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USE OF WORK–LIFE BALANCE BENEFITS GUARANTEED BY LAW IN POLAND – DO SIZE OF THE ENTERPRISE AND GENDER MATTER?

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ABSTRACT

Background: The paper is aimed at indicating the similarities and differences in use of benefits supporting work–life balance (WLB) between women and men working in Polish small/medium and large enterprises. **Material and Methods:** The sample included 556 workers (311 women, 245 men), aged 20–68 years old employed on the basis of employment contracts for at least a year in Polish enterprises. The respondents completed a questionnaire on the use of benefits guaranteed by the Polish Labour Code, referring to their current workplaces. **Results:** Women took maternity leaves and returned to the same work position after using childcare leaves more often than men. Men took leaves on demand more often than women. Our results also showed that in comparison to women working in smaller enterprises, those working in large enterprises were more likely to use almost all the analyzed WLB benefits – paid days off to take care of others, educational leaves, leaves on demand, maternity leaves and return to the same work position after childcare leave, reduction of business trips when pregnant or having young children and breastfeeding breaks. The size of enterprise, however, did not differentiate the take-up of benefits among the studied men. **Conclusions:** Our analysis brought unexpected results on the lack of common availability of the WLB benefits guaranteed by the law in the case of employees who worked on the basis of employment contracts. We also found that women used most of child rearing benefits guaranteed by the law more often than men, which might reflect still a traditional division of child care responsibilities in Poland. *Med Pr* 2017;68(5)

Key words: work, life, balance, benefit, use of benefit, gender

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, more and more attention is paid to possibilities of balancing work and life demands on individual, organizational and national levels. Work–life balance (WLB) is also a key political topic in developed countries all over the world. Although there is no universal definition of WLB, it is usually understood as combining paid work with unpaid family care work, voluntary work and leisure in a way that does not drain employees' resources or energy. Thus, it becomes a source of general life satisfaction. Many countries put an effort to introduce legal solutions to support employees' reconciliation of work and private life and

to promote gender equality in the spheres traditionally reserved almost exclusively for women or for men. Most of social policies supporting employees' WLB are written in gender-neutral language but it was observed already in 1990s that the effects of these policies often depended on gender [1,2].

In Poland, women have a wider range of WLB benefits, but at the same time employers are reluctant to employ them. Nonetheless, studies show [3] that Polish female employees willingly make use of available solutions to reconcile work and private life, regardless of having children. We argue that using the benefits guaranteed by law is gender-related at least in the countries beginning their social transformation from traditional

to integrated gender role models [4]. These differences should be mostly explicit in the benefits dedicated to parents. Results of the previous studies show that female managers consider the burden with family-related duties as crucial barriers to achieve professional success in Poland [5]. Similarly, Krawczyk et al. [6] showed that 97% of the studied women, as opposed to 79% of men, suffered from difficulties in reconciling work with private life. Also did the Central Statistical Office of Poland report that regardless of the family situation, women spent statistically more time on home and work duties in total [7].

Aim of the paper

The results presented in this short communication answer 2 questions:

1. Is the size of enterprises related to the extent of benefits take-up in Poland?
2. Are there any gender differences in the take-up of WLB benefits among Polish employees in small/medium and large enterprises?

The results constitute part of a series of publications within the project “Enhancing the effectiveness of work-life balance initiatives use” (grant No. EOG78/2013).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The participants were recruited from randomly selected enterprises from different regions of Poland. The study sample consisted of 556 workers (311 women, 245 men) employed on the basis of employment contracts (219 employed in small/medium enterprises, 337 – in large enterprises), aged 20–68 years old with minimum 1 year of job tenure at the company. The respondents anonymously completed the set of the questionnaires in their workplaces.

For the purpose of the study, we developed a WLB benefits check list. The questionnaire consisted of 9 WLB solutions guaranteed by the Polish Labour Code [8], including one item applicable only to women (breastfeeding breaks). Respondents referred to:

- the availability of benefits – “In your work, if needed, could you use the following benefits freely?” (yes/no),
- the use of benefits – “Do you use/Have you used such benefit in your current workplace?” (yes/no).

To study the differences between women and men and employees of small/medium and large enterprises, we conducted Pearson’s χ^2 test separately for women and men using the Statistica software.

RESULTS

Considering the availability of the benefits guaranteed by the Polish Labour Code, we found a lot of employees who claimed that the given WLB solutions were not available for them (7–44% of respondents) (Table 1). In the group of benefits granted to all employees the lowest availability was found in the case of educational leave (it was available to 59% of the studied workers) and paid days off to take care of others (available to 66% of the workers). In the case of benefits addressed to working parents, the reduction of business trips for parents with children aged 4 years old or under and pregnant women was available only to 56% of the studied working parents, parental leaves – to 75%. The return to the same work position after childcare leaves was available to 78% and maternity or paternity leaves were reported available to 86% of the studied working parents. The possibility of having breastfeeding break was also limited – approx. 27% of female respondents declared no access to such a solution.

We found significant gender differences in the take-up of available benefits among employees of all enterprises (small/medium and large enterprises analyzed together). These differences were mainly related to the benefits dedicated to parents. Women took maternity leaves more often than men took paternity leaves. They also returned to work to the same work position after childcare leaves more often than men. Referring to the WLB benefits granted to all workers, only one gender-related difference was found – men took leaves on demand more often than women (Table 1).

The percentage share of men using particular benefits guaranteed by the law did not differ depending on the size of enterprises they worked in. Yet, our results showed that women working in large enterprises used 7 out of 9 analyzed benefits significantly more often than women working in small and medium enterprises. Considering the benefits dedicated to all employees, female workers from large companies took paid days off to take care of others, educational leaves and leaves on demand significantly more frequently than women from small and medium enterprises.

In the case of benefits dedicated to working parents, women working in large companies took maternity leaves, returned to work to the same work position after childcare leaves, reduced the amount of business trips and took breastfeeding breaks significantly more often than women from small and medium enterprises (Table 2).

Table 1. Availability and the take-up of work-life balance (WLB) benefits guaranteed by the Polish Labour Code [8] among workers employed on the basis of employment contracts in small/medium and large enterprises in 2015, Poland, by gender

Work-life balance benefit	Respondents (N = 556)					Pearson Chi ² (men/women use of benefit difference)*
	with access to the benefit (total) [%]	women (N = 311)	men (N = 245)	with access to the benefit using the benefit [n (%)]	with access to the benefit using the benefit [n (%)]	
Granted to all employees						
paid days off to take care of others	66	214	152	96 (45)	64 (42)	n.s.
educational leave	59	191	138	73 (38)	60 (43)	n.s.
leave on demand	88	277	212	176 (64)	156 (74)	Chi ² (1.49) = 5.56
sick leave because of one's own illness	93	291	225	217 (75)	168 (75)	n.s.
Granted only to working parents						
maternity/paternity leave	86	155	86	80 (52)	25 (29)	Chi ² (1.24) = 11.43
parental leave	75	137	74	43 (31)	18 (24)	n.s.
return to the same position at work after maternity, paternity or parental leave	78	133	85	70 (53)	27 (32)	Chi ² (1.22) = 9.14
reducing the amount of business trips for parents of children aged up to 4 years old and pregnant women	56	95	63	35 (37)	19 (30)	n.s.
breastfeeding break (only women)	73	115	-	32 (28)	-	-

* p < 0.05

Chi² - Chi-square test, n.s. - not statistically significant.

Table 2. Availability and the take-up of work-life balance (WLB) benefits guaranteed by the Polish Labour Code [8] among workers employed on the basis of employment contracts in small/medium and large enterprises in 2015, Poland, by gender and size of enterprise

	Respondents (N = 556)								Pearson Chi ² (SME/LE use of benefit difference)*	
	women (N = 311)				men (N = 245)					
	SME (N = 140)	LE (N = 171)	SME (N = 79)	LE (N = 166)	SME (N = 79)	LE (N = 166)	SME (N = 79)	LE (N = 166)		
Work-life balance benefit										
	with access to the benefit [n]	with access to the benefit [n]	with access to the benefit [n]	with access to the benefit [n]	with access to the benefit [n]	with access to the benefit [n]	with access to the benefit [n]	using the benefit [n (%)]	using the benefit [n (%)]	men
										men
Granted to all employees										
paid days off to take care of others	108	106	51	57 (54)	23 (45)	101	41 (41)	Chi ² (1.21) = 6.75	n.s.	
educational leave	90	101	46	47 (47)	17 (37)	92	43 (47)	Chi ² (1.19) = 6.28	n.s.	
leave on demand	127	150	68	108 (72)	45 (66)	144	111 (77)	Chi ² (1.28) = 10.11	n.s.	
sick leave because of one's own illness	133	158	67	125 (79)	51 (76)	158	117 (74)	n.s.	n.s.	
Granted only to working parents										
maternity/paternity leave	100	55	27	35 (64)	7 (26)	59	18 (31)	Chi ² (1.16) = 4.94	n.s.	
parental leave	91	46	25	17 (37)	6 (24)	49	12 (24)	n.s.	n.s.	
return to the same position at work after maternity or parental leave	90	43	29	28 (65)	8 (28)	56	19 (34)	Chi ² (1.13) = 3.97	n.s.	
reducing the amount of business trips for parents of children aged up to 4 years old and pregnant women	67	28	25	17 (61)	7 (28)	38	12 (32)	Chi ² (1.95) = 9.72	n.s.	
breastfeeding break (only women)	83	32	-	14 (44)	-	-	-	Chi ² (1.12) = 5.60	-	

SME – small/medium enterprise, LE – large enterprise.
Other abbreviations as in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

Availability of WLB benefits

Our analysis brought unexpected results on the availability of the WLB benefits guaranteed by the law in the case of employees who worked on the basis of employment contracts in Poland. This result may have at least 3 explanations.

First, employees are not fully aware of their own rights or employers discourage their employees to use them. Similarly, previous Polish research revealed that almost 70% of the studied police officers did not know about the general rights supporting WLB [6].

Second, certainly, some of the WLB benefits analyzed in our study may be unavailable for some workers because of their work characteristics (e.g., reduction of amount of business trips for employees having children up to 4 years of age in the case of those who do not need to travel in business at all).

In some cases benefits might have been unavailable to workers due to dynamic legal changes. Thus, for instance, fathers whose children were born before 2010 were not entitled to paternity leave and some may be still not aware of such a solution. Similarly, Robak and Słocińska [9] showed that almost 80% of the studied Polish workers declared the awareness of the available organizational and legal WLB benefits, yet, 20% of them claimed that employee rights were not obeyed in their companies.

Gender differences in take-up of WLB benefits

Referring to gender differences in the use of the available WLB benefits, women used most of child rearing benefits guaranteed by the Polish Labour Code [8] more often than men. This result still reflects a very traditional division of child care responsibilities in Poland – mother is the one mainly responsible for all the duties. In 2010, the Polish legislator introduced a new solution dedicated only to fathers, aimed at increasing their participation in the upbringing of children. Nevertheless, it has not brought the expected results yet. Going beyond traditional gender role attitudes, one may conclude that our results may be also the effect of a gender gap in wages. However, this argument seems not fully justified.

Although it is estimated that women earn about 7% less than men in Poland, this gap is still much lower than in Scandinavian countries (14–20%) where mothers and fathers share their caring responsibilities more equally [10,11]. The fathers' reluctance to take leaves dedicated

to parents might also result from the contradictory social beliefs on men's role and expected behavior. On the one hand, men are expected to go beyond the traditional role of a breadwinner. They are expected to engage in the family life to a greater extent, yet, not to withdraw from their main economical provider role [12,13]. On the other hand, as Doucet and Merla [14] showed fathers wishing to face these new expectations and who decided to stay at home with their children frequently felt that they failed as men – both because men are generally expected to earn a living and because childcare is considered as female activity.

Leave on demand constituted the only exception from this traditional pattern. However, leave on demand may be taken for many different reasons (not necessarily family-related) and it is difficult to interpret such a result clearly – this solution was supposed to be used in so called “emergency cases” when sudden life circumstances prevent an employee from coming to work. Such sudden life circumstances might include childcare emergencies (unexpected sickness or lack of other childcare possibilities). Yet, they might also result from the employee's own health problems, administrative issues to be dealt with or any other reasons. And since an employee is not required to give reason to such leave on demand, it is difficult to draw unambiguous conclusions. Probably, such a result might be referred to Hall's hypothesis that men prefer using ‘universal leaves’ than those dedicated to parents for colleagues not to associate their absence with their family situation and thus, not to be accused of having priorities other than their work [15]. Thus, we assume that men are likely to use leave on demand in the case of emergency family situations, such as child's sickness.

Size of enterprise and take-up of WLB benefits

Women working in large enterprises used almost all of the analyzed WLB benefits guaranteed by the law more frequently than women working in smaller enterprises. However, the size of enterprise did not differentiate the take-up of WLB benefits between men working in large and small/medium enterprises.

Many large companies in Poland constitute branches of international corporations that employ the universal family policy offered to employees in all countries. Moreover, employees of smaller enterprises might not use formalized benefits because they are offered some flexibility and the possibility to arrange some working conditions beyond the official contract provisions. On the other hand, in small enterprises the possibility for

the replacement of the absent employee without any additional costs is much more difficult than in large companies where an employee might be transferred from one position to another when it is needed [16]. Thus, using benefits related to the absence at work may be jeopardized by organizational issues.

The core question arising from our study is why women's but not men's use of benefits is related to the size of enterprise. We cannot derive the clarification directly from our data but we associate such a result with the proportion of women employed in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). According to national statistics women prevail in the SME sector in Poland and usually work as self-employed. Till 2013 self-employment legal solutions excluded the possibility to use some of benefits – especially paternity leaves. Thus, using these benefits was the question of individual agreement between an employee and an employer. Besides being an owner of one's own business often does not allow for the “luxury” of the WLB benefits.

CONCLUSIONS

The results suggest considering the compliance with the Labour Code in Poland [8] as dubious. In our sample, a great number of workers have reported no access to the legally binding WLB solutions. These results should be treated as a recommendation to increase monitoring and corrective activities of the relevant authorities in Polish enterprises (the National Labour Inspectorate).

When it comes to gender differences in the use of leave on demand, we have not asked for the motives and there are no relevant statistics to compare our data to, thus, drawing accurate conclusions from this result is impossible at this stage. To put some lights on this problem further studies on reasons for using leave on demand are needed. According to the differences in women's use of WLB initiatives in SME and large enterprises, the background of women's decision on not using WLB benefits despite their availability might result from gender proportion in SME, but such a conclusion needs more empirical evidence.

Limitations

The study has some limitations. The retrospective study design has made us rely on testimony of respondents which may be the source of recall bias. We also have no access to objective data as company statistics which could serve as a reference point to subjective data obtained from respondents.

Moreover, we have not considered the growth rate of legal changes, which precludes unambiguous conclusions on the (un)availability of some benefits. Despite those disadvantages, the results of the project put some light on the situation of Polish employees and contextual problems affecting the use of WLB benefits, which should be carefully analyzed and studied in future. Therefore, future studies should include the information on precise reasons for not using particular benefits.

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