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## **SITUATION OF WOMEN ON THE LABOUR MARKET OR UNEQUAL FIGHT FOR EQUAL RIGHTS**

### **Introduction**

Since the dawn of history women were excluded from political and economic life in every region on the Earth. Both governments, religious communities, universities and companies participated in restricting the rights of women. The secularization and democratization progressing in the last century allowed many women not only to obtain education and work but also to sign contracts, take loans and dispose of their property. At present, the global community continues its efforts not only to investigate the situation of women but also to influence its improvement through the information obtained. The collected data confirm the existence of discrimination and testify to permanent restriction of more than half of the population in terms of the access to capital and employment, which has a negative impact on welfare on a micro and macro scale.

The aim of the article is to look at the economy in terms of gender and to find the answer to the question why the situation of Polish women on the labor market in 2022 is still unsatisfactory and what is the tangible outcome of this fact. The empirical part of the article presents selected results of the authors' own research which made it possible to look at the labor market through the eyes of Polish women<sup>1</sup>.

### **1. The origins or the history of professional activation of women in Poland**

Women have always worked in Poland but first reports on their professional activities date back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They mention wealthy women who managed a relatively significant number of farms receiving, however, lower remuneration for their work than their

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<sup>1</sup> The theoretical analyses and research results that are presented in the article come from the unpublished graduate thesis of Aleksandra Klimecka-Sobol written under the supervision of Dr Karolina Strzelczyk. The title of the thesis which was defended in WSZiB on 20.07.2022 was *Sytuacja kobiet na rynku pracy, czyli nierówna walka o równouprawnienie* (Situation of women on the labour market or unequal fight for equal rights).

male counterparts. On the other hand, a vast majority of population worked unpaid on land estates and essentially had no cash. Moreover, townswomen, daughters of innkeepers and merchants did not receive money for their work and the hired female apprentices who did not belong to the guild and consequently were deprived of its protection, received lower wages than men. However, all of them were the exceptions to the rule that the most feminine professions were that of a servant or prostitute.

A breakthrough came as late as in the 19th century when women went to work on a larger scale than before<sup>2</sup>. The developing industrial revolution involved significant demand for workforce and – following the rule that *the cheaper the better* – mostly women were employed who received on average half of the amount obtained by men. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the preservation of the traditional perception of women's work was already visible. There was a general acceptance for women's work in such areas as making clothes and bedding, embroidery and making artificial flowers. However, the production processes in each of these crafts was poorly mechanized, which pushed women to the margins.

At the turn of the century, Poland faced an undisputable period of professional activation of women. However, one should bear in mind that the activities available to them were poorly paid and not very prestigious. The core of them was still agriculture, cottage industry, service and trade. In time, thanks to the access to education, there was an increase in the number of women working in places that employed only men: railway offices, cash desks, offices and insurance companies. The First World War and the following 20 years was a turbulent period when on the one hand, Polish women broadened their horizons, gaining access to few freelance professions such as dentists or architects and on the other hand, they were subject to satire and ridicule of conservatists and the press. As women were employed on the lowest, dependent and lowest-paid positions, they practically could not develop their qualifications and be promoted.

After the Second World War, by virtue of the resolution *On work among women* of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party women entered the labor market with a full support of the impoverished society that hitherto adhered to the patriarchal family model. The fact that they began to be present in such sectors as metallurgy or mining does not mean that they were welcomed there with open arms. As a rule, they were offered the lowest positions and had little chances for promotion. Moreover, the lack of care and educational institutions meant that professionally active women faced the dilemma how to combine work with everyday

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<sup>2</sup> A. Kowalczyk, *Brakująca połowa dziejów. Krótka historia kobiet na ziemiach polskich*, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., Warszawa 2018, p. 192.

household duties. As a result, 60% of women had no professional qualifications as they simply had no time to gain them<sup>3</sup>.

The 1990s was the time when the successively introduced high childcare benefits effectively discouraged young mothers from returning to work. In the following years, despite a more favorable structure of education, longer unmarried periods and postponement of motherhood, it was more difficult for women not only to enter the labor market and stay there but also to be promoted and earn as much as their colleagues. On the eve of Poland's accession to EU, the professional activity rate was still significantly lower for women than for men; women worked mainly in the lower-paid public sector and earned below the national average. This trend continues today.

## **2. Woman: cultural and biological gender**

For several centuries scientists made attempts to prove that the structure of man's brain differs significantly from that of a woman. The primary research that "proved" that boys are naturally better at math than girls was conducted in 1980s in the US. However, almost a decade later it was proved that gender by no means affects the performance. Currently, scientists associate poorer results of women with the Global Gender Gap index. It shows that the lower the index, i.e. gender discrimination in a particular country is higher, the worse performance. Moreover, gender has no measurable impact on spatial imagination and in the face of scientific research it is impossible to maintain that there is a biological superiority of one sex over the other and to justify it, for example, by a disproportionately higher representation of men among scientists or Nobel Prize winners. Shortages in education, unequal opportunities and limitations result in poorer professional preparation, which in turn reassures the society that the resulting disproportion is caused by biological differences and it consequently undermines the self-confidence of women. This self-fulfilling prophecy is referred to as the Pygmalion effect, which concerns a negative impact of prejudices on the achieved performance. Here, one should also mention the phenomenon that is referred to as the stereotype threat effect. According to L.Scott, regardless of what intellectual capacities a woman has at the moment of employment, overtly expressed intolerance affects the results of woman's work. When confronted with stereotypes,

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<sup>3</sup> M. Hajdo, *Wizerunek kobiety jako matki, pracownicy i działaczki społecznej prezentowany na łamach prasy kobiecej w latach 1948-1956*, [in:] *Dzieje Najnowsze* 38/3, 55-72, Warszawa 2006, p. 67.

the woman must devote some of her mental power to avoid being discredited, which distracts her from her current tasks<sup>4</sup>.

What, then, determines which educational and professional paths women choose? The answer may involve cultural gender and the related social roles. Early childhood has no gender, which does not change the fact that from an early age children watch their mums cook meals and dads mow lawns. The choice of a future career path is influenced by the selection of extracurricular activities that aim at developing specific skills in children and orienting them to the future. Thus, girls choose dance lessons and art classes more often than boys whose parents send them to computer science or nature classes. Several years of the influence of the environment on girls' worldview result in a lower self-esteem and a less competitive attitude. Consequently, lower salary expectations of women may be a symptom of a fixed and replicated social norm rather than an inborn "inability" to ask for more<sup>5</sup>. A lower salary is a direct effect of the suppression of "masculine" features by women. The research shows that as many as 57% of men negotiate the terms of work agreements while only 7% of women ask for a higher salary<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the ability to negotiate seems to be the result of cultural training and the knowledge how much other people earn in the same position. And, due to the confidentiality of wages, women frequently lack this knowledge.

### **3. Discrimination of women in employee recruitment and selection processes**

Despite the fact that discrimination is forbidden by law, unequal treatment is very common both in the Polish and international legislation. Several questions are asked by a potential employer during job interviews. The ones that concern marital status, the number of children or the plans for motherhood maternity enter the private sphere and constitute a violation of the candidate's rights. The research shows that almost half of women confirm the existence of gender-related stereotypes and believe that employers use them when making employment decisions<sup>7</sup>. However, is it possible to objectively prove the existence of structural discrimination? The best tool to do is to conduct an experiment with a fake CV. The test consists in sending the same CV to employers with only one difference: one CV has a female name while the other one a male name. The results of the experiment which was repeated several

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<sup>4</sup> L. Scott, *Kapitał kobiet. Dlaczego równouprawnienie wszystkim się oplaca*, Filtry, Warszawa 2021, p. 248.

<sup>5</sup> *Nierówności płacowe kobiet i mężczyzn*, Raport Instytutu Badań Strukturalnych, Warszawa 2015, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> E. Pągowska, *Jak walczyć o podwyżkę*, „Wysokie Obcasy” 2021, No.3, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Kobiety na rynku pracy 2021*, Raport Hays, 2021, p. 17.

times testify to the inclination of employers to employ males, who not only received better grades but were also offered a higher salary than that for women. Thus, in order to be considered equal to men, women must have higher qualifications and a richer experience<sup>8</sup>.

There is also evidence for the fact that words used in job offers have a real impact on the probability that women will respond to it. This concerns mainly strongly gendered adjectives. The research shows that job offers that include more expressions that are associated with male stereotypes cause reluctance of female candidates; they lose interest in the offered positions even despite the conviction of their qualifications. A company posted a job offer with a photo of a man and a text emphasizing self-confidence and competitive attitude. As a result, only 5% of applications came from women. However, when the photo showed a woman and the text was changed so that the offer emphasized innovativeness and enthusiasm, the ratio of female candidates soared to 40%<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, there are still branches where employee selection is based on stereotypes. This concerns for example the IT sector. A cultural stereotype of an ideal developer was created already in 1960s when the market searched withdrawn and unsociable individuals with maniac tendencies. This specific psychological portrait, which by definition excluded most women, became a self-fulfilling prophecy<sup>10</sup>. At present, these prejudices are hidden in algorithms which are meant to help the work of recruiters. However, they frequently duplicate existing patterns and indirectly discriminate women. Cultural stereotypes are also present in AI-based technologies. Researchers argue that the wider stereotyping of the data, the stronger amplification effect. As a result, it is quite possible that software using data sets where *software developer* is associated with *a man* may deprive a woman of a job. Currently, AI systems already make decisions for humans and according to The Guardian as many as 72% of CVs in the US are not analyzed by human beings<sup>11</sup>. One may hope that these decisions are free of prejudice and stereotypes and the data sets from which AI systems learn do not include an information gap.

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<sup>8</sup> L. Scott, *Kapitał kobiet. Dlaczego równouprawnienie wszystkim się opłaca*, Filtry, Warszawa 2021, pp. 273-274.

<sup>9</sup> C. Criado-Perez, *Niewidzialne kobiety. Jak dane tworzą świat skrojony pod mężczyzn*, Karakter, Kraków 2020, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, pp. 137-140.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 215.



#### 4. Unpaid work and penalty for maternity

Employers have perceived women as high-risk employees for many years. This is connected with numerous regulations of the labor law that protect pregnant women and young mothers. The inability to dismiss them, the need to pay 100% of remuneration during illness in pregnancy and the possible costs involving the recruitment and training of substitute employees effectively discourage employers. An in-depth analysis of regulations and survey research leave no illusions: Polish women experience the existence of institutional discrimination and almost 70% of them claim that pregnancy and the related absence from work as well as excessive household duties have a real impact on employers who, consequently, do not want to hire women<sup>12</sup>. At this point a question arises: why does the arrival of a child have such a strong impact on the professional life of only one of the parents? One of the reasons is the aforementioned culture, the prevailing gender roles and the lingering model of woman-mother and housewife, which is evidenced by the fact that in 2018 less than 1% of men took parental leave<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, both in Poland and in all other EU countries women earn less than men. Thus, when a dilemma arises whose salary should be decreased to 60%, the choice is obvious: the parental leave is taken by the woman. The return to work involves a difficult time for many mothers who have to combine childcare with their professional activities.

Moreover, due to the lack of support of employers (such as remote working or flextime), many women decide to work part-time. A period of absence from work means lost promotion opportunities and no chances for salary rise. The gap that is created in this way is difficult, or impossible, to make up. What is more, shorter length of work period and lower salary lead to a lower pension. This process affects only women<sup>14</sup>.

Recently, a family partnership model has been gaining in popularity in Poland and it is preferred by almost 60% of Poles, However, unfortunately only 37% of families follow this model in reality<sup>15</sup>. Thus, despite declarations, the actual share of roles does not change. Additionally, in the world scale, women devote on the average twice as much time and energy on unpaid work as men and statistically they account for more than 60% of household chores.

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<sup>12</sup> A. Sielska, *Dyskryminacja instytucjonalna kobiet na polskim rynku pracy*, CeDeWu, Warszawa 2017, pp. 142-145.

<sup>13</sup> K. Fejfer, *O kobiecie pracującej. Dlaczego mniej zarabia, chociaż więcej pracuje*, Czerwone i Czarne, Warszawa 2019, p. 297.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 159.

<sup>15</sup> *Wzrósł odsetek Polaków preferujących partnerski model życia małżeńskiego*, Bankier.pl, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Wzroslo-odsetek-Polakow-preferujacych-partnerski-model-zycia-malzenskiego-8020066.html>, (accessed: 07.04.2022).

Currently, the value of the unpaid work is estimated at 1/3 of the Polish GDP. If the participation of women in economy was increased and the allocation was better, the GDP would increase annually by 9%, i.e. PLN 300 billion<sup>16</sup>. Economists argue *that the resources that could be used in the post-pandemic economy include mainly the potential of women and equal rights*<sup>17</sup>. Using this potential constitutes a huge development reserve.

The pandemic itself significantly weakened the position of women not only in Poland but also in the whole world. Research says that the salary of every third woman was decreased even by 40-50%; the same number of women lost their jobs and 60% of them had problems combining home duties with professional work and found the burden of household chores greater due to the pandemic.

Moreover, the present recession has an impact mainly on working women, which is evidenced by the fact the term *she-cession* has appeared in the literature on the subject. Pandemic restrictions affected mostly the feminized sectors of the economy such as trade, hotel industry, gastronomy and broadly understood service industry. In these sectors, women account for as many as 61% of employees<sup>18</sup>. Redundancies, disappearing businesses and employment breaks are only some of the reasons why in almost one year the time needed to close the salary gap increased by 36 years and now amounts to as many as 135 years.

## 5. Entrepreneurship and women in STEM

Business has no gender. It is neither masculine nor feminine. Despite this, there are twice as many businesses belonging to male than female owners<sup>19</sup>. Average female companies operate on a smaller scale, employ fewer staff and do not have such results as the ones owned by men. One of the reasons for their limited growth is the difficult access to capital and external financing. Although these barriers are often systemic, women are criticized for too slow development of their businesses. However, in cases when banks fail, venture capitalists (VC) appear who are a significant source of financing for the ones who cannot receive a traditional loan. However, the problem is that as many as 93% investors are men and they tend to support one another and are very cautious about women's businesses which in their opinion do not

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<sup>16</sup> E. Rumińska-Zimny, J. Hausner, rozm. przepr. M. Mierzyńska, *Ekonomia Solidarna*, „Forbes Women” 2022, No. 2, pp. 70-71.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> *Tytanki pracy. Kobiety na rynku pracy w dobie cyfrowej transformacji*, Raport Women Update, 2021, pp. 27-32.

<sup>19</sup> L. Scott, *Kapitał kobiet. Dlaczego równouprawnienie wszystkim się opłaca*, Filtry, Warszawa 2021, p. 35.

guarantee the expected return on investment<sup>20</sup>. There are statistics that show that only 2% of money from such funds go to businesses founded by women<sup>21</sup>. What is more, one should consider the results of studies where names and photos were changed in offers or meetings were arranged where men presented woman's ideas and vice versa. It turned out, that it was enough for investors to lose interest in a project when it was presented by a woman.

It is also more difficult for women to find their place in high-tech industry. Only 49% of men think that women are as good as men in STEM areas i.e. in science, technology, engineering and math<sup>22</sup>. Polish women are still a minority in technical universities (35%) and they account for only 16% of students studying prestigious new technology majors such as nanobioengineering or satellite technologies<sup>23</sup>. It is also worth noting that the share of women in the academic staff of technical universities is only 32%. Moreover, women who want to reach the highest level of the academic career, i.e. the title of a Professor experience the existence of the glass ceiling, which effectively makes it difficult or even impossible for them to be promoted. In order to measure this phenomenon Eurostat's *Glass Ceiling Index*, GCI is used. Value 1 of the index indicates equal opportunities and the higher the value of the index the higher vertical segregation by gender. In the academic year 2019/2020, GCI in technical universities equaled 2, which means that female lecturers' chances to make professional career are twice as low<sup>24</sup>. At this point one should also look at the situation of women in the IT industry, where they account for about one third of employees. First of all, the issue of remuneration deserves attention. The salary gap in this sector has been remaining the same for years and amounts to 20% on the average. However, the higher the position the more significant difference between the salaries of men and women. As a result, women on managerial positions sometimes earn as much as one fourth less than men.

## **6. A look at the labor market through the eyes of women – results of the authors' own study**

The aim of the research was to verify the thesis that the work situation of men in Poland is better than that of the women. The study was conducted with the CAWI method on a

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<sup>20</sup> C. Criado-Perez, *Niewidzialne kobiety. Jak dane tworzą świat skrojony pod mężczyzn*, Karakter, Kraków 2020, pp. 219-220.

<sup>21</sup> M. Gates, *Moment zwrotny. Jak kobiety rosną w siłę i zmieniają świat*, Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 2019, p. 280.

<sup>22</sup> *Gender gap po polsku 2020*, Report from the study of the association Women in Technology Poland, Kraków 2020, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> *Kobiety na Politechnikach Raport 2021*, Fundacja Edukacyjna Perspektywy, 2021, pp. 9-16.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.



representative group of 100 women. It indicated that a vast majority of them feel that gender really affects their career chances. A significant percentage of the interviewed women think that it is stereotypes that pose a barrier to equal right of women in Poland. Women who do not work professionally or who are on parental or childcare leave have the feeling that they are discriminated against the most. A relatively significant professional passivity of the respondents (21%) is visible, which has a negative impact on the condition of the Polish economy. It is also important to note that gender discrimination is more often noticed by women from big cities, women in the age range of 20-29 years and the respondents with higher education. They are aware above average of the existing barriers, which however does not stop them from striving for an equal share of household chores, bolder negotiating of remuneration or planning their own businesses. Moreover, the study showed that the main barriers for women are motherhood, unequal salaries, difficulties in finding work and life balance and gender stereotypes. It is worth noting that motherhood was indicated most frequently by married women and the ones living in informal relationships, which testifies to a disproportionate burden of childcare on women. The respondents also negatively assessed the ratio of men to women on managerial positions, and a vast majority had the opinion that women are promoted less often than men.

The stereotype that women are not suitable for managerial positions was frequently indicated in the survey as one of the main prejudices towards the respondents. Wide-ranging antidiscrimination programs were strongly supported by all the respondents. However, adequate steps were taken only in every tenth company. The respondents were aware of the salary gap. This feeling was shared mainly by the unemployed respondents and the ones who were on parental/maternity leaves. The respondents aged 20 – 29 were again on the opposite extreme, which indicates that younger generation experiences a more inclusive treatment. It is interesting to see that the awareness of the differences in the salaries of men and women does not result directly in the support of the transparency of salaries and the issue of remuneration still remains a kind of taboo in Poland.

However, Polish women have the same opinion as it comes to sharing household chores. They are in favor of a family partnership model and equal division of duties. Yet, after confronting the preferences with the reality, it turns out that women are still disproportionately burdened with household chores. Thus, it is not surprising that the stereotype of a woman-housewife and a woman-mother was most frequently indicated as a barrier to career development of Polish women, and an increased number of nurseries and kindergartens, longer parental leaves for fathers and the promotion of a family partnership model were indicated as

the top remedies for the improvement of the present situation. Flexible working hours, childcare at workplace, remote work and the possibility to reduce the working time were indicated as the most desirable employee benefits. Considering the fact that only every second respondent thinks that the Polish labor market is becoming more accessible and woman-friendly and that the number of respondents who share this opinion decreases with the age, the size of the place of residence and the education of the respondents, it can be concluded that although the general situation on the Polish labor market is improving, the change is not experienced by everybody.

## Conclusions

Polish women want to improve their work conditions, have better salaries and increase career opportunities. They support not only the implementation of antidiscrimination programs in companies but also the education of children and teenagers about equal rights. It is evident that worldview changes in Poland are progressing much more quickly than institutional ones. As a result, there is a dissonance between the expectations of Polish women and the reality in which they live. Moreover, the research exposes the difficult situation of working mothers and the unused potential Polish female entrepreneurs. It uncovered several interesting issues that should be investigated more extensively and comprehensively.

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### ***Abstract***

The article deals with the issue of the unfavorable situation of Polish women on the labor market. The historically ingrained stereotypes result in the discrimination of women at work, worse work and payment conditions and limited opportunities of promotion and chances to have a professional success. The article focuses on the analysis of the history of work activation of women in Poland. It also analyzes the phenomenon of cultural gender. It describes various barriers to gender equality such as discrimination of women in recruitment and selection processes, and maternity. The analysis is supplemented by the authors' own research which made it possible to learn about the real female perspective on the issue of equality.

### ***Key words***

Employment discrimination, salary gap, equal rights, stereotypes, glass ceiling, cultural gender, job activation, gender parity, institutional discrimination, unpaid work.