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## Women's Leadership in Contemporary Organizations in Poland and Other EU Countries – Social and Economic Aspects

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The aim of the article was to assess equality between women and men over the last 15 years. An attempt was also made to characterize the female and male leadership styles.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** In order to achieve this, Polish and EU reports characterizing the professional activity of women on the labor market and in European parliaments and in the management boards of listed companies were analyzed.

**Findings:** Although women are strongly determined, the number of men in management positions is still higher, despite the implementation of anti-discrimination and equality legislation by the EU.

**Practical implications:** The results of the research confirmed that it is necessary to continue the adopted policy of gender equality, because by combining the predispositions and skills of women and men, it is possible to create an excellent and effective team to manage the company.

**Originality:** The modern economy – based on knowledge and new technologies – ennobles the features associated with a woman's style of thinking and acting. This creates a demand for a cooperative, non-hierarchical and based on partnership, relational and diversity management style. Only such an approach will allow us to take a step towards ensuring not only legal, but also actual equality of representatives of both sexes.

**Keywords:** Leadership, discrimination against women, management styles, gender equality, organisationbusiness, EU.

**JEL codes:** D63, I16, I71, M51.

**Paper type:** Research article.

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## 1. Introduction

Although we observe an increasingly stronger presence of women in the labor market and progress in their acquisition of higher education, women are relatively underrepresented in top management positions and relatively rarely reach areas related to power, leadership and higher management. In contrast to their presence on the labor market in both the executive and legislative authorities - in Poland and other EU countries - we know little about the mechanisms blocking women's careers in professional and political life.

Women are equal to men in terms of their level of education and competence (PARP, 2019; Niechoda, 2019). They are well-educated, conscientious and empathetic. They are focused on cooperation, but they are discriminated against on the labor market, and their path to the top leads along a glass cliff (Marczak, 2015).

Today, they can apply and get to higher positions, but there is a problem with the career paths that women must go through to stay at the top (glass cliff) (Niżyńska, 2018-2024; Ryan, Haslam, 2007). To prevent this, the European Parliament in 2023 agreed to the European Commission directive on ensuring 40% of women in non-executive board member positions by 2020.

All studies indicate that there are no objective differences between women and men in managerial positions. These differences are only in our heads. We ourselves create divisions, using stereotypical perceptions of the roles that women and men have to fulfil (Podgórska- Rylska, 2017).

## 2. Literature Review

The aim of the article was to answer the question of whether women are still discriminated against and whether there have been changes over the last 15 years. In order to do this, the professional activity of women on the labor market in Poland and other EU countries, their participation in European parliaments and in senior management positions in listed companies were analyzed and these processes were assessed.

The modern economy - based on knowledge and new technologies - ennobles the features associated with the female style of thinking and acting. This creates a need for a cooperative, non-hierarchical and partnership-based, relational and diversity-based management style, which is one of the key symptoms of economy 4.0 (Zabratańska, 2020; Wojcisz, 2010; Zenger *et al.*, 2012).

According to many researchers (Lisowska, 2009; Zabratańska, 2024; Nermend *et al.*, 2021; Norena-Chavez and Thalassinou, 2022; Tyagi *et al.*, 2023), these are features attributed to women, mainly based on emotional intelligence.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The article is based on analyses and reports from Poland and abroad prepared within the EU and analysis of empirical research results. The research tool was the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) survey questionnaire. It contained questions about the perception and definition of women's leadership style and ways of practicing it within the granted parities. Additional sources of information were items on management and leadership devoted to these issues.

The pilot research tool was distributed nationwide in 2023 among leaders of a selected large corporation dealing with brokerage activities, using the snowball effect method. The company under study is a branch of a large international corporation. The branch has 7 branches located in different cities in Poland.

The greatest values that guide the employees of the analyzed company are a strong focus on the customer, an emphasis on teamwork, unwavering honesty, mutual respect, and constant pursuit of excellence. The 120 surveys were qualified for the study. Of the surveyed female leaders, 20% worked at a high management level, 44% at a medium level, and 36% at a lower level.

The author is aware of the imperfections of the research method used. Completing surveys using the Internet is quick, reaches a wide population, and has low implementation costs. The results and conclusions obtained may constitute a contribution to further in-depth research and scientific discussions. The presented article is a fragment of broader research conducted by the Author in the field of leadership.

### **4. Research Results and Discussion**

#### **4.1 Female Leadership Due to Gender**

Leadership is, in other words, a way of exercising power. The concept of leadership is complicated and very complex. Many definitions can be cited. According to D.A. Olson (2009), leadership is "the process of influencing the behavior of others to work willingly and enthusiastically to achieve specific goals. It indicates the ability of an individual to maintain good relationships with people and motivate others to achieve organizational goals." Northouse (2013) defines leadership as "the process in which an individual influences a group of people to achieve a common goal."

Another attempt at defining leadership was made by Griffin (2017), who believes that "leadership is both a process and a property. As a process, leadership involves the use of influence, without resorting to coercive means, with the intention of shaping specific group goals and behaviors. Leadership is a set of characteristics attributed to individuals who are perceived as leaders." The concept of leadership

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was also described by Armstrong (2007). He defines leadership as "the ability to persuade and direct, through the authority given to him" (Bass, 2008).

The general goal of leaders is to accomplish tasks with the help of their group. As part of this, they must gain the commitment and cooperation of the team, persuade the group to accept and achieve common goals, and make the best use of the capabilities, energy and talent of team members (Armstrong, 1997). Tracy, a Canadian writer, specializing in the psychology of success, described the way of understanding leadership as the art of activating extraordinary capabilities in ordinary people that allow them to achieve great successes (Tracy *et al.*, 2000).

Leadership manifests itself in various forms, and we can include leadership: authoritarian (autocratic), participatory (democratic), delegative (*laissez-faire*), visionary, trainer, affiliative, democratic, situational, and personalistic.

Similarly to new styles of being and working, new leadership styles are emerging, adapted to changing realities. The principles of work in enterprises are also changing, which is reflected in the way they are managed. We can distinguish command, democratic, affiliative, authoritarian, trainer, and process styles (Goleman, 2000).

The style of managing an organization is understood as the way a superior influences subordinates and illustrates his personality traits or beliefs regarding effective team management. Each leader chooses the best style of managing an organization for themselves.

There are three classic styles of managing an organization - democratic, autocratic, liberal. Each style of management should contribute to improving the quality of work due to the growing motivation among employees and strengthening intra-group relations.

Among the leaders using different leadership styles, there is the concept of a transformational leader. In this model, the leader's leadership style is focused on the leader's desire to change values within the organization and achieve goals by making co-workers supporters of his vision, and not just hired employees, as is the case in the transactional leadership model (Walczak-Duraj, 2001).

Transformational leadership, which promotes cooperation, collaboration and building partnerships, can contribute to improving the coordination of activities and increasing the effectiveness of the actions taken. Implementing the concept of transformational leadership, which promotes innovation and the ability to adapt, can support risk management processes by encouraging innovative solutions and effectively responding to changing conditions. Hence, it is the manager who must implement four main elements, which are: inspiring, motivating, individual treatment, idealized example and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1990).

From the perspective of the effectiveness of the entire organization, a leadership style based on employee motivation through commitment and reference to morality or values is considered more effective (Oboj, 1994). The transactional leadership style is the opposite of transformational leadership.

Transactional leadership focuses on interpersonal interactions between the leader and subordinates and depends on the leader's abilities and employee expectations. Specific leadership styles are largely dependent on the organizational culture of a given organization. On the other hand, the shape of the organizational culture depends on the management staff with ingrained beliefs and values that the staff must disseminate in the organization.

The leader is required to develop with the growth of the organization and eliminate attitudes that have a negative impact on the organizational unit subordinated to him. Changes in the organization are most often associated with the need to abandon old patterns in favor of implementing previously unknown issues (Czop, 2013). They can be so-called top-down changes, i.e., those that were ordered from above by managers. In such a case, we can observe pro-development activities of employees who try their best to adapt to new standards.

Radical changes can also be distinguished, during which the employee must demonstrate an even greater ability to cope with difficult situations. The ability of the organization to adapt to changes consists in generating appropriate solutions that will correspond to the evolution of the environment. The literature on the subject diversifies the so-called male and female leadership. Rubin (1999) wrote about the female style of management by love, while men manage by fear. The essence of this division is the effectiveness of leadership and its business results. Based on the literature and empirical research, differences in female and male management styles have been demonstrated (Rubin, 1999; Holska, 2017; Bilińska, 2021, Frańczak *et al.*, 2012) (Table 1).

*Table 1. Leadership styles by gender.*

<b>Men management by fear</b>	<b>Women management by love</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Fear-based management, pressure tactics</li> <li>- Distance in contacts between the superior and subordinates</li> <li>- Focusing on enforcing one's own arguments</li> <li>- Focusing on competition</li> <li>- Autocracy based on directives, hierarchy, focus on power defined in terms of prestige and position</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Partnership relations with subordinates</li> <li>- Orientation towards compromise and mediation.</li> <li>- Communication skills and interpersonal skills</li> <li>- High emotional intelligence</li> <li>- Ease of sharing knowledge through mentoring and coaching.</li> <li>- Cooperation and teamwork</li> <li>- Democracy based on participation.</li> </ul>

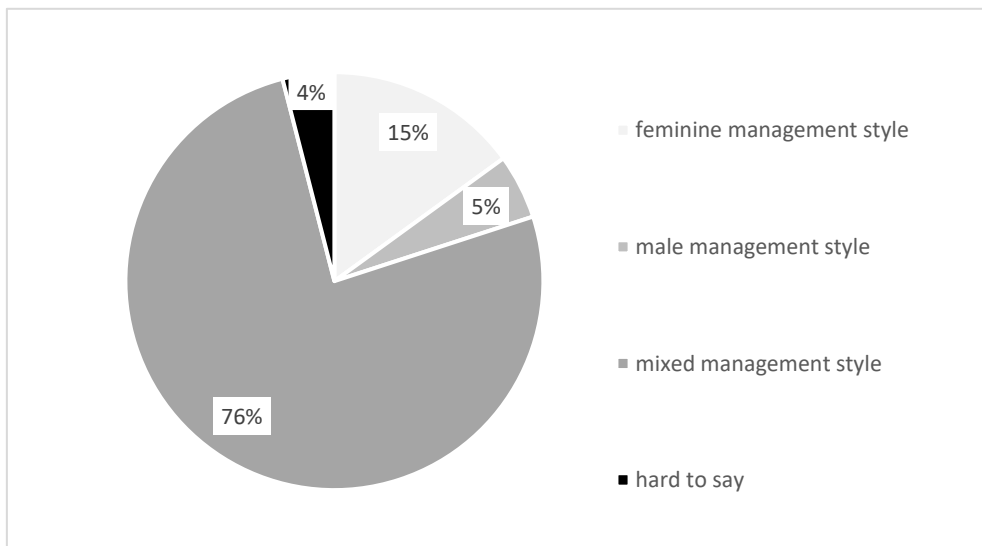
*Source: Own study based on literature and empirical studies.*

The masculine (traditional) style is based on “fear” and the feminine (modern) style on “love”. Currently, more and more attention is paid to the interactive feminine management style. Focusing on human capital and its development is a highly desirable feature of a managerial position. Both styles – feminine and masculine – can bring great added value to the functioning of a company.

Depriving one of them narrows the spectrum of managerial competences in the company. A review of the literature shows that women may have better predispositions to be “the manager of tomorrow” (Krzyżanowska, 2021; Olszewska-Miszuris, 2021; Mierzwa, 2024).

Contemporary business is shaping a new image of the leader and a change in the approach to leadership in which women should be included (Słomka-Gołębiowska, 2016). Masculine or feminine styles cannot be assessed in terms of: good/bad. The presented lists show that both styles are different, have advantages and disadvantages, but this does not mean that they are inappropriate or should not be used. The only common denominator is that managers have high qualifications and extensive experience, which is necessary in effective management of people, enterprises or processes. This was also confirmed by the results of empirical research (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Management styles in the opinion of respondents



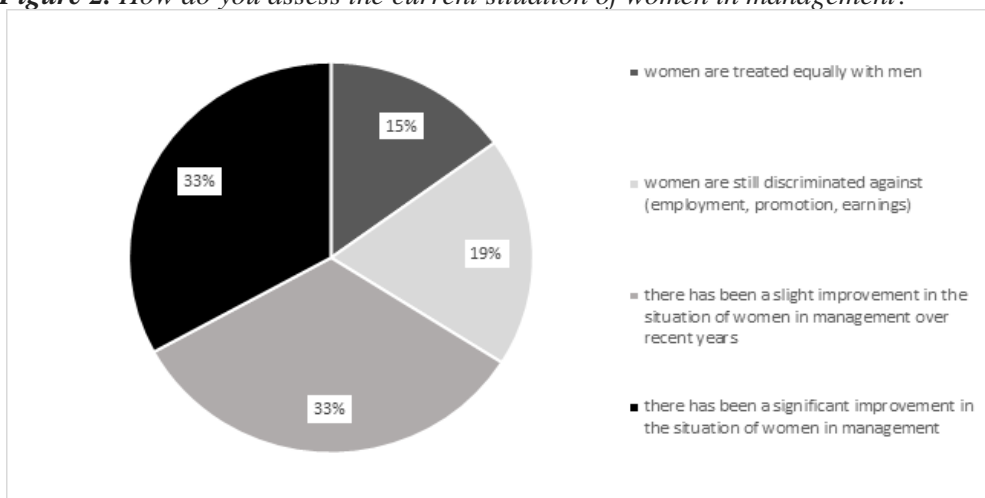
*Source:* Own study by Mierzwa D. and Kostrzewa G.

The vast majority of women surveyed - 76% of all respondents - believed that the most effective team management style was the mixed style. McKinsey's research showed that the operating profits of companies using gender quotas were 56% higher than in those dominated by men (McKinsey & Company, 2013), while

Goldman Sachs bank analysts calculated that the more women on boards, the higher GDP by as much as 9% (Credit Suisse, 2012).

The survey results confirmed the thesis that the situation of women working in Polish companies has improved significantly in recent years (Figure 1). 15% of women believe they are treated equally to men, 19% believe they are discriminated against in matters related to employment, promotion and earnings, 66% of women believe that there has been a significant improvement in the treatment of women in recent times.

**Figure 2.** *How do you assess the current situation of women in management?*



*Source: Own study by Mierzwa D. and Kostrzewa G.*

## **4.2 Professional Activity of Women in Poland and the EU**

The next indicator of discrimination against women is the employment rate by gender. It is defined as the percentage of employed people in relation to the entire population. The data analyzed focuses on the population aged 20 to 64. The data presented in this section come from the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS).

The employment rate for women in the EU has been rising since 2009 and reached a new peak of 70.2% in 2023. For men, the rate was initially higher and increased more slowly, from 74.0% in 2009 to 80.4% in 2023.

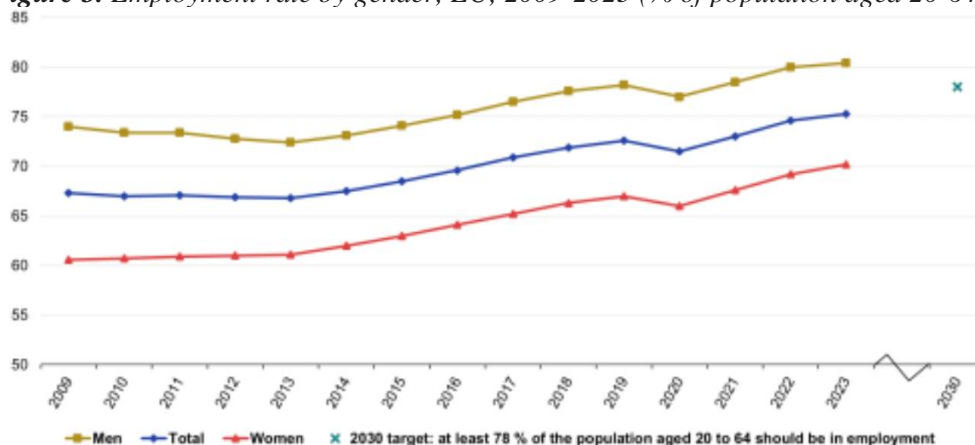
## **4.3 The Gender Employment Gap**

Figures 4 and 5 show the gender employment gap in percentage points from 2009 to 2023. The gender employment gap persists, despite a 3.2 percentage point decrease since 2009. In 2023, it amounted to 10.2 percentage points in the EU and 12.5% in

Poland, despite women becoming increasingly well-qualified (Eurostat, 2024). Poland ranks 23rd among other EU countries.

Ensuring high employment rates for both men and women is a key objective of the EU. Reducing the large gender employment gap, which measures the difference in employment rates between men and women aged 20-64, is important for equality and a sustainable economy. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan therefore includes the target of at least halving the gender employment gap by 2030 compared to 2019.

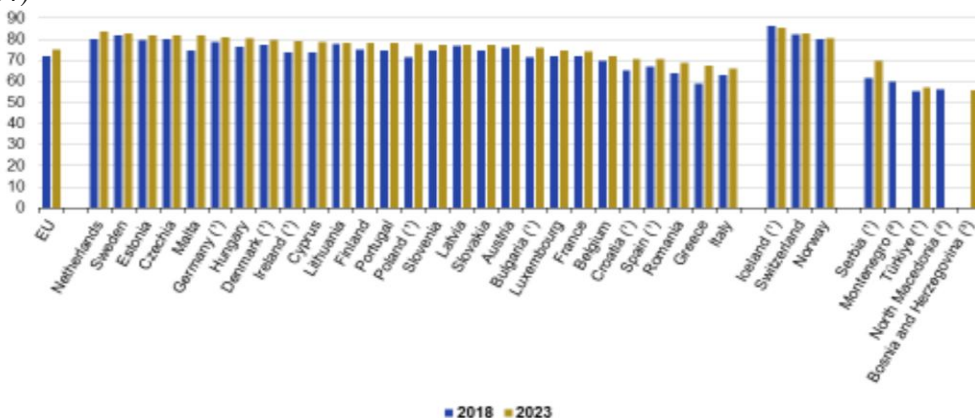
**Figure 3.** Employment rate by gender, EU, 2009-2023 (% of population aged 20-64)



*Note:* Y-axis does not start at 0.

*Source:* Eurostat (sdg\_08\_30)

**Figure 4.** Employment rate by country, 2018 and 2023 (% of population aged 20-64)



(\*) Break(s) in time series between the two years shown.

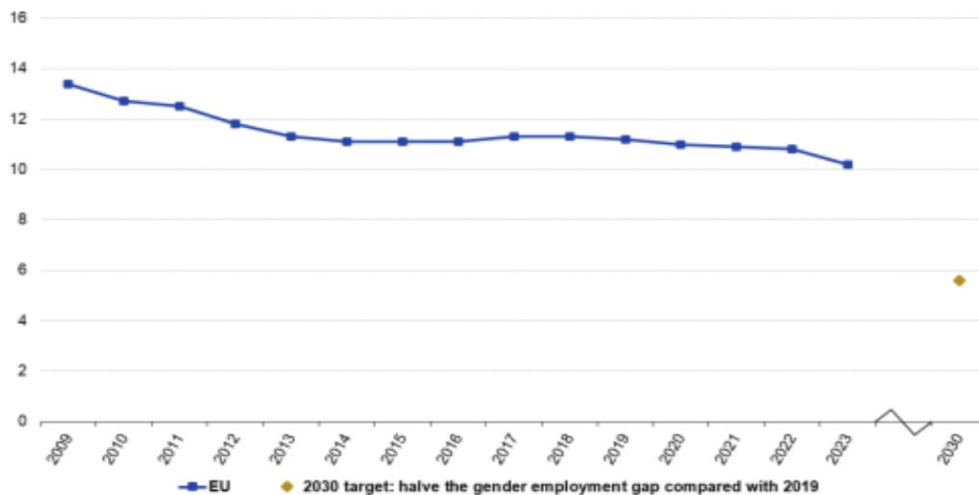
(\*) No data for 2023.

(\*) No data for 2018.

*Source:* Eurostat (sdg\_08\_30)

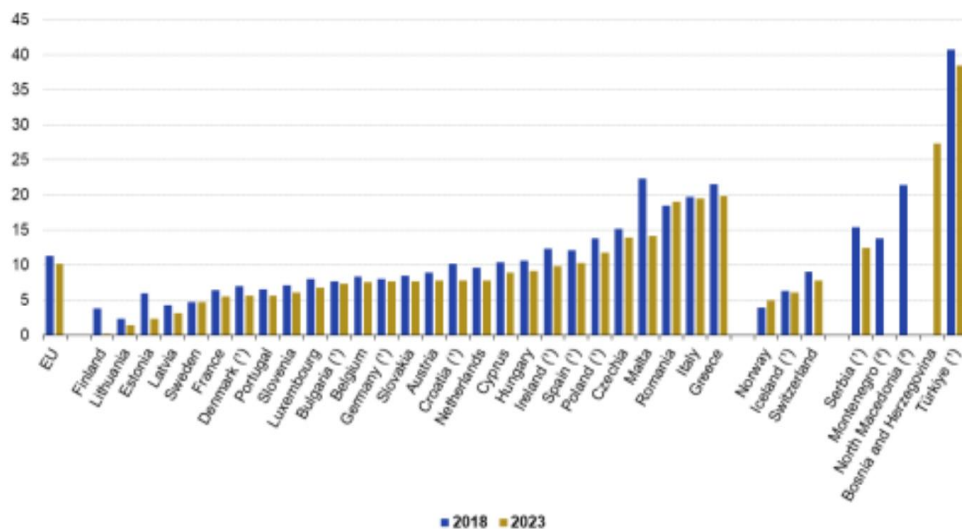


Figure 5. Gender employment gap, EU, 2009-2023



Source: Eurostat (sdg\_05\_30).

Figure 6. Gender employment gap by country, 2018-2023 (percentage points)



(\*) Break(s) in time series between the two years shown.  
 (\*\*) No data for 2023.  
 (\*\*\*) No data for 2018.

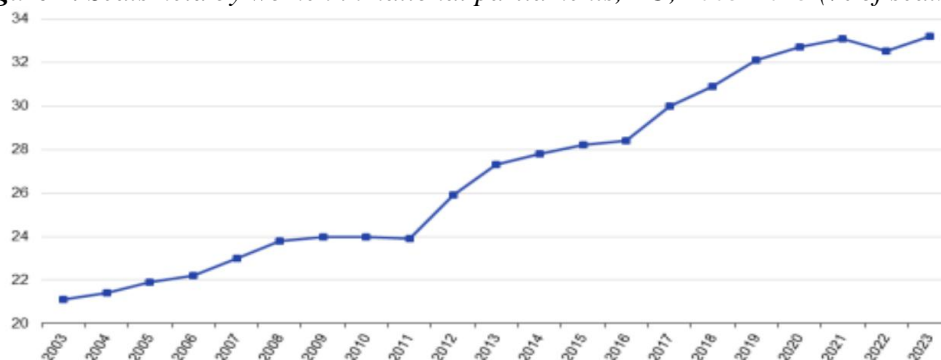
Source: Eurostat (sdg\_05\_30).

In addition, the analysis of the employment gap by degree of urbanisation shows the variation in the gap between cities, towns and suburbs and rural areas. In 2023, the gap was smallest in cities at 8.5 percentage points, while in rural areas it was 11.3 percentage points and in cities and suburbs 11.6 percentage points (Eurostat, 2024).

#### 4.4 Seats Occupied by Women in National Parliaments

This indicator refers to the proportion of women in national parliaments in both chambers (Lower House and Upper House). Data comes from the Gender Statistics Database of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2023).

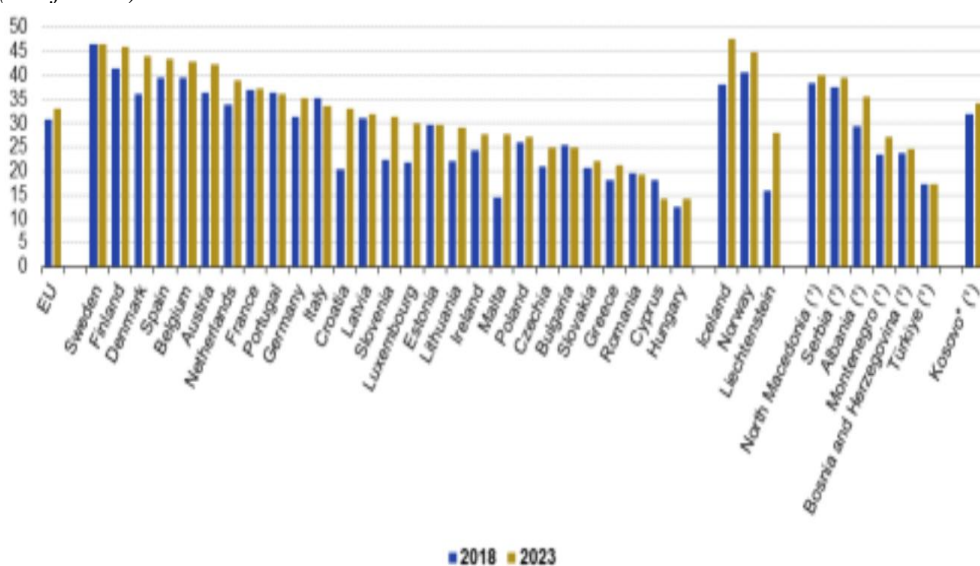
**Figure 7.** Seats held by women in national parliaments, EU, 2003-2023 (% of seats)



*Note:* the Y-axis does not start at 0.

*Source:* European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Eurostat (sdg\_05\_50)

**Figure 8.** Seats held by women in national parliaments by country, 2018 and 2023 (% of seats)



(\*) 2021 data (instead of 2023).

(\*) This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

*Source:* European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Eurostat (sdg\_05\_50)

From the data presented (Figures 7 and 8), it can be seen that there is an underrepresentation of women in the parliaments of EU countries. The share of women in national parliaments in the EU has increased steadily between 2003 and 2021, from 21.1% to 33.1%.

After a slight drop in 2022, the share reached 33.2% in 2023, the highest level ever recorded. While differences between Member States vary widely, from 46.6% of seats held by women in Sweden to 14.1% in Hungary, Poland ranks 20th among EU countries. In 2023, there was no EU country where women had a majority in parliament.

This underrepresentation is compounded by the fact that women rarely become leaders of major political parties, which play a key role in shaping future political leaders. Another factor is that gender norms and expectations reduce the pool of candidates available for election as electoral representatives. The share of women in government (senior and junior ministers) in the EU was still lower than that of men, at 35.2% in 2023, although this was an increase of 12.6 percentage points compared to 22.6% in 2003.

The number of women heads of government in EU countries also increased. In 2023, an average of six women were heads of government, compared to none in 2003. Over the entire period from 2003 to 2023, the highest share of women heads of government was recorded in 2022 and 2023, at 22.2%, meaning that there have never been more than six women holding this executive position at the same time (Eurostat, 2024).

This is due to the division of roles into male and female, the lack of support enabling women to combine caring responsibilities with work, and the political and corporate culture. Promoting equality between women and men in this area is one of the EU's priorities for achieving gender equality.

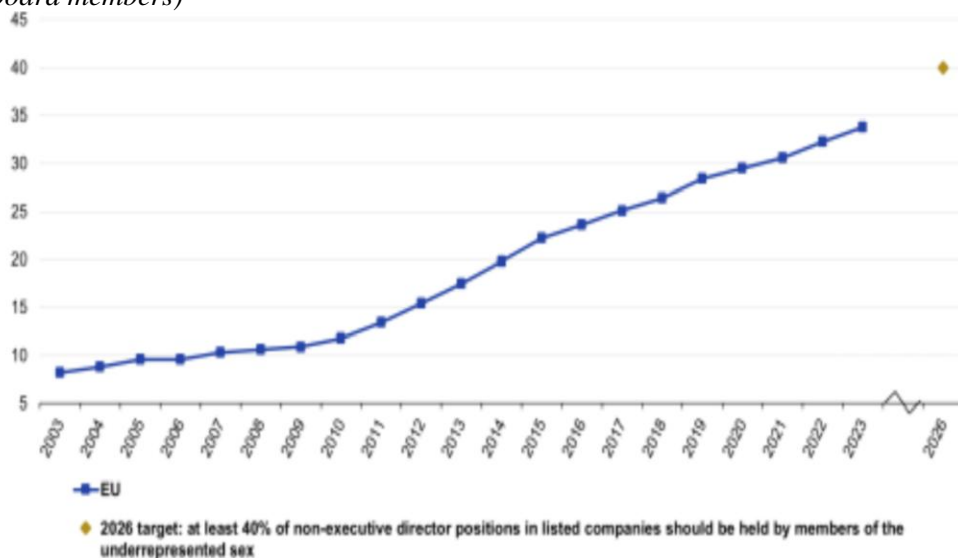
#### **4.5 Positions Held by Women in Management Positions in Listed Companies**

This indicator measures the share of women on the boards of the largest listed companies. The data presented in this section come from the Gender Statistics Database of the European Institute for Gender Equality.

Women held 33.8% of board positions in the largest listed companies in 2023 (Figures 9 and 10). The EU target is to reach 40% in 2026.

These figures also mean that the vast majority of board members in the largest listed companies are still men. The percentage of women on boards varies significantly across the EU, from 46.1% in France to 8.2% in Cyprus. In 2023, four countries – France, Italy, Denmark and the Netherlands – have already exceeded the 40% target.

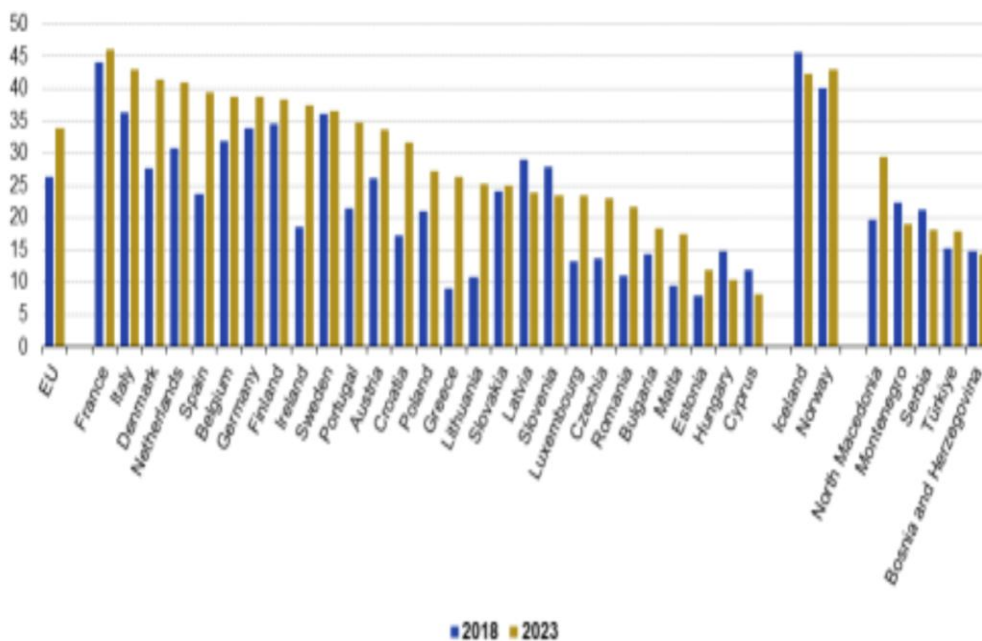
**Figure 9.** Women in senior management positions in the EU, 2003-2023 (% of board members)



*Note:* Y-axis does not start at 0.

*Source:* European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Eurostat (sdg\_05\_60)

**Figure 10.** Women in senior management positions by country, 2018 and 2023 (% of board members)



*Source:* European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Eurostat (sdg\_05\_60)

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Although stereotypes still prevail and women are still considered to be inactive in the business sphere, this view is becoming increasingly outdated. Women are entering the sphere of business and politics with increasing strength and confidence, and companies and institutions are becoming more and more open to them taking on management positions. Although they are characterized by strong determination in their actions, they:

1. The number of men in management positions is still much higher than that of women. Currently, a woman working in a corporation or the European Parliament, fulfilling the duties of a mother, is an increasingly common sight. However, it is still strongly obscured by a number of patterns and common ideas.

2. In business, two management styles clash, male and female. Both are significantly different from each other. The male style is perceived as command-and-control. It consists of transmitting orders in a cascading manner - from the top down. On the other hand, the female style, called interactive, is focused on cooperation and communication with the environment.

3. In order for a company to effectively pursue its goals and for both sexes to find their place in the business environment, their predispositions should be combined by selecting coeducational staff. Both women and men bring positive values to the company, although their management styles differ significantly, as shown in this article.

4. It is certain that the implementation of the principle of equality between women and men requires taking into account the gender perspective in the mainstream of all political, social and economic processes at every stage. For this reason, the gender equality policy should be based on the deliberate, systematic and conscious implementation of anti-discrimination and equality regulations, as well as on a reliable assessment of the implementation of these regulations in practice, which is important - from the perspective of their impact on the living conditions of women and men. Only such an approach will allow for a step towards ensuring not only legal, but also actual equality of representatives of both sexes.

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