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MATERNITY AND PROFESSIONAL WORK OF WOMEN

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Key words: maternity, employment, professional activity.

A b s t r a c t

The paper presents the results of the diagnostic survey concerning conditions of employment and professional consequences for women resulting from maternity. The analysis of opinions gathered showed mitigating difficulties in combining the roles of a mother and an employee depends mainly on the attitude of the employer as well as availability of nursery schools and/or kindergartens. The consequences of maternity include some limitations in the professional activity but also changes in attitudes and values increasing the employee competences of women such as feeling of responsibility, better self-organisation, patience and need for stabilisation. The legal regulations, information policy and proliferation of the best examples serve liquidation of employee limitations resulting from maternity and a change of the traditional mentality and paradigms hindering reconciliation of the roles of the mother and the employee.

MACIERZYŃSTWO A PRACA ZAWODOWA KOBIEŃ

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Słowa kluczowe: macierzyństwo, zatrudnienie, aktywność zawodowa.

A b s t r a k t

Artykuł zawiera wyniki sondażu diagnostycznego dotyczącego uwarunkowań zatrudnienia i skutków zawodowych dla kobiet wynikających z macierzyństwa. Analiza zebranych opinii wykazała, że ograniczenie trudności w pogodzeniu roli matki i pracownicy zależy głównie od postawy pracodawcy i dostępności żłobków oraz (lub) przedszkoli. Następnym macierzyństwa są pewne ograniczenia aktywności zawodowej, a także zmiany postaw i wartości zwiększających kompetencje pracownicze kobiet, jak: poczucie odpowiedzialności, lepsza samoorganizacja, cierpliwość, potrzeba stabilizacji. Regulacje prawne, polityka informacyjna, upowszechnianie dobrych przykładów służą likwidacji ograniczeń pracowniczych wynikających z macierzyństwa oraz zmianie tradycyjnej mentalności i stereotypów utrudniających godzenie roli matki i pracownicy.

Introduction

Present times, at least in case of the western civilisation, are characterised by an increasing participation of women in the economic, social and political life. The beginnings of this process are not at all that distant while its clear symptoms go back to just the 19th and 20th century when feminist movements appeared and as a consequence women started gaining the voting rights (first in the USA in 1869, in Poland in 1918, and in Switzerland only in 1977), increased their professional activity, obtained economic independence and permit for behaviours that earlier only men could allow themselves, and so on. Gradually the paradigm of a woman as a “Polish woman-mother” who should only by the guardian of the homestead and the holly tradition changed. As a result we observe diverse manifestations of feminisation of the modern civilisation, which is clearly proven by the situation in the United States where in 2010, for the first time in the history of the world, the number of professionally active women equalled the number of professionally active men, the situation that economies of other countries are also nearing to or by the legally sanctioned parity (limits) of participation of women in the elected bodies of power or in the projects financed from the European funds. We can say that women, equally to men, have the right and possibility of active fulfilment in professional life and that they exercise those rights and possibilities to an increasing extent.

Maternity, creating by the nature of things the need for temporary limitation or absolute interruption (resignation from) professional activity is one of the natural limitations to that activity of women. Reconciliation of maternity and professional work, despite spreading positive standards and formal regulations mitigating or eliminating some of the barriers hindering fulfilment of the roles of the mother and employee still poses many problems to women (KOTOWSKA 2007). This probably is one of the causes for the situation that the indicator of the professional activity of women still shows lower values than the indicator of the activity of men. Sometimes it is even said that women are discriminated in the labour market, which means not only preference for men in employment at equivalent positions but also uneven remuneration at the same positions (*Raport...* 2007). The trend of eliminating any manifestation of discrimination in the labour market dominating during the recent years not only in the European Union countries is accompanied by numerous studies and publications concerning, among others, the professional activity and employee status of women (JANKOWSKA 2010). The results of survey presented in this paper are linked to those general trends and aim at identification of the factors influencing the consequences and effectiveness of combining maternity with professional

activity of women. The analysis was based on the results of the diagnostic survey conducted covering 53 women that returned to work after a break caused by giving birth to a child.

Women in the labour market

Civilisation and cultural changes initiated at the end of the 19th century that gained significant momentum at the turn of the 20th and 21st c. are clearly expressed in extinction of social discrimination resulting from numerous reasons, including also discrimination resulting from the difference of gender. Inequality of the opportunities of women and men in the economic, professional, social and political life, once obvious, is gradually disappearing, at least in the western civilisation. It is enough to mention that the University of Lvov and the Jagiellonian University started admitting women for studies only recently, because just at the beginning of the 20th c. while currently the number of women possessing tertiary education exceeds that of the men. Liquidation of barriers and equalising the opportunities of women in relation to men was and is served by political decisions and legal regulations resulting from them. The issue was also noticed in the socialist economies, which was expressed in caricatured form by, for instance, the character of a woman-tractor driver. In the European Union countries, already during the 1970s, directives concerning various aspects of equality of the citizens, including the equality of genders, have been issued. Those directives covered, among others, the equal remuneration (1975), social insurance (1978), access to employment, vocational training, professional advancement and work conditions (1976), combining household duties and professional work (1992), preventing unemployment of women (2000), etc. Implementation of the ideas expressed in various declarations finds practical expression in the decisions on parities concerning participation of women in the national parliaments and the European Parliament, in the Union administration bodies, in allocations of parts of the European funds, in legal regulations eliminating inequalities and facilitating reconciliation of household and professional duties.

In the declarative and formal spheres, the issues of gender inequality have been practically eliminated. The issues of mentality and cultural character the changes in which occur definitely slower remain a problem. This covers, among others, the perception of roles, division of tasks into male and female ones, evident and hidden paradigms of cultural patterns and systems of values. As a result, not without a reason, people mention the phenomenon of glass ceiling concerning limited possibilities of vertical advancement of women or excessive representation of men in various political, self-government and managing

bodies and positions (LISOWSKA 2007). Despite still existing diversified barriers, the professional activity of women increases systematically, although the indicator of that activity is still lower by 20 percent points, and the employment indicator by 15 percent points, than the same indicators for men. The current trends show, nevertheless that those disproportions will decrease with the “risk” that the women might exceed the values of the indicators so far achieved by the men. Already now in Poland 36% of all managerial positions are held by women, they are owners of almost 38% of micro- and small enterprises and represent 45% of the total number of the employed (STACHURSKA 2009). The problem of increasing the professional activity of women gains particular importance in the context of unfavourable demographic phenomena resulting from decreasing number of children per woman. Effective preventing those phenomena requires actions facilitating reconciliation of the roles of the mother and the employee by women.

Experience and results of studies indicate that women-mothers as employees possess numerous positive characteristics that include responsibility for the work performed, conscientiousness, stability, patience and dutifulness (Tab. 1). Those characteristics though are not always appreciated and employers, under the influence of the established beliefs, frequently prefer men during recruitment.

During the recent years numerous legal regulations facilitating reconciliation of the role of a parent and the employee were implemented. This covers, among others, extension of the maternity leave, introduction of paternity leave

Table 1

Characteristics of women as employees

| Characteristics of women as employees | | Characteristics of women – mothers as employees | |
|--|---|---|--|
| Positive | negative | positive | negative |
| Ease of establishing contacts | more emotional | higher responsibility for work, creativity | lower availability |
| Better coping with bearing the responsibility | possibility of becoming pregnant | conscientiousness and dutifulness, empathy | higher ambitions at work |
| Higher patience | excessive exposure of physical attractiveness | acceptance of poorer work conditions | domination of family issues over the professional issues |
| Accuracy and precision of performance of tasks | | skills of coping with stress | |
| Better education | | emotional stability, better distance to work | |

Source: [www.hvp.com.pl/mama w pracy](http://www.hvp.com.pl/mama_w_pracy).

or the “nursery school” Act enacted already in 2011. Those regulations complement the earlier regulations concerning the conditions of work, employee rights, social benefits for women during pregnancy and after childbirth. The employee expectations from mothers of small children cover mainly the flexibility and place of employment (Fig. 1). Satisfying those expectations will facilitate maintaining balance between the family and the professional functions.

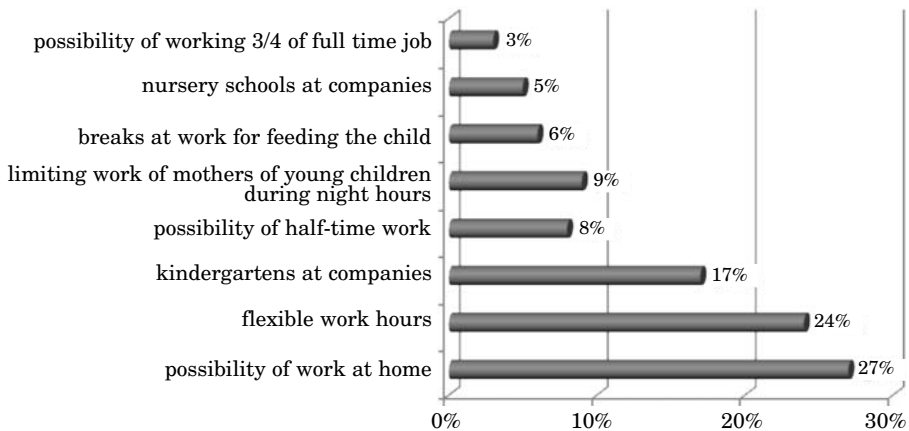


Fig. 1. Expected facilities for young mothers returning to work
Source: Report “Mother returns to work” by Institute Millward Brown SMG/KRC.

Consequences of maternity for employment

All the women covered by the survey currently worked although two of them took up the first job only after several months from childbirth. On return to work after childbirth the structure of employment changed as the number of women operating their own businesses increased from four to nine. Also the number of women employed on the base of the employment contract for an unspecified period of time decreased significantly (from 37 to 28) while the number of those employed for a specified duration increased significantly (from 7 to 12). Almost a half of the respondents (20) described their professional situation after returning to work after childbirth as the same as before the break in employment. The numbers of women that experienced deterioration or improvement in their professional situation were similar (17 and 16 respectively). The deterioration of the employee situation manifested through decrease of remuneration (13 cases), shortening the time of employment covered by the contract, change of work position to a worse one (8 cases)

or termination of employment. On the other hand improvement in perception of the professional situation resulted from an increase of remuneration (10 cases), receiving a higher position (14 cases), extending the contractual duration of employment and adjustment of work hours to the needs of the employee. In numerous cases of deterioration in the employment situation of women participating in the survey violation of the legal regulations could be observed, however, the female employees accepted less favourable conditions fearing loss of employment.

According to the respondents, it would be the best if the break in employment after childbirth could be 12 months (28 indications) or 24 months (11 indications). The actual duration of the break, however, was usually shorter and in 8 cases was just 3 months. The causes for the accelerated return to work included, among others, shortage of funds and necessity to generate income (15 indications), internal need to return to work (15 indications), fear of loosing the job (14 indications), unfavourable influence of long absence from work on professional career (12 indications), too low amount of the child care benefit or lack of eligibility to that benefit (20 indications). As a consequence, earlier return to work resulted in most cases from the financial reasons and belief that remaining home for longer and care for the child could in the future have negative influence of the professional situation of the respondents.

Independent of the involvement in the parental role and its importance in the system of values, the professional activity of women covered by the survey was very important for them and involves satisfying a diversity of needs (Tab. 2). Among those needs the need for contact with people and the related need for detachment from daily household works and need for self-fulfilment dominated. Obviously the financial considerations, starting with the necessity to earn funds for the living, through financial independence and finishing with the care for securing the funds for the old age were also not without importance.

Table 2

Functions of professional work according to the respondent women

| Professional work | Indications <i>N</i> = 53 |
|---|------------------------------|
| Allows contact with other people | 39 |
| Assures financial independence | 33 |
| Increases the feeling of own value | 31 |
| Allows self-fulfilment and personal development | 30 |
| Is the source of satisfaction | 30 |
| Secures funds for the living | 29 |
| Induces activity | 27 |
| Allows a change in household works | 27 |
| Secures benefits for the old age | 17 |
| Influences social position and appreciation | 11 |

The degree of satisfying the expectations of young mothers by the employers in the area of the solutions facilitating combining maternity with professional activity varies (Tab. 3). Liquidation of those differences requires not so much new legal regulations but rather more empathy, understanding and willingness of the employers to consider the expectations and needs of employees-mothers. The expectation concerning the situation that the employers will organize nursery schools or kindergartens exceeds the capacity and needs of the majority of employers and stem probably from the generally low availability of places at nursery schools and kindergartens on which the employers have no influence. Access to institutional forms of care for the child, empathy of the employer, assistance and support from the family and other persons are, according to the women surveyed, the major factors limiting or eliminating even the conflict between maternity and professional work. Maternity resulted in numerous positive consequences in the attitudes of those women that were also of major importance from the perspective of employee competences. The changes in behaviour and emotions observed by them after childbirth included the following: I am better organised (15 indications), I am more responsible (11 indications), and I am more systematic (8 indications).

As the effect, considering all the advantages and disadvantages resulting from maternity in the context of vocational activity, only six women in the surveyed group concluded that maternity frequently limited such activity while the others declared that it never limited it (24 indications) or only sometimes limited it (23 indications). This is an optimistic conclusion slightly contrary to the common opinions and indicating spreading of positive practices facilitating combination of family (life) functions and professional functions. Probably not every company deserves the name of a “mother friendly company” but the number of “mother unfriendly” companies is decreasing.

Table 3
Solutions facilitating combining maternity with professional work (Frequency of indication $N=59$)

| Solution | Expected | Applied |
|--|----------|---------|
| Possibility of working at home | 30 | 17 |
| Subsidy for nursery school/kindergarten | 26 | 5 |
| Flexible work hours | 26 | 19 |
| Kindergarten/nursery school at the place of work | 23 | 2 |
| Higher availability of nursery schools/kindergartens | 19 | 2 |
| Possibility of working part time | 16 | 21 |
| Break in work for feeding the child | 15 | 21 |
| Training liquidating the consequences of break in work caused by maternity | 13 | 3 |
| Limitation of sending for business trips | 11 | 14 |
| Limitation of overtime work | 10 | 17 |

Conclusion

Civilisation and cultural changes taking place during the recent decades also include changes in the relation between life and work as well as a change in the perception of social roles resulting from gender. This includes a clear increase in the extra-family activity of women, such as the professional activity. Despite the decrease or even disappearance of the differences in activity of the men and the women cases of inequality of opportunities and sometimes a worse situation of women in the labour market, e.g. in the form of lower remuneration, difficulties in professional advancement or access to high positions are encountered. Maternity is one of the factors with major influence of the professional activity of women. As indicated by the results of the here discussed survey of opinions of women – mothers the majority of the barriers hindering combining the role of an employee and that of the mother may be eliminated in case of good collaboration between the employer and the employees bringing up the small children. Some of the limitations, however, require an active role of the State and local government administration. Maternity results in women in positive changes of values and attitudes that translates into an increase in their employee competences. This includes, e.g. an increase of responsibility, conscientiousness, need for stabilisation, better self-organisation and patience. Employment of women-mothers allows using those competences and gives them the possibility to satisfy the needs related to employee activity, including the needs of self-fulfilment and development, obtaining funds for the living and financial independence, social contacts, increasing own value and acceptance. Among the employers the belief is increasingly common in the benefits and not only inconveniences resulting from employing women after childbirth. Legal regulations, information policy and good examples serve elimination of employee limitations resulting from maternity and a change in the traditional mentality and paradigms that currently have just the form of dated staff.

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