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The Queen Bee Syndrome. The paradox of women discrimination on the labour market

ABSTRACT. Nowadays, women are present in all spheres of life and legislation gives them the same rights as men. We can therefore speak about the emancipation of women for whom new areas of social life have become available, especially the area of education and the labour market. However, despite the fact that gender equality is officially enforced in Western countries, we can still notice certain forms of discrimination against women, in particular related to their functioning in the labour market. The unequal access of women to managerial positions is just one of the many examples. Paradoxically, this access is sometimes hampered by women holding high positions who are not willing to help their younger colleagues in achieving professional promotion. The aim of this article is to present and explain the occurrence of this negative phenomenon, which will be referred to as the Queen Bee Syndrome.

KEYWORDS: women, the Queen Bee Syndrome, labour market, career, discrimination, professional promotion.

In modern literature on the reconstruction of social roles of women and men, there are, generally speaking, two tendencies. Some authors believe that in Western societies a full emancipation of women took place. This is related both to changes in legislation that ensure equal rights and thus access to education and the labour market, as well as fundamental changes in the field of social awareness whose essence is a completely different perception of women, compared to the one in the 19th century (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2013). One often speaks of the identity of a new woman who, thanks to a different socialization, in no way limits her life aspirations to family and motherhood. As Agnieszka Gromkowska-Melosik (2011, p. 11) points out, "the analysis of the reality of the beginning of the 21st century can lead to the optimistic conclusion that in Western societies women are experiencing more and more equality and less inequality."

One of the ideas that provides a context for explaining the causes of women's emancipation is the concept of meritocracy, which rejects the approach of biological essentialism that talks about the impact of biological differences such as sex or race on educational and social achievements. Meritocracy, in its assumptions, thus omits the meaning of sex (as well as origin, religion and race) as a criterion defining the individual's possibilities in terms of socio-professional success (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2008, p. 79). Using the words of Agnieszka Gromkowska-Melosik (2008, p. 79), it should be emphasized that even if it happens differently, in fact there are various sociological and psychological mechanisms of excluding women from success (for example, gender stereotypes at school), promoting equality as a foundation of social life played a key role in the social and educational situation of women. Meritocracy, therefore, created a foundation for the emancipation of women in new areas, and the potential equality of women became an element of everyday life (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2008, p. 79). Nowadays, women are getting higher education and are becoming doctors, lawyers or university professors. They also perform many functions in politics, sometimes occupying the highest positions—prime ministers, presidents or judges of the supreme court (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2002, p. 239).

The second trend that can be observed in literature refers to the typical belief of many authors in the field of gender studies, that many forms of discrimination against women are still present. In the context I am interested in, it manifests itself in the disproportions regarding the remuneration of men and women for the same work (Lips, 2013, p. 166–167), and in the unequal access of women to managerial positions (Gatrell & Cooper, 2007, p. 64). It would be incorrect to state that in contemporary society, there is full and real equality of women in relation to men, especially considering the general situation of women in the labor market. In the majority of European countries women struggle with unemployment more often than men, which also affects the fact that the female employment rate is much lower than the male one (Eurostat, 2014, p. 101). They work on the basis of part-time and temporary contracts more often than men. Women constitute a social group, which is also addressed by another negative phenomenon characterized by low-level employment regarding the hierarchy at work, with few prospects of career advancement, called "sticky floor" (OECD, 2016, p. 3–9). This is the term for discriminatory practices towards women in the labour market. Randy Albelda and Chris Tilly (1997, p. 45) define the term "sticky floor" as "discriminatory hiring patterns that keep them con-

centrated at the bottom of the job scale". Stijn Baert, Ann-Sophie De Pauw and Nick Deschacht (2016, p. 714) also claim that "sticky floors can be described as the pattern in which women are, compared to men, less likely to start to climb the job ladder".

Another issue related to women's professional work, showing the ongoing gender discrimination at work is the so-called "glass ceiling". This term is most often used to describe the phenomenon in which men dominate at the higher levels of management. The word "ceiling" indicates that women face a limit to how high they can climb the organizational ladder, while the word "glass" refers to the relative transparency and subtlety of this barrier, which is not necessarily noticeable to observers. This glass ceiling, then, does not concern formal barriers in achieving professional success, such as insufficient level of education or lack of adequate professional experience (Barreto, Ryan & Schmitt, 2009, p. 5). It is a conceptual framework for a series of invisible obstacles on the way to women's promotion, which are based mainly on gender-based roles (Farady-Brash, 2009, p. 73-76). In this case, prejudices against women are mainly related to their motherhood. Women are being treated as "high-risk employees" because, due to family and household duties, they may neglect their work and be non-disposable and uninvolved employees (Polkowska, 2007, p. 237-238). Therefore, they are often not being seen as suitable candidates for managerial positions. The social beliefs referring to women's predispositions and possibilities to be successful at work resulting from fulfilling the difficult task of being a mother also result in the fact that sometimes women themselves do not believe in their own strength and the ability to "build" a career (Polkowska, 2007, p. 238). This may lead to a situation in which they won't try to fight for higher positions. It should also be mentioned that there is a problem of perceiving women through the prism of their "female character traits", which leads to women being discriminated when applying for managerial positions. It is widely believed that "delicate" and vulnerable women lack leadership skills (Marciniak, 2004, p. 12). All this contributes to the concept of the glass ceiling and as Manuela Barreto, Michelle K. Ryan and Michael T. Schmitt (2009, p. 5) stress "although the notion is metaphorical, for those women who encounter it, it is an all-too-real impenetrable barrier."

Definitely, one of the biggest obstacles for women trying to "climb" the ladder leading to the top of the professional hierarchy are the limitations related to the existence of an extremely strong male solidarity,

which is, for instance, expressed in the fact that men usually prefer male candidates applying for the job, if the competitor is a woman with the same qualifications (Polkowska, 2007, p. 237). Another phenomenon that, according to a lot of authors, contributes to the discrimination of women in the labor market is the so-called Queen Bee Syndrome. In the following part of my article I would like to take a closer look at it.

The Queen Bee Syndrome concerns a situation in which women who succeed in male-dominated work settings aim to prevent other women from developing and promoting (Faniko, Ellemers & Derks, 2016, p. 903). The term was first introduced in 1973 by G. Staines, C. Tavris and T.E. Jayaratne. Their research on the attitudes of women towards the liberation of women indicated that some of them were against any changes in traditional gender roles, which was an exemplification of the Queen Bee Syndrome (Staines et al., 1973, cited in Mavin, 2008, p. 79). The term “queen bee” refers to women in high positions who have achieved their professional goals in organizations dominated by men by distancing themselves from other women and at the same time expressing behaviors that lead to their gender stereotyping. The Queen Bee Syndrome is considered to be a phenomenon that leads to gender discrimination in the workplace and is an inseparable attribute of successful women (Derks et al., 2011, p. 519). On the other hand, Sharon Mavin (2008, p. 75) highlights that “The ‘Queen Bee’ is commonly constructed as a bitch who stings other women if her power is threatened and, as a concept, the Queen Bee blames individual women for not supporting other women”.

Evidence for the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome comes from studies showing women criticizing the professional involvement, leadership skills and assertiveness of their female colleagues (Derks et al., 2011, p. 520). An example can be research conducted among women who work in the area of science by Naomi Ellemers et al. (2004), whose results showed that female professors distance themselves from the attributes of their gender and define their traits in male categories. In addition, these tests proved that:

stereotyping of women rather than differential work commitment emerges as a plausible reason that women have more difficulty than men to be successful in an academic career and—because of their own precarious position—women are more likely than men to engage in gender stereotyping in this context (Ellemers et al., 2004, p. 333).

Robbie M. Sutton, Tracey J. Elder and Karen M. Douglas (2006) point out that by that the stereotypical views expressed by women in the workplace are particularly harmful to the reputation of other women, because their criticism is perceived as more convincing and credible than the opinion of men (as cited in Derks et al., 2011, p. 520–521). In fact, the unequal treatment of women due to gender provides a strong foundation for legitimizing the disadvantages of women in the workplace. A successful woman becoming a queen bee during the development of her career may hinder the promotion of women who are their subordinates (Derks et al., 2011, p. 521).

The occurrence of the Queen Bee Syndrome has also been pointed out by Agnieszka Gromkowska-Melosik (2011), especially in her qualitative research conducted in two groups of women—academics and managers. One of the contexts of her research indicated “the emergence of a fairly clear image of women who seek to mutually exclude rivals within their own sex” (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2011, p. 331). In statements of both academics and managers, there is a clear message that discriminatory practices take place within a group of women. One of the respondents states that:

It is very often the case that women compete more with each other than with men. This is more noticeable because women know women, they also know women’s weaknesses and are able to use these against them (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2011, p. 332).

In addition, the interviewed people clearly depreciate their own sex by assigning negative attributes to women, such as having a difficult nature, being emotionally instable or having a tendency to not being able to stay focused due to excessive meticulousness. In the same time, men are being described as rational and steadfast. Explanations of both groups are therefore based on arguments in accordance with the already mentioned theory of biological essentialism (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2011, p. 331–337), which assumes that a particular gender is connected to certain character traits and psychological dispositions (Szymczak, 2016, p. 22). The statement of one of the female managers clearly indicates that the reason for the discrimination of women by women is a whole range of negative “female” features:

No man can be as vile, cruel and mean as a woman to a woman—also at work (...). I think that one of the reasons may be simple jealousy, envy, a sense of competition, that a woman threatens me more than a man (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2011, p. 331–332).

However, it should be clearly emphasized that the above statements of the surveyed women confirm only the colloquial definition and explanation of the causes of the Queen Bee Syndrome, which, according to the opinion of the society, result from the “difficult” female personality. Sophia Zhao and Maw-Der Foo notice that in stereotypical perception:

queen bee bullies subordinates and obstructs other women’s career advancement. They are seen as selfish, insensitive, and power hungry. If a senior woman leader has a reputation as a queen bee, women in less senior positions often are advised to avoid working with her (Zhao & Foo, 2016, p. 1).

On the other hand, studies by Belle Derks, Naomi Ellemers, Colette van Laar and Kim de Groot have proven that the causes of the Queen Bee Syndrome among women in high positions should not be searched for in their character traits, but in the ongoing discrimination of women in the workplace due to their sex. The researchers mentioned above point out that „the Queen Bee phenomenon is an important consequence of workplace experiences, namely the gender discrimination women experience during their career” and that in their opinion, the queen bee behavior is “a response to social identity threat” (Derks et al., 2011, p. 521).

Naomi Ellemers was the first to say that the Queen Bee Syndrome is a response to a social identity threat. However, although Ellemers and her colleagues suggested that the queen bee behavior may be such a response, they did not directly investigate whether women who exhibited behaviors consistent with the Queen Bee Syndrome had a low degree of identification with their own gender (Derks et al., 2011, p. 521–522). But the analyses of Belle Derks, Naomi Ellemers, Colette van Laar and Kim de Groot indicate that the likelihood of such a behavior is greater in women who are poorly identified with the female gender in the workplace, and who are at the same time striving to achieve professional success (Derks et al., 2011, p. 521). It should be emphasized once again that the results of this research have shown that the Queen Bee Syndrome occurs in a work environment in which women are exposed to gender discrimination and stereotypical negative perception. Discrimination due to sex can motivate some women, especially those who highly identify themselves as female, to take action to eliminate discriminatory practices in the workplace. On the other hand, some women, especially those who do not show strong identification with their own gender, slip into the role of the queen bee and strive to increase their

individual chances of achieving professional success (Derks, Laar & Ellemers, 2016, p. 460). As Agnieszka Melosik-Gromkowska (2016, p. 63) notes, these queen bees can then resort to relational aggression, which is perceived as typical of the female sex. This type of aggression consists, among other things, in excluding some people from the group or creating a network of rumors around the victim, which results in its rejection by the rest of the group (Talbot et al., 2002, cited in Gromkowska-Melosik, 2016, p. 63).

B. Derks, C. Laar and N. Ellemers (2016, p. 457) conclude that a “derogatory ‘queen bee’ label is given to women who pursue individual success in male-dominated work settings (organizations in which men hold most executive positions) by adjusting to the masculine culture and by distancing themselves from other women”. These women let go of particular personality traits which are traditionally recognized as feminine, and do not identify with the group of women. In the following part, I will mainly use the excellent texts of Derk and her co-authors, who convincingly explained the Queen Bee Syndrome, its causes and manifestations.

Research on the queen bee phenomenon indicated the existence of three main patterns of behavior of these queen bee women:

- „becoming more like men,
- emphasizing how they differ from other women,
- endorsing and legitimizing the current gender hierarchy” (Derks, 2017, p. 1297–1298).

The first pattern results from the stereotypical perception of the personality traits of a leader or manager (i.e. agentic traits) and characteristics that are typical for the female gender (i.e. communal traits). A leader’s qualities are identified with a typically male personality, which is why women who want to get a managerial position try to fit into organizations in which men dominate by showing off especially their male features. In this case, women strive for masculine self-presentation, which is supposed to increase their chances of becoming a leader (Derks, Laar & Ellemers, 2016, p. 457). Belle Derks, Laar and Ellemers (2016, p. 457) point out that “rather than adding the desired ‘feminine perspective’ to leadership, women may assimilate to masculine definitions of leadership as they move up the organizational ladder”.

Another behavior that is typical for the queen bee is emphasizing how different she is from other women. In order to not being treated like the rest of the women, older women may, for example, present their

personality as completely different from the one of their younger colleagues by emphasizing that they are more ambitious, much more agentic and willing to sacrifice for their career (Derks, 2017, p. 1298). However, at this point it should be noted that older women do not distance themselves from all women, but they do so in relation to a group of women who have not achieved such success in the professional field as they themselves do (Derks, Laar & Ellemers, 2016, p. 457).

The last and perhaps most harmful way in which women can improve their personal capacity to succeed in organizations dominated by men is endorsing and legitimizing the current gender inequality. The queen bees may strive to maintain the status quo by, for example, criticizing younger women, as well as strongly supporting the stereotypical perception of women as less ambitious and less engaged in work than men, emphasizing at the same time that they themselves are different from this group of women (Derks, 2017, p. 1298). In addition, the queen bees in male-dominated organizations may support the principles expressed by proponents of meritocracy and deny the ongoing discrimination in the workplace due to gender—believing that since they have managed to be successful, the lack of this success in the case of other women is the result of them missing appropriate competence or personality traits. Finally, the queen bees, unlike older men, are less in favor of a policy wanting to take affirmative actions, striving to equalize opportunities for younger women’s development and a career advancement, and are less likely to be mentors for their female subordinates (Derks, 2017, p. 1298).

It is also worth mentioning that the Queen Bee Syndrome is not just a behavior suitable for women. It also occurs among members of other negatively stereotyped groups when they are subject to group devaluation in the workplace. B. Derks, C. Laar and N. Ellemers (2016, p. 457) explain that “self-group distancing can be a strategic activity in which individuals deliberately dissociate themselves from the negative aspects of their group’s stereotype”. Similarly as in the case of women showing behaviors that are typical for the Queen Bee Syndrome, the distance to their own group takes place especially in the case of members of stigmatized groups in which their identity as a person belonging to the discriminated group suffers. Therefore, those of them who do not identify themselves with their own group, try to “get closer” to the group with a higher status, in which they see a certain chance for achieving individual benefits (Derks, Laar & Ellemers, 2016, p. 457).

The Queen Bee Syndrome leads to particular consequences, both for women who in this context can be seen as these queen bees, and for their subordinates, but also for the social position of women as a group. The woman acting like a queen bee may succeed in organizations dominated by men, but she definitely will not be supported in being an effective leader from the younger women who are her subordinates (Derks, 2017, p. 1299).

For younger women, the queen bee phenomenon is extremely harmful, as it negatively affects their abilities and professional development. Queen bees that maintain the gender stereotypes about their subordinates can have a significant impact on the careers of other women. Their stereotypical assessments are less often perceived as sexist, and thus appear to be more reliable than men's stereotypical opinions of women, which leads to the creation of a "bad (and often false) image" of younger women in the workplace. The behavior of queen bees can also destroy the self-confidence of younger women, and thus negatively affect their chances of success (Derks, Laar & Ellemers 2016, p. 457).

Finally, the Queen Bee Syndrome leads to the maintenance of discrimination in the workplace due to sex. The denials of the queen bees regarding the existing inequalities between women and men in organizations lead to their legitimization (Derks, 2017, p. 1299).

To sum it up, I would like to emphasize that I do not intend to absolutize the Queen Bee Syndrome as a phenomenon explaining the relationships between women in the workplace or explain the mechanisms of women's success/promotion at work. This phenomenon is just one of the many ones that are part of the "map" concerning the professional situation of women. The trajectory of the development of women's situation at work is defined by many variables among which the important role is played, on the one hand by the education and real competences of women, their personality traits and aspirations, and on the other hand the already mentioned phenomena such as glass ceiling, sticky floor, sexism or other manifestations of excluding women by institutional structures or men from professional success (Titkow, 2007). In addition, it has to be noted that while analyzing the situation of women at work, we should take into account other contexts related to culture and identity in which one can distinguish, for example, typical contemporary constructs of the body and sexuality (Melosik, 2010; Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994). The Queen Bee Syndrome which has been looked closer at in this article is only a small and perhaps even not very significant part of the just mentioned map.

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