



STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES IN THE LABOUR MARKET – THE CASE OF POLAND

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Abstract

Poland is one of the countries which has made the most progress in making the labour market more available and friendly for women. The concept of supporting women is a collection of interconnected devices that create a system which is specific for Poland and which, despite functioning well in Poland, would not necessarily work well in other countries. The policy of equalisation of opportunities for women in the labour market involves many entities – not only state institutions and the state as such, but also local authorities, social partners and non-governmental organisations. Money spent on realising this policy is never regarded as wasted.

The article is a review. The article presents examples of Polish solutions, which on one hand facilitate women's inclusion into the labour market, and on the other hand, reduce unfavourable factors which constitute barriers to access to employment. It is not only support in the field of professional activation, but also a number of legal and systemic solutions. These are mainly activities aimed at creating favourable conditions for reconciling work and family life, such as the availability of childcare points, government programs, introducing paternity leave, or encouraging women to acquire qualifications.

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Abstrakt

Polska znajduje się wśród krajów, które dokonały największego postępu w zakresie dostępności i przyjazności rynku pracy dla kobiet. Koncepcja wspierania kobiet to cały zestaw przenikających się narzędzi, które tworzą system specyficzny dla Polski, przy czym to, co działa w Polsce, niekoniecznie musi zadziałać w innych krajach. W politykę wyrównywania szans kobiet na rynku pracy angażuje się wiele podmiotów – nie tylko instytucje państwowe i państwo jako całość, lecz także samorządy, partnerów społecznych, organizacje pozarządowe, a wydatków na nią nie traktuje przez pryzmat zmarnowanych pieniędzy. Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy i stanowi podsumowanie aktualnego stanu wiedzy na temat rozwiązań polskich, które z jednej strony ułatwiają włączenie kobiet do rynku pracy, z drugiej zaś zmniejszają niekorzystne czynniki stanowiące bariery w dostępie do zatrudnienia. Jest to nie tylko wsparcie w zakresie aktywizacji zawodowej, lecz także wiele rozwiązań prawnych i systemowych. Są to głównie działania na rzecz stworzenia dogodnych warunków do godzenia pracy zawodowej z życiem rodzinnym, jak: dostępność punktów opieki nad dziećmi, programy rządowe, wprowadzenie urlopu ojcowskiego czy zachęcanie kobiet do zdobywania kwalifikacji.

Introduction

One of the most important activities which could lessen demographic problems in the developed countries is the equalisation of employment opportunities of women, including a reduction of unfounded wage disparities. The issue of gender equality is one of the most important issues discussed at both national and international levels. In the PwC “Women in Work Index” 2019, Poland was placed eighth and it was the second country (Luxemburg being the first) which has made such a significant rise since the year 2000 in the category of availability and friendliness of the labour market for women. Poland has moved up by 11 positions from 19th in the year 2000¹. Also, the unemployment rate among women in Poland (5%) and the percentage of full-time employed

¹ The main aim of the ranking is the assessment of women’s participation in the labour market and of equality of opportunities for women in the labour market in comparison with men in 33 countries which are members of The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In this report, five areas of equalities/inequalities are analysed and assessed: gap between female and male earnings, female labour force participation rate, gap between female and male labour force and participation rates, female unemployment rate and share of female employees in full-time employment.

women (91%) look positive. Still much needs to be done in the area of women's professional activity – Poland was classified in the bottom of the ranking with a result of 63%. In this area, the top countries were Iceland (86%), Sweden (81%) and Switzerland (79%). The rise of Poland in the PwC rank is mostly due to the decline in unemployment among women and the increase in the number of women working full-time (*Women in Work...*, 2019).

Other rankings are less positive concerning Poland. The Gender Equality Index (GEI) used by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) includes six core domains: work, money, knowledge, time, power and the health of women. There are two additional domains: intersecting inequalities and violence against women. The Index uses a scale of 1 to 100, where 1 is for total inequality and 100 is for total equality. Poland (with 55.2 points out of 100) is in the 24th place in the EU in the domain of gender equality. In the years 2005–2017 Poland improved its position, but still it is significantly lower than the entire EU average – the difference being 12.2 points. At present, Poland's results are lower than the EU results in all six domains described in the Index, namely work, time, power, money, health and knowledge. The gender inequalities are most visible in the domain of power (29.1 points) and time (52.5 points). Although it is much lower than in other EU member countries, the domain where Poland has reached the highest result is health (83.2 points). Since 2005, the Polish result has improved the most significantly in the domain of money (by 13.7 points), while a drop has appeared in the domains of knowledge (by 0.2 points) and time (by 2.1 points).

Table 1

Gender Equality Index for the European Union (EU) and Poland, 2017

Specification	Gender equality index	Work	Money	Knowledge	Time	Power	Health
EU	67.4	72.0	80.4	63.5	65.7	51.9	88.1
PL	55.2	67.0	75.1	56.5	52.5	29.1	83.2
Place in ranking	24	24	18	17	20	23	23

Source: author's calculation based on *Gender Equality...* (2019).

In the Gender Inequality Index (GII) used by the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, which measures gender inequalities in three dimensions – reproductive health, labour market and social empowerment, Poland was classified in the 32nd position among 160 countries in 2017.

Until 2019, the Polish labour market was characterized by better and better indicators: professional activity and employment grew, and unemployment was falling, reaching values unheard of for years. The favourable situation in the labour market also had a positive impact on the professional situation of women

and an increase in their activity in recent years. The outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic has shocked the labour market, but the available data do not show a significant deterioration in the situation of women, including women living in rural areas.

The aim of this article is to show that for a few years the situation of women in Poland has been changing gradually, which is connected with the contemporary labour market transformations. However, despite some positive trends, such as increasing participation of women in the labour market and their gaining higher levels of education, there are still domains where inequalities exist. A crucial role in the equalisation of women's opportunities in the labour market belongs to the programmes and devices financed by the state which help to remove the negative effects that the breaks from work caused by motherhood have on a professional career. The activation schemes aimed at women returning to the labour market may, and in fact they often do, equalise opportunities for women in the labour market and remove the gaps between them and men. The activation programmes' role is to buffer the results of the breaks in employment which may even last for a few years. On the other hand, common social programmes addressed to families also have a positive influence on the possibilities of women's professional fulfilment. Thanks to the activities introduced to help women, the employment inequalities between men and women are no longer so great. In this area, Poland compares well with other European countries. The programmes mentioned above also lead to the equalisation of men's and women's earnings and their involvement in parental duties.

The article presents examples of Polish solutions, which on the one hand facilitate women's inclusion into the labour market, and on the other hand, remove the factors that are barriers to their access to employment. At the same time, the following thesis were put forward:

- in periods of deterioration of the labour market situation, unfavourable changes affect men more often, i.e. the number of unemployed men grows faster, and thus their share among the registered unemployed increases. At the same time, in the face of favourable conditions in the labour market, they find employment faster and constitute a smaller percentage of the registered unemployed;
- the situation for women in the labour market is worse than the situation for men due to the social roles the former perform. This happens in all European countries, and it is reflected in women's lower earnings;
- the projects which are addressed to women and which are connected with their return to the labour market may, as it often happens, equalise women's chances in the labour market or eliminate the differences between men and women;
- combining the two areas – professional career and family life – is possible not only because of the creation and availability of new stable positions for employees and implementation of flexible working hours, but also due to the availability of care services for children and the elderly.

On the one hand, the employment policy of, in my opinion, every country aims at the professional activation of women. On the other hand, it is important for the aging European society to encourage women to have more children. These two aims are discrepant unless measures are taken to make it easier for women to combine family and professional duties. Also the steps taken to increase the employment standards, that is creating new high quality job positions with a good salary, good working conditions or flexible working time, are important. If working conditions are satisfactory and encouraging to combine professional and family duties, there will be no need to encourage and keep women in the labour market as wise and rationally thinking women will decide to work anyway.

Women's work in Poland in comparison to other European Union members

Women in Poland account for 52% of the entire population and 50% of the working-age population. Polish women are better educated than Polish men – in 2018, 32.6% of working-age women had a university degree (in comparison to working-age men – 27.2%). In the academic year 2016/2017 over 63% of all university graduates were women. According to European Commission data, 19.3% of women finish courses in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), while for men this figure is 23.5% (*She Figures...*, 2019).

Despite the better education, the women's employment rate and activity rate are lower than men's employment and activity rates. In 2018, the activity rate² for women aged 15-64 was 63.3% (while it was 77% for men). Also the employment rate³ for women was significantly lower than for men – respectively 60.8% for women aged 15-64 and 74% for men. Both of these indicators place Poland lower than the EU average (Tab. 2). The number of working women aged 15-64 (7,281,000) has increased by 160,000 in comparison to the year 2015, and the number of working women aged 25-49 has increased by more than 115,000. The activity rate for women aged 15-64 has increased from 61.4% to 63.3% (among women aged 25-49 it has decreased from 80.4% to 79.4%), and the employment rate has increased from 56.6% to 60.8% (among women aged 25-49 it has increased from 74.5% to 76.6%). However, we need to remember that the upper limit of the working-age for women in Poland is 60. The possibility of retirement at that age is a privilege, not an obligation, and each woman takes this decision individually. The fact is, however, that according to the data of the Social Insurance Institution, the number of newly granted pensions in 2018

² The activity rate is the percentage of economically active population aged 15-64 in relation to the comparable total population of the same age.

³ The employment rate is the percentage of employed persons in relation to the comparable total population.

was nearly 4.5 times higher than in 2010 and amounted to 228.8 thousand, respectively in 2016, 416.9 thousand in 2017, and 354.6 thousand in 2018 (*Structure of the amount...*, 2019).

Year by year, a noticeable increase in the main indicator values which describe the situation in the labour market has been observed both for women and men in Poland, and the situation has improved in comparison to the European Union. For example, in 2004, when Poland joined the European Union, the employment rate for the working-age population was 11 percentage points lower than that of the EU. In 2015, the employment rate for the working-age population was 62.9% and it was lower by 2.7 percentage points than in the EU; whereas in 2018 this rate was lower by only 1.2 percentage points (67.4% compared to 68.6%). In fact, it was already in 2017 that Poland reached the national target described in the Europe 2020 Strategy concerning the employment rate for people aged 20-64. This target for Poland was defined at the level of 71% and the annual average of this rate was 70.9% in 2017. In 2018 this rate increased to 72.2%, which means that it exceeded the target set for Poland in the Europe 2020 Strategy by 1.2 percentage points⁴. It was made possible thanks to the high level of economic growth in Poland. The rate of GDP⁵ growth was constantly exceeding the EU-28 average, especially during the last economic crisis. In 2009, Poland was the only EU member state, where the GDP increased by 2.8%. GDP also grew significantly in 2010 and 2011; after that period the growth slowed down but the economy started growing again at the level of 3-4% (*Gross domestic product...*, 2019). It had a positive impact on employment – the number of working people grew steadily from 2002 (from 13.7 million to 16.4 million in 2018) (*Demand for work...*, 2019).

In the first quarter of 2020, i.e. after the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, the economic activity rate of women aged 15 and older amounted to 47.8% and was 0.4 pp lower compared to the same period the year before. At the same time, the economic activity rate of women living in rural areas decreased by 0.5 pp to the level of 46.1%. Thus, Poland's distance to the European Union deepened in terms of the professional activity of women. This is primarily the result of significantly lower indicator values for women in the groups up to 29 and over 55, which may result from the difficulties of Polish women in providing institutional care for both children and other dependent persons, because it should be remembered that it is, according to the applicable social norms, obligatory to care not only for children, but also for sick parents and grandchildren. This is confirmed by the LFS results – among economically inactive people of mobile age who

⁴ It needs to be stressed, however, that in the Europe 2020 Strategy the employment rate for people aged 20-64 was taken in to account, while the upper limit of working-age is different in Poland than in other countries (in Poland 60 is the upper limit of working-age for women; therefore the rate for women below the age of 60 would be higher).

⁵ Gross domestic product (GDP) is a monetary measure of the market value of all the final goods and services produced in a specific time period, often annually.

Table 2

Situation of women in the labour market in Poland and in other EU states

Specification	Activity rate (aged 15 to 64) in %			Employment rate (aged 15 to 64) in %			Unemployment rate (aged 15 to 64) in %		
	2018			2018			2018		
	women	men	total	women	men	total	women	men	total
European Union – 28 countries	68.2	79.2	73.7	63.3	73.8	68.6	7.2	6.8	7.0
Belgium	64.3	72.8	68.6	60.7	68.2	64.5	5.6	6.3	6.0
Bulgaria	67.0	75.9	71.5	63.9	71.5	67.7	4.7	5.8	5.3
Czech Republic	69.6	83.3	76.6	67.6	81.8	74.8	2.8	1.8	2.3
Denmark	76.6	82.1	79.4	72.6	78.0	75.4	5.2	5.0	5.1
Germany	74.3	82.9	78.6	72.1	79.7	75.9	3.0	3.9	3.5
Estonia	75.6	82.6	79.1	71.4	78.1	74.8	5.5	5.4	5.4
Ireland	67.1	78.8	72.9	63.3	74.1	68.6	5.8	6.0	5.9
Greece	59.9	76.6	68.2	45.3	64.7	54.9	24.4	15.5	19.5
Spain	68.6	78.8	73.7	56.9	67.9	62.4	17.1	13.8	15.4
France	68.2	75.8	71.9	61.9	68.9	65.4	9.2	9.1	9.1
Croatia	61.7	70.9	66.3	55.9	65.4	60.6	9.5	7.8	8.5
Italy	56.2	75.1	65.6	49.5	67.6	58.5	11.9	10.0	10.8
Cyprus	70.4	79.9	75.0	64.2	73.3	68.6	8.8	8.3	8.6
Latvia	75.1	80.5	77.7	70.1	73.6	71.8	6.6	8.5	7.6
Lithuania	75.8	78.9	77.3	71.6	73.3	72.4	5.6	7.1	6.3
Luxembourg	67.4	74.7	71.1	63.4	70.6	67.1	5.9	5.4	5.6
Hungary	64.9	79.1	71.9	62.3	76.3	69.2	4.0	3.5	3.7
Malta	63.8	84.8	74.7	61.5	81.5	71.9	3.5	3.9	3.7
Netherlands	75.8	84.7	80.3	72.8	81.6	77.2	4.0	3.7	3.8
Austria	72.0	81.6	76.8	68.6	77.4	73.0	4.7	5.1	4.9
Poland	63.3	77.0	70.1	60.8	74.0	67.4	3.9	3.9	3.9
Portugal	72.4	78.1	75.1	66.9	72.7	69.7	7.6	6.9	7.3
Romania	58.3	76.9	67.8	56.2	73.2	64.8	3.6	4.8	4.3
Slovenia	71.7	78.2	75.0	67.5	74.5	71.1	5.8	4.7	5.2
Slovakia	65.9	78.7	72.4	61.2	73.9	67.6	7.1	6.2	6.6
Finland	76.3	79.5	77.9	70.6	73.5	72.1	7.4	7.6	7.5
Sweden	81.2	84.6	82.9	76.0	79.0	77.5	6.4	6.6	6.5
United Kingdom	73.2	82.6	77.9	70.3	79.1	74.7	4.0	4.2	4.1

Source: based on data from: *Activity rates...* (2019), *Employment rates...* (2019), *Unemployment...* (2019).

do not look for a job due to family obligations and those related to running a home, women constitute approx. 90%. Research conducted in Poland shows that among unemployed women 19% are people who have never performed any paid work, while among men it was almost 27%. The common reasons for stopping work among women are: retirement, loss of job as a result of liquidation of a company or job, or termination of temporary work. Women much more often give reasons for unemployment related to caring for independent persons (mainly children) and poor non-financial working conditions (Żmurkow-Poteralska, 2017). It is worth noting that the percentage of women working part-time in Poland is 9.7% compared to 3.7% of men, which on the one hand may result from the relatively inflexible labor market, and on the other hand, the economic situation of many families who can afford to resign from full-time work or to reconcile it with better care for children or other dependents (Skórska, 2019).

On the other hand, the attitude of women to taking up employment is changing, and it increasingly becomes a tool for self-fulfilment. This is evidenced by, among others, an increase in the employment rate of women aged 15 and over – from 45.9% in Q1 2019 to 46.3% in Q1 2020 (an increase of 0.4 percentage points). The employment rate of women living in rural areas increased by 0.6 pp to the level of 44.4%.

At this point, however, it is necessary to mention the OECD report published in April 2020 entitled “Women at the core of the fight against COVID-19 crisis” (*Women at the core...*, 2020), which highlights the disproportionately negative impact of the crisis on them. Women are playing a key role in the health care response to the COVID-19 crisis. Women constitute an estimated two-thirds of the health workforce worldwide, and while globally they are under-represented among physicians, dentists and pharmacists, women do make up the overwhelming majority of the long-term care workers who not only dominate employment in the care sector, but also do most of the unpaid work at home. In OECD countries, on average, women spend just over four hours a day on unpaid work than men. Even in Denmark, Norway and Sweden – countries that express a strong and progressive approach to gender equality – the gaps in unpaid gender work are still around one hour a day. Most of women’s unpaid working time is spent caring for children. In OECD countries, on average, women spend just over 35 minutes a day in childcare activities – more than twice as much time in men’s childcare activities (15 minutes). However, many women also look after adult relatives, especially parents, even while they are employed in the workforce (just over 90%, on average across OECD countries).

In the OECD report, we read that in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, there is concern that gender employment gaps such as these put women at a greater risk of losing their jobs than men; that the lower status of women in the labour market makes them more vulnerable and easier to dismiss. These fears did not come true in Poland. By contrast, they can work well in developing countries and emerging economies, where large numbers of working women continue

to engage in “informal employment” – often undeclared jobs and generally lacking basic social or legal protection and employee benefits.

The level of entrepreneurship among women in Poland (the self-employed and employers) has been more or less the same over the last decade (around 34%). For years the women's entrepreneurship rate in Poland (including the self-employed ones) has been one of the highest in Europe (in 2013 Poland was in the fourth place) and among the OECD countries. The percentage of self-employed among all the working women is one of the highest in the EU countries, and much higher than the EU average (in 2016 it was 13%, while the EU average was below 10%). After 1989, the number of women starting their own companies increased threefold, whereas the number of men starting their own companies increased twofold (*Policy Brief...*, 2017). One in three companies in Poland (33.4%) has been founded and is run by a woman. Poland is one of the European leaders in this field (the European average is 31%).

It is worth mentioning that in 2018 (Dutta & Mallick, 2018) a study was conducted which showed that starting new businesses by female entrepreneurs is a path to prosperity, even in countries with a low fertility rate. Factors such as higher female enrolment in tertiary education and a higher female-to-male labour force participation ratio can offset the negative impact of the fertility rate and may indeed make the impact positive. In addition, greater access to informal funding sources makes women's enrolment in schools more effective in mitigating the negative impact of the fertility rate.

According to Eurostat data, Poland has one of the lowest gender pay gaps in the European Union (the difference between average gross hourly earnings in the entire economy)⁶. In 2017, it was 7.2% to women's disadvantage, whereas the EU average was 16.2%. Poland is one of the five countries with the lowest pay gaps among all countries included in the Eurostat data. In 2016 a lower pay gap appeared only in Romania, Italy, Luxemburg and Belgium (*Gender pay gap...*, 2019).

In all of the EU countries, the pay gap was higher among the private sector employees and lower in the public sector. In 2016 in the public sector in Poland, the pay gap rate was only 2.8%, which was one of the lowest figures presented, while in most of the EU countries this rate was above 10%. In the private sector the difference between female and male earnings in Poland was 16.1%, which is on the average level in comparison to other EU countries. The pay gap in Poland was very low among the employees approaching the retirement age (2.8%) and

⁶The unadjusted gender pay gap (GPG) represents the difference between average gross hourly earnings of male paid employees and of female paid employees as a percentage of average gross hourly earnings of male paid employees. The GPG is calculated on the basis of: the four-yearly Structure of Earnings Survey (SES) 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2014, and with the scope as required by the SES regulation, national estimates based on national sources for the years between the SES years, from reference year 2007 onwards, with the same coverage as the SES (*Gender pay gap in unadjusted form – NACE...*, 2019).

Table 3

Gender pay gap in EU countries

Specification	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
European Union – 28 countries	17.1	17.1	17.4	16.8	16.6	16.5	16.3	16.0
Belgium	10.2	9.4	8.3	7.5	6.6	6.5	6.1	6.0
Bulgaria	13.0	13.2	15.1	14.1	14.2	15.4	14.4	13.6
Czechia	21.6	22.6	22.5	22.3	22.5	22.5	21.5	21.1
Denmark	17.1	16.4	16.8	16.5	16.0	15.1	15.0	14.7
Germany	22.3	22.4	22.7	22.1	22.3	22	21.5	21
Estonia	27.7	27.3	29.9	29.8	28.1	26.9	25.3	25.6
Ireland	13.9	12.7	12.2	12.9	13.9	–	–	–
Greece	15.0	–	–	–	12.5	–	–	–
Spain	16.2	17.6	18.7	17.8	14.9	14.2	15.1	15.1
France	15.6	15.7	15.6	15.5	15.5	15.3	15.3	15.4
Croatia	5.7	–	–	7.7	8.7	–	11.1	11.6
Italy	5.3	5.7	6.5	7.0	6.1	5.5	5.3	5
Cyprus	16.8	16.1	15.6	14.9	14.2	14.0	13.9	13.7
Latvia	15.5	14.1	14.9	16.0	17.3	17.0	17.0	15.7
Lithuania	11.9	11.5	11.9	12.2	13.3	14.2	14.4	15.2
Luxembourg	8.7	7.9	7.0	6.2	5.4	5.5	5.5	5.0
Hungary	17.6	18.0	20.1	18.4	15.1	14.0	14.0	14.2
Malta	7.2	7.7	9.5	9.7	10.6	10.4	11.0	12.2
Netherlands	17.8	18.6	17.6	16.6	16.2	16.1	15.6	15.2
Austria	24.0	23.5	22.9	22.3	22.2	21.7	20.1	19.9
Poland	4.5	5.5	6.4	7.1	7.7	7.4	7.2	7.2
Portugal	12.8	12.9	15.0	13.3	14.9	17.8	17.5	16.3
Romania	8.8	9.6	6.9	4.9	4.5	5.8	5.2	3.5
Slovenia	0.9	3.3	4.5	6.3	7.0	8.1	7.8	8.0
Slovakia	19.6	20.1	20.8	18.8	19.7	19.6	19.0	19.8
Finland	20.3	19.1	19.2	18.8	18.4	17.6	17.4	16.7
Sweden	15.4	15.6	15.5	14.6	13.8	14.0	13.3	12.6
United Kingdom	23.3	21.8	22.6	21.0	20.9	21.0	20.7	20.8

Source: based on data from *Gender pay gap...* (2019).

it reached the lowest level among the 21 EU countries, for which it was possible to estimate this rate. The highest value of this indicator was observed among people aged 35-44 (12%). The analysis of the Eurostat data on the size of the unadjusted gender pay gap according to the sector of economic activity shows the presence of a negative pay gap, which means that on average women earn

more than men. This phenomenon is characteristic for the industries where the participation of women in the workforce is low. An example of this is the construction industry, where the unadjusted gender pay gap rate in 2017 was 14.8%, which implies that on average women employed in this sector earned almost 15% more than men. This is due to a small percentage of women working in this industry (6.5%) and is also due to the different responsibilities that women have (they more often do office jobs than work at the construction site). The sectors where the highest levels of the gender pay gap are observed are: finance and insurance (the rate is 30.4%) and the information and communication technology sector (25.9%). When these sectors are considered, Poland is one of the countries with the largest earnings difference to the detriment of women. The differences between male and female average earnings increase together with the increase in qualifications and responsibilities required at a given position. The biggest imbalance between men's and women's earnings occurs among the public authority representatives, higher level officials and managers (*National Research into Payment...*, 2018).

The positive changes in the Polish labour market are reflected in the figures on the unemployment among women. For a few years now, Poland has had an historically low level of unemployment, thanks to which the unemployment rate is lower than the EU (28) average. It is worth noticing, because in the years 2004-2006 Poland was the country with the highest unemployment rate in the European Union (19.4% in 2004), whereas now it is one of the countries with the lowest unemployment rate (3.8% in 2018). This indicator was 3.1 percentage points lower in Poland than in the EU (28) (7.0%).

Indicators describing the situation of women, despite positive changes over the years, are still significantly lower than in the case of men, which is presented in detail in Table 4. The number of unemployed women has been falling systematically since 2010, but on the other hand the percentage of women among all the registered unemployed is growing. At the end of 2018 there were 542,600 women and 426,200 men registered in the labour offices, which meant that 56% of all the registered unemployed were women. The situation of women, their living and working conditions, social and political roles also depend on where women live. In the country earnings are lower, because it is more difficult to find a job and the infrastructure is not as well-developed as in the city. Therefore, it is more difficult to cover vast distances in order to reach the potential employers, who are usually concentrated in urban centres. At the end of 2018, there were 133 unemployed women for every 100 unemployed men, while in the city there were 123 women for every 100 men. The unemployed women were younger and better-educated than men.

The fall of unemployment in general and women's unemployment has been steady in Poland since 2014. This fall has been faster among men than women, but this is not surprising since it has become the rule that in good economic times unemployment among men falls faster, while in worse economic times men were

Table 4

Unemployment in Poland from 2010 to 2018

Specification	Registered unemployed	Of whom			
		female		male	
	in numbers		% of the registered	in numbers	
at the end of the year					
2010	1,954,706	1,014,792	51.9	939,914	48.1
2011	1,982,676	1,060,204	53.5	922,472	46.5
2012	2,136,815	1,099,186	51.4	1,037,629	48.6
2013	2,157,883	1,099,456	51.0	1,058,427	49.0
2014	1,825,180	939,648	51.5	885,532	48.5
2015	1,563,339	816,138	52.2	747,201	47.8
2016	1,335,155	712,227	53.3	622,928	46.7
2017	1,081,746	595,530	55.1	486,216	44.9
2018	968,888	542,642	56.0	426,246	44.0

Source: author's calculations based on *Bezrobotni zarejestrowani...* (2019).

also more likely to become unemployed. However, the number of economically inactive women who used to work before is growing. The reasons women give for resigning from work and from looking for it are family and personal matters as well as duties in the family and at home (the number of such women is estimated at 126,000) (*Economic activity...*, 2019).

In periods of a deteriorating situation in the labour market – which we are dealing with during the COVID-19 epidemic, unfavourable changes affect men more often, i.e. the number of unemployed men grows faster, and thus their share among the registered unemployed increases. At the same time, given favourable conditions in the labour market, they find employment faster and constitute a smaller percentage of the registered unemployed. At the end of August 2020, 557.5 thousand unemployed women were registered and 470.4 thousand unemployed men. Compared to the end of August 2019, the population of unemployed women increased by 60.8 thousand persons (i.e. by 12.2%), and the number of unemployed men increased by 101.6 thousand, i.e. 27.6%. The same, the percentage of men in the total number of the unemployed amounted to 45.8% as compared to 42.6% the year before. On the other hand, it is worth adding that the increase in the percentage of men among the registered unemployed was visible at the end of 2019 (44.7%) compared to the end of 2018 (44.0%). Moreover, this trend also holds with the number of unemployed men and women at the end of August 2020 until the end of February 2020. The growth dynamics were almost identical – the number of unemployed women increased by 11.8% and the number of unemployed men increased by 11.7%.

The Family 500+ Programme

In 2016 in Poland, the Family 500+ Programme was introduced. It was first of all created to prevent the negative effects of the demographic situation⁷. The second aim of this programme was to invest in human capital – supporting families with financial transfers was to enable children to get a good education, good nutrition and treatment. The third aim was to reduce poverty among the youngest. The received child benefit thanks to this programme means an additional 6,000 PLN per year to spend on raising a child (500 PLN per month).

Parents, legal guardians or customary primary carers of a child (that is the person who actually takes care of a child if they applied to the guardianship court for adoption of this child) are entitled to the child benefit until the child is 18 years old. Until the end of June 2019, the reception of the child benefit for the first child depended on an income criterion. However, the benefit for the second and succeeding children under 18 in the family was paid to all families regardless of their income. Since 1 July 2019, the income criterion has not been applied. The child benefit is 500 PLN clear per month for every child. This sum is free of income tax and of social insurance and health insurance contributions. The benefits and the costs connected with the benefit's distribution are financed in the form of targeted subsidies from the state budget, while the benefit's distribution is the responsibility of the municipalities (local authorities).

The first noticeable effect of the programme was a drop in the poverty level. From 2015 to 2017, the drop in poverty level was most noticeable among children. According to the Household Budget Survey, extreme poverty in 2017 was 4.3% and it was lower by 35% compared to 2015 (*Household budgets...*, 2019). The main beneficiaries of the drop in poverty level were single parents with children (a drop of over 60% in comparison to 2015) and large families (a drop of over 50% in the same period). When considering age groups, the biggest beneficiaries were children under 17 years of age as among them the poverty level went down by almost 50% in comparison to 2015. In 2018 the trend of poverty decline slowed down, which was connected with, among others, a depletion of the effects of the programme on household expenditure taken into account when the extreme poverty level is measured. However, the poverty level in 2018 still remained lower than in 2015. Besides the child benefit, an improved situation in the labour market and wage increases also resulted in the decline in poverty among children and the decline in poverty in general.

The better financial security of families and more stable financial situation resulted in a higher birth rate in the years 2016-2017. In 2016, 328,300 children

⁷ In Poland for almost 30 years we have been facing a decrease in the number of births, which in turn does not make the generation renewal possible. In 2015 the total fertility rate was 1.29, which meant that for 100 women at childbearing age 129 children were born. The optimal fertility rate, necessary for stable demographic development, is 2.1–2.15. The main causes of a low fertility rate for many years were bad economic situations of families and their uncertain economic future.

were born, that is 13 thousand more than during the previous year, whereas in 2017 402,000 children were born, which is 19.7 thousand more than in the previous year (Sprawozdanie Prezesa Rady Ministrów..., 2019). Consequently, the total fertility rate increased from 1.289 in 2015 to 1.357 in 2016 and to 1.453 in 2017. In 2018 the number of children born fell by 12.4 thousand until it reached the level of 360,800, but this was connected with the smaller number of women of childbearing age. As a result, in 2018 the total fertility rate in Poland became slightly lower, namely 1.435, but it still remained at a relatively high level. In the years 2017-2018, the fertility rate reached its highest level.

Despite some research, which stressed the negative influence that the child benefit may have on women's work (*OECD Economic Surveys...*, 2018; Haan & Wrohlich, 2011), this benefit did not significantly change the situation in the labour market of women aged 25-49.

When quarterly data based on the research by Labour Force Survey (*Labour force...*, 2019) were analysed, it was concluded that the programme did not have much influence on the changes in the labour market situation of women aged 25-49⁸. In all the quarters of the year 2018, the number of women (aged 25-49) who resigned from work because of looking after children was similar – around 370,000 (with the exception of the third quarter, when this number fell to 345,000 because of the seasonal activity increase), which accounts for 28% of all economically inactive women in the age group analysed. The data analyses indicates that in 2018 there was a slight change in the structure of the group of women (aged 25-49) who resigned from work because of childminding (Sprawozdanie Prezesa Rady Ministrów..., 2019). It was reported that there was a fall in the number of economically inactive women in the household where the child benefit was granted (from 275,000 in the first quarter of the year 2018 to 261,000 in the fourth quarter of the year 2018, that is by 14,000 women), while at the same time the number of such women in the households where this benefit was not granted increased (from 96,000 to 106,000, that is by 10,000 women).

Some surveys confirm these conclusions. A report by GUS entitled "Work versus family duties" showed that among 2,932,000 mothers around 92% declared that receiving the child benefit did not trigger any activities which would change their situation in the labour market. Only 1% of mothers admitted that the child benefit led to their decision to resign from work (*Work versus family...*, 2019).

Women give up work when their families have an assured income, that is when the working husband is able to maintain the family. The improving situation in the labour market as well as the growing salaries may also lead to a situation when women can simply afford to give up work temporarily and devote their time

⁸ The analysis was done by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy in Poland and it was based on quarterly unit data bases by LFS from 2018. To do the analysis, quarterly unit data bases on the respondents' individual situation (Survey – research on people's economic activity) and on the household situation (Household file) were put together. In the calculations only the households which received the child benefit and women aged 25-49 were included.

to family life. Moreover, the possibility of one-year paid maternity or parental leave may result in a larger number of women who stop working temporarily.

Experts from the Polish Institute for Structural Research are critical of the 500+ Program (Magda *et al.*, 2018). The authors of the report hypothesize that the greater outflow of women from unemployment to inactivity is due to the introduction of family allowance. The authors of the study indicated that as a result of the introduction of the 500+ benefit, the professional activity of women with children is lower by approx. 2.4 percentage points than the level that could be achieved without the introduction of the program. Indeed, with the new 500+ payment, the income from unemployment has increased significantly for families. The new child benefits could therefore strengthen the long-lasting decline in the economic activity of women with lower qualifications in Poland. The increase in non-work income, such as the “Family 500+” benefit, reduces the financial attractiveness of employment and weakens the incentives to look for a job – this is the so-called income effect.

The fact is that three years after its introduction, poverty in families with children decreased, although, according to the authors of the report, this effect could be achieved at a much lower cost. The number of births increased in 2017 and decreased in 2018, however, these changes cannot be attributed to the “500+” benefit. The authors of the research believe that the program is very expensive, but economically ineffective. In addition, the authors criticize that the program has not been included in the entirety of family policy activities – there is no coherent vision of goals, assumptions and action strategies. The high costs of the program also means the lack of funds in other areas, potentially more desired by the society (education, health protection) or more broadly related to development perspectives (e.g. public infrastructure, including transport, air quality).

It is worth mentioning that the benefits paid to parents or guardians who bring up children are present in the legislation of all European Union member states. Legal regulations in each country are very different regarding the scope of benefits, conditions necessary to receive the benefit, the amount of the benefit, the rules of financing them and their construction. Solutions similar to the Polish ones can be found, for example in France, Ireland, Germany or Sweden, but in those countries the amount of the benefit grows with each subsequent child. In the EU countries, there are also many other additional allowances, such as additional allowances for working parents with low income, aid for housing, allowances for schoolchildren, allowances for orphans or for parents of disabled children. Usually they depend on an income criterion. According to Eurostat, the highest percentage of expenditure on benefits for families (compared to all social expenditure) is in Luxemburg. In 2016 it was over 15% of all money spent on social allowances in that country. The next positions are taken by Estonia and Poland. In Poland, according to Eurostat, the allowances for families account for 13% of all expenditure on social benefits. This is much more than the EU average, which is 9%.

Pro-employment policy for supporting women

One of the factors determining a lower employment rate among women is the limited availability of child care services, which especially concerns children under three years of age. Therefore developing high-quality childcare services is vital to promote female employment and make it easier for people to have many children. Studies from other countries show that the availability of subsidised childcare has a positive effect on female employment (*OECD Economic Surveys...*, 2018). As an example, the fertility rate in Germany has started to rise from a low level, and research suggests that massive investment in childcare is a factor behind this (*OECD Economic Surveys...*, 2018; Haan & Wrohlich, 2011).

In Poland, there functions a programme called Maluch+ (Toddler+) which supports the development of a childcare system for children under three by financially supporting, with the state budget and Labour Fund money, the initiatives aimed at creating or maintaining the functioning childcare institutions for children under three. The subsidies are available to the institutions of local authorities as well as to private facilities. The development of a childcare system for small children makes it possible for parents to choose between home and outside institutional care, which in turn allows them to combine professional and family life. The possibility of using the outside childcare institutions aids professional activation, especially that of women, who are usually responsible for taking care of the small children. An important change is the increase in budget resources of the programme. In 2018 its budget was 450 million PLN and, what is important, the regions where the unemployment rate is 150% higher than the country's average may receive preferential treatment. Thanks to this, the programme supports the activities in the labour market even more.

At the end of 2018, in Poland childcare institutions provided 146,000 places for the youngest children, that is almost 74% more than in 2015. By the end of 2019 thanks to this programme, 27,600 new places for children under three have been created in crèches, kids clubs and by day-care providers. In 2018, 23,000 places were created. At the end of 2018, the rate of availability of childcare spots for children under three in Poland (including nannies) was 19.4%, which is 60% more than in 2015. In 2019 this rate will be 24.9% (Program Maluch+, 2018).

The percentage of working and job seeking women depends on many factors, such as the number of children in a family (the bigger the number, the lower the professional activity). When the influence of motherhood on professional activity is considered, institutional solutions are always crucial, especially the access to crèches and kindergartens as well as regulations concerning maternity/paternity or parental leaves. The wider availability of childcare institutions as well as the possibility of a more equal share of duties connected with child upbringing between parents both have positive effects on women's professional activity.

The current regulations of the Polish Workers' Statute include solutions which enable women to combine the possibility of working with effective participation in family life and raising children. These solutions are connected with the organisation of working time (for example, flexible working hours, task-based working time, part-time work, individual working time, system of equivalence), with the place of work (for example, telework) and other ideas which facilitate taking care of family members (for example, company nurseries or kindergartens, providing day-care for children or dependent persons). In 2016 Poland introduced contributions from irregular work contracts, and in 2017 a minimum hourly wage for contract labor was introduced, which was at a level similar to that of the minimum hourly wage in employment contracts. At the beginning of 2019, legislative solutions were introduced which allowed people employed with non-standard contracts to consociate in trade unions. These solutions concerned all employees, including women. The changes mentioned above have already brought positive effects. In the period between the third quarter of 2016 and the third quarter of 2018 around 14,000 fewer women were employed with only irregular contracts (while the number of women with employment contracts increased).

Moreover, the regulations of the Polish Workers' Statute included various privileges connected with being an employee and a parent at the same time. For instance, these people have the possibility of taking maternity, parental or child-care leaves. These privileges are constructed in a way that parents may use them according to their needs and they may flexibly combine professional life and family responsibilities. The regulations state that parents may share these leaves and, in the case of parental and child-care leaves, they may combine these leaves with part-time work.

There is also a wide range of non-statutory regulations which make the balance between work and family life easier to keep, for example medical care packages, financial support for sport and cultural activities, trainings for mothers coming to work after maternity/parental leave or the possibility of using the tools of the trade while on maternity/parental leave.

We should not forget about women who look after a dependent family member. On January 1st 2019, the Solidarity Fund for Persons with Disabilities was created in Poland, which enables many different activities to aid the disabled. One such activity is respite care – a programme for helping family members to take care of a person with a severe disability and disabled children through providing an alternative form of short-term respite care. The support provided by the Solidarity Fund for Persons with Disabilities also includes a wide array of activities connected with taking care of disabled persons, such as increasing the access to care services, specialist care services and other short-term services (the so called support devices).

Activities by employment services for improving women's situation in the labour market

There are groups in a very special situation. They are women who do not work, but devote their time to raising children as well as the women who want to go back to work after a break for child upbringing. The changing role which women play in our times requires a combination of the two functions – that of a mother and of a professionally active person. This situation calls for changes in the labour market which would make it easier for women. In Polish labour market policy, these two groups are treated as being very important and labour offices take various steps to activate women. The support activities for women include (among others):

1. The possibility of maintaining the status of an unemployed person despite their not being available for work – a pregnant women cannot lose the unemployed person's status due to not being able to work for 90 days because of pregnancy, except for the situation when the woman herself applies for resigning from this status.

2. The possibility of reporting the fact of not being able to work because of taking care of a child – a mother cannot lose the unemployed person's status due to not being able and ready to work because of taking care of a child for the period of time during which she would be entitled to maternity benefit during the maternity leave, adoption leave and parental leave.

3. Preference in participation in special programmes – women who want to return to the labour market after a professionally inactive period caused by child upbringing and who have at least one child under the age of 6 or at least one disabled child under the age of 18 are treated as unemployed in a special situation in the labour market and they are entitled to preference in participation in special programmes. These programmes, thanks to the usage of specific elements enhancing employment, adjusted to individual needs of people taking part in the programme, help to remove the barriers to employment access, which make it difficult to go back to the labour market.

4. A longer period of unemployment benefit entitlement – 365 days (if a woman has at least one dependent child under the age of 15 and her husband is also unemployed and he lost the entitlement to the unemployment benefit).

5. A longer period of unemployment benefit entitlement – if a woman gives birth to a child while taking the unemployment benefit or within a month after this period has finished, the period is extended by the period during which a woman would be entitled to maternity benefit according to other regulations.

6. The possibility of reimbursement of costs of taking care of children under the age of 7 – the reimbursement will not exceed half of the sum of the unemployment benefit for each child who is taken care of.

7. A grant for telework and activity benefit – instruments supporting creation of new work places for people returning to the labour market after the break caused by child upbringing. They give the possibility to create a work place at home.

8. Exemption from paying the contributions to the Labour Fund and the Employee Benefits Guarantee Fund for the employer who employs workers returning from maternity leave for the period of 36 months starting with the first day of the month.

Women raising disabled children receive special support. For example, facilitations connected directly with returning to professional activity by the care-givers of the disabled include such mechanisms as preferential terms for starting one's own business (one-off financial support for starting one's own business and a loan to start one's own business). The employers of the care-givers of the disabled receive more beneficial terms for creating new work places (the reimbursement of costs of equipping or improving the work place created for the disabled person's care-giver and a loan for the company to create a work place for the disabled person's care-giver).

Employers and entrepreneurs may receive a subsidy for the salary of employing an unemployed woman who is over the age of 50. The reception of the subsidy for the salary lasts for twelve months if the woman is between 50 and 60 years of age.

Women who register as unemployed or employment seeking in the local labour office are allowed to use a wide range of support solutions for professional activation offered to all registered persons, which is described in the Act on employment promotion and labour market institutions. These solutions include, among other things: recruitment support, career counselling, trainings, assistance in gaining subsidy employment, work placement, and socially useful work.

Labour offices also offer support for working women at the age of 45 and over, who register at the labour office as seeking employment. They may attend a free of charge course, which is organised by a training institution at the demand of the labour office (according to an office training schedule), or they may choose any educational offer available on the market which is interesting for them and – after applying – they may receive the reimbursement of costs of such a training up to 300% of an average salary. Women over 45 may receive a reimbursement of the cost of exams which enable them to receive certificates, confirmations and professional qualifications and licences up to 100% of an average salary; moreover, there is a possibility of financing the costs of commuting to these exams. Women may also choose postgraduate university courses they want to attend and – after applying (and stating the purpose of their course) – they may have this course financed up to 300% of an average salary. Finally, women may apply for a loan to finance the cost of a training up to 400% of an average salary, the loan is interest-free and should be paid back within 18 months.

In 2018, with the use of various labour market instruments, 185 300 unemployed women were professionally activated, which accounted for 53.9%

of all the unemployed who used the instruments. By comparison, in the first half of 2020, 53.9 thousand people were activated as part of various forms of activation of the unemployed in Poland (despite the suspension of the activation of the unemployed during the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic). Unemployed women constituted 56% of the total number of unemployed who benefited from these forms of assistance. According to the data collected in the MRPiPS-01 report on the labour market, in January-September 2020, 163.2 thousand people benefited from active forms of support. Of the unemployed, 91.7 thousand were women, and they constituted about 56.2% of the total number of unemployed who were activated.

Summary

Whether to work or not should be a matter of choice. However, it is important that the choice be a rational decision, and the state institutions' role is to make people aware that professional inactivity today may be costly in the future. Women's professional activity depends on many factors such as: family's income (which determines whether or not women can afford to temporarily stop working and devote themselves to family life), the possibility of combining a professional career and family life (with a sufficient number of institutional care places, not only for children but also for other dependent persons, especially in the country, flexible working time), quality of the jobs offered (the working and payment conditions in the local labour market), the level of infrastructure development enabling easy access to places of work (the distance from big cities, the public transport available), the costs of institutional care for children and dependent persons in relation to the woman's income, and the awareness of the benefits from working.

In the case of women who totally devote themselves to motherhood, a long period outside the labour market results in their qualifications and skills becoming out-of-date and their value for employers decreasing. In the case of women reaching the retirement age, it is crucial to make them understand that every additional month of working will be reflected in the level of their future pension.

For women who want to develop their professional careers, a stable balance between professional and family life is crucial. Therefore, it is important to promote women's employment, and this promotion should not be limited to professional activation but there is a whole array of legal and systematic solutions removing barriers which impede, and very often prevent women's entrance or return to the labour market. They are mainly activities aimed at creating conditions favouring a balance between professional and family life, for example: the availability of childcare spots (crèches, kids clubs or kindergartens)

and institutional care places for dependent persons (that is the elderly or the disabled), developing and promoting flexible forms of employment, encouraging women to gain qualifications, as well as undertaking activities aimed at equal treatment for women and men in the field of earnings.

The outbreak of the epidemic changed the face of the current labour market on many levels. The crisis related to the pandemic has overvalued the economy, in Poland it was possible to prevent a high increase in the registered unemployment of Poland. Although from April to July 2020 the number of unemployed was growing, which usually does not happen in this period of the year, and the growth rate slowed from month to month. According to Eurostat data, in August 2020 Poland was the second country in the EU after the Czech Republic with the lowest unemployment rate calculated according to the LFS methodology (BAEL), reaching the rate of 3.1% compared to 7.4% on average among the EU27 and 8.1% in the Euro zone (*Eurostat: Polska nadal...*, 2020). One of the factors influencing the stabilization of the labour market in Poland was the support offered under the Anti-Crisis Shield. As part of the instruments offered by Poviast labour offices (salary subsidy, business activity subsidy, micro-loan), a total of almost 2.6 million applications were submitted, of which 99.6% of applications have been considered, and over 2.3 million applications for the discussed instruments, funds from the Labour Fund in the amount of PLN 14.7 billion were disbursed, and almost 3.5 million people were covered by support (*The MRPiPS-01 report...*, 2020).

The crisis related to the coronavirus pandemic in recent months affects many people, including women. It is also not without significance that industries that were particularly affected by the effects of the pandemic included gastronomy, the hotel industry, and the events industry, where the employment of women is characteristic. In periods of deterioration of the labour market, however, unfavourable changes affect men more often than women, i.e. the number of unemployed men grows faster, and thus their share among the registered unemployed increases. However, this does not affect the fact that Poland still remains a country with a low economic activity for women. This is primarily the result of significantly lower values of indicators for women in the groups up to 29 and over 55, which may result from the difficulties of Polish women in providing institutional care for both children and other dependent persons, because it should be remembered that it is, according to the applicable social norms, obligatory to care not only for children, but also for sick parents and grandchildren. However, there is still a lot to be done to improve the professional activity of women, and this is one of the main challenges of Polish labour market policy for the next few years.

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