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# Professional Activation of Women and Flexible Forms of Employment, as Exemplified by Gig Economy

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**Abstract**

The aim of the article is to present the idea of Gig Economy as a flexible form of employment, which may serve as an opportunity to break the cycle of professional passivity among women in a macroeconomic scale. The author presents data on unemployment and access to employees on the labor market, and compares them with a relatively low level of professional activity among women. The article explores the issue of motivation to undertake professional activity, discusses the barriers to building a professional path by women, and indicates the potential influence of flexible forms of employment, based on the example of gig economy, on the improvement of the professional situation of women. Based on the available reports, secondary data and source literature the author identifies the basic social factors which impact the growth of professional activity among women, indicating the relationship between flexible forms of employment and the state of the labor market, expressed through the activeness of women.

Keywords: gig economy, woman , professional activity, labor market, flexibility

## 1 Introduction

Many companies are currently struggling with a lack of talent and competency among employees. The problem of limited access to employees is experienced by over half of entrepreneurs in Poland (according to the MIK index), affecting their financial situation and directly impacting competitiveness. At the same time, according to Eurostat, unemployment in Europe is constantly decreasing (Poland is experiencing the lowest unemployment rate since 1990).

The Labor force survey shows that the rate of unemployment in Europe in 2022 equaled 6.6%. In Poland that figure was 2.6%, the second lowest figure in Europe after the Czech Republic (2.3%). Lack of access to employees, which largely hiders the functioning of business enterprises, it thus a real problem which employers are facing. The strategic aspect of enterprise development is determined by optimal qualitative and quantitative resources in term of personnel. If these resources are not satisfied, the perspective of strategic growth is disrupted. Problems with access to employees are the reason why employers in Europe, particularly in Poland, are forced to resort to non-standard forms of employment. According to Tomasz Oleksyn, the tendency to broaden the scope of work, accompanied by a consolidation of professions and specializations, requires a replenishment of professional resources and closer inspection of the previously unused workforce, i.e. women. The contribution of the paper is an examination of the problem of lack of access to employees and ways for employers in Europe, particularly

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in Poland, to cope with this problem. The article presents potential solutions to this problem by utilizing previously unused workforce – women in new ways of work i.e.gig economy.

## 2 Methods

The author of this paper applied a critical analysis of source literature, an analysis of secondary data, as well as synthesis.

The literature overview was conducted to identify the professional situation of women in the labor market, expressed by the indicator of their professional activity, and the possible impact of flexible forms of work, based on the example of gig economy, on the improvement of their professional situation. The overview was focused on information regarding motivation to undertake professional activity and the barriers to building a professional career for women in Poland. The selection of the subject of study, i.e. the determination of the set of publications which constituted the subject of the analysis, was conducted in two steps – from a preliminary verification of the available literature on the situation of women in the labor market, from the point of view of usefulness and thematic correspondence, to a reliably selected base of studied literature. The preliminary search was conducted in four main databases: EBSCO, Emerald Insight, EMIS, ProQuest, and was based on the following keywords: gig economy, professional activity of women, labor market, flexibility. The selection of primary source literature was based on full-text databases and on generally available statistical data (GUS, Eurostat, MIK, Gender Data Portal).

The process of revising available literature and statistical data allowed the author to specify the aim of the article, which is to answer the following research questions:

1) What is the state of women's professional activity, in relation to men?
2) What are the main reasons for women's professional passivity in Poland?
3) Can gig economy contribute to an increase in women's professional activity in the labor market?

The formulation of research questions made it possible to generate a research hypothesis, that the idea of gig economy as a flexible form of work is an opportunity for women in Poland to become active professionally. The selection criteria for the available set of literature was then subjected to the aim of the study, based on publication date (not earlier than 1/2016), which facilitated a significant reduction of literature and the final selection of articles for close reading, extraction of data, and text exploration.

## 3 Literature review

### *3.1 The Idea of Gig Economy*

The term 'gig economy' originated in the United States, and is a type of sharing economy consisting of a flexible form of cooperation, usually based on short-term agreements (Laukkanen,Tura 2020). The term was first used and introduced by American journalist and entrepreneur Tina Brown, in order to describe the flexible labor market after the global economic crisis of 2008. In Poland gig economy is understood as occasional (freelance) work economy or sharing economy, which means hiring employees to work on a specific project and remuneration based on contract fulfillment (Dazzi,2019). Izabela Ostoj highlights the fact that gig economy mainly consists in providing services online or offline using digital platforms, possible due to the dynamic and universal application of technology in the labor market. According the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) gig economy is a form of activity in which there is an ordering party (an employer with a specific task/order/project or 'gig' to perform) and a contractor, i.e. a freelancer or 'gigger', who enters into a short-term agreement to perform the service (Ashfor, et at., 2018). These gigs can belong to entirely different areas, have different aims and characters, however, they are based on the need of an ordering party and on the existing possibilities and resources (knowledge, abilities and time) of people who are ready to perform them (Aroles et al.,2020). Tasks, projects, specific activities can be assigned to short-term employees, who provide the completed results of their work in a specified time and for specific remuneration (Duggan et al., 2020). The biggest advantage of this form of cooperation, according to both employers and giggers, is flexibility and freedom of action. Through controlling most aspects of work, from place and method (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017) to task selection, one achieves more independence and greater work-life balance (Jabagi et al., 2019).

Work in a gig economy is often characterized by high intensity accompanied by anonymity, as a large group of giggers never meet their employers or any representatives of their organizations, performing their services remotely, in most cases without any formal preparatory training in their positions (Barley et al., 2017). Changing nearly all conventions and norms which accompany traditional employment (including the visible distance of authority and the hierarchical character of positions (Ravenelle, 2019), the gig economy model creates a constant dynamic interaction between the parties involved (in a partner relationship), oriented towards results and specific orders (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). The status of freelancers ascribed to giggers, which is considered an advantage, indicates less managerial control on the part of the ordering party (Shapiro, 2017) and a lack of strict supervision over gig employees (Norlander et al., 2021). This high level of autonomy and confidence in their independence attracts people who are highly task-oriented, and who display self-control and self-motivation to work (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019; Wood et al., 2019).

The fulfillment of professional obligations from any place in the world, flexible working time (Burke at al., 2020), autonomy and not being part of one company (Manyika at al., 2016) are not the only benefits of gig economy (Burtch at al.,2018). The idea of gig economy is a significant response to the problems of employers with access to full-time employees. Given that demand for employees and talent still exceeds supply, employers are increasingly turning to the idea of gig economy, remodeling the previous forms of work (Stanford, 2017). The growing popularity of new flexible forms of work, including gig economy, does not only result from low unemployment and shortage of human resources in firms but also from a new perception of employees and the workplace (Aroles et al., 2020). The period of pandemic has shown that many jobs can be done in a hybrid or remote manner, without the necessity to be present at the office (De Leede J. et al., 2019). The possibility to perform tasks remotely, projects based on the realization of specific aims evaluated on for their effect, and not merely spending an entire day at the company office (Maselli at al., 2016, Taylor at al. 2017), are forms of flexibility, which turned out to be possible and which spontaneously promoted itself during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gig economy is a response to the fast growing global business environment, and is in sharp contrast with the norms and rules of conventional employment (Harris & Krueger, 2015). From the point of view of the value of time for many enterprises, including the time devoted to the process of staff selection, in gig economy – contrary to conventional employment – the process of recruitment and selection is efficient and dynamic. Gig employees are employed quickly for specific projects and do not undergo long-term onboarding processes (Friedman, 2014). High competences of gig employees, their high level of professionalism and task-orientation (accompanied by the high quality of their performance) constitutes an advantage over the traditional employment model, often characterized by competency gaps among staff, who remain ineffective in their positions (Myhill, K. , Richards, J. , & Sang, K. 2021).

The possibilities resulting from such a form of cooperation increase chances of employment for women, who have remained professionally inactive and who seek flexibility which was unattainable in traditional employment. Moreover, they encourage women to be entrepreneurial (De Stefano, 2016). According to Taskmo Gig Index (TGI) – women's participation in sharing economy is increasing, as they put forward flexible working hours over stability. For many women, especially those with parental roles, flexibility of the labor market is a precondition for starting a professional career and for resolving the impasse, and this aspect is satisfied by the idea of gig economy (Harris, 2017). One of the notable advantages of harnessing the potential of women in the gig economy is their diverse skill set and expertise (Bench et al.,2015, Müller et al., 2022). By actively engaging women in flexible forms of employment, employers can access a wider talent pool, bringing in fresh perspectives and innovative ideas (Eagly et al.,2019). Women possess a broad range of skills, ranging from project management and creative problem-solving to communication and collaboration (Brescoll,2016, Fiske, 2018). Their unique capabilities can enhance the productivity and competitiveness of businesses across various sectors.

Furthermore, by actively recruiting women in the gig economy, employers can foster a more inclusive and diverse work environment. Diversity has been proven to drive creativity, innovation, and business success (Luu Trong Tuan , 2019). Women often bring distinct viewpoints and approaches to problem-solving, which can contribute to more comprehensive and well-rounded outcomes (Hentschel et al.,2019). Embracing gender diversity in the gig economy not only addresses labor shortages but also promotes a culture of inclusivity that benefits the overall performance and reputation of businesses.

## 4 Results

According to the World Bank-Gender Data Portal, women make up one of the highest groups in the unused labor force, and their professional activity around the world is much lower than men's.

Around the world women have lee advantageous earning opportunities than men and are less inclined to work and to actively seek work. The global indicator of women's (at the age of 15 to 64 years) professional activity equals 52.6%, in contrast to 80% in the case of men.

Table 1. Professional activity of women around the world

| Professional activity of women around the world: 52,6% | |
|---|---|
| North America | 68,7% |
| East Asia and the Pacific Region | 66,2 % |
| Europe and Central Asia (Poland 63,5%) | 64,2% |
| South Asia | 25,2% |
| Africa | 21,3% |

*Source: Author, based on Gender Data Portal*

Differences between the women's share and the men's share of the labor market are especially visible in South Asia, the Near East and North Africa, where indicators of men's participation are over three times higher. In spite

of the fact that, as indicated in the table above, Europe is characterized by one of the highest gender parity scores in the world, the difference between women and men in terms of labor market activity is still significant and requires action targeted at the increase in women's proactivity. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2022 developed by the World Economic Forum, achieving full parity and levelling the difference between genders in Europe is possible in around 60 years.

The reports of the European Commission on the equality of women and men in the labor market indicates that education, high competencies and professional awareness are traits which characterize European women (Berloffa et al.,2019). However, women less frequently undertake formal employment and have fewer opportunities in terms of business activity and professional development. Data collected from studies of households indicate that gender differences have also increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown and remote learning period women assumed most of the parental responsibilities and made the decision to be professionally inactive because of the necessity to remain at home with children. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data analysis, conducted by the National Women's Law Center in January 2022, there were over one million women less in the global workforce than in February 2020. Online learning, closed nurseries and preschools, taking care of children and the elderly (ill and high-risk people), contributed to the increased lack of professional activity among women.

The results presented by Rosalia Castellano and Antonella Rocca based on the Gender Gap in the Labor Market Index (GGLMI) highlight the persistence of gender inequalities in terms of the ratio of time spent on work to time spent on family responsibilities for women and men. Family care and household duties continue to be heavily imbalanced against women, while the social care system plays a significant role in the gender gap and women's labor market participation (Castellano and Rocca, 2020).

In Poland, according to the report by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, the reason for women's reduced activity in the labor market in relation to men lies mainly in socio-cultural conditions, which include the traditional family model and convictions regarding the social roles of women and men. As a result some women decide to retreat from the labor market and devote themselves to the roles of housewives and caregivers.

While lack of labor market activity in the case of men in Poland is mainly the result of illness or disability (40%), for women the main reason are family commitments (37%). Over 75% of women who are not active in the labor market do not work or seek employment because they take care of their children or their families. In Poland there is still a popular belief that full involvement in taking care of children is primarily the role of women. As shown in studies published by the office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, insufficient involvement of men in parental functions and household duties results in women becoming fully devoted to these tasks, and in their absence from the labor market connected with the birth of children. 37% of women who are inactive in the labor market would like to work, however, they do not take any steps in order to actively seek employment (Zielonka, 2021).

Table 2. Labor market in Poland and women's professional activity

| Conclusions from the report by the Institute for Structural Research - 2020 | |
|---|---|
| Limited opportunities to decide when to start and finish work. | Only 12% of women working in Poland can decide when to start and finish work, which allows them to combine work with caregiving.<br>In other EU countries the possibility to decide when to start and finish work is available to 40% [of respondents]. |
| Inflexible working hours, part-time work is rare in women's professional environment. | Women in Poland rarely work part-time, even when they have children. Only 6% of professionally active women in Poland reduced their working hours as a result of family responsibilities. In the EU the figure for those who changed / reduced their work schedule as a result of family commitments was 18%. |
| Inflexible working hours particularly in rural areas. | Only approx. 7% of women living in rural areas can make decisions regarding worktime flexibility, regardless of their level of education. |
| Employers rarely factor in limitations experienced by parents. | Lack of reorganization in terms of working time and conditions, resulting in the fact that the women who return to work are the ones who managed to adapt to the labor market (e.g. owing to access to institutionalized daycare, the help of others). Lack of adaptation on the part of the workplace. |
| Women with small children need to comply with workplace requirements. | A significant number of women who cannot adapt to the rigid conditions of employment do not return to work after maternity leave. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Demanding, tiring work contributes to low involvement of women in the labor market. | Most of the difficulties women face with combining professional obligations with caregiving result from long working hours and the exhausting character of work, which is not verified/optimized for personal life. |

*Source: Based on IBS Policy Paper "Jak zwiększyć aktywność zawodową kobiet w Polsce" Iga Magda, 16 /01/2020, ISSN : 2451-4365*

Among the reasons why women-mothers do not seek employment we can list the following:

- Cultural pressure and social norms which shape the decision to stay at home with children in their first years. According to the report titled "Poprawa sytuacji kobiet w zatrudnieniu", published by the Lewiatan Confederation, women in Poland, in spite of the traditional family model, increasingly declare their support for equality with respect to the presence of women and men in the labor market, and highlight that greater involvement of men in the upbringing of children, particularly at an early stage of their development, would make it easier for women to return to the labor market. According to Statistics Poland (GUS), only 1% of men decide to take parental leave, which means that there is still a long way to go before a family model based on partnership is achieved.
- Limited access and poor quality of nursing facilities. According to Statistics Poland the number of nurseries is increasing, however, this still does not fully address the needs of Polish families (both in terms of quantity and quality). The institutional care system in Poland accommodates only 15% of children up to the age of 3, which significantly contributes to the absence of young women from the labor market. Limited access to public nurseries and preschools constitutes a major obstacle in the professional development of young mothers, resulting in their decision to permanently or temporarily cease activity in the labor market and remain at home. For some women (especially those with potentially lower income) employment is unprofitable, in the face of rising costs of private nurseries or services (e.g. a nanny) (Zych, 2018).
- Unprofitability of work. High costs of commuting to work and of private daycare for children who were not accommodated by state institutions. The decision to start / cease activity in the labor market is also dictated in many households by the financial situation and is directly connected with the social policy implemented in the state. The 500+ social program introduced in Poland in 2016 improved the situation of many households, while at the same time decreasing the economic pressure on women to enter the labor market (Myck, 2016). According to Statistics Poland in the first year of its implementation 100 000 women left the labor market. In subsequent years a further 160 000 also decided to leave.

Table 3. The causes of the absence of women in Poland from the labor market

| Professional inactivity of Polish women – causes | |
|---|---|
| Low access to daycare for children under the age of 3. | In 2020 only 10% of children between the age of 0-3 were accommodated in nurseries. Over 2/3 of municipalities in Poland had no accommodation for children in this age group. |
| High cost of care for children under the age of 3. | The price of private institutions limited the access to daycare (especially if no state institutions are available) |
| Low quality of care for children under the age of 3 | State nurseries are perceived as "storage facilities" and "bacteria-ridden". The groups are too large and illnesses are common. As a result of the latter young mothers remain at home with their children. |
| Unattractiveness of workplaces and their lack of flexibility | Unprofitability of low-paying jobs with inflexible working-hours and high costs of commuting. |
| No economic coercion | The social policy of the state such as the 500+ program improved the situation of many households and decreased economic pressure on women to go to work. |

*Source: Author, based on IBS Policy Paper "Jak zwiększyć aktywność zawodową kobiet w Polsce" Iga Magda, 16 /01/2020, ISSN : 2451-4365*

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

The transformation in the labor market, which has been particularly visible in recent years, whereby work does not always require presence at the office or full-tome employment (Friedman, 2014, Maffie, 2020), and instead becomes agile and project-oriented (Dvouletý & Orel, 2020) is a significant value to women whose main motivation to enter (or return to) the labor market lies in balance between professional and private life, which is only possible through flexible employment (Berger at al. 2019). A more comprehensive use of the professional potential of women in the labor market is a response to the human resources needs voiced by employers. However,

this requires a flexible approach to the form, mode and time of work, in coherence with the idea of gig economy as an economy based on tasks and projects (Stanford et al. 2017). Efforts made by employers regarding the accommodation of women in order to more flexibly respond to their needs, while opening to their previously untapped potential, allow them to adapt to changing business demands and to scale the workforce in a cost-effective way. Hiring independent specialist freelancers (giggers) for short-term projects allows employers to undertake more tasks without jeopardizing the flow of orders and fulfillments in the organization, which is addresses the issue of labor shortage (Lemmon at al., 2016; Kuhn, 2016).

An interpretation of the results confirms the hypothesis that gig economy, as an alternative to the traditional model of employment, allows companies, through its flexible character, to maintain fluency in task completion, despite limited access to employees resulting from low unemployment, while being able to precisely cater to their needs. At the same time gig economy fully meets the expectations of women with a untapped labor market potential seeking flexible forms of employment, making a positive impact on their entrepreneurship, development and labor market activity (Barratt at al. 2020).

Increasing the employment of women is necessary and economically desirable, and the space to increase the involvement of women in the labor market, in accordance with the idea of gig economy, is vast.

However, this is dependent on three areas:

1. Commitment to the equal treatment of parents in the labor market through cultural changes which support women's professional aspirations, as well as combating gender stereotypes. Strategies of promoting and supporting men in their parental obligations (including knowledge of men's rights to paternity leave, parental leave and extended parental leave) would enable women to make full use of their considerable professional potential.
2. Increasing access to good quality care and education for children. Free, guaranteed, good quality care for the youngest children and early education are essential for active participation of both parents in the labor market. The mental comfort of women-mothers and a sense that children are provided with proper care in state institutions will encourage women to use the services of these facilities, thus enabling them to return to/enter the labor market and/or raise their qualifications. Wider access to various forms of care and education for the youngest children, on a full-time or part-time basis, is of key importance for the improvement of the situation of women in the Polish labor market.
3. Increased work attractiveness and flexibility in the labor market. The shaping of an attractive workplace oriented towards work-life balance, in accordance with the concept of gig economy (Wiklund at al. 2019), should constitute a significant element of the human resources strategy of companies. Care for the wellbeing of employees and coworkers is especially significant in times of labor shortage. Companies should do more to increase the attractiveness of workplaces for women and aspire to meet their needs and professional motivations, while taking into consideration previous restrictions. The popularization of part-time work, increased possibility to choose when to start and finish work , task- vs time-oriented work, as part of the gig economy idea, is an important incentive for women to enter/return to the labor market.

A shift from a traditional to a flexible model of work and a remodeling of work systems (Norlander at al., 2021), which cater to women's needs to connect private life with work, removing the barriers and limitations on their labor market activity, would contribute to the improvement of women's position in the labor market. Over half of women who are professionally inactive declare that labor market flexibility (which includes remote, task-oriented and project-oriented work, in accordance with gig economy) would increase their willingness and capabilities of employment (with varying degrees of involvement) and encourage them to be proactive (Lepanjuuri at al.2018). Moreover, incentive-type interventions, such as subsidies, promote female labor market participation more effectively than punishment-austerity type interventions, such as benefits' cuts. Policies oriented to alleviate childcare constraints can be sustainable and effective in encouraging women back to work. Considering factors wider than the standard economic variables when designing labor market policies can yield tangible results in terms of increasing women's workforce participation (Cagliesi & Hawkes, 2021).

The results presented in this article are based on a review of existing literature rather than original research. While this allowed for an exploration of the topic, it is important to consider several limitations and areas for further study. The analyzed data and available studies indicate possible links and correlations between flexible forms of employment, such as the gig economy, and women's professional activity. However, causality cannot be definitively established due to the nature of the reviewed literature. When discussing the potential of the gig economy as a means to break the cycle of professional passivity among women on a macroeconomic scale, it is important to recognize that it is not a universal solution for all women. Individual preferences, skills, and access to gig work opportunities may vary, and the gig economy may not eliminate all the barriers women

face in pursuing a career, which should be further investigated to better understand the causal relationship between flexible employment and women's professional activity.

Moreover, the long-term impact of the gig economy on women's professional activity requires deeper analysis, tracking career trajectories and job stability for women working under such arrangements. In conclusion, future research should focus on diagnosing causality, sustainability, and the long-term implications of flexible employment for women's professional development.

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