

The Evolution of Young Women's Career Priorities: An Educational Perspective

Katarzyna Peter-Bombik, Katarzyna Kowalska-Jarnot, Aneta Oleksy-Gębczyk, Paulina Rydwańska, Tomasz Załona and Sylwia Królikowska

k.peter-bombik@uj.edu.pl

kkowalska@wsei.edu.pl

aoleksy-gebczyk@ans-ns.edu.pl

prydwanska@ans-ns.edu.pl

tzałona@ans-ns.edu.pl

sylwia@vandahlen.pl

Abstract: Modern society presents young women with many challenges that require them not only to have high professional competencies, but also adaptive and entrepreneurial skills. The transition from school to higher education is one of the key moments in young women's lives. It involves a revision of previous plans and aspirations. It is a time when reflection on one's career aspirations and how to achieve them takes place. The study is part of a strand of research on factors supporting and inhibiting women's careers. Its main objective is to verify to what extent young women's attitudes towards careers change in two successive stages of their education (secondary school and university). Particular attention was paid to the changes that occur in respondents' expectations of the level to which work satisfies their basic needs (such as, inter alia, job stability, good pay, good interpersonal relations or opportunities for development). Furthermore, the study examined how the self-assessment of the surveyed women evolves in areas such as life activity, motivation, openness to change and willingness to take risks. Surveys conducted among female secondary school and university students revealed significant differences in the perception of one's own capabilities and career preferences between the groups studied. At the same time, they demonstrate that young women's life priorities change with age. The results indicate that young women, as they enter adulthood and enter university, begin to focus more on their need for professional stability at the expense of their previously perceived needs for independence and challenge-seeking. As they gain academic experience, their professional expectations change, which can have far-reaching consequences for their entrepreneurship and future careers. The findings generate further areas of research that would aim to verify the factors influencing the change in attitudes. The results of the research may serve the developers of the core curriculum in secondary schools, study programmes, as well as employers interested in attracting young women into the workforce.

Keywords: Labor Market; Women's Entrepreneurship; Career Management; Women's Economic Awareness

1. Introduction

Women take on many roles throughout their lives. Foremost among these are the roles traditionally assigned to them for years, namely those of a wife, mother, and caregiver. Over the past several decades, however, there has been a continuous increase in women's professional activity as well as their involvement in the roles associated both with maintaining the family and developing their professional careers. For women, work is not solely a source of income and status (Matyjas, 2016), their motivation also includes financial independence, respect from others, relationships, and personal fulfillment (Sulik, 2010, p. 31).

Women's professional careers in Poland are hindered by numerous systemic, financial, social, and psychological barriers. These challenges influence women's perspectives on work well before they enter the job market. Young girls are often raised in the environments, where societal expectations emphasize their domestic and family responsibilities. Moreover, regulatory solutions to ease these burdens remain limited, particularly in areas such as affordable childcare, flexible and attractive workplaces, and men's involvement in domestic responsibilities (Institute for Structural Research, 2020). Approximately 64% of women report difficulties balancing work and parental responsibilities (Hays Poland, 2022). From an early age, young women are aware of these roles and the associated social expectations, which can heavily influence their career choices, often steering them towards jobs that allow for balancing work and family life in the long run (Goldin, Grant, 2014). As a result, they tend to prefer secure workplaces and avoid excessive occupational risks. This trend is particularly noticeable in roles that require a high level of commitment (Economic Policy Institute, 2016). Research also shows that the anticipated responsibilities of raising children, and the career breaks contribute to widening the wage gap between female and male workers (Chevalier, 2007). In Europe, this wage gap stands at 13% (European Commission, 2023), while in Poland, it is estimated to range from 4.5% (Polish Economic Institute, 2023) to 15.9% (Sedlak & Sedlak, 2023). Lower salary expectations among women (Fernandes et al., 2021) and a tendency to doubt their own competencies (Buser et al., 2014) further exacerbate this gap (Briel, et al., 2020). Consequently, women are less likely to aspire to managerial positions, partly due to the so-called impostor syndrome (Clance,

Imes, 1978). Some studies also suggest that women are less likely to take risks and often adopt a softer approach to competition and negotiations at work (Niederle, Vesterlund, 2007). It is also worth noting that stereotypes significantly influence women's self-esteem and the way they are perceived by others (Bordalo et al., 2019). Even during their education, young women are often encouraged to pursue "traditionally feminine" professions, such as teaching or caregiving, while being discouraged from entering high-paying fields like engineering or science (Economic Policy Institute, 2016).

As women grow up, they absorb cultural norms, stereotypes, and entrenched beliefs from their surroundings. These observed attitudes significantly shape the behavior of girls during their pre-adulthood phase (Kuźnik, 2021). Through the process of socialization, many of them adjust to societal expectations - a process that begins in childhood and continues into adulthood. However, it remains unclear how their views on their abilities and careers evolve or at what point their self-esteem and attitudes toward risk, stability, relationships, and expected salary levels begin to change.

This situation prompted the authors to conduct research to explore the hypothesis that this shift occurs during the transition from high school to university, a critical juncture between successive stages of education. The authors proposed that this is when women's attitudes shift from an idealistic perspective - seeking work that is exciting, independent, full of challenges and new opportunities, under the belief that "the world is my oyster" - to a more pragmatic one, where secure workplaces, good relationships, predictability, and safety take precedence. A review of the literature revealed that most studies on women's attitudes in the labor market focus on working women, while high school students and university students are rarely studied as separate groups in this context. Thus, the objective of this study is to examine authors believe that the findings of their research could partially address this identified research gap and provide a theoretical and methodological foundation for further studies on this phenomenon. Thus, the objective of this study is to examine whether women's attitudes change across these two critical educational stages—high school and university—and, if so, to determine the direction of this change.

2. Materials and Methods

To achieve the main objective of this paper, the authors conducted diagnostic tests among young women attending secondary schools and universities in Poland. The research employed a survey method using a self-designed questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of demographics as well as key single-choice and multiple-choice questions. The research utilized an electronic survey form (Google Forms). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the research was conducted from April to June 2024. The survey was carried out on a random sample reflecting the number of women studying in secondary schools and universities in Poland during the 2023/24 school/academic year. Based on the data provided by the Polish Central Statistical Office, it was determined that in the 2023/24 school/academic year, 816,920 women were studying in secondary schools (as of September 30, 2023), and 728,464 women were enrolled at universities (as of December 31, 2023). From these populations, 500 female secondary school students and 500 female university students were randomly selected and invited to participate in the survey. The response rate among secondary school students was 87% and 435 correctly completed questionnaires were returned. Among university students, the response rate was 64.4%, resulting in 322 properly completed questionnaires that were included in the analysis. This allowed for the collected empirical data among the surveyed students to be representative, with a 95% confidence level ($1 - \alpha$) and a maximum margin of error of 4.7%. This means that the obtained results may differ by a maximum of 4.7% from the actual values for the entire population of women studying in secondary schools in Poland. In the group of female university students, a maximum margin of error of 5.46% was obtained at a 95% confidence level ($1 - \alpha$). The methods for frequency distribution of variables, such as: arithmetic mean, median, classical coefficient of variation, and basic numerical characteristics were used for the results analysis. The analysis was conducted using Statistica version 13.1 (StatSoft Poland).

3. Results

To explore the differences in career expectations and life attitudes among the surveyed women at two educational stages, their activities in selected areas were analyzed. The collected empirical data, along with statistical analysis, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Engagement (activity) of high school and university female students in the areas listed in the table below, where 1 means passivity (lack of engagement/lack of activity), and 5 means engagement/activity at the highest possible level.

<i>n</i> – numbers; \bar{x} – arithmetic mean; M_e – median; V – classic coefficient of variation	Frequency of answers [%]				
	1	2	3	4	5
Categories of Answers					
Commitment to learning					
High School Students : $n = 435; \bar{x} = 3,3; M_e = 3; V = 32\%$	6	16	32	32	13
University Students: $n = 322; \bar{x} = 3,7; M_e = 4; V = 28\%$	3	11	24	39	23
Memberships in school/university organizations					
High School Students: $n = 435; \bar{x} = 2,6; M_e = 2; V = 50\%$	26	26	23	15	9
University Students: $n = 322; \bar{x} = 2,3; M_e = 2; V = 57\%$	39	24	17	12	8
Involvement in voluntary activities					
High School Students : $n = 435; \bar{x} = 2,5; M_e = 2; V = 53\%$	31	23	21	15	9
University Students: $n = 322; \bar{x} = 2,2; M_e = 2; V = 57\%$	38	24	22	7	9
Part-time or full-time job					
High School Students : $n = 435; \bar{x} = 3,0; M_e = 3; V = 47\%$	21	17	24	18	20
University Students: $n = 322; \bar{x} = 3,3; M_e = 3; V = 45\%$	19	11	22	18	30
Running a thematic channel on social media					
High School Students : $n = 435; \bar{x} = 2,3; M_e = 2; V = 61\%$	44	17	17	11	11
University Students: $n = 322; \bar{x} = 1,8; M_e = 1; V = 64\%$	59	15	14	7	4
Participation in optional internships or work placements					
High School Students : $n = 435; \bar{x} = 2,5; M_e = 2; V = 56\%$	35	20	18	16	11
University Students: $n = 322; \bar{x} = 2,3; M_e = 2; V = 56\%$	36	25	19	12	8
Extracurricular activities					
High School Students : $n = 435; \bar{x} = 2,8; M_e = 3,0; V = 51\%$	27	17	21	17	18
University Students: $n = 322; \bar{x} = 2,4; M_e = 2; V = 54\%$	33	23	22	11	11

<i>n</i> – numbers; \bar{x} – arithmetic mean; M_e – median; V – classic coefficient of variation	Frequency of answers [%]				
Helping family or friends run a business					
High School Students : $n = 435; \bar{x} = 2,8; M_e = 3,0; V = 48\%$	21	23	21	21	13
University Students: $n = 322; \bar{x} = 2,8; M_e = 3,0; V = 51\%$	26	19	23	16	16
Taking initiative in your environment					
High School Students : $n = 435; \bar{x} = 3,2; M_e = 3,0; V = 37\%$	9	19	29	26	17
University Students: $n = 322; \bar{x} = 3,0; M_e = 3,0; V = 42\%$	15	21	28	21	16

The collected empirical data have revealed differences between the two groups in most of the activities studied. An analysis of the calculated means and medians of the responses indicates that the most significant differences between the groups were observed in the areas of running a thematic channel on social media and commitment to learning. Schoolgirls were more active than their older counterparts in running social media channels. However, it should be noted that the calculated coefficients of variation for both groups suggest significant variations in the level of engagement across all respondents in this field. In contrast, female university students demonstrated a higher level of commitment to learning, which may result from the greater academic pressure faced by older women at the higher education level. For schoolgirls, however, commitment to learning remained the most frequently undertaken activity. University students also demonstrated greater professional activity compared to schoolgirls, with employment being the second most intense form of engagement for this group. This finding suggests that employment becomes increasingly significant as students progress to higher levels of education. Additionally, when examining various activities of young women, it becomes evident that demonstrating initiative within their environment was a key aspect of their engagement. Younger women were more active in this regard than their older counterparts. For schoolgirls, this was the second most common activity, while for university students, it ranked third. The study also showed that younger women were more active in the following areas: membership in school or university organizations (e.g., student councils, academic/scientific clubs), involvement in volunteering, participation in non-mandatory internships or apprenticeships, and extracurricular educational activities. In the area of assisting close relatives or friends in running a business, the two groups of respondents demonstrated similar and moderate levels of activity.

The research also focused on women's aspirations regarding professional activity. The respondents were asked to indicate up to three (or/and write their own) expectations regarding their professional activity. The frequency of the respondents' expectations is presented in Figure 1.

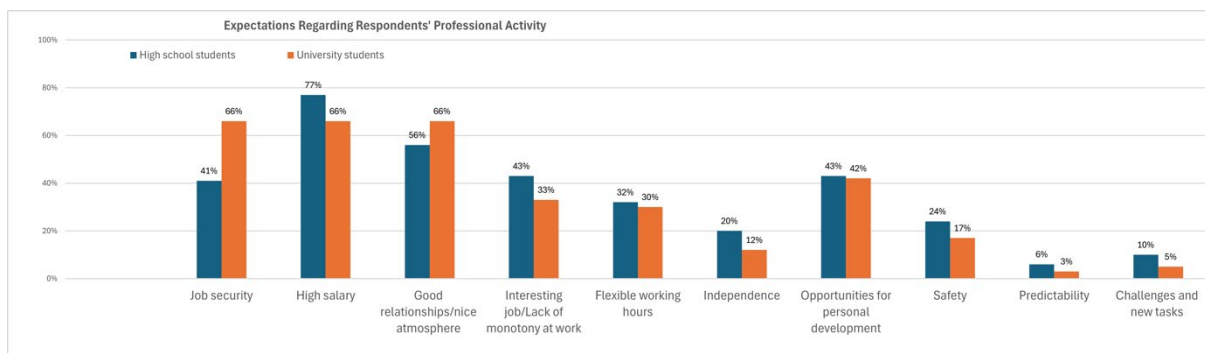


Figure 1: Expectations Regarding Respondents' Professional Activity

High earnings ranked as the top expectation among both groups, with 77% of schoolgirls and 66% of university students considering it a key factor in their future careers. It may reflect the growing financial awareness of young

women and their aspirations for material stability in adulthood. The second most important expectation was good interpersonal relationships and a positive work atmosphere, considered significant by 56% of schoolgirls and 66% of university students. Job stability was another critical factor for university students. For younger women, however, opportunities for personal growth and engaging work that breaks away from monotony were of greater significance. Nevertheless, job stability also remained a significant expectation for them. University students, in turn, prioritized opportunities for growth, engaging work, and flexible working hours as characteristics of an ideal job. The empirical data have also revealed that certain job expectations were more significant for schoolgirls than for university students. These included high earnings, engaging work (free from monotony), flexible working hours, and independence. On the other hand, university students placed greater emphasis on job stability and good interpersonal relationships, including a positive atmosphere at work. Notably, predictability was the least valued attribute among respondents, reflecting the priorities shaped by the demands of the modern labor market.

The respondents were also asked to indicate their life stance using a 5-point scale of opposing statements. The percentage frequencies of their responses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Self-definition of respondents' life attitude

	Arithmetic Mean, High School Students (435), University Students (322)	
I prefer a less well-paid but stable job.		I prefer a less stable job but with high earning potential
I demonstrate a reactive attitude towards life		I demonstrate a proactive attitude towards life
I don't like changes		I like changes
I don't enjoy taking risk		I really enjoy taking risk
I am convinced that if I started a business, I would go bankrupt.		I am convinced that if I started a business, I would succeed in the market.

	Arithmetic Mean, High School Students (435), University Students (322)	
I don't adapt to the changing conditions and situations at school.	<p>schoolgirl: 3% (1), 9% (2), 34% (3), 37% (4), 17% (5) Mean: 3.6</p> <p>student: 1% (1), 4% (2), 31% (3), 44% (4), 19% (5) Mean: 3.7</p>	I adapt perfectly to the changing conditions and situations at school.
When I work for a long time, I quickly lose motivation to keep going.	<p>schoolgirl: 12% (1), 22% (2), 34% (3), 22% (4), 9% (5) Mean: 2.9</p> <p>student: 7% (1), 17% (2), 40% (3), 26% (4), 9% (5) Mean: 3.1</p>	When I work for a long time, I easily maintain my motivation to keep going.
I am more inspired by people who run their own business than by those working in well-paid jobs (doctors, lawyers, managers).	<p>schoolgirl: 23% (1), 15% (2), 35% (3), 14% (4), 13% (5) Mean: 2.8</p> <p>student: 22% (1), 18% (2), 41% (3), 13% (4), 6% (5) Mean: 2.6</p>	I am more inspired by people working in well-paid jobs (doctors, lawyers, managers) than by those who run their own business.
Others consider me a passive and uncreative person.	<p>schoolgirl: 2% (1), 6% (2), 27% (3), 39% (4), 26% (5) Mean: 3.8</p> <p>student: 2% (1), 6% (2), 29% (3), 40% (4), 23% (5) Mean: 3.8</p>	Others consider me a very creative/innovative person.
I have no career plans.	<p>schoolgirl: 9% (1), 14% (2), 32% (3), 29% (4), 16% (5) Mean: 3.3</p> <p>student: 3% (1), 8% (2), 33% (3), 38% (4), 17% (5) Mean: 3.6</p>	I have clearly defined career plans.
Most of my decisions are impulsive.	<p>schoolgirl: 8% (1), 10% (2), 30% (3), 34% (4), 18% (5) Mean: 3.4</p> <p>student: 2% (1), 6% (2), 25% (3), 42% (4), 25% (5) Mean: 3.8</p>	Most of my decisions are well-thought-out.
I am not determined to achieve my own goals.	<p>schoolgirl: 1% (1), 4% (2), 26% (3), 36% (4), 33% (5) Mean: 3.9</p> <p>student: 1% (1), 4% (2), 21% (3), 41% (4), 33% (5) Mean: 4.0</p>	I am determined to achieve my goals.

The analysis of the research data presented in Table 2 revealed notable differences between the two groups of women in terms of their attitudes. Younger participants were more likely than their older counterparts to prefer jobs with lower stability but high earning potential. They also demonstrated slightly greater acceptance of risk and openness to changes in their lives. A larger percentage of schoolgirls, compared to university students, expressed confidence that they would succeed in the market if they started their own business. In contrast, university students showed a greater ability to adapt to changing conditions and maintained higher motivation for long-term work.

Older participants were more likely to have clearly defined career plans and viewed their decisions as more thoughtful. University students were also slightly more driven to achieve their goals. Both groups identified themselves as having an active life stance, and their surroundings perceived them as creative and innovative individuals. The study also revealed minor differences in professional inspiration. For the majority of schoolgirls, individuals working in well-paid positions (e.g., doctors, lawyers, managers) were more inspiring than those running their own businesses.

4. Discussion

Several key insights emerge from the research findings. First, a comparison of the two respondent groups reveals a decline in extracurricular and community-oriented activities with age. This reduction in participation in unpaid social activities appears to be linked to changes in life circumstances. For university students, the priority often shifts toward self-sufficiency, specifically ensuring financial means for living. This focus on the economic aspects of life—such as finding and maintaining a paid position—often driven by factors like relocating (leaving the family home), which leads to higher expenses, as well as reduced family support that was more readily available earlier in life. As a result, the second group of respondents (university students) exhibits an increase in the professional activity.

On the other hand, the necessity of securing financial independence, as the research results indicate, influences how respondents perceive work. Younger respondents (schoolgirls) primarily expect their jobs to be interesting, full of challenges, and to provide them with independence. This attitude toward their future work and career—despite the relatively low level of clarity in their future plans—can be described as "bold" and "idealistic." These young women assume that they will find jobs that are satisfying, provide an adequate economic status (high earnings), and are engaging. For the second group of respondents (university students), there is a noticeable shift in the key factors influencing their perception and evaluation of work. Stability and good interpersonal relationships become priorities. Analyzing other findings specific to this group, it is also noteworthy that their level of "long-term thinking" and consideration of decisions increases. This suggests that entering the job market and experiencing its realities recalibrates their earlier expectations. On one hand, this represents a kind of "grounding" of expectations, particularly regarding their salary. On the other hand, elements critical to long-term work satisfaction, such as a sense of security, stability, reduced uncertainty and risk, and building relationships with coworkers, come to the forefront. This approach, in contrast to the one exhibited by the younger group, can be described as "pragmatic" and "realistic."

As a result, it can be concluded that transitioning from one age group to another, as well as between educational levels (from schoolgirls to university students), leads to a shift in priorities and attitudes toward work and career. This involves a change from a "bold" to a "pragmatic" mindset, and from an "idealistic" to a "realistic" approach. This is particularly significant because, until now, studies have not focused on identifying the exact moment when this shift in attitudes and expectations occurs. Most research tends to compare women in the labor market with men, emphasizing specific deficits and limitations. However, an interesting aspect is that these studies often discuss women who are already working, overlooking the expectations and attitudes they held just a few years earlier as students. This opens up opportunities for further research. It is important not only to confirm, as demonstrated by the example of Polish schoolgirls and university students, that such a change occurs but also to explore the reasons behind this shift—something that was beyond the scope of our study.

On the other hand, an essential question emerges regarding the nature of the shift in attitudes toward work and career between the two groups of women (schoolgirls and university students). If we consider that today's world and economy—including the labor market—are based on competitiveness and innovation, the decline in "boldness" among individuals entering the workforce could be viewed negatively. This shift may indicate a reduction in entrepreneurial skills, which is crucial if we aim to encourage young women to establish and develop their own businesses. If young women (such as university students) prioritize stability, security, and risk avoidance, convincing them to start their own businesses and harness their passions and potential may prove

challenging. However, it is crucial to recognize that "pragmatism" can also hold significant value. Just as innovation, the pursuit of the "new," and aggressive competitiveness fuel progress, economies also require a certain level of order—rooted in stability and predictability. Striking a balance between innovation and pragmatism could be key to fostering a dynamic yet sustainable economic environment."

5. Conclusion

The research found that, compared to high school students, university students are more likely to seek stable and predictable jobs, particularly those with lower risk. They also tend to express a preference for stability over change and draw greater inspiration from individuals in well-paid, stable positions rather than entrepreneurs running their own businesses. Based on the research findings, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact factors that cause this shift in perspective. However, if we want to foster entrepreneurial ideas among young women, it is important to identify the factors that make the risky and unpredictable world of business less attractive to them. Future research should explore whether this is influenced by opinions from close ones (such as parents encouraging them not to take risks and instead seek stability), societal stereotypes (which claim that women are not capable of running businesses) or educational institutions, which, in trying to protect young women from failure and disappointment, might portray a pessimistic view of entrepreneurship. It would also be valuable to examine the connection between students' financial standing and their career aspirations. The university years may serve as a period of 'reality checking,' during which young women, facing reduced support compared to earlier years, may choose to abandon their dreams in favor of a faster, more stable route to securing a reliable income.

Addressing these factors could provide important insights into how to better encourage and support young women in pursuing entrepreneurial ventures. It is also important to ensure that universities offer professional internships or practical courses that allow students to experience firsthand what it is like to run their own business and determine to what extent this could be their career path. Additionally, fostering closer collaboration between universities and businesses is essential, allowing active entrepreneurs to help young people distinguish between genuine risks and unrealistic fears that may hinder the pursuit of their passions and aspirations. While we do not expect all female students to aspire to run their own businesses, we aim to promote the concept of entrepreneurship as a form of proactivity, agency, and effectiveness. We believe that a society that embraces entrepreneurship with both courage and thoughtfulness not only enjoys a higher standard of living but also experiences greater emotional well-being, contributing to an overall sense of fulfillment.

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