

## ACTIONS FOR GENDER EQUALITY: THE CASE OF ACADEMIC STAFF AT RZESZÓW UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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**Purpose:** The situation of women in higher education has been undergoing continuous changes in recent years, with their participation in academic life steadily increasing. However, disparities still exist in terms of wages, academic promotion, and women's representation in leadership positions. The main objective of the article is to present the issue of gender equality and assess its state among the academic staff at the Rzeszów University of Technology.

**Design/methodology/approach:** In order to assess the gender equality situation at the Rzeszów University of Technology, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed. The quantitative research focused on analyzing data related to gender distribution in the employment structure, leadership positions, academic degrees and titles, participation in university bodies, and involvement in research projects. The qualitative research involved conducting an anonymous survey among 300 academic staff members.

**Findings:** The study revealed that the Rzeszów University of Technology largely ensures gender equality in recruitment processes and professional development. However, subtle forms of discrimination still exist, such as inappropriate behaviors and limited representation of women in leadership roles. Most respondents appreciated the university's efforts in supporting work-life balance and acknowledged PRz as an employer committed to gender equality.

**Research limitations/implications:** The study presented in this article is limited to the group of academic staff at the Rzeszów University of Technology (PRz). Future research could track the impact of the implemented actions over time, include comparative analyses with other technical universities, and involve a broader group of participants

**Originality/value:** The article highlights the state of gender equality among academic staff at the Rzeszów University of Technology. It presents a topic valuable for academic leaders, decision-makers, and researchers interested in gender equality issues.

**Keywords:** gender equality, gender equality in education, gender equality plan.

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

## 1. Introduction

Equality is a fundamental social value that serves as the foundation of social order. It is often associated with protection against discrimination and equal rights, but in its classic sense, it primarily denotes equality of opportunity and equal access to rights and responsibilities, regardless of gender, race, religion, or other personal characteristics (Kopczewski, Pawalec, 2012). However, equality is not limited solely to equal opportunities. A critical component of this concept is equality of outcomes, which posits that merely providing equal opportunities is insufficient; it requires continuous monitoring and adjustment to achieve real, balanced results. In this context, gender equality has become a major area of research today and is a topic of international discussion. In national policies, the idea of gender mainstreaming—a strategy focused on integrating the social and cultural aspects of gender into all areas of life and decision-making processes—has gained increasing importance. In practice, this approach means that gender issues should be considered at every stage of public policy development, implementation, and evaluation, as well as within programs and projects.

Equality in the higher education sector is currently a priority goal within EU policy. Actions for gender equality in research and innovation form a vital part of the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy for 2020-2025. Since 2020, the European Commission, aiming to strengthen the European Research Area, has reemphasized the priority of gender equality by requiring research and public institutions to adopt plans that support change in this direction (European Commission, 2020). Horizon Europe, a framework program for 2021-2027, mandates that holding a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) is an eligibility criterion for all public bodies, higher education institutions, and research organizations wishing to participate in the program (Kosakowska-Berezecka, Żadkowska, Pawlicka, 2020).

The position of women in higher education has been gradually improving (Dziedziczak-Foltyn, 2010). In recent years, women's participation in academic life has significantly increased. Poland ranks high within the European Union regarding the percentage of women among PhD graduates—over 56% of doctorate holders are women. Women are increasingly represented at universities, and the idea that discrimination against them in higher education is ending has gained traction. Nonetheless, considerable disparities in pay and academic advancement remain, particularly after obtaining a doctorate, and there are still visible gaps in leadership roles. Reports on this issue, both in Poland and across Europe, point to primary causes for these differences in academic careers between men and women, including unequal distribution of family responsibilities, lower self-evaluation of research projects, and pressures to meet societal expectations (Report "Women at Technical Universities", 2022).

It remains unclear, however, whether the limited advancement opportunities to higher positions in academia stem from gender-specific inequalities within this sector or are a reflection of broader, long-standing gender inequalities in the labor market and in access to positions of power (Dziedziczak-Foltyn, 2010).

The conducted research was used to examine and analyze the situation of gender equality at Rzeszów University of Technology. The aim of this article is to present the issue of gender equality at the university among the academic staff. The research problem is formulated as follows: How is the situation of gender equality shaping up in the academic environment at Rzeszów University of Technology, and what are the key challenges related to ensuring it?

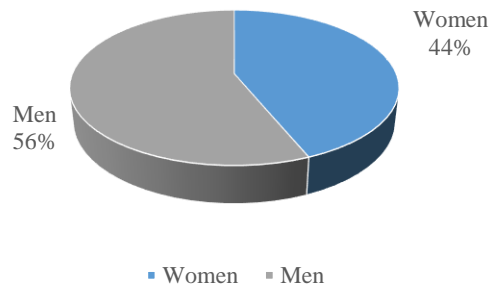
The study presents findings that not only shed light on the current state of gender equality at a prominent Polish technical university but also offer a valuable basis for action. The results of the research can serve as a significant resource for academic institutions, policymakers, and organizations seeking to implement gender equality strategies in their own contexts. The innovative aspect of this study lies in its combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, which provides a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. The findings also open up possibilities for further research and can be applied to inform policies and practices that promote gender equality in higher education, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable academic environment for all.

## **2. Research Method**

To examine the gender equality situation at Rzeszów University of Technology, a quantitative study was conducted focusing on analyzing data illustrating gender distribution in employment structure, representation in managerial positions, academic degrees and titles, participation in university governing bodies, and involvement in research projects. The data analysis covered the period from 2020 to 2021. In the qualitative study, an anonymous survey was conducted with a sample of 300 academic staff members. The survey questions primarily addressed experiences of gender-based discrimination, work-life balance issues, and the university's existing solutions and actions on these topics. Academic staff members represented 31% of the eligible individuals in this professional group. The results of the research provided the basis for the development of the Gender Equality Plan, which is part of the Rzeszów University of Technology's strategy, supporting actions aimed at eliminating inequalities. The Gender Equality Plan is directed at academic staff, administrative employees, as well as students and doctoral candidates of the university. The document includes studies on the current state among employees and staff, as well as planned actions for the years 2022-2025.

### 3. Research

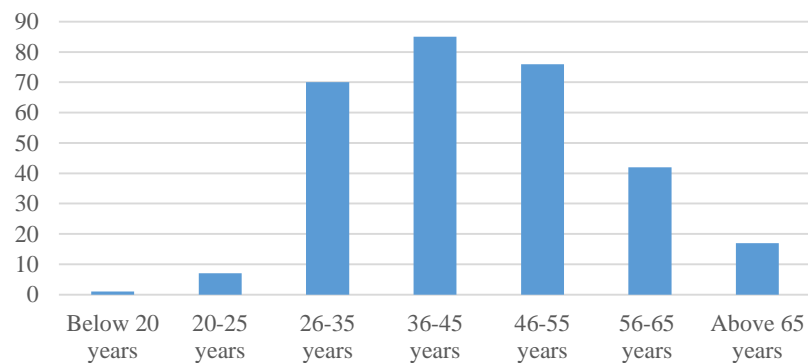
To assess the opinions of academic staff at Rzeszów University of Technology regarding the university's gender equality initiatives, a survey was conducted. The study included a sample of 300 individuals. Among the respondents, men slightly outnumbered women (56% men to 44% women) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Gender of Respondents.

Source: Own elaboration.

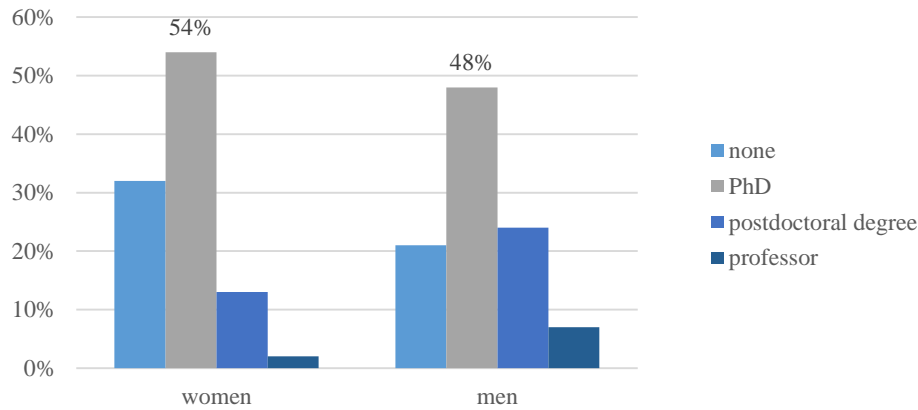
Taking into account the age distribution of the respondents, the largest group was composed of individuals aged 36-45 years (29%), followed by those in the 46-55 years range (26%). The next group consisted of respondents aged 26-35 years (23%), followed by individuals in the 56-65 years range (14%). Employees over the age of 65 represented 6%, while the smallest group was made up of individuals in the 20-25 years range (2%) (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Age of Respondents.

Source: Own elaboration.

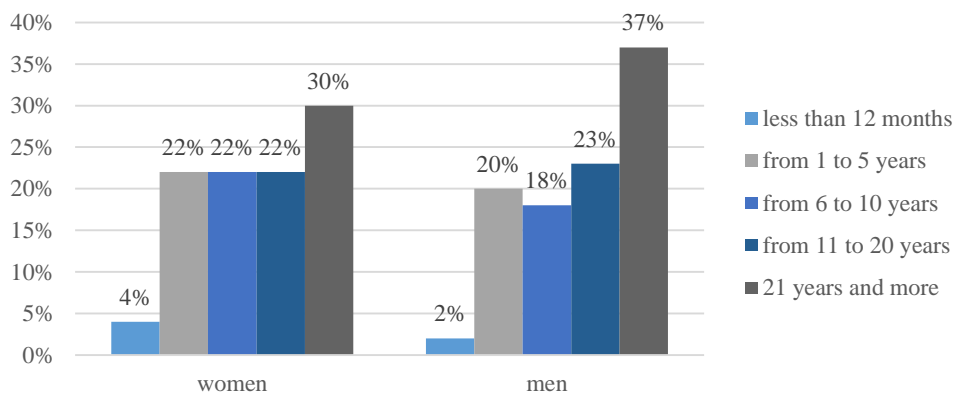
A significantly larger proportion of respondents held a doctoral degree—54% among women and 48% among men. A greater gender disparity is observed in higher academic titles, particularly in the case of habilitated doctor, where 13% of women and 24% of men hold this title. The gender gap is also evident at the professor level, with only 2% of women holding this title, compared to 7% of men (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Academic Degree and Title.

Source: Own elaboration.

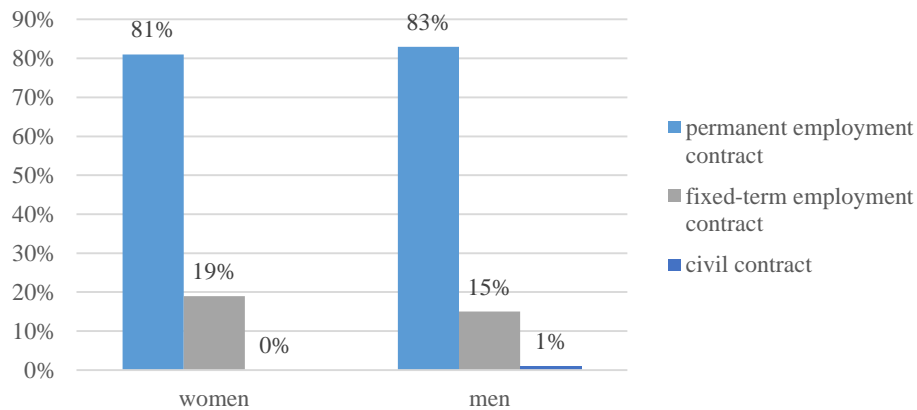
Regarding work experience, the majority of respondents reported having more than 21 years of experience—30% of female respondents and 37% of male respondents. The smallest group indicated less than 12 months of work experience, comprising 4% of women and 2% of men (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Work Experience.

Source: Own elaboration.

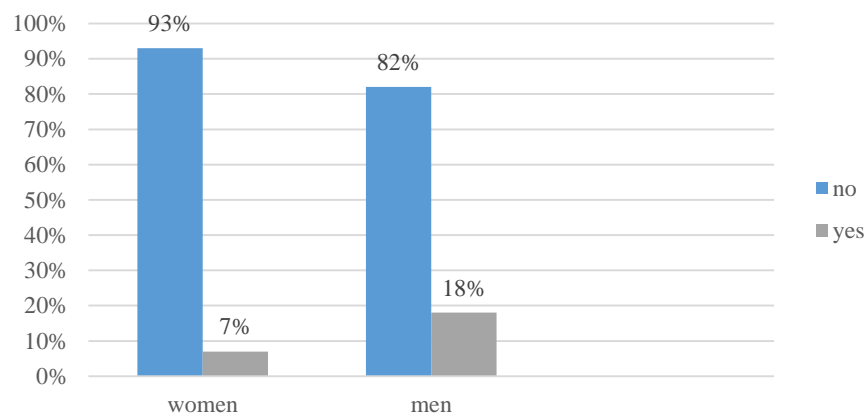
The largest proportion of respondents is employed under a permanent employment contract/appointment – 81% of women and 83% of men. This is followed by fixed-term employment contracts/appointments – 19% of women and 15% of men, and a civil contract or contract for specific work, held by 1% of men (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Employment Form by Gender.

Source: Own elaboration.

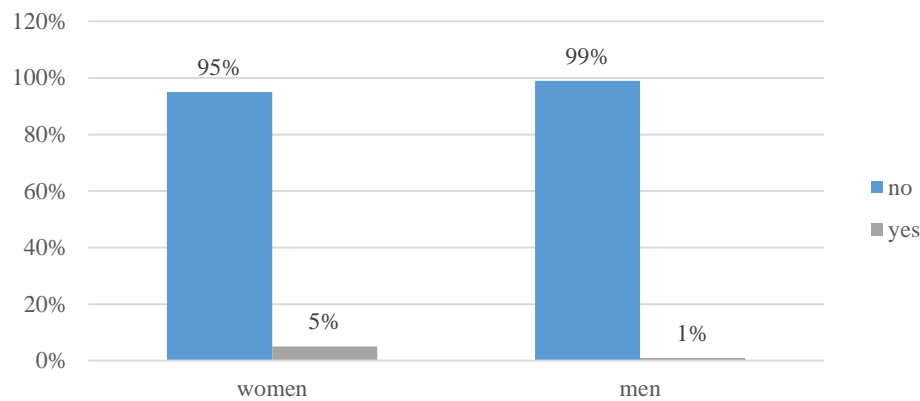
In the case of managerial positions, men are in the majority—18% of this group indicated they hold a managerial position, whereas only 7% of women provided this response (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Managerial Position by Gender.

Source: Own elaboration.

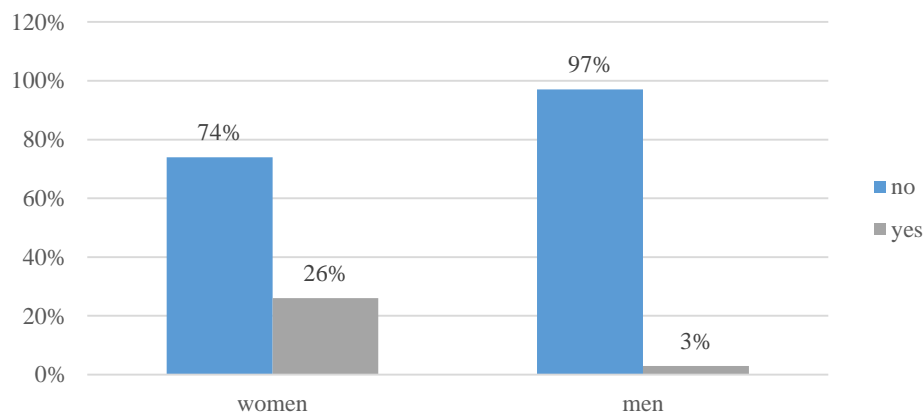
The first question in the questionnaire concerned respondents' experiences with discrimination and unequal treatment based on gender during the recruitment process. The survey results directed at employees of Rzeszów University of Technology did not indicate noticeable discriminatory behaviors that would violate the principle of gender equality, either in recruitment or employment. Only 5% of women and 1% of men experienced unequal treatment during recruitment, including questions about family planning and having children, as well as suggestions that men were "more" welcome in this workplace (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Experiencing unfair treatment based on gender during the recruitment process.

Source: Own elaboration.

In cases of discrimination in professional work, the results look somewhat different. Among women, over 25% of respondents indicated that they had experienced direct gender-based discrimination during their employment (Figure 8).



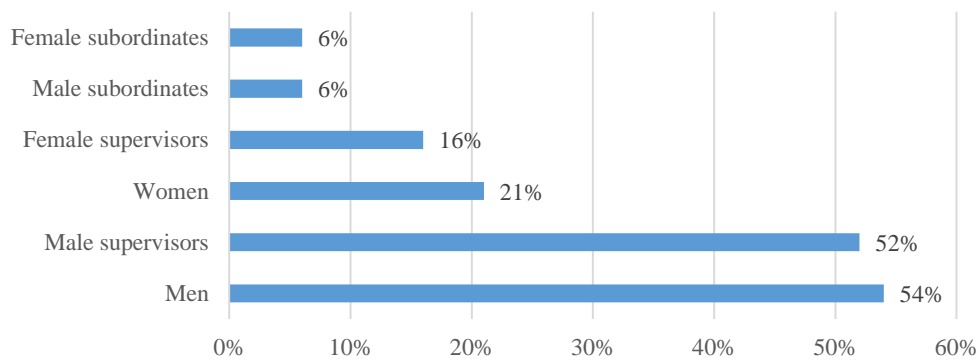
**Figure 8.** Experience of direct gender-based discrimination in professional work.

Source: Own elaboration.

Among the forms of such behavior mentioned by respondents were:

- inappropriate jokes,
- ambiguous comments,
- snide remarks,
- inappropriate conduct,
- gossip,
- public criticism and being silenced,
- lower wages,
- being burdened with organizational tasks,
- disregarding competencies, and
- limited opportunities for promotion.

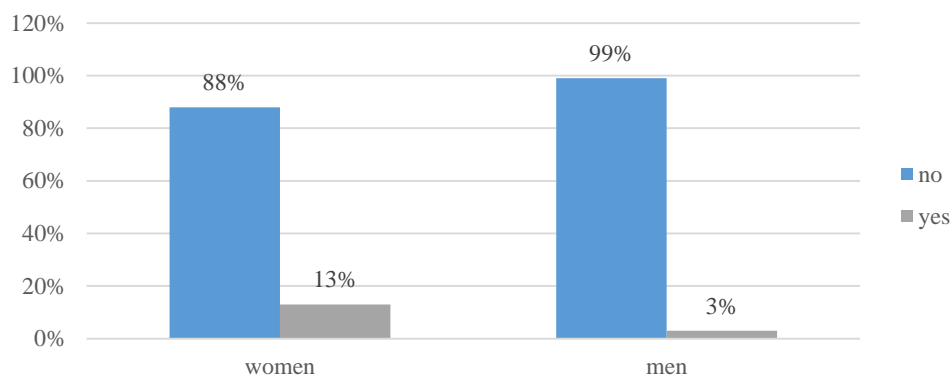
The respondents primarily pointed to men as those engaging in such behaviors (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** The person engaging in such behavior.

Source: Own elaboration.

In response to whether gender was considered a criterion in building a professional career, the vast majority of respondents answered negatively—88% of women and 97% of men (Figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Gender as a determining criterion in the process of building an academic career.

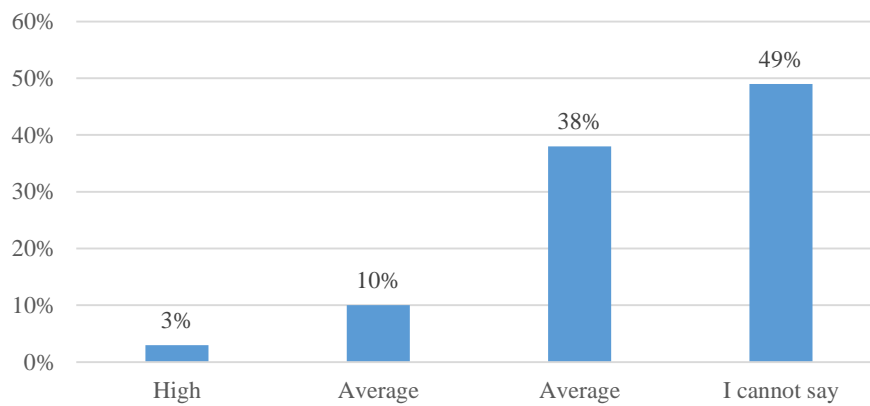
Source: Own elaboration.

In the survey, approximately 80% of respondents believe that Rzeszów University of Technology, as an employer, has sufficient institutional solutions in place to ensure gender equality at the university. Among the remaining 20%, suggestions were made to enhance gender equality in access to personal, scientific, and professional development. These suggestions include:

- Appointing a rector's representative for gender equality.
- Equalizing maternity or parental leave pay for women.
- Replacing staff members who do not adhere to gender equality principles.
- Organizing mandatory training for staff on this topic.
- Establishing clear promotion and team selection criteria.
- Increasing the number of women in managerial positions.
- Ensuring pay equality relative to responsibilities and engagement.
- Raising employee awareness.
- Creating procedures that outline appropriate and inappropriate workplace behaviors.



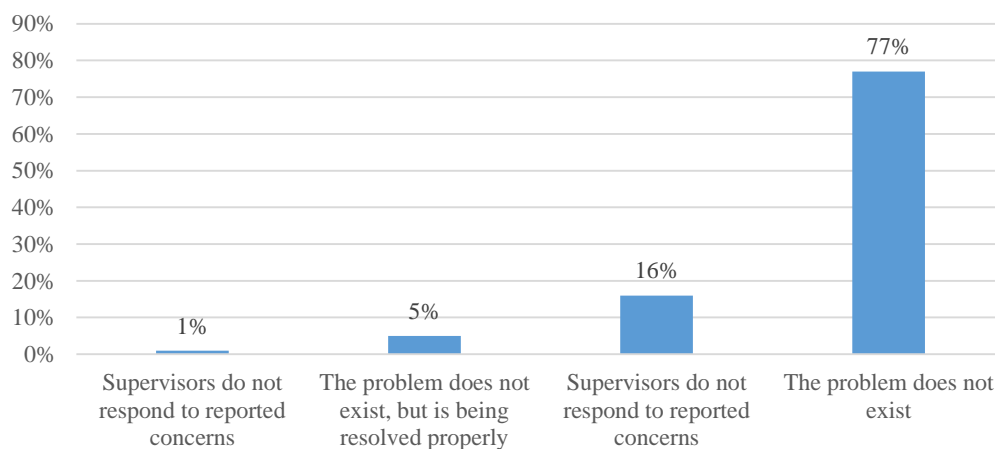
To whether the scale of gender inequality among academic staff at Rzeszów University of Technology is high, the majority of respondents (49%) answered that they had no opinion (Figure 11).



**Figure 11.** Assessment of the scale of the gender inequality problem at Rzeszów University of Technology.

Source: Own elaboration.

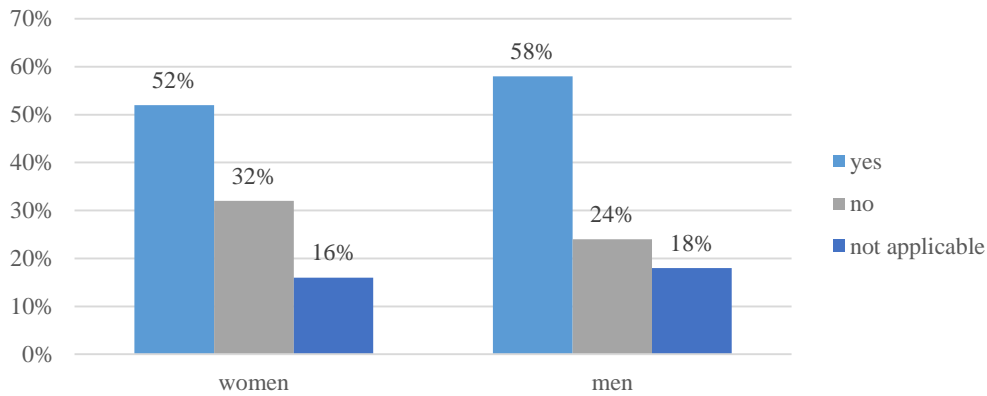
Regarding the question about gender inequality in their immediate environment and among direct supervisors, the vast majority responded that such a problem does not occur in their case (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** Assessment of the scale of the gender inequality problem at Rzeszów University of Technology.

Source: Own elaboration.

Another important element of the survey was the issue of 'work-life balance,' that is, maintaining a balance between professional work and personal life. Among the respondents, over 50% confirmed the ability to maintain this balance. When it comes to work-life balance in the division between men and women, the situation is quite similar—52% of female respondents and 58% of male respondents answered positively (Figure 13).



**Figure 13.** Maintaining 'Work-Life Balance' by gender.

Source: Own elaboration.

Respondents mainly appreciated Rzeszów University of Technology's current practices in creating conditions for maintaining work-life balance, which include:

- Flexible working hours.
- Subsidies for childcare.
- Availability of social and medical packages for employees' families.
- The option of taking personal leave.
- The possibility for employees to work remotely.
- Programs supporting the return to work after maternity or parental leave.

## 4. Conclusions

Rzeszów University of Technology is committed to upholding the principles of respect, freedom, and equality, which form the foundation of its operations. The research conducted has led to the development of a gender equality plan, which has become an integral part of the university's strategy for the coming years. The Gender Equality Plan at the university serves the entire academic community as a tool to ensure equal opportunities for scientific, personal, and professional development. It sets out five key strategic objectives: raising awareness of the need for equal treatment, striving for balanced gender representation in decision-making positions, ensuring equal career development opportunities, promoting work-life balance, and combating gender-based violence. These objectives align with the priorities set by the European Commission for gender equality initiatives. The findings of the research not only provide new insights into the state of gender equality at one of Poland's leading technical universities but also highlight the importance of further actions to improve equality in higher education. They serve as valuable foundations for institutions that wish to assess and address gender inequalities. The research shows that at Rzeszów University of Technology, there are no significant differences in recruitment processes or professional development opportunities

between women and men among the academic staff. It also demonstrates that there are no major gender disparities among the university's employees, although there is a slight male advantage, particularly in managerial positions. This reflects the general situation at most public and technical universities in Poland, which may result from stereotypical perceptions of women in technical fields. Furthermore, the research found that while the percentage of employees reporting discriminatory experiences is low, women are more likely than men to report such situations. The gender equality plan prepared at the university may be a step toward changing this situation. Although the majority of surveyed employees believe that the university already has sufficient solutions in place to ensure gender equality, further actions are necessary to overcome subtle yet significant barriers to equality, particularly in leadership and decision-making areas. More than half of the respondents also report successfully balancing their professional and personal lives. These findings underscore the validity and importance of continued actions by the university to promote gender equality and support work-life balance. As part of the plan, the university authorities are committed not only to implementing the proposed actions for equality but also to continuously monitoring and evaluating equality-related issues, allowing for prompt responses to potential problems.

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