

WOMEN MANAGERS' PROFESSIONAL CAREER VERSUS MOTHERHOOD

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Purpose: The aim of the article is to get to know female senior managers' beliefs and experiences about combining their professional career with motherhood.

Methodology: A narrative analysis of the literature and a diagnostic survey (tool – survey questionnaire) were used. The selection of the studied sample was deliberate. The respondents were only women occupying high managerial positions (157 people). The following research problem was formulated: how do women in high managerial positions perceive the influence of their professional career on their motherhood? The problem was detailed in the form of research questions: 1. To what extent did the professional career of the surveyed women managers influence their decision to become a mother? 2. What psycho-social costs resulting from combining professional and family roles were incurred by the surveyed women?

Findings: Female managers are statistically more likely to postpone the decision to become a mother and declare that they will not have children compared to women who pursue a different career path. The vast majority of them experience a sense of guilt due to the lack of time for their children and believe that they have "missed" important developmental moments in their child's life. Female managers participating in the study experience a strong role conflict (the role of the manager versus the role of the mother). They are aware of the high emotional and health costs resulting from combining the social roles of a mother and a manager. Most of their career goals remain unchanged after the baby is born.

Research limitations/implications: The obtained research results are treated as pilot ones. The complete achievement of the research goal requires continuation of the research on a larger sample of female respondents, as well as the use of comparative analysis methods, e.g. comparing the results of the research among female managers with the results obtained in other professional groups or among men.

Practical implications: The results of the research can be used to improve the policy of equality between women and men in organizations and to create a pro-family policy of enterprises.

Social implications: The article contains research results that help to understand better the childfree phenomenon in specific professional groups, and thus to diagnose various social attitudes towards combining career and motherhood.

Originality/value: this is the first study of this type conducted on the population of top female managers in Poland.

Keywords: career, motherhood, manager, emotional costs.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The subject of the article is the relationship between the professional career of women in high managerial positions and motherhood. The source of inspiration for taking up this topic was the article by S.A. Hewlett (2002) "Executive Women and The Myth of Having It All", in which the author presented the results of the research conducted in the United States among the so-called High-Achieving Women¹. The research shows that every third woman who has achieved significant success at work has no children, and the rate of childlessness among women whose earnings exceed \$100,000 per year, rises to 49%. People who try to combine career development and family roles experience the phenomenon known as "motherhood penalty" (Staff, Mortimer, 2012; Eva, Le, Sheriff, 2021). The research provides evidence that in Poland mothers earn less on average, both compared to men and childless women of similar age, in similar positions and with the same competences (www.rp.pl/wynagrodzenia). These disproportions are particularly visible in prestigious, highly paid professions. Interestingly, men who become fathers not only do not experience lower earnings, but can also expect the so-called paternity bonus.

While the economic consequences of motherhood, such as access to work or changes in earnings, are well researched, we know much less about the psycho-social, especially emotional context of combining a professional career and motherhood (Apostu, 2017). The literature devoted to the influence of motherhood on the dynamics of women's professional careers is abundant (Miller, 2011), but the opposite problem is discussed much less frequently: the influence of a professional career on a woman's fulfillment in family roles. This subject was considered topical and socially important, therefore the aim of the article is to get to know female managers' beliefs and experiences about combining their professional career with motherhood. This goal was achieved using the methodology of literature analysis and survey research with the use of a survey questionnaire. Due to the limited scope of the article, the research concerns only the professional group of women developing a managerial career and is treated as a pilot study. The following research problem was formulated: how do women in high managerial positions perceive the influence of their professional career on fulfilling the role of a mother?

2. Professional career and motherhood - conceptualization of the problem

The word motherhood, regardless of the culture of a given country, has the same meaning: it includes a mother-child dyad (Aksamit, 2019). It is defined as being a mother and as the

¹ High-Achieving Women – women aged 41-55 who achieved professional success and very high earnings.

process of becoming one. It is one of the more diverse experiences of a woman relating to all elements of her life (Krause, 2020). This is a phenomenon that she can experience at different ages and in different situations, because the faces of motherhood are the result of the intersection of many emotional, psychological, social and cultural factors and the creation of various individual and group constellations of this experience (Pryszmont-Ciesielska, 2011). Motherhood is part of the complex problem of social reality and is a derivative of economic, political and social processes, as well as those related to the personal sphere of women's lives (Wojciechowska 2012; Kusio, 2014). The role of a mother belongs to the catalog of social roles and is defined as a pattern of behavior expected from a woman in a situation of motherhood, taking into account the cultural and social context (Pringle, Harris et al., 2017). This role is placed in the following categories: identity (as a central feature of femininity), archetypal, fulfilling developmental tasks or self-realization (Maciąg-Budkowska, Rzepa, 2017; Krause, 2020). Women who are mothers are under pressure from the cultural script of being a mother. "The ideal mother is seen not only as a person with her own goals, emotions, needs, biography, but only [and] as a mother, that is, a person who has devoted her family life entirely to her child. The welfare of her children is also her welfare, her desires are reduced to the happiness of her children. Children are also the only reason she exists. It is natural when a mother devotes all her energy, time and aspirations to her children, when she has no goals, emotions and needs of her own" (Budrowska, 2001, p. 110). The content of the cultural scripts of being a mother that define the scope of the motherhood concept, defined as a kind of total social institution form a specific "regulation" of the institution of motherhood (Włodarczyk, 2017).

The analysis of the literature leads to the conclusion that the social perception of women in the context of motherhood extends on a specific continuum. One pole is a discourse that presents motherhood as a central feature of femininity, in the middle is the argument that women should be given complete freedom in making decisions about becoming a mother, and at the opposite extreme, the advantages of childlessness are shown. Therefore, the phenomenon of spreading differentiation in the presentation range of motherhood seems to be characteristic for the present day (Gajtkowska, 2016; Krause, 2020).

The relationship between motherhood and women's professional career is most often described in the context of the so-called motherhood penalty. Research conducted at Oxford University (Kahn, García-Manglano, Bianchi, 2014) shows that childless women aged 25 are better educated, more often employed, and have higher earnings and work in a profession with higher prestige than women who became mothers earlier. For women aged 20-30-40, the correlation was confirmed: the more children, the lower the activity in the labor market, the lower the salary and the lower professional prestige. The birth of each new child means a decrease in a woman's salary by 3-6%. Childless women earn on average 1/3 more than women with three children and perform more prestigious work almost twice as often. At the same time, it should be added that the disproportion in terms of participation in the labor market, professional achievements and wages between childless women and mothers decreases

with age. At 52, these differences blur to the mother's advantage. Then they are more professionally active, hold more prestigious positions, and the amount of their remuneration does not differ from that of women without children. However, it should be emphasized that this regularity applies to women who have no more than two children.

Research conducted in Poland shows that women choose one of the four models of social functioning (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2017; Krause, 2020):

- a woman whose activity is focused only on giving birth and raising children ("intensive motherhood", "full-time motherhood"),
- a woman combining the role of a mother and a worker (more or less effectively),
- a professionally fulfilled woman taking the role of a mother where the child is treated as a complement to her female identity and a symbol of her self-realization (as a result, she only fulfills the role of a mother to a negligible extent and assigns priority to the professional sphere),
- a woman giving up motherhood in favor of professional self-fulfillment (not childless, i.e. without children, but childfree, i.e. free from children).

The specificity of the postmodern world clearly multiplied the number of tasks performed by women (Jawor, 2018). Combining motherhood with professional career is a part of the image of a multitasking mother (Brycka, Ciacki, 2020) who can combine the role of an ideal mother, perfect housewife, attractive partner, a developing and ambitious employee, a manager who manages the life of a family, and at the same time a well-groomed woman practicing sophisticated sports and caring for the development of her passions (Kullman et al., 2019). It is hard to disagree with the statement that "the promise of combining multiple roles is just as oppressive for women as the patriarchal command to »stay at home«" (Krauze, 2020, p. 43). Interestingly, this problem affects even societies as sensitive to equality of rights as that of Finland (Niemisto et al., 2021).

3. Research methodology. Characteristics of the studied sample

The aim of the research was to get to know female senior managers' experiences about combining their professional career with motherhood. The following research problem was formulated: how do women occupying high managerial positions perceive the influence of their professional career on their motherhood? This problem is detailed in the form of research questions:

1. To what extent did the professional career of the surveyed women managers influence their decision to become a mother?
2. What psycho-social costs resulting from combining professional and family roles were incurred by the surveyed women?

Due to the small number of respondents, the author treats the research as a pilot and does not formulate research hypotheses. The study was conducted using an online questionnaire. The selection of the studied sample was deliberate. The questionnaire was addressed only to women. The criterion adopted was the fact that the participant of the survey held a high managerial position. It was assumed that women CEOs and board members, managing directors/department directors and owners of enterprises (excluding micro-enterprises) meet the criterion. The invitation to participate in the study was addressed to women – students and graduates of MBA studies at the Institute of Economic Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences and at the Lazarski University in Warsaw. They accounted for 71.3% of the surveyed sample. As a platform for communication with the respondents the LinkedIn portal was also used. The questionnaire was completed by 157 women fulfilling the assumed criterion. Due to the difficult topic of the research and relatively small number of women in the highest managerial positions in Poland, the sample size was considered satisfactory, although due to the size and demographic features it is not a representative sample. The obtained results are treated as a basis for formulating hypotheses for further, in-depth quantitative research.

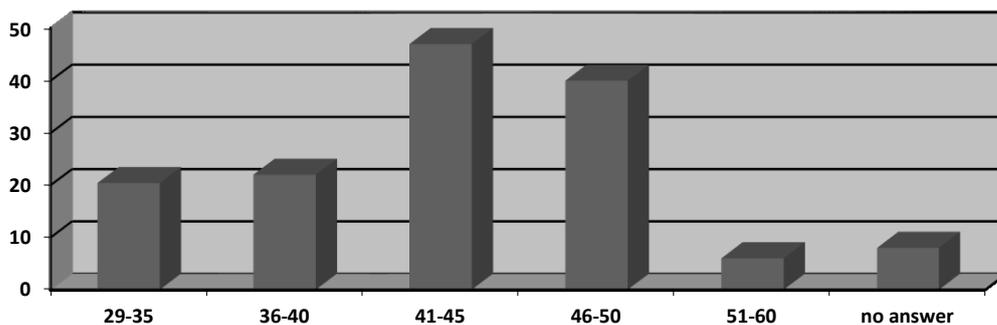


Figure 1. Age of the respondents. Source: own study based on the results of the survey.

The group of respondents was dominated by women from the 36-50 age group (77.1% of the sample in total). Detailed data on the age of the respondents is presented in Figure 1.

4. Women managers' professional career versus motherhood – the results of a pilot study

The FAMWELL study found that the number of women who consciously give up motherhood is increasing from generation to generation. Among those born between 1945 and 1955, the percentage of women who never gave birth to a child was 8%, while among those born in 1970 this value is already 17%. The percentage of women who do not and will not have children in Poland is much higher than in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Matysiak et al., 2021). In the researched sample of female managers, this trend is even more

visible. Out of 157 women participating in the study, as many as 36 (22.9% of the surveyed sample) declare that they have no children and are not planning motherhood. Those who combine professional work with motherhood most often have one or two children (see Table 1). The cause of this phenomenon is not financial difficulties as the average earnings of the respondents are in the range of PLN 18,000-23,000 gross.

Table 1.

Postponing the decision to have children due to a professional career able title

Age	Number of children (N = 157)					
	1 child	2 children	3 children	4 children and more	I don't have children yet, but I plan to have them	I am not planning motherhood (I do not have children and I am unlikely to have them)
29-35	3 (1.9%)	1 (0.6%)	0	0	13 (8.3%)	5 (3.2%)
36-40	9 (5.7%)	8 (5.1%)	2 (1.3%)	1 (0.6%)	6 (3.8%)	8 (5.1%)
41-45	15 (9.5%)	11 (7%)	3 (1.9%)	1 (0.6%)	5 (3.2%)	12 (7.6%)
46-50	10 (6.4%)	15 (9.5%)	4 (2.5%)	2 (1.3%)	0	9 (5.7%)
51-60	2 (1.3%)	2 (1.3%)	1 (0.6%)	0	0	1 (0.6%)
No information about the respondent's age	3 (1.9%)	5 (3.2%)	0	0	0	1 (0.6%)

Source: own study based on the results of the survey.

Among the female managers who have children or are planning motherhood, the majority (61.1%) agreed with the statement that they postponed or are still postponing the decision to have children because of their professional career (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Postponing the decision to have children due to a professional career

Age	To what extent do you agree with the statement: I have postponed or I am still postponing the decision to have children because of my professional career? (N = 121)			
	Definitely not	Rather not	Rather yes	Definitely yes
29-35	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.8%)	7 (5.8%)	8 (6.6%)
36-40	4 (3.3%)	7 (5.8%)	9 (7.4%)	6 (4.9%)
41-45	4 (3.3%)	7 (5.8%)	12 (1.7%)	12 (1.7%)
46-50	7 (5.8%)	9 (7.4%)	9 (7.4%)	6 (4.9%)
51-60	2 (1.6%)	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.8%)
No age information available	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.8%)	2 (1.6%)	3 (2.4%)

Source: own study based on the results of the survey.

An important subject of the research was the emotional costs of combining motherhood with a managerial career. Women who have children were asked to refer to the statement "I often experience or have experienced guilt over the lack of time for my child/children due to professional responsibilities". As many as 65 of them (66.9%) considered this sentence true, including 30 women (30.1% of the sample) claiming it is definitely true (see Table 3).

Table 3.*Experiencing guilt over the lack of time for the child/children*

To what extent do you agree with the statement: I often experience or have experienced guilt over the lack of time for my child/children due to my professional duties (N = 97)				
Definitely not (1)	Rather not (2)	Partly yes, partly no (3)	Rather not (4)	Definitely yes (5)
7 (7.2%)	15 (15.5%)	10 (10.3%)	35 (36.8%)	30 (30.1%)
median	4			
arithmetic average	3.7			
variance	1.590			
standard deviation	1.26			

Source: own study based on the results of the survey.

An even larger part of the surveyed sample agreed with the statement: "I have a feeling that I have "missed" important developmental moments in the life of my child/children because of my professional career. As many as 69.1% of the respondents acknowledged this sentence as true, including 34 ones (35.1% of the surveyed sample) claiming it is definitely true (see Table 4).

Table 4.*Experiencing "missing" important developmental moments in the life of a child/children*

To what extent do you agree with the statement: I have the feeling that I "missed" important developmental moments in the life of my child/children due to my professional work (N = 97)				
Definitely not (1)	Rather not (2)	Partly yes, partly no (3)	Rather yes (4)	Definitely yes (5)
7 (7.2%)	10 (10.3%)	13 (13.4%)	33 (34.0%)	34 (35.1%)
median	4			
variance	1.519			
standard deviation	1.23			

Source: own study based on the results of the survey.

Participants of the study experience the role conflict to a high degree. Trying to combine the role of a mother with dynamic career development, they feel that one of these areas of life is neglected because of the other (see Table 5). At the same time, when answering the question whether they redefined their career goals after the birth of a child, e.g. looking for less time-consuming and with a lower psycho-physical burden positions, the vast majority (69.1%) gave a negative answer, including 27.8% stating that it is definitely negative.

Table 5.*The role conflict*

To what extent do you agree with the statement: I often feel or have had a feeling that because of my career I am not completely fulfilling myself as a mother or vice versa: because of motherhood I am not a fully effective employee (N = 97)				
Definitely not (1)	Rather not (2)	Partly yes, partly no (3)	Rather yes (4)	Definitely yes (5)
3 (3.1%)	2 (2.1%)	4 (4.1%)	39 (40.2%)	49 (50.5%)
median	4			
arithmetic average	4.26			
variance	1.011			
standard deviation	1			

Source: own study based on the results of the survey.

labor market representing other professional groups, e.g. women soldiers (Judzińska, 2020) or women scientists (Krause, 2016). As emphasized by M. Raczek (2019), women who combine work with raising children experience enormous pressure of perfectionism in the field of every activity, which can lead to diseases, especially psychological ones, such as frustration, neurosis or depression. Usually it also contributes to conflicts in relationships and to pedagogical mistakes. The “coping with everything” imperative, so strong in the social message, is experienced by women performing various professional roles. The obtained results confirm the persistence of female managers in the role conflict described by J.H. Greenhaus and N.J. Beutell (1985, pp. 76-88) defining it as “a form of conflict between roles in which pressures from work and family are in some respects incompatible with each other. As a result, participation in the professional (family) role is made difficult by participation in the family (professional) role”. At the same time, the results of the research conducted by the author among women in high managerial positions are in contradiction to the results obtained in the studies by K. Kuśmirek (2017) and M. Piotrowska-Trybull (2016) in the professional group of female soldiers. Most women working in the military after having a child redefined their career plans by looking for less absorbing positions, e.g. administrative ones. They also showed lower interest in promotion (Kuśmirek, 2017). Such attitudes were rare among the surveyed female managers. The vast majority of women in high managerial positions did not accept the scenario of "slowing down" the career dynamics, deciding on the destructive burden of responsibilities or delegating a significant part of tasks related to motherhood to other people (e.g. grandmothers, caregivers, children's fathers) and therefore experiencing emotional costs, for example, in the form of emotional exhaustion and deep guilt.

The obtained research results are treated as pilot ones. The full achievement of the research goal requires continuation of the research on a larger sample of female respondents, as well as the use of comparative analysis methods, e.g. comparing the results of research among female managers with the results obtained in other professional groups or among men.

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