

# KOBIETY O PRACY SUPERMARKETACH

**RESEARCH REPORT**  
**"SITUATION OF FEMALE EMPLOYEES IN SUPER- AND HYPERMARKETS"**

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The report has been prepared by the KARAT Coalition within the framework of the project:

"Improvement of work conditions of women employed in chains of large area retail institutions<sup>1</sup> in Poland."

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<sup>1</sup> A large area shopping centre is a retail outlet with a sales area exceeding 400m<sup>2</sup> in which there is any retail activity carried out.

## **1. RESEARCH**

In April 2008 the KARAT Coalition carried out a research project entitled: "Situation of female employees in super- and hypermarkets". The research was performed within the framework of activities intended to strengthen the protection of women's rights in super- and hypermarkets in Poland. The research, a starting point for future actions, was designed to collect information from women - employees of super- and hypermarkets about their work conditions. The analysis of the experience of the women allowed to identify areas and forms of violation of employee rights (critical areas requiring changes) in the chains of large area retail centres and pointed out weak points of the system of following the labour law. Recommendations regarding setting and applying of the labour law will be based on these findings.

### **1.1 Research methods and techniques**

The KARAT Coalition ordered the local execution of the research to the research company in Krakow, PBJ Badania Marketingowe. Within the research two group (focus) interviews were carried out – the first one on April 11th 2008 in Krakow, and the second one on April 21st 2008 in Olsztyn.

The interviews used projecting techniques (a test of unfinished sentences and a collage) which allow to uncover knowledge about even unconscious needs, motives and beliefs of the respondents. The interviewees were to finish the sentences: "When I go to work, I feel/think...", "When I'm at work I feel/think...", "When I leave work I feel/think...". The women who took part in the group discussion were asked to paste newspaper clippings (the collage technique) of pictures of the world of an ideal/dream job and the job performed today.

Within the research there were also five individual interviews with female union workers. The interviews were completed in Tychy and Warsaw in May 2008. Persons invited to take part in the research were female leaders of labour movements chosen by the KARAT Coalition after having consulted the choice with the female and male members of the Strategic Action Advise Body (SAAB)<sup>2</sup>.

The information about work conditions of female workers in super- and hypermarkets obtained in the interviews with the union leaders were congruent with the ones obtained from the female employees during group interviews, and therefore the empirical material collected during the research was addressed collectively.

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<sup>2</sup> Strategic Action Advise Body [SAAB] is an advisory body founded within the KARAT Coalition project "Labour Rights Protection from Gender Perspective in Super/Hypermarkets in Poland." in order to work out recommendations and amendments to the regulations or practical following of the labour law. The members of the body are representatives of the Chief Labour Inspector, non-governmental organisations, trade unions in super- and hypermarkets, lawyers, scientists and researchers.

## **1.2 Characteristics of the interviewees**

There were 8 women invited to each one of the group researches. They were employees of international (Carrefour, Real, Tesco, Rast, Biedronka) as well as local chains of large area retail centres (Lewiatan, Avita, Kefirek). The age of the interviewed women was between 20 and 55 years. Most of them worked in the position of a cashier-sales representative. In each group there was also a woman in a managerial position (a manager/shift coordinator). In Krakow 4 women were employees of the local chains and 4 of the international. In Olsztyn 4 women were employees of Biedronka and 4 other of the international chains. The average time spent at the current job was about 2 years in Krakow and about 1 year in Olsztyn. Therefore, the respondents differed in terms of the company, age and job seniority. This choice of women for the research allowed to obtain information about the situation of female workers in super- and hypermarkets employed by various retail companies.

All of the interviewed union activists worked for the international chains of large area shopping centres. Their average time at the current job was between 2,5 years to 12 years.

## **1.3 Research tool – scenario**

All of the interviews were carried out according to a scenario which assumed obtaining information on the following subjects:

- what kind of a workplace is a super- and supermarket (do the women like their job; is there, and why is there, a rotation of workers; is it easy to hire new employees),
- what are the grounds of employment (issues of job contracts),
- what are the work hours and remuneration of women employed in super- and hypermarkets (work system, average number of hours worked during a day/week, breaks during work, sick leave, way of calculating salary, salary amount, determining the work hours and the remuneration received for work, possibility of satisfying needs thanks to the earnings),
- is there discrimination in super- and hypermarkets, with particular stress on gender discrimination (what is, according to the interviewees, discrimination, what types of discrimination they have witnessed and when: discrimination during recruitment, after hiring, whether there are cases of sexual harassment, type of work control and relations between the workers and the superiors),
- what is the work health and safety in super- and hypermarkets (knowledge of work health and safety (BHP) regulations, training in this area, knowledge of the norms related to lifting heavy objects, what kinds of work related ailments in women are caused by the job, incidence of doctor's examinations, accidents at work),
- what is the activity of trade unions in super- and hypermarkets (whether women belong to the unions, what the unions do/should do, issues of job regulations).

## **2. SUPER- AND HYPERMARKET AS A WORKPLACE**

### **2.1 Characteristics of staff in large-area retail centres**

The specifics of retail in the large area shopping centres are such that women dramatically outnumber men among the employed. The interviewed, when asked about the ratio between the number of women and men, most often answer that the proportions are 9:1 or 8:2. There were also opinions that men are proportionally more often assigned managerial positions.

The women stressed the issue of a very high rotation of workers.

*The rotation is incredible.*

The reasons for the high rotation of employees in super- and hypermarkets, according to the interviewees, are:

- low earnings,
- necessity of working on Saturdays/Sundays/holidays,
- hard work conditions,
- poor relations between the employees and the superiors,
- taking advantage of/ burdening the employees with too many responsibilities.

The rotation applies mainly to young people, for whom the job in a super- or supermarket is usually the first job, and cases of resigning after a few days, weeks or, eventually, months, are common among them.

A group of older employees consists of people looking for job stability and for them being employed in such a work place is assumed to be steady.

*The older ones, once they get used to it, they stay at that job.*

Almost all of the interviewees pointed out that the number of employees in relation to the number of tasks that are to be performed was insufficient. As reasons of such a state of matters they mentioned both the politics of the companies' top managers, intended to cut costs, as well as the mentioned previously high rotation of employees, who are often unprepared, not properly trained and do not want to stay at such a difficult job for a long time. All of it affects, of course, the work time of the remaining employees, which will be discussed in detail in the further sections of the report.

*There used to be 1200 people working in our store, now we are 400 and we have to do the same work.*

The women interviewed in Olsztyn claimed that it is very easy to hire new employees. The stores often hire students, especially during the holiday season, which is advantageous for the store which does not have to pay ZUS (social insurance) in those

cases. In Krakow, the interviewees claimed it is difficult to hire new people because of the low earnings and inconvenient work hours.

## **2.2 Attitude of the respondents to their job**

During the interviews only one of the women expressed aversion to having a professional career – her dream is:

*not to work, but for my husband to make money. I think that as a head of the family he should make enough money so that I could take care of the children, the house.*

The remaining interviewees did not share the traditional outlook on the position of a woman in the family, and their attitude to professional activity is positive. Some of the respondents cannot imagine life without a job – some of them because they value independence, others because they do not want to be limited to the private sphere, and there are also those who would like to try setting up a small business:

*And my dream is [to] work, because I don't like sitting at home.*

*(...) I wouldn't like to stay home...*

*I've always been saying, ever since I remember, that I like doing what I do and they even pay me for it, so I like, even love, my job. Maybe not necessarily in such a large company, I'd rather have my own little store.*

However, the finished sentences by the women contrast with the above statements:

When I go to work I think/feel that...

*it's going to be hard; I won't be able to eat my breakfast again, there will be lots of customers; I don't want to see the manager.*

When I'm at work I think/feel that...

*I'm hungry; I'm tired; I've no energy left; I'd like to be home already.*

When I leave work I think/feel that...

*I have to make dinner; and help the kids with homework; I have to do the laundry, I am exhausted, I need to get some sleep, I'm hungry.*

The tests of unfinished sentences and the collages prepared by the women, clearly show the lack of job satisfaction among the women. It is caused by the fact that the work performed by the women is hard and poorly paid. While describing their own job situation the women pay attention to:

- financial issues (earnings inadequate to the efforts and too low to satisfy basic needs),
- poor work atmosphere (it applies mainly to all the bad relations with the direct superiors responsible, among other things, for schedules, vacations and days off work, some of the respondents pointed out to poor relations between the employees themselves),
- chronic physical exhaustion, lack of vital force,
- no time for the family, children and other close ones,
- illnesses and various ailments (back and joint pain, headaches, stomach aches, chronic infections).

When defining difficult work conditions the women focused mostly on the aspect of poor management by the managerial staff. There are not enough employees compared to the needs, which is a result of the company's thriftiness, and which forces employees to accept difficult schedules and long sequences of work days. Additionally, the interviewees pointed out lack of breaks during work, too many responsibilities, stress, exhaustion/faintness which often leads to conflicts and/or ends up with a verbal warning from a male or female shift manager.

*(...) it's a difficult job for little money, the demands are huge. It's exploitation. We work there like slaves in our own country, we're treated like a worse species, I think.*

*We feel used.*

To sum it up: there is a tremendous dissonance between an ideal job and the job performed by the women today (see collages on the next pages). The women want to work but their dream is a job with decent hours, nicer atmosphere, with remuneration which will satisfy their basic needs and let them avoid debts. One can wonder whether the women's misery is caused more by low earnings or difficult work? Improvements in which of the mentioned areas would make the women happier at their job? These are the questions one needs to ask after the statements concerning women working night shifts:

*(...) they have night benefits, additional money and nobody complains.*

*(...) sometimes girls ask to work more, it's not that there's some rule broken, it's often that there are 4-5 nights and then days off.*

## Prepared with the collage technique: The world of my job today/ ideal job

OLSZTYN: The world of their job today is sad, grey and monotonous. Dominant feelings are those of exhaustion and various ailments: joint and muscle pain, headaches, undernourishment, weight loss, no time for themselves and the relatives. / The world of an ideal job is a happy world "like from a fairy-tale". They have time for themselves, home, school, child-bearing, they are well taken care of and attractive. In the workplace they can count on support and help, the people are pleasant to one another. This world gives them a sense of security and peace. They don't have to worry about the money and time.



KRAKOW: In the current job they feel unappreciated, poorly treated by the management. They are exhausted, stressed, everything happens too fast, they feel no support from the superiors, they have no time for themselves and their family./ The interviewed women would like to be able to sleep in peace, without financial and health worries. They would like to have better relations at work. The most important issues are more time for their family, rest and more money.



### **3. JOB CONTRACTS**

#### **3.1 Job contracts**

The female workers of super- and hypermarkets most often have temporary or mandate contracts. Persons employed under temporary contracts usually start with a short-term contract (1 month or 3 months – a trial period) which is subsequently extended for additional time periods – 1 year, 2 years, or, in some cases, even 5 or 10 years. From the women's statements it is obvious that they are not always aware of the official laws on that matter. A few of them said that only the fourth temporary contract becomes a permanent contract. Some of them claimed no saleswomen get this type of contract. Out of all the respondents only one was hired under the permanent contract.

*Now it's not that, for example, the first, second and third contract and then a permanent contract. Now it's, I know when the new co-workers were being hired, that it's for a year, then for four years, after four years it's extended to, for example, six or ten. It's not that there is a permanent contract.*

*No, not a permanent contract, that's very difficult.*

In the opinion of the interviewees it's very rare to hire someone part-time.

#### **3.2 Mandate contracts**

Mandate contracts with an hourly wage are usually given to people hired as replacements, for example, during summer holidays or in the Christmas holiday period due to the higher shopping traffic, or hired for specific tasks, for example for the store inventory. Most often these are young people, students.

The respondents also mentioned companies being hired to perform specific tasks, the so called services, especially to put the products up on the shelves. One of the women was hired under a mandate contract also by such an outside company and not directly by a supermarket.

#### **3.3 Respecting contract conditions**

Contracts conditions are not being respected in all the large area stores. The situation of the female employees in the international chains is better in this area than that of the women working in the local chains. The most often violated regulations are the ones concerning the work hours and time off.

*I am a student and I was supposed to get weekends off, and now it's very difficult to get a weekend off (...) I have to argue, struggle so much.*

*I had it differently in the contract than it turned out to be later. I'm talking about the clause that says that there are supposed to be 2 days off per work week and in fine print it*

*says: “unless there are specific circumstances” and these circumstances have lasted since June of last year when 3 people left. Nowadays I get 5 days off in a month and I’m supposed to be getting 8. The manager sets up the schedule and that’s it. If [someone] complains, they have to face the consequences.*

## **4. Remuneration (and potential bonuses)**

### **4.1 Remuneration**

The female employees of super- and hypermarkets receive remuneration dependant on the type of the contract. A steady salary goes to employees hired under temporary and permanent job contracts. The respondents pointed out that their income usually did not exceed the lowest income in Poland<sup>3</sup>. A monthly average gross salary, according to them, is **between 1140 zł for a cashier and 1600 zł for a shift manager**. The wages differ depending on the chain and the country region: highest remuneration is offered by Biedronka where the gross earnings reach 2200zł after 3 years. Recently there have been no raises in most of the companies employing the respondents. They did mention 2 isolated cases of hypermarkets (Carrefour in Krakow and Tesco in Olsztyn) where the employees got a few groszes gross more per hour.

In case of a mandate contract there are hourly wages. The interviewees mentioned an hourly wage of 7,70zł gross.

All of the respondents agreed that the salary is always paid on time.

Some of the respondents said that only the basic salary goes to their account and the additional earnings (for overtime, benefits) are paid on other dates. There was a mention of “under the counter” money, that is, with no contract. It is obvious that this type of payment for work lowers the costs of an employer, who pays the lowest health and pension fees in those cases. This practice has negative consequences for the employees who not only lose money when they go on sick leave (they receive 80% of the lowest remuneration) but also, in the long term, in their pension.

*I have a second deadline for an endoprosthesis but I can’t go because if I get 80% of the lowest salary, I won’t have enough for bills and food. Employers often give the lowest salary, and the rest under the counter.*

It is a common practice to give days off instead of money for overtime. In the opinion of most of the respondents overtime is not supposed to be paid for, which is usually related to the double schedules<sup>4</sup>. Double schedules allow employers to cheat the employees on the number of overtime hours and, in consequence, in remuneration for those (or the amount of time off).

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<sup>3</sup> The minimum gross salary in 2008 was 1126zł.

<sup>4</sup> More on double schedules in the chapter on work hours.

## **4.2 Bonuses**

In many international chains the employees, aside from the basic salary, receive a bonus (a so called motivational bonus and/or calculated off the store's profits) or some other type of additional reward (for example, once a year a Christmas bonus which varies and/or depends on the seniority: between 50 zł and 300 zł. Some companies prepare Christmas gifts for the employees' children). It is a rarity in local chains.

The female employees of Tesco, Carrefour and Real in Olsztyn talked about a so called company social fund, thanks to which the employees can take part in various social events, trips to the cinema or to the theatre. Moreover, the employees can apply for a refund for so called 'vacations in the countryside', camps for children, and, in case of a difficult life situation – apply for social aid. In the remaining supermarkets, despite the fact that such a fund, in theory, does exist, it is difficult, according to the employees, to take advantage of it. In Krakow none of the respondents mentioned this type of support from their company.

*I applied for that aid [from the social fund] 1.5 months ago. My papers didn't even make it to the office. (...) They had to be stamped by the regional manager who just laughed at me. So, I cried and threw [the documents] out.*

## **4.3 Financial expectations**

According to the majority of the respondents the **monthly salary is not adequate to the performed tasks or to the work conditions** or to the life costs/expenses. In case of single mothers, if it were not for additional sources of income like alimony payments, family support or an additional job, it would be difficult to satisfy the basic needs of their family such as: rent, current bills, groceries. The interviewees who are in spousal/common law relationships claimed with full conviction that if it had not been for their spouse's income or an income from an additional job (delivering flyers or work in a service which does merchandise shelving which in some stores is considered as an additional job) they would not be able to support their family. The monthly salary is usually enough for current bills and groceries. Other significant needs (furniture, apartment renovations, wedding) is possible only by taking loans.

*I have two children (...). I work two jobs, because I have an additional job, and so does my husband, but if we only worked one job, believe me, you'd sit down and cry.*

*I can say that we slave in this job like a person and a half, we should be paid a salary and a half, too.*

When asked about a satisfying and adequate to the performed work salary, the respondents usually answered with 1800 zł to 2000 zł after taxes a month.

## 5. WORK HOURS

The issue of work hours is likely the most critical one when it comes to people employed in large area retail facilities. Most violations of the law occur in this field, which the interviewees are aware of.

*(...) the best worker is the one who never gets sick, responds to the manager's every call and doesn't talk to anyone, [and one who] moves products from the warehouse onto the shelves. It's best if she stays after hours and doesn't want anything for that.*

### 5.1 Schedules and work system

Women usually work in a shift system. From Monday to Friday there are usually 8-hour shifts, and weekends and holidays the women usually work 12-hour shifts. It happens that the women stay longer than their shift. In some stores (for example Krakow's Avita or Olsztyn's Biedronka) there are often cases of long sequences of work days – even over 10 days without a day off. In extreme cases there were even 20 consecutive work days without a single day off.

According to the respondents the **schedule is a reward tool, but more often a punishment tool for the staff**: employees who had taken a sick leave, vacations or dared to claim their rights are punished with unfavourable shifts and work days (for example New Year's Eve). There were also statements indicating existence of **two schedules: an official one and an unofficial one**. The first one goes to the human resources records and is used in case of PIP (State Labour Inspection) inspections, and the second one remains in the hands of a manager. As already mentioned, as a result of such a situation the employees are often cheated on the number of overtime hours and they are not always paid for them. The women mentioned the issue of the so called forced days off which are supposed to constitute payment for overtime work. The respondents repeated many times that they had no weight on when they get these days and, as a result, they often get time off at a time inconvenient to them (but convenient to the employer).

*Recently I had a week and a half off, but it wasn't adequate to the work, I didn't want that time off.*

Moreover, as the interviewees said, the responsibility for the work hours (or rather the violations and abuse related to that) is shifted from the managers onto the employees (during the internal inspections of regional managers).

*Sometimes we have to work 8, 9 days in a row. They make two schedules, one is made according to the rules and this one is given to the human resources, and the other schedule a worker gets into her hand and everything's set in that one.*

*[The managers] have two schedules. The manager doesn't report all the overtime hours to the office. She reports 15 hours while they [the employees] sometimes work additional days for which they're not paid.*

It should be stressed that the employees have no weight over the schedules in any of the chains and they are fully dependant on the decision of the manager' who is responsible for work scheduling. Emergencies and life situations are not taken into account during the scheduling, which is particularly severe for single mothers.

*Recently I had to leave work early because I got a call from preschool that my child has a fever. We are so controlled that they had to call the preschool themselves to check if it was true.*

In the large international chains (Real, Tesco, Carrefour) the 12-hour norm of rest between the shifts is respected. However in the other chains (Biedronka or other regional ones in Krakow: Avita, Kefirek, Lewiatan) the norms are often violated. Theoretically, during an 8-hour shift an employee is eligible for one 15- minute break, but in practice it varies. While in the large chains the rule is followed, in the local chains very often the women cannot use the break they are entitled to.

In some 24-hour chains (Tesco) there are **night shifts**. The women willingly take these shifts because they are better paid. In other companies the night shifts are occasional, mainly during the inventory and/or large shipments of merchandise like, for example, in the pre-Christmas period.

## 5.2 Violations related to work hours

*In our [company] they violate all the norms in existence.*

Violations related to work time concern mainly:

- sequences of work days which last 7, 8, 9, days, in extreme cases even 20 days (while an employee is entitled to at least 35 consecutive hours of rest in a week),
- length of shifts and breaks in between them; theoretically weekday shifts are 8 hours long, weekends and holiday ones may be extended to 12 hours, but there has to be at least an 11-hour break between the shifts. (However, it is often abused and the employees have to extend their shifts or shorten breaks between them.),
- breaks; during the minimum of 6 hours of work, there has to be a 15-minute break. The rule is not always followed, especially in the local chains. The women stressed that during such hard work 15 minutes is not enough to use the restroom, eat and get a bit of rest. In some stores the employees begin work 15 minutes earlier in order to extend the break to half an hour, or to have an additional break. Moreover, the respondents, especially the cashiers, while talking about exhaustion, pointed to the fact that their job has to do with responsibility, especially for the money and cash calculations (deficit in the cash drawer has to be covered by the cashier).

*It never happens that if the line-up is long, and some manager is free, she's a person after all, who used to be on the cash drawer, who knows how it is, that she would say: Listen, I'll take over for those 15 minutes, go, eat something, and would take the cash. (...) You have to be just plain rude to go and eat, there are moments that you're just*

*fainting. Stomach ache, stress, and there's money [in the cash drawer], you can make mistakes (...).*

Asked about the reasons of violations related to work time, especially illegal extending of work hours, the women unanimously pointed to not enough employees, which is, in their opinion, caused by the stinginess of the store managers.

Let us remind that in some chains the responsibility for violations related to work hours is shifted from the management to the workers.

*A regional manager comes and we're punished for working so much, not the manager (...). One girl got a verbal reprimand that she's at work for the sixth day in a row.*

### **5.3 Sick leave**

Only a small percentage of people employed in large area retail facilities use sick leave, for themselves or for their children. On the one hand it is caused by fear of the repercussions – the person who goes on sick leave is considered unavailable and non-efficient which may result in losing the bonuses or a poor schedule. On the other hand, using sick leave results in lower earnings and the financial situation of the super-and hypermarkets' employees is not the best.

*In January my child was sick and had no childcare, I had to take time off. I had to take 3 weeks off and there was a moment, in February, when I made very little money and I already had to hear some mean remarks from the management [because of the leave].*

It is a very common situation for an employee to come sick to work in spite of being eligible for sick leave, as an effect of which they suffer ongoing infections which lead to weakening the immune system and overall lowered immunity. It also happens for an employee to use vacation time instead of sick leave or child care leave.

*I'm bringing the doctor's note, I'm sick, and I'm afraid that they, I don't know, will fire me or something. And the supervisor told me something like that, and it hurt: "We hire such people... You have to know if you're planning on getting sick. (...) If you were planning on getting sick, you shouldn't have looked for a job." And the cash drawer I'm at is right by the door and I kept coming in sick, and if my lungs get infected then I don't know what's going to happen.*

*People try not to take sick leave. Sometimes you're sick but keep going to work until you collapse.*

Parents of children up to 14 years of age are eligible for 2 days of child care apart from vacation days. The women usually use it around Christmas time to prepare Christmas meals or at the beginning of a school year, or in order to extend vacations. In Olsztyn's Biedronka the workers could not use it at all due to underemployment in the store.

*(...) last year I couldn't even use the child care leave, the two days that I'm entitled to.*

*I had the same thing, they didn't let me, not enough people to work.*

#### **5.4 Vacations**

Vacations are the next problematic issue related to work in super- and hypermarkets. There are differences between large chains – Tesco, Carrefour, Real and the regional chains like Biedronka. In the former ones, usually at the beginning of a year, each employee determines vacation dates and is eligible to recreational vacations of at least 10 work days. It is in accordance with the labour code which says that at least a part of vacation should last no less than 14 consecutive calendar days. In the other companies, however, the vacations are approved very reluctantly, and their dates are imposed on the employees who are often forced to change their vacation plans.

Vacation days given on request are almost impossible to obtain in the local chains, but they do function in the international chains and there are no issues with taking them.

*In theory we could take vacations but nobody does, because it's frowned upon. The manager would look at you cross, could get mean and set the schedule so that you get nights.*

We have already mentioned the issue of taking vacation days not for recreation but instead of sick leave. Whenever the women take vacation days instead of sick leave, the time for the actual recreational vacation shortens. With their demanding job, they do not get enough time for resting. If a woman takes vacation days instead of sick leave a few times a year, she would have no vacations days left for recreational purposes, or it would be so short that it would not satisfy the norm of 14 consecutive calendar days.

### **6. DISRIMINATION AND MOBBING**

The respondents had trouble defining discrimination in the workplace. They identified certain behaviours or actions as discrimination only after they have been described by the moderator. When they used their own examples, they usually referred to mobbing.

#### **6.1 Discrimination**

The women note examples of gender discrimination only after the moderator asks very specific questions – about different treatment of women due to being a mother or having children.

The very term of discrimination is misunderstood by the women. They associate it more with mobbing and persecutions (inadequate relations at work, humiliation of workers, lack of respect, ordering inappropriate tasks, for example for women to carry heavy loads, taking advantage of employees).

Women are less desirable employees due to their household and childcare responsibilities. Even though the positions of a sales representative and a cashier are traditionally dominated by women, even at the recruitment level the issue of their motherhood surfaces. Discrimination in this area is mainly experienced by young women. Often discrimination due to motherhood is directed even at women who are not mothers.

*That you're an unmarried girl, that you'll get married right away, that you'll get pregnant and leave.*

During the recruitment process questions about marital status, number and ages of children and planned pregnancy are common.

*Recently they were looking for a female employee at work. Friends of ours. So they said she should have older children, grown up, so that she'd be available any time, wouldn't have to take days off, not like me, who has little children.*

*(...) But the fact that we're mothers is some sort of a problem. During an interview the manager asked me whether I'll be taking time off to take care of sick children often.*

There were claims of lack of good will to take into account the situation of mothers with children. One should note that not all employees who have children are treated worse at work. The only ones treated poorly are women and they are the recipients of remarks such as "and who told you to give birth".

*(...) I wanted a morning shift, because I'm in a really tough situation, I have to leave the baby with my daughter, and she has her needs, too, wants to go out somewhere, etc. Finally I told her [the manager]: this is why you don't have people if you treat them like that. I have children, it's hard. And she says: "and who told you to make children". I thought I was going to explode.*

In super- and hypermarkets the majority of employees are women, but even here job segregation due to gender is visible. Women are considered to be more meticulous and predisposed to performing monotonous tasks, so they are usually hired to be cashiers. Men – strong, decisive – are usually put in the position of security guards. The respondents say that "security" is a superior position and the men hired in those positions are also responsible for watching over the employed women.

*Security, yes [checks out women's purses when they leave work]. You have to have everything marked, signed, so that it's somehow documented [what's been brought in/taken out].*

The men's surveillance of women causes unpleasant situations for the latter:

*They security says: and where are you going? I say: I have to. Do I have to explain to him that I have my period? (...) I told him: I'm going to the washroom, lock me up. And he says there are too many people. When a woman has her period, she feels worse and*

*has to go to the washroom more often, and I'm supposed to explain it to the security that I need to go to the washroom for the third time.*

Moreover, it is interesting that the security guards are not ordered to do heavy tasks, they are “told to work” only if there is a lot to do. Carrying heavy loads is mostly a women’s job. However, hiring men in the positions of security guards and women as cashiers is considered “natural”, just like it is “unnatural” to burden women with heavy loads.

*They tell us to carry heavy loads. But a woman is not meant to do such work.*

There were opinions that the number of men on managerial positions is disproportionate to the number of men employed in the large-area retail centres. Preferences in granting men with managerial positions is a sign of unequal treatment, but it seems that the respondents did not consider these practices as discrimination

The respondents do not notice discriminations in salary policies.

In one instance a case of sexual harassment was mentioned – the guilty person was punished and lost his job. The women have a low awareness of discrimination issues due to gender. When asked if they have witnessed such cases, they deny.

*I never saw anything like that.*

*Me neither.*

Apart from the above instances the interviewees did not mention discrimination, instead, they talked about respecting their dignity. It should be pointed out that the fact that the women (with small exceptions) did not mention examples of discrimination, may mean that there indeed is not any unequal treatment, or that the women do not know how to identify it. The stories told by the respondents are closer to mobbing and persecution.

## **6.2 Mobbing**

The atmosphere in the workplaces is described as terrible. **Bad atmosphere** is, in the opinion of the respondents, one of the worst aspects of working in super- and hypermarkets. It is mainly a result of poor relations with the direct superiors. Women see it as: lack of good will, hostility of people on managerial positions, lack of support, praise and motivation, disrespecting needs of employees, instrumental treatment of employees, insulting, humiliating in front of other employees/customers, persecution, using employees for tasks exceeding their physical capabilities. Women often feel afraid and mistrustful when it comes to relations with the superiors. The perception of negative atmosphere is likely intensified by chronic exhaustion.

Rights and needs of women are ignored by the superiors.

A woman who has children says:

*I, because asked [for 2 days of child care] had to work on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, alone, as a punishment.*

Threats:

*There will be ten [people] willing to take your place.*

Mocking, humiliating:

*(...) So she [the manager] told everyone out loud about my private matters.  
(...) Whoever came to the office, she says: look at what she's wearing, haha.*

*The manager sometimes yells at me in a room full of people that I'm staring, that I'm too slow.*

It seems that this type of atmosphere stops the women from demanding their rights and fighting to improve their situation, as well as deepens the feeling of dissatisfaction and disappointment at work. Often the smallest attempt to stand up to a superior is met with persecution. The people who openly discussed their problems and complained about the work conditions were treated unequally by the superiors, which resulted in a bad schedule – long sequences of work days, work on weekends and all holidays, no breaks during work, insults, etc.

The interviewees also pointed out the fact that it is difficult to get a promotion. The skills and predispositions have less impact than good relations with the management.

## **7. BHP – Work Health and Safety**

### **7.1 BHP Training**

The newly hired employees go through compulsory trainings on work health and safety, however their length and intensity varies among the companies. In some cases they last a whole day, in others – only an hour. The new workers take part in a short training on the store's organisation, placing goods on the shelves, operating the cash register, but they admit it is usually not thorough enough to allow them to perform their tasks efficiently. Due to low numbers of employees there is not enough time for thorough training. Moreover, some of the interviewees (from Olsztyn's Biedronka where they use forklifts and where there is danger of running over somebody's foot) pointed out that they need special footwear to operate the forklifts (which the workplace does not supply them with). If the management does not supply the employees with the proper footwear and the internal inspectors find out, the responsibility is placed on the employee.

## 7.2 Work conditions

All of the respondents went through a doctor's examination before starting the job. The examinations were, however, related to the concrete position, most often – the cashier-sales representative, and not with the tasks which the women are, in fact, ordered to perform. The everyday tasks of the cashiers, apart from working at the cash register, are: **unloading the goods, work in the warehouse, shelving the goods, cleaning the store, stacking shopping baskets.** As a consequence, the women, while performing the work they are not prepared for, suffer from many ailments. Most of the women complain of back pain, but also problems with joints, hips and wrists, also they often suffer from headaches and stomach aches. These complaints are usually the result of lifting heavy loads and sitting in uncomfortable chairs at the cash.

*Work in the store, in the warehouse, cleaning, everything...*

*We're not allowed to sit at an empty cash desk.*

The norms concerning lifting heavy loads (even though there have been many changes recently to assist the employees) are not always followed:

*There's a cart. What we're allowed to move, it should just be the cart. Plus a box of bananas. But we have to put loads of alcohol in it.*

The interviewees also mention infections which, in their opinion, they contract from customers. The cashiers also pointed out that when sitting at the cash closest to the door they are exposed to sudden changes in temperature. There was an idea of vaccinations provided by the employer to strengthen their immune system.

Pregnant women working in super- and hypermarkets usually have somewhat better work conditions.

When asked about using the toilet, the women say the situation has improved over the last few years, but difficulties still happen.

*Of course that [using toilets] is a hassle. You're sitting at the cash drawer and can't leave. You're waiting for someone to come and take over. It's not that someone forbids. If there isn't anyone to take over, you can't go.*

*You can't go to the toilet if the line-up is long. No way.*

*I am rude. If some manager tells me: you can't leave [the cash register], I tell them: so I'll pee at the cash.*

The majority of BHP violations are related to lifting heavy loads and transporting or moving them. There are also problems related to the equipment not being serviced often enough (for example broken conveyer belts at a cash register), saving up on scissors,

gloves, dustpans, aprons and limiting them. There were also voices saying that there is a shortage of various equipment, carts, and that some more efficient machinery would be appreciated.

### **7.3 Accidents at work**

In the opinion of the interviewees there are not many accidents, and if they do happen they are, for example, cuts made with a cold cuts cutter, falls off of ladders, cuts and other incidents during transportation of goods (crushing of feet, hands). The injured persons usually come back to work after a period of recovery.

Some persons (employees of Olsztyn's Biedronka) complained of broken conveyer belts at cash registers, which force them to lift the merchandise and often result in sprained muscles or wrists injuries.

### **7.4 PIP (State Labour Inspection) and PIH (State Retail Inspection) inspections**

In the opinion of the interviewed women the inspections carried out by PIP are set up with the management in advance, so that there is time to prepare for them. Some cashiers (from Olsztyn's Biedronka), after an unannounced inspection of PIH, were confronted by the management because of the lack of clean aprons, safety footwear and gloves.

PIH also carries out inspections, but, as is the case with PIP, they are superficial and arranged for in advance.

*(...) the funniest thing is that they will always tell us a week in advance that they're coming. Then there's a big commotion at work and everything looks good.*

Judging by the interviews the women know the basic rules of BHP but they rarely report violations and demand the rules meant to protect them to be followed out of fear of persecution. The fact that the management does not attempt to provide the employees with the work conditions in accordance to the BHP rules, and is afraid of revealing violations during the inspections, is also shown but this statement:

*And the management is only nice to us when BHP comes.*

In some markets – similarly as in the case of observing the work time norms – the management transfers the responsibility of following the BHP rules and norms onto the employees.

*We have these rules that you need to have special footwear [to ensure safety when using forklifts]. I've been working for 2 years and never got them. I decided not to touch the forklift. (...) Why am I supposed to later pay 1000zl fine for the management. Employees pay.*

*The management was furious with us after that inspection (an unannounced PIP inspection] that we have old aprons, gloves, but nobody ever gave us [the new ones]. And they, that there are some in cabinets. (...) we can't go to the office by ourselves.*

## **8. Trade Unions**

None of the women interviewed during the focus interviews is a member of a union. Knowledge of the existence and basic areas of activity of the unions is limited. Only the employees of these chains: Real, Tesco and Carrefour stated that there are trade unions in their workplaces, but even they were not able to pinpoint the concrete area of their actions.

The interviewed women summarise the role of the unions mainly as an organisation meant to protect the rights of employees. In their statements about what the unions do, there is a thread of social aid and general actions to improve situation of workers. When asked about what else the unions should be doing, they gave the following examples:

- inspection of schedules/ work hours/ breaks at work
- inspection of remuneration
- inspection of days off
- immediate aid from the social fund
- relations between employees and their superiors

*[The union is supposed to take care of] the well being of an employee, (...) it should play the role of an employee's advocate, (...) that the social fund was well used, [the issue of] hours off (...).*

Among the majority of the respondents there is a careful, cautious attitude to this institution. When asked whether they would join a union, they gave indecisive answers. There were positive statements concerning the actions of the unions, but the majority of the voices showed disappointment over the effectiveness of the unions when it comes to solving employees' problems.

*When [an employee] has a problem, let's say a financial one, or an emergency (...). A co-worker had a husband sick with cancer and she received a really large amount. There are also additional packages for employees or children.*

*We have unions that work well (...). Right now, starting in July, the girls from the chemical department, the night shift, will get a really nice raise, the one on paper. It's a promised raise and they're very happy.*

*I never had any contact, I don't know how it works.*

*I used to belong to Solidarnosc but I was disappointed.*

*We have a union, but the employees get no information about their activities.*

Based on the above it seems that one of the main challenges of the union workers is reaching the employees and better co-operation with them.

## 9. Conclusions

Based on the research the following conclusions have been reached:

1. The situation of women employed in the international chains of large-area retail stores is better in terms of work conditions than that of the women employed in the Poland-wide and local chains.
2. An important role in shaping the work environment is played by the human factor, which cannot be regulated or controlled by law. The work conditions of the women differ depending on the attitudes of their superiors and their individual decisions. It is important in this case to develop a law culture in order to encourage good will in observing labour law in super- and hypermarkets.
3. A difficult situation of the super- and hypermarkets' employees is largely affected by the work atmosphere, especially the difficult relations with the superiors – male or female managers, who decide on them by making the work schedules. He/she is seen as unfriendly, and the women are afraid of him/her. As a consequence of poor relations with the managers, the employed women are void of support in solving their problems at work. They also rarely **attempt to claim their rights** or stand up to the management, because, and it should be stressed again, there are **persecutions** (usually in the form of unfavourable work schedules and loss of bonuses). Another factor in the passive attitude of the women and lack of will to fight for improvement of their situation is lack of knowledge about their own rights and ways to claim them (it also includes knowledge about trade unions).
4. The reason for difficult work conditions of the women employed in super- and hypermarkets is not just the law, but the practice of following the rules. It is particularly obvious in case of violating the rules concerning work hours: lengths of shifts, time off between shifts, number of days worked in a row. The responsibility for organizing work hours for the employees lies with the shift managers. However, it is difficult to determine who and at what level of management makes the decisions concerning these issues and is, in fact, responsible for the violations.
5. The situation of women employed in super- and hypermarkets in their own opinion is characterised mainly by:
  - exhaustion and illnesses,
  - lack of time for the children, family,
  - lack of money,
  - bad atmosphere at work,

The respondents agree that their work is particularly difficult. Not only does it not give them any satisfaction but it also makes it impossible to meet basic life needs. Constant

exhaustion, lack of sleep and hunger (resulting not from poverty but from lack of time to eat) accompany them every day. They summarise their needs in a slogan “to live with dignity” and they understand it as a life where they do get enough sleep, rest, have time for loved ones, and mainly for their children (this theme was very frequent), have the means to support their family.

6. Postulates formulated by the respondents about the conditions at work mainly concerned:
  - higher salary,
  - observing the norms concerning work hours,
  - improving the work atmosphere, especially in the context of relations with the management,
  - remuneration for overtime,
  - improvement of work conditions, especially concerning health,
  - access to the social fund services,
  - provisions for mothers with children (flexible work hours, company-subsidised nurseries and preschools),
  - support of trade unions.

## 10. RECOMMENDATIONS

During the research there were several ideas and suggestions that are worth mentioning. In order to improve the situation of the women – employees of super- and hypermarkets, the activities should be carried out on many levels:

1. Observing the labour law. PIP inspections should be more thorough and, most importantly, unannounced. The women said it would be a good idea for PIP to compare the schedules with the actual presence of the employees on the day of the inspection and for the inspector to stamp the checked out schedules. Another mechanism of controlling work time could be punch cards which have been cancelled, but which used to protect from violations.

*Sure, they [PIP] come, check (...). They're completely detached from the reality, they don't know the real life.*

*We used to have punch cards and it was very good, you could calculate those work hours up*

2. Raising awareness among the employees with regards to the regulations, employees' rights and instruments of protecting those laws. The respondents often know where they should report various violations and breaking of employment law, but the fear of repercussions and the possibility of being fired, seem to form a barrier they are not able to surpass. Moreover, they believe their intervention is not going to change much.

It seems that this is the area of action for trade unions, which should consider changing how they function, especially when it comes to providing staff with

information. Trade unions should be more open to new members and help them become active in their work places.

It seems reasonable to organise course/workshops on the subject of interpersonal relations, assertiveness, but also strictly concerning employees' rights.

The employers should put more stress on training the managerial staff on how to manage the personnel.

3. Making the top store managers aware of the advantages that would be brought about by improving the situations of the employees. The respondents from Olsztyn declared willingness to take part in various courses/trainings raising their qualifications, but they could not give concrete examples.
4. Raising awareness about the violations and standards of employment law among the consumers, stores' customers. During the interviews there were voices saying that it is the stores' customers who sometimes become advocates of the employees – they express interest in their work conditions, show understanding when a cashier has to use the restroom, they notice when the cashiers are sick and tired. Perhaps the customers could be the mentors/advocates/allies in improvement of the situation of women working in super- and hypermarkets.

#### Abbreviations:

- BHP – Work Health and Safety  
PIP – State Labour Inspection  
PIH – State Retail Inspection  
ZUS – social insurance institution