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She is the author of over 60 papers published in journals in Poland and abroad, and several books on social psychology. She has been awarded several academic prizes, including the Laur Jagielloński for outstanding academic achievements, a medal from Polish Association of Social Psychology for scientific achievements and the Tadeusz Tomaszewski Prize for best publication in psychology. She also received a grant as part of the "Stay With Us" program organized by the *Polityka* weekly (2001).

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BRINGING AN END TO UNKINDNESS

We talk to **Prof. Małgorzata Kossowska** from the Institute of Psychology at the Jagiellonian University about whether women are appreciated, the significance of openness and tolerance, and what makes a terrorist.

ACADEMIA: Women account for a smaller share of members of the Polish Academy of Sciences than of its sister institutions in Sudan and Saudi Arabia. Why do you think this is?

MAŁGORZATA KOSSOWSKA: I'm delighted that the Academy has appointed more young women scientists than before, and I hope the trend is maintained. I'm not naïve, though; even in countries with the highest gender equality the numbers of women in science academies and other prestigious scientific institutions is low. And the numbers get lower the higher up the hierarchy we look. Why is that? It's a vast question to try to address, but reasons include the ingrained culture of male domination, unequal distribution of power, various social policies preserving and bolstering inequality, gender stereotypes...

Are women working in science properly appreciated?

If we measure value by numbers of women serving on boards of scientific and academic institutions, then the answer is a resounding no. They are also rarely awarded prestigious distinctions, such as prizes of the Foundation for Polish Science and the National Science Centre. If we are talking about the presence of women in academic discourse, then it depends very much on the discipline. For example, philosophy is a difficult field for women to break into, while many others – in particular life sciences – are far more egalitarian.

In your own scientific discipline, are there more men or women?

There are quite a few women, perhaps even outnumbering men, although when we look at scientists who are widely recognized at home and abroad, men dom-

inate yet again. But I am watching the next generation closely, and I have no doubt that young women will come out fighting.

What about your older colleagues? Are women as able as men to continue working and lecturing?

They are working and lecturing. But – here I have data – their participation in research projects, especially those more prestigious and highly-funded, reduces significantly with age. I sit on the board of the National Science Centre, where we analyze women's engagement in grant activities by comparing the numbers and ages of men and women applying for and receiving specific scientific grants. We find no difference between genders when it comes to minor grants aimed at relatively junior researchers, but when it comes to prestigious, high-value grants, women are at a huge disadvantage. It's difficult to tell whether there are generational differences; younger women are active, aware and well-prepared to compete with men, and most are yet to start families. And, just as was the case for their older colleagues, the latter is certain to slow their career progression, which in turn will likely exclude them from vying for money and status later. This is because science is highly competitive, and any break, any time you slow down – even briefly – tends to mean poorer results, which are very difficult to make up for later. That's why support for talented, motivated women determined to work in this fascinating yet difficult field is extremely important.

You held post-doc positions in Maryland and Tel Aviv. Where would you say is more women-friendly?

Working in the States is absolutely amazing, regardless of gender. Science and the entire system supporting it

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is incredibly well organized and funded. There isn't a better country to be a scientist. But I shouldn't generalize. I was lucky to work with the best team, under excellent supervision, with post-docs selected from all over the globe. The situation is different in Israel, although it's still better than Poland. I didn't feel any difference in how I was treated – it was wonderful working in both countries. I also know excellent laboratories in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden. I never experienced gender prejudice, in spite of major differences in organization and structure. But let's not forget that post-doc positions are unusual as jobs go. Abroad there isn't this tendency to moralize, which is a major drag in Poland; there aren't the constant organizational duties, such as sitting on boards, committees, subcommittees, endless teams for absolutely everything, which take up an enormous amount of time in Poland. The work is clearly defined, and although it is competitive, gender doesn't come into it in my experience. I also haven't encountered gender as a barrier to employment. I haven't encountered gender discrimination against junior scientists in Poland, either, but I do think it is a problem faced by more senior women.

Polish people can be said to be slow to evolve socially, and they tend to very set in their ways. Why is that?

There are many reasons, but I think it's mainly because of the role the Church has played and continues to play in Poland. In fact this role is increasing. The Church preserves conservative views, hinders and discourages change and pushes people into mental backwaters. It's true that people need clear guidance on how to live their lives, that they need comfort and solace at difficult times or when they feel overwhelmed, and they find these things in religion and in the Church. But this has consequences. Poles are also insecure about many things, such as their place in Europe and in the world, whether they are treated well by others, whether they are seen as sufficiently civilized or whether they are up to the challenges of the contemporary world. They have a lot to catch up on, because history hasn't exactly been kind to them. And they make up for these insecurities with arrogance, closing themselves off from others and focusing only on things they find familiar. The phenomenon has been described in depth by Krystyna Skarżyńska and Agnieszka Golec de Zavala.

Although the dislike and distrust of others goes back a long way in Poland, it seems to be on the rise. Why is that?

Because of fear. I don't know if this is permanent, but – as we are increasingly seeing – it's certainly easy to inspire and manipulate. Categorizing people into “familiar” and “others” according to obvious traits such



as gender, color or religion is a basic, natural process of social cognition. What is not natural is taking advantage of this tendency, exaggerating differences and using them to stoke fears. We should be doing the opposite – highlighting our similarities and common goals and showing that we can work together. But there's no political value in that.

Statistically speaking, young Europeans are left-leaning, open and tolerant. Young Poles are the polar opposite with their right-wing, homophobic and anti-Islamic views. Where do these ultra-nationalist views come from?

I wouldn't get too carried away with openness – attitudes in Europe are changing, and this applies to young people, too. That's a subject for another conversation, but my point is that Poles are not unique. The tools they use to quell their fears – prejudice, hate speech, aggression – are known and used the world over. The difference is that they have been legitimized in Poland. If basic social norms such as respect for others, politeness, or taking care not to hurt or offend people no longer apply, it means that it's acceptable to insult, abuse or assault. What's more, the authorities delight in reaching for those tools, setting an example and showing that such behavior is tolerated and permitted. Social norms are one of the most important regulators of relationships between people, so it is essential that we preserve them rather than undermining them.

The 19th-century poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid once said that Polish society is “no society”. Has anything changed since then?

We were heading in the right direction for a while, and it's not going to be easy to return to this path. First of all, Polish society is fractured and it's difficult to bring together polarized groups. And a society must have common goals, values and strategies. Second of all, we don't respect others. There is no society without understanding and tolerance towards differences. Finally, when it comes to outsiders, even if we don't actively seek to harm them, we certainly don't tend to help or support them. And a society which doesn't help those who need it cannot be healthy. And so on.

Is it possible to inherit beliefs?

In a “soft” way it is. We tend to share the beliefs of the people we have grown up with. We absorb them, and it's difficult to distance ourselves from that even if we actively rebel. But there is more: beliefs, especially the most radical, serve as a cognitive response to insecurity. And there are biological differences in how we deal with insecurity: some people are more susceptible to radical views than others due to biologically-determined mechanisms.

You were a member of the governing board of the Society for Terrorism Research in the United States. What kinds of personality traits push individuals towards terrorism? Because clearly not all people who feel frustrated and excluded direct their aggression towards others...

It's a vast topic. I don't want to trivialize it by just saying a few words, so I'll focus on motivation as the source of terrorism, because it's something my team is working on. I should add that works of Katarzyna Jaśko are especially good on the subject. We know that one of the most important motivations for terrorists is their quest for significance – a term coined by Arie Kruglanski and his team in Maryland. It's a powerful factor, which appears as a result of frustration of important needs such as the individual's need to matter, have a sense of their own life, belonging and control. Those needs are threatened when individuals or groups experience rejection by society, humiliation, injustice and lack of respect. Research shows that social rejection and ostracism facilitate aggression, even towards people who aren't responsible for this isolation. Recent systematic analysis reveals that in comparison with the general population, individuals who engage in terrorist acts are far more likely to be single, divorced or widowed, separated from their family and friends. Violence, aggression and revenge also present when individuals feel their social identity is under threat. This happens when a group an individual belongs is treated as inferior, less talented or less deserving. A threat, perceived or real, to important values (including religion) breeds conflict and facilitates radicalism. It is those values which become the source of violence, leading researchers to coining the term “sacred values”. They are values such as God, honor and homeland; values individuals believe in entirely and are willing to kill others for and die themselves to support. Research into collective narcissism – a form of unstable attachment to one's own group, described by Agnieszka Golec de Zavala – reveals that it is linked with individuals perceiving their own group as being under constant threat, systematically disrespected, undervalued and insulted, all of which fosters aggression. Additionally, constantly thinking of oneself as a victim can push an individual towards aggression as retaliation against others. These are all potential reasons why people who experience these emotions reach for violence.

But other research shows that the same factors lead to kindness and socially responsible behavior.

Of course people who are or feel excluded are frequently productive members of society. They continue to believe in a greater good despite being stripped of dignity themselves. It's worth bearing in mind, because it means we are dealing with both universal

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and individual mechanisms. Frustration and disappointment which can motivate individuals to rebuild their sense of significance are universal. The more powerful an individual's experience of humiliation and injustice, the more powerful their motivation to rebuild their sense of worth and engage in activities they perceive as useful and effective. On an individual level, at times people choose to rebuild their sense of worth through violence, even though they don't have to.

When faced with a choice to engage in violence or kindness, why do some people go for the former?

Extreme behavior and violence can be attractive for two reasons. Firstly, they are often perceived as highly effective in reaching certain goals. We should remember that the main aim of it usually is not to improve the excluded group's conditions – that's secondary. That's why arduous, long-term activities to help the group don't seem to be a good strategy. The individual's main goal, then, is to rebuild their own self-worth. Terrorist acts are immediately publicized by the media, making them seem spectacular and effective. No one has heard of me before, and now look! Everyone is talking about me! Secondly, extreme behavior clearly communicates a complete dedication to a cause. If someone needs to feel acknowledged and significant, this is extremely important.

However, choosing between violence and kindness is decided by social contexts. Research into social influence shows that people care about the opinions of individuals they see as important, such as leaders and members of groups they belong to. This concern over what others think is enhanced when we feel worthless. A radicalized social environment – which includes online circles – can affect individuals' intentions to engage in terrorism through two main mechanisms. The first is that seeing other radicalized individuals legitimizes the very idea of violence as socially acceptable; as a norm. This significantly reduces their objections to using violence. Research shows that when violence is socially acceptable – for example, when political leaders say that only violence can help reach a particular goal – people feel less guilt and stress when resorting to violence. The second mechanism, known as group polarization, is to do with intensity of interactions with people who can influence one's extreme beliefs. Being wholly immersed in certain beliefs, in complete isolation from others (especially those which might undermine them), can make an individual believe that any means to eliminate those conflicting views are acceptable. This is simply a description of a motivational mechanism explaining why some people become terrorists while others don't. There are also other processes, very well described in literature. An excellent example is the staircase model proposed by

Fathali M. Moghaddam, where each step is influenced by a specific psychological process, suggesting that the higher the individual moves up the staircase, the fewer alternatives to violence they will see.

Why are the vast majority of terrorists men?

Some women do become terrorists, too. I recently read a fascinating report on the subject written by Dr. Aleksandra Zięba from the University of Warsaw including lots of statistical data. I think that the mechanisms underlying terrorism are the same in women and men, even though I have read research whose authors try to indicate factors specific to women. For example, according to the scholar of suicidal terrorism Mia Bloom, terrorists are motivated by factors she describes as the Four Rs Plus One. They are revenge, redemption, respect and relationships, with rape as the additional motive for aggression in women. Modern psychology shows no evidence for this, and it is generally accepted that women and men are equally driven by a desire to regain a sense of dignity, worth and meaning. Women aren't driven by love or hate any more than men.

Personally, I see three differences which could explain why few women engage in terrorist acts. First, women are better than men at dealing with humiliation and losing their sense of self-worth – years of social conditioning are surprisingly effective. Second, they learn much earlier about alternatives to violence to reach their goals. Third, they are better adapted socially; they have more extensive networks of family and friends, and they tend to value the welfare of their community more highly than their own. However, if all their loved ones are violently taken away, they can become ruthless terrorists.

I also believe that the role of women in terrorist organizations depends on individual terror cells. Studies into extremist religious organizations show that women are actively involved in providing support to terrorists without actually engaging in violence. That's the situation with ISIS, although it's gradually changing. However, in independence movements resorting to violence, such as in Palestine and Chechnya, women are far more likely to be active freedom fighters.

How do you see the Polish society in the future – in 20 years' time, say?

I'm a bit of a pessimist, so I tend not to think about the future too much. My dream, though, is that the current climate of callousness and cruelty will come to an end. When it does, I hope that the accumulated energy will allow us to rapidly rebuild all that has been destroyed. Perhaps the time will make us realize that it is worth embracing openness and tolerance.

INTERVIEW BY ANNA KILIAN

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