

Why many Polish women don't enjoy high-flying careers

Through the Glass Ceiling

ANNA TITKOW

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Warszawa
Polish Academy of Sciences
atitkow@ifispan.waw.pl

Rising public acceptance in Poland for women combining family and professional roles is not going hand-in-hand with a more widespread sharing of family duties at home – especially in childcare, a factor of key significance for the careers of women

The aim of research being done on the transformations in gender relations that have been taking place in Polish society since 1989 is to register and explain the nature of the changes taking place in the cultural principles that underpin these relations. Research projects carried out in recent years (2001-2004) were devoted to two closely tied social phenomena, termed the “glass ceiling” and “unpaid female labor.”

The Glass Ceiling

Aside from few exceptions, why don't women enjoy successful professional careers? We might respond that they do not because they do not want to. Or, one might be convinced that they do indeed desire to have such careers, but come up against barriers and obstacles. What forms these barriers, and do women want to overcome them? We took a look at this problem from the perspective of the “glass ceiling” notion, using a combination of techniques that were both qualitative (in-depth interviews) and quantitative (a questionnaire survey of a representative sample of the adult Polish population).

The “glass ceiling” metaphor has been in use since the late 1980s to describe the invisible barrier that prevents women from reaching the highest professional echelons. The “glass ceiling” therefore denotes the obstacles that women encounter when holding management posts, and it symbolizes the limitations on their opportunities for promotion.

Can this barrier be shattered? It certainly can. Moreover, this “glass” ceiling is no longer as invisible as it had until recently seemed. In any event, the elements that comprise it can be named, and the mechanisms that constitute it can be at least partially defined – as shown by studies carried out by the Research Unit on Women and Family at the PAN Institute of Philosophy and Sociology and by the Institute of Polish Affairs. Such barriers are formed on the one hand by stereotypical opinions about women: by the assignment of

traditional roles to women, by the limitations associated with motherhood – augmented by the widespread lack of truly partnership-based sharing of duties in the family, and finally by how women define their own strong and weak sides. And on the other hand, there is male dominance in the workplace based on solidarity amongst men, in the absence of such female solidarity.

Research also shows that the cultural models of womanhood are slowly beginning to change. Notably, there is a change in the “favorable conditions,” meaning a rising acceptance for women's professional careers, for women who do decide to combine family and professional roles and for treating the importance of professional successes of wives and husbands on similar terms.

Nevertheless, the results of research on the “glass ceiling” incline us towards the notion that social stereotypes – which can be treated as a prerequisite for maintaining the status quo of the political, professional, and financial elite – are being retained more than overcome. The core of the stereotypical woman's role entailing motherhood and the accompanying obligations, the model of the traditional Polish mother, continues to pose the most serious obstacle to women's successful careers.

Unpaid female labor

For almost all of society, for both women and men, it is something self-evident that women's empathy for others and their related “multifunctional” activities are simply things everyone is entitled to benefit from. Unpaid work done by women in the household is a universal cultural norm in Poland.

Within the household, the clear majority of daily activities are performed by women. The extent of the unpaid work they perform bears a strong relationship to their status: the lower a woman stands in the social structure, the greater the scope of unpaid labor she provides.

Parenting is also a job, and the responsibilities of mothers and fathers for the individual elements of childcare is not equally distributed. There is a set of childcare duties that almost everyone (90% of women, 96% of men) concurs are the responsibility of women. Almost 40% of women maintain that children's fathers do not participate in their care or fostering to any extent.

How do men perceive housework, and how do women see it? Here there is a kind of “manipulation of reality”: men ascribe themselves with the performance of certain household chores (which women do not confirm); and they



East News

While women in Poland account for 50 per cent of the labor force with a higher education, still only one in ten managerial positions are held by women

significantly more rarely assert that certain chores are performed by women. At the same time, we should cite another research result: some 85 percent of women maintain that at home they frequently prefer to do something themselves, rather than asking someone else to do it.

Let's change things!

However, there are factors that attest to the need for change, and also attest that changes are already taking place in the cultural model underpinning the "gender contract."

For example, an "assertive" type of woman has appeared, and the "traditional Polish mother" type is beginning to be more characteristic of older women with a low social position. Assertiveness is not conducive to a woman viewing childcare as an "obligation," a "duty in life," or a "way of filling up her life." Just like being a young, educated assertive woman who takes account of her own needs is not conducive to declaring a positive attitude with regards to housework.

Marriage thus stands chances of being transformed from an institution based upon strictly defined roles, into one defined as an interactive process. This could change the extent of the unpaid work performed by women, and in effect minimize the consequences of the public/private division in women and men's lives. And so, it could thereby help shatter the glass ceiling.

Long road ahead

In truth, one in four men and almost 50% of women agree with the concept that women's working at home

means being taken advantage of, yet the way in which women define the notions of family and home and their strong identification with the motherhood role comprise a cultural binding agent that keeps women (and will continue to keep them) under the yoke of unpaid labor. Since most women still desire to have children, it is hard to expect to see a radical rejection of the existing standards. We should, on the other hand, expect to see their significant modification, i.e. changes in the existing gender contract, whereby men pretend to be involved in housework and women pretend that men help them.

We believe that the intensification of the "favorable conditions" will not in fact suffice to weaken the barriers and limitations in Polish women's careers. In addition to the emergence of a truly partnership-based sharing of family duties between women and men, any sort of counterbalance to the effects of male domination in the workplace, and above all in politics - domination which clearly operates based upon "cultural" principles - will require women to move beyond individualistic, frequently anti-female, strategies of action in the workplace and begin to build female solidarity, a phenomenon practically unknown in Poland. ■

Want to learn more?

Titkow A., (eds.) (2003). *The Glass Ceiling - Barriers and Limitations to Women's Careers - A Monograph of the Phenomenon* [in Polish]. Warszawa: Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw.

Titkow A., Duch-Krzyszczek, D., Budrowska B. (2004). *Unpaid Female Labor - Myths, Realities, Prospects* [in Polish]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN.