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Actions of enterprises to improve the situation of women on the labour market

Działania przedsiębiorstw wpływające na poprawę sytuacji kobiet na rynku pracy

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Abstract

The topic of discrimination against women in the labour market, although frequently addressed, is still extremely relevant in many European and other countries. In addition to rules regulated by law, the equality policies of companies also have a significant impact on the situation of women. The aim of the research was to analyse the strategies of companies that support women and to describe the measures that companies put in place to enable and encourage women to start a career, or come back to work, thus ensuring gender diversity, which also has a positive impact on the success of the company. The article refers to the current situation in Poland in the context of other European Union countries. The research is based on a historical method and an analysis of available documents. The analysis of data found in available reports prepared by enterprises and focusing on the effectiveness of strategies supporting gender diversity, allowed me to conclude that the implemented measures are bringing the expected results, and that the current policy should be continued and expanded, as more and more women decide to return to professional activity, thus leading to a reduction of gender discrimination in the labour market.

Keywords: women, professional activity, discrimination, workplace, equality policies

Abstrakt

Temat dyskryminacji kobiet na rynku pracy, choć często podejmowany, jest wciąż niezwykle aktualny w wielu krajach Europy i świata. Oprócz przepisów regulowanych przez prawo czynnikiem znacząco wpływającym na sytuację kobiet jest również polityka równościowa przedsiębiorstw. Przeprowadzone badania miały na celu analizę strategii przedsiębiorstw wspierających kobiety oraz opis działań, jakie firmy wprowadzają, aby umożliwić kobietom rozwój i zachęcić je do rozpoczęcia kariery, tym samym zapewniając zróżnicowanie płciowe, wpływające również korzystnie na sukces przedsiębiorstwa. Artykuł odnosi się do aktualnej sytuacji w Polsce w kontekście innych państw Unii Europejskiej. Badania oparte są na metodzie historycznej oraz na analizie dostępnych dokumentów. Analiza danych zastanych w dostępnych raportach, przygotowanych przez przedsiębiorstwa oraz skupiających się na efektywności strategii wspierających zróżnicowanie płciowe, pozwoliła stwierdzić, że podjęte działania przynoszą oczekiwane rezultaty, a obecna polityka powinna być kontynuowana i poszerzana, ponieważ coraz więcej kobiet decyduje się na powrót do aktywności zawodowej, co tym samym prowadzi do zmniejszenia dyskryminacji płciowej na rynku pracy.

Słowa kluczowe: kobiety, aktywność zawodowa, dyskryminacja, miejsce pracy, polityka równości

Introduction

The low professional activity of women is an issue that the government is trying to improve by introducing various laws. Companies are increasingly noticing that they and their policies also have a real impact on how women feel in the workplace, which affects women's decisions in the future. The following research contains an overview of the current situation of women's professional activity in Poland and the European Union, and the determinants of professional activity. The research also includes strategies that companies undertake to create a friendly place to work for women and the success of the implemented measures. The main aim of the research is to conduct analyses focused on companies' strategies supporting women and to describe the measures that companies put in place to enable and encourage women to start a career, or come back to work, thus ensuring gender diversity, that also brings additional value to the organization. The study is based on a historical method. It analyses available documents. The analysis of the data contained in the available reports, prepared by companies and focusing on the effectiveness of strategies supporting gender diversity, allowed conclusions to be drawn and hypothesise that the measures implemented are having the expected results and that the current policy should be continued and expanded as more and more women choose to return to the labour market, with the help of actions implemented in the organizations. The following paper consists of four main parts. The first part focuses directly on a factor influencing women's low participation in the labour market, namely discrimination in the workplace. The next

part is devoted to the situation in Poland and how it compares with the European Union. The next two sections describe the research form, the research techniques and data used, and the research results with examples. A conclusion closes the article.

Discrimination at the workplace

While looking at the actions that entrepreneurs are taking to improve the situation of women in the labour market, it is necessary to first understand what the current state of knowledge is. One of the most common reasons for the poor situation of women in the labour market is discrimination against women in the workplace, which can be both direct and indirect, and it is usually presented in various ways. Discrimination can be manifested as inferior treatment, such as a dismissal of a woman simply because she is a woman.¹ The most common forms of direct discrimination include unfair recruitment, a pay gap among people with the same education and experience, differing only by gender and the advertisements that in the grammatical structure suggest that men will be more welcome in the position, and the demands that are made on women are often overstated. There can be also indirect factors. One of the most common is introducing a rule that only full-time employees can be promoted, while women, who are more predisposed to work part-time due to parental obligations, will suffer because of the lack of promotion opportunities. Another manifestation of this may be the situation when during interviews, women are often asked about their family situation and related plans and these are the questions that men do not face.

The causes of discrimination against women can be traced back to both cultural and social factors as well as behaviours observed within organisations². The first category includes pervasive gender stereotypes and typically female and male roles³.

In traditional cultural systems with polarised social roles there is an obvious distinction between female and male professions instilled in society from an early age. Boys are the ones who play pretending to be firefighters, police officers or drivers, while at the same time girls are frequently getting a toy kitchen or dolls that look like young children. Therefore, there is a division between bold and strong men and emotional, caring women that is present from childhood. This vision is repeated and kept in the mind, creating gender stereotypes that have a strong influence on what decisions women make in their future life.⁴ An excellent example showing how stereotypes affect women's professional lives

¹ *Sex Discrimination*, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014, p. 2, https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/GPGB_sex_discrimination_0.pdf?_ga=2.163971391.144284906.1684611195-1602066646.1684611195 [access: 10.04.2023].

² A. Holska, *Kobiece przywództwo w zarządzaniu organizacją: szansa czy zagrożenie*, "Zarządzanie. Teoria i Praktyka" 2017, nr 1(19), pp. 16–17.

³ K. Znańska-Kozłowska, *Dyskryminacja kobiet na rynku pracy*, "Zeszyt Naukowy. WSZiB w Krakowie" 2012, p. 25, 175.

⁴ J. Szymczyk, *Dyskryminacja kobiet na rynku pracy – czy rzeczywiście jest problemem?*, "Poradnik Pracownika" 2022, <https://poradnikpracownika.pl/-dyskryminacja-kobiet-na-ryнку-pracy-czy-rzeczywiście-jest-problemem> [access: 17.04.2023].

is the involvement of each gender in leadership positions divided by industry. Analysing the figures from the Global Gender Gap Report, it can be seen that the largest share of women is in education, personal services, wellbeing and health sectors. At the same time men are performing leadership roles in sectors such as infrastructure, manufacturing, energy and technology.⁵

The reasons for the creation and development of stereotypes should be sought deep within the culture in which society is embedded, because it is not men or women, but the cultural models they have been taught and that people adopt that cause stereotypes leading, in later phases, to discrimination. The second reason follows directly from the first one and can be traced to self-discrimination. The pervasive opinions about women and their careers have begun to affect women so strongly that they lead them to doubt their own strength, potential and competency⁶. The inefficient childcare system for children up to the age of three, which significantly postpones the moment when women return to the labour market, is also a factor contributing to the low economic activity among women.

Situation in Poland

The labour force participation of Polish women is low compared to other EU countries. Women's professional activity rate in Poland at the end of 2020 was 67.9%, which, against the backdrop of the European Union with a rate of 71.9%, may seem a good result, but looking at the increase in these figures over 15 years, the situation no longer looks positive. In Poland, the increase was just 4.3 percentage points, while in the European Union, it was over 7 percentage points.⁷ This is because in Poland the majority of businesses are private enterprises that pay less attention to gender diversity in the organization.

Poland's weaker situation compared with the European Union is also visible while analysing the work area of Gender Equality Index figures presenting the progress of gender equality in the EU. In 2022, the index value for the European Union was 71.7, while for Poland, placed fifth place from the bottom of the ranking, it was 67.3. This indicator shows that in Poland the labour market has a very long way to go before the status of gender equality will reach the European Union level.⁸

In addition, in 2022, the Global Gender Gap Index prepared a report with a division of countries by region. It concluded that Poland is one of the lowest ranked of all European countries, in 30th place out of all 35 countries. Although these are separate measures, they

⁵ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender GAP Reposr. Insight report*, July, 2022. p. 37, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf [access: 10.04.2023].

⁶ A. Holska, *Kobiece przywództwo w zarządzaniu organizacją: szansa czy zagrożenie*, "Zarządzanie. Teoria i Praktyka" 2017, nr 1(19), 17.

⁷ M. Zielonka, *Poprawa sytuacji kobiet w zatrudnieniu*, Warszawa 2021, <https://lewiatan.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Poprawa-sytuacji-kobiet-w-zatrudnieniu.pdf> [access: 20.04.2023].

⁸ Gender Equality Index, 2022, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2022/compare-countries/work/bar> [access: 30.03.2023].

lead to the same conclusion that Poland and Polish companies should follow European leaders of the ranking, such as Sweden, Denmark or the Netherlands.⁹

Role models companies

In order to achieve the intended research objectives – that is, to find out what measures companies are taking to improve the situation of women in the labour market, the study, which is based on a historical method and an analysis of available documents, such as reports showing the diversity level of chosen companies, was carried out. The analysis of the data contained in the available reports, which are prepared by companies and focus on the details and effectiveness of strategies to support gender diversity, makes it possible to learn about the programs offered by companies and the results they achieve through their established objectives. In order to select the right companies for the study, an in-depth analysis was made of the differentiating factors that must be taken into account in the selection. Three businesses were chosen for more detailed analysis, starting with Procter & Gamble¹⁰ representing the packaged goods and self-care industry. The next company was Zalando¹¹. This company is currently ranked seventh in the Forbes ranking of The World's Top Female-Friendly Companies. The final company examined was the SAP¹² organization. The reason why these companies were chosen is that they represent different industries, namely packed goods, online sales and software, so IT services. This was done to show that, regardless of the industry, a company can introduce similar policy measures to support women.

Strategies implemented by the role models companies

After analysing company reports and websites, it can be concluded that the chosen companies support women, both those who have previously worked for a company and have had a break due to childbirth or other reasons and also those who are just starting out in their careers. An example of company actions supporting both these groups include the strategy offered by the first studied company – Procter & Gamble. This company introduced several actions belonging to the #WeSeeEqual¹³ gender equality programme, which is all about promoting equality between both sexes, with an emphasis on actions aimed at women. Examples of actions encompassing the programme include increasing paid leave before childbirth and maternity or paternity leave. Another measure is the possibility to

⁹ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender GAP Report. Insight report*, July, 2022, p. 24, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf [access: 5.04.2023].

¹⁰ 2022 *Citizenship Report*, Procter & Gamble, n.d., <https://us.pg.com/citizenship-report-2022/> [access: 5.04.2023].

¹¹ Zalando: *do. BETTER – Diversity & Inclusion Report*, 2022, p. 3, <https://corporate.zalando.com/en/dobetter-diversity-inclusion-report-2022> [access: 20.04.2023].

¹² 2022 *Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) Report. P. 10*, n.d., <https://www.sap.com/about/company/our-values/diversity.html?pdf-asset=4e7e324b-6e7e-0010-bca6-c68f7e60039b&page=1> [access: 5.04.2023].

¹³ *Gender Equality*, n.d., <https://us.pg.com/gender-equality/> [access: 15.04.2023].

work flexible, especially for a parent caring for a small child, for whom the possibility of flexible work is a real help. For women just starting out, the company offers a number of interesting programmes, for example, promoting girls in STEM and providing a mentoring programme for women looking to take on new career challenges. According to the Citizenship Report 2022¹⁴ prepared by the company, women make up as much as 41% of all employees and, more interestingly, 50% of managerial positions.

In all companies under study, mentoring programs for women is a very popular practice. In the case of Zalando, it is a program that promotes the development of women in management positions. Zalando have established measures to ensure that the application and promotion processes are free of biases that favour one specific gender. The company is investing in dedicated initiatives, such as a Women in Tech Reskilling program and collaborative partnerships with external organizations. The strategies chosen by Zalando are bringing the intended results, as at the end of 2022 as many as 37.5% of leadership positions were held by women. Their target is to increase this number to 40–60% by the end of 2023, at the same time increasing women working in tech jobs.¹⁵

The final company studied, the SAP organization, offer a great opportunity for the second group of women, i.e., those starting their career in a completely new company. SAP offers the Returnship “Back to Work”¹⁶ Program. This is a 20-week, paid return program for mid-career professionals with more than five years’ work experience who have taken a career break of more than two years due to care or relocation and would now like to start their career again in a new company, but not from scratch. The program includes workshops, coaching and a dedicated mentor to ease the transition as an on-ramp back into the workforce. It is dedicated for both genders but most beneficiaries of the program are women. SAP boasts a return conversion rate of more than 60%. Depending on business needs and performance, qualified candidates after the Returnship Program are offered a full-time position. Even though the industry in which SAP operates does not have a large share of women generally, the percentage of women working there is 35%, which looks quite significant in relation to the IT sector.¹⁷

Conclusions

More and more employers are becoming aware of the importance of skilful diversity management and how many benefits it brings to the company. This includes the boost to the creativity of teams resulting from the different perceptions of different genders, through to greater loyalty of the whole team, enhanced profitability, and innovativeness.

¹⁴ 2022 *Citizenship Report*, Procter & Gamble, n.d., <https://us.pg.com/citizenship-report-2022/> [access: 9.04.2023].

¹⁵ Zalando: *do. BETTER – Diversity & Inclusion Report 2022*, n.d., p. 3, <https://corporate.zalando.com/en/dobetter-diversity-inclusion-report-2022> [access: 5.04.2023].

¹⁶ *SAP Returnship Programme*, n.d., <https://jobs.sap.com/go/SAP-Returnship-Program/5365101/> [access: 17.04.2023].

¹⁷ 2022 *Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) Report*, n.d., p. 10, <https://www.sap.com/about/company/our-values/diversity.html?pdf-asset=4e7e324b-6e7e-0010-bca6-c68f7e60039b&page=1> [access: 5.04.2023].

Companies are wondering what to do to make their strategies more attractive to women, a group with a lower level of professional activity but which, at the same time, is effective and profitable for the organization. In order to improve diversity management processes, the company can use the measurement of Diversity Index, which measures the level of various groups present in the company, in this case gender.¹⁸

The companies under study are international enterprises from Germany and the United States. Though they have different programs, their actions are similar to each other. The solutions proposed by the companies surveyed are an inspiration for Polish small businesses, firstly to check the status of gender diversity in their company, for example by using the Diversity Index and then taking steps to improve the current situation. After implementing such programs as described above, it will encourage women to decide to start working or to return to their careers that they needed to leave due to the various reasons. The measures put in place are having a positive effect, which reinforces the companies' conviction that they need to continue their policies to support women in their career paths.

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¹⁸ Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu, *Barometr Różnorodności i wskaźnik Diversity Index*, 2013, <https://odpowiedzialnybiznes.pl/karta-roznorodnosci/aktualnosci-karta/barometr-roznorodnosci-i-wskaznik-diversity-index/> [access: 17.04.2023].

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