

SELECTED SIGNS OF DISCRIMINATION AS PERCEIVED BY WOMEN EMPLOYEES OF POLISH COMPANIES: A SELF-STUDY RESEARCH ACCOUNT¹

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Abstract:

The issue of unequal treatment of employees and prevention of discrimination in the workplace is frequently under the public debate. Due to its complexity, discrimination draws the attention of a wide range of people from theoreticians to practitioners in the field of management, and - first of all - the people influenced by this negative phenomenon. The objective of this article is to present the experience of women employed in Polish enterprises in the scope of their contact with the cases of unequal treatment during their professional career, as well as to diagnose the possible reasons for the occurrence of discrimination in the workplace. The article shows the result of the research concerning the frequency of cases of unequal treatment of women in their professional life, the level of knowledge of the rights possessed by discriminated people, and the selected manifestations of discrimination in the workplace. The research covered 327 women employed in 12 deliberately selected innovative enterprises where they hold managerial and specialist posts, located in different areas of operation of enterprise. The enterprises covered by the research are located throughout Poland. The conclusions arising from the research constitute practical recommendations which may be applied by the managerial staff and their subordinates in organisations of different types operating in Poland and abroad.

Keywords: discrimination, unequal treatment, stereotypes, employee

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1. DISCRIMINATION IN THEORY

In general understanding, the term 'discrimination' means 'making a distinction' and is derived from Latin *discrimination* (Marciniak, 2011, p. 28). In the literature, discrimination is defined as "improper, selective, harmful, unjustified and unfair treatment of an individual based on the membership in a certain group" (Branka & Cieřlikowska, 2010, p. 108). It should be emphasised, that the reasons for discrimination may include innate features of a given person or features acquired against their will, as well as the features shaped at their own discretion (e.g. sex, age, disability, appearance, religion, race, nationality, political views, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, lifestyle). Employment discrimination occurs when an individual receives unequal treatment in an employment situation based on a trait unrelated to the performance of their job, such as race, sex, origin, religion, disability or sexual orientation (www.civilrights.findlaw.com). In recent years, the increase in women's professional activity is noticeable in Poland. This phenomenon is accompanied by certain barriers which weaken its impact and scope (Gliksman, 2006, p. 11). Numerous negative stereotypes about women as employees reduce their professional opportunities, which translates into the amount of their earnings. The results of the all-Poland survey related to remuneration carried out in 2014 clearly show the differences between the earnings of women and men in Poland. In 2014, the median of the total gross remuneration equalled PLN 4600 for men and PLN 3600 for women (www.wynagrodzenia.pl). In 2015, the average difference in the amount of remuneration for women and men was 16% in the European Union (www.equalpayportal.co.uk). The main reasons for the difference between the earnings by women and men include but are not limited to the following (Reszke, 2001, p.27):

- segregation of professions according to sex (lower pays in feminized jobs),
- lower number of women – in comparison with men – that hold managerial positions and among those that run their own business activity,
- lower average number of hours of work by women than by men per week,
- shorter seniority among women caused by different breaks (e.g. taking care of children),
- lower spatial mobility (looking for a job near the place of residence).

The issue of equalisation of professional opportunities of women and men became particularly important after the accession of Poland to the European Union in 2004. The determined frames for combating the discrimination in the workplace refer mainly to equal treatment of employees in terms of their sex, age, religion or beliefs, disability and sexual orientation (Czyżewska, 2011, p. 39). The provisions of the Polish law in the area of non-discrimination and equal treatment of people are included in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and in the Labour Code (Gliksman, 2006, p. 32-37). In the area of anti-discrimination policy, the European Commission emphasises a wide range of activities necessary to implement in each member state of the European Union, such as:

- "disseminating the knowledge about discrimination and raising the social awareness in the scope of citizens' duties and benefits of diversity,
- supporting intermediate entities, that is non-government organisations, social partners and authorities dealing with equality in order to increase the capabilities of combating discrimination,
- supporting the development of policy at the national level and encouraging the exchange of good practices between the EU member states,
- training activities in the scope of anti-discrimination resulting in actual changes in the area of combating the discrimination,
- activities aimed at promoting diversity management in enterprises in response to the increasing social diversity" (www.rownosc.info).

The recommendations of the European Commission listed above should constitute a standard in the scope of popularisation of anti-discrimination behaviours in Polish enterprises. The employers should be particularly careful to respect human dignity of their employees, and first of all - to undertake planned activities aimed at educating their employees in the scope of principles of equal treatment and to eliminate any and all discrimination practices occurring in the workplace. The employers' inertia and indifference towards the employees who violate the anti-discrimination principles are unacceptable. The obligation to combat discrimination in employment should be always considered by the employers in legal, ethical and image-related terms. The organisations in which the employees' rights and dignity are not disregarded and violated operate in a more effective way and also are more respected and recognised by their stakeholders and their environment.

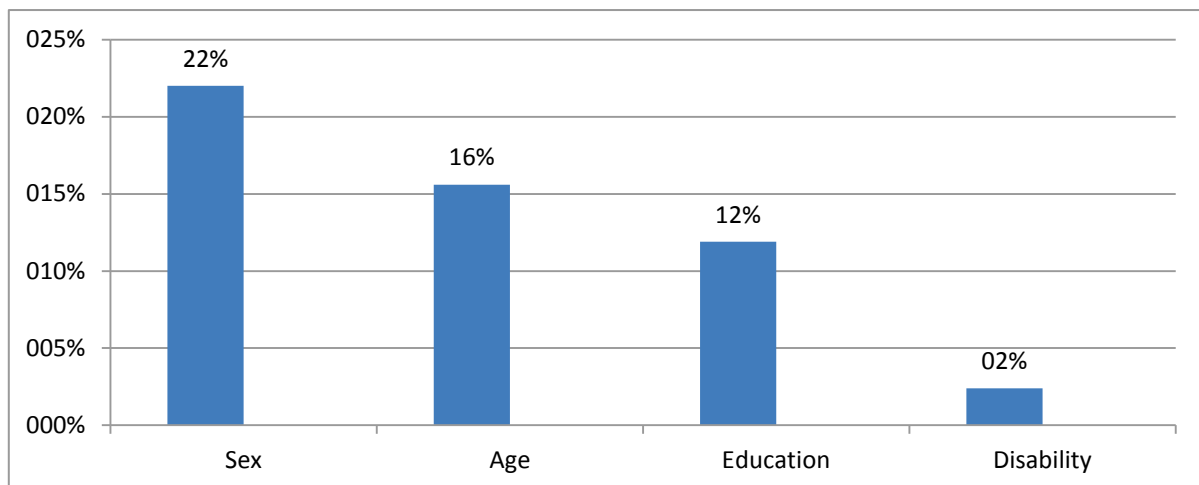
2. RESEARCH METHODS

The objective of the empirical research described in the article was to assess the frequency of occurrence of practices in the scope of unequal treatment of women employed in Polish enterprises and the knowledge of rights possessed by discriminated people demonstrated by the employees. The results of the research included in this article are the effect of the works carried out within the research grant² obtained by the employees of the Management Institute at the Faculty of Economics at the Maria Skłodowska-Curie University in Lublin. Originally, the research encompassed 12 enterprises (two big- and ten medium-sized ones) in the trade, production and service sectors which are localised throughout Poland. Those enterprises were selected purposefully (they are innovative enterprises) and it was dictated by the guidelines of the implemented research grant. The research was carried out with the use of a questionnaire³ answered by the total of 327 women. The research sample is not representative. The questionnaire was addressed to women employed in the enterprises covered by the research that hold managerial and specialist posts, located in different areas of operation of the organisation. The research based on the questionnaire was carried out between January and December 2015. The results of the research were presented in the form of tables and charts accompanied with a detailed description.

3. PHENOMENON OF DISCRIMINATION IN POLISH ENTERPRISES BASED ON THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The action against discrimination in societies based on democratic system is a priority. The programmes of creating equal opportunities and the principles of equal treatment of all citizens are included in numerous normative acts and provisions of the law. The area where discrimination may occur with different intensity is the workplace. The question included in the questionnaire and concerning the contact of the research participants with the discrimination during their professional career in the workplace was asked in the research as the first one. Picture 1 shows the percentage distribution of answers confirming the occurrence of such events by respondents.

Picture 1: The respondents' answers, given as %, confirming that they encountered discrimination in the workplace (on the grounds of sex, age, education, disability) during their professional career



Source: Own work based on the research results. N=327

The answers given by the respondents (picture 1) show that the least frequent grounds for discrimination encountered by them in their professional career in the workplace include the discrimination based on disability (2.4% of given answers). The women taking part in the research indicated the following discrimination grounds as the most frequent cases: sex (22.0%), age (15.6%)

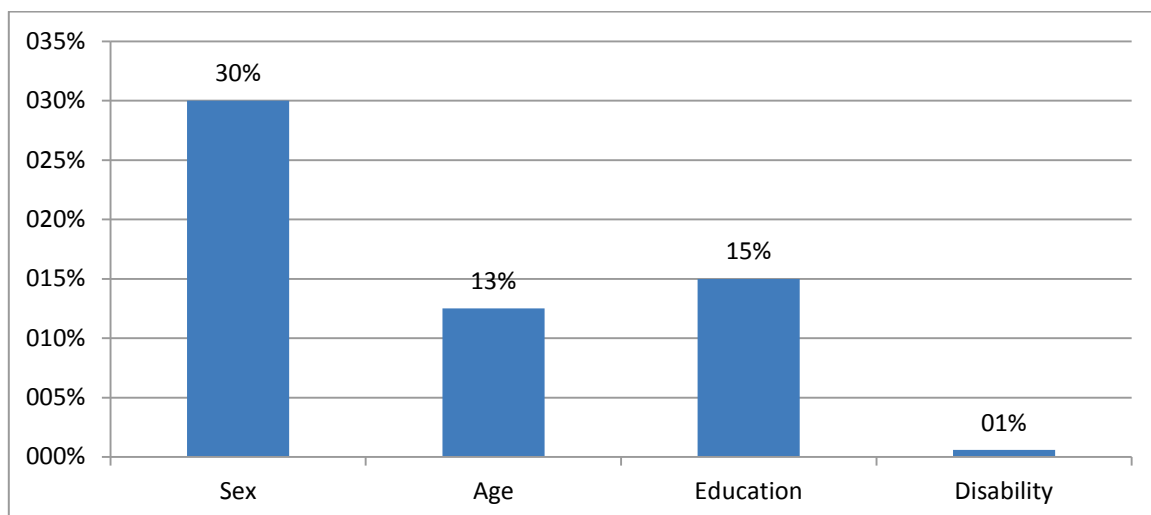
² The research grant entitled "Competence potential of selected groups of employees in terms of diversity management in innovative enterprises" 2013/09/B/HS4/01307

³ The article is based on one part devoted to the issue of discrimination out of eight parts forming the questionnaire.

and education (11.9%). The results of numerous social surveys show that the stereotypes based on sex affect women more often than men both in their everyday life and their professional life. The studies performed for the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development concerning the sector of innovative enterprises and new technologies showed that the following stereotypes based on sex prevail among the employers (Niemczewska & Mrowiec & Paterek, 2007, p. 89-90): women are less competent than men in spite of having the same qualifications, men are better in managerial positions than women, women have lower expectations as to their promotion and development of professional career than men. Relatively worse situation of women in the labour market also results from the fact that the employers view women as less flexible because of the necessity of reconciling professional and family obligations (Staszewska, 2012, p. 52). The aforementioned example is a proof that women are labelled by some employers as less attractive employees than men.

In the second question, the respondents taking part in the research were asked whether they encountered - in their professional life - the problem of receiving lower remuneration as a manifestation of pay-related discrimination based on stereotypes concerning sex, age, education and disability. Picture 2 shows the percentage distribution of answers confirming the occurrence of such events by respondents.

Picture 2: The respondents' answers, given as %, confirming the cases of receiving lower remuneration by the employees as a manifestation of discrimination based on stereotypes concerning sex, age, education and disability

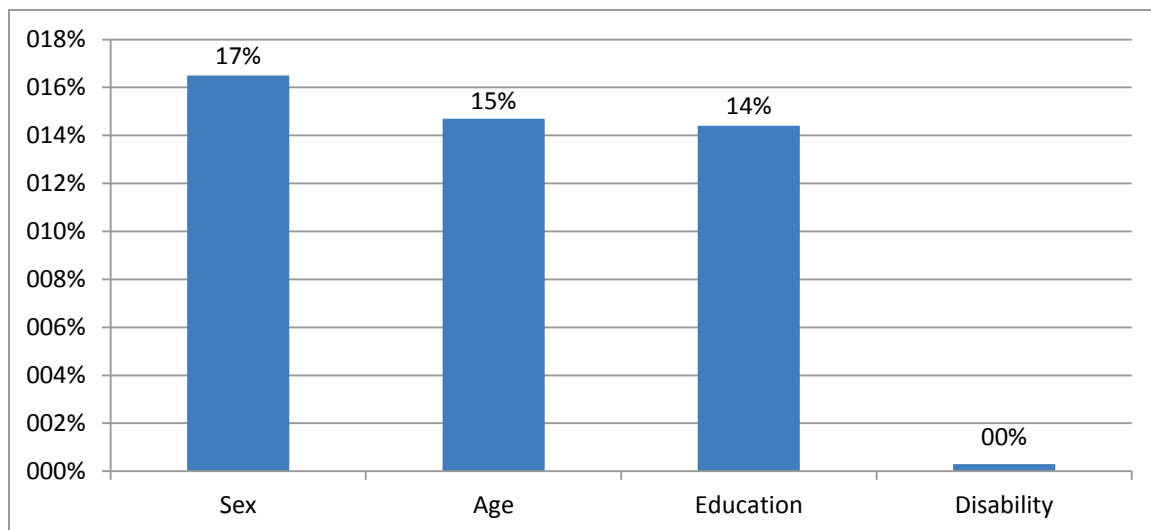


Source: Own work based on the research results. N=327

In the question whether the respondents encountered the situation of receiving lower pay based on stereotypes (picture 2), they indicated the most often the stereotypes concerning sex (30%). The respondents confirmed that they encountered the situation of receiving lower remuneration based on stereotypes concerning education as the second reason (15%), and the stereotypes connected with age - were the third-ranking reason (12.5%). The least frequently given answer by the respondents concerned the disability (0.6%).

In the third question, the respondents taking part in the research were asked whether they encountered - in their professional life - the situation of limited promotion opportunities as a manifestation of discrimination based on stereotypes concerning sex, age, education and disability. Picture 3 shows the percentage distribution of answers confirming the occurrence of such events by respondents.

Picture 3: The respondents' answers, given as %, confirming the cases of limited promotion opportunities as a manifestation of discrimination based on stereotypes concerning sex, age, education and disability



Source: Own work based on the research results. N=327

In the third question whether the respondents encountered the situation of limited promotion opportunities based on stereotypes (picture 3), they indicated the most often the stereotypes concerning sex (16.5%). The respondents confirmed that they encountered the situation of limited promotion opportunities based on stereotypes concerning age (14.7%) and education (14.4%), which means a similar result. The least frequent answer given by the research participants concerned disability (0.3%).

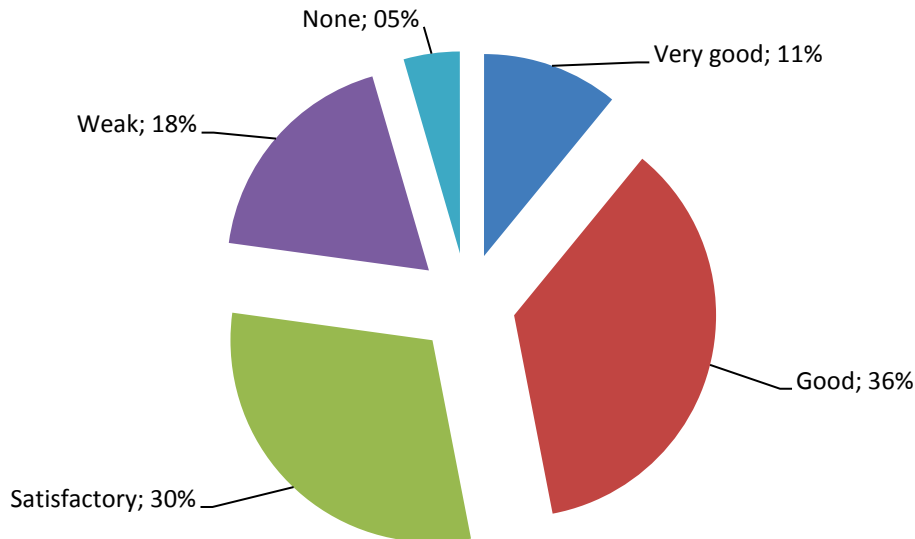
It may be supposed that the most frequent answer to the question concerning the contact with the situations of receiving lower remuneration (picture 2) and limited promotion opportunities (picture 3) based on stereotypes concerning sex results from widespread stereotypes about women which place women in a less favourable light than men. The most characteristic and the most widespread stereotypes about women are as follows: women are weak and submissive, they are mainly mothers and wives, they are supported by their husbands, they are too emotional and unable to make decisions (Buchowska 2011, p. 14). The aforementioned example shows that the stereotypes about women influence the behaviour of some employers in the scope of limiting or blocking the promotion opportunities and receiving lower remuneration.

The second-ranking answer - in terms of the number of indications by the respondents taking part in the research - to the question whether they encountered the situations of receiving lower remuneration (picture 2) or of limiting the promotion opportunities (picture 3) based on stereotypes concerning education is the grounds for assuming that the answer was selected based on the incidents during which women were stigmatised because of their education or its incompleteness. It is confirmed that one of the problems in the present labour market is that the education is not insufficient but too high, which makes it difficult for the employers to employ, remunerate and promote an employee.

The third-ranking answer - in terms of the number of indications by the respondents taking part in the research - to the question whether they encountered the situations of receiving lower remuneration (picture 2) or of limiting the promotion opportunities (picture 3) based on stereotypes concerning age is the grounds for assuming that the answer was selected based on the cases of unequal treatment of older persons as employees caused mainly by prejudice. The most widespread stereotypes concerning older people include the following: they are insufficiently efficient, insufficiently flexible, insufficiently creative, resistant to changes, are not interested in professional development, characterised with unwillingness to learn technological innovations (Shore & Chung-Herrera & Dean & Ehrhart & Jung & Randel & Singh, 2009, p. 120). Such prejudice is further strengthened by the fact of competition between the young and the elderly in the labour market. It should be emphasised that the knowledge and experience held by the older employees guarantee - in many cases - that the occupied positions are kept, and also contribute to uninterrupted operation of the organisation and its development.

While performing the study, the research team also paid attention to the level of knowledge about the rights possessed by discriminated people. The respondents were asked to give answers in that scope and the structure of provided answers is shown on picture 4.

Picture 4: The respondents' answers, given as %, concerning their knowledge of rights possessed by a discriminated person



Source: Own work based on the research results. N=311

The respondents' answer to that question show that the rights of discriminated persons are know very well and well by the total of 46.9% of them. Satisfactory and poor knowledge in that scope was confirmed by the total of 48.5% of women. 4.5% of research participants declared complete lack of knowledge in that scope. Based on the obtained answers, it may be stated that more than a half of research participants is not able to properly exercise their rights when they encounter unequal treatment in the workplace. The most probable reasons for the shortage of knowledge in that scope among the respondents is the insufficient commitment of employers to the process of educating the employees on the issues of recognition and response to any manifestations of discrimination in the workplace. The lack of knowledge or its low level among the employees may contribute to inertia or improper response by a discriminated person. The cases of unequal treatment of employees negatively influence the quality and efficiency of work done by employees' teams, which translates into improper operation of the organisation viewed as a whole.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research carried out among women employed in Polish enterprises are the grounds for drawing the following final conclusions.

The first of them refers to the phenomenon of discrimination in the Polish labour market, which was confirmed by the research. Beyond all doubt, the stereotypes concerning sex, age, education and disability carry numerous actual threats to which the persons subject to discrimination may be exposed in the workplace and outside it. The stereotypes about sex operating within the society cause that it is more difficult for women to get promotion or to be appreciated for their professional work. Yet, the generation of young women is more aware of their rights and thus can better fight such stereotypes. In the scope of combating discrimination in employment, the Polish legal provisions were adapted to the EU standards. Apart from the operating legal mechanisms for fighting against discrimination based on age, the assessment of the range and character of that phenomenon in Poland is made difficult at present. A serious restriction is a limited number of research and collected data which may be the grounds for the proper assessment of the range of this phenomenon and for fighting against unequal treatment of elderly people in the workplace. The anti-discrimination policy related to age is at present

increasingly important as it is an important element of the labour market policy which is focused on professional activation of older people. The situation of shortage of labour force may additionally and naturally contribute to future limitation of discrimination in employment based on age. To sum up, it should be stated that the quality and manner of performing the work does not depend on repeating the same stereotypes about sex, age, education, disability and many others but mainly on the employees' qualifications, attitudes and commitment in the scope of performed tasks.

The next conclusion arising from the conducted research is the finding that the research participants have limited knowledge of rights in the scope of protection of discriminated people. More than a half of the women taking part in the research indicate that their knowledge of rights possessed by people discriminated in the workplace is limited or they do not have it at all. To solve this issue, it would be recommendable that the employers establish anti-discrimination policy principles in the workplace that are clear to all employees. What is fundamental to anti-discrimination activities is the social education explaining the phenomenon of discrimination, its manifestations, consequences for the discriminating and the discriminated, as well as the ways of combating its occurrence.

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