

Zora Bútorová, et al.: She and He in Slovakia. Gender and Age in the Period of Transition

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Some readers informed about gender and family research in Slovakia will be a little surprised when reading the title of this publication. They will realize that there is already a book with the same title, but a different subtitle. It is a book that has become a widely quoted classic named *She and He in Slovakia. Gender Issues in Public Opinion* released in 1996 under the guidance of Zora Bútorová. It was probably the first more complex publication of this kind in Slovakia. Based on representative sociological survey it dealt with the changing relationships in the family, at work and in the public sphere “wearing gender glasses” (this was truly a very appropriate metaphor that helped to increase gender sensitivity and to cultivate the sterile language that is so often used in social science). In the following decade a number of research teams from academia as well as the third sector pursued the gender and human rights issue monitoring the status of women in diverse areas of private and public life. Many of them were led by a sort of boom of this topic to some degree influenced by the willingness of foreign grant schemes to finance this research area, which was closely connected with the accession of the Slovak Republic into the European Union. Here the so called gender agenda was an important part of the public interest. Maybe due to the utilitarian approach to gender research, the “gender glasses” did not always become part of the social science discourse even in areas, where it would be required and of principal importance. This is why the introduction of the book emphasizes the need of keeping the gender glasses on and accounts for the reason why the current book is devoted to a similar issue as the book published more than a decade ago. As Zora Bútorová, the author and the head of the team of authors said: “We are convinced that this perspective is far from exhausted, and by no means should be taken for granted – either on the level of intellectual reflection or on the level of everyday life.” (p. 10)

As the title suggests, the authors did not only wear “gender glasses” but also “age glasses” since women in Slovakia face not only gender but also age discrimination. This is also why their statistical analyses aimed at uncovering the differences between men and women, as well as between younger and older women. Team of authors (formed primarily by Z. Bútorová and J. Filadelfiová) tried to capture the status of women between 45 to 64 years of age since this generation has to overcome double handicap namely gender and age disadvantage.

The publication follows up on a number of studies and surveys by the authors within the scope of “women’s” issues. It is the “eleventh separate publication released by the Institute for Public Affairs that deals with gender issues” (p. 11). This information indicates that the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) and its research team hold a leading position in this field – in sociology at least – and contribute to the cultivation of social relations and to clearer depiction of the contexts where women and men perform their everyday activities and roles.

The strength of the book (mainly of its first seven chapters) lies in methodological approach and in the interpretation of the collected data. The researchers combined different types of empirical data that had been collected by means of representative sociological surveys carried out by IVO (mainly within the project Plus for Women 45+ financed by the EQUAL Community Initiative) as well as by means of representative surveys carried out by The Institute for Sociology of SAS, and by the FOCUS agency. Other data stem from population development survey in the Slovak Republic, Slovstat, from statistical yearbooks, population and housing censuses, from the overview of the state and migration of the population of the Slovak Republic (and other surveys carried out by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic), by The International Centre for Family Studies, as well as by Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. They have analysed also the data and statistics of the European Commission, the Council of Europe or European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in Dublin and many others. Even a list as incomplete as this can demonstrate the astonishing amount of varied data and statistics that the team of authors had been working with. Nevertheless, publication is still very compact and reader does not feel lost in the abundance of numbers, tables and charts. This is thanks to understandable and sophisticated interpretation of empirical data that is analytically exact, reveals remarkable connections and additionally, is reader-friendly not only to the experts – sociologists. Highly valued could be passages such as (but not only) section 3.2 Life Stages and Age in the Eyes of Women and Men, in which sociological theories known from foreign literature are used to interpret empirical picture of Slovak reality. Reader could start studying the book in any part. Individual chapters make sense even on their own and thus they can be read separately, according to the needs and interests of every reader.

It would certainly be worth mentioning some particular findings and connections from the publication. However, this raises a dilemma, which of the number of issues and topics should a reviewer choose and what should be the selecting criteria that would not exclude other interesting findings. Therefore, it will probably be more helpful to name the most important areas of interest, so that those interested get an overview of the topics included into the publication.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Reader is offered an exceptionally rich package of data and knowledge concerning various life situations of women and men. The analysis captures forms of gender identity as they are manifested in the views and expectations of Slovak population. It shows how the normative concepts

regarding the ideal woman and the ideal man have changed in the last decade. It pays attention to specific normative expectations of men and women of different ages and shows to what extent are these expectations in harmony with their ideas of ideal relationships within a family.

The book also contains analysis of demographic trends and changes in the household composition, as well as in reproductive and partnership behaviour (including attitudes to abortion, untraditional family forms and homosexuality). It describes the age structure of population in Slovakia within the context of population ageing. It deals with such interesting issues as is the difference in perception of women's and men's ageing or the difference in the retirement strategies of women and men. It emphasizes that the challenge of reconciling the work and family does not only refer to the period of bringing up and taking care of small children, but also to the period when women are expected to take care of older relatives and of grandchildren (so called "sandwich years").

Relatively large portion of the book is dealing with the work in the life of women and men. It analyses their education and professional orientation, their digital literacy, gender gaps in remuneration as well as attributes and rate of their unemployment. It depicts relationships between working and private life, gender similarities and differences in attitudes to work and in the evaluation of the work and its particular aspects. It deals with physical and mental demands of work and with the ability of women and men to carry out their current job until retirement. It brings an interesting, here still unconventional perspective on gender equality, on the most important problems of women in the society and on the public perception of gender opportunities and inequalities in individual areas of society (here, it is worth mentioning that the comparison of data from 2000, 2002 and 2006 revealed an increase in the number of women and men stating that women are disadvantaged when aspiring to be placed on the candidate list of a political party or to be elected to a post – p. 184). The authors describe public attitudes to gender equality (or to favouring men) on the labour market as well as personal experience of women and men with favouring the opposite sex at work. It pays special attention to opportunities of women and men over 45 on the labour market, to their discrimination and their ability to resist it.

However, the publication does not only focus on gender differences at work and in the field of paid labour, but also in the private sphere. It analyses family situation of women and men, explores differences in their family status and in the composition of their households. It compares generations of married women and men according to a number of children. It lays emphasis on the problem of double burden of women and examines gender division of labour in the family on fifteen activities, out of which eight concern running of a household and seven concern taking care of family members. It compares division of household chores as viewed by younger and older generation of women and men and also takes into account how the real division of responsibilities changed in time together with normative perception of population between 1995 and 2006. It monitors time demands of unpaid work placed on men and women and the frequency of different activities in the private sphere. It presents how women and men solve the conflicts between the demands laid by work and family as well as implications resulting from the discrepancy in family and working duties. It describes material life conditions of women and men of various ages, as well as their satisfaction with them. Finally it analyses opinions of men and women on the course of society and their perception of crucial social issues and key political and social institutions. It analyses gender differences in the electoral behaviour and civic participation of Slovak population and takes a closer look into the representation of women in legislative and executive bodies.

So far, topics and problems have been mentioned that are included into seven chapters of the publication. The last eighth chapter differs from the rest of the book in its character, content and applied methods. It encompasses results of content analysis of selected press from 2005 until 2008 and aims at capturing media images of basic attributes of femininity in general with emphasis on women of mature years and elderly women. Authors of this chapter (M. Bosá, M. Minarovič and M. Sekulová) worked on the assumption that the analysis of media discourse on women helps better understand the influence of media on the lives of women in private and in public spheres.

Content analysis concentrated on identifying the basic images of femininity and of the aging process using newspaper articles and photographs from four dailies (Sme, Pravda, Nový čas, and Hospodárske noviny) on the one hand. It also paid attention to interviews with professionally successful women and men in four magazines (Plus 7 dní, Život, Slovenka, Trend). Besides, content analyses used the material from interviews with well-known female personalities published throughout a year and a half in special supplement of the daily Sme (SME Ženy).

The otherness of this chapter is not the trouble. The main author of the book herself substantiates in the preface the complementarity of methodological approaches by anticipating synergic cognitive effect. The assumption is legitimate in a work with a character like this. The problematic aspect of the last chapter is that it leaves us with a certain impression of voluntaristic interpretation of content analysis visible mostly in sections 8.1.2 and 8.1.3. Many strong assertions and conclusions regarding how women are perceived or thought of sound subjectively. Since they are not supported by arguments such as occurrence frequency of the described

phenomenon they seem to be more a reflection of opinions and gender values of the authors. Here, content analysis is presented as a qualitative method. This cannot be completely accepted. Methodological handbooks describe content analysis as quantitative, objective analysis of any statement that aims at transforming a document, text or any other statement of non-quantitative character into a quantitative form. Therefore the interpretation of content analysis should be based on a certain quantification of analysed units (they are mostly defined on two levels – as record units and as context units). It is not always the case with the chapter eight of the book. Interpretation (mostly of the extensive chapter 8.1.2 called *Images of femininity and old age in select daily papers*) is quite often based on vague claims such as “most articles...”, “it was sometimes difficult to avoid the impression...” and the like without supporting this claim by any objective data from the content analysis. Just to illustrate this interpretation here is at least one such claim: “And what is the society's attitude towards women who do not have children? Many people think of them as “unfeminine women” or as “bad mothers”. Consequently, not only mothers, but also childless women risk being accused of failure and selfishness”. (p. 266)

In spite of these reservations about the last chapter the book is a useful and successful accomplishment. Its significance does not only lie only in the emphasis on the gender dimension, albeit I believe it is very important. The publication contains a large number of valuable research data, findings and interpretations from more key social areas (concerning private, working and civic relationships and attitudes) that create an apt sociological image of the contemporary life in Slovakia. When capturing generation gaps and describing not only the existing situation, but also the one desired by the respondents, the authors endeavour to reveal a hidden and so far unused potential of the society. A certain mobilizing element is one of the leitmotifs of the book. Astute reader can find it not only in the area of gender equality, but also in other areas of public interest – the envisioned goal being the increase of individual responsibility and freedom. Time comparison of data and description of development trends represent a very valuable asset of the publication.

As I wrote at the beginning, one could start reading the publication *She and He in Slovakia. Gender and Age in the Period of Transition* in any part and read each of the chapters separately. However, considering all the mentioned facts I recommend those interested in the issues and gender and age to read the whole book. Those who are not specialists in some of the issues covered in the book will be offered interesting insight and food for thought, while the rest of readers will be provided not only knowledge and inspiration, but also useful research material and a potential reference source.

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