

## SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN IN ACCESS TO HIGH-LEVEL POSITIONS

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**Purpose:** This article aims to verify the relationship between discrimination against women in access to high-level positions and their discrimination in the choice of their jobs, their return to the labour market, their education in technical subjects and the promotion of their participation in management decision-making.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The first part of the article includes a literature review that introduces the concept of labour market inequality, with particular emphasis on gender inequality. The next step involved analysing the relationship between the response variable and the explanatory variables. The results of a pilot survey conducted in early 2024 were used for this purpose. The GRETl econometric package was used to determine the degree of correlation between the variables, based on which the parameters of the ordered logit model were found using the ordinary least squares method (OLS).

**Findings:** The parameters of the developed logit model allowed us to conclude that there is a significant relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables. According to the respondents, women who are discriminated against in terms of their jobs or return to the labour market after a long break are also discriminated against in terms of access to high-level positions.

**Research limitations/implications:** An analysis of the results obtained showed that discrimination against women in the labour market is considered a widespread social problem. Consequently, it was assumed that this research should be expanded to include issues aimed at identifying solutions to prevent such practices, among other things. Further, to gain insight into the motivations of the opposite side, surveys should be addressed directly to employers. The survey was a pilot and, as such, no limitations were identified during its implementation.

**Social implications:** The survey results indicate that gender inequality in the labour market is a widespread problem that generates negative emotions in society. This points to the need for a strategy that can prevent such practices and reduce prejudice at the same time.

**Originality/value:** The considerations in this article highlight the problem of gender inequalities in the labour market. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the issue of discrimination against women in access to leadership positions. The article is primarily aimed at women in the labour market and employers.

**Keywords:** Women in high-level positions, gender inequality, discrimination against women, GRETl.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Employment issues continue to be recognised as pertinent, forming the basis of numerous studies. It is worth noting that the labour market is highly heterogeneous in many respects, among which the gender employment gap is often highlighted. In practice, such an approach generally meets with public disapproval.

Apart from the social consequences of inequality, the literature also refers to those of an economic nature. In this respect, it is assumed that high levels of inequality negatively affect economic growth in the long term, consequently exacerbating the problem of social and economic exclusion (Bryan et al., 2024). Estimates suggest that the gap in Gross Domestic Product *per capita* resulting from inequalities between men and women in the European labour market can be as high as 10 percentage points (Cuberes, Teignier, 2016). The inequalities indicated as particularly significant in terms of affecting economic prosperity include such things as differences in wages and access to education (Boboc et al., 2012).

As noted by J. Oczki, inequalities occurring in the labour market are universal and depend both on the individual characteristics of a specific worker (Lüthi, Wolter, 2023), as well as on issues regulated by the market, including the demand for a specific type of work and the supply of a specific group of workers. In practice, efforts to reduce inequalities are primarily driven by public disapproval and divergent attitudes between employers and employees. As shown by the analyses carried out so far, particular attention is paid to gender inequalities in the labour market, where the following are considered key manifestations: gender pay gaps, as well as the unfair assignment of managerial functions and board positions (Oczki, 2015).

The previously mentioned inequalities are closely linked to the segmentation of the labour market based on selected employee characteristics, among which gender is one of the main criteria. Entrusting a position to a specific person does not guarantee success for either party, which is mainly due to the difficulty of matching the employer's needs and expectations with the individual characteristics of the employee. Hiring an employee and then promptly terminating them generates costs for the employer, which is why segmentation — enabling the selection of employees with the characteristics deemed desirable by the employer (e.g. gender) — is used in such cases (Gueltzow et al., 2023). In practice, such categorisation of social groups is not always genuine and often causes them to be perceived through stereotypes and, as a result, to also be discriminated against (Sánchez et al., 2022). The characteristics that employers believe describe discriminated groups include a focus on family life (often linked to the high cost of caring for young children) (de Gispert et al., 2024), lack of commitment to work, no ambition for higher pay, no ambition for promotion, etc. On the other hand, the manifestations of cited discrimination include the gender wage gap and the lack of access to certain positions (including in the technical sciences) (Lindner, Makarova, 2024), including on company boards (Baizan, 2020; Zwiech, 2013).

K. Kompa, D. Witkowska and B. Jarosz emphasise that the spread of gender inequalities is considered an unacceptable phenomenon that should be prevented. This is evidenced, among other things, by existing legal regulations.

This starts with European Union legislation, in which ensuring equal treatment between women and men is a fundamental value guaranteed by the treaties, and the pursuit of this value is one of the main objectives of the EU's activities (Ludera-Ruszel, 2015; Burgoński, 2024). Article 157(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Consolidated version..., 7.6.2016, pp. 117-118) states that: "Each Member State shall ensure that the principle of equal pay for male and female workers for equal work or work of equal value is applied".

This principle is reiterated in Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (OJ C 2010 No. 83, item 389). The Council Conclusions of 7 March 2011 (European Pact for Gender Equality (2011-2020), Official Journal of the European Union (2011/C 155/02)), which expand on this, identify ways to close the gender gap in the labour market, combat the exclusion of women on the grounds of age and gender stereotypes and counteract related violence. The need to promote equality in the rules of access to education and training and, finally, to strengthen the professional position of women in political life, to promote female entrepreneurs, to foster gender equality initiatives was emphasised (Majkowska-Szulc, Tomaszewska, 2020).

In Polish legislation, the principle of gender equality is established by Article 33 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 (Dz.U. /Journal of Laws/ of 1997, No. 78, item 483), providing for equal rights for women and men in family, public, social and economic life. Section 2 of that Article explicitly emphasizes that: "Men and women shall have equal rights, in particular, regarding education, employment and promotion, and shall have the right to equal compensation for work of similar value, to social security, to hold offices, and to receive public honours and decorations". This provision is horizontal, meaning that not only public but also private actors — for example, employers — are obliged to comply with it (Safian, Bosek, 2016; Burek, Kalus, 2013). The prohibition of discrimination was introduced to protect individuals from harmful conduct motivated by discrimination, and as such, it does not matter what entity is the originator of such conduct (Krzemińska, 2006).

Likewise, Article 11<sup>2</sup> of the Labour Code of 26 June 1974 (consolidated text of Dz.U. /Journal of Laws/ of 2023, item 1465), reiterates the principle of equality of employees, explicitly emphasising that it applies "in particular to the equal treatment of men and women in employment". Here, it is worth recalling that equal treatment does not mean identical treatment. Differences may arise due to personal characteristics of employees, e.g. disability. The Constitutional Court has also indicated that granting additional rights to women aimed at guaranteeing the achievement of equality does not contradict the principle of equality, but rather pursues it (CC judgment of 3.3.1987, P 2/87, OTK 1987, No. 1, p. 2), (Muszalski, Walczak, 2024).

In practice, however, significant disproportions are noticeable when it comes to women in leadership roles. Some authors note that a result of discrimination against women on boards of directors, which is due to (Kompa et al., 2015):

- more difficult access to these positions,
- lower pay for work in the same position compared to a man,
- a longer career advancement path.

Undoubtedly, gender inequality generates considerable tensions, including both among women seeking promotion or higher pay and in the views of the public which, in practice, entails widespread opposition to such conduct. It is not without reason that recent years have seen a particular emphasis on increasing women's participation in decision-making processes, regardless of their place in the organisational structure. It has been pointed out that women in leadership positions create a positive perception of the organisation from the corporate social responsibility standpoint; moreover, they improve the company's image and positively influence financial performance (Evans, 2014). It is further highlighted amidst many opinions that the increase of women's involvement in the management of economic actors contributes to the reduction of men's exclusive right to exercise power. The need to eliminate the "glass ceiling" (Akpınar-Sposito, 2013a; Naguib, Madeeha, 2023; van Ruler, de Lange, 2003), construed as obstacles placed in front of women on the way to promotion, is also considered as one of the key arguments (Akpınar-Sposito, 2013b; Kompa et al., 2016). Efforts to close the gender wage and employment gaps can significantly reduce household income gaps (Azzollini et al., 2023).

As noted above, gender disparities in access to managerial positions are recognised as a widespread problem that, in practice, can involve discrimination against women at many levels of socio-economic life. Considering the above, this article aims to verify the relationship between discrimination against women in access to high-level positions and their discrimination in the choice of their jobs, their return to the labour market, their education in technical subjects and the promotion of their participation in management decision-making.

## 2. Methods

The article provides a vertical analysis of the labour market from the point of view of those in leadership positions (split between men and women) in the overall workforce. Additionally, the Gretl econometric package (Adkins, 2018; Cotrell, 2021; Kufel, 2013) was used to achieve the previously stated objective, which enabled the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable to be verified. In this respect, the ordinary least squares method (OLS) was applied, which made it possible to find the ordered logit model parameters. The results of the analysis are presented in the next section of the article.

### 3. Results

At this point, it is worth referring to the regular labour market analyses carried out by Statistics Poland — the Labour Force Survey (LFS). According to the guidelines, the LFS enables a comprehensive verification of the labour force resources in terms of employed, unemployed or economically inactive status (Statistics Poland, n/a).

Table 1 shows the percentage of leadership positions in the total workforce, broken down by women and men.

**Tabela 1.**

*Share of persons in leadership positions in the total workforce*

Item		Employed persons aged 15-89 (in thousands)	Public officials, senior officials and managers (in thousands)	Share of public officials, senior officials and managers in the total workforce (in %)
Q3 2021	Total	16,814	1,103	6.56
	Women	7,630	484	2.88
	Men	9,184	619	3.68
Q3 2022	Total	16,690	1,109	6.64
	Women	7,616	469	2.81
	Men	9,074	640	3.83
Q3 2023	Total	16,873	1,179	6.99
	Women	7,764	471	2.79
	Men	9,109	707	4.19

Source: own elaboration based on the LFS.

The latest LFS analysis of the labour market covers Q3 2023. For comparison purposes, 2021-2022 data for the same quarter were used as well. As indicated by the information in Table 1, the share of all (i.e. female and male) public officials, senior officials and managers in the total workforce was characterised by a regular increase, reaching values of 6.56%, 6.64% and 6.99%, respectively, in 2023. Undoubtedly, the growth of this indicator is the consequence of the increasing number of men occupying the above positions, i.e. from 619,000 in 2021, 640,000 in 2022, to 707,000 in the last period analysed. In contrast, the share of women in leadership positions is characterised by an annual decline, from 3.68% in 2021 to 2.79% in 2023. This demonstrates an increasing disparity between the number of men and the number of women in leadership positions, which was 135,000 in 2021, 171,000 in 2022 and as much as 236,000 in 2023. The downward trend in the number of women participating in management decision-making is indicative of an inconsistency between the initiatives promoted to prevent such situations and the actual state of affairs.

Here, it must be noted that the standards for the empowerment of women to occupy leadership positions, as indicated by international organisations, are still far detached from the views and beliefs prevailing in society, which particularly highlight discrimination against women. Therefore, a preliminary survey was conducted in early 2024 to verify the relationship between the occupation of high-level positions by women and the commonplace discrimination in this regard. The survey questionnaire consisted of a core section of 12 questions and

a demographics section. The survey mainly addressed the situation of women in the labour market and the role they are assigned in their private lives. The answers to the questions were structured according to a Likert scale, to which appropriate values were assigned, namely:

- strongly disagree – 1;
- somewhat disagree – 2;
- no opinion – 3;
- somewhat agree – 4;
- strongly agree – 5.

Responses were collected from 310 respondents, 64.61% of whom were women and the remaining 35.39% men. As for the place of residence, 67.65% of respondents indicated an urban municipality, 21.90% an urban-rural municipality and 10.46% a rural municipality. Notably, 65.25% of the total responses were given by people aged 26-55 years.

To answer the research question posed, the next section of the article assesses the relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables (Table 2). For this purpose, the GRETLM econometric package was used which, based on the ordinary least squares method (OLS), made it possible to find the parameters of the ordered logit model.

**Table 2.**

*Variables used to develop the logit model*

<b>Dependent variable</b>	
<b>D</b>	Do you think women are discriminated against when it comes to access to high-level positions?
<b>Independent variables</b>	
<b>A</b>	Do you think women are discriminated against when it comes to their choice of jobs?
<b>E</b>	Do you think that women's participation in decision-making (e.g. in politics, on company boards, etc.) should be promoted?
<b>F</b>	Do you think that women have free access to all fields of study offered by universities, including male-dominated fields, e.g.: sciences, technical sciences, etc.?
<b>I</b>	Do you think that women are discriminated against in the labour market with regard to their choice of giving birth to and bringing up children?

Source: Own elaboration.

As can be seen based on the information in Table 2, the dependent variable is the respondents' answers as to whether they think women are discriminated against in terms of access to leadership positions. The study looked for a relationship between this aspect and the independent variables, which included issues related to discrimination against women in terms of women entering the workforce, the promotion of women's participation in management decision-making, the issue of free access to university faculties that were commonly dominated by men and discrimination against women in the labour market due to childbirth. The results of this relationship are presented in Table 3.

**Tabela 3.**

*Ordinary Least Squares method (OLS). Dependent variable: D (using observations 1-310 (n = 305)).*

	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>Std. error</b>	<b>t-ratio</b>	<b>p-value</b>	
const	0.124849	0.202624	0.6162	0.5383	
A	0.521445	0.0432095	12.07	<0.0001	***
E	0.277217	0.0418086	6.631	<0.0001	***
F	-0.155550	0.0434537	-3.580	0.0004	***
I	0.275421	0.0483367	5.698	<0.0001	***
Mean dependent var	2.859016	S.D. dependent var		1.391867	
Sum squared resid.	210.7406	S.E. of regression		0.838134	
R-squared	0.642168	Adjusted R-squared		0.637397	
F(4, 300)	134.5957	P-value(F)		1.10e-65	
Log-likelihood	-376.3995	Akaike criterion		762.7989	
Schwarz criterion	781.4005	Hannan-Quinn		770.2392	

Source: Own elaboration.

The results show that there is a significant relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables selected for the study. The explanatory variables are characterised by high significance, which oscillates at around  $p < 0.01$ . The signs of the independent variable estimates show that variables A, E and I are stimulants, while variable F is a destimulant. This means that an increase in the values of variables A, E and I implies an increase in the value of the dependent variable D, whereas a decrease in the values of these variables contributes to a decrease in the value of the complex phenomenon. More specifically, respondents who strongly agreed that:

- women are discriminated against when it comes to their choice of jobs (A),
- women are discriminated against in the labour market with regard to their choice of giving birth to and bringing up children (I),
- women's participation in decision-making (e.g. in politics, on company boards, etc.) should be promoted (E),
- also strongly agreed that women are discriminated against when it comes to access to high-level positions.

As respondents' feelings about the above-mentioned aspects decreased, so, too, did their feelings concerning the dependent variables. Therefore, when respondents disagreed with the statements indicated as independent variables, i.e. A, I and E, they also did not believe that women are discriminated against in access to leadership positions. The results obtained for variable F, the destimulant, show that the more respondents disagreed that women have access to all university faculties, including male-dominated fields, the more they expressed the view that women are discriminated against when it comes to access to high-level positions. In contrast, if they agreed with the independent variable, they disagreed with the dependent variable. These scenarios demonstrate a negative relationship between the explanatory and response variables. The value of the R-squared coefficient demonstrates a good fit of the variables to the model, the value of which confirms that the variation in the independent variable

explained 64.21% of the variation in the dependent variable. The p-value for the F-test ranked below 0.01, which also indicates the significance of the variables used in the model.

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of the above surveys show that even though gender discrimination of employees is considered unacceptable (according to the position of the European Union, among other things), it is still a commonplace practice among employers, characterised by a negative public perception. The answers given by the respondents demonstrate a widespread belief that women are discriminated against in many respects. This includes the choice of jobs, the decision to give birth to and bring up a child, and access to study in technical subjects. Notably, the promotion of women's participation in management decision-making also plays a vital role in this perspective. All these aspects have an important bearing on women's occupation of leadership positions. In practice, discrimination against women in the labour market is closely linked to their discrimination in accessing high-level positions. Women's career development is severely restricted as early as the stage of their search for a place in the labour market, which prevents them from achieving career advancement at a later stage.

In line with the above, discrimination against women is currently a widespread problem. The public emphasises the need to implement measures aimed at correcting this trend, thus aiming to change employers' attitudes. It therefore seems reasonable to introduce policies that could support women as they re-enter the labour market and then as they build up their leadership positions.

Based on the results of the above research, it can be concluded that discrimination against women in access to high-level positions is closely correlated with discrimination against women seeking employment or returning to the labour market after a long break. This phenomenon should be viewed as a social problem for which preventive action is required. Given the importance of the issue, it is worth expanding the research carried out to include additional issues, such as employers' beliefs regarding the employment of women in various positions. Among other things, this would make it possible to find out whether employers are guided by prejudices in this respect and what these prejudices stem from.

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