in the popular television program. On the other hand, it could be due to the enthusiasm coming from the evident confirmation of the stereotype of “a good wife” for the Dutch man (in the positive and the negative sense). When I was reviewing the Polish and Dutch internet forums cautiously, I met negative comments most often, together with references

to the movie “*De Poolse bruid*.” This may be the evidence that the colligation of a “Polish women” with a “wife of the Dutch man” is recognizable. In the next sub-section, I will make a step further and show exactly how the stereotypes may influence the opinions of the people.

4.2 The opinion-forming character of the stereotypes and their circulation. Dating sites

I decided to start my research on dating sites, assuming that they might be the greatest source of informants at the first stage. However, besides finding conversation partners I noticed that the dating sites provide a unique space where certain images and stereotypes circulate. The choice of the dating portals was determined by easy accessibility (fdating.com) as well as their popularity in Dutch society (lexa.nl, russiancupid.com, we-dwoje.nl and polishhearts.nl).

I am aware of the difficulties concerning ascertaining the validity of the source materials derived from these websites. People might create fictive accounts or attach photos which are not their own. However, most of the members of the above-mentioned forums upload amateur pictures and use first names (sometimes even surnames) rather than nicknames, what makes them more reliable. I also noticed that they indeed look the age that they state in their profiles. There was nothing provoking my suspiciousness concerning the users’ genuineness.

The intention of men in creating personal accounts on the website fdating.com was undeniably to find a partner. In addition, the website has a visibly sexual undertone. The age restriction for access already attests for a sexual character of the portal. It is also evidenced by the presentation of ten of the most popular profiles of women and men on the homepage.⁸ It is significant that the most popular female members show themselves on the photos with poses and clothes that expose female curves. However, the most popular male members look much more serious. I can easily see that the selection of pictures of both female and male users is based (probably also unconsciously and unintentionally) on the stereotypical gender connotations. In other words, on the dating site fdating.com, women look feminine and men look manly.

All the men I met virtually on fdating.com were the first to start the conversations. They did it mostly by sending me nice emoticons or giving me a compliment. During our chats, many of them declared that they were looking for a girlfriend or future wife, which only confirmed my impression of their intentions. In many cases they were searching especially for Eastern-European women and sometimes particularly for Polish women. Only a few male users I chatted with had met a Polish woman before in real life. Usually my informants mentioned that they base their opinions on the stories and opinions of their friends or other people. This means that they

⁸ To be one of the “most popular members” on fdating.com a user needs to have his/her own profile added to favorites by other members. The more interest the user has, the more popular he/she is.

were going by already existing images and stereotypes and they were looking for their realization on these dating sites. The way my informants make judgments of Polish women confirmed the statement that people “hold beliefs about social groups and these beliefs influence our interaction with people identified as members” (Oakes, Haslam and Turner 1994, 1).

My male informants on the [fdating.com](#) referred to the theme of family and sexuality when describing Polish women. They perceived them usually as obedient, “proper wives” and “good mothers”, the stereotypes usually being linked together. Sometimes, they compared this to their visions of Western-European women, pointing out the more conservative gender roles of Polish women. They also referred to the sexual theme expressing a liking for Polish women’s appearance. My informants described Polish women in a positive way, as they also expect positive and desirable features of women. We also need to keep in mind that this positive undertone could be reinforced additionally by my gender and marital status. I am sure that most of the twelve men I chatted with would not have written to me if I had not stated in my profile that I came from Poland. I am also aware that my research status (I wrote in my profile I am a social researcher) and the fact that I admitted having a boyfriend might have influenced the form and content of the conversations.

The contact with people via other dating portals that I found during my research was not as easy as [fdating.com](#). I therefore decided to look into descriptions and statuses of Polish women that appeared on their personal profiles on the most popular dating sites in the Netherlands. Their analysis enabled me investigate the self-images of Polish women pointed to the different groups of male internet users, such as foreigners or particularly Dutch men, at other times Polish men and women living in the Netherlands. I browsed four websites: [lexa.nl](#), [russiancupid.com](#), [we-dwoje.nl](#), [polishhearts.nl](#), and I will briefly present them here.

The first dating site, [lexa.nl](#), is a popular Dutch portal where mostly people living in the Netherlands (male and females) sign on. On this website, I found the profiles of 113 Polish women who are also looking for a Dutch partner. During the signing-in process, it is not possible to choose both men and women as a search criterion. One may only register as a woman or a man looking for a partner of the opposite sex, or as a woman or a man seeking a partner of the same sex. In the case of the last choice, the user is automatically identified as a homosexual. In consequence, [lexa.nl](#) has the typical status of a dating portal, not of a social network where the user could form friendships.

[RussianCupid.com](#) is an international dating portal where women from Eastern Europe create their personal profiles. There you can also find Polish women who declare Polish nationality, but live in a different Eastern European country. My criterion was Polish nationality

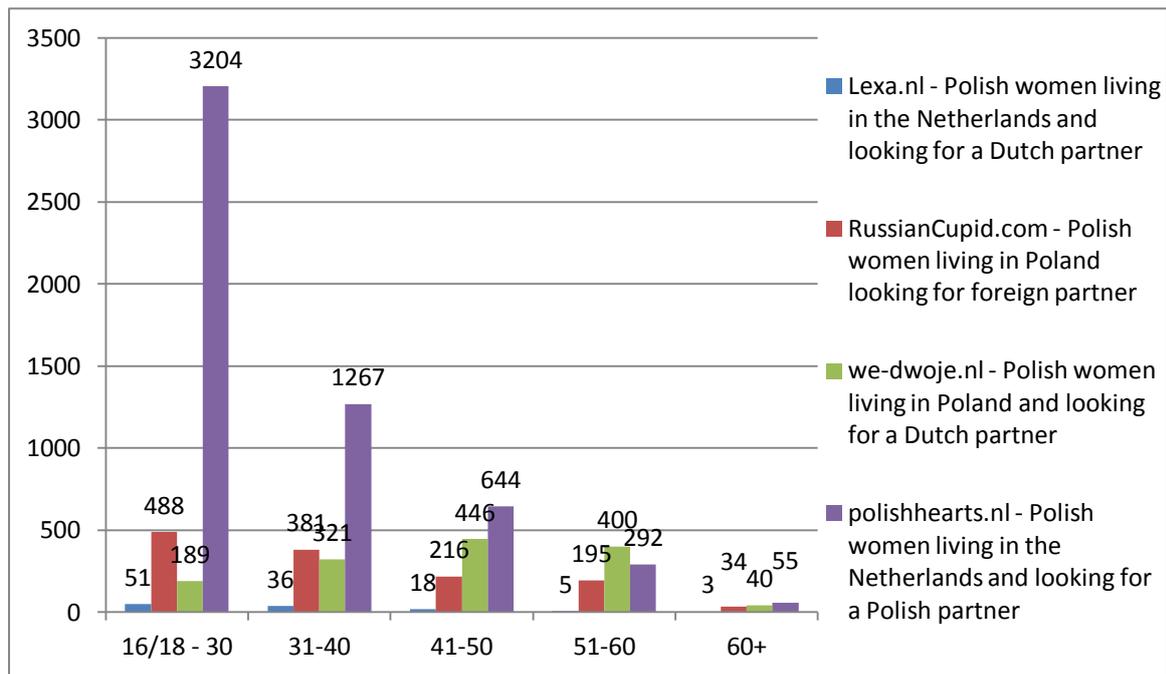
and Poland as a country of residence. I found 1314 women of different ages altogether. Also on this portal the user's research criteria, namely a gender of seeking user, is equivalent with a preferable sex of future partner. As a woman looking for other women, I am perceived as a lesbian, and in addition, all women have an option to block for messages from users of the same sex.

Website we-dwoje.nl is an internet portal for a Polish-Dutch matrimonial agency. One may view the profiles of around 1400 Polish women living mostly in Poland (but also in the Netherlands and Germany). According to the information given on the home page, these women desire a Dutch or Belgian partner and also want to move to the residence country of the man. The contact with women who have an account on this portal is made through the agency by paying a service fee.

The last portal is polishhearts.nl, a "Polish dating portal for Polish women and men on emigration." On this portal, one may find Polish women living in Poland as well as in other countries, including the Netherlands. I found 5462 profiles of Polish women living in the Netherlands who were looking for contacts with other Poles in this country. On polishhearts.nl, it is possible to search for the profiles of users of different genders without necessarily being identified with a certain sexual orientation.

Below, I will present a chart, which shows the number of Polish women found on four dating sites. The women are assorted into five age groups.

Table 2



As the reader probably remembers from the last chapter, one of the common stereotypes of Polish women was that they are materialistic and in search for a (rich) foreign man. Apparently, this is not the case for those who already live in the Netherlands. According to the chart, many Polish women who live in the Netherlands seek contact men of the same nationality (compare polishhearts.nl with lexa.nl). What I found very important was that in their personal profiles on polishhearts.nl Polish women admit that they feel lonely abroad or that they miss contacts with compatriots. The figure of the “lonely Polish woman” did not appear on any other portal. The website polishhearts.nl is adapted to the needs of Polish people. Through this portal, they may contact compatriots, but not necessarily for sexual purposes.

In turn, when we view the profiles of women⁹ on the dating site we-dwoje.nl, we can notice that they describe their character according to the stereotype of “a good wife”, giving characteristics such as honesty, romance, faithfulness, responsibility and caring. It may be the result of the intentions for which these women are registered (i.e. a marriage or partnership), or of their simple calculations based on the awareness of who is the receiver of their self-images – the men wanting to marry Eastern-European women.

In addition, if we consider visual representations of Polish women on the portal russiancupid.com, their poses and looks are definitely more provocative than on the other websites. In their profiles on this dating site, they usually state they are seeking all kinds of

⁹ Most of them are not highly educated, and what is interesting, there are more women in their forties looking for foreign men than women of other ages.

acquaintance (but only with male users): pen pals, friendship, romance, partnership and marriage. Some women, however, stated that they are registered for marriage purposes only. Sometimes I had the feeling that most of the women who have profiles on this website do not look for serious partnerships because their pictures attest of a sexual purpose.

The self-images of a “good wife” and an “easy to approach” woman close, or begin to close, the circle of the transmission of the stereotypes. It is possible that the women who have accounts on the dating portals represent themselves in a certain way, because they are assured that the values they mention or present are the search criterion of men at whom these websites were aimed. In turn, the men might affirm the image of Polish women derived from friends’ stories and opinions by seeing and reading the profiles of female users on the dating sites.

4.3 The people’s involvement influencing the overtone of images. Internet forums

The next sources that I will use to describe the logic behind stereotyping are internet forums. I chose three forums: fok.nl, wiatrak.nl and niedziela.nl to provide a good example of the differentiation in the atmosphere of online discussions and of the overtone of images presented by their users.

Initially, Dutch portal fok.nl, created in 1999, was aimed at the Dutch youth¹⁰. The portal has been growing gradually, offering more and more entertainment and services. An advantage of this website is that users are given a free hand in expressing their opinions. It is a very subjective portal and it may contain as many visions and opinions as subscribers leaving comments. The news articles posted on the website (concerning various themes) can be also very subjective and controversial, and will therefore attract people to read them and leave comments. We may question their authenticity, as in many cases they have been copied from already existing articles that were published on other online news portals, such as trouw.nl or novum.nieuws.nl. It happens that the articles on fok.nl are the interpretations of already existing pieces.

An example is a summary of the article published originally on the website trouw.nl in November, 2007. The article concerned the findings of anthropologist Cathelijn Pool, who examined Polish female migration to the Netherlands. The original text was much more objective than the interpretation that appeared on fok.nl. For instance, the author of the original text presented much more data from Pool’s anthropological research. He included quotations from informants who explained their motivations and the wider context of their migration.

¹⁰ Information about the history of the portal was found directly on fok.nl

However, the author of the article on fok.nl chose only those parts of the original text that referred to the aspect of marriage migration, presenting Polish women in a more negative light. He presented Polish women as sex-products, willing to come to the Netherlands and take advantage of Dutch men in order to improve their economical status. This set the tone for further online discussion on the subject.

The images of Polish women that became apparent during the three discussions¹¹ concerning them vary. However, most of them are negative and refer to the theme of sexuality, especially when discussing the appearance of Polish women. Many photos were attached, the biggest interest being in the picture of Ewa Sonnet, especially because of her female curves (big breasts). The discussions about the appearance of Polish women referred to the look, figure, make up and clothes (or fashion taste). Polish women were often described as sexual objects, sometimes being seen as prostitutes, at other times as women who are easy to approach, or as materialistic, venal and sneaky women seeking money from Dutch men. I found only one image of Polish women according to the subject of “family” on the forum fok.nl, which was a young mother searching for a “better chance” abroad. There were, however, also images with a positive overtone. Polish women were considered more feminine in their appearance and behaviour than Dutch women, in the sense that they take their roles of womanhood more seriously. There were also opinions that they are sociable, party-like and that they drink a lot of alcohol. Although these last images were considered as positive, not all Polish women will perceive them in this way.

The catchy titles and controversial subjects induced vivid discussions. Most subscribers who posted on these subjects used male-sounding nicknames¹². The opinions that appeared during the discussions were very often based on the guess or stereotypes heard before. The way the users write about Polish women suggests that many have never met any Polish women. The descriptions are mostly poor and vague, which makes the statements inaccurate and untrustworthy. The users also did not give accurate arguments to their conclusions and did not try to analyze precisely the behaviour of the Polish women they had come across or had heard

¹¹ I have found three titles on the forum fok.nl concerning Polish women: “Poolse vrouwen willen een Nederlandse Man” (Polish women want Dutch men) (26.11.2007), “Poolse dames scoren” (Scoring Polish ladies) (30.04.2011), and “Poolse chicks vs NLse chicks” (Polish chicks vs. Dutch chicks) (10.06.2011). The discussions that showed up under these titles were always introduced by controversial or attracting entries. Once it was a text about the outcomes of the research upon marriage migration mentioned above; another time there was an comparison of Dutch and Polish women; or tips on how to approach women in general.

¹² The authenticity of the users’ accounts is what we also need to take into consideration. People may create fixed profiles, changing their age or sex. Under the cover of a nickname they are writing more freely, as they might feel it will have no consequences.

about. The reasons for creating (or forwarding) the images with a sexual connotation might lie in the male, as well as leisurely, character of the discussions. I had the feeling that most of the men posting on these threads were killing their boredom by writing posts, which were meant to be short, funny, surprising, or interesting. The involvement, and therefore the knowledge and interest of the people in the subject are cursory and their knowledge of Polish culture and Polish women is minimal.

Polish internet users posting on the forum wiatrak.nl represent another level of involvement in the subject of Polish women living in the Netherlands. The portal wiatrak.nl was initially created in 1997 as an online tourist guide about the Netherlands. Today, it is one of the most popular websites among Polish people living in the Netherlands or Poles connected with the Netherlands in some way. The portal embraces different subjects, from Dutch and Polish news to the cultural differences or interesting details. Visitors can post their advertisements, comment on specific topics, or write on a chat box. The author uploads new articles regularly (over 10 per month) taking up a wide range of subjects. The scheme of the posting on wiatrak.nl is very similar to the one on fok.nl. At first, there is a catchy, controversial article¹³ and secondly, the open discussion on it. The purposes of the people using this forum are similar to those of users of fok.nl. In other words: they use the forum to kill their time and provide leisure. However, there are basic differences that make the forum wiatrak.nl unique.

I have the impression that anything the author of wiatrak.nl writes is his own point of view framing all discussion. The information and data that he obtains from different sources are meant to support his own statements and are considered by many users as predictable. In addition, the author's entries are always marked by a different colour of the background, as they are meant to dominate those of other users. By sustaining common stereotypes, his articles become controversial and thanks to this, the discussions become vivid and opinions become various. A second important difference is the involvement of the forum users in the topics they comment on. Their posts are critical, comprehensive and detailed. They either know Polish women or they are Polish women, and in their posts they confront the stereotypes and images with their own experiences of Polish women living in the Netherlands. In addition, many users of the portal were regular members¹⁴, so most of them know each other - if not in reality, then most probably virtually from previous entries.

¹³ Many of my informants who were also users of wiatrak.nl, mentioned that sometimes the opinions of other users offend them so much that they feel a compulsion to "push their two cents" (to express their own opinions).

¹⁴ I am aware of the possibility that some users might create fixed accounts or post different statements all the time under different nicknames. Some of my informants, who were already regular members on this forum, stated, however, that even if some other regular member used different nicknames, they were able to recognize this

Wiatrak.nl is a source of a variety of images of Polish women. This involves images in all domains described in the previous chapter: family, sexuality and character. However, the most controversial was a subject about cross-cultural marriages in which the woman is Polish and the man is Dutch. I found many titles concerning this topic: “Why Dutch man is willing to marry Polish woman?”, “Polish bride”, “Polish wife for a Dutch man”, “Polish women in the Netherlands”, “In a search of better life.”

The reasons behind these Polish-Dutch relationships were discussed particularly vividly. According to the users, many Polish women are willing to marry Dutch men on the one hand, and there are many Dutch men who want to have a Polish wife on the other. It seems to be a perfect fit if both sides share the same feelings. However, according to many (male as well as female) users, most of Polish-Dutch marriages are based on calculations and are ultimately considered as unhappy and unsuccessful. It is said that Polish women marry Dutch men in order to gain material and social benefits. Dutch men are considered a better partner for Polish women than Polish men, because they live in a wealthy country in the West, and therefore have a higher social and economical position. According to many users on the forum, Polish women who have met Dutch men consider themselves lucky, as through the marriage they can improve their own social and economical status.

However, many users stated that these Polish-Dutch relationships are very common and that these venal and crafty Polish women who marry Dutch men for personal benefits ultimately regretted their marriage decisions, when “a real life” (a real characters of both spouses) shows up. It is important to mention that none of female user writing on this forum applies the image presented above to her own situation. They all write about these materialistic and disappointed women, but nobody admitted to be one of them. They distance themselves from this vision and base information and opinions on their observations. Many users, however, have an opposite opinion on this topic (especially those women who are in a relationship with Dutch men): that many of the visions of Polish women presented on the forum are just stereotypes.¹⁵

Because people’s involvement in the topic was of different depth, plenty of images and stereotypes could be found next to the ones described above, making the Polish woman a very complex figure. For instance, there was the vision of a beautiful and feminine Polish woman - well groomed, with good taste, and being more feminine than Dutch women; a “good worker”; an intelligent and well-educated woman or a caring mother. However, there were also more

person. It is because they recognize characteristic way of writing or the typical argumentation he or she was using.

¹⁵ In next chapter the reader will find out how the discussion on this topic continued and what the opinions were of those Polish women who were in a relationship with a Dutch man.

negative typologies, such as: a desperate woman with a past experience looking for a “better chance” (rich husband) in the Netherlands; a Mother Pole - an obedient wife taking care of the household and the Dutch husband; a woman (young or old) using a lot of make-up, wearing skimpy, tawdry clothes, artificial nails and angling for a husband; and finally (but not ultimately), a lazy mother sitting at home with children avoiding work.

The element that can cause the emergence of many negative opinions about Polish women being in a relationship with Dutch men is the fact that many people who express their views are not directly connected with this group, so they base their knowledge on the stereotypes and superficial observations. The recipients of these opinions stood in defence of “their group” more often than people to whom these opinions did not apply. Moreover, as it was noted by one of the users of the portal, “the opinions are given from different perspectives.” Wiatrak.nl embraces different people with various experiences, probably living in very different conditions. Therefore, there are as many opinions on the site as there are users. Hence, also the figure of “the Polish woman” is bound to have different faces.

The last source that I will use to prove my statement that the involvement of the users in the topic influences the overtone of the image is an internet forum called *niedziela.nl*. Just like the last two forums, it is in part a news portal. However, *niedziela.nl* is aimed particularly at Polish immigrants in the Netherlands, offering them information about events, various advertisements (concerning work, buying and selling, transport and social issues) or the most important news from both Poland and the Netherlands. On July 18, 2012 there were 75106 registered members, 163287 posts and 21349 threads concerning every possible topic.

Many discussions in which Polish women living in the Netherlands took part, considered the subjects of pregnancy and motherhood, for instance obstetric and gynaecological care, childbirth, childcare and education, medical care for children or formalities relating to the child¹⁶. Other threads, which mainly the women took up, concerned beauty and diet. Under the threads of these topics, the women exchanged information and advice.

One of the titles of the threads that particularly interested me was “Polish women, the wives of Dutch men” from 2009. The title of the topic automatically pointed to the type of the panellists. The women who wrote under this thread shared the stories of their successful relationships with Dutch men. They presented their partners in a very good light. Quite often the

¹⁶ It is significant that the number of male and female participants in the threads concerning the subject of children differs considerably. This may be due to the influence of a widespread stereotype of women in Poland - the Polish Mother, whose role is related to motherhood and its responsibilities (A.Titkow). The reader will find more in the next chapter about the “sacrificing mother.”

figure of the “flying Dutchman” appeared, the man who visits his girlfriend in Poland. Long-distance relationships were presented as difficult and implying a painful longing. Most of the women posting on this site were already living in the Netherlands with their Dutch partners, but there were also women who were expressing an interest in joining their Dutch partners. They were looking for support and advice regarding the decision of emigration. The atmosphere on this forum was usually warm and hospitable. I noticed that if the users do not express their views and statements, but only their experiences, the atmosphere during the discussion remains friendlier and it lacks aggression. This is why on the forum [wiatrak.nl](#), which entices users to express their opinions, there are always the clashes between users. The figure of the Polish woman appearing during the discussion on the forum [niedziela.nl](#) is positive, because it is derived from Polish women (the receivers of the common stereotypes) themselves. So it is no wonder that they are positive. The figures appeared as follows: “caring mother”, “feminine woman”, “loving partner” and “longing partner”.

The overtone of the images of Polish women living in the Netherlands (positive or negative, as the neutral ones appeared rarely) depends on the speaker’s involvement in, thereby their knowledge of, interest in and the stance on the topic. The three forums I presented in this sub-section differ by the user’s involvement in the subject in question. On [fok.nl](#) users were usually Dutch men who did not know any (or knew but cursory) Polish women. Their interest in Polish women was limited to sexual purposes only¹⁷. The Polish forum, [wiatrak.nl](#), embraces many users of various life situations, such as living in Poland or the Netherlands, or being in mixed or non-mixed relationships. Thereby, they represented different points of view. The threads in which the speakers only consist of women who the topic concerns directly, contain much more positive images.

Overview

My intention for creating this section was to show that the stereotypization of Polish women is linked to the conditions of the media that are used. In this chapter, I presented the way in which people use stereotypes to communicate through internet. In addition, I presented several internet sources by which the various stereotypes appeared to me. The choice of the sources was determined by their popularity in Dutch or Polish-Dutch society as well as the opportunities offered by these sources to confront different images.

¹⁷ In comparison with the foreigners on the dating site [fdating.com](#), Dutch men posting on the forum [fok.nl](#) did not show any interest to really know or meet a Polish woman.

The movie “*De Poolse bruid*” (1998) presented at the beginning was the first source of the stereotypes that was recommended to me by Dutch people. This recommendation attests to its representativeness (or opinion-forming character) among Dutch people. The makers of the movie maintain the stereotypes of a “Polish prostitute” and “housewife” to create a coherent storyline, meant to give the impression of a realistic and ordinary image. The overtone of the image of the main character – Anna - is positive in the movie, but it does not mean it has a positive influence on the creation of the people’s opinion about Polish women. The stereotypes may be used for certain purposes, but they can also recur automatically on the base of some similarities. The example provides the comparison of the one of the female contestants of the program “*Boer zoekt vrouw 2011*” to the fictional character from the movie “*De Poolse bruid*”.

The next source, the dating sites, shows that stereotypes have the power to influence opinions. The sources in question are great examples of how the stereotypes circulate and how self-stereotypization is sustained. Foreigners appreciate stereotypical characteristics and roles of Polish women as they are looking for certain traits in the women. They base their perception of Polish women on stereotypes. It is possible that women realise that men have such a specific perception about them. They may present themselves in a certain way to capture this perception and attention. Of course, this process may be opposite. The women may present themselves in a certain way and the men may draw such conclusions by looking at the profiles on the dating sites. Further studies concerning purposeful self-stereotypization is needed to examine this issue. However, it is impossible to set down the starting point in the process of the circulation of the stereotypes. In addition, the example of dating sites shows that the usage of certain stereotypes by people depends on the context. We can easily imagine that the vision of Polish women in the economical context will be different from those in the matrimonial context, where the images refer to the theme of family and sexuality.

The stereotypes can have a positive or negative connotation. I presented this notion by analysing three internet forums. According to my research, the overtone depends on the level of involvement in (i.e. knowledge and interest about) the human subject. When the speakers are men who have never met Polish women close-up, they construct more negative images than the Polish women themselves. Online forums are spaces for unlimited production, transmission, confrontation, refutation or subsistence of such stereotypes. This is why the internet forums were the most comprehensive sources of the stereotypes and images.

In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I presented the characteristics and conditions of stigmatisation of Polish women. The fact that my informants referred to and reacted to certain stereotypes already outlines the importance of their presentation in this thesis. As the reader will

find out very soon, self-representation of Polish women in the face of stereotypes shows another, unique mode of their usage. The description of the stereotypization is therefore important in order to understand the strategies my informants use to cope with stigmatization.

Chapter 5: Self-representation of Polish women in face of stereotypization

In this chapter, I compare the images and stereotypes presented in the previous chapters to the self-representation of the Polish women who became my informants. I tried to show how Polish women are perceived according to different perspectives, and now it is time to present the way in which Polish women represent themselves. In certain statements about their womanhood, motherhood and partnership, they respond (maybe even unconsciously) to the universal stereotypes labelled on them. At first, I introduce my female informants in order to confront their self-images with the images and stereotypes mentioned in the previous chapters. Secondly, I explain what independence means to Polish women, and finally, what reasons are why they represent themselves this way. The present chapter reveal how they refer to the common stereotypes labelled on them, and to the values and qualities represented by host society. This part of my thesis will contain the analysis of the ethnographic interviews, online discussion conducted by me on the portal wiatrak.nl, and the open questionnaire I used during my fieldwork.

5.1 Who are my informants?

The internet occurred to be the best tool for finding conversation partners. 20 women I met personally, 3 women filled in the open-question survey and 16 women took part in online discussion that I conducted. Every house I have visited was different, the same as women with whom I spoke. Seventeen women that I interviewed (in real and by questionnaire) were in the relationships with Dutch men and most of them were educated. Despite this, when they arrived in the Netherlands, the majority had problems finding a job at a suitably high position. Most of them also report that learning the Dutch language is a fundamental step to facilitate life both on the professional and private level. Reasons for coming to the Netherlands initially were various, but the most common reason was to find work. However, love was the most decisive argument to stay in this country permanently. Some women consider the Netherlands as their “new home” or “home of choice.” While they have their homes and families here, however, they very often still own apartments in Poland too. Almost all informants said that they feel Polish at heart, and they still feel an attachment to the life they left behind in their homeland. I write more about my informants, by referring to the stereotypes that I described in Chapter 3.

5.1.1 Family

Many women who I met said that their life was divided into different stages, the periods during which one accomplishes something or waits for something. The first stage is the maiden life, when one looks for a partner, gains an education and looks for a job. Then, “there comes a time”¹⁸ when a woman achieves all these three markers: a partner, an education, and steady work. Then “comes the time” to buy a house, marry and have children. After this period, a woman's life is usually related to the upbringing and the education of the children. One of my interviewees even stated that there is a point of stagnation.

Karina D. (34): I think, in my situation, at my age, there comes a point of stagnation. A few years ago, one had to marry and deliver children, and get job or something. You see, you [I am – the interviewer – 23 years old] are in the phase that you are still waiting for this. (March 2012, interview)

According to my informants, “there is a time” for everything in women’s lives - primarily for marriage and children. According to this statement, the roles of wife and mother are seen as natural and universal. However, some conversation partners rightly pointed out that these roles are socially constructed, and the models vary culturally. Living in the Netherlands, my conversation partners had to confront alternative models of mothers and wives. Because of the significance of these roles in the lives of my informants, I will present their different attitudes. Among my informants there were thirteen women who had the children. There was a marked difference in how they valued the way of raising children, and the way of women’s realisation as mothers. Most of them referred to so-called “Dutch model” of motherhood, namely Dutch women’s approaches to parenting. In turn, the “Dutch model” was also perceived differently by the different informants.

Ania (33 years old) has lived in the Netherlands for 9 years already, with her Dutch husband and their six-year-old son. Her adventure with the Netherlands, however, had began even earlier. She had a Dutch boyfriend in Poland, with who she often visited the family in the Netherlands. She gained a Master’s degree in Philosophy in Poland, but she never wanted to work in her profession. Before she met her present husband, she had worked as an au-pair in a Dutch family. She concluded from her observations, that many Dutch women neglected their children and approached their motherhood too loosely. Ania believed that it is important to play with a child, sacrifice time for it and give a lot of attention.

Once she had her own child, she felt comfortable staying at home with the child and building a good relationship between herself as a mother and the child. She said that motherhood

¹⁸ The expression used by several informants.

is a choice and requires commitments, but in a positive way. Ania is proud of the sacrifices she makes for her son. She said she did not go to parties, and she could not really enjoy the evenings as she would imagine her child crying. She colligated leaving a child in the care of other people with an act of “dropping the child anywhere”. As she puts it, “the child is not my dog”, so she cannot just leave him anywhere. It is Ania’s opinion that if someone decides to have children, one must be prepared to take on the commitments. She views the “Dutch model” of raising children negatively, because parents do not pay much attention to the responsibilities associated with having the children. When both parents are working, but also when only the father works, they put their child in the care of another person or institution. Some of my informants perceived this in a negative light. A “good mother” in this case is ready to sacrifice her personal and professional life in order to have a very close relationship with her children. Her life “revolves around her children” (Sylwia, 32, March 2012, interview).

An example that represents the different approach to the “Dutch” way of rearing children is the opinion of Dorota (26). She has lived permanently in the Netherlands for one and a half years, although her encounter with this country began earlier too. After graduating from high school she worked in the Netherlands as an au-pair and met her present boyfriend. Although she is not a mother, she has very definite ideas about motherhood. Being a mother, one needs to “be able to cope with one’s ambitions on the one hand and with one’s domestic responsibilities on the other” (Dorota, March 2012, interview). The domestic responsibilities include, according to Dorota, childcare, but also cleaning and cooking.

Squaring a woman’s own desires and ambitions (concerning career or other interests) with childcare is another issue according to the “Dutch” model of motherhood. Dorota explained her preference:

Dorota: I want my children to know that I also have my own interests and passions that I also want to realize my potential. I do not want them to have complexes and hope to be able to inspire them. (March 2012, interview)

Dorota considers the total sacrifice of Polish mothers as something negative that limits a woman. She mentioned that she did not want to be a mother who is “glued to the children.” In addition, many other interviewees noted the overprotection among Polish mothers.

According to my informants, the “Dutch model” of motherhood does not depend on whether or not the Dutch mothers are in paid employment. This is because some focus on their career, they work and give a child in the care of other people, while others have part-time jobs or prefer to stay at home with the child. Often, however, as my conversation partners indicate, Dutch mothers do not commit to their children as much as Polish mothers. As the examples

showed, the conversation partners perceived this as a negative as well as a positive feature. For some women, a child gives fulfilment, for others children are not the only one factor that determines a woman's personal fulfilment. Some women of the latter group emphasized that they changed their attitude to motherhood when they observed the different, more liberal, family model in the Netherlands.

The concept of being a mother is largely dependent on the model of the family, as represented by my conversation partners and their partners. When asked who is a "mother" and who is a "wife", the women stated that these are certain women's roles that were very often united: "Being a wife is a certain role in life. You have to take care of the husband, the children, and the house." (Agnieszka, 41, survey)

The obligations related to childcare and household chores are very often presented under the expression: "domestic duties" and, moreover, are mostly attributed to women. When asked whether being a woman is linked to any responsibilities, many women listed childcare, cooking and cleaning. For the interviewees, these are also the common determinants of a sense of being a "wife":

Dorota: I associate a wife stereotypically with a woman who just cooks for her husband. And because I cook and deal with the majority of domestic duties, I actually feel like a wife. (March 2012, interview)

Another understanding of the word "wife" is connected with emotional stability, commitment and responsibility. Many of the women find these traits positive. Although Kasia (27) did not marry her partner, she already feels like a wife due to the strong commitment:

Kasia(27): I would call myself a wife. Do you know why? Because it means to be with someone and, even with the situation I have, not to think, "Pffff, I can find someone else" or "I will search further." (...) This means to accept everything of the partner - the better features and the worse ones. To me that is what being a wife means. (...) I am the wife, because I am sure that I would not leave him now. (March 2012, interview)

Although marriage is seen as "the act of affixing a seal on the partnership"¹⁹, a sense of being a wife, as the reader might have noticed in the above citation, may appear without the act of marrying. In this case this feeling is not subject to being married, but to the roles and traits of the woman. Getting married in a traditional Polish understanding initiates a woman's role of loyal and committed wife. The woman's role was removed from the bond of marriage and adopted by women even before. Although a marriage is not conditional to the feeling of being a wife, the women's belief about other people's perceptions is closely associated with the act of marrying.

Karina D.: Marriage is something special. It means that she belongs to him and he belongs

¹⁹ A common expression in Poland.

to her. There is something in it... It is not needed in order to feel as a partner, but the world somehow sees you differently as a wife. (March 2012, interview)

This sense that there is a difference in perception of a woman as someone's partner or as someone's wife may be due to the social stigma of cohabitation present in Poland, especially among the older generation and in the countryside. Many women I interviewed called attention to the social pressure in Poland to have an early marriage and children, since these two factors decide the success of women.

Dorota: Because in Poland is like this: "Oh, if I catch the guy, everything will be alright". Or in some smaller towns the girl is actually being pushed to catch the guy. And then, if you finally catch him, you will gain some respect too... You see, this success is contingent upon being married and having children, while here [in the Netherlands] the success is that you are just happy. (March 2012, interview)

All the elements - the stigma of cohabitation, the social pressure on young girls to marry and have children early, the understanding of "wife" and "mother" to be the natural and highly valued roles of women, appears to be opposite to "the Dutch model." The conversation partners did not describe it very specifically, as they did in the case of motherhood. However, in the interviews there were many references that enabled me to reconstruct the features of "the Dutch model" of wife. ?]. Kasia, who was already quoted above, presented herself as a wife despite the lack of a marriage, distancing herself from a looser and less engaged approach to the relationship. The opposite of her approach would be a Dutch woman who would be able to say to her partner "Pffff, I can find someone else" or "I will search further".

According to the informants the "Dutch model" offers a view of a woman as a partner, not a wife. The difference is not so much in the act of marrying itself, but in about the attributes ascribed to the words "partner" and "wife." Many of my informants, those with whom I talked personally as well as those who posted on the internet forum, perceive Dutch partnerships as being based on equality, whereby both partners take the same responsibility for home and family, for both finances and the household chores. Dutch women are seen by them as independent women, for whom success in life is not contingent upon marriage and having children, but upon their fulfilment in work, education and the cultivation of their own interests and hobbies. They are perceived as women who are oriented towards their own happiness, instead of towards pleasing others. Again, my informants perceive the "Dutch model" alternately in a negative and a positive way. Sometimes it is seen as a selfish attitude, while at other times it is seen as a model, which should be followed. There were more supporters of the latter understanding, as they preferred that the word "wife" to relate to "life partner" rather than "housewife." I only outlined the differences between "Polish" and "Dutch approach" of self-

realization of women as wives and partners. Due the fact that this topic is linked to economic aspects, I will continue and develop the notion of a partnership in a later subsection, entitled “work.”

5.1.2 Womanhood

Actually, I could attach this paragraph to the previous section, since it concerns the family relationships. However, I decided to make it a separate section, because it says a lot about the reaction of Polish women and their partners on the stereotypes associated with sexuality. Many informants had to face such stereotypes. They sometimes appeared even in their vicinity. The prejudices mostly make it difficult to build healthy relationships within the family. I will present two cases concerning the relationships between my informant and the family of her Dutch partner.

Jola (48): The relations with the family of my husband were very difficult, because I came from Poland. After the first relationship of my husband [Henk] with another Pole, Henk’s family looked very negatively on Polish women. Anyway, in Friesland they have a very bad reputation and the stereotypical thinking is very difficult. The relations with my husband’s family were difficult because of the stereotypes, because of the former relationship of my husband and due to the fact that I was a stranger. (March 2012, interview)

Jola’s relationship changed radically when the husband’s family realised that she took good care of Henk during his severe illness. In contrast to Henk’s previous partner, Jola was constant in her actions and feelings. Family members begin to trust her also thanks to Henk’s enthusiastic stories about Poland. Even after his death, the relationship between my conversation partner and his family remained friendly and warm.

However, not always do the relationships have a positive character. I met with an extreme case, whereby my informant’s mother-in-law sent her for an HIV-test. It was a horrible experience for Ewelina (28)²⁰, who admitted that she forbore the behaviour of the mother-in-law for even longer period after this situation. Unfortunately, her partner was not an active figure in this entire event, nor in other matters. According to Ewelina, her partner is a rather introverted, preferring “not to say anything to saying something he would regret.” Now, because of many other factors, which overlapped for a long time, my conversation partner no longer maintained a contact with her mother-in-law, who always “got in the way.”

According to my observations, the attitude of a partner in a conflict situation affects not only the family relationships, but also well-being of the Polish partner. For a frustrated woman to fit into the network (completely new to her) of family relations can be even more difficult when

²⁰ The name of the informant was changed.

the partner is not an active party in the process of adaptation. Sometimes, however, the family network and the prejudices are so strong that even the intervention of the partner does not resolve the conflict. Fixes, however, another aspect - it is the manifestation made to his family that the woman is his girlfriend, which opinion counts. This positively affects the relationship.

Another aspect concerning sexuality that I would like to address is the external appearance of woman. During my research, I discussed the differences in style and attitude to external appearances between Polish and Dutch women with my conversation partners. Analysis of these differences will introduce the concept of femininity, which will be discussed further in this subsection. I will present the results of the online discussion conducted in February 2012 on the website wiatrak.nl. More than ten women and a couple of men took part in the discussion. I will focus only on the statements of women, to which this chapter applies. The critique of the appearance of both Polish and Dutch women revealed a twofold perspective on how these two groups dress. Their appearance was perceived alternately in a negative and positive way, depending on the conversation partner. The Dutch positive image is an image of a woman dressed modestly, comfortably, without much make-up (or traces thereof), in clothing that enables natural and unconstrained movements. The opposite image is the image of an unkempt woman in ragged, overstretched clothes, unable to dress according to the occasion. In turn, Polish women are described, on the one hand, as the women paying a lot of attention to their own appearance, highlighting their female strengths and femininity and on the other hand, as the women setting the appearance above the intellect going to extremes of aesthetics (very strong make-up, intensely bright hair colour, skimpy clothing). Regardless of the positive or negative opinion, the general observation is that Polish women are perceived as women paying attention to their appearance than Dutch women. There are a few explanations for this.

Karina D.: According to my own observations, in Poland (but also in France, Spain, Greece, and the Eastern European countries) women put much emphasis on their appearance, make-up, clothes or curves. In my opinion, women in Poland often think that they have to make themselves more beautiful to be attractive. (...) In the Netherlands, the emphasis lies rather on self-confidence, inner strength, the pride of being oneself – “*mooi in eenvoud*.” (...) Perhaps the pressure of the Catholic state left an imprint on women in Poland. Femininity is associated with being a wife who adorns her husband as well as with being a caring mother who forgets her sexuality, her own ambitions and dreams, and lets the teachings of the church about the role of women prevail. Holland is flat and its inhabitants averaged; women do not need to care that they will attract men by their appearance. *Doe maar dan gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg* [Just act normal, then you are acting crazy enough as it is] reflects what I mean. (February 2012, wiatrak.nl)

Holandya: The Polish nation is full of complexes. (...) The reason for this emphasis on the appearance lies in complexes. We conceal our own defects by drawing attention to the cover. (...) By such behaviour, we compensate the guilt. Another example: why does a

woman seduce men? She does not do it in order to find a husband, but to have an assurance that she is attractive. (February 2012, wiatrak.nl)

Polish women themselves admitted that they took over the “Dutch approach” to their appearance, namely, they began to appreciate the modesty, simplicity and naturalness. Most women said that they also changed their habits. There is even a joke circulating among Polish people in the Netherlands that talks about it in a rather exaggerated way:

- How do you recognize how much time a Polish woman is living in the Netherlands?
- After a few months hair roots (Holandyja, February 2012, wiatrak.nl)

Some of the women admitted during the ethnographic interviews and the online discussions that they changed their attitude while they were in the Netherlands or that they were changing it temporarily depending on where they were living.

Ania74: A well-groomed appearance affects one’s well-being. In Poland, I look much better (probably because the intolerant and superficial assessment of the Poles irritates me, and besides, if I do not work and go out somewhere, I have a greater desire to take care of myself). (February 2012, wiatrak.nl)

As it follows from my observation and the opinions of the interviewees, during their stay in the Netherlands women’s expectations seem to alter. My informants did not feel a strong social emphasis on appearance, as was the case in Poland. They noticed that in the Netherlands women are rather free in their choice of how they use make-up (if at all), how they style their hair and how they dress. This physical release undoubtedly entails a mental release from the obligation of “always being beautiful”, too. The difference in the approach to external appearance probably lies in the different intensity of sex differences and role divisions between Poland and the Netherlands. In Poland, some roles and features are still very strongly assigned to women. But their stay in a liberal country, where the roles and characteristics of men and women are more fluid might influence a change in their attitude.

On the portal wiatrak.nl there were many different opinions related to the concept of femininity. Sometimes they were very diverse, overlapping, and sometimes even mutually excluding. Some women feel encouraged to “be themselves” and set aside the aspect of appearance.

Zosiahol: Women, do you even know what femininity is? I doubt it! Do you think clothing, make-up, hairstyle, being influenced by men’s opinions, being intelligent, having a career etc. are characteristics of womanhood. I will tell you one thing... the most important thing is to be yourself! No matter what you are. Everyone has something nice, and most important is a person’s inner side. You can have the most beautiful make-up, trendy haircut, good clothes of fashionable brands, or have a Master’s degree... But if you are hard to live with, if you are selfish, hypocritical, jealous, etc., you will never be an example of a feminine woman. Femininity is not dependent on external features! I know many women who seem to give the impression of “mousey”, but this is only an illusion! I think

taking care of oneself is a normal thing, but there must be a limit. Very often, underneath the 3 cm of make-up hides another person. She does it for others. Mistake! I support those women who have feel free to go to the shop in *joggingbroek* [sweatpants]. That is why I like the mentality of Dutch women. They do not care if someone criticizes them! They are themselves! No-one pays attention to appearance over here! Polish women - yes! And they are critical. (February 2012, wiatrak.nl)

Some conversation partners denied the importance of appearance and gave “naturalness” as the “proper” manifestation of femininity. Some other female users of the forum claimed that femininity is something a woman exudes, some energy, which is not controlled. On the other hand, many women claimed that appearance is one of the most important aspects in the process of gender manifestation and that taking care of one’s external appearance affects a woman’s well-being.

Due to the many different opinions that arose during the online discussion, I decided to ask my conversation partners what femininity is to them, and what they are doing to be feminine. Many of the informants had difficulties answering my questions about the meaning of being a woman. One of my interviewees said: “This is a difficult question, because it is hard to know what it means to be female when you do not know how to be anything else” (Ania, 33, March 2012, interview). However, the state of being a woman was most often associated with motherhood:

Karina P-B. (33): Surely, the state of being a woman relates to specific roles. A mother will surely be a woman, and even the best father would not substitute some of the emotions associated with being a mother, such as care-giving. (...) To me, femininity is still associated with children and motherhood, because in other areas it comes to the liberation. (March 2012, interview)

For some interviewees, such as for Karina, motherhood is the role of a woman and it is the result of her biological predispositions. The care-giving, mentioned in the above quotation, is a common feature mentioned by other conversation partners as distinctive for women. They consider the role of a mother as natural, while it is in fact social. Another group of interviewees claim that women’s roles (including the role of a mother) are socially imposed.

Sylwia: I think that one of the specific attributes of women is that they can have children. In addition, if you are in a relationship, people expect you to have children. They are quite often surprised when someone says she does not want to have children. “How can you not have children? You need to have a maternal instinct.” I think that being a woman means that people expect certain things from you, that you will marry, you will have children and some even people expect you to stay at home and look after the children. Nowadays there is also an expectation that women - beside doing everything at home - will also go to work. (March 2012, interview)

Sylwia also remarked that only women have the possibility of having children, but she does not see this fact alone as a factor constituting being a woman. A woman, according to her, is a social

role composed of other roles, such as mother, wife or a home carer. In addition, other women expressed different characteristics of what a woman should be:

Jola: Being a woman means that you have to be delicate, neat, fragrant, well-dressed, soft in contacts, hushed, and full of compromises. You should listen carefully to your partner or conversation partner, and not be dominant. You can be dominant, but in a woman's way: listen to the other person, do what you think should happen, but do it in a feminine way. Do not say "Do it like this, because I want you to", but rather "You know, maybe we could do it this way. I would like that." This is how I see it. (March 2012, interview)

The description of a woman given by Jola, displays an understanding of femininity as a set of specific traits and behaviours that she considers as her strengths. Here description gave was no reference to the "naturalness" of these traits and behaviours. They are rather earned qualities that a woman can develop or not. Also the picture of a "strong and independent" woman (Monika, 30, April 2012, survey), who "accepts herself, being able to strive after her ideals in the face of adversity" (Marysia, 26, March 2012, interview) provides the features that a woman can accept or not. The last two statements clearly show the approach that was already defined as "Dutch".

Another question I asked my conversation partners was "What is femininity?." For many women "to be feminine means feel to feminine. (...) For me, it is just to feel good in my own skin." (Karina D., March 2012, interview) My conversation partners sensed femininity individually. The feeling was associated with bodiliness and with appearance and it could be intensified or triggered by various factors. One of them was relaxation and taking time for oneself.

Me: And what you do to "feel good in your own skin"?

Karina D.: I need to sleep, sometimes I need to have some peace, some time to take care of myself a bit. (March 2012, interview)

Sylwia: Feminine means to have a moment to myself, to relax, to feel. (...) Maybe not so much freedom, but... just to have a moment to myself. Not to be in a rush. (March 2012, interview)

Another factor that influences a positive sense of femininity is to take care of one's appearance. However, many women stated that it is not so much about a lot of make-up, so-called "plaster", but the mere fact of carrying out certain actions:

Karina D.: It is not the point, to put on make-up, but for example to visit a beautician, to dye my hair, to have my hair cut, to have the impression that you did something for yourself. (March 2012, interview)

Kasia: femininity is more about appearance, for example, that you will take time to go to a Jacuzzi for a day, to have a manicure, to style your hair and then you feel much better, don't you? You feel much more... You produce some positive energy. You feel better and it shows from the outside. (March 2012, interview)

The last quotation indicates the possibility of a sense of femininity to manifest. It is not because of a more diligent make-up or nicer clothes that others see the women differently, but because of the “energy”, “strength”, or “charm”²¹ that they exude.

The next possible factor affecting the sense of femininity is attractiveness, associated typically with the external appearance. To some respondents attractiveness relates to intentionally creating one’s own image.

Agnieszka(41): To be feminine means to be conscious of the charm associated with the female sex - to dress and do your make-up in order to be an attractive woman. (April 2012, survey)

Ania: For example, if I go out, I have to... well, I do not have to but I want to look good. Maybe somebody will look at me. It is a normal thing. Maybe I use more intensive make-up, have a nice neckline... but I also do it for myself, to that if somebody looks at me, I feel better. It is a circle. (March 2012, interview)

It may be indeed a circle. Caring about her appearance, a woman feels good “in her own body.” Thanks to her well-being or to the visible effects of this care, she exudes “energy”, which is visible to others. Next, when others show that they noticed this energy or the effects of the care, the woman feels better. Such a scenario would fit some of my informants. However, the attractiveness has two faces. It is not only the self-satisfaction of the woman’s appearance, but also a pleasure derived from the attention from other people, mostly from men.

The fourth factor influences the sense of femininity also arises in the context of the appearance. For many interviewees, the manifestation of the external components associated with a woman, such as female clothing or make-up, was very important.

Karina P-B.: To me, femininity is associated with a feminine look. (...) It is important for me, instead of putting the intensive make-up on, I would rather softly emphasize my femininity by mascara or clothing, so men can see how beautiful I am. (...) I want to appeal as a woman. I want it to be evident that I am a woman. (...) I would not like to be an object of desire for all men, no. Just to look good, to feel good about myself as a woman and to be identified as a woman. (March 2012, interview)

The mere identification with womanhood is an assurance and a conformation of her femininity. The fourth factor, which influences a sense of femininity, is the identification of a woman with her gender.

Another factor found in the statements of my interviewees, is a fulfilment coming from the accomplishment of the roles that a woman follows. There will be, for instance, the role of mother or wife, or a professional role.

Karina D.: Lately I do not feel feminine, because I am tired. I have a lot of work, I have to travel and I do not have too much time for others or myself. I also feel a little guilty that I

²¹ The terms used by my informants.

have no time for Pola and Jan. Then, I start to feel worse. (...) I also feel good when I am appreciated at work. (...) It makes me tired when guys at work never ask me about anything because they think I do not know it. Only when they ask me, they notice that I know it. Sometimes I have a day in which a lot is going on, and everyone asks a lot from me. Then, I really feel that I have done something to offer, I feel so fulfilled. This fulfilment at work contributes to my sense of femininity. (March 2012, interview)

Żaneta (25): Feminine means to realize one's potential in personal and professional life. (April 2012, survey)

While being a woman is often associated with playing certain roles (such as the role of a wife or a mother), being feminine (or rather feeling feminine) is subject to the fulfilment derived from the accomplishment of these roles. The fulfilment is often conditioned by other's appreciation.

The last factor that may affect the sense of being a woman is self-acceptance. When the women talk about self-acceptance, however, it is not associated with the typical (stereotypical) female qualities or roles. The phrases "feeling good in one's own skin," or "being oneself" or the statement of Marysia. (March 2012, interview) "I think a real woman accepts herself, and is able to strive after her ideals in the face of adversity" would seem very neutral if we remove them from the context of femininity. In such statements, the importance of external appearance is put aside and traits such as independence and confidence are valued highly. As the reader will find out later in this thesis, self-acceptance is one of the most relevant ways for the women to manifest their independence.

My conversation partners perceive femininity primarily as a certain feeling that may be affected by many factors: by relaxation and having some off-time for oneself, by the enjoyment of taking care of oneself, by being attractive, by receiving men's attention, by being identified with the female gender based on one's appearance, by experiencing the fulfilment derived from the accomplishment of woman's roles, and by self-acceptance. These factors may induce an inner sense of femininity. Then, a woman exudes "energy", "strength" or "charm." It should be also noted that in the perception of femininity there is no dichotomous division of male and female. Women saying, "I do not feel feminine" do not mean they feel masculine. They are simply devoid of a sense of femininity - a positive condition that may be elicited and is not imposed on women.

The topics covered in this section concur to the broad context of womanhood, understood as a social and cultural construct (Giddens 2004). The circulation of the stereotype of Polish women as prostitutes and promiscuous women has affected the relationship between some of my informants and the families of their Dutch partners. Sometimes it came to the cut loose, other time to the final acceptance of woman as a new member of family. I noticed that the attitude of a male partner had a large impact on the nature of these relationships. By his active support of his

partner, he confirms the position of the woman in his family. Another aspect, which particularly drew the attention of the conversation partner, is the attitude to external appearance. Many women, both in mixed and non-mixed relationships, noticed the differences in the attitudes towards appearance between Polish and Dutch women. My informants presented both the “Dutch” and “Polish” approach in a positive as well as a negative way. The major difference is that appearance is a more important factor of femininity for Polish women than for Dutch women. However, there is a tendency to take over the “Dutch” approach, namely to appreciate the naturalness, modesty and simplicity. Many women admitted that their stay in the Netherlands entails deliverance from the obligation of “always being beautiful”, which comes from the strong division between women’s and men’s roles in Polish society. Many informants stated that womanhood in Poland differs from womanhood in the Netherlands.

Basia (40): The men in Poland look more at women and flirt. In Poland you can feel more intensively that you are a woman, while here [in the Netherlands] (...) people try avoid differences in treatment. (March 2012, interview)

Femininity is socially constructed and its models differ culturally. As a result, there are two meanings of femininity. On the one hand, there are the roles imposed on women, such as the roles of wife or mother. On the other hand, femininity is perceived as a personal feeling having a predisposition to intensify or decline, a feeling that is not imposed on women.

5.1.3 Work

Most of my informants were highly educated women having well-paid, highly valued jobs in the Netherlands. However, many of them struggled with finding a job either in their initial period in the Netherlands or very recently (caused by the economic crisis). Some of them found themselves to become depressed because of their helplessness and the inaction deriving from having (too) much free time.

Monika(30): When I came to the Netherlands I had to start everything over. For half a year, I was trying, unsuccessfully, to find a job and, cross my heart, I think it was the most difficult period in my life. It was a time with much overvaluation and reflection, free time filled by activities for which I did not have time in Poland (walking, getting pedicures, walking, getting manicures, walking). (...) Sitting at home drove me crazy and drove me to despair. I think that the hardest moment in the life of every educated person who cannot find the work, is the moment when he or she thinks, “I need to do something, so I will start looking for any sort of work.” This is the biggest mistake one can make. (April 2012, survey)

The other informants noticed that their “new life” started when they arrived in the Netherlands. They had to learn a new language, prove the knowledge they gained in a different system of

education, and prove their professionalism. As a result, many of my informants either started their own business or were planning to.

There is no denying, however, that most of my conversation partners had emotional and financial support provided by their partners. Monika, who was quoted above, took up the aspect of the taking a “bleak” job, namely an easily approachable job not associated with her profession or education, such as cleaning and childcare (*au-pair*).

According to my research, young Polish women deciding to work as an *au pair* in the Netherlands perceive this job as an additional occasion to learn a new language or visit other countries. Morokvasic noticed that working as an *au pair* remains one of the few legal means of labour migration for women (Morikvasic 2008, 6). For my informants, it is mostly a temporary work for 1 or 2 years. After that, they usually decided to stay in Holland because they fell in love with Dutch men. In turn, women who take up cleaning are usually those who already had partners and wanted to move abroad. This job is usually perceived as “the first” step and a transitive occupation. I was also trying to earn extra money by cleaning houses, of which I was not proud. Every time I cleaned, I had the feeling that I realized the stereotype of a “Polish housewife.” My strange feeling was reinforced when one of my employers said - quite seriously and based on the results of my work - that he would love to have a Polish wife. He could not know that in my private life, I am a terrible litterlout and my boyfriend is the one who cleans up after me.

These two activities - cleaning and childcare - often taken by Polish women residing abroad, are implicated in a relationship of economic demands and stereotypization. I noticed that there is quite a large demand for Eastern-European women to take up work connected with the sphere of home (cleaning, childcare, care of elderly or sick people). They are related to the common stereotypes of a “housewife” or a “caring mother.” On the other hand, the Eastern European women are often willing to work in these sectors, because they are aware of the strong demand in Western Europe. However, this is only a hypothetical relation, which requires further research.

Another aspect that I would like to address in this section, also concerns work associated with stereotypes of Polish women, but this time in their own house. Because of the frequent references of my conversation partners to the “Dutch model” of partnership, I will elaborate on this notion. During my research, I met with opinions that “Dutch” relationships are based on a more equal division of the household chores such as cleaning, cooking, bringing up the children, and other related activities.

Marysia: I think in the Netherlands there is more equality in the relationships, and women are not only for cleaning and taking care of the children. (March 2012, interview)

According to Marysia, the role of a woman is not limited to performing domestic duties. Thanks to the equal division of the family responsibilities, she has the opportunity to work or develop her own passions, equal to men. For many women, this division of the roles is “fair” and gives them an opportunity for personal growth. In addition, the joint work is an advantage for the relationship.

Jola: I loved such joint actions, such as cooking. It is something that I find desirable in life and that I always liked. (...) Working together is very important to me, because it builds up and strengthens the relationships and creates trust. (March 2012, interview)

Nevertheless, I also met women who consciously chose to stay at home or perform more household chores than their partners. Still, however, the strict division of a “gainful employment” of a man and the “domestic duties” of a woman was not preferable. It would mean that none of the partners goes beyond the “boundary” of his or her roles. Many women claimed that they required from their partners that they get involved in the care of the house and the children.

Ania: In our relationship, it is not like you can hear from the stories that a woman does everything. Anyway, I think that it is the fault of these women, not the men. They allow this to happen. Look, if he does everything for me, I would also sit on the couch with a computer and legs on the table and do nothing else. (...) In addition, if he does not complain, I would even send him to do grocery shopping. (March 2012, interview)

This woman who does everything, as mentioned by Ania, is called “*kura domowa*” in Polish. Her responsibilities are associated with the sphere of home. The strong role division, derived from the stereotypes, might be so strongly rooted in the mentality of Polish women that it was perceived as natural (as I noticed also with women in relationships where the partners shared the household responsibilities).

Me: Have you talked about the division of the roles in the relationship? Were there any conflicts?

Monika: There are the typical male-female conflicts, I think. When a man does the laundry, he has it written on his forehead and walks as proud as a peacock all week. A woman is doing it and that is it – but that is probably the same everywhere. (April 2012, survey)

As follows from the quotation above, the obligation, which is stereotypically attributed to women (or in this case the laundry) might be something extraordinary for a man, regardless of nationality. A man expects the appreciation for his achievements, while the woman takes it (or she is taught to take it) as a natural and common responsibility. This attitude of women, according to my other interviewees, is typical for Polish rather than for Dutch women.

Although some of the women seemed to me to be the “housewives” (*kura domowa*), they definitely did not want to be called that. It is because the word “housewife” is not only associated with the performance of household duties, but indicates a dependent and slave-like position of a woman. Referring to the statements of my conversation partners, the performance of household duties should be perceived as work. The women expected some compensation in the form of gratitude, appreciation and active attitude of the partner, namely his self-involvement.

On the one hand, there were women who found fulfilment in the performance of domestic duties. They preferred to clean or cook, because they did it better, more accurately, and they liked to do it all. They took the initiative. On the other hand, there were women who could not get rid of the household chores, which they took up by themselves, or which just “fell down” on them automatically. According to this group of women, taking the initiative is an irreversible process, which is believed to be unchangeable. According to my research, the women found it important that not only did they have to be responsible for the house and the children (even if the women themselves take over most of the duties at home), they wanted the man to feel responsible too and offer help “by themselves”.

Kasia: Well, I am responsible for the house, my job, my school, the finances and the whole administration.

Me: Are they responsibilities that fell on you? And does it bother you or do you like to be responsible for everything?

Kasia: It is my fault that it is like that. (...) I like to do it. When I have days off, I like to do something at home from early morning, but there are also moments that I want to lie down, because I had enough.

Me: Why do you not do that?

Kasia: To lie down? I lie down, but then I have this ideal vision that my partner will come and say “How are you darling?” He would probably see that I am tired. Then, I would like him to empty the dishwasher or something. He would see that I am not able to do anything anymore. But, you know, it never works like that. I always have to ask for it. (March 2012, interview)

Kasia said that she was able to change her Dutch partner, who now sometimes reaches for a vacuum cleaner by himself. However, as can be seen from many of her utterances presented in this thesis, she is not satisfied with the acquisition of full responsibility of the house. She wished her partner were also an active figure and engaged by himself.

For Kasia and many other women I interviewed, it is important to be appreciated by their partners for the work that they do at home.

Kasia: I have such an ideal of a man, who would always be with me and be there for me. And that he would appreciate my cooking. (...) You know, I like to cook. (...) When my brother comes, I like to cook for him (...), because he appreciates this, he likes it, and afterwards he says, “It was so good, I am full.” And what about my boyfriend? When I

prepare some vegetables for him – I like vegetables – he says “Jesus, not this. I am not a rabbit, I will not eat grass.” Nothing tastes good for him. And when I ask him “What should I buy in the supermarket, what shall we eat?”, he always answers one thing: “I don’t know.” And sometimes, when I am very angry, like once a month, I say to him “Today you are cooking dinner.” He always prepares the same thing: fries. (March 2012, interview)

The reaction of the husband on what a woman does and how she performs this work is important. I do not know how it is in other families in Poland, but, for example, when my dad got up from the table, he said “Thank you”, but actually left the plate and the rest for my mother. She had to put the plate in the sink, wash it, and clean up everything. Everything was done by the woman. Here [in the Netherlands], I think it is more like when a man sees that the woman cooked, he will clean up and thank her. This attitude is more grateful. (March 2012, interview)

Karina referred to her own relationship by presenting a “Dutch model” of partnership, where both partners perform household chores equally. It seemed she never wanted to take over all the domestic duties. She appreciated to have a time to herself and, additionally, work was very important for her. She admitted that she would not be able to sacrifice her job to stay at home with a child.

The reader could already notice that the woman’s involvement in the household chores differed, although all of them lived in Polish-Dutch relationships. Some realized a “partnership model” of relationship, whereby both partners share the responsibilities, while others took over the responsibility for most of the household duties, even though they and their partners had jobs. Others decided to stay at home, expecting (or not) that the responsibilities would be shared equally between both partners. Probably, I did not describe all the possible options. However, the issue, which was common to my conversation partners, was the expectation of self-engagement of their partners and the appreciation for their work at home. They were not always able to accomplish this, but at least we can see that the partnership type of relationship was appreciated the most. According to my informants, housework should be perceived as work, not as a duty of women. One of my interviewees (Marysia) said that due to her stay in the Netherlands she changed her point of view concerning the realisation of herself. She realized that she could follow her dreams equally to a man and share the responsibilities with her partner.

In conclusion, the stereotypes circulating widely in society find reflect in economy. I noticed that many Polish women in the Netherlands take up the work associated with the domestic sphere, such as a childcare, the care of elderly or sick people, and cleaning. These are the easiest approachable jobs for women who do not speak the local language and who are not fully economically active in the Netherlands due to their limited knowledge about the legislation. In this way, the circulation of the stereotypes of Polish women as “good wives” and “caring mothers” are reinforced. It seems that the women take these jobs to earn money, not because

they are designed for them or because they have a better predisposition for these jobs than women of other nationalities. While the approach to work at home is very different among my conversation partners, they always wanted to be appreciated for their efforts, and prefer that both partners carry the responsibility for the household chores. They appreciated the self-involvement of the partner in performing domestic duties, including childcare.

5.1.4 Character

In the Chapter 3 the reader had the opportunity to read about the stereotype of Polish woman as materialistic, crafty and venal, looking for a husband among rich foreigners (here Dutch men). Now, I would like to present the point of view of the interviewees who explained why they have Dutch partners.

First, we should make a distinction between the state of marriage from just a state of being together, as these are completely different situations. The vast majority of women I talked with, state that the decision to stay in the Netherlands was conditioned by love. However, love itself was not the main reason for the marriage. The marriage was definitely an important event in the lives of the women I interviewed, and love was undoubtedly the primary factor, but not the determining one. My conversation partners often emphasized that the decision was made mostly because “a time came.” Thereby, the marriage was seen as a natural and universal experience and an introduction to the next stage of life at the same time. One should know that today, the purpose of marriage is no longer solely to create a family and deliver children, as it was seen like in the past (Szlendak, 2011). Another common reason for women to want to marry their (Dutch) partner was a sense of unity and belonging associated with having a common name. In addition, it is much easier to gain parental rights by the men in case they have children. My informants very often admitted that a direct impulse for the marriage were the facilities offered to married couples. For instance, they claimed that the mortgage credit is readily available to the married than unmarried couples. Despite the inclusion of the last, practical reasons, they were marginalized by women.

According to Denis de Rougemont (1983), love replaces all practical reasons for choosing partners. In his opinion, love is an invention of the Middle Ages and the cultural construct immanent to the American-European culture. I do not want to go into the discussion of what love is - a misguided fantasy or an actual state. What is most relevant, is that these strong feelings were underlined by my conversation partners, and no matter what one calls them, they were a decisive factor for them staying in the Netherlands with their partners. The practical aspects, if they were listed, were presented as an impulse to marry and were not considered as important. It

is possible that such marginalization of the practical reasons and the emphasis on love as the only “right” one, is due to the stigma of the “marriage of convenience” in European culture. It is also possible that women want to be married because of the feelings it provides, such as feelings of stability and belonging. As these feelings are usually associated with having a house and money for living, some people might mistake them with the desire to gain personal benefit.

The proof that so-called “practical reasons” for choosing a partner are criticized is provided by the statements of Polish women who posted on the forum *wiatrak.nl*. In a thread from 2009, one woman described her problems with being in a relationship with a possessive and restrictive man of Dutch nationality. Surprisingly, many regular female members of the forum criticized and blamed her for the problems she had.

Biedronka: “higher goals” they have when they make the decision to go to the West. Zero ambition, no self-confidence, and no willingness to work hard or to establish a position of her own. The easiest way is to cling to some Man and that is it. But that scenario of is not always going as it should for Polish women, and we read the stories later on. Women, do not put yourself to shame. Have a little ambition and respect yourself, because if you are convinced of your power, any Dutchman, a Pole, or Turk will not dare to degrade you. (May 2009, *wiatrak.nl*)

Michalina: Normally I would say something, but as I start writing I would probably sit at my computer all night. I feel sorry for you, because there is the loss of a year of your life. But on the other hand, if I met you in the Netherlands, I would probably kick your ass to make you think a little differently about the world and about your partner. It lacks the voice from the other side. I will tell you, I do not give a damn what other guys from abroad think about Polish women. I am not a whore, I am not an alcoholic, I am not into money and luckily I do not have that kind of women around me. Respect yourself, women! (May 2009, *wiatrak.nl*)

Gekke Marcia: Basically, you did not know the guy but you joined him in the West... Sorry, but that was really naive and stupid! So, what did he think about you? The young, naive girl who does not know the language, does not even know him, comes for him from so far! So you did not expect respect, did you? Be happy that nothing worse happened and you did not meet the worse guy. Fortunately, nothing worse happened. I have been with a Dutch man for 3 years and, to be honest, I do not have to worry. There are no such strange situations. So, women, respect yourself and the other person will respect you too. (October 2009, *wiatrak.nl*)

The example of criticism among the female compatriots presented above, was not only the criticism I encountered during my research. The negative and stereotypical attitudes of Polish and Dutch people to the Polish-Dutch relationships and Polish women deciding to emigrate could be the cause of the withdrawal of many Polish female immigrants from the circle of Polish immigrants. This aspect can be compared with the image of a Polish sociable woman presented in Chapter 3. Their image is different among Polish people living in the Netherlands. Many forum members and my conversation partners noticed and even admitted to the reluctance to

meet officially with other female compatriots. Maybe they avoid the evaluation and the judgments of others. As a result, Polish women having problems in their relationships or in general, during the process of emigration, have little opportunity to share them publicly, and, moreover, to find understanding and support. In the recent two years the Miss Poland in Holland (Benelux) even became a mobilizing action. Its organizer, Monika Stępień, who agreed to fill out my survey, admitted that she encounters stereotyping. Her aim is to overthrow the stereotypes by showing that Polish women can either engage publicly and socially or be successful and socially respected.

According to three women cited above, and many other internet users, a Polish woman who shares her experiences concerning her failed relationship with a foreigner, does not respect herself. One reason for this was the suspicion of materialism and laziness (Biedronka), another forum user attributed it to naivety and the ill-advised decision to leave Poland without knowing the language or even the man she was leaving Poland for (Gekka Marcia). Voices of understanding and support appeared rarely. The woman was mostly criticized and blamed for problems in her relationship.

Given quotations touched two very important issues. First, the fact that other women assume in advance that a Polish woman having a problem with her foreign partner is naive and materialistic, proves that Polish women are also thinking stereotypically about their female compatriots. Secondly, by criticizing the materialistic and naive attitude of women, they call to the importance of being an independent woman. The independence of a woman brings her respect in the eyes of her compatriots and in her own eyes. Love, as the reason for which the woman is with a foreigner, is one of the determinants of independence. Love denies the materialistic attitude of a woman by proving she is not with the Dutch man in order to improve her financial situation, as the status of the partners is irrelevant in relationships based on love.

5.2 Independence means respect

I noticed that most of Polish female migrants I talked with, value their independence very highly. In their understanding, independence entails the respect in the eyes of other people as well their own. It is the proof that a woman did not marry a man for her own benefits, as the universal stereotypes say. I state that Polish women with Dutch partners are creating their own self-image of independent women. The independence has many faces, which already appeared earlier in this chapter. In this subsection, I will assemble them together, while adding new aspects. Thus, I will demonstrate what it hides behind the word “independence” and what elements constitute an independent woman.

To introduce the notion of independence it is important to present what people hold against Polish women being in a relationship with Dutch men. One may notice that on many Polish-Dutch internet forums it is a very controversial topic. This often results in arguments. On the forum wiatrak.nl, under the question “Why a Dutch man is willing to marry a Polish woman” the reader will find answers like the following:

Patryk: Today’s Dutch woman wants to be independent, wants a career. She does not want to be dependent on anyone, but not every Dutch man likes that. That is why a Polish wife who does not complain, cooks delicious meals and looks after children is a real treasure. A Dutch woman? She also expects the husband to cook at least two times a week and takes care of the children. A beautiful Peugeot in the garage and holidays in France do not impress her. Here lies the whole problem. (February 2010, wiatrak.nl)

Following the online discussion, one may quickly notice that many people, particularly those in non-mixed relationships²², have such points of view as Patryk. According to these users, Dutch men prefer Polish women as wives, because they are not as demanding as the Dutch women are. They explained this mainly in terms of independence, the ambitions of Dutch women and the traditional roles of Polish women. However, there was a different kind of opinion, again, from a woman from a non-mixed relationship.

Mar: A Polish woman will not notice that he stammers or is “handicapped” (because she does not know the language yet). He thinks that if there is such poverty in Poland, the Netherlands will be a paradise for her. His previous partner cheated him and took everything he had, now he is in debt. (...) He is an asshole and no Dutch woman wants him. (...) So he takes a Polish, Russian, Thai girl. (...) I do not talk about a new generation of young people who come to the Netherlands for study, but show me an example from the older generation of a man who is a Dutch businessman, director or manager and who married a Polish woman...;-) (February 2010, wiatrak.nl)

According to some users, Dutch men choosing Polish women as their wives do not have a high social status in the Netherlands, which also makes it difficult for them to find partners among female compatriots. In addition, Polish women are seen as being unaware of the disadvantages of these men. They are “seeking money” and do not realize the actual social status of their Dutch partners.

Many women, especially in the Polish-Dutch relationships, took the voice of opposition against the allegations presented above. They usually described their personal experiences to express their objections. They usually claimed that their relationship was based on love and there is nothing wrong with their partners. They present themselves as independent women.

Zuzanna: Dear Women! For crying out loud, everything changes as time goes by. Poland is in the European Union. Even if slowly, the chances are getting equal. Polish women do not need a husband from across the Oder River to boost their confidence. Foreign passport,

²² I based the information about the statuses of relationship on the posts of users, where they usually clarified them.

guldens and D-Marks do not make an impression anymore! (...) For my Dutch boyfriend and for me as well, it would be much easier and more convenient to have a partner from our own country. It happened, that is life. And, by the way - in my circle of friends there are a few mixed pairs (she is Polish, he is Dutch). All of those girls were already living in the Netherlands, knew the language, earned good money and were independent before they met their partners. So, it depends on your viewing point, or on the people we hang out with. (February 2010, wiatrak.nl)

The first type of independence that can be distinguished is financial independence. Many of my interviewees sought to emphasize their financial independence, which would, for example, be shown by the ownership of one's own car, stable work and high education. After one meeting, when I was about to leave, my conversation partner pointed to the car standing in front of the house, stressing that she bought it from her own money. In addition, she referred directly to the stereotype of a Polish woman being a Dutch husband's dependant, appeared on the forum wiatrak.nl. Owning a car was supposed to be a proof of her financial independence.

In addition, I had the impression that the emphasis on the high level of education was also meant to rebut the stereotype of Polish women as materialist.

Magda: The way the Polish women are perceived and all the stereotypes about them scare me. I do not want to be seen this way. I am moving to my Dutch boyfriend within 3 months. We met at a university in Germany. I completed my studies in Poland and after two months, I will be finished in Germany as well. I speak German, English and a little bit of Dutch. He completed his study in the Netherlands and now he starts his PhD. He speaks English, German and a little bit of Polish. However, I am scared to be confronted with the stereotypes, according to which I am an immigrant from a poor country, who caught a Dutch man. (July 2008, witrak.nl)

Presenting her history of education and her language skills was a kind of proof she do not realize the stereotypes. She shows herself as a woman who is not a partner's dependant, but as well-educated, self-contained woman.

Many women I spoke with emphasized the importance of finding work. For most of my interviewees, work is a privilege. It not only provides them (and their families) with an income, but also gives them a sense of fulfilment and personal development. According to my research, it not that only a man is responsible for the livelihood of the family, as the stereotypes say. For most of my conversation partners, financial independence is one of the foundations of emotional autonomy.

Basia: I always thought that I just needed to be independent. That sometimes you have a guy, at other times you don't. If you have to divorce, you just have your money so nobody can say "you are dependent on me". (March 2012, interview)

Being independent does not only mean being able to support oneself, but also to avoid the hierarchical relationship between the partners, which is opposed to the ideology of a relationship based on love and equality. Due to the stigmatisation linked to economic aspects in choosing a

partner, love remains the only “right” relation between the partners. Therefore, the next kind of independence – emotional independence – consists of women’s financial independence, with love as a main reason for being together and the relationship based on a partnership, where a man and a woman share responsibility for home and family.

Many informants appreciate the equality in their relationships. However, the idea of partnership model did not necessarily mean that the partners divided the household chores equally. Most important for women was an appreciation for their commitments to work at home and to care of children. Although this is what the women desire, they did not always implement it. I met one informant who, during our conversation, gave two conflicting images of the role division in her relationship. At the beginning of the conversation, she stressed that she was opposed to the woman’s subservience towards a husband. She mentioned that at the beginning of her relationship she stood up against the expectations of her husband towards her (he expected she would be on his beck and call). She said her objections led to a change in the attitude on her husband’s part. As a result, they now perform household chores together.

Karina P-B.: For example, when the cleanup is coming and he is free, we do it together. (...) Some day he finally observed: “You probably have too much work.” This was a turning point. From that time, I could say more to him, because at the beginning I could not say anything. When I said, “Do this or that” he got mad: “You will not tell me what I have to do. (March 2012, wiatrak.nl)

Later in our conversation, however, Karina said that she herself had to control the course of cleanup, because her husband did not take any initiative or “starts doing something and does not finish it or does not do it accurately.”

Karina P-B.: He has some aversion to cleaning, so when we clean together, I clean the most and give him only a small part. (March 2012, wiatrak.nl)

Karina P-B. took over the responsibility for most of household chores, changing her status from a submissive and dependant wife to a “carer woman of hearth and home,” who gives instructions. A husband’s involvement is essential to abolish the feeling of subservience. According to Titkow (2005), in Polish families there is present the „reality manipulation”, the silent agreement between spouses, where “the men pretend they participate in completing domestic duties, and the women pretend the men help them.” (Titkow 2005, 33). Although Karina seem to implement this scheme, it is essential she was strongly convinced of the equity and rightness of a partnership model whereby both husband and wife respect each other, appreciate their commitments, and take joint responsibility for home and family.

Another kind of independence that I came across among my conversation partners is a social independence. Many interviewees stressed that it is important for them to have their own

group of friends, other than their husband's. This was not always easy to achieve, especially at the beginning of their immigration, when the women did not know more people than their own partner and his family. In addition, the women who did not have a job or stayed at home with their children did not have many opportunities to meet new people. According to my research, hanging around people other than their partners' friends and family, is proof of women's independence in choosing their own friends, with whom they share interests or problems.

The inability to communicate in Dutch language can make finding real friends more difficult. This was a very important aspect, often cited in the discussions. Many women mentioned that learning Dutch is a fundamental step towards integration. The language is very often required at work, but also warms the relations between the foreigners and the Dutch people, who look positively on those who try to speak Dutch. Language also determines the relations in the partnership.

Jola: When Henk was healthy, it was a beautiful partnership arrangement, such a daydream for me. (...) However, it was partnership arrangement at home, because we spoke the same language, English. Outside, this arrangement was no longer a partnership. He was dominant and I was somebody behind him. It was because I could not speak Dutch. I had to adapt and accept it. I enjoyed being with people - family and friends - who spoke English, because I could be an active party. Whenever there were meetings where I had to just sit and smile, answer only by shortcuts, I would feel so bad. The roles were twisted in our relationship. (...) Henk did not want me to learn Dutch, he explained that anyway we will live in Poland. He was probably a little bit macho (...), did not want me to be independent and leave him like his previous partner. That girl had learned Dutch. When she left him, she had her knowledge of the Dutch language, I only had English. (March 2012, interview)

As it follows from the above quotation, the lack of knowledge of the Dutch language may affect the relations in the partnership. The women may feel dependent. I myself feel uncomfortable when during the meetings with members of my partner's family, I am omitted in the discussions or I am not able to express my opinion (due to my inability to communicate in Dutch). The solution resides in learning the language, so I can become an equal partner in the conversation who can express her own opinion.

Personal independence, another kind of independence, ensures a free expression of oneself. One interviewee had a problem to explain what femininity was, just because of the different approaches to women's self-realization in Polish and Dutch cultures. Marysia lived in the Netherlands for three years, and had a Dutch boyfriend. She noticed even before our conversation that there is a big difference in the expectations of women in both societies.

Marysia: My Polish side says I have to be sweet, I have to dress nicely, I have to put nice make-up on, I must be silent and speak when I should. I have to do what is my duty and what a real woman should do, namely cook, bear children and sit at home. My Dutch side

says I have to be independent, not influenced by other people and that I have to express my opinions on various topics, also in conversations with men. I have to accept myself the way I am. I must, first of all, feel comfortable with myself and not care whether others feel comfortable with me. (March 2012, wiatrak.nl)

In Poland, there are strong roles and qualities assigned to women, so she may feel that her duty is to implement these. It can be hard for her to give them up (Titkow, 2006). Although Marysia seemed to be confused by so such different expectations, she definitely preferred to listen to her Dutch side. I also mentioned in the previous section entitled “womanhood”, that many women admitted their appreciation for the “Dutch model” of femininity, which focuses on simplicity, convenience and naturalness. It is possible that due to the observation of Dutch society, many conversation partners were inspired to seek out their personal independence.

Overview

My conversation partners very often referred to the so-called “Dutch model” as an alternative, liberal model of femininity, motherhood or partnership. Most of them were aware of the generalization they made, as they admitted that it does not apply to all Dutch men and Dutch women. The “model” is primarily a collection of ideas and attitudes that entail the standards of behaviour. They are stereotypically linked with Dutch culture, because of the widespread association of the Netherlands with liberal attitudes.

The references of my conversation partners to “Dutch model” were both critical and approving. The first example provides the perception of a woman as a mother and wife. My conversation partners agreed that in Poland women’s success is often conditioned by the role they play in the family, especially the role of a “committed mother and wife.” According to my informants, the “Dutch model” offers an image of a woman whose success is not attested by such roles, and whose femininity is not mainly determined by these roles. A woman in this model is oriented toward her personal development: education, professional accomplishments, dreams, interests, hobbies and happiness. My informants often admitted that in the Netherlands they felt some kind of relief from the social expectations present in Poland, for instance, from the expectation of “always being beautiful” or taking on the full responsibility for household chores and childcare. Femininity, for my interviewees, was not only a collection of roles imposed on them, but also some positive, very individual feeling. A sense of femininity was associated with their appearance, or with a different kind of satisfaction and fulfilment. Femininity is thus a condition that can be elicited and not imposed on women.

Above all, they wanted to be perceived as independent from the prevalent approach to womanhood and stereotypical expectations. I believe that women derive an independent attitude

from the “Dutch model” of womanhood, motherhood and partnership as well as in the result of stereotypization. Independence entails respect in the eyes of other people and automatically becomes something desirable. This process leads to self-empowerment or re-empowerment, as the women might lose their power due to stigmatization.

Conclusions

When a Polish woman comes to the Netherlands, she is faced with a magnitude of stereotypes and images, which she is confronted with in various circumstances and with different groups of people. They apply to the different fields of a woman's life, such as partnership, motherhood, sexuality or character, and their context and overtones differ with different speakers. In this thesis, I tried to examine, using a group of Polish female immigrants in the Netherlands, how they refer to and react to these stereotypes. The qualitative research among Polish women who are in Polish-Dutch relationships revealed that paradoxically, their confrontation with these stereotypes leads them to self-empowerment. However, in order for this to take place they also need to be confronted with the attitudes and ideas prevalent in Dutch society.

My conversation partners very often referred to the so-called "Dutch model" as the alternative, liberal standards of femininity, motherhood, partnership and behaviour. The "model" that they referred to, is a set of attitudes that entail a socially constructed behavioural scheme - or the other way around. These attitudes are stereotypically connected with Dutch culture, because of the universal identification of the country of the Netherlands with liberal notions. My informants gained inspiration from the attitudes in their new homeland and often even followed them. We might call these attitudes emancipated, because they liberate Polish women from the expectations and duties that are labelled on them stereotypically, in Poland as well as in the Netherlands. They gained the strength to confront these stereotypes by referring to the "Dutch model" – to a set of attitudes that are socially accepted in the Netherlands. Most of all, they want to be perceived as independent women, independent in every field of their lives.

Polish women are very often perceived as family- and home-oriented, heartily performing their domestic duties. However, the way this stereotype represents them is objectionable, because it shows them in a slave-like position. Although there were many women who shared the domestic duties equally with their Dutch partners, quite a lot of the informants expressed a liking for taking care of the house. However, they always wanted to be appreciated for their work. They expected that their partners would also feel a degree of responsibility for house and family. Sometimes they did not receive the expected appreciation and my informants were not satisfied of the division of the roles in their relationships. The word "housewife" has two faces, also in Polish language. Firstly, the term "housewife" (in Polish "*kura domowa*") reflects a negative image and entails the domestic duties that a woman should complete, putting her in a slave-like position. Secondly, the term also refers to the high position of a woman at home, who has many

skills and protects the heart and hearth of the house (in Polish “*gospodyni domowa*”). None of my informants wanted to be called “*kura domowa*”, as it entails inequality in the relationship.

During the conversations, Polish women emphasised the differences in women’s realisations of their role of wife and mother in the Dutch and Polish “models”. My informants remarked that women’s success in Poland depends on their status and the roles they complete, whereby the role of mother and wife is most highly valued. According to my conversation partners, when they were living in Poland they felt some social pressure to get married young and to have children. Still, the understanding of the word “wife” entails the feeling of having certain responsibilities in the relationship (like cooking or cleaning), and possessing certain characteristics (like loyalty or devotion). Marriage as such is not necessary any more to feel as a “wife”, because it does not bring new responsibilities for women that she did not have before her marriage. However, to many of my informants it was very important that other people recognize them as “wives”. Also, the successful realisation of a woman as a mother depends on the roles and responsibilities she takes up. My informants agreed with one voice that a Polish mother is a “sacrificing mother” (in a positive as well as negative sense). In the Netherlands, however, women’s success depends on their self-development. According to my conversation partners, the husband and children are not the only things the Dutch women have, but they also have their education, career, hobbies and interests. The “Dutch model” of marriage is based on partnerships relations, where the self-development of the partners is equally important and the responsibility for house and family lies on both sides. Many of my informants admitted that they took over the “Dutch model” of marriage or motherhood.

The stereotype of Polish prostitutes is very strong and it occurs in many – Polish and Dutch – contexts. The internet research among male users of the Dutch forum fok.nl revealed that they perceive and talk about Polish women the sexual objects. Even the authors of the popular Dutch movie “*De Poolse bruid*” (1998) used this representation of a Polish woman to create a realistic and convincing story. According to my conversation partners, the stereotypes lodged in people’s mind have a big impact not only on the adaptation process, but also on the relationships between the family of a Dutch man and his Polish partner. The stereotyping has an opinion-forming character and it may result in breaks within families. I noticed that the partner’s attitude in the face of this situation is very important. His active and supporting attitude confirms the position of his new partner in his own family.

I noticed that many people, Dutch and Polish, as well as my female conversation partners see the difference in perceiving “femininity” by Polish and Dutch women. My informants agreed that Polish women generally pay more attention to their appearance (in a positive as well as a

negative way). However, Polish women themselves remarked that in Poland they felt some social expectation to “be always beautiful.” According to my research, “femininity” has two meanings to my Polish female informants. On the one hand, there are the roles that are imposed on woman socially, such as the role of mother and wife. On the other hand, there is a positive, personal feeling that is not imposed, but may be intense or even disappear. The “Dutch model” of femininity that my conversation partners referred to, is deprived of the aspect of the external appearance. It rather concerns an attitude that is hidden in the sentence “be yourself”, namely: appreciate naturalness, modesty and simplicity, not only in look but also in behaviour. There is a tendency among my conversation partners to taking over the “Dutch” approach to femininity.

The character of Polish women was also a subject of some stereotypes, usually negative though. Polish women are perceived as materialistic, venal, and crafty women who want to improve their financial situation by marrying Dutch men. This vision of Polish women is inspired by the stereotypical imagination of Poland as a poor country and the Netherlands as a wealthy “Western” country - a paradise for Polish people. However, this is not the case in the eyes of my conversation partners. All of them decided to stay in the Netherlands because they fell in love with Dutch men. Practical aspects of the marriage, if they were mentioned during the interview, were not considered too important. The main reason to marry was love and the practical aspects were considered as only an impulse. It is possible that the marginalization of practical reasons and emphasizing love as the only “right” reason to marry is due to the stigma of the marriage of convenience in the European culture (Rougemont 1983). My conversation partners emphasized love, which, along with a good education or financial independence they used as proof that they did not marry the Dutch man for personal (financial) gain. Negative and stereotypical attitudes to the Polish-Dutch marriages among Polish and Dutch people could be the cause of the withdrawal of many female immigrants from a circle of Polish immigrants.

Media provide the characteristic condition for the stereotypization. The stereotypes can become the tools that many of them use for certain purposes. They may refer to them only on the basis of small similarities. The example provides the occurrence of the stereotype of a Polish woman as a “perfect wife” in the Dutch movie “*De Poolse bruid*” from 1998 and its later recurrence in 2011 in the program “*Boer zoekt vrouw*”, where the female (Polish) contestants was compared to the fictional character from the movie. The stereotypes have a strong, opinion-forming character and many of my informants learned it the hard way when the family of their partners showed malicious, strong opinions about them. However, their receivers use the same stereotypes as well. Although I did not see it among any of my conversation partners, I noticed that on the dating portals single Polish women represent themselves in the terms that are

stereotypically connected to these stereotypes. Namely, they referred to the characteristics that are typically associated with the image of a “perfect wife”, what could be a purposeful as well as unintentional practice. They may commodify this alternative image (Bunten 2008). The issue of purposeful self-stereotyping should be taken up for a further research. The issue of self-stereotyping should be taken up for a further research. Other important findings of this research - in accordance with stereotyping - is that the involvement, thereby knowledge, interest and the stance of people, influences the overtone of the stereotypes (whether they are positive or negative). For instance, on the Dutch forum fok.nl the usual participants in the discussions were Dutch men, who did not know any (or knew only cursory) Polish women. Their interest in Polish women was limited to sexual purposes only. In turn, under the thread “Polish women, the wives of Dutch men” on the Polish internet forum niedziela.nl, the images had a positive overtone. It was not surprising that people, who the topic concerned directly, represent themselves in a positive way and in a positive atmosphere, especially when they shared their experiences, not opinions. The way my conversation partners represent themselves, as independent women, is another characteristic of the stereotyping. Namely, it may lead, paradoxically, to self-empowerment.

Because of the stereotypization of Polish women, they may refer to the “Dutch model” as to an approach that is socially accepted and valuable in the Netherlands. They could really take it over, but also only show themselves as its representatives. The most important is that they are inspired by the liberal notions and thereby empower themselves. According to Morokvasic (2008), “crossing borders can be empowering, and established gender norms may be challenged” (Morokvasik 2008, 2) and in the case of Polish women these new norms begin to be the tools for coping with the stereotyping.

Some of them might not even notice it, but in the interviews they portrayed themselves as independent women, which means that they wanted me to perceive them this way. It is not necessarily important to discover *who* is indeed independent and *who* is not, but *why* they want to portray themselves as independent women. According to Berger (1972), the specific of women’s self-perception is that they see themselves in the eyes of other people. Thereby, they present themselves in certain way, because they want to be perceived like that by others, and ultimately by themselves (Berger 1972). The independence entails respect in the eyes of other people and automatically become a desirable approach for the receivers of common stereotypes. I state that the independent attitude of Polish women in the Netherlands results from both the appreciation of the attitudes coming from the so-called “Dutch model”, and from the

stereotyping. Independence brings about respect in the eyes of other people and automatically becomes a desirable attitude for the subjects of common stereotypes.

Maybe the “independent woman” is the other type of an “assertive women” (Titkow 2005), with the difference that the first one takes advantage of the fact, she is living in more liberal society than Polish. Women living in Poland are also stigmatized, however, they do not have guaranteed that their emancipation will be appreciated by others.

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