

## Article

# 200 Years of Feminisation of Professions in Poland—Mechanism of False Windows of Opportunity

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the problem of the female labour market in Poland and the phenomenon of the feminisation of selected occupations. The main aim was to identify the mechanisms behind the feminisation of occupations in Poland and its consequences by combining considerations of labour market theory with development path theories. This research employed various methods such as the method of analysis of secular trends, as well as a critical reinterpretation of the literature review. Data from the 19th century to 2019 were analysed. The textile industry, education, local public administration, and social care are included in the analysis. The research motivation was to answer the question as to when and under what conditions the selected occupations were feminised. The mechanism of false windows of opportunity was identified, as well as times when the windows of opportunity to enter a given occupation opened and closed for women. Specifically, the research findings described that the female labour market is dependent on the male labour market and thus windows of opportunity offer new employment opportunities but with limited possibilities and under poorer conditions.

**Keywords:** feminisation of professions; female labour market; false windows of opportunity



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## 1. Introduction

The labour market is characterised by inequalities, especially between workers of different genders. In 2019, 67% of women were economically active in the European Union, compared to 78% of men [1]. In the same year, women earned on average 16% less, were much less active in STEM professions, and less frequently held managerial positions [1]. Women dominate in the group of care and educational professions (education, healthcare, welfare services) and lower-order services (such as personal services, cleaning).

The main reasons behind the present-day situation of women in the labour market are those resulting from the gender contract. The literature (e.g., [2]) emphasises the division of social roles, in particular the attribution of a caring and educational role to women and the resultant perception of women as potentially less flexible as workers. Women undertake unpaid work in the home to a greater extent. In addition, given the care they provide to children and sick and elderly persons, they are more likely to choose part-time work. The career gap caused by motherhood is also perceptible later with women have less experience, a limited network of contacts, and consequently, less chance of promotion [3].

Until the end of the 19th century, the gender contract meant a clear-cut division of roles in marriage, assigning paid work to men and housework and care work to women. Naturally, women were professionally active at the time, but this was only the case among poorer groups (mainly rural residents), unmarried women or widows, and a specific group of professions, such as housekeeping service and employment in the textile industry. World War II was a turning point in the history of women's professional activity since it forced women into employment [4]. Socialism, which would later come to dominate the political system in Central and Eastern Europe, consolidated and even strengthened social attitudes towards women's work. Compared to Western Europe and the US, the post-socialist

countries were characterised by lower occupational segregation and the greater economic activity of women [5]. One consequence of the rapid social changes was the so-called ‘false emancipation’, where equality between men and women is understood as their sameness and not as equal opportunities [6]. The issue of equal opportunities, and more broadly, gender equality, is embedded in the discourse of social sustainability [7]. One of the main elements of social sustainability is also social justice, human rights, and quality of life [8,9]. In the context of the labour market, diversity plays a particularly important role, and as Jabareen [10] stresses, it is a constitutive process for social sustainability. The concept of diversity management stems from the transition from a paradigm based on acceptance and tolerance to a paradigm emphasizing the effectiveness of inclusion [11], and in this approach, the role of women in the labour market is particularly important.

Against the background of other post-socialist countries, Poland stands out for various reasons. One of them is the female’s labour market, where, in addition to the universal factors identified in the other countries, there are other conditions linked to the specific role of the Catholic Church. Moreover, Poles are among the most traditional societies in Central and Eastern Europe [12]. In particular, young men (18–29 years old) have conservative views [13]. Every seventh Pole (mainly men) prefers the traditional family model where the man takes up paid work and the woman keeps the house. Although the majority of Poles declare a partnership-based family model, it is mainly women who perform unpaid housework [14].

The important role of religion, the traditionality of society and the introduction of a new political system in Poland after World War II have led to a number of contradictions. In the early 1950s, due to shortages of the labour force, women were also encouraged to take up employment in industries considered typically male (such as mining, metallurgy, and construction). This did not take long. As early as 1956, based on arguments linked to their biological disposition, women started to be discouraged from such work and moved towards lower-paid caring professions. This was repeated several times, having a greater or lesser impact on the situation of women in the labour market [4].

Currently, the employment rates of Polish women are close to the European average. However, women in Poland are much better educated than men, and they are also highly mobile. In addition, the feminised professions in Poland are characterised by very low salaries and social prestige ([15,16]). However, one may wonder to what extent the current situation of women in the labour market results from the combination of various attitudes promoted during the socialist era, namely the consolidation of pre-assigned roles (the dominance of women in ‘female’ professions), on the one hand, and a significant increase in the professional activity of women and the popularisation of higher education among them, on the other. The feminisation of professions has taken place at different times and for various reasons, but the employment rate of women during the socialist period increased rapidly, strengthening the job division along gender lines, which is still discernible today.

The aim of this paper is to identify the mechanisms behind the feminisation of occupations in Poland and its consequences by combining considerations of labour market theory with development path theories. The research motivation is to answer the question as to when and under what conditions the selected professions were feminised. The author identifies the times when the windows of opportunity to enter a given profession opened and closed for women. Moreover, the motivation was to fill the conceptual gap in studies on the labour market in Poland and to try to outline a new research perspective by applying concepts from evolutionary economics, such as windows of opportunity or self-reinforcing sequences. The textile industry, education, local public administration (function of village administrator), and social care are included in the analysis. Moreover, the developments on the female labour market are discussed in a broader sense. The analysis takes into account both social conditions, stemming mainly from the roles attributed to the genders, and the other factors, i.e., political activity, not necessarily directly related to the labour market.

The paper is an attempt to fill a noticeable gap in research on the female labour market. Fidelis [4] clearly identifies World War II and the period of socialism as turning points in

the redefinition of gender roles, which, however, did not happen in Poland, despite the numerous social changes. The female labour market is a subject widely researched by both economists and sociologists as well as geographers and historians, but there is lack of interdisciplinary cause-and-effect analyses that could explain these relationships. By contribution to the above trends, the author attempts to explain the phenomena discussed by describing the mechanism of dependence of the female labour market on the male labour market, which underlies the existence of false windows of opportunity for women. As Mahoney [17] emphasises, self-reinforcing sequences contribute to the creation and long-term reproduction of a given institutional pattern, which, in the context of false windows of opportunity, adopts a mechanism that sets in motion an institutional pattern that is self-reinforcing and irreversible. The literature lacks an answer to the question of how institutions deliver increasing returns over time. Nevertheless, by pointing to women's false windows of opportunity, the author illustrates the mechanisms that underlie the reproductive processes pointed by Mahoney [17].

The periods of World War II and socialism were conducive to fostering the professional activity of women, offering them an unquestionable opportunity. In addition, the feminisation of individual professions has given women a number of previously unavailable options, but these opportunities are limited, and the conditions of employment are worse than in the case of men. Moreover, feminised professions are those that men do not want to take up due to lower salaries or low prestige. The mechanism of false windows of opportunity for women is also influenced by the so-called 'false equality', which is manifested on the labour market by the fact that men allow (or do not allow) women to enter a given profession.

#### *Theoretical Framework*

The topic described here combines two lines of theoretical considerations—theories concerning the labour market and those related to path dependence. Numerous theories of the labour market [18,19] reject the homogeneity of the market in favour of multiple segmentations resulting from the heterogeneous nature of the demand and supply for labour. Kryńska [20] identifies four types of segmentation, i.e., competitive, informational, network, and behavioural, none of which, however, relate directly to the situation of women. Traditionally, the theories of the labour market (including [21–23] explain the situation of women by reference to the gender contract. Bourdieu [24] points first of all to the predominant social belief that women's professional work is an extension of their domestic role. In addition, he emphasises the lack of authority of women and their subordinate role towards men, as well as ascribing more technical skills to men. For Beck [25], the segmentation of women in the labour market results from the so-called inverted hierarchy—the unrepresentativeness of women in occupations not considered to be influential and their low share in areas characterised by high public esteem. Giddens [26] points to the role of a number of factors—both historical conditions and sociocultural norms. Feminist economists see the issue of the market in slightly broader terms, rejecting the existence of homo oeconomicus and studying the impact of social norms on the behaviour of individuals [2].

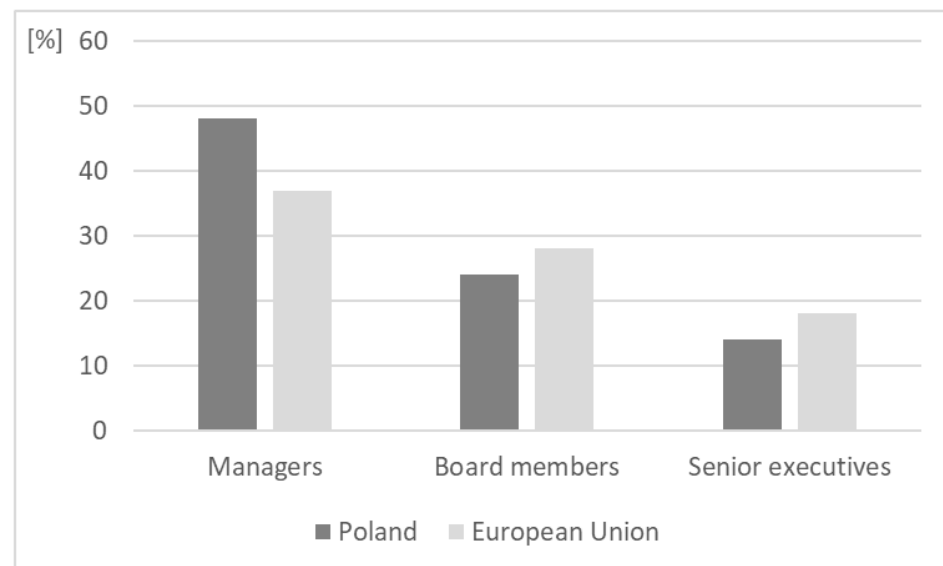
In the context of the labour market, path dependence can be understood as an increase in women's economic activity which, in the context of the labour market as a whole, takes a character similar to that of the gradualist approach. In the case of individual professions, it seems to be closer to the punctuated equilibrium approach. Pobłocki [27] points to a structural discontinuity, which largely depends on political conditions in the context of women's professional activity. In this narrower approach, namely, that focusing on individual occupations, it is possible to identify specific windows of opportunity understood in path dependence theories as moments which, as a result of the occurrence of a major instability of the existing system, abruptly change the conditions of its functioning and enable the roles of its individual elements to be reconfigured. In the path dependence theory, contingent events are potentially of huge importance, which may be amplified in

further development of the system or may reconfigure it. Importantly, while the system is being reconfigured, ideas and actions that would not normally have a chance of being implemented can actually be adopted [17,28].

In the paper, World War II and the socialist period, which saw a steep increase in the professional activity of women, are assumed to have been the periods when the system was reconfigured. If analysed, the current situation of women clearly shows that the changes in the perception of roles have had a significant impact—though not the only one—on the reconfiguration of the position of women in the labour market.

## 2. Materials and Methods

For the analyses of the women's situation in the labour market, the method of analysis of secular trends was used. The analyses of the current situation of women in the labour market in Poland was made by using aggregated statistical sources from Poland such as the Central Statistical Office, e.g., Labour Force Survey in Poland and the Local Data Bank, and Europe, e.g., the European Institute of Gender Equality and Eurostat. Table 1 shows employed persons and average monthly gross pay by selected sections of the Polish Classification of Activities (PKD) in the 1st quarter of 2020. It is based on the Labour Force Survey in Poland (Central Statistical Office). The women in managerial positions in Poland and the EU presented on Figure 1 shows the data from 2018 published by Eurostat. Figure 2 shows the share of women in employment in the years from 1950 to 2019. Because of the changes in data collection by the Central Statistical Office, data up to 1994 refer to the share of women in total employment, and data from 1995–2019 refer to the share of working women in the labour market. The archives data were used based on the Yearbook of Labour Statistics from 1986 and 1990 and current ones based on Local Data Bank. Furthermore, the paper shows the archives data from literature like results of sociological surveys from 1969 and mid-1970.



**Figure 1.** Women in managerial positions in Poland and the EU, 2018; based on [1].

The paper presents a critical reinterpretation of literature review. Table 2 shows the feminization of selected professions and functions made based on literature about the textile industry, education, local public administration (function of village administrator), and social care.

## 3. Current Situation of Women in the Labour Market in Poland

The Polish female labour market is distinguished by a lower percentage of professionally active women (65% in 2018), with the rate averaging 67% for the European Union and reaching 72% for the Czech Republic and 80% for Sweden [29]. In general, women take

up employment in the public sector (education, health care, social welfare) and in lower-order services much more often than men (Table 1), but in Poland, these occupations are perceived as being associated with extremely low prestige. In a December 2020 survey [30], Poles ranked the choice of such professions as teacher or nurse of children particularly low compared to other countries (for both professions, about 30% of the respondents from Poland would be dissatisfied, while 52–70% of respondents from the other countries declared their satisfaction).

**Table 1.** Employed persons and average monthly gross pay by selected sections of the Polish Classification of Activities–PKD (2020); based on [31].

Selected Sections in PKD	Total Labour Force (Thous.)	Women (%)	Men (%)	Average Monthly Gross Salary (PLN)
Agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing	1511	38.2	61.8	5143.58
Mining and quarrying	229	9.2	<b>90.8</b>	8303.17
Manufacturing	3301	32.5	<b>67.5</b>	4713.05
Construction	1318	6.4	<b>93.6</b>	4061.68
Trade; repair of motor vehicles	2253	55.9	44.1	4306.03
Transportation and storage	1065	22.0	<b>78.0</b>	4258.86
Information and communication	432	28.5	<b>71.5</b>	8438.91
Professional, scientific and technical activities	672	53.1	46.9	6221.76
Administrative and support service activities	421	45.6	54.4	3716.04
Public administration and defence	1015	50.0	50.0	5978.14
Education	1304	<b>78.8</b>	21.2	4863.52
Human health services and social work activities	979	<b>81.5</b>	18.5	4847.04
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	234	62.0	38.0	4334.21
Other service activities	287	<b>72.1</b>	27.9	3706.17

The Polish labour market is characterised by a large gender gap in education. Among employed women, 45% have higher education. For men, the ratio is much lower at 27% [15]. This inequality is bound to continue—in 2018, 62% of women completed higher education [15,16]. There is also a discernible disproportion among students, with women representing the vast majority [15,16]. In Europe, the average gender gap in education is 11 percentage points, and women account for 53% of students [32].

Women in Poland are more likely to work part-time (65% of women and 35% of men [15,16]). They take up jobs in the public sector more often than men. Their overrepresentation is particularly discernible in the care occupations, that is, in healthcare and education (Table 1). Nevertheless, the public sector also includes government bodies, with few Polish women among the members of the government. In 2020, in Poland, women formed 20.3% of the government, with the rate averaging 34.2% for the EU, and reaching 52% for France and 46% for Norway [33].

Compared with other countries, Polish women are also highly entrepreneurial. In 2020, women from Poland ranked fifth after Israel, the US, Switzerland, and New Zealand in the Mastercard Index of Women’s Entrepreneurship [34]. In the same year, women accounted for 30% of the total number of self-employed in Poland [31]. However, the high entrepreneurship of women does not always translate into their financial success. Often, establishments run by women, most of which deal with service provision, are one-person businesses operating on a small scale [11].

Women are less likely than men to study and work in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) industries [35,36]. In Poland, considerably fewer women (19%) than men (44%) graduate from technical studies [15,16], but a relatively large number of them work in science and engineering (47%, EU average 41%, [37]). Stoet and Geary [38] draw attention to a much higher share of women in STEM in developing countries than in developed countries (e.g., Bulgaria 54%, Finland 28%). This follows from the fact that the choice of the field of study depends on the earnings obtainable in an industry, even if



working in a less favourable environment is involved (numerous overtime hours, flexibility required). Owing to the specificities of STEM work, but also the reluctance of women to take up employment in a male-dominated environment, not all STEM graduates continue their career in STEM. In Poland, only 28% of women work in IT companies, which is problematic because the industry offers the highest earnings (Table 1).

The low earnings of women in Poland result from a disproportion that has two dimensions. On the one hand, their employment concentrates in the low-paid care sector, and on the other, there is the pay gap. Lower salaries are also a consequence of the significantly lower proportion of women in decision-making positions. Women account for nearly 40% of managerial positions in Europe and nearly 50% in Poland (Figure 1), but the proportion of women in top managerial jobs is much lower. Across Europe, senior management positions are dominated by men. Even in countries where the share of female managers is the highest (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia), the rate is just over 30% [1].

#### 4. Determinants of the Labour Market in Poland

The current situation of women in the labour market is attributable to two key groups of factors, namely sociocultural and political (including historical) ones. While the consequences of the gender contract can be seen in the broader context of women as a group, the other determinants have a local impact to a greater or smaller extent. The CEE countries are characterised by them having undergone a period of socialism, but Poland has another distinguishing feature, namely the role of the Catholic Church and the way it has modelled attitudes in society.

##### 4.1. Sociocultural Determinants

The gender contract determines the attribution of roles to genders, which mainly means that domestic and educational work is assigned to women, while professional work to men. This clearly affects the presence of women in the labour market, causing them to have fewer working hours or more career breaks as a result of them caring for children or elderly people [2,39]. Women spend more time than men in paid and unpaid work and thus have less time for personal development. This also affects finances, with women receiving lower earnings and lower pensions. Career interruptions due to childbirth means that women have less professional experience, a smaller network of contacts and less career opportunity. The literature (incl. [3,40]) even refers to the so-called ‘motherhood penalty’. The lower flexibility of women puts them in a disadvantaged position, especially in the case of layoffs, since part-time jobs are more likely to be liquidated. The situation of women in the labour market is well described by the phrase ‘last in, first out’, highlighting both the problem with finding a job and the ease of losing it (e.g., [41]).

The sociocultural factors also include lower salary expectations of women, differences in how they handle negotiations, lower propensity to take risks, as well as different kinds of discrimination, which are manifested, inter alia, by vertical and horizontal gender segregation, especially by the ‘glass ceiling’ effect [42,43]. Women also choose a different career path than men, which is largely due to socialisation [44] but also to them being ascribed such features such as empathy, sensitivity, and caring [45].

##### 4.2. Legal Determinants

In addition to the various social and cultural determinants, the development of the labour market is definitely influenced by state policy. Political decisions may be directly related to labour market policy, for instance, matching employee qualifications or professional activation.

In Poland, since 1918, the Constitution has ensured equal treatment of women and men in the professional sphere. Legislation from this period regulated equal pay and working conditions. However, until 1946, and in some cases until 2011, some regulations influenced the choice of profession by women and thus their feminisation (or masculinization) [46]. During the interwar period, women were forbidden to work underground in mines and

in the industry at night. Moreover, different conditions of employment were set for certain professions on the basis of gender. Most of this concerns public administration, such as the judiciary. Under the 1919 Judicial Apprenticeship Decree, women could only apply to become lawyers, while men had more options, including applying to become judges. Another example of discrimination from this period is the Civil Service Act of 1922, according to which the requirement for a married woman to be employed in the civil service was her husband's permission. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were also so-called celibacy laws that restricted the employment of married women. Such a law applied, among others, to the police or post offices [47]. In the Silesian province, the celibacy law was also applied to women employed in schools. Until 1938, after getting married, women had to resign from their jobs and were hindered from promotions [48]. After World War II, subsequent documents (e.g., the Constitution of 1952, the Labour Code of 1974) referred to equal rights of women and men in the labour market. In 2009, the prohibition on women working underground was lifted, and in 2011, the prohibition on women working at night [47]. Currently, equal rights for all employees, including equal pay for equal work, are guaranteed by the Constitution and the Labour Code. Employees, regardless of gender, are bound by most of the same rights and obligations. Exceptions to this are the weight limits for carrying objects (for women 12 kg, for men 30 kg) set out in the 2017 Regulations of the Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy. Pregnant women are also subject to special protection; employers are bound by, among other things, limited working hours (max. 8 h) and a prohibition on directing pregnant women to do work that is arduous, dangerous, or harmful to health.

#### 4.3. Political Determinants

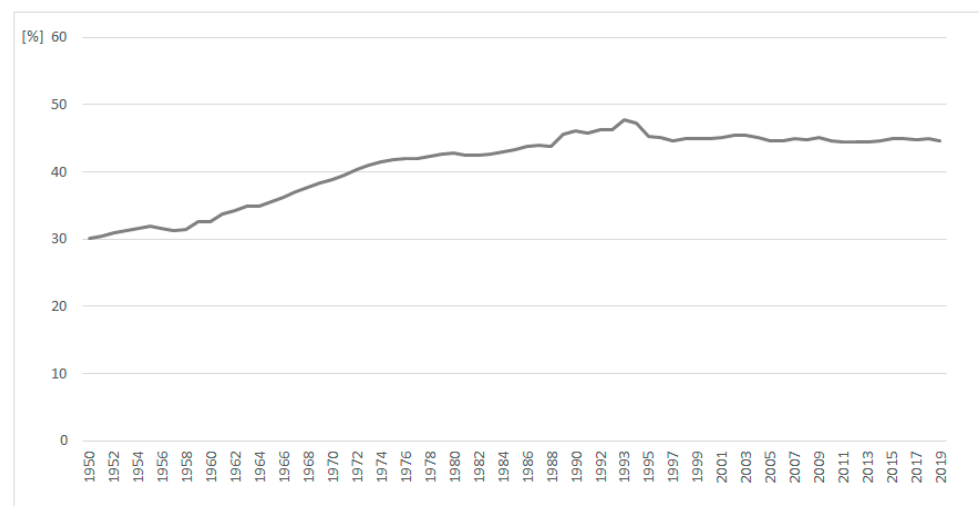
The situation of employees is also influenced by political decisions that do not follow directly from the employment policy pursued. This was evident in the socialist countries of the CEE, where an economy based on heavy industry and manufacturing also forced the professional activation of women in sectors previously dominated by men. In order to make this possible, for example, the state invested in the development of educational and care facilities for children and the elderly. Communist Russia promoted the idea of the socialisation of households, which proposed transferring some of the household duties to state institutions [49]. One indirect effect of industrialisation was also a disproportion in the availability of vocational schools for girls and boys. Some schools offered single-gender education, but 'male' schools were definitely more numerous and available, also in spatial terms. Others, despite their ostensible openness to girls, did not offer them accommodation in boarding houses, which was often of crucial importance in choosing a school and future career [50].

Apart from industrialisation, socialism, as the dominant system, directly influenced the social attitudes of the inhabitants of what are now known as post-socialist countries. Social equality was one of the cornerstones of the socialist system. Kiczková and Farkašová [6] stress one popular aspect of the socialist narrative, namely, the identification of social equality with the myth of unity, which was based on the idea of the homogeneity of society and the erroneous assumption that 'equal' means 'same'. Thus, the vision of emancipation based on equal opportunities was rejected in favour of the socialist concept (called 'false emancipation' by Kiczková and Farkašová), which was founded on sexual universality and androgyny. This assumption proved to be particularly wrong in the labour market, where women who were embarking on their professional career were forced to adapt to the prevailing male model, which meant that they were not active entities, but rather played passive social roles.

Social equality in the context of gender equality was also interpreted differently depending on local circumstances [51]. In Poland, the prevailing belief was that the family was of the utmost importance for women, and if they did start work, they should reconcile household and professional duties [49]. A special role in the public debate was played by

the Catholic Church, which strongly defended the traditional image of a woman-mother, emphasising the differences in the biological conditions of women and men [4].

The rapid economic development of Poland from the beginning of the 1950s and the accompanying shortage of labour gave rise to increased professional activation of women. The employment of women after World War II was continually growing: in 1931 the share of women in the labour force reached 16%, exceeding 30% in the 1950s and 40% in the early 1970s (Figure 2). The productivisation of women resulted, on the one hand, from the availability of employment on account of a greater number of jobs, and on the other, from economic reasons, and also indirectly from the willingness to change the social position of women and public acceptance of their work. However, the taking up of employment by a woman was not always synonymous with her emancipation. Women had appropriate qualifications less frequently than men, which followed from previous conditions and relationships in the family. As a result, they more often took low-paid jobs, and thus remained economically dependent on their husbands [50,52].



**Figure 2.** Share of women in employment in the years 1950–2019, based on [16,53,54]. Note: Due to a change in data collection by the Central Statistical Office, data up to 1994 refer to the share of women in total employment, and data from 1995–2019 refer to the share of working women in the labour market.

The professional activation of women was perceived differently by society. The results of the 1969 sociological surveys in Nowa Huta (an industrial district of Krakow) showed that half of the professionally active women preferred to focus solely on household duties, leaving paid work to men. For the most part, women took up employment for economic reasons and in order to improve the situation of their household [55]. Similar surveys carried out in the Katowice area found a close correlation between a woman's willingness to remain in employment and her education. Low education and underqualification made women reluctant to take up employment or stay in the positions they held. Moreover, there was a belief, both among women and men, that combining paid work with childcare was impossible, which meant that gainful employment was most often taken up by childless women ([56]). Men, especially those married, adopted different attitudes regarding the professional activity of women. More than half of the respondents preferred the traditional family model, in which a woman was expected to be economically inactive. Some of the men were in favour of women's salaried employment as such, but not with regard to their own wives, who, as they claimed, should focus on caring activities [55,56].

Research conducted in the mid-1970s reveals a change in the perception of professionally active women. Women were more willing to take up employment not only because of the associated economic benefits, but also to satisfy their own ambitions and out of a



desire for independence. Furthermore, for both women and men, women's work became something normal and expected [57,58].

While the issue of the professional activity of women in the 1980s ceased to be a controversial topic, women undertaking traditionally male dominated (and better paid) professions remained a debatable issue [4]. In the early 1950s, when the country was undergoing far-reaching industrialisation, women were encouraged to work in mining, construction, and metallurgy. The performance of typically male work by women was explained by the liberation of women offered by socialism. Women were also encouraged to engage in the political spheres, including on a professional basis and in pursuit of a political career. The perception of women changed radically in the years from 1955 to 1956. Decreased needs for labour in industry and a greater number of professionally active men (returning after the war) contributed to a complete change in the political message in relation to women. The official discourse highlighted the 'natural' qualities of women and men and their impact on the suitability to perform specific jobs. The dominant role of a woman-mother was emphasised, and the traditional gender ideology was invoked, with women barred from better-paid professions that could harm their future procreation such as working underground in mines. Another five-year plan (1956–1960) offered women fewer hours of employment (Figure 2) and encouraged them to commit to outwork [4].

The Catholic Church and right-wing political groups were particularly active in the debate addressing the issue of taking up paid work by women. The strong position of the Catholic religion in Poland began in the period of struggle for independence (from the end of the 18th century onwards) and became deeply rooted in the identity and culture of the country. The traditional model of 'Matka Polka' (Polish Mother) was one of the eighteenth-century models for which there was an effort to preserve, despite the social developments after World War II. The vision, which was reminiscent of that professed in the pre-partition period, was considered to be the quintessence of Polish femininity. The archetypal 'Polish Mother' was not just an ideal wife or housewife, but also a committed patriot mother raising her children in the spirit of love for the homeland and the Catholic faith [59,60]. Such an image of a woman assigned her almost entirely to the sphere of home and practically excluded her from public or professional life. The Catholic Church largely accepted professional work by women, especially by those from the lowest spheres, but insisted on the protection of their morals [4]. Such a deeply rooted presence of the Church in society and the traditional gender divide had a direct effect on the professional activity of women, the occupations they chose, and broader social attitudes.

## 5. Feminisation of the Professions

The points regarding the reorientation of the labour market for women can be seen not only in the context of the female labour market as a system—a larger whole, but also in the light of individual occupations (Table 2). For years, researchers have sought to answer the question of whether professions are feminised as a result of low salaries, or conversely, if a large number of women in a given profession lowers the salaries, since, as Knothe [61] observes, men do not want to take up low-paid professions. When competition is less intense, it is easier for women to get such jobs. The same author also points out that high feminisation and less willingness on the part of women to negotiate the terms of employment hampers the growth of prestige of these professions. Undeniably, women accept lower salaries, but it is difficult to determine whether low remuneration is the cause or the effect. Reskin and Roos [62] describe a mechanism in which women take up jobs previously performed by men, which leads to the lowering of its prestige and earnings, and then to an outflow of men from the respective specialisation and its total devaluation. Similar observations are made by McDowell and Massey [63] (p. 208), who conclude that "once defined as 'women's work', the jobs are then classified as semi- or unskilled and hence low paid". However, Gromkowska-Melosik [64] maintains that some professions have never enjoyed too much prestige and high earnings, and therefore they were feminised sooner or later.

**Table 2.** Feminisation of selected professions and functions.

Sector	Initial Degree of Feminisation	Current Degree of Feminisation	Time of Change	Main Reason
Education	Average	Very high	First half of the 19th century, very large influx in the 1950s (previously the function of a governess)	Low salaries, lower qualifications, an unattractive profession for men, division of roles
Textile industry	Low	Very high	Second half of the 19th century	Lower salaries of women
Public administration–village administrator (softys)	Low	Medium/High	After 1989	Low prestige
Welfare services	High	High	None	Attribution of specific characteristics to women

School education, especially at the primary level, is one of the most feminised sectors. The teaching profession is perceived as requiring great empathy and patience; therefore, it is often associated with women. Nevertheless, until at least the mid-nineteenth century, education had been almost entirely a man's domain. That women were gradually admitted to the profession had several main reasons, one of which was the desire to improve the quality of education. As early as that time, discussions about gender roles were ongoing, and women were considered to be better suited to teach children, especially from the 18th century, when some women were entrusted to the role of governesses [65]. Work in education was often seen as preparation for the later roles of wife and mother, especially since historically (in England until 1944), it could only be undertaken by unmarried women [66]. Moreover, work at school was seasonal and temporary and did not require continuity, which made it easier for women to reconcile it with other duties. Women were also preferred for economic reasons. Their salaries averaged a third of men's remuneration [67]. Importantly, the feminisation of the teaching profession was also fostered by the relatively low qualification requirements and the popularisation of education and industrialisation, which offered men better paid jobs [64]. Already at the beginning of the 20th century in Poland, women represented half of those employed in education. In the 1970s, this rate increased to 70%, but it varied depending on the level of education: 100% for kindergartens, 80% for primary schools, 30% for higher education [68]. Currently, these discrepancies are slightly smaller, especially in higher education (46% of the staff are women, but the rate among professors is only one-third of the staff). There are still many more women than men working in primary schools—nearly 80% [15,69].

The textile industry is another example of the feminisation of a male profession. Until the nineteenth century, industry had been considered too demanding for women. Later on, it evolved into typically male heavy industry (mining, metallurgy, arms production) and the opposing light industry (including textiles, clothing, food, ceramics and glass), which was dominated by women. In the years 1885–1892, the Polish textile industry saw a sharp increase in the employment of women and children from 47 to 75%. Women were treated as unskilled workers and earned lower salaries (half those of men), which considerably reduced production costs [70]. The effects of feminisation of the textile industry had a number of consequences. Research on centres of the British textile industry has revealed, for example, that the roles in the family reversed completely, with women taking up economic activity and men becoming passive actors in the labour market [71,72]. In Poland, the periods of socialism and the post-1989 transformation have had a crucial effect on the current situation in the country. From the 1950s on, the authorities placed heavy emphasis on the development and promotion of heavy industry, mainly mining, and based the country's economy on it. The official rhetoric portrayed the miner as a hero, and the mining and textile industries were supposed to complement each other—coal was essential for the

production of clothing, which in turn met the needs of working-class families. Fidelis [4] also notices the aspect of gender segregation which is emphasised by this message, where the hard and dangerous work of a miner is contrasted with the repetitive and boring work of women in the textile industry. The consequences of such occupational segregation were also visible during and after the post-1989 political transformation, where the prevalence of heavy (male) industry over light (female) industry was reflected in policy measures (severance pay, subsidies, reorganisation programmes). Left to their own devices, textile production plants and their female employees have been struggling with poverty, social deprivation, and the effects of the feminisation of poverty until today [73].

A phenomenon has been described in public administration, especially at the local level, namely that the share of women in decision-making functions increases after these functions lose prestige and financial attractiveness [74]. In Poland, this tendency is best illustrated by the function of the village administrator. Given the low remuneration, it is an additional public function rather than a job or profession proper, as was the case with the examples described above, but the mechanisms in regional, national, or European politics are similar, with such jobs now dominated by men [33]. Over time, especially after 1989, a large increase in the share of women village administrators started to be visible. In 1958, the share of women holding the function was 0.8% [75], growing to 43% in 2019 [15,16]. Matysiak [76] identifies two main reasons behind this change. First of all, the post-1990 local government reform greatly limited the competences of village administrators, effectively depriving them of formal power and various benefits, including economic ones. Secondly, the function acquired a more pronounceable social character, with village administrators tasked with organising the activity of the local community, inter alia, by applying for EU subsidies. These two factors came to discourage men, especially economically active ones, from assuming this role. Owing to the decreased interest of men, as well as the traditionally greater involvement of women in various grassroots initiatives (Rural Housewives' Clubs, activities of parishes, libraries, cultural centres, etc.), the function has been undergoing growing feminisation.

Welfare services form a slightly different example of a feminised profession, which, as one of the few, has always been performed by women. In addition to the determinants associated with the aforementioned gender contract, the socialisation and attribution of educational and care professions to women, the historical background has also played a role. In the 19th and 20th centuries, aid and charitable activities were often the only possible manifestations of the emancipation of upper-class women. Caring for weaker people fit into the home roles without contradicting the prevailing assumption that paid work was not suitable for women [77]. In Poland, since the end of the 1980s, the share of women among those employed in social services has continued to be at least 90% [78].

It is difficult to clearly identify the reasons for the feminisation of individual professions, but an analysis of their development allows for the identification of the opening and closure of windows of opportunity for women to enter the respective professions (Table 2). An important role in increasing the presence of women in a given profession has been played by the coupling of various factors, including sociocultural (e.g., the gender contract and the assignment of social roles, as well as changes in the prestige of various jobs), economic (no possibility of sustaining a family with one pay), historical (industrialisation, government policy, etc.) and technical ones (including the growth of the IT sector, improvement of working conditions). The dependence between professionally active women and men is a common element of the examples discussed above. The female labour market is largely determined by the male labour market. Feminised professions are those that men do not want to take up for various reasons (earnings, prestige, perception of a job as 'female'). The later entry of women onto the labour market compared to men has conditioned this dependence, which persists despite the passage of time. In a typical situation, the opening of a window of opportunity for women coincided with the opening of another window for men, which led to the abandonment of a profession by men and allowed women in (Figure 3). In the broader perspective of the labour market as a whole, the period of World

War II, during which women's activity resulted from the shortage of men who could fill jobs, and the period of socialism and industrialisation, which offered well-paid jobs for men, can be identified as windows of opportunity for women. Understood in this way, such a window of opportunity may be considered 'false' or 'deceitful', since, on the one hand, it does play its role of opening up new chances of employment, but on the other, it offers limited opportunity and poorer job terms. The reversal of the mechanism, with the presence of women pushing men out of a profession, has been very rare and only occurred when women received lower salaries in a traditional industry.



Figure 3. The mechanism of false window of opportunity.

## 6. Discussion

The women's and men's labour markets are influenced by a number of factors and determinants. It is very difficult to clearly identify the dependencies, as well as their causes and effects. The post-war period was undoubtedly a time of social transformations, the impact of which is still visible today. Traditionally assigned roles were redefined, causing women to appear also in the public sphere, which had been previously reserved for men. Nevertheless, the intensification of women's presence in the public and professional domains was not tantamount to them being relieved of their house duties, but rather took the form of a double burden [79]. The changes which took place in the broader context of the labour market as a whole have varied over time and have depended on factors and conditions discussed by many authors. The changes are more noticeable with regard to individual professions and have resulted from the emergence of windows of opportunity which have allowed the previous system to be reoriented and changed.

In addition to the far-reaching activation of women, there have also been noticeable social changes in terms of the role of education. Until the 1950s, the prevailing view was that women's paid work was not their main role in life; therefore, they should not spend too much time on education and pursuing a career, which meant that occupations that did not require higher education feminised faster [50]. On the other hand, the offer of educational institutions, especially vocational schools, was mainly addressed to men, as a result of which girls more often opted for education in general secondary schools. Later on, this led to women undertaking higher education more often than men, which may explain the considerable gender gap in education in Poland, but also more broadly in post-socialist countries. Such a strongly diversified offer of schools could also contribute to the consolidation of the stereotypical ascribing of skills in science to men and in humanities to women, which is still mirrored by the selection of fields of study [32].

The continuing feminisation of professions has a number of negative consequences, not only for women. Schools where female teachers predominate are said to have a

negative impact on adolescent boys, who lack male role models [64]. More importantly, the persistent preconceptions about jobs and their division into female and male ones are and likely to continue to be reproduced in the future process of socialisation, preventing inequalities from levelling. This may be especially important in the face of the ongoing social and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature (incl. [80–83]) emphasises that women are more susceptible to changes caused by crises (economic, climatic, and social) and are more vulnerable to their effects, which persist much longer for women than for men. In the context of the labour market, it is women that will be laid off first [41], which renders the reversal of the mechanism of dependence of the female labour market on the male labour market, such as what happened in the textile industry, unlikely to repeat. Especially in this context, it seems important to emphasize the role of social sustainability [7], and above all, equal opportunities and supporting diversity [10].

The false window of opportunity, as defined in this paper originates from, inter alia, the phenomenon of false emancipation and from the fact that women were forced to adapt to male models in socialism, as described by Kiczková and Farkašová [6]. However, more broadly, it may also be caused and preserved by a ‘false equality of women’, understood as equality that can only exist within the limits imposed by men. False equality in the labour market is exemplified by the dependence on where men give up a specific profession, allowing women (or not) to take their place. In typically male occupations, despite the socialist efforts, the trend has never been reversed and the number of men and women has never been equalised. Additionally at present, despite wide-ranging policies towards equal opportunities for women (including the EU Strategy for Gender Equality 2020–2025 [84]), the likelihood of a sudden increase in their numbers, e.g., in the IT sector, is close to zero. A more likely scenario seems to be one of the further developments of attractive industries that open up new opportunities for men, with jobs that are losing their attractiveness likely to be ‘given over’ to women. This has already been the case, inter alia, in the public sector, where the share of women has been continually increasing since 2000 [16,31]. Thus, the equality of women and men in the labour market does not have the same dimension. Not only are women constrained by the segmentation of the labour market, but also, to a large extent, men, who take advantage of greater opportunities, prevent them from being promoted. In this sense, the phenomenon of false equality affects various spheres, not only the labour market. Currently, this is evidenced particularly strongly by the actions of conservative governments, where the ruling men make decisions that have a direct effect on the lives of women by imposing a specific framework for their equality.

## 7. Conclusions

The periods of World War II and socialism in Poland were conducive to fostering the professional activity of women, offering them an unquestionable opportunity. In addition, the feminisation of individual professions has given women a number of previously unavailable options, but these opportunities are limited, and the conditions of employment are worse than in the case of men.

Despite the far-going social transformations, the perception of professions and their preferences has not changed much. Both the 1970s and current studies display a clear-cut division of preferred occupations depending on the child’s gender. In the 1970s, parents more often chose for their daughters the already highly feminised professions of a teacher, nurse, doctor, or work in services (shop assistant, accountant, hairdresser, dressmaker). The preferred sectors of work for boys were engineering or law [85]. Surveys from the first decade of the 21st century reveal that the preferred occupations for girls included again that of a teacher, but also a pharmacist or an economist. For boys, technical professions, such as an engineer or IT specialist, were still the most desirable jobs. Regardless of the child’s gender, those surveyed would often name the most prestigious professions, such as doctor, lawyer, and architect [86].

In the paper, the mechanism of dependence of the female labour market on the male labour market was explained. Despite the existing legal acts ensuring equality between



women and men in the labour market, sociocultural factors, including stereotypes and historical decisions, contribute to the persistence of a worse situation of women on the labour market in Poland and therefore the existence of false windows of opportunity for women. These mechanisms will not be stopped without supporting the existing activities to equalize wages, increasing access to care services, promoting an equal division of household and parenting responsibilities (mainly extending leaves for fathers) and supporting activities enabling the development of women in masculinized industries (mainly STEM) and increasing the balance between women and men in decision-making positions (also in politics), and more broadly, activities within the framework of social sustainability.

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