



# THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL WORK IN THE LIFE OF MOTHERS RAISING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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**Abstract.** Developmental tasks that give a sense of agency, responsibility and independence are important in an adult's life. These include taking up a job and keeping it as long as possible while experiencing satisfaction and fulfilment, as well as starting a family. Today, women very often feel a strong need to fulfil family and professional roles. Connecting these important living spaces is a big challenge, especially when in the family there are children with special educational needs. The article presents the results of the research on the importance of professional work in the lives of women who raise children with disabilities or other developmental difficulties.

## ZNACZENIE PRACY ZAWODOWEJ W ŻYCIU MATEK WYCHOWUJĄCYCH DZIECI ZE SPECJALNYMI POTRZEBAMI EDUKACYJNYMI

**Słowa kluczowe:** rodzina, macierzyństwo, praca zawodowa, specjalne potrzeby edukacyjne

**Streszczenie.** W życiu dorosłego człowieka ważne są zadania rozwojowe, które dają poczucie sprawstwa, odpowiedzialności i samodzielności. Należą do nich podjęcie pracy i utrzymanie jej jak najdłużej przy jednoczesnym doświadczaniu satysfakcji i spełnienia, a także założenie rodziny. Współcześnie kobiety bardzo często odczuwają silną potrzebę realizowania się w rolach rodzinno-zawodowych. Łączenie tych ważnych przestrzeni życia jest dużym wyzwaniem, zwłaszcza gdy w rodzinie są dzieci ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań, dotyczące znaczenia pracy zawodowej w życiu kobiet, które wychowują dzieci z niepełnosprawnościami, czy też innymi trudnościami rozwojowymi.

## Introduction

Professional work brings people a lot of advantages. It allows for satisfying basic physiological needs, gives a sense of security and becomes a space for satisfying the need for belonging; it may be a source of recognition and become an area of self-fulfilment. An individual goes through many developmental stages before becoming ready to undertake a professional activity. Professional work fills a considerable part of a person's life, marks their social position and also defines their chance in life. It becomes a value which contributes to the emergence of new and new values, including the spiritual ones (Wiatrowski, 2009, p. 42).

Professional activity is not only connected with material values, although the latter are important from the perspective of satisfying needs. Any kind of activity by an individual becomes a basis for gaining experience. Professional space also supports interpersonal relations and allows for discovering oneself anew in the context of one's resources and limitations. It is worth emphasizing that human work is a multidimensional concept and in the objective scope it concerns the products and outcomes of human work, whereas in the subjective sense it constitutes a purposeful, fully informed human activity. In the institutional context, though, human work concerns the places where people undertake professional activity and in the functional sense, work is analysed through the prism of the human body functioning at the time of performing work as well as the equipment and tools needed for the process of work. Professional work may also be considered from the point of view of the ideal sense, which is connected with the theory of physical sciences (Ostrowska, 2017, p. 143).

A human functions in three spheres: individual, social and gendered. The awareness of this fact allows for making an analysis in the context of human work from those three perspectives. In reference to the most personal, unique and typical of each individual sphere, work constitutes an attribute and fundament of human existence; it is a source of income. When taking into consideration the aptitudes and talents of an individual, the professional activity becomes a space for self-fulfilment. Search for the meaning of human work, though, from the social perspective leads to the conclusion that it facilitates establishing social contacts, a constant exchange of experiences, learning, maintaining and strengthening social ties and self-fulfilment, and gives a sense of being needed by others. From the gender perspective, professional activity is evidence

of the humanness of an individual by reconciling a successful life with moral life (Tomaszewska, 2021, p. 69; Ostrowska, 2017, p. 152).

## **Professional work in the context of human needs**

Abraham Maslov's hierarchy of needs corresponds with the theory of motivation, which is also reflected in professional space. Different theories pertaining to needs allow for understanding the external factors conditioning specific human behaviour. What is being sought in them are the answers to such questions as What does a human need? What kind of needs does he or she aim to satisfy? What makes them undertake the activity? It is assumed that each person has needs and aims to satisfy them by undertaking activity. Therefore, human needs become a force driving an individual's activity (Miler-Zawodniak, 2012, p. 101).

Professional work lets a human satisfy their basic physiological needs without which an individual is not able to survive and, even more so, to perform work. Hence, humans need to work to have the possibility of buying food, clothes, hygiene products or a flat. From a longer perspective, they are not able to perform work when feeling hungry or not having basic funds for proper clothing for their work. Moreover, professional activity gives a sense of security, independence and agency. It certainly contributes to strengthening self-esteem, especially when performed work brings visible effects to an individual and others. Professional space creates a chance to satisfy the need for belonging, recognition and respect, although there are situations where it becomes a place where we can find neither the former nor the latter which, unfortunately, does not give a sense of satisfaction from the performed work. Professional activity motivates a person to self-fulfilment, improvement of skills and competencies as well as gain more and more knowledge in a given field.

## **Professional work in the life of women – mothers**

For decades, growth in the professional activity of women has been observed. There are many reasons for this situation. One of them is the progressive emancipation of women and the strong need for self-fulfilment. There is also a change in the demographic structure in Poland which shows that the Polish society is an ageing one, where the generational exchange is not possible, which necessitates the inclusion of women in the labour market and, at the same time,

change in the model of a family from the traditional to a modern one, assuming partnership in relations (Radzik, 2018, p, 60).

Work has become as important to women as having a family and fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers. A more common model of households is families with two working parents (Szyszka, *Aktywność*). According to the research conducted in 2016 by Małgorzata Szyszka, women undertake professional work for diverse reasons. The most frequent group of factors determining the professional activity of women are those connected with their living and housing situation. In this aspect, professional work is treated as a source of satisfying individual and family needs, both basic and higher ones. It also helps to reach financial independence, which is very important in the life of an adult person and gives a sense of agency. Moreover, professional activity, when taken seriously, allows for earning a pension, which enables planning in old age years. 60% of interviewed women pointed to this group of factors. The internal determinants of a woman appeared in the second position of importance, including her pursuit of interests at work, self-fulfilment and the need to raise professional qualifications, which was mentioned by more than half of the respondents. The least frequently observed group of determinants are those related to the social situation. Women take up employment because they want to raise their social prestige and do not want to feel worse than working women, as stated by 40% of the survey participants (Szyszka, *Aktywność*).

Professional work may also be treated as a kind of punishment and this happens when we view it as an obligation and necessity to satisfy our needs, primarily those elementary ones ensuring livelihood. However, professional space may also be understood as a good in itself. It becomes possible when professional work allows for pursuing one's aspirations, dreams, and aims, and contributes to the development and helping others. Perceiving it as a good interpreted as values takes place when a professional activity allows for satisfying all the needs of an individual and thus contributes to their well-being (Zdun, Kopański, Brukwicka, Jastrjemska, *Praca*).

In Poland, women-mothers want to work and they are aware of why it is a very important issue for them. According to the report on motherhood and the professional activity of mothers prepared by the "Parent in the City" Foundation within the framework of the project, "I work and raise children", more than 90% of professionally inactive mothers want to go back to the labour market. Women do not only want to be perceived through the prism of the role of a mother and wife or a partner. They need a space which gives the possibility of financial

independence and using one's own potential, not only by fulfilling it in the family-caregiving roles. It should be added that despite the fact that they are ready to take up work, women are very much concerned about whether they will be able to reconcile family duties and work in such a way that they do not neglect any of these spheres of life (Krzyżak-Pitura, *Raport*).

## **A child with special educational needs in the family**

The birth of a child is often a long-awaited moment in the life of adult women and men. The time of pregnancy is conducive to creating visualisations of the child and wondering what they are going to be like, who they are going to be like and how they will change our world. Excitement and expectation are interspersed with insecurity, fear and interest in the child and their development. Unfortunately, it is not always correct. All kinds of developmental disruptions, and unusual child behaviours often make the family reorganise their current lifestyle in order to be able to take care of the special needs of their offspring. One of the most principal dilemmas is making a decision by a woman about whether to keep or resign from their job. This decision also depends on the level of performance of the child.

Students with special educational needs cannot meet the demands set for their peers. They require proper methods of work as well as psychological and pedagogical counselling. Groups of students with special educational needs include, for instance, children with different kinds of disabilities, including autism and Asperger syndrome, as well as those threatened by social maladjustment or socially maladjusted. These are also children affected by a chronic disease, learning difficulties, with behavioural and emotional disorders, those experiencing crisis or traumatic situations, children from underprivileged environments, but also the children of migrants who experience adaptation difficulties, and talented students. These issues are regulated by the Education Law of 2016 and Ordinance by the Minister of National Education from 2017 amending the ordinance on the principles of providing and organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions. For the purpose of this article, I focus primarily on the children affected by autism, Asperger syndrome and ADHD.

The results of studies conducted by Joanna Szymanowska among 155 families raising a child with a disability and making use of help and social support in the place of residence show that among mothers resident in small towns

of the Podlaskie Voivodeship, just like in big cities, more than 18% are professionally active, whereas in the countryside they comprise nearly 10% of the respondents (Szymanowska, 2019, p. 201). Combining the family and professional roles of women is a big challenge. Where there is a child with a disability or threatened by social maladjustment, playing several social roles may be very difficult, often not possible. Those children need a lot of multidirectional therapeutic activities which frequently involve financial costs. That is why women are partly forced to take up employment, although this is not the only reason for looking for a job by them.

### **The results of the author's own research**

I conducted my own research at the turn of 2022 in a group of 158 mothers. The aim of the research was to learn about the significance of professional work in the life of mothers raising children with special educational needs. I used the method of diagnostic survey and questionnaire technique. The largest group, almost 40%, consisted of mothers aged 38–43 years old. The respondents between the ages of 32 and 37 represented more than 30%. The fewest subjects were at the ages of 26–31 and over 50. More than 77% of the respondents received higher education, nearly 20% said they had received secondary education and the remaining subjects pointed to primary or vocational education. The majority of women covered by the study work in the trade and services sector and they constitute nearly 35%. Quite a considerable group of respondents work in the educational sector – virtually every fifth respondent. More than 14% of the study participants perform jobs related to office work and more than 10% are employed in the healthcare sector. The lowest number of respondents do technical jobs or work in the IT sector. Almost 7% of them are employed in administration and chose the category „Other”, encompassing the jobs related to self-employment the area of which the respondents did not indicate.

Nowadays, on account of the constant growth of the prices of services, food and bank loan interests, people often undertake multiple full-time jobs and it also concerns women. According to my research, nearly 80% of the interviewed mothers work in one place, and 15.2% of the respondents are employed in two places. Few subjects work in more than two workplaces or, as they put it, at home caring for children or do not work at all on account of the retirement age. Because of the small number of women belonging to these groups, I included them all in the category „Other”. I have presented the results on the chart below.

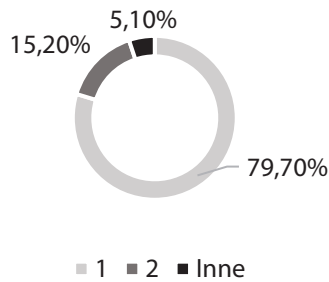


Chart 1. Number of workplaces

Source: author's own research

For many years the family model „2+1” or „2+2” has been characteristic in Poland. There are many reasons for this and usually, it is a combination of factors, both internal and external. Undoubtedly, one of them is the fact that Polish women tend to postpone motherhood and therefore later they find it difficult to make a decision about having another child. Among 156,965 women in Poland who gave birth to their first child, 14,292 were at the age of 35–39, 2529 of them were between 40 and 44, and 116 became mothers for the first time at the age of 45 and more (Rocznik Demograficzny 2021).

The results of my research show that most interviewed women raise two children and they constitute more than half of the respondents – practically every third respondent has one child, whereas 15.2% take care of three or a larger number of children. It is worth mentioning that the subjects raise at least one child with special educational needs. This is what nearly 83% of the respondents pointed to. Nearly 15% raise two children with different developmental difficulties and those related to a difficult behaviour of the child, whereas less than 3% have more than three children with a diagnosis. The largest group of the study participants admitted that their children were diagnosed with ADHD and this was more than 42% of the respondents, more than 39% – with Asperger's syndrome, and autism was mentioned by 32.3% of the subjects. Over 18% of the interviewed women gave other reasons for the special educational needs of their children, including impaired hearing, aphasia, cerebral palsy, behavioural disorders and physical disability (the subjects could point to more than one cause of the diagnosis, therefore % do not add up to 100).

In the family where a child with special educational needs is raised, on account of the disability or threat of social maladjustment or already diagnosed



social maladjustment, the family structure is especially important. Undoubtedly, it is easier to look for solutions to different problems in a situation where the relations between the parents of a such child are lasting and based on mutual support. It is optimistic that 3/4 of the respondents said that they remain in a marital relationship, more than 10% of the subjects of the study are in an informal relationship, nearly 9% of the interviewed mothers experienced divorce, whereas 2.5% went through a partner's death and exactly the same number of them declare that they are single.

Professional work may have a different meaning for each woman. Moreover, each mother may ascribe a different meaning to it depending on the period of life she is in at a given moment. Employment may be perceived in a different way by a childless woman, differently by a mother and yet differently by a woman-mother raising a child with special educational needs. As the results of my research show for the interviewed mothers work is primarily a source of satisfying the needs of family members, a break from problems at home, a space for pursuing their passions and a rest. Sometimes, unfortunately, it is also an obligation, a necessity and also a big challenge. This is confirmed in the words of the subjects about their professional work: *„It's a way to earn money”, „a rest”, „It is difficult to reconcile everything but this is a place where I forget about problems, though it could be nerve-racking”, „One of the most important forms of life. I cannot imagine not working. I like my job very much”, “For me, it is a source of satisfaction and success”, „Professional work gives me satisfaction, the possibility of fulfilment and raises my self-esteem. It is also a break and gives me the possibility of getting my mind off the problems at home and summoning strength and motivation to help my children. Unfortunately, a full-time job is not an option because of additional child therapies”, „It's the necessity on account of the need for private treatment and therapy for my son. It was once a pleasure and challenge. Now, because of the problems with my son's behaviour, it is a big burden”, „It's my passion”.*

The fact of taking up professional activity by mothers whose children have special needs and require frequent therapeutic activities may be subjected to reflection. In this analysis, we should, however, take into account the moment of starting a professional career. The child's diagnosis is often a surprise for the whole family which has to reorganise the whole life anew. The women who agreed to participate in my study started to be active in the professional sphere at different moments of their life, but the majority of them started their professional work before becoming mothers. This group is composed of 82% of the subjects. It should be emphasized that every fifth respondent had already



worked before her child was diagnosed. Nearly 8% of the interviewed mothers took employment after the child was diagnosed.

It may seem that the main motivation behind taking up or maintaining work in the situation of raising a child with developmental difficulties is the necessity to improve the material situation of the family in such a way that all kinds of help or therapies needed by the child with special needs are not beyond their reach. However, as my own research results indicate, there are more many factors, which I show in chart 2.

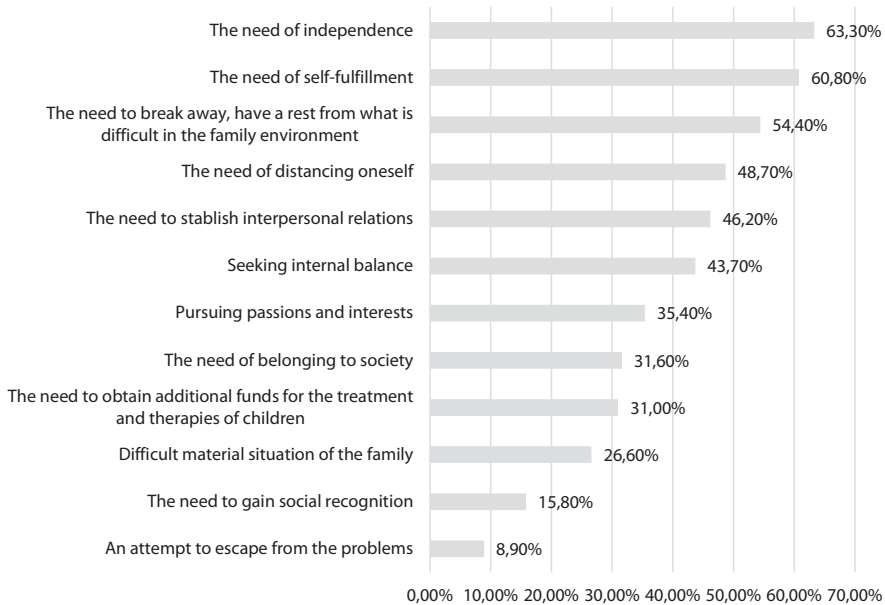


Chart 2. The motivations behind taking up professional work by the interviewed mothers

Source: the author's own research

The subjects were given multiple-choice questions, therefore % do not add up to 100.

The data presented above show that despite everything, the need for independence is very important for the interviewed mothers. The mothers whose children have a disability or face other developmental challenges do not want to count exclusively on state assistance with everyday problems. They want to have a sense of agency and make decisions about how much, when and to what kind of therapy they devote their financial means. Probably, they do not want to adopt a passive approach focusing on what is difficult. They do not to be shown pity, but understanding. The child's disability or their atypical behaviours do not

cause the mothers to no longer feel the need for self-fulfilment. For more than 60% of the interviewed mothers, it is an important factor which motivates them to undertake employment. More than half of the respondents feel the need to rest and “break away” from the problems at home. It is understandable. The women want to perceive themselves not only through the prism of the role of a mother but also of a woman. Sometimes, the difficulties arising from the specific character of the child’s functioning are so big that the woman needs to “switch off” but for a moment in order to supply her resources and support anew her child with special needs. Practically, half of the respondents need to distance themselves from the diagnosis of the child and therefore from the situation of the whole family. What is also important for the interviewed mothers is the interpersonal relations with other adults. When analysing different internet forums devoted to the support of children with special educational needs I have noticed that mothers seek contact with other mothers who have similar experiences in the care of neurodiverse children. Professional space often makes it possible to enrich their social contacts. Thanks to their job, the interviewed women feel they are needed by society, have a sense of belonging and can also develop their passions and interests.

Quite often women take up employment on account of a difficult financial situation of the family, which was pointed out by nearly 30% of the subjects. It was similar in reference to the need to take up employment in order to pay for medical visits and therapies. Based on these results, I think that the subjects are concerned about public opinion and that is why they think that if they work professionally they will gain social recognition, which was admitted by more than 15% of the subjects. I think that in a sense some of the interviewed mothers want to be recognized by public opinion as heroines. It is optimistic, however, that few interviewed women perceive professional work as a chance to escape from their problems. This kind of motivation for work was mentioned by 9% of the respondents.

Diagnosis of the child’s disorders, depending on the level of its performance and intensity of symptoms may be significant in the life of women, also in the aspect of continuing their professional work, resigning from it or looking for a new one – for example the one which can be more flexible and allow for reconciling care and upbringing of a child with special educational needs. In the group of women interviewed by me, the child’s diagnosis had an impact on perceiving one’s own professional activity, which I demonstrate in chart 3.

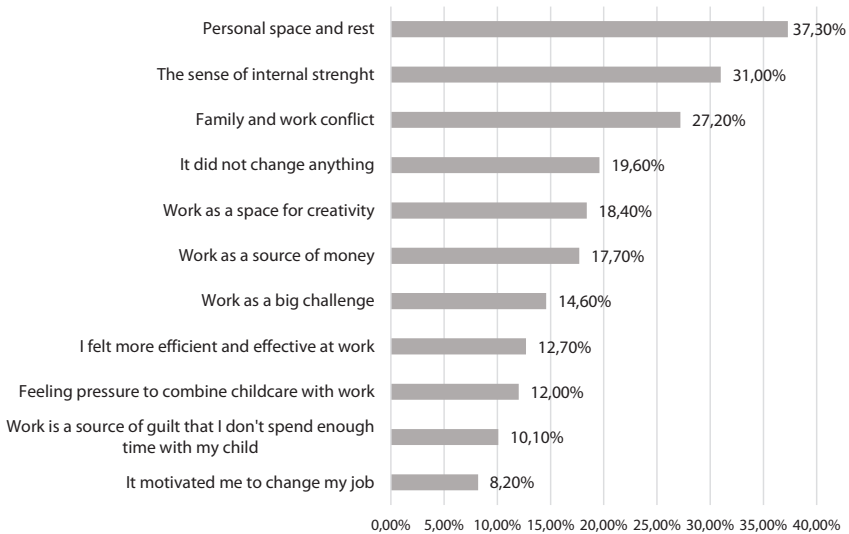


Chart 3. The child's diagnosis and perception of professional work by the subjects

Source: the author's own research

The subjects were given multiple choice questions, therefore % do not add up to 100.

Upon analysing the data above, one may draw a conclusion that almost every fifth respondent declared that the diagnosis of the child's disorders did not change anything in their professional space. The largest group of the interviewed mothers said that after receiving the child's diagnosis they started to find the possibility of rest and recuperation in their professional work, which constitutes more than 37 % of the subjects. In addition, 1/3 of the respondents stated that combining work with care and upbringing of the child with developmental challenges gives them a sense of internal strength and motivates them to undertake activities for the sake of the child with special needs. More than 18% of the subjects admitted that at the time of receiving the child's diagnosis, professional work contributed to adopting a creative approach by them. Some of the interviewed women associate work with a source of money. It should be emphasized that over 8% of the study participants said that diagnosing disorders in their child motivated them to change their job for a better one, not only in financial terms.

Developmental disorders of the child, their illness, and problems with behaviour usually change the mothers' perception of their own professional activity as the child with special educational needs requires frequent medical and

therapeutic consultation. I was curious about how the child's diagnosis changed the meaning of professional work in the life of respondents.

The results of my studies show that for the majority of subjects work allows for satisfying their family needs, which was pointed to by more than 67% of the interviewed women. For more than 45% of the subjects, work constitutes a value in its own right despite certain barriers in the family as a result of the child's disability. This is an optimistic fact. I think that such an approach to work protects the mother of the child with special needs against being confined to one social role. Despite the child's illness or developmental deficits the interviewed mothers see the possibility of pursuing their passions in professional work, which was declared by 40% of the respondents. The smallest group of subjects (nearly 10%) in professional activity see a chance to go up the career ladder to the very top of it. This is not a surprising result since the women raising children with disabilities or developmental deficits usually devote more time to their children than their own professional aspirations, with some of them mostly seeking financial gratification in their career, which is crucial in the diagnostic and therapeutic process of the respondents' children. Moreover, work enables contact with adults they cannot afford to have very often as raising a child with special needs poses a big challenge and is connected with the need to devote more time to them and support their growth. Almost every third subject sees professional work as a space where they can do something good for others. This fact may be interpreted as the openness of the interviewed women towards other mothers who are in a similar life situation, and readiness to support them and share their own experiences. Sometimes the child's diagnosis contributes to taking up employment on behalf of children and youth with disabilities or establishing a foundation or an association, which translates into multiplying goodness. Nearly 40% of the interviewed mothers see the professional space as an occasion to rest from family challenges – for those mothers, it is a kind of body regeneration and mental regeneration space.

It is worth mentioning that by pointing to professional priorities the interviewed women were guided not only by their own needs but were concentrated on the good of the child. The largest group of respondents perceived maintaining their job position as a matter of utmost importance and this constitutes more than half of the subjects. One in three women participating in my study admitted that her underlying professional goal was receiving a pay rise. This is an obvious priority, especially today, when everything gets expensive, including the specialist therapies of the child. For more than 17% of the study

participants, it is important to change their work to one which will allow them for combining it with childcare. Nearly 16% of the subjects expect a promotion at work. It may result from the feeling that there are ups and downs in the family space and not every day is a good one. Quite often the mothers of children with disabilities or difficult behaviour want to be appreciated and strengthened by the employer. They probably hold a position that promotion will improve the material situation of their family and allow for experiencing admiration and recognition from society. Unfortunately, not all mothers are able to combine professional work with the care and upbringing of a child and that is why they resign from work and apply for a carer's allowance. I have presented the results on the chart below.

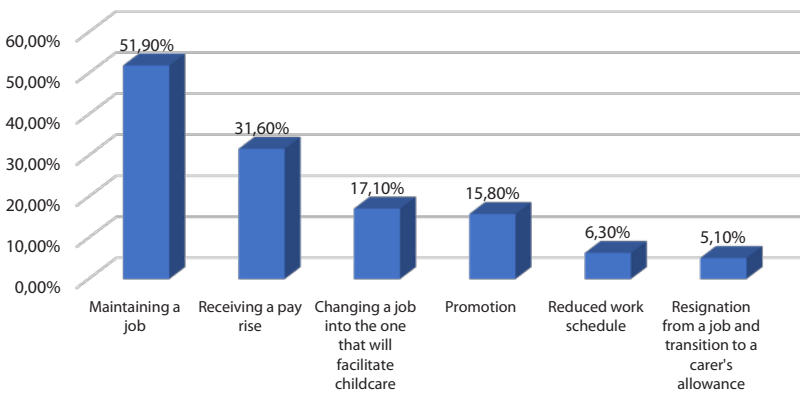


Chart 4. Significance of professional work in the life of interviewed mothers after the child's diagnosis.

Source: the author's own research

The subjects were given multiple-choice questions, therefore % do not add up to 100.

Professional work is a space of continuous development of people – it is often a source of rich experiences and emotions which appear at different moments of life. Unfortunately, the interviewed women sometimes experience unpleasant emotional states. The results of my studies show that 1/3 of the subjects perceive work as an opportunity for becoming a creative person. The creative approach developed by professional work may be maintained in the family environment, which is important in the case of children with special needs. Usually, in response to the difficult behaviours of the child, mothers look for different educational methods in a creative way. It is optimistic that the large majority of subjects – over

50% –experience both fulfilment, satisfaction and motivation to act. Presumably, a successful course of professional life helps to supply the mothers' resources and allows them for supporting the children with special educational needs even more. Work also gives the interviewed women a sense of internal balance and readiness for self-growth. However, one cannot ignore the negative experiences related to professional work. Almost one in three subjects experiences a high level of stress in the workplace. It is likely to result from the specific character of the work done, but also from thinking at work about the child, its behaviour and satisfying their needs. Moreover, the interviewed mothers experience a certain kind of pressure, which was emphasized by 21% of the interviewed mothers. It may result from the attitude of society which is not lenient with its remarks about the mothers of children with special educational needs. People are now more inclined to say that mothers of such children do not want to work but prefer to use the benefits which they are entitled to on account of the child's disability. Some subjects have to cope with professional burnout and they constitute 12% of the respondents. I have presented the results of my studies in the chart.

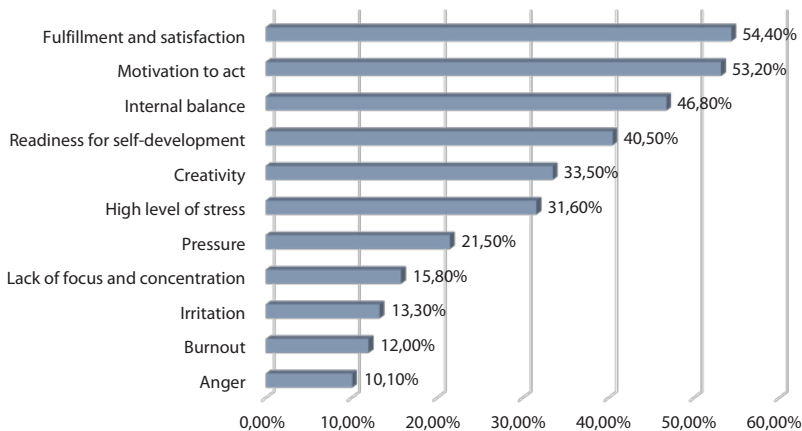


Chart 5. Experiences in the professional work of subjects

Source: the author's own research

The subjects were given multiple-choice questions, therefore % do not add up to 100.

## Conclusions

Raising a child or children with special educational needs and combining family duties with professional work is a big challenge for women. However, the interviewed mothers make this attempt because of the significance of professional work in their life. Its major importance lies in securing their own and family needs as well as having a rest and distancing from what happens with their child. I think that women raising children with special needs should not be deprived of the possibility to take up work. Undoubtedly, what is central here is creating a conducive atmosphere at work which lowers the level of stress and prevents professional burnout. I think that for the effectiveness of work it is important to perceive women-mothers through the prism of their competencies, knowledge, skills and level of engagement, and not through their motherhood and their children's educational difficulties. If professional work motivates women to act, and helps to develop their creativity, it is bound to be beneficial to the whole family. It is worth deepening this research area by, for instance, looking for good practices which could be supportive of women raising children with special educational needs.

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