

LABOUR MARKET EQUALITY POLICIES – THE SITUATION OF WOMEN AFTER PANDEMIC COVID-19

Mariola DŹWIGOŁ-BAROSZ

Silesian University of Technology; Mariola.dzwigol-barosz@polsl.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-5306-3836

Purpose: The analysis of the employment situation of Polish women after the COVID-19 pandemic and identification of measures in the area of labour market equality policy, both at the legal level, i.e. national and European Union regulations, as well as good practices in this area applied by enterprises.

Design/methodology/approach: This study is a review and attempts to analyse the professional situation of women on the Polish labour market after the COVID-19 pandemic, based on the latest Polish and foreign reports.

Findings: Current social and economic changes create conditions for a greater participation of women in the labour market, including in management. Gender equality measures concerning formal guarantees of equal treatment of women and men in the professional sphere should ensure the equal participation of women in the labour market. The problem of gender inequality in the labour market described in this paper needs to be looked at from a broader perspective than just legal or social justice. It should be seen as an opportunity to harness the potential of women as a force for economic growth and the development of businesses and entire economies. It is therefore worth pursuing and promoting all measures aimed at increasing women's participation in the labour market, including in management positions.

Research limitations/implications: The paper points out the benefits of taking pro-equality measures and supporting the conscious use of gender diversity as one of the organisational values. This should serve as a starting point for considering ways to avoid wasting the potential that makes up half of Polish society. Methods supporting gender equality in organisations were identified - both internal company regulations to ensure favourable working conditions for women, and those at the level of Polish socio-economic policy and European Union directives which make it easier to combine work and family responsibilities. Arguments are also provided for increasing the proportion of women in managerial positions with a view to gender diversity, which promotes the efficiency of companies and national economies.

Practical implications: the author presented good practices of companies in terms of gender equality policies.

Originality/value: Given the dynamic changes on the Polish labour market, which is already facing very strong supply pressures, seeking solutions to encourage as many people as possible on the labour market, including women, to remain economically active for as long as possible is a necessary condition for the development of the modern economy. Harnessing the potential of women brings tangible effects to economies and businesses, and therefore measures should be taken to redress the gender imbalance in various areas of the wider labour market.

Keywords: equality policy, gender equality, labour market, woman in business.

Category of the paper: The paper is a review.

1. Introduction

Over recent years, we can observe a number of initiatives aimed at ensuring equal treatment of women and men on the labour market, but despite this, there are still many challenges that Poland, like other European Union countries, will have to face in the coming years. The most important of these include increasing women's professional activity and equalising pay levels between men and women.

Changes in the labour market due to digitalisation, flexible forms of employment and remote working, bring new challenges for companies. This requires breaking down the stereotypes and barriers that characterise the patriarchal model of development and moving towards an equality model both at company level and in the labour market as a whole.

Many manifestations of gender inequality can be observed in today's labour market, which include wage inequality, the feminisation of certain professions and sectors of the economy, and the restriction of women's access to managerial positions, which is known as the glass ceiling phenomenon.

Discussions on the need to increase the proportion of women in management positions are currently being undertaken by politicians, academics and economists alike. The main advantage of more women in management positions is the achievement of better financial ratios in companies and, consequently, a higher market value for them, as evidenced by numerous authors and the research results of many reports (Devillard, Graven, Lawson, Paradise, Sancier-Sultan, 2012; Lisowska, 2010, pp. 3-12; Desvaux, Devillard-Hollinger, Baumgarten, 2007; Zwiększanie roli kobiet...). This approach also provides an opportunity to use all the skills and talents that both sexes are equipped with and ensures social justice.

Arguments in favour of increasing the proportion of women in leadership positions include (Zwiększanie roli kobiet...):

- diverse competences (education, experience and skills) enhance the quality of the management team,
- in gender diverse teams there is more social sensitivity and personal commitment to problem solving (people try harder),
- the company is perceived externally as ethical and financially sound,
- the company manifests a lower propensity for risk, which is particularly important in times of crisis,

- the company is oriented towards the needs of diverse target groups, including women, who are responsible for the majority of purchasing decisions,
- there is a better utilisation of the potential of employee teams at all levels of the company, and talent is valued and attracted,
- the world's highest valued brands have women on their boards.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the employment situation of Polish women after the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify measures in the area of labour market equality policy, both at the legal level, i.e. national and European Union regulations, as well as good practices in this area applied by enterprises.

2. Work situation of women after the COVID-19 pandemic

Poland is one of the countries struggling with the problem of a significant disproportion between the percentages of economically active women and men. The gender employment gap (Eurostat...) exceeds the EU average in our country, and the economic activity rate of Polish women (CSO...) has for years remained one of the lowest among EU citizens. These mechanisms can be considered particularly worrying in the era of an ageing population, when the number of working Polish women and men is decreasing year by year for demographic reasons.

Women in Poland are less economically active than men, however, they perform a lot of unpaid work, which results from the dominance of the traditional division of family roles, related to housekeeping and caring for children and family members in need of support. The excessive burden of domestic responsibilities is a major barrier to women's labour force participation. During the pandemic, women's unpaid care work increased, exacerbating the asymmetry in the combination of work-home responsibilities. Their incomes also fell as a result of the large price increase in 2022. Women have felt it more than men due to lower wages and pensions. Women's participation in the labour market is low and they are more inactive (especially 50+) (Report of the Women's Congress Association...).

Stereotypes in societies are also a barrier to women's participation in the labour market. These stereotypes make women themselves afraid to apply for attractive positions, underestimating the value of their competences. In turn, economically active women are confronted with stereotyped prejudices and direct discrimination, i.e. they are less frequently promoted, rarely hold the highest and best paid positions in the organisational hierarchy and, even in management functions, earn less than men with comparable competences. Unfortunately, no matter what position a woman holds, regardless of the industry, her earnings tend to be lower than a man's. If, in addition, she does not work full-time (women predominate

among those in part-time jobs), the wage gap (Sarata), taken as the difference in her total earnings compared to men, can be as high as 40% (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/...>).

Table 1 outlines the main causes of inequality in access to promotion between men and women.

Table 1.

Causes of gender inequality in access to promotion

Women are sometimes overlooked for promotions by the Board of Directors, management and/or by HR staff as being:	Women exclude themselves from promotion by not applying for management positions because:
More 'problematic' because they get pregnant, take leave for the baby, etc.	They fear they will not be able to reconcile the career with childcare and home.
Having less aptitude than men for leadership positions: more emotional, less concrete, less organised, etc.	They assume that they are 'unsuitable' for management in 'typically male' industries, even though there is often no glass ceiling on promotions.
Difficult to accept as bosses by men working in positions of power executive, especially in male-dominated industries, teams dominated by men and/or in smaller towns/communities.	They find management jobs too stressful and/or time-consuming.
They fear that they will not be able to balance their careers with caring for their children and home.	
They assume that they are 'unsuitable' for management in 'typically male' industries, even though there is often no glass ceiling on promotions.	
They find management jobs too stressful and/or time-consuming.	

Source: Report of the Women's Congress Association, "Kobiety, rynek pracy i równość płac", <https://kongreskobiet.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/RAPORT.pdf>, Warsaw 2023, p. 15, 15.07.2023.

According to Eurostat (*Czy płeć ma znaczenie...*), 44% of Polish women already hold managerial positions in the country. However, when we look at senior management, this share drops to around 25%. In turn, research conducted by the Polish Economic Institute among the largest companies listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange shows that the share of women on management boards is 12.6% and on supervisory boards is 17.3%. Even in the financial sector, where women account for 60% of employees, there are only 13% of women on company boards (*Increasing the role...*).

According to the results of the Women's Congress Association's report, "Kobiety, rynek pracy i równość płac" (*Women, the labour market and equal pay*), 53% of those surveyed, including 60% of women and 47% of men, agree with the statement that it is mainly men who hold managerial positions. 38% of respondents disagree with this statement (Report of the Women's Congress Association...).

Currently, one of the manifestations of discrimination against women in the labour market is the problem of the wage gap. In the above-mentioned report, an overwhelming number of respondents (86%) disagree with the statement that women are less educated, so they earn less. At the same time, as many as 10% of men agree. The existence of such a belief is particularly

surprising given that women in Poland are much better educated than men. Similarly, as many as 76% of respondents (81% of women and 71% of men) disagree with the statement that women do not engage in work as much as men due to having children, so they earn less. However, almost one fifth of men believe that women do not engage in work to the same extent as men (so they earn less) (Report of the Women's Congress Association...).

3. Labour market equality policies

Measures aimed at providing equal opportunities for women and men on the labour market are an indispensable element on the road to increasing the competitiveness of the economy. Polish enterprises are currently facing a shortage of skilled workers and the growing costs of an ageing society. Without utilising the potential of women and diversity management policies, they will not be able to grow.

The Polish government's actions aimed at ensuring equal opportunities are often only a facade. The National Action Programme for Equal Treatment for 2022-2030 (National Action Programme...), contains announcements of, inter alia, supporting the professional activation of women, closing the wage gap and increasing the share of women on company boards. However, the programme has remained largely in the realm of declarations. There are no concrete measures for its implementation, no schedule for the work, and no sources of funding.

In Poland, several solutions have so far been introduced at the socio-economic policy level to facilitate the combination of work and family responsibilities (Table 2).

Table 2.

Polish legal solutions to support women's professional activity

Source	Content of the regulation	Benefits
Journal of Laws 2023.1465 i.e. Act in force Version from: 31 July 2023.	<p>Article 1821e. § 1. An employee may combine the taking of parental leave with working for the employer granting this leave up to a maximum of half of the full working time. In such a case, parental leave shall be granted for the remainder of the working time.</p> <p>Article 1821f. § 1. Where an employee-parent combines the taking of parental leave with work for the employer granting the leave, the duration of parental leave shall be extended in proportion to the amount of time worked by the employee during the leave or part thereof, but no longer than up to:</p> <p>1) 82 weeks - in the case referred to in Article 180(1)(1);</p> <p>2) 86 weeks - in the cases referred to in Article 180(1)(2-5).</p>	Possibility combining parental leave with part-time work.

Cont. table 2.

Social Security regulations effective as of 01.01.2018.	<p>The nannies' pension, disability and accident insurance premiums, calculated from a base which is no more than half the minimum wage, shall be financed by the State budget through the Social Insurance Institution. The premiums are financed by the state budget regardless of whether the nanny is subject to compulsory or voluntary pension insurance.</p> <p>The Social Insurance Institution pays contributions financed by the state budget, when the following conditions are all met:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the nanny has been declared by the parent for social security and health insurance; 2. parents or a single parent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is/are employed (this should be understood as the performance of work on the basis of an employment relationship, a contract of employment, the undisputed performance of employment in a country other than Poland, and the performance of other forms of professional activity (...), - provide services on the basis of a civil law contract constituting a title to social insurance (this refers to all civil law contracts constituting a title to insurance, i.e. an agency contract, a contract of mandate or another contract for the provision of services to which, in accordance with the Civil Code, the provisions on mandate are applicable), - is/are engaged in non-agricultural activities, - is/are engaged in agricultural activities. 3. the child is not placed in a creche, a children's club, has not been taken care of by a day-care provider and is not in pre-school education including the adaptation period. 	Funding of insurance premiums for nannies from the state budget.
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Source: Own compilation on the basis of: Journal of Laws 2023.1465 i.e. Act in force, Version from: 31 July 2023, <https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dzu-dziennik-ustaw/kodeks-pracy-16789274/art-182-1-e,8.09.2023>; SSP, Nannies in Social Insurance, <https://www.zus.pl/documents/10182/44493/nianie+kompendium.pdf/cd66ef6e-ece8-416e-8362-10154e5b20cc>, Warsaw 2022, pp. 8-10.

The framework for equality policy is also provided by the new European Union Directives, which give directions and introduce tools for implementing equality policy in important areas for equal opportunities for women and men (Report of the Women's Congress Association...):

- **WORK-LIFE BALANCE** - Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers (Directive (EU) 2019/1158...).
- **PARITIES IN BUSINESS** - Directive on improving gender balance among non-executive directors of listed companies and related measures (Directive Of The European Parliament And Of The Council (EU) 2022/2381...).
- **PAY TRANSPARENCY** - Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on strengthening the application of the principle of equal pay for men and women for equal work or work of equal value through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms (Directive Of The European Parliament And Of The Council on enhancing...).

It should be emphasised that in order to realise the potential of women, it is necessary to introduce effective systemic solutions to counter discrimination in the labour market.

4. Good corporate practice in equality policy

Business has emerged as a leader in changing the introduction of good practices in equality policies. Model solutions are initiated especially by large companies, often with foreign capital. These organisations are taking more and more initiatives to eliminate barriers, creating inclusive recruitment policies and clear career paths, providing training on unconscious biases, making working patterns more flexible and increasing the transparency of remuneration policies. There is also a growing widespread awareness of one's rights and sensitivity to inequalities and companies are recognising that social change entails guaranteeing everyone equal opportunities for employment, a raise or promotion.

Examples of good practice from companies operating in Poland cover three main areas (Figure 1):

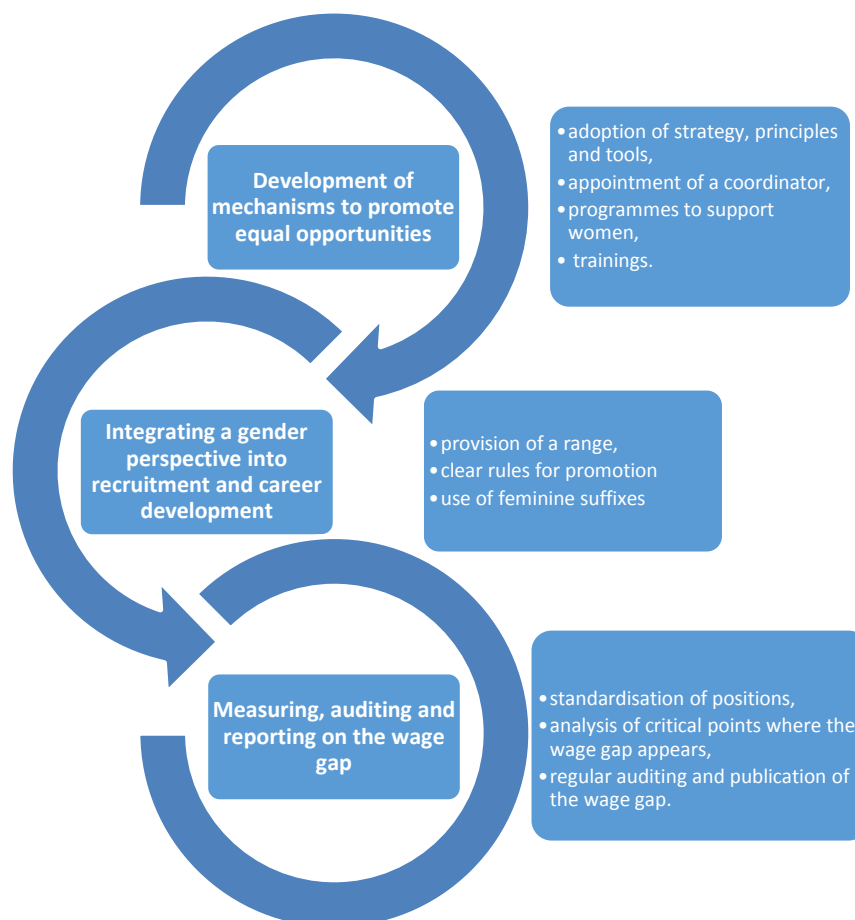


Figure 1. Corporate equality measures.

Source: Own compilation based on the Report of the Association of the Congress of Women, "Kobiety, rynek pracy i równość płac", <https://kongreskobiet.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/RAPORT.pdf>, Warsaw 2023, p. 35, 15.07.2023.

As behavioural economists point out, prejudice against women is a significant barrier to making visible progress towards greater representation of women in decision-making bodies (Wolfers, 2006; Reuben et al., 2012). Women with identical qualifications and skills are perceived as less competent than men. In business, abilities and skills are underestimated in women and overestimated in men. This is confirmed by studies conducted in Poland: employers are not convinced of women's competences and qualifications (Niemczewska, Mrowiec, Paterek, 2007, p. 34). They explain women's lower professional position and their lack in managerial positions by their lower ability to manage subordinates, their inability to set goals and create visions.

Diversity - especially gender diversity at the highest levels of management - is nowadays seen primarily as a creator of higher profitability (Adler, 2001; *The Bottom Line...*, 2011; *Women at the Top...*, 2010; Lisowska, 2010, pp. 3-12) and company competitiveness (Griffin, 2004, pp. 15, 190; Wróbel, 2010, pp. 72-79). This is one of the drivers for which companies are increasingly implementing solutions to support the increased employment of women in management positions (shown in Figure 2), which primarily require:

1. allowing employees to flex their working hours,
2. the wider implementation of professional development programmes for women,
3. changing the organisational culture of companies to promote different management styles.

The inclusion of women in boards and top management is not a fashion imperative, but a logical business decision. A greater role for women in business management - and a diverse leadership team - can be elements of a company's competitive advantage (Wróbel, 2010).

A focus on diversity is conducive to attracting talent, especially women, who, as a significant group (half of every society), constitute a hitherto undervalued source of talent, including managerial talent. A feature of a diversity-oriented organisational culture is the respect of existing laws on equal treatment in the workplace and in relations with stakeholders, but also the widespread promotion of values, norms and customs that are part of building an atmosphere of acceptance and appreciation of differences, rather than merely tolerating them (Wojciechowicz, 2015, p. 711).

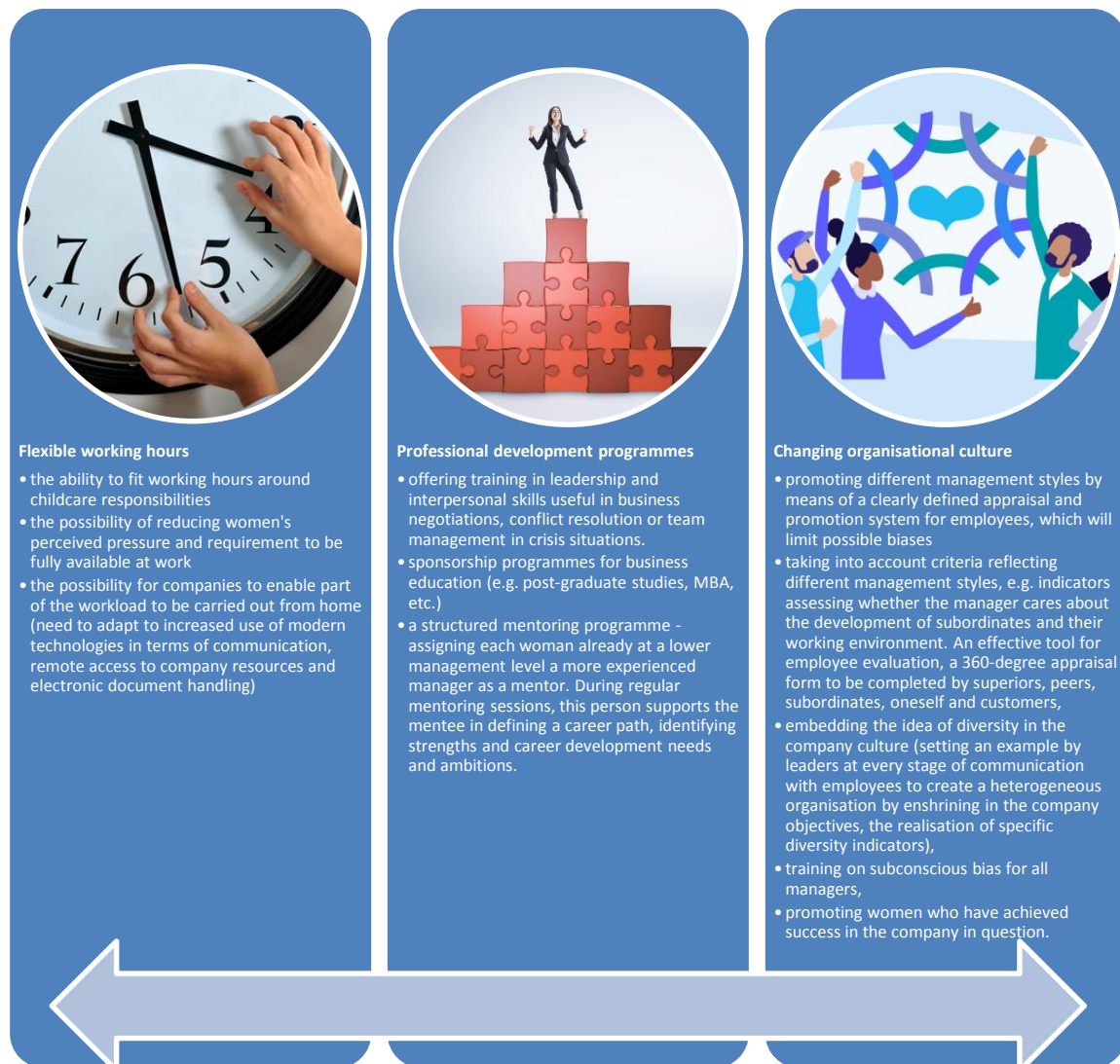


Figure 2. Initiatives by companies to support women in management positions.

Source: own compilation based on McKinsey&Company report, *The Power of Equality. How and why to support women in their careers*, 2017, pp. 23-25.

Realising the potential of women in the labour market largely depends on the employers themselves. Openness to flexible working hours, remote and part-time working, training, the creation of an appropriate organisational culture and the broader concept of diversity management serve to demonstrate the tangible benefits of these measures.

5. Conclusion

Gender is one of the most visible signs of diversity in the workplace. The diversity of human capital is a source of new opportunities for the company, and diversity management is a business strategy aimed at consciously harnessing the diverse potential of employees (Thomas, 2006, p. 103).

According to current research from the global report 'Women in Business and Management. Gaining Momentum' produced by the International Labour Organisation in 2015, achieving gender balance economically is a wise calculation. It is estimated that maintaining equal proportions could add US\$240 billion to the UK's GDP, US\$1,201 billion to the US GDP, US\$526 billion to Japan's and US\$285 billion to Germany's. The report's findings indicate that reducing the gender gap in business has been one of the factors that has significantly influenced European economic growth over the past 10 years (Słowik, 2017, p. R6).

Unfortunately, the perception of women through the prism of motherhood, questioning of competences or unconscious biases sometimes held by decision-makers in organisations continue to be an obstacle to equal opportunities for women and men in the labour market.

Current social and economic changes are creating the conditions for greater participation of women in the labour market, including in management. This subject continues to be the subject of much controversy, whether regarding the facts, the directions of change, women's opinions, legal solutions or factors determining women's success in management. The body of work on gender equality concerning formal guarantees of equal treatment of women and men in the professional sphere should ensure the equal participation of women in management (2009, p. 9). Reality, however, leaves no illusions that the situation is still far from desirable. The problem of gender inequality in the labour market described in this paper needs to be looked at from a broader perspective than just legal or social justice. It should be seen as an opportunity to harness the potential of women as a force for economic growth and the development of businesses and economies as a whole. It is therefore worth continuing and promoting all measures to increase women's participation in the labour market, including in management positions.

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