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## Socio-cultural and political conditions for reconciling professional and family roles in organisations

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### ABSTRACT

Professional and family roles are one of the basic and most important roles performed by adults. Transformations of modern organisations and families show that these two types of social groups are closely related. Work allows people to acquire material resources that are necessary to meet family needs and determine its social status. This study is of qualitative nature. Its main goal is to identify the factors that limit professional activation of mothers and those that limit implementation of the right of fathers to engage in the family life related to the difficulties encountered in reconciling professional and family roles. The attempt to identify these factors was carried out at the level of individual parent strategies, organisation practices, and at the level of implemented social policy, taking into account employers' organisations and trade union opinions.

**Keywords:** family role, professional role, reconciliation of roles, social conditions, cultural conditions, political conditions

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The reconciliation of professional and family roles is a major challenge of our time. For many years, the European Union has been using various activities and implementing solutions for maintaining a balance between family and professional life of employees in order to meet

contemporary economic and social challenges, especially demographic ones (Becker, 1991). In Poland, solutions aimed at facilitating the reconciliation of employees' family and professional roles are antiquated. For decades, workers have been offered typical benefits for employees with family responsibilities.

Therefore, there are many solutions that form the module of national family policy, generally targeted at employees, meet the European Union standards, in particular that recognise the principle of non-discrimination on grounds of sex and the principle of balanced participation of women and men in professional and family life (Mary, 2011).

However, these solutions operate under rigid forms of work organisation, which makes it impossible to use them fully to combine family and professional responsibilities. It should be emphasised that currently developed government family policy recognises the problems of parents who combine family and professional roles and suggests the solutions to support families in this regard (Corrinne, Brandt, Haberkern, Szydlik, 2009).

It should be hoped that public consultations of the proposed solutions will allow to optimally shape the legal framework for the solutions proposed in the programme, and sensitivity to family problems as well as monitoring of the operations carried out will enable a quick response in the event of errors or threats. However, it seems that too little attention is paid to organisation of a comprehensive support system for working parents which would enable creation of coherent alternative solutions that do not cause threats to the functioning of family or the position of parents on the labour market, allowing them to be adapted to individual needs and family choices (Maaïke, Bavel, 2012).

The issue of reconciling work and private life is a fixed item on the European policy agenda. When the European Employment Strategy was introduced in the 1990s, the adaptability of employees and enterprises already was discussed many times. Later, and especially in the recent years, the debate focused on the analysis of models and principles of the so-called flexicurity (Cox, Jakubson, 1995).

The Lisbon Strategy clearly showed Europe's competitiveness and progress with more flexibility in the labour market. It is not possible to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (the priorities highlighted in the Europe 2020 strategy) without flexibility regulations. According to the European debate, the challenge is to find the right balance between the needs in terms of flexibility of organisation and allow it to respond to market changes and customer requirements and the needs of employees who seek to achieve a balance between work and private life (Daatland, Herlofson, 2003).

The key proposals for solutions to the problem of reconciling work and family life are childcare centres, the right to leave and flexible working hours. In contrast, commitments are spread between the European, national and local levels, and between social partners at the European, national and sectorial level.

The European Parliament is in favour of improving current European Union legislation on maternity and parental leave. The European Parliament acknowledged that it is possible to positively influence the fertility level in member states by coordinating political activities and creating emotionally and materially friendly conditions for family and children. To this end, it encouraged the EU countries to adopt practices that positively affect the length of maternity leave (Karsten, Buber, 2009).

## **2. CHARACTERISATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT THAT AFFECT CHANGES IN THE REMODELLING OF FAMILY AND PROFESSIONAL ROLES**

### **2. 1. Demographic change**

Today, the process of demographic ageing is noticeable. It is associated with an increase in the percentage of older people to the current population and low fertility rate. The effect of demographic ageing is insufficient generational replacement which affects disturbances of generational balance. Contemporary demographic trends have an impact on the specificity of the labour market. Labour resources are shrinking with a simultaneous increase in the number of people in retirement age (Ruth, Lowenstein, 2010).

The best solution is to create conditions for achieving the two goals by taking actions to balance work and family life. Implementation of such actions requires parallel changes at many levels (Szelewa, Polakowski, 2008):

- ✓ state legal regulations regarding labour law and family policy,
- ✓ enterprises that alleviate the role conflict,
- ✓ cultural patterns in households that set out the models of involvement in family roles and professional activity of women and men.

### **2. 2. Changes in the socio-cultural sphere**

The roles assigned to women and men are culturally defined. Recently, the systems of values and life aspirations of young people have been changing, in particular how they relate to the achievement of goals concerning education, family and work. This finding is reported by research carried out under the “Social Diagnosis” project. These modifications cause changes in employee behaviour and pose a challenge in the area of human resource management. Research shows that reconciliation of family and professional responsibilities is associated with institutional support from the entire economic system. Such support and changes related to the marketisation of some of the home activities traditionally performed by women increase the acceptance of changes in the sphere of cultural patterns (Kohli, 1999).

### **2. 3. Actions on the part of legislator**

The evolution of legal regulations regarding the system of childcare leave has gradually progressed in two directions: equality between women and men in this respect and greater flexibility in its use by parents, according to their situation and needs. For a long time, the legal solutions applicable in this area were based on the belief that the performance of guardianship functions is solely the responsibility of women. Family, parenthood and motherhood are protected today by the Polish Constitution. It is the responsibility of the public authorities to take into account the good of the family in social policy as well as to provide special assistance to a woman / mother before and after childbirth. The principles of protection in this respect are determined by the principle of equal rights for both women and men in family life (Sigrid, 2003).

### **3. CONDITIONS FOR RECONCILING THE PROFESSIONAL AND FAMILY ROLES IN ORGANISATIONS – AUTHOR’S OWN RESEARCH**

The survey was devoted to the socio-cultural problems and political conditions of reconciling the professional and family roles in organisations (Pfau-Effinger, 2005).

The specific objectives of the survey include:

- identifying the practices used by employers to reconcile the professional and family role of employees;
- indicating the individual strategies undertaken by employees in order to reconcile the professional and family role, taking into account the gender breakdown of respondents;
- obtaining information and opinions from trade union representatives on employers' practices and government policies in the area of reconciling the professional and family roles of employees;
- obtaining opinions and information from employers' representatives on the employers' practices in order to achieve positive results in the studied area;
- comparing the perspectives with each other, taking the situation of men and women and gender discrimination into consideration;
- identifying the social needs and proposals for changes in the analysed area.

The research sample consisted of the following groups of respondents:

- representatives of large enterprises,
- women and men - parents up to 50 years of age,
- employers and trade unions.

**Table 1.** Groups of surveyed respondents.

	Representatives of enterprises / directors / human resource department	Women / mothers	Men / fathers	Trade union representatives	Employers
Number respondents (n)	999	76 / 76	40 / 40	4 / 4	7 / 7

Individual interviews with company representatives were conducted as part of the research. Individual interviews with trade union representatives were also conducted. Group interviews with parents were also held in order to carry out the research. Individual in-depth interviews were carried out in order to better understand the parents' perspective (Chiara, 1997).

#### **4. RESEARCH RESULTS**

##### **4. 1. Individual strategies pursued by women to reconcile the professional and family roles**

The female respondents participating in the survey use only part of their rights, most often taking advantage of the basic maternity leave. Women declare that they take parental leave less frequently, while they take childcare leave sporadically. Mothers of young children extend the time they spend with their children by taking advantage of the holiday leaves they are entitled to.

The survey has shown that women do not decide to take longer leaves for economic reasons, fear about keeping their jobs and fear about a negative influence of long breaks in work on their career development.

In the opinion of the respondents, women fear that long absence from work may have a negative influence on their career development. A prolonged absence may lead an employer to hire a replacement for a woman on parental / childcare leave. Employers admitted in the conducted survey that a replacement person has current knowledge and this may raise the employer’s doubts which employee to keep in the company after a woman on leave returns to work.

**Table 2.** Results of the surveys among respondents on the reasons why mothers do not take longer leaves (respondents were to give 3 most important reasons).

Reasons	Women surveyed (n = 76)	%
Economic reasons	62	81.59
Fear of keeping the job	68	89.47
Concerns about a negative influence of long job breaks on career development	72	94.73
Concerns about taking up a job by a person employed as a replacement	74	97.36

In the opinion of respondents who represent human resource departments, a too long stay of women on parental / childcare leaves is unfavourable for employers. During this time, the employer must additionally organise work in the company, hire replacements, train them, which results in additional costs. The decision to take a long break from work has particularly negative consequences, especially in these sectors which are exposed to constant changes and require constant improvement of knowledge and enhancement of skills on the part of employees.

The findings reveal that the absence of a woman resulting from maternity leave or longer absence may significantly hamper her professional career. The employers participating in the survey encourage employed women to make decisions that minimise the risk of long absence from the labour market. The employers suggest that women should return to work after a shorter break, e.g. for a smaller period of time, so that they have contact with the company.

The surveyed employers stressed the growing problem of treating pregnancy as a disease by women, which results in taking advantage of sick leave in the first months of pregnancy, often until childbirth.

#### **4. 2. Individual strategies pursued by men to reconcile the professional and family role**

According to the conducted survey, men / fathers take advantage of a two-week paternity leave more and more often. However, it is rare for men to take advantage of other available forms of leave, such as a 6-week maternity leave, 26-week parental leave or childcare leave.

The following are the factors that make it more difficult for fathers to take leave:

- stereotypes about the role of father, widespread in society,
- fear of losing one's job or stalling one's career,
- lack of support for fathers in taking paternity leave by employers,
- lack of full knowledge of the employee rights in this area,
- loss of higher wages.

The employers drew attention in the survey to the growing interest in paternity leave. This increased interest is due to a greater awareness among fathers of their role in the life of his child and to social and cultural changes in society. In the opinion of employers, the traditional approach to the division of family roles has a major influence on the fathers' use of leave. In such an approach, it is the mother who is responsible for taking care over the child.

The use of maternity and parental leave by fathers is not a common practice in companies. Usually, fathers take their holiday leave after the birth of their child. The employers declare that they do not mind fathers taking longer parental leave. In companies, however, it is difficult to see the systems implementing strategies for supporting father-employees and promoting the use of maternity and childcare leaves by them. HR representatives pointed out that longer secondments of fathers on leave are a serious problem for the employers because they are forced to find a replacement, which is a particular difficulty, especially in case of high-class specialists – hardly available on the labour market. The men participating in the survey discern a stereotypical perception of the role of fathers by employers, which may hinder fathers from fulfilling their caring responsibilities. Fathers decide to take parental leave when:

- the woman is forced to return to work quickly,
- the earnings of the child's mother are higher than those of the father.

The main factor that influences the fathers' restrictions on taking maternity / parental leave is unequal treatment in terms of the entitlement for childcare leave. The father of a child can only take maternity leave after 14 weeks of the mother's leave. The leave is always started by the mother, and the father can take the leave second. However, all this depends on whether the mother has the right to take such a leave. The father cannot take maternity / parental leave if the child's mother is not covered by social insurance.

#### **4. 3. Use of the instruments enabling parents to reconcile the family and professional roles after returning to work**

One of the topics addressed by the respondents was formal and informal solutions applied by employers and employees. Such solutions make it possible to reconcile family and

professional roles after returning to work. Despite the employers' declarations about the possibility of exercising the rights by parents, the employees claim that willingness to use them is met with employers' disapproval. The young parents participating in the survey identified the biggest problems and challenges they face in reconciling the both roles. The following areas of challenges can be pinpointed based on the responses obtained from the respondents:

- challenges related to the specificity of the work performed
- organisation of childcare time
- requirements imposed by employers
- difficulties in returning to work
- finances

A big obstacle being noticed by the respondents was the limited availability of public nurseries / kindergartens. Parents are forced to use private kindergartens and nurseries, which results in higher costs of the child's stay, or are forced to organise informal child care.

Trade union representatives also pointed to a problem related to the lack of places in nurseries / kindergartens.

Parents note that devoting oneself to professional work is associated with a reduction in the quality of time spent with a child. The respondents are very often tired and do not have enough time to plan their free time well.

The problem of young parents is to provide childcare during the winter and summer holidays because the forms of institutional care are not available. The working people with children must plan their holidays in such a way as to ensure that children are looked after on their holidays. The biggest problem that the surveyed mothers highlighted is the obligatory business trips and overtime work. Young parents admit that they feel pressured by the employer. The challenge for women / mothers is to return to work after maternity or childcare leave. This is linked to stress and uncertainty about the sustainability of employment and job. Women with full rights can cause dissatisfaction among employers, and returning to work after a long break can result in a lack of job opportunities available in a previous position.

Women who work under fixed-term contracts, when the term for which the contract was concluded expires yet during the taken leave, are most often not taken back into work because they are already replaced by new employees. In most cases, the parents working under fixed-term contracts do not return to the work they did before the birth of their child.

#### **4. 4. Reconciling the family and professional roles in the employers' perspective**

During the interviews, the employers declared that they complied with the law relating to parents with children. Sometimes, they offer additional informal solutions but this depends on the size and sector of the company.

The strategy of reconciling the family and professional role of young parents was mostly implemented by the employers who employ a large number of people. Representatives of small companies admitted that they could not afford to provide additional support than that provided for in the Labour Code. During discussions on the use of leave by young parents, the employers expressed their full support for their rights. However, the parent statements show that this attitude of the employers is not the rule. An employer must fulfil the obligations laid down in the law but very often young parents feel their dissatisfaction.

The informal amenity used by employers is flexible working hours and the possibility to work from home. This solution is used in companies in almost all industries. These solutions are set out in the company's regulations together with the specification of who is entitled to them and under what conditions.

**Table 3.** Informal solutions applied by the surveyed employers.

	Employer No. 1	Employer No. 2	Employer No. 3	Employer No. 4	Employer No. 5	Employer No. 6	Employer No. 7	%
Flexible working hours	✓		✓	✓				42.86
Ability to work from home	✓			✓			✓	42.86
Ability to adjust the start time to employee availability					✓	✓		28.57
Limitation of business trips	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		71.42
Ability to take a break during the day in an emergency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100
Gradual introduction of employees returning from holidays to work				✓	✓			28.57
Financial privileges (holiday gifts, trip subsidies, gift vouchers, etc.)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	85.71
Broad social pack age	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		71.42

The respondents indicated the possibility of adjusting the start time of the workday to the employee's availability, the possibility of stopping work during the day in case of emergencies, as well as the possibility of working at home.

Employers provide facilities for the parents of young children but consider the possibility of an abuse on the part of employee. Mutual trust and respect are a key issue in the use of additional facilities. The employers representing large enterprises sometimes decide to gradually introduce workers who return to work after a leave. Half of the companies have a 3-day working week. For the remaining 2 days, the employee will, for example, take a holiday leave. These facilities are limited in time and are provided only after the parent returns from maternity / childcare leave. Half of the surveyed employers try to facilitate the reconciliation of family and professional roles by limiting business trips. This arrangement between the employer and the employee is informal.

Almost all the large companies surveyed have financial privileges for working parents. Financial privileges include Christmas gifts for children, travel grants, gift vouchers and even

vaccinations for children. Companies provide their employees and their children with a comprehensive medical and social package.

Some of the surveyed companies declare the possibility of bringing their children to work but most often in a limited time.

## 5. POSTULATES SUBMITTED BY THE RESPONDENTS

**Table 4.** Postulates submitted by the respondents.

	Women (n = 76)	Men (n = 40)	Employers (n = 7)	%
Increasing the availability of state nurseries and kindergartens	76	40	7	100
Creating kindergartens run at work establishments	63	29	1	75.60
Increasing the availability and extension of working time of school day-rooms	76	36	4	94.30
Greater financial support for parents	76	40	3	96.74
Broadening social campaigns strengthening the image of working mothers	68	11	2	65.85
Additional few days of leave per year	76	32	1	88.61
Extension of the protection against dismissal to people returning from leave.	76	34	2	91.05

In the next part of the survey, all groups of the respondents (parents, employers, employers' organisations and trade unions) considered what could be done to facilitate the reconciliation of family and professional roles by parents. Women most often submitted

postulates, and they particularly proposed to increase the involvement of grandmothers in childcare.

In each group interview with parents, employers and trade union representatives, there were postulates to increase the availability of state nurseries and kindergartens. The idea of creating home kindergartens appeared several times. The respondents admit that this is an alternative to the lack of places in public nurseries and kindergartens. Parents claim it to be a good idea to have kindergartens run at workplaces or to help the employer to provide a place for child care. The respondents propose to provide financial support to companies that provide such solutions, e.g. through tax reliefs for employers.

Another postulate is to increase the availability and extension of working time of day-rooms because a short-time child stay at schools and frequent breaks in education (winter holidays, summer holidays, Christmas holidays) require additional childcare to be provided.

In all interviews with parents and employers, without exception, there were calls for greater financial support for parents from both the state and the employers.

The women surveyed pointed to a need to broaden social campaigns that strengthen the positive image of working mothers and fathers caring for children.

The majority of the surveyed respondents emphasised the value of additional few days of holiday per year for employees with small children.

It is very important for the respondents to provide protection against dismissal for those returning from leaves, so that they will not be afraid to take advantage of them.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

Statistics show that employers in Poland make little use of the forms of flexibility provided and that the vast majority of employees work traditionally full-time. The results of statistical surveys show that the methods helping employees maintain work-life balance need to be popularised among them.

The balance between work and family life is not the same for all people. These relations are mainly differentiated by age, gender, education and family situation. The results of research on the effectiveness of institutional activities are not clear. According to some data, support and activities involving organisation of childcare, holiday and flexible working hours did not bring spectacular effects in reducing the work-family conflict. International research indicates that longer paid parental, child-rearing or health leaves may weaken the work-family and family-work conflicts. According to the research, organisational supervision and support for families are associated with a smaller work-family conflict, which provides strong arguments about the value of these instruments for effective social policy.

On the other hand, Shockley and Allen, when discussing the problem of work flexibility, point out that time flexibility is more closely related to the work-family conflict than workplace flexibility. Available data suggest moderate optimism in assessing the value of modern instruments that organise work time and workplace. Employers in their activities should take into account the roles of individual differences and contexts. It is worth noting how the atmosphere of the workplace influences the experience of role conflict. Research suggests that a good atmosphere in the organisation has a positive influence on the balance between work and family life.

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