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Transition and beyond: women on the labour market in the changing context of social norms

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Inequalities between men and women in Poland 30 years after the transition

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Abstract

Transition and beyond: women on the labour market in the changing context of social norms

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As countries brace themselves for severe economic slowdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, earlier crises, such as that which followed the political transformation of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, may serve as important points of reference. While of course different in many ways, the changes that accompanied the transition affected society as a whole, but also had heterogeneous effects across different groups. One particular dimension – also discussed in relation to the current COVID-19 crises – is that of relative costs and benefits for men and women respectively. In this brief we re-examine one specific dimension of this, namely the developments of gender gaps in the labour market and social norms related to labour market activity. The starting point is the fact that, at least nominally, women had a relatively strong position before the onset of transition, especially conditioning on the level of economic development of transition countries (see e.g. Campa et al. 2018). This background gives rise to several possible mechanisms and potential developments in the transition period and beyond. On the one hand, the relatively gender equal legacy creates conditions for path-dependency toward further gender equality, and the high levels of education should favour women in more competitive labour markets. On the other hand, the “centrally imposed” gender equality under state-socialism was not accompanied by actual changes of patriarchal values with respect to responsibilities for the household and children, and women remained responsible for these. The end of central planning could thus mean a setback for most common gender equality indicators especially in countries with traditional division of family roles. In this brief we give a quick overview of what has happened in some of these dimensions over time and across countries, starting in the years before transition. The brief gives a short background for the specific country reviews that follow this introduction. It seems clear that the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath may also differently affect the lives of women and men. The experience of the post-communist transition of the 1990s shows that adopted policies may prevent the gender gaps in various dimensions from growing as a consequence.

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Similarly to the current economic crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the socio-economic developments of the post-transition period left women in Poland in a less favourable economic position relative to men. In this part of the brief, we discuss two main sources of gender inequalities in the context of the Polish labour market – the gender gap in employment and pay. Though a certain improvement in this regard can be observed over the last 30 years, significant inequalities between women and men remain today and may have substantial impact in the future, especially for differences in poverty risk in old age.



Transition and beyond: women on the labour market in the changing context of social norms

Expectations and starting conditions around 1990

It is a well-established fact that the socialist economies of Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union had much higher rates of female labour force participation than the OECD in the decades before the 1990s. Many reasons for this have been considered, ranging from the near political obligation to have a job, to the economic necessity for a family to have two wage earners, to the relatively well-developed support structures, such as child-care, for enabling female economic activities (e.g. Atkinson and Mickelwright, 1992). It is also the case that women were well-represented in higher education earlier than in the OECD.

In the very beginning of transition arguments in favour of women playing a central role in economic development were put forward based on their favourable starting position. As Fong, 1993 (p. 31) put it for the case of Russia: *“Women in Russia have the capacity to play a positive role in the economic reform process, notwithstanding the tradition of concessions to women as the weaker half of the population. Women are the majority of the labor force and of the voting population. The female labor force is more highly educated than the male labor force; retraining women can take less time and be more cost-effective. Women are under-represented in declining heavy industries, and are concentrated in sectors of potential growth – commerce and trade, banking, and social services. [...] In many ways, women have a clear potential of becoming leading*

elements in reform and a pro-active stance on women in social policy reform is called for.”

At the same time there was awareness early on that some of the consequences of transition could be particularly negative for women unless counter measures were taken. For example, it was feared that radical cuts in the bureaucracy’s support staff, consisting almost entirely of women, would especially increase female unemployment, and also that an increased profit-motive would put higher demands on longer working hours making it particularly difficult for women to work (Moghadam, 1990, p. 29). That women’s status would be additionally affected by cutbacks in family related policies (state-provided or subsidized childcare, long maternity leaves, guaranteed return to work after maternity, and other systems that made it possible to re-concile women’s roles as workers and mothers) was also very clear; the following passage from Fong (1993), p. 31 illustrates this point: *“The near-exclusive dependence on women’s domestic labor for maintaining the material well-being and comfort of the household, means that much of the cost of social protection of the young, the old and the disabled is borne by women in the context of the family, through a system of labor market concessions. The transformation to a market economy has made these labor market concessions incompatible with the efficient operation of the enterprise, and necessitates a re-examination of family policy in the interest of the free movement of labor.”* In short, in some dimensions women were clearly in a favourable position, at least when compared to most OECD countries. They had been active and comparatively well represented in the labour market, often in sectors that were viewed as growing; they also had comparatively high levels of education.

So what happened?



The economic turmoil in the first half of the 1990s has been well documented and it has been well known that the economic recovery and further development in the region has been very uneven across countries (see, e.g. Svejnar 2002; Campos and Coricelli, 2002, special issue of *Economics of Transition*, Vol 26:4). This heterogeneity has also been reflected in the pattern of relative changes in socio-economic outcomes for men and women (see e.g. Brainerd 2000, Fong 1996, Razzu 2015, and UNICEF 1999). The female/male labour force participation (LFP) rates have in many cases dropped relative to the early 1990s, but the changes in most countries have not been as dramatic as some expected. In many countries relative female participation rates over 25 years after the start of the transition are higher or similar to those in the early 1990s (see Figure 1A). Looking at the country rates in 2017 and comparing them to the – growing – relative average OECD values it must be noted that it is generally the developed Western countries which in terms of the relative employment rates have been catching up with those of the “Eastern block”. Such a trend has also been noted in the comparison between the former East and West Germany – with the female/male participation ratio falling in the East from 61.2% in 1991 to 54.3% in 2010, at a time when the ratio in the former Western regions of the country grew from 45.4% to 52.0% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019).

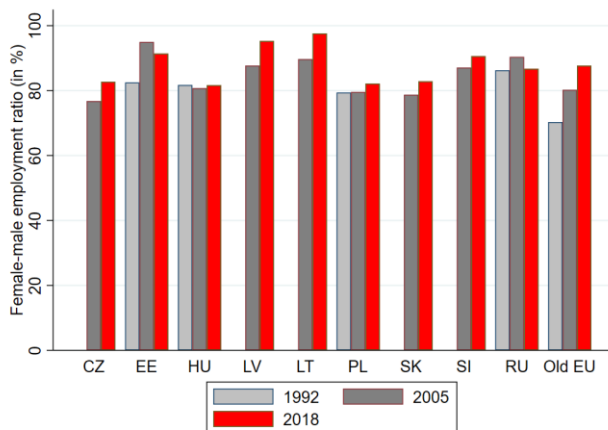
Data on childcare suggests that the negative scenario of significant reductions in enrolment in nurseries and kindergartens did not universally materialise in the region. Although reductions in nursery enrolment were substantial in countries where the rates were high prior to transition (esp. in the countries of the former Soviet Union), drops in nursery enrolment in the countries of Central Europe, in which they in any case were lower prior

to 1990s, were modest. Comparing rates of kindergarten enrollment in 1989 and 1997 in countries such as Poland, Bulgaria or Hungary, shows that they remained essentially unchanged, while they dropped from 78% to 65% in Russia (data from UNICEF 1999). From this point of view, transition brought more substantial changes in this regard in countries further to the East with kindergarten enrolment falling from 44% to 19% in Georgia and from 52% to 12% in Kazakhstan. Thus, while certainly not uniform across the region, the withdrawal of the state from the provision of care services in several countries certainly played a role in changing the relative position of women on the labour market. The implications of these developments may have been further corroborated by the fact that it is in these countries where social norms have been strongly skewed towards the home and family rather than professional life as the key responsibilities of women.

With regard to the relative dynamics of wages in Figure 1B we show a long-term series of averages of the female-male wage ratio for a subset of “old” EU members and some “new” post-transition EU countries. These are set against the ratios from the US, Russia and Ukraine. One clearly needs to be cautious concerning the possible effect of labour market selection which can affect these averages, but the overall picture for the years available is rather positive for the group of the Soviet-block countries which joined the EU.

Figure 1A. Female-male labour force participation

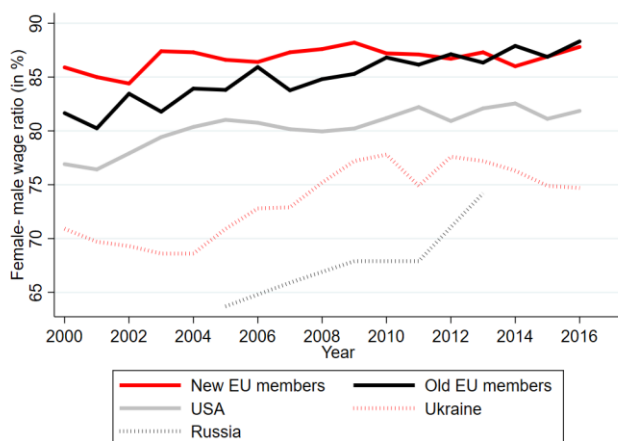




Source: OECD database, 2019.

Notes: Czech Republic (CZ), Estonia (EE), Hungary (HU), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), Poland (PL), Slovak Republic (SK), Slovenia (SI), Russian Federation (RU). "Old EU" includes the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.

Figure 1B. Female-male wage ratios



Source: OECD database, 2019.

Notes: Due to data availability grouped countries include: "New EU" members: Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Poland (even years only), Czech Republic (except for 2000); "Old EU" members: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.

The EU group averages show a generally growing trend in relative wages, but for a significant part of the analysed period the "new" EU countries have outperformed the "old" EU average, while both groups have had significantly higher rates than the US. In the years after 2010 it looks like the ratio

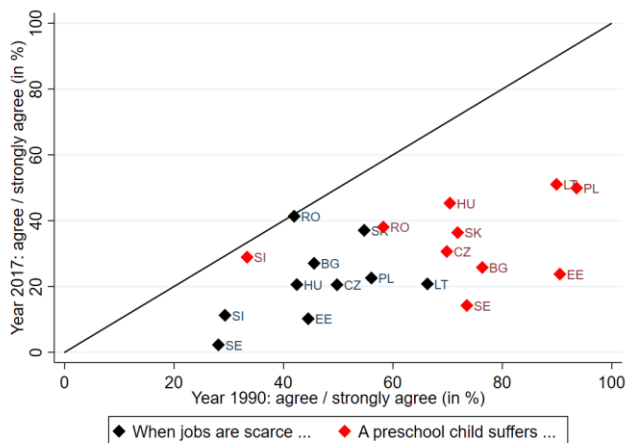
in the "old" and "new" EU countries have converged. The figures show, however, that in countries further to the East, such as Russia and Ukraine, significant challenges remain with regard to wage inequality despite the very high participation of women.

The changing context of social norms

While labour demand conditions as well as the available pay offer and labour market constraints are crucial determinants of relative labour market participation rates and the gender pay gap, the prevailing social norms create the context for all of these forces, determine the supply of labour and play a significant role in determining the relative importance of constraints such as childcare for men and women. As data from the European Values Survey suggests, social norms in the region have been changing along many dimensions, and by 2017 attitudes regarding female labour market participation have become significantly less traditional. For example (see Figure 2A) while in Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland and Lithuania the range of people agreeing with the statement that "When jobs are scarce men should be given priority" was between 42.4% and 66.3% in 1990, by 2017 it dropped to less than 23% in all four countries. In 1990, in Estonia, Lithuania and Poland over 90% of individuals believed that "A preschool child suffers if his/her mother works". By 2017 this ratio fell to around 50% in Lithuania and Poland and to ca. 24% in Estonia. The numbers are still very high in comparison to Sweden - considered as one of the champions of gender equality - where in 2017 only 14.2% of individuals agreed with the first statement and only 2.3% agreed with the second, yet changes towards a less traditional division of responsibilities regarding home and market are evident across nearly the entire region.



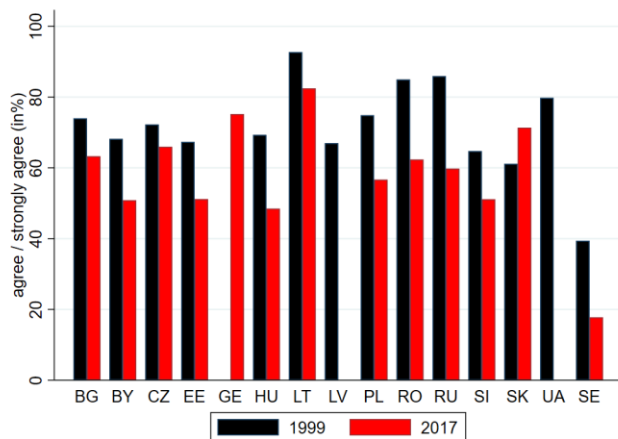
Figure 2A. Social norms: women at work, 1990-2017



Source: European Values Survey.

Notes: Full statements were: “When jobs are scarce men should be given priority”; “A preschool child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works”.

Figure 2B. Social norms: what most women really want: 1999-2017



Source: European Values Survey.

Notes: Full statement was: “A job is alright but what most women really want is a home and children.”

Social norms have also been changing with regard to the perception of women’s aspirations. In this dimension, again, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe still remain behind Sweden, but recognition of women’s professional aspirations is apparent in nearly all countries. While in 1999 85.9% of Russians believed that “A job is alright but what most women really want is a home and children”, the number dropped to 59.8% by 2017.

In Poland, the proportions dropped from 74.9% to 56.7% while in Lithuania, which appears to be the most conservative country along this dimension, from 92.7% to 82.5%. Taking Sweden as the yardstick – with only 17.8% agreeing with this statement in 2017 – the countries of the region are still some distance away from recognizing the role of female professional aspirations, but the direction of changes in social norms is clearly towards a more balanced perception of women’s role on the labour market.

Prospects for the future and the role for policy

At the onset of transition many of the countries in the region were doing relatively well in terms of gender gaps in a number of dimensions. The developments thereafter show great diversity, with some front-runners as well as some laggards. This is true both in terms of overall economic development, as well as for the relative developments on the labour market for men and women. Gender gaps in employment and wages in the countries of Central Europe which have joined the European Union have generally been low, and conditions for women in many of these countries did not worsen to a greater extent than they did for men, and they have been improving for both in recent years. The situation seems much more challenging in the republics of the former Soviet Union which remain outside of the EU. Despite high female employment levels in countries such as Russia or Ukraine, female wages continue to be much lower than those of men, and labour market constraints tend to concern women much more than men. Social norms with regard to female labour market participation and women’s aspirations may hamper the continued progress of women on the labour market in many countries of the region.

Several broad policy areas could be helpful in assisting the change towards more inclusive and



equal labour markets. Governments should take a more active role in reducing constraints related to care – both for the youngest children and for older people, and policies should put further emphasis on enforcing equal pay between men and women. Rebalancing of family responsibilities through care policies can directly influence female employment and can have an indirect effect through changes in social norms (Unterhofer and Wrohlich 2017). Governments could also support dual-earner families through tax and benefit policies. As countries in the region prepare to address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, the implemented policies should seriously consider their relative implications for men and women in order to use the expected wave of reforms to support greater equality of opportunities as well as of social and economic outcomes.

Inequalities between men and women in Poland 30 years after the transition

Introduction

Though the real economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown regulations is still far from determined, especially since experts anticipate a recurrence of the virus in the near future, some early studies of the economic consequences of the first wave of the pandemic indicate serious inequalities in how different groups of population were affected. While men are more vulnerable to negative consequences of the virus health-wise, with higher incidence and death rates, there is some evidence women are less resilient to the economic aftermath of the pandemic (Eurofound 2020, Lewandowski et al. 2020). This is also true in the context of Poland, where women are more likely to work in sectors of

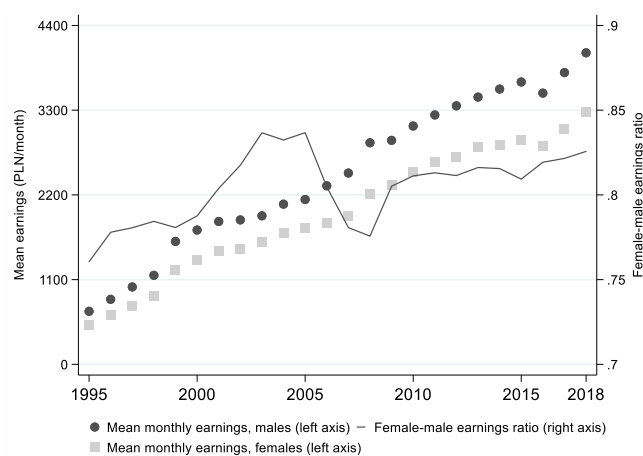
the economy that have been particularly exposed to the negative economic consequences of the recent lockdown, and they are also more often self-employed or hired under civil law contracts with elevated risk of job loss (Myck et al. 2020).

This is not the first crisis that leaves women in Poland in a less favourable economic position relative to men. According to a World Bank report (2004), women took a heavier burden of the socio-economic developments of the post-transition period, and, as we briefly show below, significant inequalities between women and men continue to exist today. In this part of the brief, we discuss two main sources of gender inequalities in the context of the Polish labour market - the gender gap in employment and pay.

How big is the pay gap, really?

According to the data from the Polish Household Budget Survey (HBS) collected regularly in Poland by the Central Statistical Office, over the last 25 years on average the increase in earnings of working females was somewhat higher than the growth in male earnings (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Mean monthly earnings and female-male earnings ratio in Poland since 1995



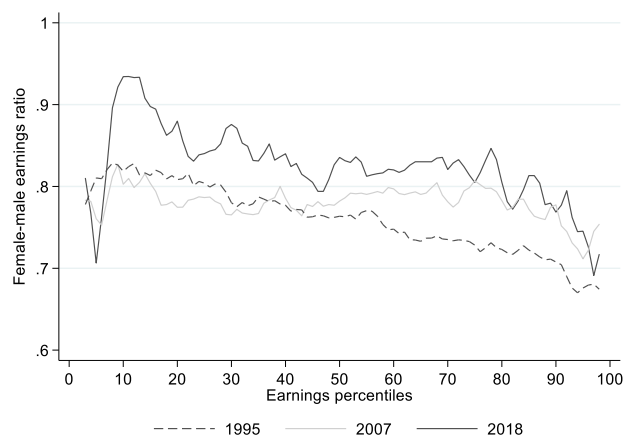
Source: own compilation based on Polish Household Budget Survey data by Central Statistical Office.

Notes: Included: non-missing, plausible (higher than 1/4 minimum wage) monthly income from work of workers aged



>24 and <60. Temporary workers excluded. Observations from two first and last percentiles of earnings distributions excluded to remove outliers.

Figure 2. Distribution of female-male earnings ratio by percentiles of mean monthly earnings in Poland in 1995, 2007 and 2018



Source and notes: see Figure 1.

As a result, when considering this period as a whole, the raw female-male earnings ratio in Poland increased slightly from 76% in 1995 to 82% in 2018. However, within this period there was a high variation in the dynamics of the average female-male earnings ratio, with a steep increase until 2003 and almost as sharp of a decline between 2004 and 2008. Since 2009 the ratio stabilized, and on average women in Poland earn about 80% of men's earnings.

Figure 2 captures the distribution of the female-male earnings ratio in the working population over the respective monthly female and male earnings distributions in Poland at three points in time - in 1995, 2007 and 2018. In mid-90s the ratio was much more unevenly distributed, with women receiving much lower salaries than men in the upper tail of the distribution. This changed substantially over time and in 2007 the female-male earnings ratio was relatively stable between the 10th and 90th percentile of the distribution. Compared to the ratio of top earnings in 1995, the level of the top 10% of female earners twelve years

later was about 6 percentage points higher, and the relative earnings of women increased from about the middle of the respective distributions. We can see further increases in the female-male earnings ratio in later years - in particular in the lower half of the distribution, and continued small gains at the upper end.

Another interesting feature of the Polish gender pay gap was emphasized in a report by the Central Statistical Office, where the pay gap was calculated according to the EUROSTAT methodology (GUS 2016). EUROSTAT international estimates of the gender pay gap are based on wages from selected sectors of the economy, and importantly from the Polish perspective, exclude agriculture and public administration. Thus, both past and most recent estimates (8.8% in 2018, EUROSTAT 2018) are substantially lower than the reported pay gap observed in the household data. In the report, the Polish CSO decomposed the gender pay gap (7.7% in 2014) by different employee characteristics, finding a stable level of the gap regardless of education, but with a high, age-related variation. The gap increased from 8.8% among employees under 24, up to the highest level of 13.1% among those aged 35-44 and decreased sharply among older workers, with negative values among those working after the age of 60 - in the latter case most likely due to the selection of women with lower wages into retirement.

In Leythienne & Ronkowski (2018) the raw gap was split between the explained part, which is a result of differences in observed characteristics of female and male employees, and the unexplained part. Controlling for education, job experience, occupational segregation and hours of work the average gap in the EU in 2014 falls from 16.6% to 11.5%, primarily due to a sectoral bias and a higher proportion of women working part time. Among



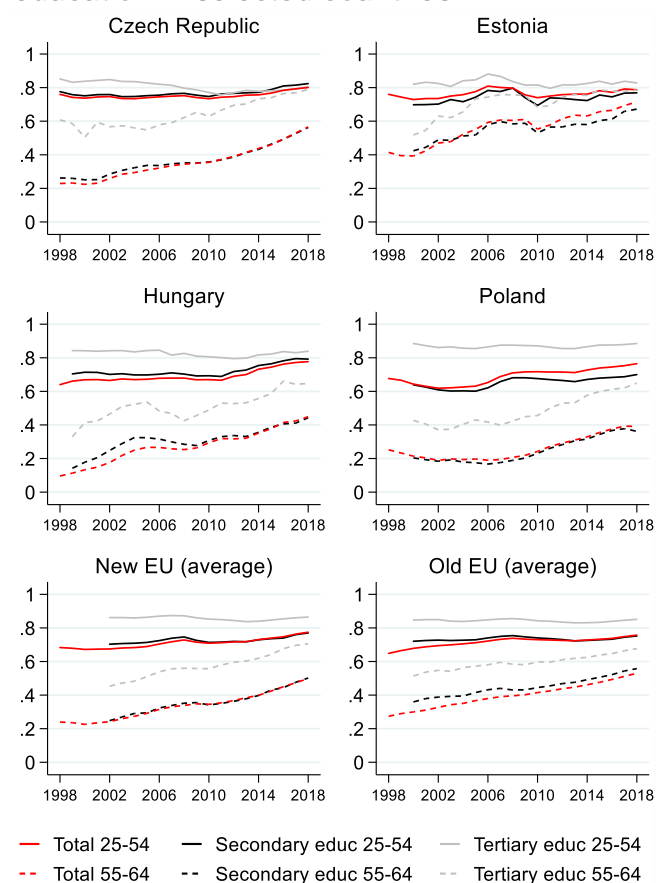
the individual EU countries, Poland, together with Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Romania and Slovenia, belonged to the smaller group, where, according to the differences in average characteristics between male and female employees, the latter group should actually earn more than the first (negative explained gender pay gap). Though the unadjusted gender pay gap in 2014 in Poland was only 7.7%, due to their (on average) higher education, choice of better paid occupations and longer job experience, women should actually have earnings higher by 9.1% than men. In total this gives the unexplained gender pay gap of 16.8%, far above the EU average and among the highest in Europe. A negative explained part of the gender pay gap implies that the total gender bias in earnings is higher than that captured just by looking at the raw pay gap (for other studies on pay gap in Poland see: Gorau and Tyrowicz 2015, Magda et al. 2015, Majchrowska et al. 2015).

Divergence in female employment rates by age and education

Among other important points, the EUROSTAT report emphasizes that the negative explained gender pay gap is correlated with low levels of female employment, since low-educated and low-skilled women tend not to engage in the labour market. This indeed is the case in Poland as shown in Figure 3, where female employment rates in selected countries are split by age and education. While the most recent overall employment rates among women aged 25-54 in Poland no longer deviate much from either the 'new' EU or the 'old' EU averages, the rate for women with secondary education or less was much lower in Poland in comparison to both EU averages and other Central and Eastern European countries. As a result, the difference in employment rates between women with tertiary and secondary education is higher in

Poland than on average in EU countries. The reasons behind low female activity on the labour market in Poland were studied by Magda (2020), who argues that employment rates are especially low among low-educated women from rural areas raising two or more children due to the unavailability of institutional childcare solutions, inflexible working arrangements, a generous system of social transfers, but also persistent social norms.

Figure 3. Employment rates since late 1990s among women aged 25-54 and 55-64 by education in selected countries



Source: own compilation based on EUROSTAT data.

Notes: 'Old' EU members: AT, BE, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GR, IE, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK. 'New' EU members: BG, CY, CZ, EE, HR, HU, LT, LV, MT, PL, RO, SK, SI. Rates for females with primary or no education not displayed due to low shares in the population (in 2018 for women aged 25-54 - e.g. 3% in PL, 8% in 'new' EU, 13% in 'old' EU).

Poland also stands out in Figure 3 in terms of the lowest employment rates among older women.



Even though these rates increased significantly over the past 20 years, the observed growth was much slower compared to other European countries. In 2018 the total employment rate among women aged 55-64 grew in Poland up to 40%, much below EU averages (50%) or 'new' EU leaders like Estonia (70%), Latvia or Lithuania (65%). Low employment rates among older cohorts of women have been mainly driven by a low retirement age and the design of retirement pensions which have allowed for early exit from the labour force. As we can see, education is also an important factor affecting the level of labour market activity in older age, with women with tertiary education almost twice as likely to work compared to those with secondary education.

Conclusion

In relation to many western countries Poland has a history of relatively high levels of female labour market activity, and employment rates among women have grown in recent decades. However, levels of female employment have strongly diversified among different groups of women, and in comparison to several Central and Eastern European countries labour force participation in Poland has been much lower among older and less educated women. The factors behind low employment rates among these groups are diverse, which calls for targeted policies if they are to be effective at increasing participation among these groups. The challenge will be particularly demanding given the slowdown of the economy resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular if caring for children as well as for the old moves increasingly towards home-based provision, the responsibility for which continues to fall disproportionately on women.

Easy access to early retirement pensions, in particular in the first two decades of the transition

period, has been one of the key determinants of low employment among Polish women aged 50+. Even though there has been some improvement in this regard in recent years, primarily due to cutbacks in early retirement regulations, there is still a gap that needs to be addressed as compared to other 'new' EU transition countries. However, significant gains in employment levels among older women in Poland may be difficult to achieve in the coming decades given the return to the gender-differentiated statutory retirement age (60 years for women, 65 years for men) in 2017, which reversed a reform aimed at a gradual increase in the retirement age to 67 years for both men and women.

The two discussed dimensions of inequality on the labour market between men and women - i.e. the gap in employment and earnings, together with the gender-differentiated retirement age, combine to result in significant differences in the risk of poverty in old age. Important gaps in the level of pensions between men and women in Poland have been noted for a long time now (World Bank 2004), but they will continue to grow and become particularly severe for the cohorts retiring in the coming decades. Therefore, reducing the current gender gaps in earnings and employment are important objectives on their own, but they also have significant implications for the future development of relative poverty risks among the old.

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