

Women on the Glass Cliff: Managing Local Funds

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The purpose of this research was to present problems and challenges that must be faced by women managers who stand at the helm of non-governmental organizations, which is traditionally considered to be a men's domain. The organizations studied and selected by us, as very particular within the specificity of the third sector, were local funds – the method of a collective case study was adopted. The particular focus was put on the identification of: reasons and manners of women leaders' involvement in establishing and running local funds, objectives they execute, distinguishing features of particular local funds resulting from women's leadership, opportunities and obstacles awaiting women leaders in these organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership, management of the organisation and women's work in NGOs are rarely subject to systematic studies worldwide. There are no sufficient, precise statistical data presenting the situation of women in third sector organisations, in particular concerning women's share in the management of these organisations, managing roles they fulfil and challenges which women leaders must face. Poorly identified are also determinants of the development of women's organisations all over the world, particularly political and legal, as well as cultural. It would, however, seem that there exists a considerable research gap concerning women's leadership, women in management positions in NGOs and the way women fulfil managerial roles and manage organisations.

The research shows that due to a number of factors – social, political, economic and cultural – the feminisation and women's leadership in NGOs differs depending on a country. Nevertheless, challenges which women are facing as a result of progressing shifts in the third sector include: the choice of the management style, the issue of salaries and forms of employment, selection and execution of values, organisational mission and vision, opportunities for advancement and development, as well as overcoming professional obstacles, existing stereotypes and imposed roles. In Poland, researchers focus, among others, on studies concerning the activity and participation of women in NGOs and the identification of the role of women's organisations.

It would, however, seem that there exists a considerable research gap concerning women's leadership, women in management positions in NGOs and the way women fulfil managerial roles and manage organisations.

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to present problems and challenges that must be faced by women managers who stand at the helm of non-governmental organisations, which is traditionally considered to be a men's domain. The organisations studied and selected by us, as very particular within the specificity of the third sector, were local funds – the method of a collective case study was adopted. The particular focus was put on the identification of: reasons and manners of women leaders' involvement in establishing and running local funds, objectives they execute, distinguishing features of particular local funds resulting from women's leadership, opportunities and obstacles awaiting women leaders in these organisations.

WOMEN IN THE THIRD SECTOR – REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The feminisation of NGOs is a phenomenon occurring in numerous countries across the globe. Notably, in less developed countries or patriarchal societies more men than women work in the third sector; moreover, they also take the highest positions in these organisations more frequently than women who must face numerous obstacles on their way to a professional promotion – e.g. the so-called glass ceiling (Damman, Heyse, Mills 2014, Pynes, 2000, Sahasrabudhe, 2013, Biernat-Jarka, Trębska, 2016). At the same time, there is no research on the subject of the glass cliff in the third sector, while the phenomenon has been identified in enterprises (women leaders overrepresented in precarious areas) and selection of candidates for political positions (Ryan, Haslam, 2005). The glass cliff means that women take management and leadership positions more easily in the situation where the risk of failure is significant, in situations of a deep crisis.

The situation of women in NGOs differs between various countries, which results from legal and social circumstances, barriers and expectations, as well as roles and stereotypes concerning men and women. Beginning in Europe, in Sweden, from the late 19th century, the non-governmental sector was created by middle-class men, but within the span of a century women dominated Swedish organisations with their commitment; they also moved away from the patriarchal formula of the organisations' operations (Sköndalsinstitutet, Wijkström, 1995). In France, the feminisation of NGOs relates to the perception of the sector as more family- and women-friendly, as well as men's increased interest in benefits of working in the private sector. Incidentally, the non-governmental sector in France gives more opportunities for part-time work, which coupled with a shorter work week, favours the activity and employment of women with children (Lanfranchi, Narcy, 2013). In the American third sector women play a significant part, in particular in the area of philanthropy, employment and volunteer work. Traditional American philanthropy is built on the shoulders of women who for centuries have supported those less affluent and built museums or universities (Davidson). Interestingly enough, American studies show that society, as well as women themselves, often diminish their role and importance in charity, volunteer work and work for the third sector, and usually unintentionally replicate traditional gender roles, also in organisations (Petrzelka, Mannon, 2006).

Women involved in the third sector in Latin America encounter other difficulties. For instance, it is remarked that in Peru, women in NGOs are employed with low salaries or without reimbursement at all, which testifies to the ostensible feminisation and gradually makes the third sector dependent on the work of poor women (Jenkins, 2009). In Asia, in India, it has been noticed that the common trait of women's NGOs is the willingness to help other people as well as feminist beliefs. Importantly enough, the social status – class and income – help Indian women not only to start their non-governmental activity, but also face controversial problems and issues deeply rooted in their culture and tradition (Handy Ranade, Kassam, 2007). However, despite the fact that the Indian NGO sector is dominated by women, decision-making positions are occupied mostly by men (ISST, 2016).

Studies conducted in the EU member states as well indicate the still insufficient number of management positions occupied by women in NGOs, even if this number remains higher in comparison to business enterprises (Claus Sandlin, Callahan, 2013).

The issue of women's activity relates also to the observed shifts in NGOs in Anglo-Saxon countries. Organisations characterised by collective action based on ethics, caring for their beneficiaries and employees, and appealing to social justice, increasingly often become business-oriented, competitive, introduce changes or are "colonised" by technocratic solutions, constant monitoring and measurements of results, as well as the focus on technical processes of goal execution (Baines et al, 2012). Organisations that adopt the business model become more "male" in their organisational culture, which researchers associate with the progressing masculinisation of the sector, stemming from the shifts on the job market where an increasing number of men are made redundant and "move" towards professions or sectors traditionally "reserved" for women. Researchers conclude that managers who appreciate a pension plan, and opportunities for development and public service are more willing to accept a position in the public sector, whereas managers who value family-friendly organisational policy and larger responsibility would probably accept a job in the third sector (Lee, Wilkins, 2011). Furthermore, it is an important point that work in NGOs give their employees more satisfaction than work in other sectors (Lee, Wilkins, 2011, Becchetti, Castriota, Depedri, 2014).

According to certain authors, women leadership or management of an NGO is focused on fostering values, interpersonal communication and participatory decision-making (Vasavada, 2012). It was also noticed that multiple life roles which women fulfil enable them to develop and practice multitasking and the ability to forge interpersonal relationships as well as acquire competences of a successful leader – thus impacting the effectiveness of their management in organisations (Pynes, 2009). NGOs run by women more frequently adopt the organisational mission and vision based on values (Claus, Sandlin, Callahan, 2013), and women who reach a managerial position in organisations dominated by men learn the "male" style of management "as the go". Meanwhile, women who work in feminised organisations or have run their own organisation from the beginning show the tendency to apply the "female" management style (Dym, Hutson, 2005). Another reason why women in NGOs adopt either the matriarchal or patriarchal management style is the pressure from the members of the organisation itself, who force certain behaviours on their leaders, depending on needs and expectation (Hailey, 2006).

In 2005, the first Polish study of the situation concerning the activity and employment of women in the third sector was conducted. Its results indicated that women working in the sector enjoy the friendly atmosphere, opportunities for self-improvement and professional development, as well as tolerant attitude towards maternity (Wysocka, 2009). The research proved that certain features of working in NGOs, such as: using and expanding women's qualifications, largely informal relations at work, flexicurity, in particular flexibility in terms of working hours, can support increasing the activity and employment of women (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, Rymsza, 2009). At the same time, the research revealed that women lack the stability of employment and higher salaries which are to this day rather rare in the Polish third sector.

Other studies led to a conclusion that by deciding to involve themselves in the work for NGOs, women desire real changes which would improve the current situation of women whose self-realisation is for various reasons made difficult. Other motivations include: meeting the needs of women in terms of public services and promotion of the idea of equal rights (Domaradzka, 2009). The increased activity and involvement of women in the work for Polish NGOs can be caused also by their inferior – compared to men – situation on the Polish job market, exclusion or marginalisation in the public sphere or poverty among women, i.e. the so-called "feminisation of poverty" (Tarkowska, 2009, Desperak, 2009, Radiukiewicz, 2016). This phenomenon is related to the outcome of the Polish political transformation, where women are indicated as one of the "losing" groups – previously working in "women's" areas: education and healthcare (Desperak, 2009) – that after the transformation-related reduction of employment found themselves among workforce of the non-governmental sector (Radiukiewicz, 2016). Therefore, for women the participation in NGOs means the choice of a workplace often without or with a low salary, unstable and temporary (Radiukiewicz, 2016).

On the basis of the conducted quantitative research, M. Borowska (2012) indicated several key findings concerning the situation of women in Polish NGOs. Various “glass” phenomena identified on the job market occur within the sector – more frequent promotions of men in feminised organisations (glass elevators) or “sticky floors”; in the Polish third sector the composition of management approaches the parity, so currently there is no glass ceiling; there are areas dominated by women (healthcare, education and welfare) which relates to the horizontal segregation (Borowska, 2012). However, women’s NGOs less frequently focus on the issue of equal rights (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, Wrona, 2017).

In summary, the identified research gap concerns the research on the leadership and the specificity of women’s management in NGOs, in particular in the identification of the phenomenon with the use of qualitative research methods.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To find the answer to the stated problem and the identified research gap, the following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1: What were the reasons behind the establishment of the local fund by women and how did they shape and participate in that process?
- RQ2: What objectives are realised by funds managed by women and how are (were) they constructed?
- RQ3: What women leaders bring to the funds they are running? What distinguishes these organisations? Do they have particular traits/attributes that stem from women’s leadership?
- RQ4: What obstacles and opportunities women leaders encountered in the development of the funds they manage?

To answer these questions, we decided to adopt the empirical research strategy, and selected the method of a collective (or multiple) case study. A case study is a research strategy based on the understanding of processes occurring within a particular case, or system (Eisenhardt, 1989). Case studies can be based on single or numerous cases and concern various levels of analysis (Yin, 1984). There are several distinctions of case studies in the literature. One of the most popular divisions was proposed by Robert E. Stake who described three types of case studies (Stake, 2005): intrinsic case study, instrumental case study, and finally collective case study. In our research we propose the latter, which includes several cases to achieve a better and deeper understanding of the phenomena that interest us.

We decided that the research would focus on a single type of organisation – local funds. The focus on only one type of NGO stems from a number of reasons. Above all, local funds:

1. appeared in Poland after 1997 – currently there are over 20 in operation, including 13 within one network;
2. can operate either as associations or foundations;
3. compared to other organisations, they have fairly uniform objectives related to the improvement of the quality of life in local communities, both in the individual and organised dimension; the important area of operations for most local funds are scholarship funds and numerous educational programs;
4. function as “leaders” in their local community – integrating and initiating the cooperation between partners from different sectors, supporting smaller organisations, among others, within regranting procedures;
5. aim at building long-term financial stability. Their foundations consist of restricted endowment capital that secures future financing of the organisation’s operations. The endowment is formed from funds both private (philanthropy of individuals and business entities) and public (for instance – financial support from local authorities).

We selected 3 case studies of local funds headed by women. These were funds located in various parts of Poland. Due to the possible identification of the interviewees, names of the funds were removed.

For the purpose of this study, the organisations were ascribed letters A, B and C for the presentation of the findings. The choice of 3 particular cases of local funds was dictated by the following factors:

1. they were established and are managed by women,
2. they are the oldest out of over 20 funds operating in Poland.
3. they have been operating without interruption since their creation.

The research was conducted in 2017. To collect data in each case study (local fund) three research methods were used:

1. in-depth interviews with leaders who run the funds,
2. short participant observation in the organisation, carried out during visits in selected local funds,
3. analysis of organisational documents obtained during visits (reports, organisations' portfolios and websites).

In-depth interviews were conducted on the basis of a free-form interview in which only the key points were outlined. The interviewees were allowed free, in-depth reflexion on any subject. Interviews were, with the consent of the subjects, recorded and then transcribed. All available organisational documents that in any way related to the research problem were collected as well. Observation notes taken by one of the researchers during visits to funds that year were significant as well. After transcribing the interviews and organising documents and notes from the analysis of websites, the analysis of data began. Due to a small number of interviews and documents, computer programmes were not used in the analysis. Interviews and documents were read multiple times to identify emerging relationships and acquire the comprehensive view of the situation of women leaders. We decided to present each particular case study in turn, and then conducted a comparative analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Fund A

Local fund A was established by local leaders who noted the needs of the community, mostly in the area of education, sport and culture. The support was provided by a previously existing employers' organisation, whose objectives were, however, limited only to economic growth.

“In time, thoughts started to appear – what about culture, what about sports? So, the search began for the formula of an organisation working on something more than economic growth.”

The current leader of the fund was from the very beginning among the initiators of its creation. The most important action in the initial phase was the creation of the endowment capital by acquiring funds from donors, which thanks to the participation in the Akademia Rozwoju Filantropii (Philanthropy Development Academy) project were doubled (according to the principle of matching “one to one”, with the minimum collected capital at the level no lower than PLN 100,000):

“That was the challenge (...) We encouraged the local government to participate in the creation of the local fund as well.”

The current leader – even though she was not the first president of the fund (previously it had been managed by men) – did not notice significant changes in the functioning of the fund, related to the change of leadership.

“Certainly, for the fund it was a transition “from a man to a woman”, but there weren't any reservations or resistance.”

Assessing her way of managing the fund, she points to her own foresight and reluctance to take risks. But she justifies it more with the specificity of the organisation itself than her leadership skills.

“My distinguishing feature is, in a way, thrift. In brief, I “don’t go crazy” – don’t spend a lot of money for something that gives little advantage. The important thing is a common-sense approach to the cost-effect relation.”

However, she sees the appearance of a woman as the manager of the local fund A on the one hand as a coincidence (they happened to be looking for a new president), and on the other hand as a kind of regularity in the NGOs sector. This relates to lower financial demands, less mobility, and greater sense of mission and involvement in social issues, including problem-solving.

“Why a woman at the helm of a local fund? Because women in Poland earn less and don’t care as much. Because women get used to things (...) Because women are less likely to decide on making changes. Women can ‘slave away’ without pay, and this is considered normal.”

What should be regarded as the main objective of the local fund A, according to its statute, is supporting other people, both in the institutional and individual dimension. The leader of the fund sees its objectives in the networking of organisations and providing young people with opportunities for growth:

“Looking at the main objective of the activity, it is supporting gifted and active individuals. Supporting the gifted refers to the youth and is carried out in the form of scholarships and supporting the active concerns smaller but active organisations (...) We don’t want to compete with small organisations. We are rather acting as an integrator, a catalyst, someone who initiates partnerships.”

The leader of the fund A believes her role as a woman is in creating an appropriate climate for cooperation with others within the organisation and outside of it, a kind of “warmth”, but also order, thrift and attention to detail.

“A woman brings to the fund diligence and circumspection, attention to details, prudence, safety, tactfulness and a kind of “cosiness”. Because women are characterised by a kind of intrinsic warmth, the willingness to surround themselves with people, looking for support and acceptance of what they do, as well as delving deeper into problems. Men can’t manage that.”

She also indicates the similarities of women running NGOs in Poland. Among the shared traits of women leaders, she lists primarily the commitment and caring for the common good:

“What connects us is a stronger involvement. Men don’t become involved so strongly (...) We also share empathy for people we encounter” And a kind of mission-orientation, i.e. putting what we do before financial profits.”

An important element of activities is building relationships with people. In the case of a local fund that bases its operations on donors, this area seems particularly significant. Benefactors need to be acquired and maintained, so the most important skill is the ability to work with people:

“In general, I devote most of my time to relationships with people.”

People, as the beneficiaries of activities, and donors, as those who provide the material foundations of the fund’s functioning, are the essence of its operations. The leader – speaking about the challenges of

working as the boss, indicates the low level of involvement, both on the part of the members of the organisation and its benefactors, emphasising at the same time that without people and their involvement in the organisation, without the response of the beneficiaries of the activities and the increase of the social involvement, the fund would simply cease to exist:

“What makes the work difficult? The lack of full involvement of the Fund’s board members. In other words, some people are very honoured by the sole fact of being on the Board, they congratulate on achievements and successes, but don’t get involved themselves (...) It would be great if everyone were in the frame of mind of changes and openness.”

From the perspective of local funds’ operations (serving as an intermediary in handing down donors’ money), among administrative and technical limitations, apart from numerous controls, there are also problems related to financing indirect costs.

“The problem of most organisations, especially local funds that pass the money on – for instance, in the form of scholarships – are administrative costs. We acquire donors, we hand over the funds we obtained from them to scholarship holders, but we have to finance the cost of services and processing somehow. Benefactors usually do not think about that.”

Fund B

Local fund B was created initially as an additional activity of people working with the local foundation (which constituted – particularly in the first period of its operations – significant support for the fund). The leader of the fund – who was its president from the very beginning, among numerous women involved – became the boss “organically”. It was the result of the involvement in the creation and functioning of the fund which remained in her to this day.

“When the fund was established and there was a vote, it turned out that no-one had any doubts that it should be me (...) I was the person who created that fund (...) The fund is my baby.”

At the stage of the initiation of the fund’s operations, the challenge was to collect the capital endowment, which initially seemed unrealistic, mostly due to significant structural unemployment. At the same time – by creating the capital endowment – a decision was made to forego public (self-government) funding, adopting the assumption that charity should depend above all on donations from individuals and private enterprises.

“From the start we decided that we wouldn’t involve public money in this. It’s supposed to be exclusively charity-based.”

The leader regards the objectives of the local fund B as a part of public benefit activities, including organisational and financial support for individuals and other organisations. It is possible mainly due to the position that the fund has established and trust that it enjoys in the local community.

“We are a kind of ‘transit’ between the benefactors and the beneficiaries. People know that it works on the local level and that it’s locally used.”

The main beneficiaries of the funds’ activities are children, even though the fund realised a part of its activities in the group of the youth and adults.

“Our greatest motivation to work are children. Even though the first addressee of our actions were the youth. We wanted to help them, so that they learned better, go to the university, so that they wouldn’t say that nothing happens around here.”

The leader of the fund points out the specificity of the organisation’s operations, which she calls a “great philanthropy”. This is one of the reasons why local funds, due to their specific features, are headed by women. Involvement is also a common trait of women managing local funds in Poland.

“A woman is essential, because these are problems that require a deeper consideration and relationships with people that need to be built and fostered (...) A woman provides warmth and enormous commitment.” [...] We share sacrifice and involvement. We are connected by a shared issue – helping the weaker ones.”

What makes her work easier, is her passion. Support of the family and friends is important as well, as is the positive attitude of the local community and the reception of her activities. The activity in a local fund involves, above all, working with people and for people:

“In our case, it turns out to be true that work can be one’s passion. We turned what we do into our passion. The benefactors of our fund are our friends.”

Despite much success, the leader of the local fund B points out certain limitations. On the one hand, their nature is organisational (indirect costs of projects). On the other hand, it is decreasing social involvement.

“Finances are an important issue, more precisely – indirect costs. There exists a certain conviction that since it’s charity, then I should ‘live on air alone’.”

Fund C

Local fund C was created “from scratch”, without any support from the previously operating entity. 20 years ago, funds constituted a brand-new entity in the Polish context. It resulted, on the one hand, in their appeal (as an idea), and on the other hand, in certain problems and limitations, including the lack of traditions of charity work.

*“If I knew then what it would be... Lack of knowledge was good.”
“We had no tradition of ‘giving’.”*

In practice, the process of creating the fund was a significant challenge for the leader and it required taking numerous actions related to the acquisition of the capital endowment, including convincing people to the idea of the fund, treated as “organic” work. It required a lot of enthusiasm which, according to the fund leader, is a distinguishing feature of women in particular.

“The enthusiasm must be absolute. Without it, you can’t be a leader (...) Comparing men and women – I think I was more enthusiastic. Men are often malcontents (...) What matters for a guy is investments and not people.”

Fund leadership was the result of the involvement in its creation, as well as the natural openness to new ideas and social actions:

“My drive to action is probably encoded in my DNA.”

From the perspective of the leader, managing the local fund is the outcome of women's traits (empathy, bravery and confidence in achieving success, the wish to change the world), but also the specificity of funds and their manner of operation (solving social problems, responding to local needs).

“Women stand at the helm of local funds, because they have more boldness, empathy, they sense local needs, and feel something can be changed – you only need to become involved. Women have a conviction that you have to push forward, that things will surely succeed.”

“A woman brings to the fund empathy and better understanding of local needs. Women notice other people. They know that there are people who need support.”

What women bring to local funds – except for the orientation on the needs of other people – is above all the atmosphere of cooperation and orientation on team work:

“Women are more caring towards other people (...) A woman wants to share her success. I personally believe that this is always many people's effort. The credit goes to everyone, not just me.”

According to the leader, the objective is first and foremost counteracting the indifference and changing the world for the better.

“In general, our objective is counteracting every form of indifference. It is about the indifference towards another human being, environment, poverty. Indifferent people are vapid and become toxic (...) “People need to be educated. When you are educated – you have more opportunities to choose from” We're supposed to change social awareness (...) Everyone can be a “changer of the world.”

Activities of the fund are addressed mainly to the youth who is perceived as “the future”. However, this does not exclude activities for other groups (children, adults).

The functioning of the local fund C encounters certain limitations, related mostly to the acquisition of donors, and decreasing social involvement and social trust:

“People don't want to understand that locally given money bring profit locally.”

“Less and less people are becoming socially involved. People are not willing to act.”

People are what gives meaning to the work: both those who provide support and those who benefit from the fund's activities.

“People are the foundation. (...) I could always depend on people.”
“Children see that we are giving them a chance.”

CONCLUSIONS

The most important findings of the study:

1. The interviewed leaders did not see their positions as a glass cliff, but rather a challenge which someone had to accept. At the same time, the local community clearly “pushed” them to the top of this very cliff, which was evidenced by the fact they had decided to take up the management of risky organizations, without previous traditions or good practices in place (first local funds in Poland). Furthermore, they took action in the situation of a financial crisis in their communities, dominant precarious conditions of life, where the collection of funds for

organizational objectives was often very difficult. The risk of failure was therefore significant, which they had mentioned in interviews.

2. Women in our research are leaders – initiators of the creation of the fund who often managed it from the start. Environments in which they created their funds had a positive attitude towards their activities, and the women were natural leaders. Perhaps difficult local situations appealed to their social sensitivity because the funds execute important objectives in local communities. They treated emerging transformation-related problems of local poverty as a challenge, without feeling in any way that the communities are placing them “on a cliff” [cf. Desperak, 2009, Radiukiewicz, 2016]. Like the Polish proverb says: where the devil gives up, a woman carries on.
3. Women perceive objectives executed by the funds, except for those clearly stipulated in their statutes, in the following way: resolving social issues, responding to local events, changing the world and people’s attitudes – in the spirit of values, mission and organisational vision [cf. Clauss, 2013].
4. The objective of their activities is creating networks with other organisations, creating a shared non-governmental space.
5. The studied women leaders ascribe to themselves certain leadership skills which they consider to be “female” traits, such as: diligence, caution, prudence, creating a warm atmosphere, involvement, sacrifice, enthusiasm – often presenting them in opposition to “male” traits. It confirms the research path that divides leadership styles into more “female” and more “male” (Vasavada, 2012, Patrzelka, Mannon, 2006). By adopting such a perspective of their own leadership and contribution to the management of the organisation, women in a way both perpetuate and confirm common beliefs and stereotypes concerning women’s roles in the organisation and society (Patrzelka, Mannon, 2006).
6. Limitations which women leaders perceive in the management of NGOs include: low salaries, managing a limited budget of the organisation, weakening involvement of members and stakeholders in the activities of the organisation. The first two factors are identified as the social lack of awareness about the mechanisms of NGOs’ functioning and the prevailing belief that the charity should not be paid work – which are the same problems women in NGOs must face in numerous countries (Jenkins, 2009, Bogacz-Wojtanowska, Rymysza, 2009).
7. Women leaders are motivated to work in NGOs by non-material aspects, including the satisfaction drawn from the achieved objectives and fulfilling the mission, real assistance given to the beneficiaries, contributing to the changes in the community (networking, integrating and initiating cooperation), leaving legacy, and co-creating a certain local tradition. Such motivations support the activity of women and their employment in the third sector (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, Rymysza, 2009, Wysocka, 2009, Domaradzka, 2009).

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