



World Scientific News

An International Scientific Journal

WSN 122 (2019) 109-121

EISSN 2392-2192

Situation of women on the Polish labour market. A case study

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to present the most important issues related to discrimination against women on the Polish labour market. Visible differences between the situation of women and men can be seen when analysing the level of unemployment, which for years has been higher for women. The author put forward a hypothesis that women face discrimination both when looking for a job as well as during their employment relationship. The article consists of an introduction, three parts and a summary. The first part presents the concept and essence of discrimination. The second part presents the situation of women on the Polish labour market. It also presents the difficulties faced by women on their career path. The third part presents the results of research on discrimination against women on the labour market in Czestochowa. The study was conducted between October 2018 and January 2019 among 100 randomly selected women from the city of Czestochowa. The survey used a questionnaire in a paper version. The questions were of a closed nature.

Keywords: labour market, discrimination against women, labour law, equality at work

1. INTRODUCTION

This article discusses an important and still current issue of discrimination against women on the Polish labour market. Equality before the law is one of the fundamental principles of human rights protection. The imperative of equal treatment occupies a high place both in

national regulations as well as in international law acts. The principle of equality between women and men is one of the fundamental values of the EU Member States, ensured by the regulations of the EU Treaty itself, which advocates the promotion of gender equality as a permanent objective of the European Community in all its actions [1].

It is often the case that people who want to return onto the labour market after a longer period of absence are confronted with numerous obstacles. The long-term unemployed are less attractive to employers as their skills become outdated over time. They find it difficult to adapt to the needs of the modern labour market and are mostly poorly motivated to find a job. In this group, there is a significant number of women returning from maternity or parental leave. The aim of the article is to examine the situation of women on the Polish labour market on the example of the city of Częstochowa. Unemployment is one of the areas where inequality in the treatment of women and men on the labour market is particularly noticeable. Gender is the basic factor differentiating the duration of being unemployed.

Differences can be seen in the level of salaries, entrustment of managerial positions as well as employment itself. In order to change this situation, it is necessary to introduce solutions that will make employers look at the female-employee's figure in a different way [2].

The topic presented in the dissertation concerns all women, so it is significant for the whole population. Neither the issues related to the barriers impeding women's full and satisfactory participation in the labour market nor the proposals to improve this situation have been sufficiently investigated, which has contributed to the choice of such a topic for the dissertation. This topic is always relevant since it concerns a very wide range of society.

2. THE PLACE OF A WOMAN IN THE PROFESSIONAL AND PRIVATE SPHERES

To a large extent, gender still shapes organisational life [3]. Discrimination is defined as the restriction or deprivation of equal social, political or economic rights of certain groups of people. That is receiving different pay for performing work of the same value [4].

Discrimination against women is any differentiation, exclusion or limitation on grounds of sex which causes or aims to deplete or prevent women, irrespective of their marital status, from enjoying human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal footing with men in political, economic, social, cultural, civil and other areas. The phenomenon of discrimination against women in Poland is confirmed by both quantitative and qualitative studies.

Since long ago, the professional and private levels have functioned side by side. Stereotypically, men are considered to be active in the professional sphere, while the domain of women is the private sphere. This is related to the image of women as wives and mothers. A woman has always been perceived as the guardian of the home and this image has nothing to do with the image of a woman as a qualified worker. It is a common phenomenon, despite the lack of formal barriers, to exclude women from certain positions. Stereotypical perceptions of the role of women result in discrimination at every stage of employment. An additional difficulty is the fact that women have to solve the dilemmas related to various social roles, forcing them to combine professional and parental responsibilities. The way in which women cope with losing their jobs is also different [5].

The unemployment rate in Poland in December 2018 was 5.8%. This is the lowest recorded unemployment in nearly 30 years. At the same time, however, the analysis of the market shows differences in the treatment of employees on the basis of gender.

One of the reasons for this status quo are the historical circumstances. During the Partitions of Poland, women fought on an equal footing with men for the survival of the Polish nation. They often had to cope with a completely new role for them, i.e. the breadwinner of the family, because in case of arrest or death of the spouse, it became their duty to provide for the family. They were required to be committed, unreservedly dedicated, faithful to ideas, strong and persevering. They became largely responsible for maintaining and re-establishing the national bonds which were in danger of disappearance and for instilling the spirit of Polishness and patriotism in the young generation, who had never seen Poland as a free country. As a result of demographic and economic changes in Poland at the turn of the century, female representatives of the middle class in particular were forced to find themselves on the labour market. Single women were in the most difficult position because they had to take care of their own safety.

The effects of the Second World War played an important role in the transformation of the labour market. Due to the significantly limited population and the need to rebuild Polish towns and villages, the demand for labour force was growing. Many typically male occupations were performed by women, e.g. drivers, miners, excavator operators or builders. Initiators of economic activation of women in these areas created their innovative image then. The most famous was probably the image of an energetic woman on a tractor, who proudly and with commitment fulfills her civic duty.

The development of the private sector was significantly influenced by the period of political transformation. At the same time, it was accompanied by a decrease in the level of employment in the public sector. Among the factors that contributed to the fact that unemployment affected mainly women at that time are: social, cultural and religious factors. It was also significant that the state withdrew from caring for children and the elderly, which made it much more difficult or even impossible for women to take up employment [6].

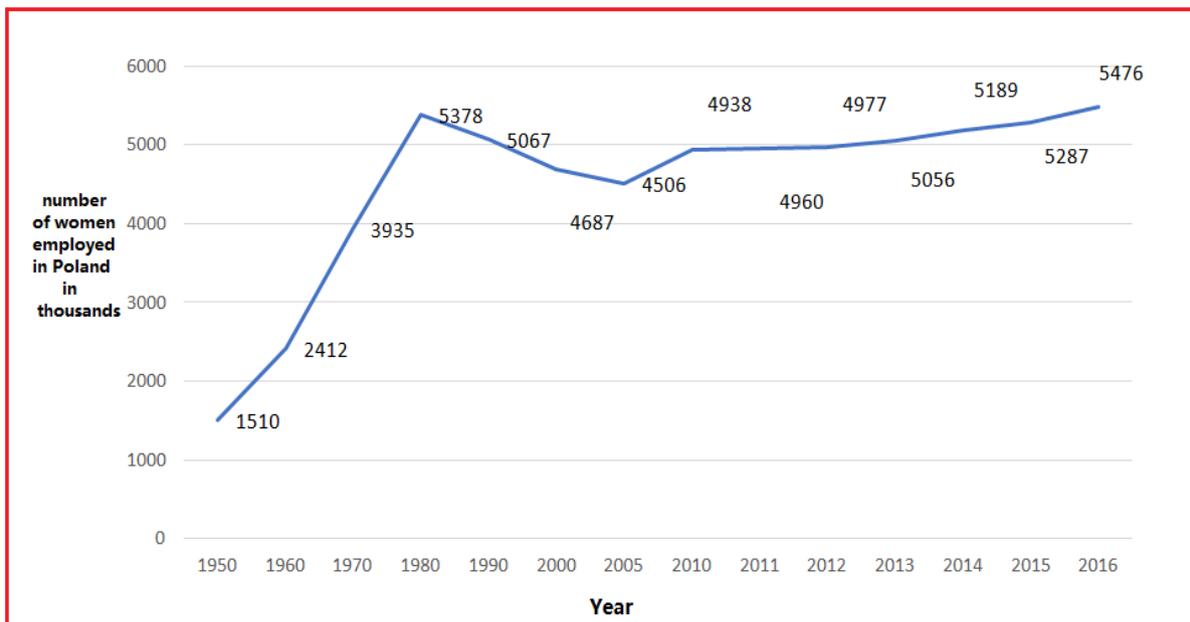


Figure 1. The number of women employed in Poland in thousands)

Source: Labour Statistical Yearbook 2017.

Undoubtedly, the position of women on the labour market is definitely more difficult than that of men. This situation results from the fact that they are expected to give birth and raise children, which means being on maternity and parental leave. This significantly reduces the chances of their return to work, as well as their professional advancement.

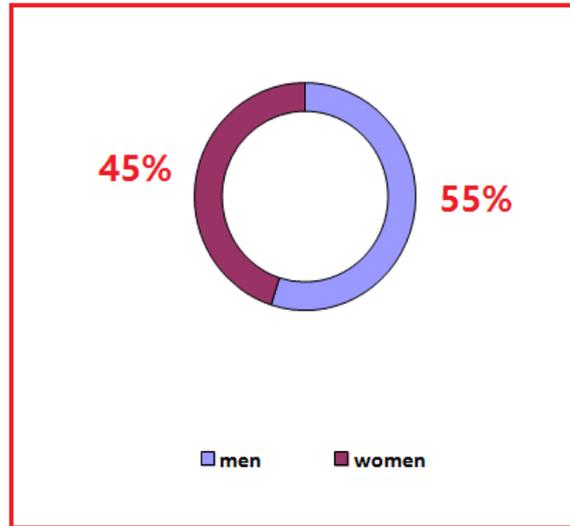


Figure 2. The share of men in the number of employed people – the third quarter of 2018
Source: The author's own study based on 'Information on the labour market in the third quarter of 2018.

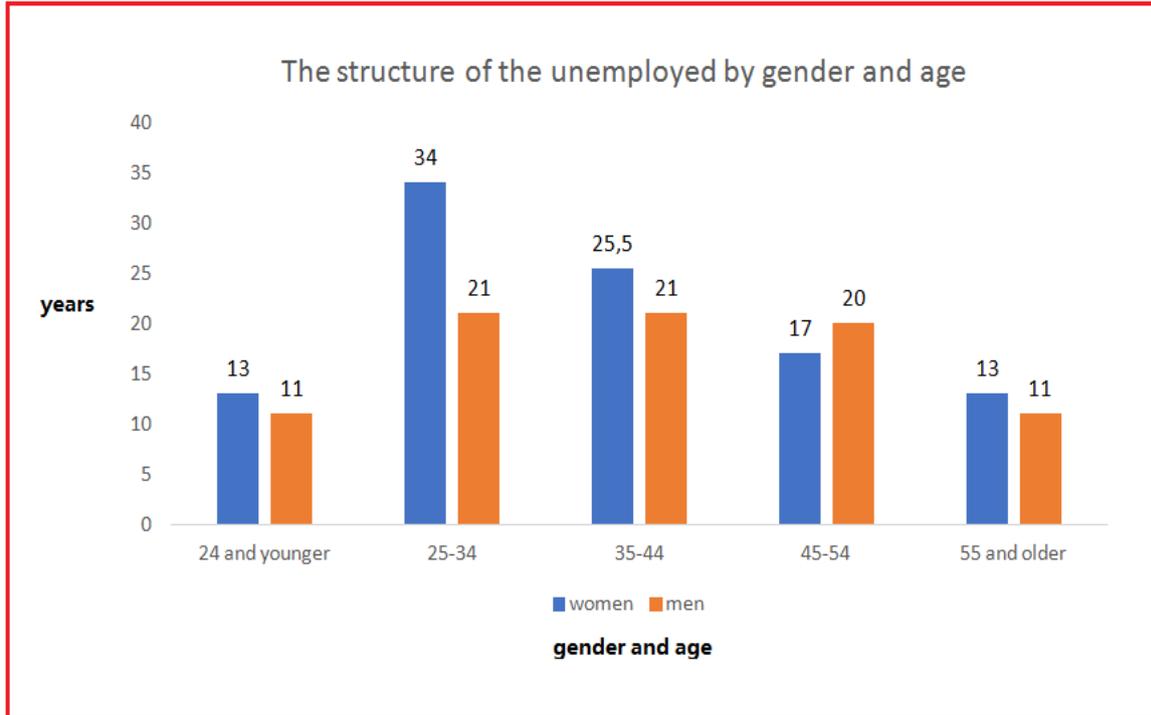


Figure 3. Shows the structure of the unemployed in the first quarter of 2018 by gender and education level

Source: Central Statistics Office (GUS) Report on unemployment in the country.

The professional activity rate varies depending on gender. This ratio is much lower for women than for men. The share of women in the total number of employees in Poland since 2014 has been at the level of about 49%.

According to the Central Statistics Office (GUS) data, in the third quarter of 2018 the share of men in the total number of professionally active people amounted to 55.0 %.

According to the Central Statistics Office (GUS) data, the share of women in the total number of the unemployed in the first quarter of 2018 amounted to 54.1% and was by 1.4 percentage points higher than in the corresponding quarter of 2017. Figure 3 presents the structure of the unemployed by gender and age in the first quarter of 2018.

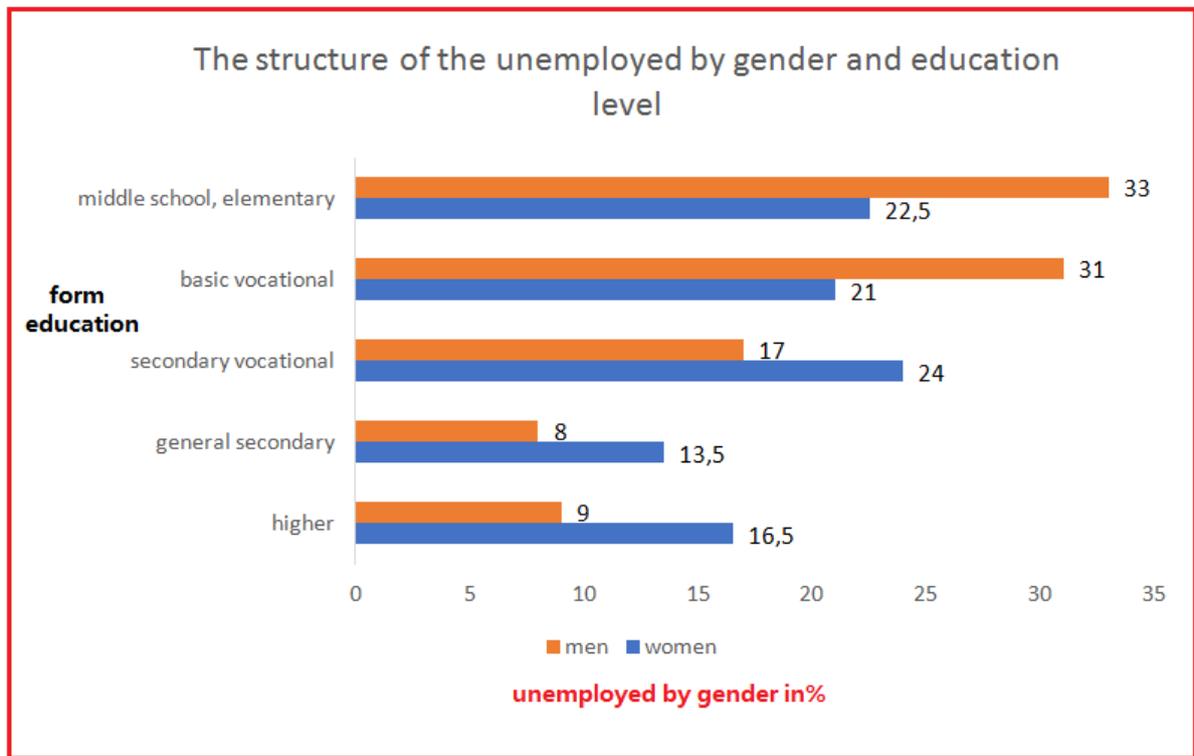


Figure 4. Structure of the unemployed gender and education level
Source: Central Statistics Office (GUS) National Unemployment Report, 2018.

3. OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION ON THE LABOUR MARKET

Women, whose ambition is a professional career, face numerous obstacles on their career paths which block their access to many jobs. The most important ones are discussed below.

- 1) **Internal barriers and constraints** – a variety of dilemmas, doubts and fears. It is also low self-esteem, insecurity and a lack of confidence in one's own skills and abilities. Unfortunately, these factors make it difficult for women to take up a job. The result is fear of holding managerial positions and a lack of courage to formulate and express one's own needs. This is also influenced by 'facade modesty', which means that women believe that they should not promote themselves when seeking promotion, because it is others who should appreciate them.

- 2) **Traditional division of roles** – there is a general conviction that a woman's main role is that of mother and wife and that this role is the best for her and only in this role can she fully fulfill herself. Some women decide to become mothers early and in many cases they do not stop at giving birth to just one child. This, in turn, significantly delays their entry onto the labour market. Maternity reduces women's chances of taking up a managerial position, as it forces them to take a break in their professional career for a certain period of time. It also means more frequent absence from work due to a child's illness than in the case of men. There are also women who first decide to pursue a professional career, thus postponing family life, especially childbirth. It is worth stressing that the resignation from professional activity of women is not due to their preferences, but due to necessity.
- 3) **Different socialisation of women and men** – the fact that women and men are assigned different roles in society reinforces occupational segregation by gender and also causes a gender pay gap between women and men, since there are role models in society, which are taught to children from an early age [1].
- 4) **Discrimination in employment** – employers fear that a young mother will often be absent from work due to a child's illness. They are also concerned about the fact that women can concentrate entirely on family responsibilities and problems, thereby neglecting professional duties. Furthermore, employers suspect that women will be reluctant to accept overtime. It is common practice to discriminate against women when it comes to filling certain positions [2].
- 5) **Glass ceiling** – in 1978 N. D. Fliegstein and W. C. Wolf published the first analyses in this area and it turned out that *glass ceiling* is a popular barrier that effectively hinders women's careers and prevents them from progressing to the top. This term denotes the obstacles that women face on their career paths. According to the author, they may be the result of stereotypical thinking that men can handle important management issues better than women and that they do not make decisions under the influence of moods or emotions. This is confirmed by the fact that women are relatively poorly represented in top management positions and relatively rarely reach the areas of authority, leadership or top management [3]. For example, the number of female members of the Sejm is 125, while the number of men is almost three times higher (335 seats).
- 6) **Glass escalator** – this term refers to the invisible power pushing men up the career ladder. It is the opposite of the *glass ceiling* – an invisible barrier that blocks women's way to the top. This phenomenon reflects a situation in which men occupy a privileged position in jobs traditionally practiced by women. This is due to the conviction that men should not work in professions commonly regarded as female, and even if they are to do so, they should hold managerial positions. This applies mainly to occupations such as, for example, human resources worker, secretary, office worker.
- 7) **Sticky floor** – this phenomenon refers to professions of a low status. This term is used to describe a situation in which there is no or only a rare possibility of promotion to a higher position. This term applies to occupations such as clerks, secretaries, beauticians, dressmakers or housekeepers. There is no doubt that these jobs are also highly female-dominated [3].
- 8) **Velvet ghetto** – this term was introduced in the 1970s and denotes a situation in which women are not admitted to managerial positions in technical, marketing or production departments.

- 9) **Tokenism** – a term used to describe a situation in which a small number of women are employed in male-dominated positions. The presence of a small number of women in groups or in positions dominated by men gives an illusion of the existing gender equality and thereby 'absolves' the group of responsibility for reviewing their discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. This phenomenon may affect any minority group. The term tokenism is derived from the English word *token*. Women become, as it were, tokens tossed on the game table when accusations of discrimination regarding access to high positions are made. Then, the figures and names of women are evoked as examples of the non-existence of barriers that women have to overcome because of the prevailing gender stereotypes [16].
- 10) **Occupational segregation** – this phenomenon concerns the unequal distribution of women and men in different occupations. There is vertical segregation, blocking women's access to positions that guarantee promotion and influence. In turn, horizontal segregation is characterised by the fact that women and men work in various occupations [15]. The most feminised areas of the national economy include: education (76%), health care and social welfare (82%), hotels and restaurants (70%). Occupations dominated by women are worse-paid, despite the fact that they require comparable qualifications or experience. For example: a nurse statistically earns less than a policeman, a nanny less than a car mechanic, and a cashier in a supermarket less than a warehouse worker [16].

It is impossible not to notice that the position of women on the labour market is much more difficult than that of men. This results from the fact that they are expected to give birth and raise children, which means being on maternity and parental leave [17].

4. STUDIES ON THE SITUATION OF WOMEN ON THE LABOUR MARKET

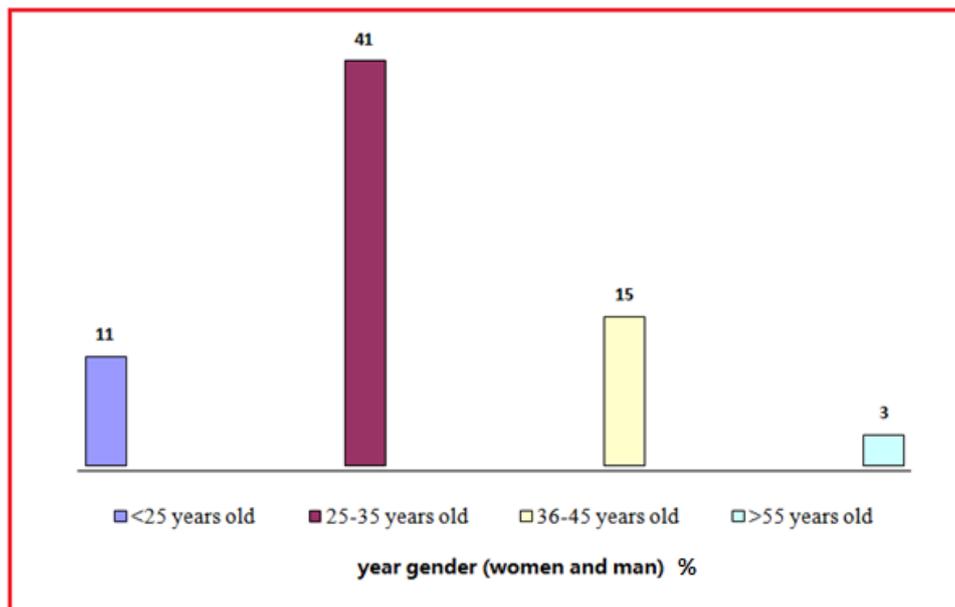


Figure 5. Age of respondents

Source: Own research

Among the surveyed women, 11 were under 25 years old, 41 were in the 25-35 age group, 30 in the 36-45 age group, 15 were between 46 and 55 years old, and 3 of them were over 55 years old (Figure 5).

The majority of the surveyed women had higher (53) and secondary education (28), while there were 19 women with vocational education (Figure 6).

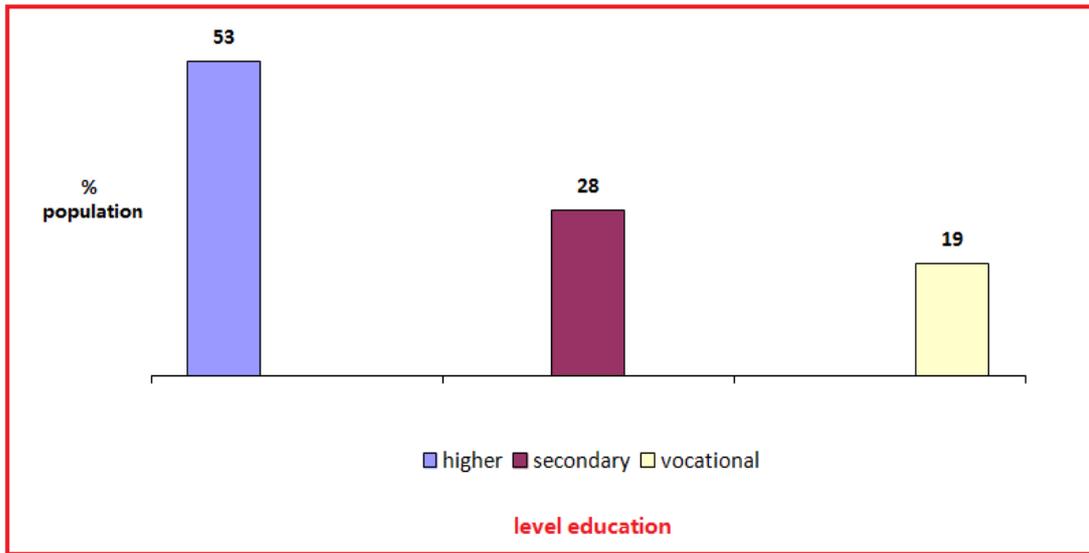


Figure 6. The structure of the studied population by education level
Source: Own research.

When asked about the phenomena of discrimination faced by women, the respondents could choose several answers (Figure 7).

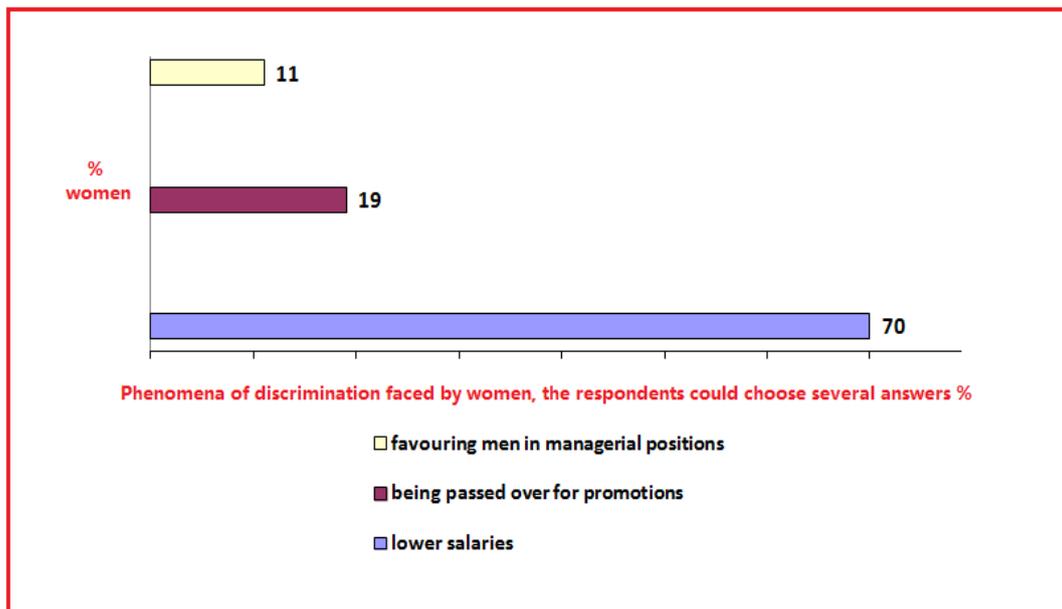


Figure 7. Forms of discrimination faced by respondents
Source: Own research

According to the surveyed women, the biggest barriers in obtaining a job for women are gender, age and having children (in this case there was also a possibility to choose several answers) (Figure 8).

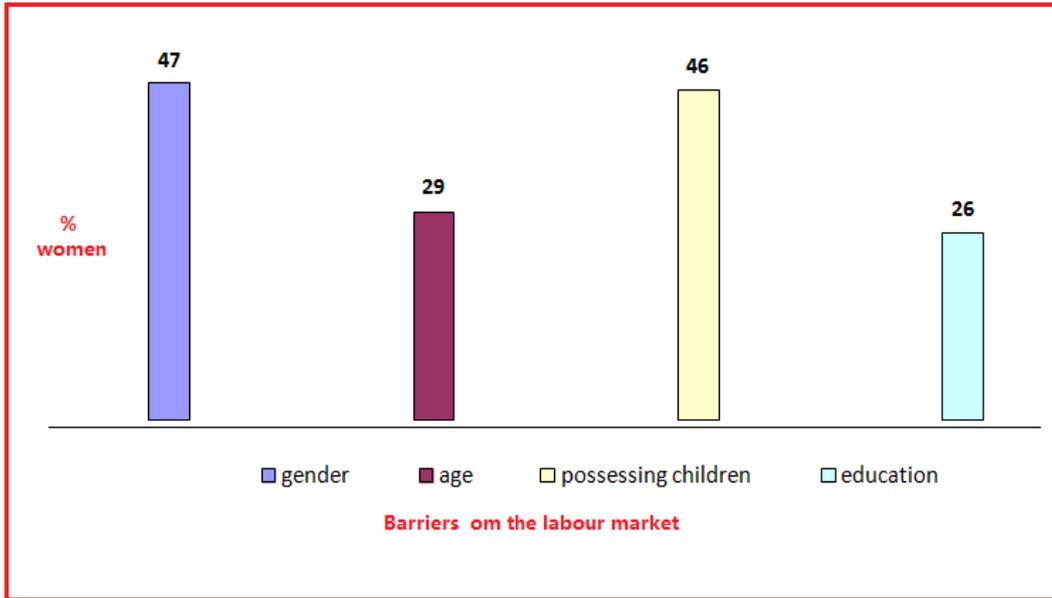


Figure 8. Barriers to women's participation in the labour market

Source: Own research

The subsequent question concerned the assessment of the labour market in Częstochowa. More than half of the respondents assessed it positively, which is shown in Figure 9.

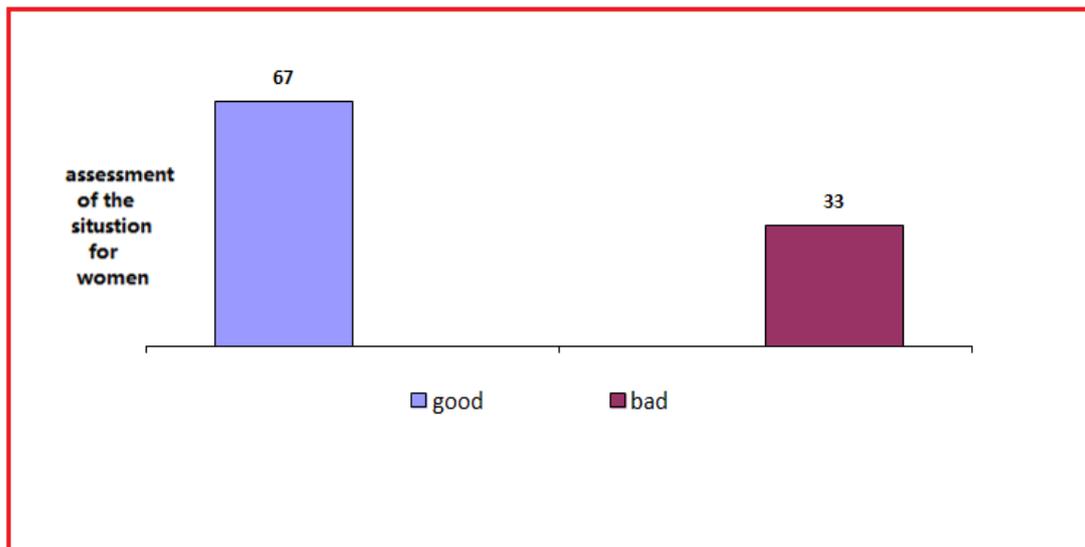


Figure 9. The assessment of the labour market in Częstochowa

Source: Own research.

As many as 86 women admitted that it is men who have an easier situation on the labour market (Figure 10).

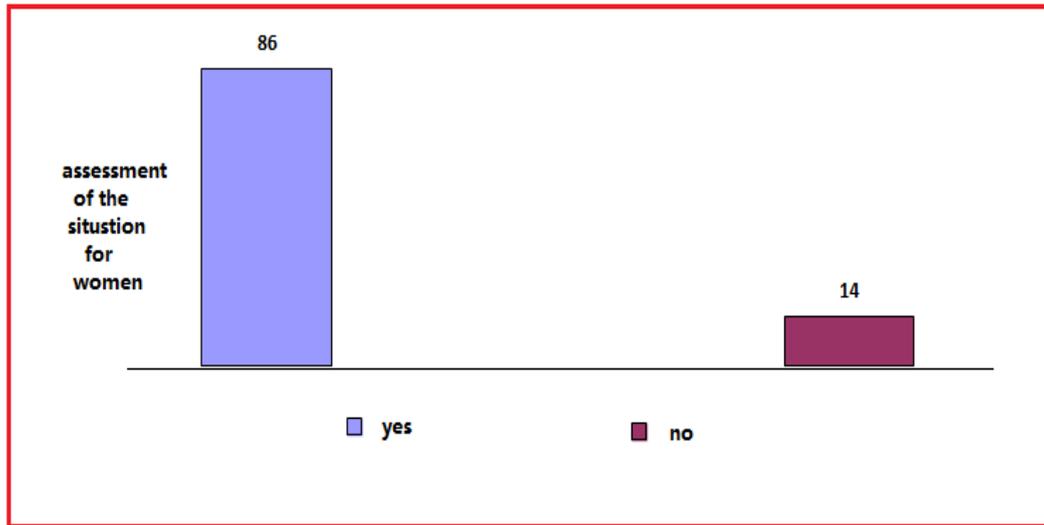


Figure 10. The assessment of the labour market situation by gender

Source: Own research

Summarizing the results of the conducted research, it should be noted that more than half of the respondents considered Częstochowa as a friendly place to gain professional experience. Such an opinion was expressed by 67 surveyed women [18].

The phenomenon of unemployment is determined not so much by the local economic situation as by the national and global situation. A number of external factors and phenomena influence the relation between supply and demand for labour. Gender (47), having children (46) and age (29) were considered to be the greatest barriers in the development of women's professional activity [19].

On the other hand, the most frequent forms of professional discrimination against women in the eyes of the respondents were lower salaries (70), favouring men for managerial positions (11) and leaving out women when it comes to promotions (19).

33 of the surveyed women admitted that during a job interview they had been asked about their family situation and plans to have children [22].

5. PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION OF WOMEN ON THE LABOUR MARKET

Women want to take an active part in the economic life. Their role on the labour market is clearly changing, and the changes in the performance of family duties as well as in the forms of employment enable women to take up full-time or part-time jobs and involvement [21].

A properly designed labour system could make it easier for many women to return to work after childbirth. Working at a convenient time is a significant facilitator for young mothers. It is also a good idea to allow women to work remotely. In the case of many

occupations, especially those related to computer work, tasks can be successfully completed from home. It is enough that the employer equips the working mother with appropriate hardware and software that can be used outside the office. While on maternity or parental leave, she could stay in permanent contact with the company thanks to appropriate hardware and software. Permanent access to the Internet provides the opportunity to participate in branch meetings and trainings through teleconferences or videoconferences. Women on maternity leave should be able to use company cars, telephones and laptops. Such tools make it easier for young mothers to return to work shortly after childbirth. Flexible working hours and the ability to work remotely undoubtedly make it easier for young mothers to smoothly reconcile family and professional life [22].

On 1 April 2016, the Family 500 Plus Programme was implemented in Poland. Its aim is to help families raise children by a monthly benefit payment for the second and each subsequent child in the family in the amount of 500 PLN. The condition for the benefit payment for the first child is the fulfilment of the income criterion. The Family 500 Plus Programme found its regulations in the Act of 11 February 2016 on state aid in the upbringing of children (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1851) [23].

Discussions arise as to whether the Family 500 Plus Programme has had an effect on the professional deactivation of women. Nearly two years after the entry into force of the regulations concerning this programme, the author is of the opinion that these regulations encourage professional passivity. The activity rate, an extremely important measure of the labour market, shows what percentage of people work or are willing to take up employment in relation to the population of a given age bracket. Its low value is a sign of problems on the labour market. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) conducted for the third quarter of 2017 shows worrying results. The level of women's professional activity has been the lowest since 2003 (The Central Statistics Office, 2018). The professional activity of families receiving the Family 500 Plus benefit for their first and only child (69.7%) is alarmingly low compared to the professional activity of families not receiving such a benefit (89%). It is becoming more and more common that women give up looking for a job in order to receive social benefits [7], [24].

It seems far more effective to make sure that parents have stable employment, that mothers have an easier return to work after childbirth, so that they can reconcile work and childcare through easier access to nurseries and kindergartens. Such measures strengthen the feeling of economic security. In addition, working parents strengthen the child's feeling that it is necessary to work. Bearing in mind that the role of mother and employee is difficult to reconcile, one should strive to provide services that would support women with small children. In particular, the author refers to the creation of in-company nurseries and kindergartens. In 2016, the legislator introduced tax preferences for entrepreneurs who decide to set up an in-company nursery or kindergarten, as well as for those who finance or co-finance an employee's child's stay in an institution other than the company's own (Act on Personal Income Tax, art. 21.(1), item 67a and b). Women are awaiting such solutions [8-10].

6. CONCLUSIONS

In the past, the woman's place was at home, and her main responsibility was childcare. Only a small number of women were able to break away from existing stereotypes and take up

employment. Professional career plays an important role in a modern woman's life. As a result, women improve their qualifications and change jobs. However, this does not protect them from the fact that they still encounter many difficulties on their way to finding a job.

Barriers to women's access to the labour market and gender equality can be overcome. However, this requires commitment of the state. In the first place, early childcare arrangements should be made. This seems to be the biggest obstacle to women's professional development. Changes in the Polish labour market have had an effect on postponing the decision of having a baby until later. This is a testimony to the fact that the policy pursued by the state did not solve the problem of the clash between work and home.

The situation of women and men on the labour market reflects the most common division of roles: women – caring for the household versus men – providing for their family. Such a division has many negative consequences. Not only does it weaken women's chances for employment or provides them with jobs that do not ensure development or promotion, but also frequently decides that in the case of redundancies it is women who are the first to be made redundant.

In conclusion, there are still barriers which hinder women's access to employment. Return to work, especially during the intensive period of parental responsibilities, entails conflicts that arise as a result of the necessity to reconcile work and family responsibilities.

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