


Agnieszka Karoń*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8631-1285>

THE INFLUENCE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE ORGANISATION OF FAMILY LIFE AND THE PURSUIT OF CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF MOTHERS SEEKING IT JOBS

Abstract. The article discusses the topic of experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the organisation of family life and the realisation of professional plans of mothers wishing to pursue their ambitions in the IT sector. The starting point for the considerations is a gender-sensitive analysis of the condition of the IT sector in Poland conducted on the basis of found data, complemented by an exploratory qualitative study conducted in two stages using the technique of Individual In-Depth Interviews (IDI). The study is part of the ongoing POB HERITAGE grant “Women, get to coding! Mapping educational initiatives supporting women. Pilot study”.

Keywords: home office, COVID-19, digital economy, IT, division of household chores.

1. Introduction

As recently as in February 2020, remote working was just one of the non-wage benefits at many companies, including those in the IT sector. The pandemic situation, and the accompanying sanitary requirements, turned it from a privilege into a necessity, which, combined with the transfer of all childcare to households, presented a major adaptation challenge. Pre-pandemic research had already indicated that daily struggles to balance paid work and family responsibilities were particularly burdensome for female workers with children. Despite their education and pursuit of professional fulfilment, as well as their opinion that relationships should be based on a principle of equality between partners, they took on the majority of

* MA, Jagiellonian University, Institute of Sociology, ul. Grodzka 52, 31-044 Kraków, e-mail: agnieszka.karon@doctoral.uj.edu.pl

housework and caregiving responsibilities (Scholarios, Marks 2004). The pandemic, as the research shows, has exacerbated these trends (Galasso 2020; Alon et al. 2020; Del Boca et al. 2020; Hite, McDonald 2020; Uddin 2021; Power 2020), and will continue to affect both work organisation (Del Boca et al. 2020; Hite, McDonald 2020) and inequalities related to reproductive workload (Galasso 2020; Hupkau, Petrongolo 2020). The topic of gender inequalities related to remote work and caregiving responsibilities in the context of the demands of the digital economy has been widely discussed recently (UN Women 2020). The study presented here focuses on the pandemic experiences of Polish women seeking to pursue careers in the IT sector. It addresses issues related to the organisation of daily life and adaptation of domestic space to the demands dictated by the insecurity of the pandemic reality, the impact of these experiences on the realisation of career plans. Everyday life is an important dimension of social life (Lewicka 2021). In the pandemic, it was mainly realised at home, causing a gradual blurring of the boundaries between work and private life. This led to problems with maintaining a balance in these two spheres of life, even in IT professions, which are associated with flexibility and theoretically easier reconciliation of work and family responsibilities.

In addition, it contributes to the discussion on creating an enabling environment for women in modern technology sectors (Hanson, Krywult-Albańska 2020), as well as to the literature on the inequalities and challenges of the women's workload during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Characteristics of the information and communication technology (IT) sector in Poland during the pandemic, including the situation of women

According to the data from the National Official Register of Business Entities (REGON), the number of entities declaring their business activity increases every year. At the end of 2021, there were 4.2 million entities, 3% more than the year before. There is also an increase in entities involved in the area of computer programming, consultancy and related activities (Section J, Division 62 of the Polish Classification of Activities, PKD). On the last day of December 2021, there were 141,400 such entities in Poland (3.3% of all entities), more than twice as many as at the end of 2015 (68,000, 1.8% of the total). The growth of the number of entities in the areas of Division 62 occurs at double-digit rates every year. In 2021, compared to 2020, the number of entities increased by 16% (by 19,500), five times more than the number of total entities, and in 2020 it was 10.1% higher than in 2019 (GUS 2021a; GUS 2021b).

It is worth noting that in 2020 women accounted for 46.7% of the total working population, a percentage that fluctuates only slightly from year to year (GUS

2020a). The shares of women among employees (48.4% in 2020) and among owners, co-owners, and family members helping in business (42.1% in 2020) are also stable. The impact of the pandemic is not visible in the 2020 data. However, the situation of female workers in software and IT consulting companies is different. Overall, there are more women working in this industry, with 47,000 in 2016 and 67,000 in 2020. However, the share of female workers is much smaller than in the economy overall. In 2020, women accounted for 27.5% of the employed population (0.3 percentage points less than in 2019). Significant differences exist in the status of women working in business areas listed in Section J Division 62 of the Polish Classification of Activities. There is a much higher (and increasing year by year) share of women working under an employment relationship (36.4% in 2020, while in 2016 the percentage was 32%) than the share of women in the group of business owners and co-owners (7.2% in 2020, the lowest since 2016, when it was 11.7%). As this is a trend observed since 2016, it is difficult to link it to the pandemic. For every one female owner/co-owner of an entity listed in Section J Division 62, there are more than eleven women employed in such businesses. Considering the total workforce in this industry, there are two employed persons per owner/co-owner. However, when analysing these data, one has to bear in mind that there are also persons in managerial positions among those listed as employed.

In 2020, more than 161,000 full-time employees and more than 8,500 part-time employees (95% of the total were full-time employees, 93.4% were women) worked in software and IT consulting entities. Among those employed on a full-time basis, 35.8% were women and among those employed part time, there were 47.4% of women (2020). In 2020, the number of full-time employees in Section J Division 62 increased by 5.2% compared to 2019, and the number of women among full-time employees increased by 6.4%. At the same time, the number of part-time workers fell by 1.9% and the number of female part-time workers fell by 5%. Perhaps this is related to the pandemic, or perhaps the decrease in female part-timers is some kind of correction after the dynamic increase between 2018 and 2019 (the number of female part-timers increased by 21.3% then). This question requires additional analysis which will not be undertaken in this article (GUS 2020b).

GUS (Statistics Poland, formerly known as CSO) data on employment and wages of employed persons by occupation show that in 2020 there were about 15% women in IT-related occupations in managerial and middle-level positions (technicians), and about 19–20% women among those in specialist positions (systems analysts, database and network specialists). In relation to 2018, the share of women has increased in all groups except managers. In specialist occupations, where relatively more women are employed, the largest wage gap between men's and women's earnings exists, with income differences of up to one fifth (GUS 2020b).

Eurostat's data on professionals working in ICT show that in Poland in 2020 women accounted for 15% of this professional group (85% were men), while in the EU as a whole the percentage was 18.5%. Both in Poland and in the EU, an

increase of 0.6 p.p. was recorded in comparison with 2019 (Eurostat 2020). These data cannot be compared with the GUS (Statistics Poland) data for methodological reasons, including a completely different definition.

In the ranking “Women in Digital Scoreboard 2021” (published in November 2021), created on the basis of 12 indicators, Poland, with a score of 43.7 (on a scale from 0 to 100) ranked 24th among 27 countries in Europe. The average score for the entire European Union was 53.2, and for Finland (first place) – 76.9. In terms of specialist skills and employment (one of the three components), Poland ranked 20th with a score of 40.6. The value for the entire EU was 47, and for Ireland (first place) – 67.2. This component consists of three indicators:

1. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) graduates – according to the data for 2018, Poland is second in the EU, behind Ireland. Poland has 17.4 female STEM graduates per 1000 people aged 20–29 (Ireland 23.9, EU as a whole 13.7). The value of the indicator for men in Poland is 22.6.
2. ICT professionals (service managers, specialists, technicians, installers, repairers) – data for 2020, LFS (Polish: BAEL). Female ICT specialists constitute 1.14% of the total number of employed persons in Poland, which means the 25th place in the EU (the leader is Finland with the result of 3.68%). The indicator for the entire EU amounts to 1.73%. The value of the indicator for men in Poland is 5.18%.
3. In terms of the gender wage gap indicator, Poland (28.2%) ranked 24th. The smallest gap (8.7%) is in Sweden, while in the whole EU it is 19.3%. The data used here are for 2019 and include all employees of companies with 10+ employees, not only ICT (European Commission 2021).

The report “Women in IT 2020” by No Fluff Jobs indicates that the industry is perceived as attractive by women, who most often mention higher salaries (70%), opportunities for personal development (51%) or the possibility to pursue their passions (40%) as the main motivators. Women who want to take up programming usually just change their jobs and educate themselves. 49% of Polish women who want to start a career in IT gain the necessary knowledge and skills by self-studying, 25% want to complete specialist courses and only 7% are thinking about university studies in this field.

The report also indicates that employment contracts are the most common among women in IT. Only 17% of the surveyed women work under a B2B contract, despite the fact that such a form of cooperation is often associated with greater freedom as to the place and time of providing services and, theoretically, easier reconciliation of numerous professional and non-professional duties, as well as with maintaining work-life balance.

The cited research also indicates that due to the pandemic, women working in IT have more work to do at home. 41% of female programmers worldwide believe that remote work has negatively affected them. It is hardly surprising, considering the fact that many tasks and issues related to childcare, despite the declared equal

partnership-based model of relationship, in practice are still assigned to women (CBOS 2020). Helping children to study remotely while taking care of the home and the irregular working hours caused by the pandemic are therefore not making life any easier for any woman, including those working in IT. As many as 57 per cent of women feel more burnt out in their jobs, 43 per cent of them work longer hours and 42 per cent have more household duties than their partners (No Fluff Jobs 2020).

As indicated on the basis of the presented data, the pandemic has not stopped the development of the industry. The IT sector is constantly looking for new employees, including women. Considering the above-mentioned findings and the fact that the pandemic causes an increase in the load of caregiving work, which is delegated to households to a substantial extent and burdens women, it seems justified to recognize women's pandemic experiences and their impact on the organization of family life and the fulfilment of professional plans.

3. Research methodology

The conducted research is exploratory in nature. Respondents were selected by means of purpose sampling on the basis of a key variable – the desire to pursue professional ambitions in the IT sector.

In order to capture a fuller picture of experiences at different phases of the pandemic, the study was conducted in two phases on the same group of female respondents, the first part between March and June 2021 and the second part in January and February 2022. It is worth noting that on 12 March 2020, activities and classes in kindergartens, schools, and universities were suspended, and distance learning was introduced. In the following days, the government declared a state of epidemic and ordered a lockdown. At the beginning of May 2021, a gradual lifting of the restrictions began and kindergartens were allowed to open, but the order to wear masks and keep distance in public spaces remained in force. In 2022, due to further mutations of the virus, the rules of the sanitary regime were temporarily reintroduced, including distance learning and work from home.

The pandemic situation, the accompanying uncertainty and lack of safety, as well as the requirements of research ethics necessitated the implementation of the research process through online platforms (Zoom, Messenger, MS Teams). All respondents agreed to participate in the study and were informed that their participation would be anonymous.

In the research, the IDI (Individual In-Depth Interviews) technique was used. It allows for a dynamic modification of the scenario, depending on the respondent's specifics, the nature of answers or the introduction of topics to the conversation that were not considered at the stage of designing the interview scenario.

The first part of the research, conducted in 2021, was focused on the respondents' life situation, their professional plans, the organisation of their workspace, the

difficulty of combining work with caregiving and studying, conflicts, fears and expectations. The second part (2022), on the other hand, referred to what the respondents believed they had achieved in their professional and domestic lives.

The interview scenario consisted of three parts. The first was a free, in-depth account by the interviewee of her own story in the context of her career aspirations and pandemic experiences centred around her life at home, as well as combining work duties or job searching with her responsibilities to her family. The second part consisted of the explanation of any points that might be unclear, while the third part consisted of additional, more specific questions (Merrill, West 2009). In addition to these core parts, the interview was introduced with a brief discussion of its aims and concluded with an open-ended question about issues that the interviewee felt had not been addressed (Kvale 2007: 106). To summarise and code the data, thematic analysis was used. Data labelling was used in the transcriptions to protect the identity of the participants.

During the study, 17 script-supported in-depth interviews were conducted in two rounds. Seven of them involved young mothers (ages 23–26) who, being fresh out of university, attempted to start working in the IT sector during the pandemic. Ten of them involved mothers (ages 27–40) with more work experience who wanted to retrain and change jobs. All the respondents were married, with higher technical (9) or humanities (8) education and lived in cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants, i.e. Kraków (5), Warsaw (6), Wrocław (3), Poznań (3). Among the respondents who planned to change their occupation during the pandemic, there were female science teachers, i.e. mathematics and physics teachers (3), foreign language teachers (3), a translator (1), a designer (1) and corporate accountants (2). As for the occupations of the husbands of the women surveyed, in the group of mothers entering the labour market, three men worked as sales representatives (working outside the home, also in lockdown), two in local government administration (working from home) and two were associated with the IT sector (working for corporations). In the group of retraining women, four men were working in corporate accounting (who also worked from home in lockdown), three as sales representatives (working outside the home), two in uniformed services (working outside the home) and one was self-employed.

4. Findings

The participants of the study are women who are in favour of a partnership family model, understood as a union of equals in which decisions are made after open discussion and domestic roles are negotiated. Only four of the surveyed women come from metropolitan cities in which they currently live. The others, except for two, came from small towns (up to 50,000 inhabitants) to study at universities and stayed, seeing it as an opportunity for a better life, as well as for personal and professional development. Two of the respondents came to live in the city from

the countryside (Poznań voivodeship, Podlaskie voivodeship), while their brothers stayed on the farm. Being a homemaker does not suit any of the respondents. They have been observing the lives of their mothers and despite the fact that they perceive their childhood as being within the norm, they do not want to repeat patterns taken from home. A recurring theme in the interviews is that of a tired and unappreciated mother who kept a brave face. Even if the father was “fine” and family life was within the local norm, i.e. no more serious issues than quarrels about money, silent treatment or alcohol were present, the respondents perceive the falseness of their mothers’ declared contentment. One respondent said:

I am grateful to my parents for the way they brought us up, it was hard at times, but they persevered with each other. I could never understand why my mother, who was offered a career in mathematics when she was at university, chose my father and a stable job as a teacher. When he died, about 4 years after his death she burned pictures of him, and I found out I had a brother out of wedlock. I think she regretted her decisions a bit (M, mother of three, thinking of divorce).

The respondents combined work with study when they were at university. These were various occupations, from being a hostess, a cleaner in corporate office buildings, a tutor, an Avon salesperson or a babysitter, to more prestigious jobs, such as being an accountant in a small company or working at cultural events. This is where linguistic skills came in handy. Their work was a form of self-expression, an element of building an alternative to the “husband, children, chores, bitterness” scenario (as referred to by A, mother of two). Those respondents who are young mothers just after graduation stress that they are “looking for a well-paid idea for living, so as not to get stuck” (B, mother of an 11-month-old daughter). Good earnings and a better quality of life are emphasized, “which, if you want to live on a decent level, costs a lot” (D, mother of a 6-month-old son), especially when the couple are paying off a mortgage, and their families have contributed to the payment.

This cash we got from my husband’s family for the flat is nice, but I feel obliged to his family. The mother-in-law claims the right to interfere in everything, even though she has not been an exceptionally good mother and has been divorced twice. All her unsolicited advice and telling me off for buying clothes, even though I earn my pennies and breastfeed my kid at the same time (D, mother of a 4-year-old daughter and a 5-month-old son).

In the women’s answers, there is also a recurring issue of increasing mortgage instalments and the need to reduce the financial burden borne by the husband: “The instalments for the flat are getting higher, and because of his job (sales representative) he hardly ever sees us. When we do see each other, we growl at each other out of exhaustion” (G, mother of a 3-month-old daughter). It appears from the statements of the interviewed women that the husbands most often resort to the strategy of “intensification of activities” in order to meet their idea of the husband’s role that they learned at home, which, despite the declaration of equal partnership, is related to providing for the family, especially in times of uncertainty and insecurity caused by the pandemic.

Differences in spouses' earnings play a significant role in this. The respondents appreciate what they received in the family home, even if it was not a smooth experience. However, they want to avoid repeating patterns copied from their family of origin; on the contrary, they intend to build their marriage on the basis of equal partnership. A crucial element in the statements made by the interviewed women is the orientation towards having their own money and fulfilling their ambitions and, what is more important, combining these two spheres with a successful and harmonious family life. The respondents are aware of the burden resulting from their upbringing, habits, and the full set of experiences that has shaped them. They try to structure their family life on the basis of valuing themselves as a fully-fledged partner and not as someone who is just of service to others.

5. Professional plans. Achievements

The IT sector comprises many professions. The young mothers who participated in the study treat it as a kind of discernment of options, an element of development. They are tempted by good salaries, by the development of the sector and by the fact that if they get settled in the profession, "the career will take its course". "Everyone praises it so much, and I've always been good at maths, we'll see, maybe it will be the golden shot" (O, mother of an 11-month-old son). In the answers, there is often (6 respondents) a theme of not knowing which profession would be best for them and which one to try. "When you read blogs, and you stumble upon incentives to go in that direction every step of the way, you catch the hook, but it's hard to determine on your own what it is you have an aptitude for" (A, mother of a 4-month-old son). Four respondents aspire to IT because their friends have found their way in the profession, and they are following them. "While still at university, a friend got me interested in IT, explaining that it's not just coding. I like teaching, but we all know how little money you earn at school. She succeeded even though she taught herself everything" (B, mother of a 6-month-old son).

The women actively use what the Internet and support groups for mothers have to offer. They participate in forums and information exchanges. There they seek comfort and inspiration. They also seek information on the best options available through personal networks, through word of mouth and through friends, for example from their university.

The pandemic experience did not change the mothers' career plans. It only adjusted the timing of their expected success, even a small one. In the group of mothers with some work experience, four have been successful. However, the adaptation to the new working conditions is still a significant effort, despite the relaxation of restrictions and the fact that the world is slowly returning to normal. This is indicative of the persistence of women's demands on themselves and their pragmatic approach to finances. "You don't know what will happen with finances,

times are uncertain. I am still earning less and the bills are increasing” (M, mother of three, thinking about divorce). Even successful retraining is accompanied by huge remorse. “I barely started working and, here we go, the little ones are sick again, so everyone is quarantined” (A, mother of a 4 -year-old son).

In the group of young mothers entering the job market, three women have been successful. Two of them got an internship as testers and one as a data analyst. In the group of mothers with some work experiences, five have changed their jobs. They all emphasise that it cost them an awful lot of self-denial and that their children give them wings in the daily struggles for a better tomorrow. The remaining women are still looking for their place and definitely do not want to give up.

6. Organising the workspace

Home office is a big challenge. It is only seemingly limited to organising a work area. The respondents mention practices aimed at time management (also children’s time: naps, teaching the daily routine, specific rhythm of the house), technological support such as smartphones, tablets, and solutions aimed at adapting the available and often scarce space of the home for work. This is particularly difficult when both parents work remotely. It also frequently generates difficult situations and battles over territory or habits.

The worst thing is to find my own place to work, a quiet one. If I somehow manage to get a piece of space for myself, I desperately protect it from the rest of the family. It’s difficult because every time I start writing a CV, doing commissioned work, or finishing a training course, I have to clear my place of mugs, teddy bears, and other knick-knacks (D, mother of a 6-month-old son).

It is also difficult to find time to work.

When you start a conversation, suddenly everyone wants to drink or eat. Not a moment of peace. A complete disaster. The kids’ rooms and the bedroom are also out. The husband works in the bedroom. Check-ins, calls. During lockdown, we kept bumping into each other. The atmosphere in the house was getting thicker (A, mother of 4 year-old son).

Both space and time are subject to negotiations. However, these negotiations are not on equal terms. Women’s aspirations often lose out to finance and the pragmatics of everyday life.

7. Balancing work, care, and study. Strategies

According to the statements of the women interviewed, there emerges a picture of a kind of a maternity multitasking frenzy composed of a series of “must do” activities. “You’re trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle on the floor during dinner, checking if the laundry is already done, trying to have a conversation with your

daughter” (H, mother of a three month-old daughter). There is a theme of guilt towards the child, but also strategies undertaken to juggle different fields of daily activity. The strategies are dictated by the husband’s availability after work, especially when he has an outside job during the lockdown and the woman is left to herself, and by financial pragmatics: “It is his income that allows us to live, we have loans, he is under pressure too” (M, mother of a 5-month-old son). Situations in which both partners work from home only seemingly improve the sharing of responsibilities. It is not a matter of the husbands intentionally shirking their duties, but of the work schedule and the tight workflow imposed by the employer, as well as the fact that children, especially small ones, incessantly demand their mother’s attention. The coping strategies indicated constitute snatching a minute for oneself, i.e. for study or work, followed by remorse resulting from playing YouTube cartoons to the children. Toys and gadgets, such as rocking-toys, merry-go-rounds, to keep the child occupied for a while, are often mentioned. The elements indicated as helpful in combining learning, work, and care in the opinions of the respondents are slings, baby carriers and ultra-light and spill-proof tablet computer equipment.

I used to have time for proper concentration and learning during the child’s naps, but also when my toddler was crawling on the carpet and looking at things. Then you can turn on some short tutorials. Plus in the afternoon, when the husband comes back less tired. He drives a lot, so sometimes there’s a moment like that, but it’s all a drop in the ocean of needs (P, mother of 6-month-old son).

The most extreme examples of maternal multitasking documented in this study are articulated by mothers seeking to reinvent themselves.

Immediately after leaving the hospital I went back to my job in the home-office (half-time). Most of the day I am alone with the children, my husband works in the uniformed services. It is a demanding job, frequent trips, but it is paid moderately [...]. I work on the phone, usually holding one child in my arms and following the others from the corner of my eye, unless they are in kindergarten. And if they are not, because in autumn they are frequently ill, then if they are sleeping, the laptop/phone comes into play. I often don’t have enough energy to prepare application documents or put something on the GitHub (M, mother of a 4 month-old daughter).

For the interviewees, motherhood in the pandemic is like the Olympics, requiring a strong commitment on all fronts. It was the most difficult in lockdown because kindergartens and schools were closed, and face-to-face contacts with other people were reduced. “Aunting,” i.e. handing the children over to the care of a friend in order to use the time to look after oneself, was also out of the question. The option of sending the children to the park with their father did not work either.

The mothers surveyed set extremely high standards for themselves. Not only do they have to give their children a lot of tenderness and love, take care of their intellectual development (they feel obliged to give them clever toys and feel guilty about letting them watch videos), but at the same time it is necessary not to neglect any developmental opportunity for oneself, not to miss the moment, not to fall out of

the game. According to the respondents, this is more than exhausting, but it is difficult to let go without feeling guilty. This self-discipline seems to be rooted in wider social constructs of being a “good mother”, which refer to daily presence and involvement in raising children, but also not letting go of the pursuit of a career. Expectations of an equal partnership among respondents remain unchanged. During the most severe restrictions, it was not the agreements between partners that influenced the division of responsibilities, but financial pragmatics. The husband’s professional work, in the face of the uncertainty of unprecedented sanitary restrictions, was more important, but not so much as to give up dreams altogether for it. No lasting solutions were worked out, but the issues related to the division of responsibilities were better emphasised.

8. Conflicts, negotiation of roles

Despite the equal partnership model of the relationship declared by the respondents, the line of conflict turned out to be that of habits and tedious, endless housekeeping.

Jacek helps around the house, but not spontaneously. Sometimes I don’t have the strength to repeat over and over: »Don’t put your plates around the bed, put your shoes in the cabinet«. Sometimes I get mad because the kid, when he crawls into the hallway, puts everything in his mouth. I understand that he is tired, but I also work hard at home (A, mother of a 7-month-old son).

Conflicts are also fostered by overwhelming responsibilities. “Last night, out of tiredness, I argued with my husband, and it was his birthday. There was the proverbial spark and boom! Even the fact that I had prepared a present for him didn’t save the situation. We are both exhausted” (M, mother of a 4-month-old daughter).

Although the women interviewed are aware of the importance of negotiating the division of responsibilities, the practice of daily life in the pandemic can be unpredictable and fraught with hotspots that explode.

In May I rebelled. It can’t be that the child is solely my responsibility. He will play with his daughter sometimes, making a terrible mess, but when it is necessary to get up at night, it all comes down to me. I understand that my money from commissions is not enough to provide for my family, but I am also human and I want to rest. My husband doesn’t see that I help him a lot, even if only by keeping the house quiet when he has a call. Why can’t I count on mutual help? (A, mother of 3-month-old daughter).

Men, in the face of the pandemic, as admitted by the respondents, most often adopted the strategy of “intensifying activities” and “escaping into work”, implementing their image of the husband’s role as the one who provided for the family. While at the level of information exchange and decision-making the partners cooperated, the fathers did not participate as much as they could in household duties. The demand for equality and partnership was accepted, but economic

arguments prevailed, which translated into additional emotional labour for the women, who cared for their husbands' comfort by taking on additional responsibilities. In addition, the women interviewed felt a need to alleviate stress-related arguments and discharges. This was an expression of concern for the emotional stability of the marriage.

9. Fears and expectations

Concerns about health as well as high levels of stress and fatigue emerged in the respondents' statements. The sudden and unexpected limitation of social contacts, the accompanying sense of threat and anxiety, especially in the first weeks, as well as the incoming stream of often contradictory information, posed a considerable challenge to all the participants. All this did not eliminate their "old" fears about whether they would be able to find a decent job and whether they would not lose out on motherhood. One mother interviewed said, "I am afraid that this boom for IT professions will pass, and I will not succeed. I don't have much of an idea what I want to do and how to organise my professional life so that the work is exciting and productive. I seem to want to try many things, and IT seems attractive to me" (M, mother of an 8-month-old son). Those with more work experience emphasise financial worries and the fact that they finally want to do something that allows them to develop themselves. The current job does not give them satisfaction. The promise of a good salary and a job in which they can fulfil themselves is tempting, "because if not now, then when" (B, mother of a 10-month-old son).

10. Conclusions

Combining work and private life during the pandemic is not an easy task. The greatest difficulty is the unequal distribution of responsibilities in the household (lack of sufficient support from the partner), children getting ill frequently, quarantine, and the difficulty in finding a quiet place to perform professional duties or a moment to study. Coping with all the responsibilities is particularly difficult for mothers with little work experience who are just starting their careers. As women get more experience with family and work, their attitude changes. They start to share more responsibilities with their partner, but their expectations of themselves do not diminish. They negotiate roles, responsibilities, and duties, but they are more lenient towards their husbands, for reasons of financial pragmatism and fear for the well-being and financial upkeep of the family, as well as the general family atmosphere.

Overwhelming domestic responsibilities have not affected the professional aspirations of the respondents. None of the respondents gave up their plans. They stressed the financial attractiveness of the sector and the fact that higher earnings

would improve the family's livelihood and allow for financial respite. It would also give them more possibility of self-development. Those women who have accomplished their plans feel immense pride and emphasise that it is the children who motivate them to make such a huge effort.

In the pandemic, despite minor adjustments, typical patterns persisted. Mothers working or studying remotely were the ones responsible for most of the housework and childcare. The situation was more difficult when only one parent (the mother) worked or studied remotely (the other outside the home). The gender disparity in household responsibilities was much more pronounced here. The mothers who worked or studied at home took on almost all the additional work, while the fathers, justifying themselves by the pressure and fatigue resulting from the intensification of efforts to provide for the family, reported much less interest in additional household duties and childcare. They did not ignore these needs but allowed themselves more leeway. Domestic chores had to be solicited and reminded of or requested repeatedly. The domestic situation of the respondents did not change significantly when the restrictions were relaxed. Open kindergartens or nurseries were not a total relief. Children's illnesses and COVID-19-related quarantines again confined childcare to the home. Mothers were supported by grandmothers, but it can be seen in many statements that this generated conflicts, especially when the mother-in-law helped with childcare.

The pandemic experience did not change the mothers' career plans. It only corrected the timing of the expected success, even the small one. Future research, to provide a better understanding of the situation and how it unfolded, should consider the views of men, and compare them with the experiences articulated by women. Future studies could also explore the impact of remote working on broader cultural shifts regarding gender equality and gender roles, particularly in the IT sector, which is changing everyday life and requiring deep adaptations. This is important in an era of a digital economy that leads to inequality.

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WPLYW PANDEMII COVID-19 NA ORGANIZACJĘ ŻYCIA RODZINNEGO I REALIZACJĘ ASPIRACJI ZAWODOWYCH MATEK POSZUKUJĄCYCH PRACY W BRANŻY IT

Abstrakt. Artykuł porusza tematykę doświadczania pandemii COVID-19 i jej wpływu na organizację życia rodzinnego i realizację planów zawodowych matek chcących rozwijać się w sektorze IT. Punktem wyjścia podjętych rozważań jest uwzględniająca płeć i przeprowadzona w oparciu o dane zastane analiza kondycji sektora IT w Polsce, uzupełniona eksploracyjnym badaniem jakościowym przeprowadzonym dwuetapowo techniką Indywidualnych Wywiadów Pogłębionych (IDI). Badanie jest elementem realizowanego grantu POB HERITAGE „Kobiety do kodu! Mapowanie inicjatyw edukacyjnych wspierających kobiety. Badanie pilotażowe”.

Słowa kluczowe: home office, COVID-19, gospodarka cyfrowa, IT, podział obowiązków domowych.