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Empowering women in organizations – good practices

Introduction

Intense global competition of goods and services providers and human capital – which results from the globalization of economies – forces companies to search and implement new solutions in management and organizational culture. In this context, women’s talents are increasingly valued by companies. This is because in developed countries, women more often than men have high level of education and more often than men have qualities and skills necessary in management. In the seven most developed countries (the United States of America, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Canada), there are 10% more women than men with a university degree in the 25–54 age group, while there are still significantly more men in senior and top management positions [Scott 2021:65-66]. The complementarity of characteristics and qualifications of men and women as employees and managers is indicated as one of the factors in the development of modern economies and wealth creation.

Numerous studies conducted since the early 2000s [Boulouta 2013; Cook, Glass 2014; Conyon, He 2017; Credit Suisse 2012; Hafsi, Turgut 2013; Festing, Knappert, Kornau 2015; Kirsch 2018; Lisowska 2010; Post, Byron 2014] show that employing women at the highest levels of management (in management and supervisory boards) brings both economic and non-economic benefits to the company. The practical conclusion from these studies is that we should use the skills and potential of women to a greater extent than before for companies to function better, be a desirable employer, have

a better image among its stakeholders and, as a result, achieve better economic results and competitive advantage [Lisowska 2019].

In 2012, the European Commission presented a draft Directive on quotas in business and thus started a discussion about the problem of low representation of women in top management positions and very slow changes in this regard over the last decades [European Commission 2019; European Commission 2012]. The preamble to the Directive indicates EU legislation that mandates equal treatment for men and women, namely Articles 8 and 157(4) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union¹ and Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights². The Directive’s proposals apply only to the largest listed companies and propose that each gender should be represented in supervisory boards at a minimum of 40%. At the same time, the Directive stresses that recruitment should consider merit, and given the same or similar qualifications, the person of the less represented gender should be selected to the board until the indicated quota is reached. The Directive provides for the introduction of sanctions, which are at the discretion of each country and are sufficiently effective to deter companies from violating the quota law, e.g., administrative fines or the annulment (by court decision) of the election of board members when it does not meet the Directive’s criteria [Lisowska 2013].

Although it was impossible to pass the EU Directive on gender quota (due to the lack of consensus among EU member states), the European Commission (EC) formulated proposals that encourage individual countries to voluntarily introduce domestic

legislation that promotes women to senior and top management positions. The EC introduced both the option of “soft” solutions – voluntarily implemented by state-owned companies, listed companies, and all other enterprises – and mandatory laws that introduce sanctions imposed on public companies if they do not respect the quota law and fail to meet its provisions in a specified period.

Thanks to the solutions introduced in some EU countries, there has been an increase in the share of women both among managers in general and among senior managers, both in management and supervisory boards of public companies [European Commission 2019]. This trend also applies to Poland: in the largest companies listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange the share of women on supervisory and management boards increased from 10% in 2008 to 21% in 2018 and 23% in 2020 [Lisowska 2019].

The increasing participation of women in management confirms that they are interested in taking up leadership positions and working in supervisory and corporate boards. However, women still face sociocultural barriers when applying for these positions [Górska 2017; Lisowska 2019; Scott 2021]. The mere interest of women in taking up managerial positions is not enough for a breakthrough change to occur, namely exceeding the critical mass defined at the level of at least 40% of women on management and supervisory boards. What is necessary are activities initiated internally by companies, which are aimed at supporting the development of women in the organization and promoting them to managerial positions. Companies that introduce such activities remain in the minority in Poland: they are limited to listed companies as these are covered by the obligation of reporting on the promotion of women to supervisory and management boards.

The main objective of the study is to show good practices from the Polish market that will answer the question of how a company can support women in their advancement to higher managerial positions. The analysis used both published results of previous research, mainly the Responsible Business Forum's (FOB) reports of 2019 and 2020 in the field of company's activities towards women, and data obtained from selected companies (case studies). The presentation of good practices was preceded by an analysis of statistical data concerning the share of women in top managerial positions and an indication that the higher number of women in these positions is one of the factors of gaining competitive advantage by an enterprise in the global market.

Women in Management: Determinants and Benefits

The European Commission's cyclical analysis of major public companies – those listed on stock exchanges in EU member states – shows that over the past decade there has been an increase in the proportion of women on supervisory and management boards, largely due to EU and national efforts to encourage companies to implement gender equality and diversity policies in the workplace and in leadership positions.

The data in Table 1 shows that, in the last decade, the share of women among members of supervisory boards, boards of directors, and boards of trustees (non-executives) has doubled from 17% to 33%; and it also doubled among chairpersons of supervisory boards, boards of directors, and companies themselves (executives): from 10% to 21%. The relatively smallest changes occurred in the group of CEOs: from 2.5% to 7.9%.

Table 1. Women in management positions in the biggest listed companies in 2012–2021 (EU-28 average in %)

Year	Women among non-executives (%)	Women among executives (%)	CEOs
2012	17.2	10.4	2.5
2013	19.5	11.8	2.8
2014	22.0	12.9	3.3
2015	24.7	14.3	4.3
2016	26.1	14.9	5.9
2017	27.9	15.8	5.3
2018	29.3	16.6	6.4
2019	31.5	18.6	7.7
2020	32.6	20.0	7.4
2021	33.3	20.7	7.9

Note: *non-executives* – members of supervisory boards, boards of directors, management boards, executive officers; *executives* – persons who head supervisory boards, boards of directors, management boards.

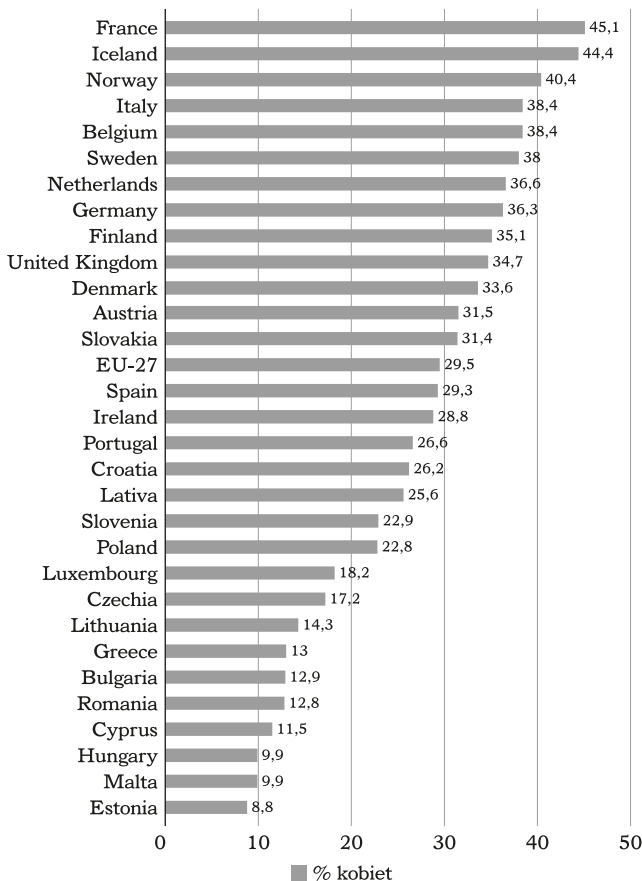
Source: own elaboration based on data from the European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE 2021] relating to the field of “business”.

As shown in Figure 1, the highest rates of female representation on supervisory and management boards of the largest listed companies are found in those European countries that have introduced mandatory, and sanctioned, business quotas, France (45%), Iceland (44%), Norway (40%), Italy (38%), and Belgium (38%). Sweden also has a relatively high

rate (38%). It is a country that has not introduced a business quota but where a comprehensive gender equality policy has been in place for many years. Countries such as the Netherlands or Spain also have a mandatory quota introduced for business, but without specific sanctions, while Denmark, Greece, Austria, Poland, Ireland, or Slovenia have only introduced soft regulations for gender quotas in state-owned companies [Kirsch 2018:347]. As we can see, most of the countries that took steps toward increasing the proportion of women in senior management positions have soft solutions – they are not obligatory and not subject to any sanctions [Terjesen, Aguilera, Lorenz 2015] – which makes the pace of achieving the equal representation of men and women in management slower than in countries with legal sanctions.

With 23% of women in supervisory and management boards of listed companies, Poland is below the EU-27 average of 30%. Nevertheless, we should

Figure 1. Share of women among members of supervisory and management boards of the largest listed companies in European countries in 2020



Source: own elaboration based on Eurostat data [Eurostat 2021].

note that over the last decade this indicator has more than doubled: from 10% in 2008 to 23% in 2020. Already in 2010, the Warsaw Stock Exchange recommended companies to promote women to management and supervisory boards and in 2011 reinforced this recommendation by recommending that online annual company reports should include information about the number of women and men in these positions³. Thanks to these soft solutions, there has been noticeable progress in the discussed area, although not satisfactory from the viewpoint of the European Commission's guidelines (40% by 2020).

The literature explains the low share of women in senior and top management positions with cultural factors and the stereotypical perception of roles played by women and men in the society. The research of American scientists shows that in recruitment for managerial positions men's skills are overestimated while women's – underestimated; also, by women themselves [Reuben et al. 2012; Wolfers 2006]. The norm is that it is men who lead, manage, and make business decisions, and a woman in the position of company president or CEO is a deviation from the norm and still a rare phenomenon. It is difficult to achieve critical mass in these positions, allowing to break the perception of women as less suitable for senior and top management positions [Erkut, Kramer, Konrad 2008]. Stereotypical approach disallows noticing that today women are qualified to perform managerial functions: women have a higher level of education than men, e.g., in Poland 47.6% of working women have higher education, while among working men it is only 28.6% [BAEL 2021, Table 2.2]. Women are more likely than men to graduate with majors related to business, administration, and law, with respectively 6.8% of working men and 19.1% of working women holding such an education profile [BAEL 2021, Table 2.20]. Women are also more likely than men to participate in postgraduate studies: in 2019, they accounted for 75% of graduates of such studies [GUS 2019], including mainly managerial studies related to business and administration.

The history of women in the public sphere is relatively short compared to that of men, and women's experience in managing organizations is even shorter, so women have not had time to build their own networks and develop forms of support like those in the male world. Therefore, it is much more difficult for women to be effective in communicating their managerial aspirations and obtaining the managerial positions to which they aspire.

One of the stereotypical statements has it that women do not want to take managerial positions because they require availability and women want to have time to fulfill themselves not only as employees but also as mothers. However, McKinsey's research conducted among 2000 female and male employees in five European countries shows that women are just as ambitious as men: 68% of women and 67% of men declared that they want to advance in the company structure, and 48% of women and 44% of men indicated that they aspire to a position of a board member. However, only 25% of women and as many as 42% of men believe that they can achieve these aspirations [McKinsey 2017:15].

Researchers point to numerous economic benefits [Lisowska 2010; Post, Byron 2014; Vishwakarma 2017; Dang et al. 2018; Fan et al. 2019; Martinez, Rambaud 2019] and non-economic benefits [Williams 2003; Mallin, Michelin 2011; Boulouta 2013; Hafsi, Turgut 2013; Adams et al. 2015; Harjoto, Laksmana, Lee 2015; Post, Rahman, McQuillen 2015; Byron, Post 2016; Glass, Cook, Ingersoll 2016; Zou et al. 2018] connected with the presence of women on management and supervisory boards. Previous studies and analyses allow us to conclude that the higher number of women in top managerial positions increases company's competitiveness in the market as people then perceive the company as a non-discriminating employer. Therefore, the company attracts talent, diverse teams are more efficient and innovative, and the presence of women in top decision-making positions make the company's product offer broader and better tailored to different groups of consumers, e.g., to women – who make most purchase decisions among customers [Scott 2021; Silverstein, Sayre 2009].

This knowledge reaches a growing number of employers in Poland, and therefore, more and more companies are implementing programs that strengthen the position of women in their organizations and promote them to top management positions.

Activities and Programs Implemented in Enterprises: Examples of Good Practices

Businesses operate within specific legal frameworks, both market-based and those regarding equal treatment in the workplace based on gender and other demographic and social characteristics of the

employed. After all, institutions influence business behavior. According to Scott, institutions mean the regulations, norms, and the cultural and ethical order of society [Scott 1995]. Institutional theory explains why organizations operating in a particular social environment behave similarly and why it is difficult for them to implement strategies related to openness to diversity and managing diverse workforces.

Institutions play an important role in stakeholders' legitimization of equality solutions and human capital diversity practices [Yang, Konrad 2011]. In those countries where institutions are oriented towards equal treatment and against any discrimination, it is easier to implement diversity management solutions because they are expected by stakeholders. According to Zhang [2020], social norms and regulations can influence employees, investors, and managers' attitudes toward gender diversity in the workplace. When people see diversity as a value in a country or industry that contributes to better decision-making and increased productivity, investors may prefer gender-diverse companies, and employees and managers may have a positive and accepting attitude toward such an approach. On the other hand, when diversity is not valued by society, investors may see it as detrimental to company performance and future results, and female employees may experience the stereotypical belittling of competencies. Thus, the institutional environment shapes people's attitudes toward diversity and its impact on corporate performance.

While institutional theory explains the homogeneity of organizations and indicates reasons for the difficulty in practicing diversity, resource theory is at its core based on heterogeneity [Barney, Clark 2007]. Humanity operates with limited resources – physical, financial, human, and natural – so companies must make optimal use of them to achieve competitive advantage in the marketplace. Considering this theory, human resource diversity is a desirable activity from the perspective of building competitive advantage. The implementation of diversity management practices generates resources that are scarce and difficult to imitate by market competitors.

In Poland, companies focused on diversity and benefiting from the implementation of diversity management strategies are in the minority. However, we should note that over the years 2012–2021 – since the establishment of the Diversity Charter by the Responsible Business Forum – the number of its signatories has visibly increased: from 40 to 233

[FOB 2021]. Joining the Diversity Charter is voluntary and for many years it was free of charge, only since January 2019 does it involve a one-off fee for large and medium-sized companies. By signing the Diversity Charter, each employer undertakes to respect the principle of equality (prohibition of discrimination) in the workplace and to take measures to create and promote diversity inside and outside its organization, but also to express its readiness to involve all employees and business partners in activities promoting diversity. One of such activities listed in the Charter is women empowerment in the organization and their promotion to leadership positions, including the highest level. This process consists of all kinds of anti-discrimination documents and procedures included in the strategy, used in all areas of the company's operation, namely recruitment, working conditions, professional development, work-life balance, and performance appraisal. However, to eliminate the historical burden of negative stereotypes of the supposedly inferior management competence of women, what is of particular importance are special programs for women. These programs seek to foster self-esteem among women by highlighting their talents and encouraging them to apply for senior and top management positions in the organization.

The literature foregrounds that women notice and positively perceive job advertisements that present an equal approach in content and image. Moreover, such advertisements induce them to apply for a given position [Avery, McKay 2006]. Employers' assurances – in both internal and external communication – that they promote women to leadership positions and how the former implement the assurances are perceived better by women with a strong gender identity than women who identify with their gender less [Martins, Parsons 2007]. Strong female gender identity is associated with a lack of motivation to enter male-dominated areas, and thus explains why women shy away from top management positions and are less visible than men in applying for such positions. Various incentives addressed to talented female employees result in enhancing their potential and, consequently, in their greater interest in managerial positions. Moreover, the implementation of such programs is an important part of the process of change in the perception of women and their treatment as the main or only caregivers of children and their lack of availability or willingness to be mobile due to care responsibilities. This stereotype assumes that every woman is entangled in a conflict of professional and parental roles and

cannot or does not want to undertake tasks that reinforce this conflict. Meanwhile, it is very easy to mitigate the conflict of roles, both through government policies leading to an increase in the number of childcare institutions and the promotion of fathers' involvement in childcare, not to mention company-level work-life balance activities addressed not only to mothers but fathers as well. It is necessary to go beyond the stereotype of women as sole caretakers of homes and recognize the fact that both parents have responsibilities in caring for and raising children, and to recognize women's talents, commitment to work, and career ambitions.

Since Poland became a member of the European Union, there is a law prohibiting discrimination on the labor market and a law that allows for the implementation of solutions that equalize opportunities for women in access to managerial positions of various levels. The law is undoubtedly conducive to promoting women wherever they are underrepresented. Nevertheless, the social and cultural norms prevalent in Poland create a bad climate for diversity and action to combat gender-based stereotyping and exclusion in the workplace. Therefore, still few employers believe that more women in management means more benefits for the company. Therefore, it is worthwhile to communicate good practices in this area as a benchmark for others.

Programs implemented by companies active on the Polish market, mainly those with foreign capital, mostly form **networks of cooperation for women** in organizations, usually created from the bottom up, accepted and supported by the company's management. Such women networks serve the purpose of integration and exchange of experience, discussion about women in the organization and its international branches, training in various areas identified as important, necessary, and useful to women, mutual support and articulation of achievements, development of individual plans, and influence on the company's HR policy. Examples of such networks include Women in Capgemini; Women Polish Chapter at Microsoft; Discovery Women's Network at TVN Discovery Poland; Council of Women in IT initiative at the Credit Suisse Poland bank; Veolia Leaders; Women in Leadership at Henkel Poland; Women@HPE Poland at Hewlett Packard; Businesswomen's Lodge present in all branches of PwC in Poland; Citi Women's Network [FOB 2019; FOB 2020].

Relatively often the implemented programs offer **mentoring and coaching** addressed to women in the organization that seek to support their profes-

sional development aimed at assuming a managerial position. For example, Dentsu Polska implemented internal mentoring that includes several cooperating pairs of a female manager and a female employee [FOB 2019; FOB 2020]. In turn, Orange Polska uses job shadowing, which consists in spending a certain amount of time with a person from whom you can learn something while observing them at work. This is a program aimed at newly appointed managers or directors, and it is recommended that a woman shadow a man and a man shadow a woman⁴.

The least frequent are practices directly related to increasing the number of women on management boards, namely setting a benchmark to be achieved within a certain period and monitoring the achievement of this goal. For example, Philip Morris Poland assumed that, by 2022, it would increase the share of women on management positions to 40% and Santander Bank Poland would do the same by 2025.

Some companies empower women as part of their diversity policy. Orange Polska has a program called Razem.One (Together.They), which focuses on four blocks: (1) Power, i.e. giving women the strength to act, to reach higher and achieve better results, both at work and in their private lives, through various types of training, among other things; (2) Ambition, i.e. encouraging women to apply for managerial positions; (3) Presence, i.e. increasing the presence of women in IT areas; (4) Awareness, i.e. spreading knowledge about the actions taken under the diversity policy and building balanced teams. This scheme conducts periodical analysis of the number of women and men in specialist and managerial positions and the conditions of employment in equivalent positions (including the analysis of remuneration levels by gender), along with the analysis of women and men participation in the recruitment process.

BNP Paribas Bank Polska launched a similar program in 2020, "Women Changing BNP Paribas." The project creators distinguished five thematic zones addressed to women: Power, Bloom, Voice, Change, and Openness. There is also a Women Up program launched to support women in discovering their strengths, develop soft skills, and use the potential of women in management at all levels [FOB 2020].

Another similar initiative is the #SantanderWomen program, an internal online platform through with workshops organized for women to enhance their leadership qualities and encourage them to apply for managerial positions. Within the framework of diversity management, the Santander Bank Polska

group strives to achieve a balanced representation of women and men at all positions, including those in management and supervisory bodies. In 2020, a series "You've got the power" and "Mastermind" workshops took place with the aim to inspire women to develop their leadership competencies and to share knowledge and experience among the participants. Santander cooperates with the Vital Voices Polska Foundation and the Lesław Paga Foundation, which support women in business. Female leaders of the Santander Bank Polska group act as mentors and pass on their practical knowledge by participating in conferences and panel discussions organized by these foundations⁵.

Summary

As institutional theory suggests, gender board diversity may be perceived negatively by employers and stakeholder groups in societies that lack good climate for equality and diversity because it causes adaptation difficulties. At the same time, many studies show that diverse teams make better decisions because they consider many different perspectives, generate more ideas, are more creative, innovative, and better able to align decisions with implementation opportunities. Employing women in management boards is a signal to investors, consumers, shareholders, and potential employees that the company's actions respect the law and social values. In this way, the information flowing to stakeholders indirectly conveys that the company has a policy of equal opportunities in employment, includes needs of women and minorities in the development of products and services, and is socially responsible. All this contributes to positioning the company as more competitive in the marketplace. After all, according to resource theory, in a competitive world of limited resources – including human resources – companies must seek opportunities that differentiate them in the market. Orientation toward diversity is exactly such an opportunity.

The knowledge that diversity pays off is gradually reaching employers in Poland, as evidenced by the fact that the number of signatories to the Diversity Charter has grown eightfold from 2012 to 2021, ranging from large foreign companies through homegrown enterprises of varying sizes to public institutions like government agencies and universities. However, the most convinced and advanced in implementing diversity policies remain subsidiar-

ies of large multinational corporations, which follow the example of their parent companies in introducing solutions aimed at creating a more diverse work environment, convinced that this is good for business. These solutions include those aimed at increasing the participation of women in management staff.

The most frequent practices implemented in companies that operating on the Polish market include internal networks of women for the exchange of knowledge and experience, mentoring, and coaching programs, but also comprehensive professional development programs for women employed in the companies. Some firms set periodic targets for women participation in management boards. Other companies communicate externally that they attach great importance to gender diversity in management by engaging in initiatives undertaken by NGOs to strengthen women's potential.

The above study was based on the critical analysis of the literature on organization theory and resource theory. Moreover, the study overviewed all good practices sent by companies to Responsible Business Forum's (FOB) reports of 2019 and 2020, and the information obtained from representatives of two companies about programs implemented by them to empower women in their organizations. The main limitation of the study was the relatively low number of companies that disclose solutions to promote women to managerial positions. Therefore, it is advisable that future research continues the process of collecting good practices in this area to spread knowledge about the possible activities aimed at strengthening women's potential and promoting them to top positions in company structures.

¹ Article 8 stipulates: "In all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women." Article 157 (4) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union explicitly refers to equal treatment in the professional sphere and the application of special compensatory measures: "With a view to ensuring full equality in practice between men and women in working life, the principle of equal treatment shall not prevent any Member State from maintaining or adopting measures providing for specific advantages in order to make it easier for the under-represented sex to pursue a vocational activity or to prevent or compensate for disadvantages in professional careers." See Official Journal of the EU C83/49 of March 30, 2010.

- ² Article 23 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights "Equality between women and men" states the following: "Equality between women and men must be ensured in all areas, including employment, work and pay. The principle of equality shall not prevent the maintenance or adoption of measures providing for specific advantages in favour of the under-represented sex" [Karta 2021].
- ³ Resolution No. 17/1249/2010 of the Supervisory Board of the Warsaw Stock Exchange of May 19, 2010, concerning the adoption of the Code of Best Practice for WSE Listed Companies; Resolution No. 20/1287/2011 of the Supervisory Board of Warsaw Stock Exchange of October 19, 2011, concerning the adoption of Best Practice for WSE Listed Companies.
- ⁴ Information obtained from a person employed by Orange Polska as part of a discussion during postgraduate studies at SGH.
- ⁵ Management Report on the Activities of the Group of Santander Bank Polska SA in 2020 obtained by e-mail from the bank's representative.

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