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## **Women in Management. Addressing the Issues of Social Structure and Education**

### **ABSTRACT**

The paper is part of the interdisciplinary considerations on the management of organisations and the participation of women in these processes. The presented approach combines the science of management with the sociology of education. It allows the analysis of macro-social aspects of women's functioning and micro-social aspects related to the functioning of women at the top of corporate power. The article is based on a management survey published in 2019, which concerns issues of mutual relations between education, socialisation, and the place of women in the social structure or the selection of co-workers. It is qualitative research that does not allow for the generalisation of conclusions to the entire population of Polish managers (or, more precisely, managers working in Poland), but the representativeness of a typological nature has been preserved. It means that the interviewees represented distinguished types of managers, mainly due to the industry and the type of position. The study concerned the highest-ranking company managers, Chief Executive Directors (CEO), and members of the company's boards with various academic diplomas.

### **Keywords:**

women, management, CEOs, social structure, education

### **INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

Women's social role and place in the social structure have undergone profound transformations in recent years, as well as in Poland (cf. Kotlarska-Michalska,

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2011, pp. 28–31; Magda, 2019, pp. 10–11). Education, which has been and still is considered conducive to obtaining the highest positions in social life, has become an important factor facilitating changes (cf. Banaszak, 2006; 2011). In this paper, I address the issue of women in management and, more specifically, women holding top managerial positions in companies. Mainly, I try to show the importance of education in these structural shifts, both in the sense of socialisation and selection (Szymański, 1996; 2013).

Thus, the adopted perspective falls within the sociology of education enriched by studying the social structure of modern societies (Banaszak, 2019). Such an approach, combining at least several disciplines that constitute the field of social sciences, provides an expanded perspective on the phenomena and processes in question, as well as an expanded analytical approach. Finally, it allows shifting perspectives and moving from what is seen in the macro view to what is available to the micro view, from macro communities to micro societies, as well as the educational, social, cultural or economic phenomena and processes occurring in them (cf. Mintzberg, 2005).

The empirical reference point for the present considerations is a managerial survey published in 2019 (Banaszak, 2019). It provides substantive empirical data and a heuristic inspiration in analysing modern social and educational phenomena and processes occurring in the management structures of organisations (cf. Byham & Dixon, 1993). They allow a multilateral analysis of management processes, the representation of women in management and their mutual relations with education.

## **THE NOTION OF MANAGER AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

Let us begin by determining who a manager is in an organisation and society. It is worth noting that some publications begin with a declaration that it is difficult to define a concept. In the case of managers, this is not such a complicated task. Moreover, it should be considered that this otherwise fundamental term for organisational analysis has a relatively well-established sense (cf. Banaszak, 2006; 2011; 2019). Of course, different practical interpretations are possible, and there are differences in practical applications of the term in question in different countries. Nevertheless, most researchers agree that a manager means a person who manages an enterprise or a part of it and the career of others.

The significance of managers' role should be derived from this in a particular organisation and society. Directing someone's work, managing human teams, and

finally, planning, organising, and controlling the work of others is not an easy task, requiring special qualifications and competences, highly complex and far-reaching in its consequences. Especially when we consider that in English-speaking countries, the noun *executive* refers to the general concept of a management-level employee. The adjective, in turn, has the meaning of executive and director, as in the phrases *executive board* and *executive director*. The following phrases are extremely important in modern business practice: *chief executive* and *chief executive officer*. The former is characteristic of British English, the latter for an American one, in which it occurs mainly as an acronym and is written with capital letters: CEO (cf. Banaszak, 2006, pp. 19–21).

Nowadays, the notion of leadership has become very popular. It is often used and sometimes also abused. It has long been firmly established in the management sciences but is now entering educational studies, and finally, everyday organisational practice. Therefore, it is worth emphasising that the concept of a leader can be considered in terms of authority. It is how the term leader functions among the representatives of management sciences (cf. Drucker, 2006; Kotter, 2001).

An important factor differentiating a manager and a leader is formal legitimacy to exercise authority. While a manager, *ex definitione*, is appointed to run the affairs of a company, a leader does not need formal legitimacy. Instead, her/his distinctive feature are the followers who voluntarily follow her/him and who carry out her/his will. A leader is also more than a manager focused on creating a vision, direct communication, and bringing together people who share common values (cf. Collins, 2001).

Like the English language analysed in this paper, every language has a rich lexical resource denoting specific terms. Therefore, other words used in English to denote managers are director and conductor. They are chronologically earlier than executive (Banaszak, 2006, pp. 20–21). The latter, meaning leading, directing, was used in a similar sense in, among others, Thorstein Veblen's memorandum (2000/1918), which the author devoted to higher education in America and university management by businessmen.

Finally, in modern English, there is the word *supervisor*. In the very act of supervising human work, there is an element of management, and certainly of authority, even in the very general sense of both terms. A supervisor is someone who, among other things, monitors the actions of subordinates. Therefore, the problem lies in whether activities related to supervision may be considered to fall under the definition of management. For example, Charles Wright Mills (2002) considers them as such. The organisational practice of many businesses and non-business organisations is also moving in this direction.

Therefore, trying to outline our own position in terms of capturing the meaning of the word manager, let us assume that we will apply it to those employees of modern organisations who manage other people's work, coordinate it, and make decisions. At the same time, we will not reduce managers only to decisions of a strategic nature for the organisation, but we will also include in this category people who deal with activities of an operational nature (cf. Banaszak, 2019).

## **CONTEMPORARY MANAGERIAL ROLES**

Certainly, in analysing the roles of contemporary managers, we should emphasise their growing importance and social impact. And I do not mean here fame or recognition, but the creation of social networks, connections, real influence, which managers realise through organisations and associations of a diverse (industry, local, business) nature (cf. Banaszak, 2006; 2011; 2019).

Apart from the roles considered on a macro scale, it should be pointed out how the organisational roles of managers, i.e., those performed on a micro scale, in a 'natural' environment, i.e., in a company, have changed in recent decades. The changes concern both basic issues, mainly planning, organising, motivating and controlling, image, relations with the organisation's social environment, and personal development. It is not surprising, as the organisations themselves have changed. Although they retain their national features, nevertheless the managers themselves, due to the globalisation of modern markets (product and capital), have become more modern, change-oriented and, thanks to the unfettered transfer of information, benefit from good practices and cultural patterns from other countries (cf. Drucker, 2006; Banaszak, 2019).

Besides, managerial work is the work that requires a combination of various factors: from personal, through organisational, economic, cultural, etc. Its effects, in turn, are deferred in time, which means that what managers do today will be reflected in concrete results in a few or several months. It is also associated with risk and uncertainty. It affects both the perception of managers themselves and the evaluation of their work. It becomes more complex than executive work and implicates trust as an intrinsic element (Banaszak, 2019).

When analysing the place and role of managers in society, I use a model developed earlier, which assumes the combination of the macro and micro social perspective (cf. Banaszak 2006; 2011). It means not only the juxtaposition of both angles but, above all, their mutual permeation and complementation. In turn, in social reality, it means the occurrence of various structures that enter into mutual

relations that build a relatively complete picture of the analysed social phenomena and processes.

In the case of managers, these assumptions call for analyses of the natural environment, i.e., an organisation, as well as analyses of the social position of managers. Organisations in this approach are treated not only as a place to work and spend time but as complex systems of positions and social roles played by managers and other participants. Research problems of interest include recruitment and selection of modern human resources (not only managers), training (understood both as education, including academic education, as well as training, courses, etc.), education (understood as an intra-organizational system of raising qualifications and as mutual learning from each other, and finally as secondary socialisation related to performing managerial roles), intra-organizational communication, management styles, organisational culture, conflict and ways of dealing with conflict, mutual attitudes of managers and subordinates or forms of dismissing employees not only in the formal-legal perspective but from the point of view of long-term relationships (cf. Banaszak, 2011; 2019).

The key issue is also the location of managers in the social structure (in this case, in the class-state structure) and the presentation of mutual relations with other categories of persons, particularly the owners of capital, professionals, workers, etc. This perspective also includes the cultural point of view, which includes not only the traditionally understood participation in culture but also the lifestyle of managers, which is characteristic and may be the main factor distinguishing them from other social categories (cf. Weber, 2013; Kozyr-Kowalski, 1993; Banaszak, 2006; 2011).

Various inter- and transdisciplinary accounts of the latest phenomena and processes of the modern, globalised world also play an important role in the macro-social perspective. All of them are inspired by the crisis of the capitalist model of the economy that hit the system in 2008. Some of them, however, as now Thomas Piketty (2015) or Guy Standing (2011), go far beyond an examination of what has been said and written about the crisis. They constitute independent proposals that could be counted as successful attempts at an exploratory approach to recent social phenomena and processes. In all the books, managerial issues are also present, almost at the forefront.

## **WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT IN THE FACE OF DISCRIMINATORY PROCESSES**

This capitalist economic system, especially in formal regulations, defends itself against discrimination, including discrimination in management and, more

broadly, in the labour market. Formally. In this article, however, the formal point of view is transcended. The aim is to shed light on social phenomena and processes that accompany women in the upper ranks of corporate power. Admittedly, the issues of discrimination are not unique and not even fundamental. Nevertheless, considering the social importance of the issue and the possibility of getting to know the opinions of these processes' main actors, it is worth analysing this field of functioning of contemporary managers as well.

The analysis of the place and role of women in management should begin with the important issue of the generic division of labour. Based on recent empirical reports, the percentage of women in managerial positions is high in Poland. Not only on the European scale but even worldwide. The world average is 24%, for the European Union 27%, and for Poland 34%. Thus, we can say that more than one-third of all managers are women. In Europe, we are surpassed only by Lithuania and Estonia, the small Baltic states, where this percentage is 36%. However, we are on a par with Italy, which is larger and has a longer capitalist tradition. On the other hand, lower rates are recorded by economies with a long tradition, such as Germany (23%), Great Britain (22%) and – outside Europe – the United States (21%). Definite world leaders are the Philippines (47%), Indonesia (43%) and Thailand (42%) (cf. *Sfeminizowany polski biznes*, 2018). Therefore, due to not fully comparable cultural and educational conditions, such a high percentage of women employed in managerial positions in relation to other European Union countries is something to be proud of.

However, it is important to recognise that this is only the beginning. Especially that the quoted data are general and concern average values and a wide range of managerial positions in the economy. In the highest positions, those of CEOs and members of company boards, the situation is not so optimistic, as only 8% of women are board members. However, I express the view that it is still a matter of time before the share of women in the management of organisations will steadily increase.

Assuming even the minimum rationality of economy, one must conclude that women, who in Poland constitute the majority of university graduates and the majority of students, will soon find a place at the highest levels of management. It means that they will soon supersede men and usher in an era of female supremacy in management. And it will not be revolutionary in terms of a revolution or coup but as a result of a historical process that began in Poland with the breakthrough of 1989.

For the time being, however, analyses pointing to still deep segregation divisions in society and within organisations, including economic organisations, are confirmed by factual data. So is the division into the centre and periphery of

organisations along gender lines. It means that women occupy still less prominent positions whilst men occupy top management.

In turn, the so-called glass cliff is becoming an interesting new phenomenon, i.e., entrusting women with high and responsible positions, but in conditions of market instability and turbulence. They make the function extremely difficult to maintain, being all the time exposed to criticism (cf. Ryan et al., 2011). In further considerations, especially in the analyses of the women's statements, we will see whether this state of affairs was in line with the respondents' experiences.

## **MAIN ASSUMPTIONS AND DIRECTIONS OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES**

Twenty-four managers participated in the managerial survey, conducted from 2018 to 2019. Interviewees' engagement with the interview issues varied, corresponding to varying interview lengths; however, in each case, the interviews significantly deepened information that could be gleaned from a survey, for example. Interviewees responded with understanding, thoughtfully, elaborating on threads identified by the researcher (Banaszak, 2019).

Two of the interviewees conditioned their participation in the study on their prior reading of the list of interview instructions. In doing so, they explained that the reason for their 'caution' were clauses in their employment contracts or the of their appointment to company boards. The interviewees, with one exception, were managers with several years of experience in high managerial positions. Their age was 40 and more. It was the researcher's intention, i.e., to reach out to experienced persons, both in terms of a professional career and in the context of reminiscences related to the family home, educational choices, first job, participation of third parties in these decision-making processes (Banaszak, 2019).

The selection of individuals for the managerial research was non-probabilistic. It was a combination of purposive sampling, based on specific and predefined criteria (top management function, a minimum of two places of employment and a minimum of several years of experience in a top managerial position) and selection according to the principles of the so-called snowball effect (cf. Kubinowski, 2013; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 2014; Babbie 2015). The former implies the identification of specific individuals, while the latter means identifying individuals 'on the spot' already in the course of the survey, i.e., referring to individuals indicated by other respondents as meeting the assumed criteria. It happened in a few cases, while in a dozen or so cases, particular managers were included in surveyed units earlier, based on the adopted criteria and the initial contact.

Regarding the generic differentiation of interviewees, the researcher did not have a pre-developed, rigid criterion. Rather, the aim was to include both women and men in the study without a clearly defined 'quota'. Nevertheless, previous studies (cf. Banaszak, 2011) unambiguously revealed that women are present in managerial positions, including the highest ones. Their declining share as they move towards the highest positions in corporations is a separate issue, but, as I have been with pleasure emphasising for years, I treat this state of affairs as temporary and transitory.

In this edition of the survey, the typological representation of women also emerged somewhat spontaneously. Seven surveyed female managers representing large, well-known international and Polish companies and the highest positions in the management structure constituted an extremely important point of reference. Their opinions provided many important conclusions, sometimes even guiding inferences. And although in a qualitative study referring to ratios does not make much sense, I would like to note with satisfaction that the representation of women in this study significantly exceeds that known from official statistics. Above all, however, the representation of a somewhat different point of view is a distinct feature of this edition of the survey, which was based entirely on in-depth interviews.

## **WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT ABOUT THEMSELVES**

I begin my analysis of the women's narratives with the upbringing and socialisation aspects. They are important because these early experiences build individuals' social personalities and identities. At the same time, they show relative durability and influence on subsequent lives and biographies. Against this background, the statement of an experienced female manager, who represents a difficult and rather 'male' industry, is quite significant.

After the war, they completed their education, and dad worked in the army, he was a sapper, and later he had his own small construction company, he managed this company and employed people, he did renovations and built houses. And my mom was also economically oriented. She didn't finish..., she didn't continue her education, because she had three children. But my mom was also a humanist, so in fact, she had a huge influence on me, she worked... eventually she was... I mean, at the beginning of her career, she was an accountant, and later she worked in a store, so she was a salesman, oh yeah, a saleswoman. And she really influenced me a lot on who I am, she talked to me a lot, she said a lot of things about life. She didn't complicate any challenges for me, she trusted me a lot. (Chairwoman, 58)



It is an interesting statement because it reveals some barely perceptible sources of influence, which constitute important factors determining the interviewee's future professional and life course. Some elements of the quoted statement have the character of self-analysis made post factum, and from the perspective of specific experience. Nevertheless, they are worth taking into account in the analysis. Although a social researcher does not have quantifiable tools to measure the sincerity of the interviewees, I am inclined to consider the respondent's statements, referring to my own research experience and managerial practice, as highly credible. An interesting thread in the interviewee's statement is precisely her awareness of the intertwining of past and future, of early experiences with the present day, of the relationship between family life and the course of professional life.

Also my life and that poor family, a little bit of deprivation, but I didn't suffer too much because I just lived like that. I can approach life with humility. I can also approach life with humility because I used to sail, and sailing is such a thing that sometimes you have to reach the destination, and you sail against the wind, so it doesn't scare me. I just look for possibilities, how to do it, how to achieve such a goal, and this humility has been in my life for a long time. (Chairwoman, 58)

At this point, one should also refer to the interviewee's experience, both in life and in her profession. We could then state that she is far above average in her reflectivity and ability to conclude from sometimes barely perceptible everyday events. At the same time, as I would like to emphasise again in my assessment, she is authentic. She does not 'play' the role written for the interview. She rather focuses on the questions and formulates answers prompted by her current state of consciousness, accumulated experiences, and reflections.

Another interlocutor is slightly more categorical in her judgments and pragmatic, so to speak, she also has a technical degree, acquired almost two decades later. Her family history is also quite different. She speaks mainly in the spirit of professional pragmatism, emphasising that she is oriented towards implementing specific and strictly imposed tasks.

I don't see differences between men and women... Or at least I don't judge and don't think this way. When I'm hiring – what matters to me is only qualifications, not some other things. I have had good experiences with both men and women. And in the company, there is an overwhelming majority of men, so you know... The demand for qualified engineers is huge, so there is no room for picking and choosing. (Director, 42)

Working for a huge American corporation obliges her to fulfil her duties, especially since she is one of the most experienced employees in the Polish branch and holds one of the most prominent positions in technical solutions. Her judgments are imbued with organisational rationality and a kind of acceptance of the game's rules.

At the same time, I treat this attitude in formal terms, i.e., I assume that she approves the employment terms (contract) and, in order to remain in compliance with administrative requirements and, at the same time, not to violate internal convictions, she tries to represent the interests of the company in the best sense. Clearly and without ambiguity. There is no question of 'winking at' the researcher, for example, with regard to the internal governance or specific solutions. There is no impression that there are any further, informal 'additions' hidden behind the interviewee's opinions, that she does not identify with the company's values or dissociates herself from them. On the contrary, the impression prevails that one is engaged in a dialogue with a company representative and that her statements could constitute an official 'interpretation' of the internal order – its logic, corpus of values, and artefacts. Therefore, it is worth returning to the previous interviewee, who is in charge of a large logistics company, because she also presents an attitude that is fully 'representative' of the company. However, she adds the humanising dimension of internal relations to this picture.

Our company has a value system. One of the elements is trust, open minds, broad horizons, and team. I care a lot about people, they are very important to me. I try to be a fair boss who can be trusted. (...) But how I approach, I talk to people, we look for common solutions; sometimes people's habits and their perspective on something that happens at work is different from mine, so I try to talk, I am persistent... (Chairwoman, 58)

I would like to point out, not only by analysing the interview transcript with the manager in question but also by referring back to the audio recording and my own notes made immediately after the interview, that she places a clear emphasis on the values that organise everyday professional life. She adheres to them, cherishes them, and promotes them. They are guideposts of sorts for her and, as one might suspect, are fully internalised, also in the sense that they permanently organise daily professional life, being an important point of reference.

Although it is difficult to state explicitly that each employee equally acquires this catalogue of values, the interviewee's statements testify that she emphasises training and development with regard to the corpus of 'corporate' values. I deliberately put the word 'corporate' in quotation marks as trust, fairness of assessments,

or placing human needs at the centre are all within the framework of general social values. They are only adapted in a specific way to the conditions of functioning of a microstructure such as a company. The issue of axionormative regulators of everyday life is also present in the statements of many managers interviewed. The words of one of them, an experienced director of a well-known publishing house, are significant.

After graduation, I stayed at the university because the professor (we were on the same wavelength) asked me to be his assistant. At that time, it was still an assistantship, and I stayed really with the idea that I would just do my PhD in 5 years and 10 years and get the Nobel Prize. Really! I know this is naive. Now, in retrospect, I know it is very naive. Certainly, but I had some kind of a scientist gene in me. (Director, Editor-in-Chief, 52)

This interviewee, commenting on her own educational and life choices, also refers, at least indirectly, to specific values and social norms. It is rather a consequence of her 'immersion' in everyday life that she assesses those actions as naive. The complex structure of the respondent's speech and her professional trajectories indicate that she uses a clearly defined, realised and internalised corpus of values. Thus, the same states of affairs and processes, which the interviewee calls naive from the perspective of several decades, could be described as ambitious goal setting and persistence accompanying their implementation. The analysis of the statements of the interviewed manager referring to managing people makes this direction of conclusions plausible.

## **FINAL REMARKS**

The quoted opinions of the studied women holding the highest positions in companies indicate their correct functioning in these structures. Not only do the interviewed women perform very well, achieving very high results, but they are also devoid of any prejudice against others. It could even be argued that involvement in work, strategic thinking and decision-making almost completely frees the interviewees both from idealising their own work and from processes aimed at contesting it. Their primary goal is to act and achieve aims rather than address systemic issues. However, it does not mean they are unaware of certain barriers, segregation, and discrimination processes. The interviewed women know that they function in a predominantly male world. Nevertheless, it does not constitute a problem for them, but only a specific point of reference.

Another conclusion is that the women who participated in the study do not have any particular type of academic background in common. Although it is impossible to do a clear statistical thesis, it requires a different measurement organisation. Nevertheless, it is characteristic within the surveyed units. This situation certainly reflects certain 'market' tendencies, which have been present for the last dozen or so years and tend to lead to an almost complete abandonment of formally certified qualifications of a particular type.

This bold turn away from the credential employment policy of individual institutions, to a greater extent observable in corporations than in non-economic organisations, expressed in visible market trends, means the use of other, rather non-quantifiable criteria, included in the category of soft competencies. Opinions of the surveyed female managers fit into this model of the employment market. They abound in various ideas of diagnosing these competences of a new type. In a sense, they also undermine popular and certain professional beliefs about the necessity to 'shift' the education system, especially academic education, to narrowly specialised education as a kind of response to immediate and temporary market demand.

The interviewees did not use generic criteria when evaluating colleagues and job candidates. Such a declaration implies using only merit-based criteria for evaluating employees. The division into men and women becomes simply non-merit-based in the organisation. These are only declarations but supported by tangible management practices, making them more plausible. For the researcher of social phenomena and forms of management, they also mean a perceptible turn in employment relationships, fostering the exposure of specific competencies and probably the clarification of intentions.

The conclusions drawn from the study should be tied with an educational buckle. On the one hand, we are dealing with big and permanent changes in attitudes towards women, especially towards women holding top positions in companies, while on the other hand, we are facing an unprecedented entry of women into the sphere of academic education. Every year more women than men obtain university degrees, thus gaining a pass to perform managerial roles in business and beyond it. Therefore, the changes occurring in management structures are interesting to follow. Perhaps soon, management will become a female domain.

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