

WOMEN'S CAREER MANAGEMENT AFTER MATERNITY LEAVE

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to analyse the impact of motherhood on women's career management and to identify factors that enable them to pursue their chosen career path within an organisation.

Design/methodology/approach: This study used a qualitative approach. Face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with women who had returned to work after maternity leave. This method was chosen due to the complexity and subjective nature of career management in the context of motherhood. The aim was not to make statistical generalisations, but to understand the experiences and decision-making processes of the women surveyed.

Findings: In the respondents' opinion, the birth of a child does not mean completely giving up career goals, but rather the need to logistically renegotiate one's career path, in which social and organisational support plays a key role.

Research limitations/implications: The main limitation of this study is the small size of the research group, which makes it impossible to generalise the conclusions to the entire population of women returning to work after maternity leave. The study is focusing on understanding individual experiences rather than providing a statistical description of the phenomenon.

Practical implications: The results of the study are a valuable source of knowledge that can be used to design and implement reboarding programmes for women returning to work after maternity leave and wishing to continue pursuing their career goals.

Social implications: The results show that motherhood requires a change in career management models, but does not diminish competence. A clearly defined career path after returning to work from maternity leave reduces stress levels, preventing burnout and feelings of exclusion.

Originality/value: The article provides a critical insight into the complex process of managing the career of a young mother, contributing to a better understanding and support of this key group of employees. The article is aimed at a wide audience – managers and HR staff responsible for personnel policy in organisations, researchers studying the impact of motherhood on career management, and young mothers who are looking for good practices for developing their careers during this special period of their lives.

Keywords: career management, career path, women's career patterns, maternity leave.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Women's professional careers often involve a synergy between the roles of mother and employee. Despite progress in gender equality, women still tend to take on more responsibilities related to childcare and housework, which makes it difficult to balance these with their careers and often leads to a conflict between professional ambitions and domestic duties. This imbalance can cause frustration and even burnout. Motherhood is often a turning point in a woman's career. It is a time when women may change their priorities and their career takes a back seat.

Returning to work after maternity leave is not always easy. This can be influenced by both personal factors, such as fear of leaving the child in the care of another person, and organisational factors, such as a lack of support from the employer in reintegrating into professional duties. Unfortunately, women may also experience discrimination during this period. Employers often perceive young mothers as less competent and committed to their work than non-mothers, and consequently discriminate against them in hiring and remuneration decisions (Correll, Benard, Paik, 2007). In the social sphere, women who pursue careers are often perceived as failing to fulfil their role as mothers. It should be emphasised that having children is not a necessity, but a matter of choice for every woman. More and more women are postponing this period or even consciously choosing not to have children in order to improve their quality of life or develop their careers.

In the literature on the subject, the topic of motherhood is often addressed and considered in various areas and aspects. Numerous studies have focused primarily on reconciling the roles of mother and employee, the well-being of working mothers, their situation in the labour market, and solutions supporting mothers on the part of partners, employers and the state (e.g. Hampson, 2018; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Greenhaus, Beutell, 1985; Anwar, Suhariadi, Fajrianti, 2017; Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2023). Research confirms that young mothers encounter many problems in pursuing their career paths and that only employers who are open to the evolution of best practices in maternity leave will attract and retain talented women (Brand, Barreiro-Lucas, 2014, p. 69). Research also suggests that professional experiences during pregnancy and return to work influence subsequent career decisions (Desjardins, Fortin, 2025, p. 3). Women are aware that during their absence due to childbirth, they may lose contact with their network, their job may change, and others may take over some of their responsibilities. As a result, they face increasing social uncertainty (their position in the group during and after pregnancy) and uncertainty about the future (what career opportunities and responsibilities will be available to them). For these reasons, during the important transition that childbirth represents, women are likely to be sensitive to signals of (in)justice (Desjardins, Fortin, 2025, p. 3). These episodes may be factors that, over time, trigger attitudes and behaviours associated with giving up one's career (Desjardins, Fortin, 2025, p. 19). Women who take a career break longer than two years find that their careers are stifled and limited (McIntosh et al., 2012).

Despite the popularity of the topic, the literature on the subject still does not sufficiently explore the specifics of career management for women returning to work after maternity leave. This area requires further systematic analysis, as existing approaches overlook certain aspects. The literature on human resource management is dominated by an institutional perspective, which creates space for analysing the individual perspective, which has been less frequently addressed so far. Firstly, most studies focus on systemic and organisational solutions and devote little space to information on how women after maternity leave shape their own career paths, what strategies they adopt and how they cope within the organisation to combine professional development with motherhood. Therefore, there is a justified need to deepen scientific reflection on women's individual strategies. Secondly, they often treat returning to work as a one-off event, whereas it is a process that begins much earlier. It is a time when women redefine themselves and their goals, which happens during their leave and continues after they return to work. Additionally, in organisational terms, studies focusing on informal barriers, such as managers' prejudices against young mothers, are difficult to capture in quantitative analyses, which usually reduce the penalty for motherhood to measurable indicators such as wage inequality or lack of promotion. It is also rarely pointed out that a negative attitude on the part of the employer can be an unplanned shock for young mothers, which affects their loyalty to the employer. The article analyses the subjective mechanisms of career management by women at a specific moment of transition, which is the return to work after maternity leave. It focuses on women's individual experiences, shows that returning to work is a process, and emphasises the importance of mental support and the manager's attitude in career management.

In order to answer the research question: Do women continue their careers in their chosen field after returning to work from maternity leave, ten individual in-depth interviews were conducted. The sample was purposively selected and included respondents of different ages, seniority and positions. The article analyses whether returning to work is associated with continuing the current career trajectory or whether it becomes an impulse for professional reorientation. In addition, the determinants of these changes were explored, with particular emphasis on the role of the work environment. This article is a valuable source of knowledge both for women consciously planning their motherhood and managing their own careers, as well as for employers responsible for developing company policies focused on creating a workplace that is friendly to young mothers, where they can pursue their career goals. It enriches the literature on the subject by offering an in-depth insight into the experiences of women returning to work after maternity leave. It helps to understand how mothers actively shape their position in the organisation and adapt their career plans to their new life situation. It also points to the key role of managerial attitudes. It suggests that the role of the employer does not end with providing statutory benefits, but consists in actively supporting mothers in their career development. The conclusions of the article also have significant practical value for HR departments and management. They allow for a better understanding of the psychological

and logistical needs of employees, which can translate into building more effective and inclusive organisational cultures.

2. Literature review

Career management can be defined as the process of planning and implementing activities related to an employee's professional development. It is the ideal match between the organisation and the individual (King, 2004). It is a process in which people develop, implement and monitor career goals and strategies (Greenhaus, Callanan, Godshalk, 2000, p. 12). Employees manage their careers taking into account their individual interests and motivation as well as their biological and social development. From the organisation's point of view, career management means supporting the professional development of employees by offering them appropriate solutions (Jarosik-Michalak, 2018, p. 128). This process requires constant communication between the employee and their superiors and the HR department in order to be able to adapt career plans to changing market conditions and the employee's personal aspirations. It should enable employees to plan their own career paths, taking into account their needs and development opportunities (Jarosik-Michalak, 2018, p. 126).

Women's careers differ significantly from men's careers. Men tend to follow more linear career paths, while women's careers are more non-linear, chaotic and interrupted (Mainiero, Sullivan, 2006). During their professional lives, women's focus often shifts as they try to balance work and family life. This shift in focus may explain why women choose flexibility strategies, including reduced working hours and career breaks, which typically hinder their career advancement (Desjardins, Fortin, 2025, p. 3). Career patterns typical for women were identified by D.E. Super (1957). They differ from men's career patterns due to cultural conditions. Within this division, it was established that women can play the role of a housewife who is fully focused on the family. Another career pattern is a conventional career involving taking up work after completing education and developing it until starting a family, and an interrupted career involving interrupting or limiting satisfying work. Super also pointed to stable and unstable career patterns. The first is based on the assumption that work is a role to be fulfilled. The second type involves interrupting one's career depending on professional and personal circumstances. Women may also pursue a career of multiple attempts, which, like an unstable career, involves changes, in this case caused by inadequately met needs. Super also distinguished a dual-track career characterised by finding a balance between professional activity and fulfilling domestic responsibilities. This career pattern is most commonly pursued nowadays due to the high aspirations of women who no longer want to just take care of the home, but also achieve high results and social status. Within this division, we note that the roles women can play are not solely dependent on gender, but also on the motivations and needs of women themselves.

Duda (2019) describes how women adopt different career development strategies, which is related to the difficulties they encounter in their professional and family lives. The first group consists of women who focus primarily on their professional life, postponing motherhood on the assumption that their position will make it easier for them to return to work and pursue their chosen path. The second group includes women who decide to have children before entering the labour market, as they assume that early motherhood and raising children can be an asset when looking for a job. Another group of women combines motherhood with professional work, and this state of affairs motivates them to act. The fourth group consists of women who give up work during motherhood and, although they declare that they may return to work one day, in reality they do not plan to do so. The last group consists of women who did not plan to have children and have no professional experience, and having a child has, at least for a while, freed them from having to think about their future.

Women who decide to become mothers often have to give up their careers, as returning to the same job is either impossible or very difficult to adjust to the new reality. Maternity leave and motherhood are usually associated with serious consequences for women's careers. Some studies suggest that this may be due to women resigning (the so-called pull dynamic), while other studies show that mothers may be pushed out by organisations (the so-called push dynamic) (Desjardins, Fortin, 2025, p. 1). Taking up professional work and fulfilling a professional role requires women to commit to their own professional careers, but many women are unable to effectively combine different roles with the pursuit of self-fulfilment in their professional work (Christoph, Krause, 2019, p. 199). It should be emphasised that keeping their skills up to date is an important challenge for women who stop working, as knowledge and skills are one of the key elements of a smart career (Cabrera, 2007).

Rapid changes in the organisation's environment, the development of new technologies and artificial intelligence, as well as uncertainty related to the geopolitical situation, mean that career management requires employees to take on new roles and activities that increase their value in the labour market. This is particularly difficult for women who decide to become mothers, as this entails additional difficulties in fulfilling their professional duties. Work strengthens a woman's professional position in the family, because through work she not only contributes to the household budget, but also becomes financially independent, which has an impact on her self-confidence and self-esteem (Kwak, Pascall, 2005) and provides the foundation for future pension security (Baszczak et al., 2022).

Women's professional work is also associated with many limitations and negative consequences. The most frequently reported include a lack of time for family, friends and acquaintances, and for fulfilling household duties (Szyszka, 2015, p. 139). Interestingly, it also happens that women themselves give up promotions because the new position would require greater availability and involve responsibilities that may require overtime work (Kielczewska, Kukołowicz, Wincewicz, 2022). Women are also more likely to be overlooked for promotions and generally earn less than men. Gender discrimination against women in the labour market

reduces the availability of talent in the economy, which has negative economic consequences (Esteve-Volart, 2004). Women's work is extremely important for a country's economy. Countries with efficient health, education and social care systems, where women make up the majority of the workforce, were able to absorb the costs of the pandemic more quickly and restart their economies earlier. Equality is a key element of development based on an economy of care and respect for the natural environment (RSKK, 2023). It can also have a negative impact on society by increasing mistrust. The level of female employment in Poland is moderate compared to other European Union countries (Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny, 2023). Women's economic activity is linked to childcare, and among mothers of children aged 1-3, the economic activity rate is 62% – 26% lower than among women without children. This rate increases with the age of the youngest child, which is due to the fact that some mothers resume their professional activity as their children grow up.

The main reasons for returning to work after maternity leave are mainly fear of losing one's job and position, as well as the obsolescence of one's knowledge and difficulty in reintegrating into work (Rękas, 2013, p. 129). A CBOS survey (2022) shows that other motivating factors include a salary that would cover the costs of raising a child or children (30%), facilities to facilitate professional work, flexible working hours, the possibility of part-time and remote work (28%), and easy access to nurseries and kindergartens (27%). A step in the right direction is the implementation of the Work-Life Balance Directive in March 2023, which allows parents to make greater use of flexible working hours and, thanks to the introduction of additional leave for fathers, may reduce the asymmetry in the division of care responsibilities (RSKK, 2023). When choosing between full commitment to motherhood and pursuing a professional career, women often postpone or completely reject procreative decisions due to their desire for self-fulfilment and professional success (Krause, 2018, pp. 73-74).

The *State of Motherhood in Europe 2024* report conducted by the international non-governmental organisation Make Mothers Matter (MMM) shows that motherhood has a negative impact on mothers' professional careers, with 20% believing that it disrupts their career development. The most frequently cited negative effects of motherhood in Poland are job loss (37%), reduced working hours (16%) and a change in professional status after childbirth (52%). Only 36% of mothers saw benefits from a gradual return to work, 48% from changes in working hours, and only 31% gained access to teleworking opportunities (MMM, 2025).

Another report, *Motherhood and Professional Activity* (2021), prepared by the “Parent in the City” Foundation as part of the “I Work and Raise Children” project, it can be seen that almost 50% of mothers of children under the age of 3 do not return to work due to a lack of access to childcare, and they cite the inability to combine work and parental responsibilities as the main reason. Young mothers want to work, with as many as 94.4% declaring their willingness to return to the labour market, 52.7% of them immediately after maternity leave, but employers often view women through the prism of their motherhood rather than their skills.

Women consider flexibility in terms of place and hours of work to be the most supportive solution, with as many as 48% valuing the possibility of remote work. One in three mothers considered the atmosphere at work to be a factor facilitating their return to work. Interestingly, 24% of mothers fear a lack of understanding on the part of their employer regarding their role as a mother.

Research on returning to work after maternity leave shows that women, despite their positive perception of work, find returning to work difficult. There is also a significant change in the participants' attitude towards their professional career after childbirth. This change is not necessarily negative and should not be interpreted as a sign of a loss of interest in their professional careers. However, it highlights the need for appropriate management of the entire process – from pregnancy in the workplace to the return of employees to work (Brandt, Barreiro-Lucas, 2019). Other studies reveal a clear tendency to continue academic and professional qualifications and to pursue a second career after returning to work (Geber, 2000). Research by Roch et al. (2023) reveal that women face socio-cultural challenges, including work-life balance issues, poor jokes and moral harassment. The prejudice they experience makes them feel insecure and low in confidence in their work. In addition, they typically lack a support network during and after maternity leave, which results in feelings of overload.

3. Methods

The aim of the research was to determine whether motherhood has an impact on career management and to identify barriers to development and solutions that will enable young mothers to continue the career path they chose before giving birth or to embark on a new one, while at the same time allowing employers to harness their potential and thus retain the right employees to achieve the organisation's goals.

The specific objectives were as follows:

1. The perception of the concept of professional career by the women surveyed.
2. Identification of the career paths preferred by young mothers before giving birth.
3. Identification of activities undertaken by young mothers during maternity leave in order to manage their own professional careers.
4. Identification of factors determining a change in the chosen career path.
5. Determination of the type of support provided by the employer in the implementation of duties.
6. Identifying barriers to professional development.
7. Identifying organisational solutions for young mothers that facilitate conscious planning and shaping of their career paths.

The research process was organised in such a way as to obtain reliable data on career management by young mothers. In the first stage, the research sample was defined and the method of obtaining information was established. The sample selection was purposeful. The research population consisted of women who, after maternity leave, took up employment or resigned from professional activity after the birth of a child. These women had different levels of education, marital status, seniority, and job positions. They were employees of organisations representing various industries and employing different numbers of people. Due to the personal nature of the study, selected young mothers were asked to express their willingness to participate in the study in person. The author of the study wanted to obtain reliable and honest answers, so the focus was primarily on obtaining in-depth answers within the analysed areas, rather than on collecting general data.

The study was preceded by an analysis of the literature on the subject, which made it possible to present the most important issues, the results of published studies and reports addressing the issue of women's career management. This knowledge contributed to the formulation of methodological assumptions and the preparation of a set of questions addressed to selected women. Data was collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The questions were designed to obtain the necessary information about the situation of women in terms of their career development before and after returning to work after maternity leave. The focus was on three areas. The first concerned the challenges at the intersection of professional and parental life that young mothers face in the first years after the birth of a child and their impact on professional decisions and career trajectories. The second area focused on the career management strategies that young mothers use to achieve their professional goals and achieve work-life balance. It was also important to determine how young mothers redefine their career goals and professional ambitions in the context of their new role in life. The third area examined external factors that can positively influence career management. Attention was paid to both sources of social support (husband/partner, family, friends) and organisational policy and the involvement of managers, HR departments and colleagues in helping young mothers settle into their professional duties.

The study was conducted using individual in-depth interviews conducted by telephone. The average duration of each session was 50 minutes. The research process was carried out in accordance with ethical principles. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, assured of anonymity, and given the option to withdraw from participation at any stage. Due to the respondents' refusal to consent to audio recording, the documentation was prepared in the form of real-time notes, which were then anonymised by assigning appropriate names (pseudonyms) to the files in order to protect the participants' identities. The collected material was subjected to qualitative analysis. In order to increase reliability, consistency was ensured between the research questions, the interview script and the areas of analysis. The article also includes quotes from the participants' statements to enable an assessment of the extent to which the conclusions are rooted in the data.

Although there are certain limitations to the methodology used, the results provide valuable data for both young mothers and employers on how to consciously manage their professional careers. Although the study provided rich qualitative data, its limitation is the size and specificity of the sample, which limits generalisation. It is also worth noting that the results are based on the subjective feelings of the respondents, which may be subject to interpretative error resulting from their personal experiences and the specific nature of the industries in which they are employed. Further research should focus on comparing the strategies of young mothers and quantitative analysis to validate the findings in a larger population. An interesting direction for further analysis would be to compare the opinions of women with the perspective of management or HR departments to examine whether the perceived limitations to development stem from systemic barriers within the organisation or from women's self-perception of their own role. It is also worth examining the extent to which new forms of work and other facilities for young mothers actually eliminate barriers to career management.

4. Results

The study covered 10 women aged between 23 and 39. The average age of the respondents was 33. The dominant age group was 30-39, which included the majority of respondents. Half of the respondents had higher education, which may indicate their high professional ambitions and potential for career development. Four women have secondary education and one has primary education. The vast majority of women (70%) are married. The largest group (60%) are women raising two children, one mother has three children, and for the rest it is their first time being parents. The respondents have varying lengths of service (from 4 to 18 years), with an average of around 11 years, which indicates that most of them are people with established professional experience. Half of the respondents work in small organisations, which may affect flexibility and work culture after returning from maternity leave. Two women work in organisations with 50 to 249 employees, and three are employees of large organisations. The respondents represent a wide range of industries (8 different ones), which may indicate the universality of the challenges associated with career management after maternity leave, regardless of the sector. Among those mentioned were: education, manufacturing, beauty, medicine, banking, catering, energy and finance.

An analysis of the collected research material allows us to conclude that the respondents show a similar interpretation of the concept of professional career. Their perception is dominated by a developmental paradigm – a career is identified primarily with the progressive improvement of competences, promotion within the hierarchical structures of an organisation, and the successive achievement of professional goals. For some of the respondents, an important aspect of a career is self-verification of their own value and the pursuit of improved

financial status. In one case, the emancipatory function of work was noted, understood as a space for leaving the domestic sphere.

All respondents declared that they were actively pursuing their career paths before becoming mothers. In addition to routinely fulfilling their professional duties, a significant part of the group (6 women) undertook systematic activities in the area of their careers, participating in internal training and external courses that were highly relevant to their professional profiles. Two respondents showed particular proactivity by undertaking higher education and postgraduate studies in order to prepare themselves for specialist roles. With regard to preferred career types, the majority of respondents (6 people) leaned towards a model focused on structural promotion and financial rewards. Two respondents preferred an expert path (specialisation), while two women preferred an autonomous, entrepreneurship-based career model. The vast majority of respondents (7 women) remained professionally active during pregnancy (from the fifth to the ninth month). During this period, they performed their duties as usual. Some women, due to feeling unwell, had their supervisor's permission to finish work a little earlier or to perform some of their tasks remotely from home. One of the women surveyed worked fewer hours than before during her pregnancy and performed lighter work. One woman did not work due to her health and personal circumstances, and two deliberately took sick leave at the beginning of their pregnancies because their superiors were unwilling to extend their contracts after the birth of their children. These were people who were employed on a fixed-term basis.

In terms of childcare and upbringing, almost all respondents received support in raising their children. Most often, it was their husbands/partners who helped, slightly less often their parents and siblings, and occasionally friends or a nanny. It is worth noting an important voice in the discussion on the division of roles, in which one of the respondents considered childcare not as "help" but as a shared and equal role of both parents:

My partner was also involved in raising the child, but I would not call it help, because taking care of the child is our shared responsibility.

The maternity leave period was characterised by a dichotomy of attitudes. Half of the respondents maintained contact with the labour market through online training, postgraduate studies or monitoring industry trends. One person was looking for a new job during this period and searching for offers that matched their qualifications. The remaining group completely suspended their professional activity in favour of family life, motivating this with a desire to fully celebrate motherhood or the burden of household duties.

All respondents took full advantage of their maternity leave entitlement. In 9 out of 10 cases, the decision to return to work was motivated by financial considerations. Half of the women also indicated a desire for professional development and fears of losing their skills or even their jobs. The decision to return was mostly made jointly with the husband or partner. The process of returning to work varied: four women returned to their previous positions, while the others experienced internal or external rotation. The change of employer was often motivated by fear

of excessive workload (work-family conflict) and the search for an organisational culture that was more inclusive towards parents. The positives of these decisions included: a position more suited to their competences, greater opportunities for development, and the company's location closer to their place of residence. Although most experiences related to returning to work were positive (flexibility, mentoring, onboarding), there were cases of regression in employment conditions and a lack of support from management. Support from colleagues proved to be a key resource in the adaptation process.

The return to work was accompanied by emotional ambivalence. On the one hand, there was satisfaction at regaining professional activity and social interaction, and on the other, a strong fear of sanctions for a child's sick leave. As one mother put it:

I was afraid of my children getting sick and having to take sick leave. I was afraid that motherhood would interfere with my professional duties and that my employer would take a dim view of my frequent absences.

There was also stress related to getting used to new responsibilities and learning new programmes or technologies. There were also these responses:

I was sad that I was offered worse working conditions.

When I returned to work after maternity leave, I received no support from my employer in returning to my duties. I was offered worse working conditions and, consequently, fewer financial opportunities. Only my colleagues at work gave me a helping hand.

Returning to work was a shock for me because I didn't know if I could handle it. A lot had changed in my industry over the course of a year. I was afraid to ask for help, lest it be perceived as a lack of competence.

Unfortunately, when I returned to work, my employer did not take any steps to assist me. I had to organise my work myself.

According to most respondents, becoming a mother did not change how they were perceived by their employer, and two of the mothers were even offered training opportunities. One mother did not notice any advantages or limitations in access to training or promotion. For one mother, becoming a mother meant fewer financial and development opportunities. Two of the mothers also had their contracts terminated and felt resentment from their employers. One of the mothers summed it up by saying:

I felt that being a mother was inconvenient for my employer. I felt that my supervisor was not positively disposed towards me.

The impact of motherhood on career development is assessed ambiguously. Although most women continued to pursue their previously chosen goals, many of them indicated a slowdown in the pace of promotion. In the perception of the respondents, motherhood did not change their ambitions, but forced them to redefine their time and energy management strategies, with social support proving to be a key moderator of success in this area. The new situation was associated with difficulties on their chosen career path, but did not mean giving up on their goals.

Motherhood delayed my professional development, but my professional goals have not changed.

One of the mothers pointed out that motherhood did not affect her career development, but without the support of her loved ones, it would have been impossible. Some women became even more committed to achieving the goals they had set before giving birth. There were also women who said that it did not hinder their development, but their priorities had changed.

According to the respondents, motherhood can limit career development and affect a woman's value in the labour market. This is mainly due to a lack of time for professional activity and self-development:

It is difficult to reconcile caring for a small child with working or continuing education. It is possible, but it requires determination and little sleep.

Only two mothers felt that motherhood motivates development:

Having children motivates development because we want to be able to provide our children with a good quality of life.

All respondents agreed that support from their families, especially their husbands/partners, made it easier to pursue their chosen career paths. According to the women surveyed, time management skills are also important. One of the mothers also pointed out the role of the state in supporting young mothers as an important factor in helping them achieve their professional goals. Among the answers to the question of what measures employers should take to effectively manage the careers of their employees after maternity leave, the most frequently mentioned were: treat them equally with other employees, create opportunities for development, be positive towards young mothers, create opportunities to combine work and private life, e.g. through flexible working hours, remote/hybrid work, reboarding programmes to keep young mothers up to date with changes at work, support with kind words and provide psychological support if necessary.

5. Discussion

This study, based on an in-depth analysis of responses from young mothers, shows that a major challenge in career management is the difficulty of fulfilling both caregiving and professional responsibilities simultaneously. These observations are strongly supported by Greenhaus and Beutell's (1985) work-family conflict theory. This model specifies the mechanisms of conflict formation, identifying three sources of conflict. Conflict between work and family occurs when: the time devoted to the demands of one role makes it difficult to meet the demands of another role; the burden of participating in one role makes it difficult to meet the demands of another role; and certain behaviours required by one role make it difficult to meet the demands of another role (Greenhaus, Beutell, 1985, p. 76). In this view, the slowdown

in professional career advancement shown by the research can be considered a direct result of the difficulty in reconciling both roles. It is worth noting, however, that the women surveyed do not see the causes of these difficulties solely in the lack of their own time, but also in insufficient support from the system and their employers.

The analysis is deepened by Clark's (2000) boundary theory, which allows us to view the mothers studied not as victims of conflict, but as active agents managing boundaries. The author analyses how negotiating physical, temporal and psychological boundaries between spheres affects the achievement of balance (Clark, 2000). This study emphasises that it is the ability to effectively manage these transitions that determines the continuity of women's professional development after childbirth. In this context, the slowdown in career development is not merely a passive effect of overload, but a conscious mechanism for regulating the physical and psychological boundaries between these spheres. This corresponds to the concept of Nippert-Eng (1996), which assumes that individuals create separate spheres of home and work by building physical and psychological barriers. The degree of this separation falls within the integration-segmentation continuum. In light of the results obtained, a temporary slowdown in one's career can be interpreted as a rational strategy for increasing segmentation. It serves to protect family identity from the dominance of the professional sphere. At the same time, the subjective sense of balance is conditioned not only by personal competences, but also by negotiations with employers, partners and other family members. This means that the process of reconciling roles is a relational and structural challenge, not just an individual one.

The results of the study shed interesting light on the dynamics of women returning to work after a maternity leave. Particularly striking is the discrepancy between the declared support of organisations and the actual experiences of women, who still face the phenomenon of maternity penalty. This confirms the diagnosis made by Correll, Benard and Paik (2007) that motherhood is still often seen by employers as a sign of lower commitment, which is a barrier that is difficult to overcome even with high qualifications. In this context, it is crucial to view the deterioration of material conditions and non-renewal of employment not only as an economic problem, but above all as a career shock. In the literature, career shock has been defined by Akkermans, Seibert and Mol (2018, p. 4) as "a destructive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some extent, caused by factors beyond the individual's control and that triggers a conscious thought process about their career". This approach helps to understand why returning to work is a moment of crisis for many women. If, instead of support, the organisation offers the employee a negative impulse, this triggers a rapid process of reevaluating their career to date. Such a shock can destroy the social capital of an organisation, damaging trust that cannot be easily rebuilt. Instead of a loyal and experienced employee, the organisation gains an emotionally distant person who feels compelled to seek a new career path outside the structures of their current employer.

An interesting phenomenon is the grassroots attempt to counteract these negative effects through educational activities undertaken by mothers while still on maternity leave. The actions taken during this period can be interpreted as an attempt to deliberately build career capital in order to minimise the effects of the anticipated career shock. This demonstrates the high level of agency of women, but at the same time exposes the weakness of the organisational culture of the companies surveyed. If mothers feel pressure to maintain constant professional readiness, it means that work-life balance in many workplaces remains nothing more than an empty slogan. The challenge for HR practitioners is therefore to create implementation systems that are not just a formality, but actually help to manage the competence gap and neutralise managers' unconscious biases. Although this study is based on the subjective feelings of the respondents, it is precisely this subjective perspective that allows us to understand the emotional cost of career management. Without taking this human dimension into account, the struggle to retain talent in organisations seems doomed to failure.

6. Conclusions

Young mothers treat their careers as a means of developing their skills, advancing within the company structure and achieving professional goals. Their return to work begins while they are still on maternity leave. Some women invest in education and new skills so as not to fall out of the market and prepare for specialist roles, while others deliberately give up their professional activity. This shows that young mothers are aware that it is worth setting realistic professional goals during this period. It is also worth taking advantage of opportunities that will allow them to develop their skills and build networks. Although the main motivation for returning to work is financial and the desire to avoid routine, the process is very stressful. Women fear losing their jobs, technological changes in their organisation and a lack of understanding from their superiors in the event of their child falling ill. The study shows that another problem is the deterioration of working conditions after returning to work or the non-renewal of fixed-term contracts. Such actions by employers are harmful because they weaken employees' identification with the company's mission, which in the long run reduces the efficiency of the entire organisation and forces mothers to look for work with more friendly competitors. Interestingly, mothers can usually count on the support of their colleagues, but they often lack support from their managers.

To retain skilled female employees, employers should consider implementing formal reboarding programmes focused on filling skills gaps, gradually increasing workloads and, depending on needs, coaching or mentoring sessions as career management practices. Training for managers is also key to ensure that they do not discriminate against mothers exercising their rights. Success in combining professional and domestic responsibilities depends on a woman's

determination, but it also requires support from her family, the state and a modern approach from HR departments, which can offer returning mothers dedicated digital skills update programmes to minimise the shock of returning after a long absence.

The publication enriches the literature on the subject with an analysis of the experiences of women returning to work, highlighting their active influence on shaping their career paths and the key importance of support from their superiors. The results of the study also have practical applications for HR departments, as they help to create friendly workplaces that better respond to the real needs of young mothers.

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