

MOTHERHOOD AS A FACTOR DIFFERENTIATING WOMEN'S CAREERS

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Purpose: The aim of this study is to demonstrate the differences in the professional careers of women with and without children.

Design/methodology/approach: The quantitative study was conducted using the survey method (CAWI) using an online questionnaire on a sample of 517 women. The survey included single- and multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The study lasted 9 months (February-October 2022) and included professionally active women working in medium-sized or large enterprises in south-eastern Poland.

Findings: The obtained results indicate emerging significant differences between the surveyed women with children and women without children, in the context of professional career, preferences and activities undertaken for professional development. Professional career covers various spheres of life, including family, which means that motherhood has a significant impact on women's professional development. The higher education and age of women with children suggest the dominance of a conventional or dual career path. The age differences between the groups coincide with the trend of younger women giving up motherhood. Childless women are more likely to work in prestigious industries, while mothers value performing a prestigious profession. The average earnings of mothers are lower than those without children, but mothers are more likely to earn top wages. Childless women value continuous learning in their careers more. Women with children show a higher level of career satisfaction, which may reflect the modern approach to combining motherhood with professional work.

Research limitations/implications: The research has limitations and the results cannot be generalized to the entire population. They only focus on certain aspects related to motherhood and women's careers, which could be expanded in future research. It is also suggested to study the differences between Polish regions and a longer analysis of the development of women's careers in various phases of professional life, especially those related to motherhood.

Originality/value: Due to the very diverse approach to the topic of motherhood and careers, there are few studies relating to the differences in women's careers resulting from motherhood, and even fewer studies in this area are based in selected regions of Poland. Therefore, it seems justified to take up the topic of motherhood discussed in the article as a factor differentiating women's careers.

Keywords: career, women's career, maternity, motherhood, work-life balance.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Modern society is an arena of dynamic changes, where women play an increasingly important role not only in the family sphere, but also in the labor market. However, even in the era of social progress and equal rights, motherhood still appears to be one of the most important experiences that influence women's professional lives. This topic is becoming the subject of increasing interest among researchers due to its potential impact on women's professional careers. Research covers the topic of combining motherhood and career (Collins, 2019) in a very broad scope. Many studies discuss the topic of academic careers. The latest studies focus on, among others, the impact of motherhood on a scientific career (Gallardo, 2021), prejudices against women - mothers in science (Staniscuaski et al., 2023; Thébaud, Taylor, 2021). There are also studies combining the topics of academic careers, motherhood and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bowyer et al., 2022; CohenMiller, Izenkova, 2022; Minello et al., 2021; Staniscuaski et al., 2021) or publications talking about gender diversity towards parenting among early career scientists (Bonache et al., 2022). The authors' research also concerns motherhood and professional careers in other areas, e.g. sports (Tekavc et al., 2020), medicine (Hoffman et al., 2020) or management (Moczydłowska, 2023). Among the more general approach to the discussed topic, which does not link motherhood and career with a specific area, one can point to research on overcoming prejudices related to motherhood in the workplace (Arena Jr et al., 2023), differences in remuneration due to motherhood (Cukrowska-Torzewska, Matysiak, 2020), entrepreneurial behavior of mothers and their professional careers (Kodagoda, Samaratunge, 2023), women's professional careers in modern organizations (Christoph, Krause, 2019), patterns of women's professional careers towards combining family and professional roles (Duda, 2019), dilemmas of young mothers between family and professional work (Czajka, 2021) or women's value systems and their attitudes towards motherhood (Lachowska et al., 2017). Given such a diverse approach to the topic of motherhood and professional careers, there is little. However, there are studies relating to differences in women's careers resulting from motherhood, and even fewer studies in this area are based in selected regions of Poland. Therefore, it seems justified to take up the topic of motherhood discussed in the article as a factor differentiating women's professional careers. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the differences in the professional careers of women with and without children. Given this goal, a research question was formulated regarding the differences between the professional careers of women with children and women without children.

Career is an individual process that changes over time. It encompasses the sequence of experiences, roles, and positions that an individual undertakes during his or her life (Sears, 1982). Contemporary career definitions place greater emphasis on an individual's individual experiences, aspirations, and goals (Guan et al., 2020). Career is viewed as a subjective

construct, dependent on personal preferences, values and aspirations. A professional career is not limited to working in one organization. It also includes other areas of life such as family, society and personal development (Hall, Chandler, 2018). Career is a complex process in which an individual integrates various areas of life, striving for a balance between professional and private life. An important feature of a career is also the need to adapt the individual to the changing conditions of the labor market and organization. A professional career requires constant learning, developing skills and adapting to new requirements (Lyons, Kuron, 2014). People who manage their careers effectively are able to achieve success and sustainability in a dynamic work environment. A professional career has both a subjective aspect, related to individual aspirations, expectations and satisfaction, and an objective aspect, related to observable achievements, progress and changes in the profession. It is important to consider both an individual's subjective experience and objective indicators of career success. Career is shaped by the organizational and social context in which an individual operates. The organizational system, organizational structure, opportunities for advancement and professional development, as well as social, economic and cultural variables influence the development of individuals' careers. Today's perspectives on careers also place greater emphasis on personal fulfillment and professional satisfaction (Guan et al., 2018). Career does not only have the dimension of hierarchical promotion, but also involves achieving the professional and personal goals of an individual.

Super (1976) noticed that professional experiences accumulated by individuals in real life influence the development of their refined patterns of professional identity. These patterns include aspects of professional maturity, such as the ability to plan, take responsibility, and accept multidimensionality in professional life and beyond. Super (1976) identified several career patterns for women that are strongly related to their individual characteristics:

- stable career as a housewife - means that a woman focuses mainly on the role of a housewife before taking up work or almost immediately after taking up work. Professional work is of secondary importance, and the main ambitions and commitment are focused on the family area;
- conventional career - involves taking up work immediately after completing education and continuing it until marriage;
- stable job career - concerns women who focus mainly on work, treating it as a role to be fulfilled;
- dual career - characterized by women who achieve professional success, but starting a family means they have to find a balance between professional work and home responsibilities;
- intermittent career - means a situation in which family circumstances force a woman to interrupt satisfactory work, sometimes without having to abandon it;

- unstable career - similar to the male pattern, includes breaks in professional work, usually related to periods of financial difficulties;
- career of repeated attempts - similar to the male role model, but the reasons for frequent job changes usually result from family needs (Herr, Cramer, 2005).

Motherhood, despite the enormous joy and satisfaction it brings, brings with it a number of challenges, especially in the context of a professional career. Women often have to choose between being a mother and developing their career path. This dilemma, although present for years, remains relevant and still influences the life decisions of many women. Structural inequalities and gender stereotypes may make it difficult for women to achieve a balance between the roles of mother and employee (Meeussen, Van Laar, 2018). Women are often expected to be the primary caregivers of children, and parenting in a professional context is most often equated with motherhood, and not to the same extent with fatherhood. It is therefore important to promote equal parental responsibilities and change cultural norms regarding gender roles. Supporting equality in the division of household responsibilities and childcare can contribute to a greater balance between the roles of mother and employee and enable women to develop their professional careers equally as men (Young, 2018). Secondly, insufficiently flexible work policies and support for parents may constitute an obstacle for women in continuing their professional careers (Mikołajczyk, Stankowska, 2021). Many workplaces do not offer sufficiently flexible working time, remote work or childcare options, which makes it difficult for women to reconcile parental responsibilities with professional demands (Hess, Pollmann-Schult, 2020). Moreover, women often experience parental discrimination, which makes it difficult to return to work after maternity leave, or they experience it already at the level of recruitment or selection, where plans to start a family turn out to be a disqualifying criterion. Nevertheless, more and more organizations realize the need to support working parents, including women, by introducing childcare programs and equal opportunities for professional development. This gives hope that in the future women will have better opportunities to combine career and parenthood.

Research conducted at Oxford University (Kahn et al., 2014) shows that childless women aged 25 are better educated, more often employed, and also have higher earnings and work in professions with higher prestige than women who had previously become mothers. For women aged 20–30–40, a relationship was confirmed - the more children, the lower activity on the labor market, the lower salary and the lower professional prestige. The birth of each additional child means a woman's salary decreases by 3-6%. Women without children earn on average 1/3 more than women with three children and are almost twice as likely to perform more prestigious jobs. This regularity is also visible in Poland. Research provides evidence that mothers earn less on average both compared to men and childless women of similar age, in similar positions and with the same competences (Moczyłowska, 2023). These disproportions are particularly visible in prestigious, highly paid professions. Interestingly, men who become fathers not only do not earn less, but can also expect

the so-called paternity bonus. However, a study conducted as part of the FAMWELL project shows that the number of women who consciously give up motherhood increases from generation to generation. Among those born between 1945 and 1955, the percentage of women who never gave birth to a child was 8%, while among those born in 1970 this figure was 17%. The percentage of women who do not have and will no longer have children is much higher in Poland than in other Central and Eastern European countries (Matysiak et al., 2021).

2. Methods

In order to collect empirical data, quantitative research was carried out using the survey method and the CAWI technique. This study used an online survey questionnaire, created using the Google Forms platform, which used single- and multiple-choice questions and an open-ended question format. Some of the questions used a five-point Likert scale, consisting of the answers: "definitely not", "rather not", "difficult to say", "probably yes", "definitely yes". The survey consisted of questions about professional career and personal details. The study was conducted over 9 months (February 2022 - October 2022) in the form of disseminating an appropriate link to an online survey on the Google Forms platform. First of all, the organization and women working in them were addressed to which the author had direct access. Then, using the "snowball" effect, women participating in the study were asked to further share the survey in other organizations, thus inviting additional respondents to participate. At the same time, the author popularized the study through e-mails containing an invitation to participate in the study, sent to organizations that met the assumed sample selection criteria. The organizations were selected on the basis of rankings of medium and large enterprises prepared by portals such as: <https://nowiny24.pl/> (Golden Hundred Companies, 2021), <https://www.obserwatorium.malopolska.pl/> (500 List), <https://www.forbes.pl/> (Forbes Diamonds, 2021).

The research sample consisted of professionally active women ($n = 517$), currently working in medium-sized or large enterprises, living in two voivodeships: Lesser Poland and Podkarpackie. The choice of voivodeships was dictated by their economic diversity, socio-cultural conditions and economic differences. The Podkarpackie and Lesser Poland voivodeships are located in the southern part of Poland, which is characterized by a diversified economic structure and level of development. Moreover, the choice of the Podkarpackie and Lesser Poland voivodeships was also due to the small amount of previous research on women's professional careers in these regions.

After collecting the empirical material, the data were subjected to statistical analysis, which included descriptive characteristics and tests of intergroup comparisons - the variables analyzed in the study were two types of data: quantitative and categorical. Quantitative variables were

understood as all answers provided by respondents on a five-point Likert scale, and their characteristics included, among others: arithmetic mean, standard deviation, median, first and third quartile values, and minimum and maximum values. After making comparisons, those results that turned out to be statistically significant were selected for presentation and discussion.

3. Results

Among the surveyed women, over 32% of respondents declared having children ($n = 169$). Women with children were on average 41 years old. They were more likely than those without children to have higher education of the second degree (60.9% vs. 51.4%) and third degree (10.7% vs. 4.9%) and more often lived in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship (59.8% vs. 40.2%). They also more often earned the highest amounts (above PLN 10,500 per month) (8.3% vs. 3.2%), held positions at the highest levels in the management staff (9.7% vs. 0.3%) and performed executive work of a mental nature (53.2% vs. 43.4%). Women with children most often worked in public administration and national defense (26.6%), education (18.9%), and health care and social assistance (13%).

Women who did not have children were on average 33 years old. They earned amounts up to PLN 4500 per month more often than those with children (59.2% vs. 43.7%). Childless respondents more often held low-level managerial positions (7.2% vs. 5.2%), were independent workers or specialists (25.8% vs. 19.5%) and also worked in mixed executive positions (15% vs. 8.4%) and physical nature (8.2% vs. 3.9%). Most often (12.1%) they worked in financial and insurance, education and other service organizations. Women without children were much more likely to have worked in their current job position (34.5% vs. 6.5%) and in their current organization (30.5% vs. 6.5%) for less than one year and more often in the same position (48% vs. 39.6%) and in the current organization (47.4% vs. 32.5%) for one to five years than women with children.

All women took actions aimed at developing their professional careers, but depending on the fact that they had children, these actions differed in terms of frequency. Women with children more often took part in courses on developing hard skills (63.9% vs. 44.5%), took up postgraduate studies (35.5% vs. 19.8%) and trained independently of work in the organization (45% vs. 32.8) and as part of work in the organization (63.9% vs. 46.6%). Women without children were more likely to focus on learning foreign languages (44.3% vs. 20.7%), networking (4.6% vs. 0.6), taking up studies (83.6% vs. 59.8%) and they focused on self-education (27.3% vs. 14.8%).

Women without children more often declared that a professional career was definitely important to them (41.5% vs. 28.4%), while women with children were less determined (the answer was "rather yes") (56.8% vs. 42.5%). However, these women showed a higher level of career satisfaction than those who did not have children (mean 3.46 vs. 3.26).

In the next step, the respondents were asked how important the indicated aspects of their professional career were to them. For women with children, leadership, having power, the ability to delegate tasks to others (average 3.26 vs. 3.04) and performing a profession perceived by society as prestigious (average 3.63 vs. 3.29) were more important. For women without children, the more important aspects were continuous learning and improving the level of their competences (average 4.35 vs. 4.17), as well as high remuneration and achieving a high financial position (average 4.13 vs. 3.86).

Then, they were asked to determine the degree of satisfaction with the presented aspects in relation to their own professional career. Women with children were more often satisfied with such aspects of their career as: continuous learning and improving the level of their competences (average 3.83 vs. 3.6); establishing valuable professional connections (average 3.71 vs. 3.47); receiving distinctions, awards, decorations (average 3.9 vs. 2.86); leadership, having power, the ability to delegate tasks to others (average 3.11 vs. 2.83), realizing one's own ambitions, dreams and professional plans (average 3.5 vs. 3.21); specialization in a given field (average 3.64 vs. 3.37); performing a profession perceived by society as prestigious (average 3.37 vs. 2.93); high salary and achieving a high financial position (average 3.09 vs. 2.77).

In terms of activities related to shaping their own professional career, women with children more often indicated that their professional career is based on the activities of the organization in which they work (average 3.62 vs. 3.41), their professional career development plan was shaped by the influence of close people (family, friends) (average 2.83 vs. 2.61) and that acquaintances, networks and relationships helped them shape their careers (average 2.6 vs. 2.35).

Women with children more often indicated that among the competences and personal resources in the context of shaping their own professional career, the following were more important for them than for women without children: professional experience (average 4.24 vs. 3.8), life experience (average 4.14 vs. 3.75), mobility (e.g. readiness for business trips; temporary change of place of residence) (average 3.43 vs. 3.17), level of education (average 4.14 vs. 3.69), as well as predispositions to performing a given profession (average 4.24 vs. 4.02).

4. Discussion

According to the findings of researchers dealing with career (Hall, Chandler, 2018), who claim that it covers, apart from professional work, also other spheres of life, including: such as family, it can be concluded that motherhood plays an important role in shaping a professional career.

The higher level of education of women with children and the higher average value of their age may indicate the dominant type of women's conventional or dual-track professional career in the study group, as described by Super (1976). The differences in the average age of women with and without children coincide with research conducted as part of the FAMWELL project, which reported an increasing level of resignation from motherhood among increasingly younger women (Matysiak et al., 2021).

Childless women most often worked, among others: in financial and insurance activities, which may be considered more prestigious than public administration, where women with children most often worked, and this is consistent with research conducted by Oxford University (Kahn et al., 2014), which showed that women those without children are more likely to have more prestigious jobs. Therefore, it seems interesting that, in relation to the degree of importance of various aspects of a professional career, performing a prestigious profession was more important for women with children.

Research (Moczydłowska, 2023) also showed that mothers earn less on average compared to childless women, which partially coincides with the results obtained. In most cases, women without children earned amounts of up to PLN 4,500 per month more often than those with children. This is also reflected in the degree of importance of various aspects of professional career, where childless respondents valued high remuneration and achieving a high financial position more. However, the highest wages above PLN 10,500 per month were more often earned by mothers.

As Lyons and Kuron (2014) point out, a professional career requires constant learning, developing skills and adapting to new requirements. Even though women in both groups studied take actions aimed at implementing this aspect, the childless respondents valued continuous learning more in relation to the degree of importance of various aspects of their professional career.

Today's approach to professional career also places greater emphasis on personal fulfillment and professional satisfaction (Guan et al., 2018). In this respect, women with children showed a higher level of career satisfaction than those who did not have children, which may indicate that the idea of combining motherhood with professional work is part of the modern concept of a professional career (Hall, Chandler, 2018).

5. Summary

The study indicates emerging significant differences between the surveyed women with children and those without children, in the context of professional career, preferences and activities undertaken for professional development. Women with children had an average age of 41 years. It is worth noting that this group more often had secondary and third level higher education, which suggests that mothers are more likely to invest in educational development. Additionally, a much larger percentage of women with children held positions at the highest levels, which indicates individuals with a strong position in the professional sphere. In terms of geographical location, women with children more often lived in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship. This is an interesting observation, which may be related to differences in access to resources, social support or the structure of jobs in a given region. Women with children were more likely to earn the highest monthly amounts, which may be due to their higher level of education and management positions. On the other hand, childless respondents more often earned amounts up to PLN 4500, which may result from a different priority in terms of professional life. In the area of career development activities, women with children were more likely to participate in courses developing hard skills, undertake postgraduate studies and train independently of work in the organization. However, childless women were more likely to focus on learning foreign languages, networking and taking up studies. This may suggest that mothers invest more in specific skills, while childless women emphasize the development of more universal competencies. In relation to the degree of importance of various aspects of a professional career, leadership, having power and performing a prestigious profession were crucial for women with children. However, childless respondents valued continuous learning, high salary and achieving a high financial position more. In the context of career satisfaction, women with children showed higher levels of satisfaction with various aspects of their career path. What was important for them was continuous learning, establishing valuable contacts, receiving awards, leadership and specialization in a given field. Career-shaping activities also differed between the two groups. Mothers more often indicated that their career is based on the activities of the organization, the influence of close people, as well as the importance of acquaintances and networks of contacts. In the area of competences and personal resources important for a professional career, women with children attached more importance to professional and life experience, mobility, level of education and predispositions to perform a given profession.

The research conducted is not free from limitations. First of all, it should be noted that the results obtained can only be used to demonstrate differences in the studied group and there are no grounds for generalizing them. The examined aspects do not exhaust the subject of motherhood and professional career, but constitute only a fragment of it, which can be treated as an introduction to the full research. However, this limitation indicates a possible direction for future research that could focus on a deeper understanding of the impact of having children

on women's career development. It could also be interesting to examine the differences in other regions of Poland and compare the results obtained or conduct research on the entire country. The study could also be extended with a longer analysis of women's career development to see what changes occur in different phases of professional life, especially in the context of having children.

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