

THE ROLE AND SITUATION OF WOMEN IN BUSINESS

Anna KWIECIEŃ

University of Economics in Katowice; anna.kwiecien@ue.katowice.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-4928-5396

Purpose: Drawing attention to the situation and role of women in business. Women are a valuable element of human capital that can change and enhance the effectiveness of management of entities thanks to their abilities, skills and flexibility. Therefore, the aim of this study is to demonstrate the significant and growing role of women in management and to identify the current situation and position of women in enterprises in the light of previous research.

Design/methodology/approach: The study is based on a critical analysis of literature and Internet sources, including reports from previously conducted research on the role of women in management.

Findings: The considerations presented in this study have shown that women usually have a specific, feminine management style that is more relationship-oriented and democratic, which fits the current situation. Women seem to be more efficient in solving problems; they adopt a more interpersonal leadership style, but they usually fail to enter the management boards of companies. They occupy management positions at lower levels of the structure. There are many reasons for this situation.

Practical implications: The theoretical considerations are supported by the results of national and global research on the role and position of women in management. Thanks to this, it is confirmed that women, along with their management style and many specific skills and competencies, still do not have an equal position with men in the context of the positions they hold and the roles they play. Making everyone aware of the potential of introducing gender diversity into organizations can convince company boards to change the structure of employment and ultimately improve the situation of women.

Social implications: Recognising the specific character of the female approach to management and the typical characteristics and competences of women should raise awareness of the issues of the current perception and position of women in management as well as raise awareness of the multi-faceted beneficial socio-economic consequences of greater women's involvement.

Originality/value: This study presents the assets of women and their management style, but above all it draws attention to the need for changes in the approach to women's involvement and in the assessment of their various social roles, which is necessary to achieve long-term positive changes.

Keywords: women, management, management style, parity.

Category of the paper: Viewpoint, General review.

1. Introduction

The last decade has undoubtedly been a period of challenges for the entire entrepreneurship sector. This is observed not only in Poland, but in the entire European Union, which, in the face of rapid changes in all its areas, is struggling with a number of different problems of an economic, cultural and social nature. The situation of women in organizations is one of the aspects that is certainly worth paying attention to today (Editor Harasim, 2015).

Although Polish business is quite heavily feminized, the highest management positions are mostly held by men. A woman in the role of a manager is not surprising, however a woman as a leader of a company is not very common.

The number of women in management is systematically increasing and this is visible in many countries, especially the highly developed ones. However, it is not yet possible to speak of equal opportunities for women and men, and the scope and pace of changes taking place in this regard should be considered unsatisfactory (Kupczyk, 2009).

The social and economic transformations of the modern world, shape the need for changes in management and are the basis for greater participation of women in the labour market and participation in management (Kowalska-Myśliwiecka, Szypulska, 2021). However, there are many obstacles on their path to a career, which often results from stereotypes. The problem of gender discrimination is still present, but the mentality of society is changing and the participation of women in management is growing. The United Nations, the European Union, the Council of Europe and other international regional organizations have been promoting equality policies aimed at balancing the participation of women and men in social and economic life for almost two decades. The main tool used to achieve this goal is the establishment of gender parity in specific socio-economic areas.

It is also increasingly noticed that contemporary organizations need women. Firstly, because women are more flexible and multi-skilled, secondly, because they agree to work for less money, and finally, because, in accordance with the gender stereotype, they attach greater importance to interpersonal contacts, participation in decision-making, and teamwork, which is in line with contemporary trends in management science (Baskiewicz, 2013).

Increasing the share of women in management is consistent with the idea of caring for diversity¹ in the workplace. Research confirms that diverse teams have access to a wider range of experiences and skills and are open to new ideas and solutions. Companies that have taken care of equality regardless of gender, age or origin are more resistant to crises, which is an increasingly important competitive advantage. In such companies, it is easier to build long-term development strategies (Report: Business..., 2023).

¹ It should be emphasized that the concept of diversity in this matter applies not only to gender, but also to age and origin.

It is therefore worth analysing what the situation is in practice. Is business properly using the potential inherent in the diversity of human capital? This study will present the advantages of the female management style in the context of the real situation on the market.

In light of the above considerations, the study aims to demonstrate the significant and growing role of women in management and to identify the current situation and position of women in enterprises based on the results of previous research.

Due to the currently introduced EU directives on the employment of women (Women on Boards) in senior positions, this topic is particularly relevant, so it is worth verifying the current situation and answering the research questions: What is the female management style? What is the current situation of women on the labor market? There are many publications and studies available on the market on the subject of women in business, so an attempt was made to synthesize the results obtained in them, which will allow for a certain diagnosis and definition of the role and situation of women in business and indication of the potential direction of further changes. The analysis undertaken is not comprehensive and exhaustive.

This study was prepared based on a critical analysis of the literature and, due to the topicality of the subject matter, on numerous press publications and Internet sources. The review of literature and available research results was selective. The focus was on selected studies that illustrated issues important to the topic and allowed for answering the questions posed. The article is a general review, and the conducted literature studies and research review were to help diagnose and interpret the current situation.

2. Woman manager - feminine management style - literature review

We live in a cultural context shaped by masculine values. For many years, men dominated the broadly understood business. Therefore, based on a stereotypical pattern, many people associate the word manager with a man. There is something like a social construction of gender or characteristics related to masculinity or femininity (Jarocka, 2019).

As A. Revenga and S. Sudhir (2012) indicate, socio-economic development is not possible without the active participation of women in all spheres of life, which is why promoting gender equality in business is becoming so important. The worldview is changing, and people are beginning to notice that not only men are good leaders. Women bring to business a lot of qualities that male managers lack. It should be realised that both feminine and masculine management styles are needed. Both sides contribute a lot to the organization, introducing a specific management style and considering the values they are guided by.

It is said that the most important qualities of a manager include among others, knowledge, experience, self-confidence, empathy, assertiveness, self-control, and self-discipline. Anyone can have these qualities, it is not a matter of gender, but of personality or individual abilities.

When asked about the characteristics of an ideal manager, women indicated empathy as a key characteristic (31%). This was followed by courage and self-confidence (29%), determination and decisiveness (15%), competence (14%) and communication skills (12%) (Report: Manager..., 2019).

The conventional perception of masculine traits defines a man as strong, arrogant, intelligent, ego-driven, brave, bold, dominant, assertive, single-tasking, focused, and competitive.

Women are different. The specific attitude of women and their personality shape their leadership potential, which is typical of the feminine management style. Women are multitasking, emotional, empathetic, intuitive, compassionate, relationship-oriented, reliable, focused on building consensus and cooperation (Garczewska, 2019). The greater tendency to diplomacy and the ability to alleviate disputes also need to be mentioned (The Role of Women, nd). Women seem to be more efficient when it comes to solving problems; they adopt a more interpersonal leadership style. The feminine management style is more relationship-oriented and democratic.

The above-mentioned qualities of women and their management style naturally translate into effective leadership.

In addition, research conducted by professors Woolley and Malone (2012) showed that when there are more women in a group, the collective intelligence of the team increases. Their experiment on the effectiveness of task teams proved that it is not IQ that determines higher effectiveness, but the number of women in the team. Teams with more women performed better in the assessment. There are premises that prove that diversity in a team is important and that is why both men and women should be part of the team (Woolley, Malone, 2012). Additionally, research reports that women are characterized by higher social sensitivity than men. This seems to be the most important argument when considering the need to include women in task teams, as social sensitivity is manifested in the satisfaction, cohesion and motivation of the team. Today, not only specialist knowledge, but also empathy, which allows for great achievements in managing teams consisting of individuals are becoming important.

In the face of the competition for talent on the labour market, women-friendly companies can be much more attractive, as they facilitate the building of a sense of loyalty among employees of both sexes. Therefore, the presence of women, not only in the employment structure in general, but in management boards, plays an important role in the development of the company.

When highlighting the characteristics and role of women in management, it should be indicated that the organizational structures of companies are currently being flattened, which is an important condition for appreciating women in management. Modern companies are often characterized by a flat structure, with a rapid flow of information and flexibility reflected in the speed of adapting processes to both the needs of customers and the challenges posed by competitors. This also means changes in management methods. The management style has

changed from authoritarian to partnership, and this has brought a change in the role of the leader. Currently, the leader is supposed to combine being an expert with leadership. The leader is mainly concerned with defining organizational problems, initiating changes and coordinating them and involving other people in the decision-making processes, thus making them responsible for the implementation of the process. This means that today's manager (at every level of the management hierarchy) should have, above all, interpersonal skills. They should be able to stimulate people and be a catalyst for them, and when necessary, to be an agent of change. Such a person must first of all listen to others and quickly recognise what is important and what is not in a given matter. Today, not only specialist knowledge is becoming important, but also empathy, which allows for great achievements in managing teams consisting of individuals. Effective management depends on the predispositions and skills of the manager, which are subject to change as a result of economic and socio-cultural development. Such changes have created conditions to which the female style of management seems to be better adapted.

It should be emphasized, however, that the feminine style of management is not unique only to women. Referring to gender differences, business specialists point to managerial behaviours that are typical of women. However, this does not mean that classical theories of management styles lose their *raison d'être*, and that gender determines the way of acting. A good manager is a flexible and effective manager, regardless of gender (Doraczyńska, 2013).

However, we should be aware of the differences in the classic female and male approaches to management in order to realize what we can gain by introducing gender parity and respecting them in practice.

3. Women in business - review of research results

There are numerous studies conducted worldwide on women in business, or women in the labour market in general. As indicated by Eurostat data from 2021, the share of women in management positions in Poland was 44%. However, if we consider senior management, the percentage of women significantly deviates from parity, despite a two-fold increase in 10 years (from 11.6% in 2011 to 24.7% in 2021). Research by the Polish Economic Institute conducted among the largest listed companies indicates that the share of women in management boards was 12.6%, and in supervisory boards - 17.3%. Even in the financial sector, where women constitute 60% of all employees, there are only 13% of them in company boards (Leśniak, 2024).

The report "Manager in high heels" (2019) based on research conducted among women in high positions and prepared by HRK S.A., a human resources consulting company shows that women in high positions most often (68.5%) hold the position of a manager or an executive.

They are less likely to be directors, i.e., in 25% of cases. Only 5.4% of the surveyed women are company presidents. Women in high management positions most often work in sales (15.2%), HR and marketing (9.8% each). They are less popular in the IT industry (8.7%). However, they work least often in the energy, construction, customer service or public utility institutions (1.1% each).

The results of research conducted by Grant Thornton in 2023, regarding the opening of Polish business to diversity, (Report: Business...; 2023) showed that around 27% of women currently sit on the boards of medium and large companies in Poland. It is interesting that this percentage has been systematically decreasing in recent years (in 2021 there were 31% of women, while in the following year 2022 - 29%). This is also a problem worth paying attention to. Not only are there still relatively few women at the highest levels of management, but among those who get there, a process of resignation and withdrawal can be observed. Women leaving high positions usually emphasize that the reasons for leaving include, among others, work culture, microaggressions, money, lack of flexibility and diversity, as well as overwork and underestimation. According to the McKinsey report, in 2021 around 10.5% of women in management positions left their companies (Armstrong, 2023). This is the highest voluntary departure rate since McKinsey began collecting data in 2017. This is a deeply alarming phenomenon that highlights deeper issues underlying the situation of women in business.

The gap in senior positions is one problem, but the Eurostat 2024 study shows the overall scale of the problem, which concerns not only senior positions but employment in general. The study showed how large the gap is in employment between women and men, especially if they have children. For people aged 25 to 54, the gender employment gap in the EU in 2023 was much larger for people with children than for those without children. For people with children, the gap was 17.0 percentage points, which resulted from a higher rate for men (91.9%) and a lower rate for women (74.9%). For people without children, the gap was 4.0 percentage points, with the percentage being higher for men (83.7%) than for women (79.7%). A similar trend was observed in 2023 in many EU Member States. Without exception, the highest employment rate was for men with children. The employment rate for men with children was higher than 90.0% in 24 Member States. In two thirds of the Member States, the lowest employment rate was for women with children. This data illustrates the root of the problem related to staffing managerial positions.

Special attention should be paid to the research conducted since 2004 by Grant Thornton (Report: Woman, 2024) on global trends relating to women in business. It has shown that in the last twenty years there has been noticeable progress in the participation of women in management positions, but it is still insufficient. In 2004, only 19.4% of senior management positions in medium-sized enterprises were held by women. Currently, it is 33.5%. The authors of this report draw attention to what helps and what hinders women in the labour market. The results of their many years of observation and research indicate 3 fundamental factors and thus 3 paths to success in the area of employing women in senior positions.

Firstly, companies should have clearly defined strategies in the area of DEI, i.e. the implementation of attitudes of diversity, equality and inclusion and diversity management. It is necessary to set specific, measurable goals in this area and actually measure them.

Secondly, it is extremely important who leads and is responsible for DEI.

It is important to get acceptance from senior management for any DEI effort, but it is crucial to engage women in leadership roles in cooperation. Leading DEI alone is not effective in increasing the percentage of women in leadership positions.

Thirdly, the work system in force in a given entity has a real impact on the situation of women in the labour market. In companies that offer greater flexibility in the way of working (hybrid, remote work), a higher percentage of senior management positions are held by women.

To sum up the considerations about the characteristics of the female management style and the situation of women in business, it can be noticed that one of the problems of the modern business world seems to be the fact that, as a result of the pattern of male dominance that has been ingrained for years, we still cannot fully break this stereotype. And the traditional social roles instilled over the years have made women unable to believe in their own abilities, unnecessarily comparing themselves to men. In the report "Only a few women manage to enter management boards - the situation of Polish women on the labour market" (2019), women revealed what caused their blockage regarding promotion or work in managerial positions:

- low self-esteem (39%),
- combining family responsibilities with work (26%),
- stereotypes (25%).

The study shows that it is primarily women who have an impact on the development of their own careers. Excessive perfectionism, lack of courage and self-confidence prevent them from achieving their goals. Women seem to succumb to stereotypes and as a result do not believe in their own abilities. Unfortunately, although several years have passed since this study was conducted, the situation on the market has not really changed.

4. Summary

The debate on increasing the participation of women in business, and especially in company boards has been going on for years, but still only a few women manage to join company boards. Most often the highest positions in companies are still held by men. The situation in managerial positions is similar. In the light of contemporary theory of management sciences and the real situation in many companies (flattening of organizational structures), the model approach to a manager is more in line with the character of women. A female manager has an advantage thanks to their interpersonal skills. However, the problem goes deeper. It often results from the

structure of general employment as well as from the way talent is managed and succession in companies. Another problem is that most women do not believe in their abilities and do not have a developed plan for their career development. Obstacles resulting from entrenched stereotypes and unequal treatment that appear on their career path, make it difficult for women. However, gradually, this situation is slowly changing for the better.

Meanwhile, statistics show that the results are not satisfactory on the Polish market (and not only). Perhaps the process of positive changes will be accelerated by the EU directive, according to which by July 2026 all listed companies in the European Union must achieve a situation in which 40% of non-executive directors and 33% of all management positions are held by people belonging to the underrepresented sex, which in the case of all European countries means women. It should be emphasized that the directives apply only to a narrow group of companies – listed companies, which constitute a small percentage of the market structure. And the changes should cover all types of companies. The challenge facing Polish business is still huge, but it is worth facing. One can argue whether gender parities are good or not, but we must note that in countries where parities were introduced years ago (e.g. France, Norway, Belgium), the results are visible. Parities alone will not solve the problem, but they can accelerate certain processes.

It is very important to remember that gender diversification in the workplace is not only about artificially maintaining the appropriate number of women in the employment structure or on company boards, i.e. meeting the imposed parities, but also about providing professionals with the opportunity to advance and improve their qualifications while respecting other female social roles (Report: Women..., 2017). Otherwise, women's participation in employment structures will never be satisfactory and stable. With a labour market fully open to these issues, formulating gender parities will be absolutely unnecessary.

As a popular quote goes, “women are expected to work as if they had no family and raise children as if they had no job” (Armstrong, 2023). This perception needs to change, otherwise we will continue to see female leaders leave and never achieve satisfactory results in terms of hiring and staffing of women in senior positions and therefore we will not realise the potential that diversity offers.

In light of the considerations presented, it can be stated that the issues related to the employment and situation of women on the labor market and in business in a broad sense are of a deeper and multi-faceted nature. It is impossible to indicate one source of the problem and one way to solve it. It is not only an organizational or management problem, and its basis goes beyond the pure sphere of business and has a social character. This shows the complexity of this situation. It is therefore worth writing about it, because full knowledge of what the role of women is, what the potential of introducing diversity into organizations is, what the current situation on the market is and where the problems arise from, can ultimately improve the situation of women.

Gender diversity in the workplace should not only be a good practice or an element of responsible business, but above all an understanding that it also means better results and the condition of the company, and that gender diversity policy has a positive impact on the organizational culture, the company's reputation and employee morale.

References

1. Armstrong, S. *The Great Break-up': Why female leaders are ditching their companies*, euronews. Retrieved from: <https://www.euronews.com/next/2023/02/23/the-great-break-up-why-female-leaders-are-ditching-their-companies>, 28.03.2025.
2. Baskiewicz, N. (2013). *Kobiety w zarządzaniu organizacjami*. Studia Ekonomiczne. Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Katowicach, pp. 27-3.
3. Doraczyńska, N. (2013). Menedżer na szpilkach: czy istnieje kobiecy styl zarządzania? *Personel i Zarządzanie*, no. 4, pp. 32-35.
4. Eurostat (2024) Statistics on equality and non-discrimination in the EU 2024 edition. Retrieved from: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/7870049/20101952/KS-FT-24-002-EN-N.pdf/9957200d-2d34-8e49-4fcf-0d941c2bd02e?version=2.0&t=1728386850354>, 28.03.2025.
5. Garczewska, W. (2019.) *Jestem kobietą i chcę być managerem. Sytuacja i obecność kobiet w świecie biznesu. Kariera w Finansach*. Retrieved from: <https://www.karierawfinansach.pl/arttykul/raporty/manager-w-szpilkach>, 28.03.2025.
6. Harasim, W. (2015). Wpływ kultury organizacyjnej na zarządzanie kapitałem ludzkim w tworzeniu wartości dodanej organizacji. In: W. Harasim (Ed.), *Zarządzanie wartościami niematerialnymi w erze gospodarki cyfrowej*. Warszawa: Wyższa Szkoła Promocji, Mediów i Show Businessu.
7. Jarocka, K. (2019). *Kobiecy styl zarządzania jest Twoją siłą. Kompetencje menedżerskie*. 12/12/2019. Retrieved from: <https://kjarocka.pl/kompetencje-menedzerskie/kobiecy-styl-zarzadzania/>, 28.03.2025.
8. Kowalska-Myśliwiecka, S., Szypulska, N. (2021). Społeczna rola kobiet w zarządzaniu. *Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Nauk Społecznych z siedzibą w Lublinie*, 10(1), 125-143.
9. Kupczyk, T. (2009). *Kobiety w zarządzaniu i czynniki ich sukcesów*. Wrocław: WSH we Wrocławiu.
10. Leśniak, G. (2024). *Lewiatan: Unijna dyrektywa wymusi większą równowagę płci w zarządach spółek giełdowych*. Retrieved from: <https://www.prawo.pl/kadry/od-kiedy-bedzie-wieksza-rownowaga-plci-w-zarzadach-spolek,518783.html>, 28.03.2025.

11. *Raport: Biznes w Polsce otwarty na różnorodność* (2023.) Grant Thornton. Retrieved from: <https://grantthornton.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Biznes-otwarty-na-kazdego-RAPORT-Grant-Thornton-08-08-2023.pdf>, 28.03.2025.
12. *Raport: Kobiety na rynku pracy. Ambicje i wyzwania* (2017). HAYS Recruiting experts worldwide. Retrieved from: https://porp.pl/uploads/original/g2/2017_07/1583c54ffaacb7f90b1cf28577c57e77.pdf, 28.03.2025.
13. *Raport: Menedżer w szpilkach* (2019). Urbańska M. HRK. Retrieved from: https://komunikatywnie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/manager_w_szpilkach_2019-12.pdf, 28.03.2025.
14. *Raport: Tylko nielicznym kobietom udaje się wejść do zarządów – sytuacja Polek na rynku pracy* (2019). The Chartered Institute of Management Accountants. Retrieved from: <https://prnews.pl/nielicznym-kobietom-udaje-sie-wejsc-zarzadow-sytuacja-polek-ryнку-pracy-441421>, 28.03.2025.
15. *Raport: Woman in Business 2024. Pathways to Parity* (2024). 20 years of woman in business. Grant Thornton. Retrieved from: <https://www.grantthornton.global/globalassets/1.-member-firms/global/insights/women-in-business/2024/grant-thornton-women-in-business-report-2024.pdf>, 28.03.2025.
16. Revenga, A., Sudhir, S. (2012). Empowering women is smart economics. *Finance & Development*, vol. 49(1), 40-43.
17. *Rola kobiet w nowoczesnym biznesie – efektywne relacje i skuteczne przywództwo*. Retrieved from: <https://onesano.pl/rola-kobiet-w-nowoczesnym-biznesie-efektywne-relacje-i-skuteczne-przywodztwo/>, 28.03.2025.
18. Woolley, A., Malone, T. (2012): Jak podnieść inteligencję zespołu? Dołącz do niego więcej kobiet. *Harvard Business Review Polska*, no. 4, pp. 30-36.