

Women's Return to Work after Parental Leave: A Case Study on the Czech Republic

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The topic of the paper is the issue of women's return to work after parental leave in the Czech Republic and factors that complicate the position of women in the labor market. This topic is being explored by Czech and foreign experts and authors of publications related to the position of women in labor market, motherhood, parenthood and namely the factors that make it harder for women to return to work after parental leave with a focus on the Czech environment. The core of the paper is the presentation of selected results of descriptive analysis of quantitative research of women in the Moravia-Silesian region in the Czech Republic which point out the experiences and perceptions related to the return of women to work after parental leave. Using a significant sample of respondents (470), the results partially confirm and also refute the findings of the theory. The findings from the primary research presented in the paper will contribute to updating the current picture of women's return to work after parental leave in the Czech Republic and at the same time create a basis for a future qualitative type of research on women's experience and perceptions of return to work in the context of their cultural, social and economic environment. The aim of the paper is to present the results of primary research with a focus on Czech women's experience and perceptions of returning to work after parental leave. At the same time, we aim to compare the theoretical approaches proposed by selected authors and experts with the obtained results of the descriptive analysis.

Keywords: Czech Republic, position of women on the labor market, maternity leave, parental leave, social security, research.

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INTRODUCTION

The content of the contribution addresses the current issues surrounding women's return to the labor market after parental leave and the societal and economic factors that limit women's reintegration after parental leave. The aim of the contribution is to present the results of primary research focusing on the experiences and perceptions of Czech women regarding their return to employment after parental leave. Simultaneously, it involves comparing the theoretical opinions of selected authors and experts on the chosen topic with the results of descriptive analysis.

Women who care for an unattended child become a vulnerable group in the job market, as their professional careers stagnate during the parenting period. If they stay at home longer with another child, there is a limitation in contact with the employer or complete loss of it. *„The situation in the Czech Republic is characterized by a relatively long parental leave and a high proportion of women utilizing the right to parental allowance even after the end of parental leave. Returning to the labor market after a three-year or longer employment break means stagnating qualifications in many professions and the associated disruption of contact with the employer, weakening of self-confidence, etc.“* (Kuchařová et al., 2006: 8)

The birth of a child is a significant social event for the family and simultaneously a change that has fundamental impacts on the lifestyle and balancing of personal, family, and work life for all family members. For women, motherhood and parenthood are significant factors contributing to job insecurity. The reason is the reduced attractiveness for the original or subsequent employers due to childcare responsibilities. A woman caring for a young child faces challenges in reconciling work and family life, simultaneously satisfying professional

needs, and maintaining her career (Bartáková, 2008; Hamplová and Šalamounová, 2015).

Women do not return to their original job position after maternity and parental leave due to the fact that working conditions do not allow for a balance between family and work life. They often address this situation by starting their own business or engaging in alternative forms of work, such as a work performance agreement, work activity agreement, part-time work, etc. (Cozlová Čmolíková et al., 2022).

Due to family care responsibilities, women often seek part-time employment. In connection with this, they may have to choose less qualified work with lower financial compensation. While part-time employment increases the chance of finding a job and allows for a balance between work and family care, from the perspective of equal opportunities, it is also a means of increasing gender segregation (Kroupová, 2001).

As mentioned earlier, the return of women to work after parental leave is currently influenced by many factors. The authorial team's intention is to provide a comprehensive overview of selected theoretical foundations complemented by a comparison with the results of descriptive analysis of primary research. Deliberately, data were selected from the research results that correspond to the aim of the contribution.

The input data for the presented research, concerning the experiences of mothers from the Czech Republic regarding their return to employment after the end of parental leave and the perception of financial, career, and social factors influencing decision-making, are based on the results of quantitative research conducted through a questionnaire. The research took place in the Moravian-Silesian Region in the Czech Republic during May and June 2022. The research aimed to analyze the motivational

factors of women towards motherhood and parenthood, the return to employment after parental leave, and the reasons that led women to return to the job market. The research results were compared with the age and level of education of the respondents. The questionnaire also included questions about opinions on the financial dependence of women during maternity and parental leave on their partners, family, or social benefits. Respondents also expressed their views on obstacles that hinder their return to their original employment (part-time work, childcare issues, etc.).

Due to the article's capacity constraints, not all research results can be presented. Therefore, the authors focused only on selected results related to the experiences of women from the Moravian-Silesian Region in the Czech Republic regarding their return to employment after the end of parental leave.

The article is structured into seven sections. The first and second sections introduce the reader to the theoretical foundations related to the topic and the goals of the contribution, along with a literature overview. The third section is dedicated to legislation concerning the return of women to the workforce after parental leave. The content of the fourth chapter outlines the research methodology and its implementation. The fifth chapter focuses on the analytical-empirical part: the categorization and evaluation of opinions and perceptions regarding the return of women from parental leave to the workforce. In the concluding part of the contribution, the sixth chapter is devoted to discussion, summarizing the most important research results and comparing them with selected theoretical foundations and opinions. The content of the seventh chapter consists of the conclusion and summary, including a proposal for further research possibilities.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

According to Kroupová (2001), the labor market is defined as a market where labor services can be hired. The labor market is composed of three basic factors: labor supply, labor demand, and the price of labor. Employers offer jobs on the labor market, while employees seek employment. After agreeing on wages and working conditions, an employment relationship is established.

The structure of the female workforce in the Czech Republic primarily differs in terms of industry and professional characteristics, especially in the length of working hours (Kuchařová et al., 2006). The economic activity of women in the Czech Republic is shaped primarily by features such as the historical continuity of female employment and the temporal progression of employment based on women's age, which is influenced by breaks in employment for 2-3 years due to childbirth (Kroupová, 2001).

The mechanism of women's return to the labor market after parental leave is complex and determined by various structural, cultural, and institutional factors. Among the significant theoretical approaches to explaining women's behavior in the labor market is the theory of rational choice, which refers to deliberate cognitive behavior aimed at achieving utility. Utility can be the desire for a child, maternal status, or career decisions at the expense of childcare. The social and cultural environment, gender, age, social norms, and values related to upbringing in a particular environment play a significant role here (Becker, 1981). Furthermore, there is the theory of preferences, which builds on the theory of rational choice and is related to it. It involves prioritizing either one's own needs (often selfish in relation to the family) or the needs of the family or employer (Hakim, 2000; Hakim, 2003), and the cultural theory, which defines differences in the behavior and actions

of individuals based on regional variations, highlighting certain patterns influencing individual and collective or community behavior (Pfau-Effinger, 2004). Just as motivation for parenthood is influenced by state family policy, the social security system, the standard of living in society, and the associated financial situation of households, the motivation to return to work after parental leave is influenced by the structure and conditions of the labor market, regional demographic factors, the setup and availability of formal and informal measures aimed at balancing work and family (Fitzenberger et al., 2016; Bartáková, 2008; Koldinská, 2010; Kuchařová et al., 2006).

Even though the unemployment of both parents can have serious implications for the life of the unemployed individual, their children, families, and the economy as a whole, it is necessary to mention that the situation of women is often more complex in this regard. Motherhood itself can have a negative impact on women's employment and their position in the labor market. Traditional literature often refers to the existence of the so-called "motherhood penalty," where women with children earn less than childless women. This motherhood penalty ranges from 0% (Sweden and Finland) to 26% (Austria) in developed countries (Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann, 2012). Zajíčková and Zajíček (2020: 588) state that the net motherhood penalty in the Czech Republic has been decreasing since 2009 and has become insignificant for mothers with more than three children in the years 2014-2015. Kim and Hahn (2022) examined parenthood in South Korea and found that the birth of the first child does not affect fathers, but mothers' earnings decrease on average by 66.2%, mainly due to lower female participation in the labor market. For mothers who decide to work, there is subsequently a reduced likelihood of entering jobs or industries dominated by men.

Willage and Willén (2022) found that job loss had a long-lasting negative impact on labor market participation for mothers who lost their jobs in the first year after giving birth compared to fathers or mothers who did not give birth in the same year they lost their jobs.

Due to the specific situation of women, motherhood and employment have traditionally received significant attention in the literature, including factors that make it difficult or, conversely, facilitate the return to the labor market. Arena, Volpore, and Jones (2022) highlight formal, interpersonal, and internal biases that mothers face in the workplace. These can include organizational barriers (e.g., Ladge and Greenberg, 2015) or issues related to mothers' self-confidence (Ladge, Humbert, and Eddleston, 2018), identity, image, and the management of the social role of motherhood and work (Zagefka et al., 2021; Manna et al., 2021). Regarding organizational barriers, some of them were dismantled in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as both men and women worked from home to a greater extent, and this flexible work arrangement can continue to be implemented without stigma, especially for mothers seeking more flexible working hours (Abendroth et al., 2021).

The crucial determinants of women's return to employment are satisfaction with working hours, job content, and job security according to Guma, Plagnol, and Piasna (2022). Overall job satisfaction increases the likelihood of an early return to the same job and enhances women's ability to combine work with family responsibilities. Johnstone and Lucke (2022) found that four out of five stay-at-home mothers initially aspired to balance motherhood with a career, and these mothers subsequently exhibited lower life satisfaction and were more dissatisfied with their career progression, despite describing their current situation as their "choice."

As mentioned above, in some cases, women may struggle to reconcile the roles of a wife and mother. They may feel unprepared for these social roles and prioritize their career and employment. Murphy-Lawless, Oaks, and Brady (2004) examined the attitudes of Irish women towards fertility, sex, and motherhood and found that young women expressed doubts about their ability to cope with the demands of both motherhood and the demands of the labor market. For women, social recognition or self-recognition is often possible only if they successfully manage both of these roles. However, the combination of these roles can lead to conflict, and some studies point out the dilemma faced by women in balancing personal and professional life, particularly in terms of motherhood and employment. For example, Poduval and Poduval (2009: 76) highlight that working mothers, due to a lack of time, may struggle with feelings of guilt related to perceived neglect of their maternal role, but the rewards for their work can include personal recognition, financial security, and a higher family standard of living achieved through employment.

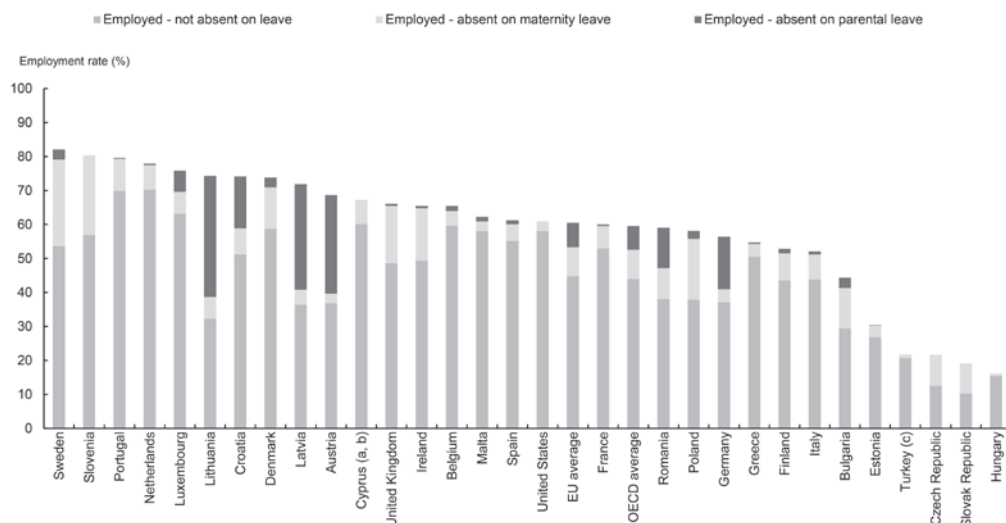
In addition to these aspects, family policy settings in a given country also influence women's decision-making regarding their return to employment after giving birth. A long parental leave period, during which the mother may receive parental benefits from the state, generally extends the period of childcare at home and reduces the supply of female labor (Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017: 227). For example, based on legislative changes in Colombia that extended maternity leave from 12 to 14 weeks, Uribe, Vargas, and Bustamante (2019) highlight the increase in inactivity among women aged 18-30 in the labor market compared to older women. In addition to the length of parental leave, the amount or level of benefits and the protected period during which the employer must maintain the employee's po-

sition are crucial for the speed of the return to employment (Fitzenberger, Sommerfeld, and Steffes, 2013). Österbacka and Räsänen (2021) found that the home care allowance, combined with a low attachment to the labor market and low earnings before childbirth, prolongs the return of mothers to employment in Finland. Increasing the home care allowance by 100 euros, on average, extends the period during which a woman stays at home and cares for the child by 2-3 months.

Based on OECD data, as seen in Figure 1, differences in the impact of motherhood on unemployment can be observed among selected countries. These differences may be associated with the respective legislative framework of each country and other national specifics related to motherhood and parenthood.

Based on these data, the Czech Republic can be characterized as one of the countries with the largest negative impact of motherhood on female employment in the EU, together with Hungary and Slovakia, as in 2019 the employment rate of mothers in the Czech Republic with children aged 0-2 years was below 30% and the employment rate of mothers with children aged 0-14 years is around 60% in these economies, which is below both the OECD average and the EU average (OECD Family Database, 2019: 2). The low employment of mothers in these economies, including the Czech Republic, is to some extent related to the setup of the maternity benefit system, as these are economies that, against the background of their common historical development within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were pioneers in incorporating women's right to maternity leave and as the results of the comparison of maternity benefit systems and financing in the V4 countries show, even after more than a century, these countries have not lost their specific approach to the institution of motherhood and provide maternity benefits for more than 90% of

Figure 1
Employment rates for women with children aged 0-2, by maternity/parental leave status (2019 or the latest available year)



Source: OECD Family Database, 2019: 7.

mothers (Duda, Turečková, Buryová and Kubalová, 2022: 157). Moreover, among the V4 countries surveyed, the Czech Republic specifically shows the most stable system, where the financing of maternity allowances accounted for 2% of social security expenditure at the beginning and end of the 2010-2019 survey period (Duda, Turečková, Buryová and Kubalová, 2022: 157-158).

Bodláková (2012) examined how young women in the Czech Republic approach their role as mothers in the context of building their careers and found that the interruption of their careers as a result of their new role as mothers and taking parental leave was not perceived by the respondents themselves as an unfavorable work situation.

Considering the low participation of mothers in the labor market in the Czech Republic and the previously identified factors related to family policy that may contribute to a longer return of women to the

labor market, the following chapter presents the legislative definition of the position of women – mothers in the context of their return to the labor market in the Czech Republic.

RETURN OF WOMEN TO WORK AFTER PARENTAL LEAVE – CZECH LEGISLATION

According to Section 196 of Act No. 262/2006 Coll., the Labor Code, the employer is obliged to grant parental leave to the employee at their request to deepen the care of the child. Parental leave shall be granted to the mother of the child after maternity leave and to the father from the birth of the child to the extent requested by them, but no longer than until the child reaches the age of 3 years.

While on parental leave, it is possible to run a business or work almost without restriction, even if you receive a parental

allowance¹. You can also work under your original contract of employment with the same employer or another employer, subject to the above conditions. The important thing is that you must arrange for another adult to care for your child while you are working or running your business. However, there is a time limitation for having a child in a nursery (Mečířová, 2021). Furthermore, an employer cannot order an employee to work overtime if the employee is caring for a child under 1 year of age (Section 241 of the Labor Code).

It is the employer's responsibility to ensure that their employee has somewhere to return to from maternity or parental leave. When parental leave ends and the employee returns to work, he or she is entitled to a position that corresponds to the job description in the employment contract. This always applies to an employment contract of an open-ended duration. In the case of a fixed-term contract, this applies only for the duration of the fixed-term contract. When the fixed term of the employment relationship expires, it is terminated and the employer is not obliged to extend the employment relationship. The employee, in such a case already a former one, cannot claim the position and further employment (Dvořáková, 2021). According to the provisions of Section 47 of the Labor Code, Act No. 262/2006, if an employee returns after parental leave, the employer is obliged to reinstate such an employee to the original position and workplace. If this is not possible because the original job ceased to exist or the workplace was closed down, he/

she shall be obliged to reinstate him/her in accordance with the employment contract.

In this way, the Labor Code provides special protection to the employee-parent in relation to his/her employment until the child reaches the age of 3. According to Section 53 of the Labor Code, it is prohibited to give notice to an employee during the protection period, i.e. when the employee is on parental leave. Both maternity and parental leave fall within the employee's so-called protection period. This means that the employer cannot unilaterally terminate the employment relationship. The Labor Code provides only one exception when this can be done, namely if the employer or part of the employer is being closed down. In such a case, however, the employee is entitled to severance pay.

If a woman wants to stay on parental leave until the child is 4 years old (or possibly even longer), it is possible to agree with the employer on unpaid leave (the employer does not have to grant the request) (Kučerová, 2021). As parental allowance can be taken for one year longer than parental leave, an employer may find that an employee requests to extend parental leave up to the child's fourth birthday after the child reaches the age of three. Given the statutory maximum length of parental leave, this is in effect a request for unpaid leave. However, the employer does not have to grant the employee's request for unpaid leave until the child reaches the age of four and may ask the employee to either start work or terminate the employment relationship

¹ A parent who cares for the youngest child in the family for a full day for the entire calendar month but no longer than until the child is 4 years old is entitled to a **parental allowance** of up to a total amount of CZK 300 000. If the youngest child in the family is represented by 2 or more children born at the same time, the parent is entitled to up to a total of CZK 450 000. When applying, the parent also chooses the monthly amount of the parental allowance. The amount of the parental allowance is determined by the amount of the daily assessment base for the determination of maternity allowance or sickness allowance in connection with the birth or adoption of a child under the Sickness Insurance Act. The choice of the amount of parental allowance can be changed once every three months (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2022).

after the end of the parental leave. If the employee does not start work after the end of the parental leave and has unexcused absences from the employer, the employee runs the risk of unilateral termination of the employment relationship by the employer due to a breach of employment obligations (Pirklová, 2018).

The employee-parent has partial rights under the Labor Code which are linked to his/her parental status. Employees caring for children under the age of 8 may be sent on a business trip outside the municipality of their place of work or residence only with their consent. Such an employee may be transferred only at his/her request. In the case of a lone employee, the age limit for childcare is extended to the age of 15 (Section 240 of the Labor Code).

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

The input data for the presented research on the experiences of mothers from the Czech Republic with returning to work after the end of parental leave comes from a quantitative research study conducted in May and June 2022 in the Moravian-Silesian Region of the Czech Republic.

The research utilized the survey method, specifically the questionnaire technique. The questionnaire's questions focused on women's perceptions and opinions regarding the motivational factors of motherhood and parenthood in connection with the respondents' age. Additionally, the questions addressed the financial situation during maternity and parental leave, including dependence on the family, social benefits, and satisfaction with the social security system in the Czech Republic. Lastly, the questions dealt with work activities during the parental leave period and the return to employment. Specifically, the study examined whether women returned to their original jobs, the necessity of requalification, chang-

ing employers, and the associated length of parental leave.

The pilot research was preceded by a one-month pre-research phase to ensure suitable question formulation and their relevance to the desired findings. The questionnaire had both online and physical forms and was targeted, addressing only women with one or more children. A total of 470 respondents participated in the questionnaire. No advanced statistical or mathematical tools were needed for data analysis. It involved the standard processing of questionnaire responses supplemented by the filtration method.

Basic identification details related to the surveyed sample are provided below in Table 1. In the context of these characteristics and classifications, responses about the work placement of women after the end of parental leave in the Moravian-Silesian Region of the Czech Republic will be subsequently analyzed and confronted. The aim is to reveal and specify latent differences or similarities among them. It should be noted that our typical respondent was on average 35 years old, had two children, was married, had secondary education with a high school diploma, experienced a period of unemployment, worked in the public sector, and lived in a city. Motherhood/parenthood did not reduce our respondent's required qualification, and she had approximately 10 years of work experience.

On the theoretical level, the article is based on a standard literature search subordinated to the problem under study. In our case, the connection between the status of women after the end of parental leave and their return to work is emphasized, both from the perspective of Czech legal norms and the discussion of general findings that are important for the return of women-mothers to work, both for her personally and for her surroundings. The empirical part devoted to the analysis of the results

Table 1
 Identification characteristics of the respondents (2022, n=470)

Category	Response options	number	in %
Age of respondents	up to 30 years of age	150	32%
	31-40 years of age	158	34%
	41-50 years of age	72	15%
	51-60 years of age	44	9%
	61-70 years of age	31	7%
	over 70 years of age	15	3%
Highest level of education	Primary	17	4%
	secondary education without high school diploma	67	14%
	secondary education with high school diploma	189	40%
	higher vocational (higher vocational school)	27	6%
	University	170	36%
Sector where the respondent has worked/works for the longest time	Public	210	45%
	Private	140	30%
	both public and private	51	11%
	didn't work	11	2%
	Not specified	58	12%
Place of residence	in municipality	201	43%
	in town	269	57%
Number of children	1	175	37%
	2	214	46%
	3	57	12%
	4 and more	24	5%
Marital status at the time of birth of the first child	Married	281	60%
	Single	185	39%
	Divorced	3	1%
	Widowed	1	0%
Working while on parental leave	Yes	180	38%
	No	290	62%
Experience of unemployment	Yes	255	54%
	No	215	46%
Reduced qualification due to motherhood/parenthood	Yes	133	28%
	No	337	72%
Length of work experience	up to 10 years	226	48%
	10-20 years	106	23%
	21-30 years	52	11%
	more than 31 years	75	16%
	None	11	2%

Source: own processing based on conducted survey (2022)

of the questionnaire survey itself is complemented by a comparison of partial results in individual categories (age, residence, number of children, family status, etc.) and supported by an inductive summary of the key findings.

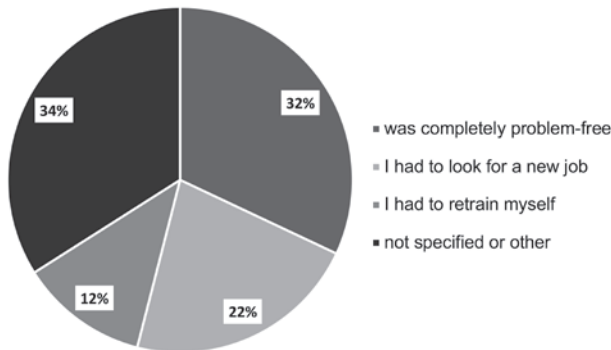
ANALYTICAL-EMPIRICAL PART: CATEGORIZATION OF WOMEN'S ATTITUDES WHEN RETURNING FROM PARENTAL LEAVE TO WORK

The key component for the data analysis was the respondents' shared experience of returning to work after parental leave, which was also a criterion for looking for seemingly latent similarities or differences in other ten categories: (1) by age, (2) by the highest level of education attained, (3) by the sector in which the women were employed, (4) by residence, (5) by a number of children and (6) by family status, (7) whether the woman worked while on parental leave, (8) by the experience of unemployment, (9) by the fact that they experienced a decline in qualifications and work competencies during parental leave, and finally (10) by the number of years of work experience. Some of the links between the

chosen categories and the stated experience on return to work are logical, while others are not. Therefore, the potential results of the analysis carried out and the confrontation of the information found appear to be of research interest.

Out of a total of 470 responses to the question on the evaluation of returning to work after parental leave, only 310 women chose a specific answer from the three options offered, with 158 women choosing the fourth option "not specified or other". The return to work after parental leave appeared to be completely unproblematic for 149 women, while 108 women had to look for a completely new job and 55 women stayed in their original job but had to retrain for new requirements and acquire different job competencies (see Figure 2). The remaining respondents (the 158 women already mentioned, mostly under 30 years of age) did not indicate their answer or added a short comment. Here, they often referred to the fact that they had started maternity leave again after one period of parental leave or were still currently on parental leave (at the time of completing the questionnaire), had not yet started work and thus could not give a relevant answer on their experience of returning to work.

Figure 2
Women's attitudes towards their return to work after parental leave; in %; n=470)



Source: own processing based on conducted survey (2022).

With reference to Figure 2, we have profiled four groups of women for whom we will look for specific features within

the other categories of questions, accompanied by the necessary commentary, which is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Return to work after maternity leave in the context of defined categories (in absolute; in %; n=470)

Category	completely problem-free		need to look for a new job		need to retrain myself		not specified or other	
Quantity	149 (32%)		108 (22%)		55 (12%)		158 (34%)	
	➔		➔		➔		➔	
Age								
up to 30 years of age	24	16%	31	29%	8	15%	87	55%
31-40 years of age	39	26%	39	36%	17	31%	63	40%
41-60 years of age	51	34%	33	30%	25	45%	7	4%
over 61 years of age	35	24%	5	5%	5	9%	1	1%
Education								
Primary	3	2%	5	5%	2	4%	7	5%
secondary education without high school diploma	23	16%	18	17%	8	15%	18	11%
secondary education with high school diploma	64	43%	46	42%	20	36%	59	37%
higher vocational (higher vocational school)	5	3%	9	8%	3	5%	10	6%
University	54	36%	30	28%	22	40%	64	41%
Employment sector								
public sector	72	48%	43	40%	33	60%	62	39%
private sector	45	30%	31	28%	14	25%	50	32%
both sectors	17	12%	17	16%	5	9%	12	8%
did not work	1	1%	1	1%	1	2%	8	5%
not specified	14	9%	16	15%	2	4%	26	16%
Place of residence								
Municipality	59	40%	48	44%	29	53%	65	41%
Town	90	60%	60	56%	26	47%	93	59%
Number of children								
1	51	34%	37	34%	17	31%	70	44%
2	68	46%	54	50%	24	44%	68	43%
3 and more	30	20%	17	16%	14	25%	20	13%
Marital status								
Married	114	76%	59	55%	35	64%	73	46%
Single	34	23%	49	45%	19	34%	83	53%
divorced/widowed	1	1%	0	0%	1	2%	2	1%
Working while on parental leave								
Yes	72	48%	35	32%	26	47%	47	30%
No	77	52%	73	68%	29	53%	111	70%

Category	completely problem-free		need to look for a new job		need to retrain myself		not specified or other	
Experience of unemployment								
Yes	68	46%	78	72%	25	45%	84	53%
No	81	54%	30	28%	30	55%	74	47%
Reduced qualification due to motherhood/parenthood								
Yes	11	7%	40	37%	17	31%	65	41%
No	138	93%	68	63%	38	69%	93	59%
Length of work experience								
up to 10 years	35	23%	55	51%	14	25%	122	77%
10-20 years	41	28%	26	24%	16	29%	23	15%
more than 21 years	72	48%	26	24%	24	44%	5	3%
None	1	1%	1	1%	1	2%	8	5%

Source: own processing based on survey (2022).

In the first part of the data analysis, we define four groups of attitudes towards returning to work after parental leave:

1. respondents who had no problems with returning to work after parental leave were relatively older, aged 41-60 years (34%), with secondary education with a high school diploma (43%), employed for more than 21 years (48%), purely in the public sector (48%), living in the city with two children (46%), usually married (77%), who did not work while on parental leave (52%), have no experience of unemployment (54%), and do not significantly feel that motherhood/parenthood has reduced their work competencies and qualifications (93%);
2. respondents who had to look for a new job after the end of their parental leave were most often aged 31-40 years (36%), secondary school graduates with a high school diploma (43%), employed in 40% in the public sector with at most ten years of work experience (51%), living with two children (50%), living in the city (56%) with family status married (55%), not working while on parental leave (68%), previously unemployed (72%) and not perceiving a decline in
3. respondents who had to be retrained to meet new job requirements were most likely aged 41-60 years (45%), female university graduates (40%), working in the public sector the most of all respondent groups (60%), for more than 21 years (44%), and married (64%), living in a village (53%) with two children (44%), more likely not to have worked while on parental leave (53%), mostly have no experience of unemployment (55%), and not feeling that motherhood/parenthood had reduced their work competencies and qualifications (69%);
4. the last group is made up of respondents who chose the option "not specified or other", most of whom are women who are currently still on maternity or parental leave and have no more than 10 years of work experience (77%). These are mainly young mothers under the age of 30 (55%), university students (41%) with the most diversified group of responses to the question on the employment sector, living in the city (59%) most often with one child (44%) and single (53%), who are not working while on parental

leave (70%), have experience of unemployment (53%) and feel the decline in work qualifications the most of all groups of women analyzed (41%).

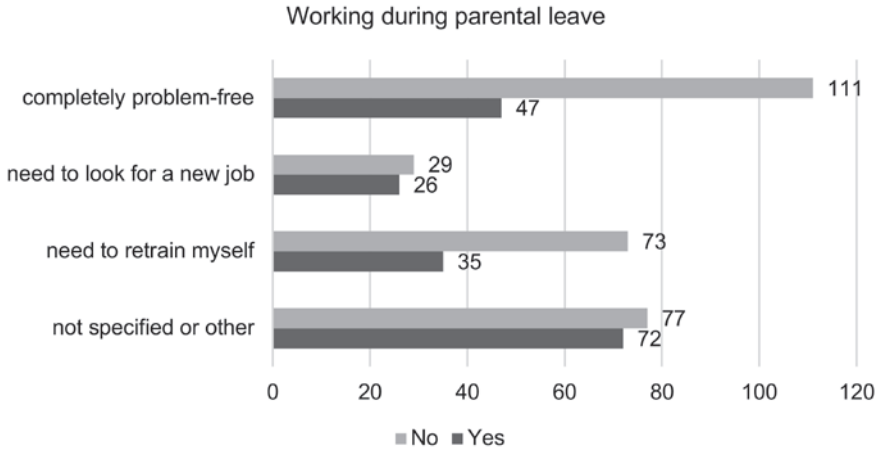
We complement the vertical analysis of the data presented in Figure 3 with a horizontal analysis, and a brief commentary on the selected findings. In the age criterion, it is the younger women who have chosen the option “not specified or other” or have indicated that they had been forced to look for a new job. In contrast, relatively older respondents had no problems returning to work or ‘only’ had to be retrained in terms of acquiring new job skills and competencies. The women who did not have a university degree were most often forced to look for a new job. Most of the respondents work in the public sector, which at the same time puts most demands on their retraining. This is also most demanded by respondents living in villages and having more than three children. On the other hand, the need to find a new job is relatively most common among mothers with two children. Job stability is also related to the family status of the woman, where married women either have no problems with returning to work or “just” have to learn new procedures, skills and knowledge. Similarly, where women were employed while on parental leave, they were also relatively more likely to return to work and had less experience of unemployment than women who had to look for a new job or those who were currently at home with their children and chose the fourth answer. The group of women who say that motherhood/parenthood has not reduced their required qualifications have integrated into the workforce smoothly. The final finding in this section relates to years of work i.e. labor market experience, with respondents who have been working for a short time (up to 10 years) being much more at risk of job insecurity.

The last presentation of the findings will refer to the selected observed relationships resulting from the combination

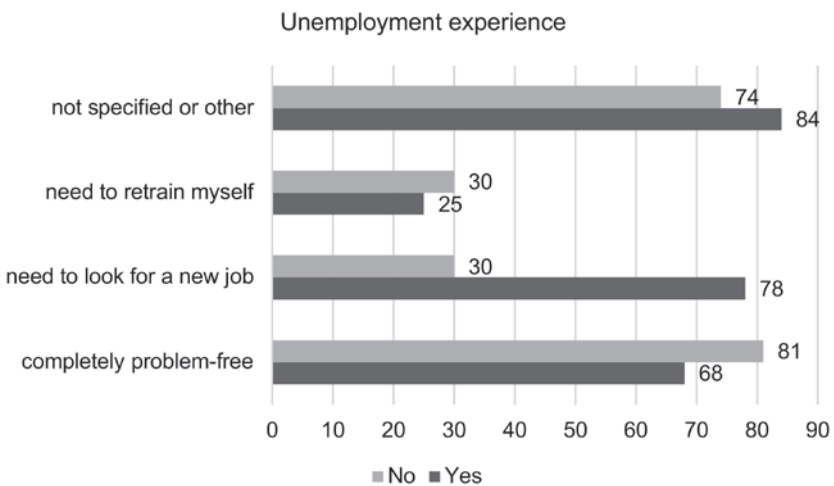
of the sub-results and will highlight the most noticeable similarities or differences that may, on the one hand, support general ideas or, on the other hand, may be considered controversial. For example, single mothers are twice as likely to have to look for a new job than married women. Similarly, this applies in connection with the level of education, where higher education of respondents indicates a balance between personal and professional life and is an important aspect influencing the quality of life for each individual and thus the quality of family life in contemporary society. While in the past, women were primarily responsible for household care, family, and children, nowadays, it is common, and in many cases necessary, for both parents to contribute to providing the household income and greater job stability. Women with more than 3 children are usually those who have job security, even if they might need to partially requalify or acquire necessary education and knowledge. Another interesting aspect is that women living in rural areas typically work in the public sector, and in half of the cases, they worked there during parental leave. Conversely, women who fell into the category of “not specified or other” logically did not go to work during parental leave. This group includes younger women with a low number of years worked (see Figure 3) and women who subsequently had to find a new job. In other words, women who worked during parental leave had a more advantageous position in the job market because their previous jobs remained, and they were not forced into unemployment to the extent seen in women who stayed at home with their children full-time.

The reduction of qualifications due to motherhood and parenthood is also directly proportional to the age of the respondents. Older women with more years of work experience perceive a decrease in qualification significantly less than younger mothers with less work experience and those who did not

Figure 3
Selected results of data analysis; in %; n=470)



Source: own processing based on conducted survey (2022).



Source: own processing based on conducted survey (2022).

work during parental leave. The final insight is that women who were unemployed at least once faced the need to find a new job much more frequently even when returning from parental leave.

DISCUSSION

To begin the discussion, it is important to note that our research sample (n = 470) included a cross-section of generations of mothers in the Czech Republic, 38% of whom were employed at some point during their parenthood. This is higher than the

30% employment rate of mothers, which is reported in the OECD data for 2019 only (OECD Family Database, 2019: 7), but within the group that did not specify their return to employment, which was 34% of women, we detected mainly women who were on parental leave at the time of the survey and who did not work during maternity leave (70%).

OECD data from 2019 also show that the employment rate of single mothers in the Czech Republic was 10% higher than that of families with two parents or partners (OECD Family Database, 2019: 3), and the results of the questionnaire complement this fact by showing that single mothers find it more difficult to return to work and are more often forced to look for a new job than married women.

If we assess the specific situation of Czech women on the labor market in terms of their return to work, then the results show that 32% of women considered their return to work to be problem-free, 22% of women had to look for a completely new job after parental leave and 12% of women had to retrain despite the low employment rate of mothers on parental leave in the Czech Republic, the relatively long parental leave and thus the relatively long absence of women from work.

The most important findings of the research are the links between women's experience of unemployment, length of time in employment, working during parental leave and return to work, as women who reported a smooth return to work were characterized primarily by the inexperience of unemployment, long periods of employment (over 21 years) and were much more likely to have worked during parental leave than women whose return to work was less smooth. Women who had to look for a new job often had the experience of unemployment, were characterized by short employment activity (up to 10 years) and were less likely to have worked during parental leave. Women who

had to retrain when they returned to work were more likely to have no experience of unemployment, to have a long employment history (more than 21 years) and to have worked to a lesser extent during parental leave.

As already mentioned, within the group that did not specify their return to work mainly young women were detected, who were on parental leave at the time of the survey, to a large extent with their first child, and thus could not yet assess their return to work, which was yet to come. However, these were mainly mothers who had not worked during the parental leave itself, had experienced unemployment, had worked for less than 10 years and felt the loss of their work competencies the most.

The majority of women in the sample did not feel that they lost their work competencies during the parental leave, and it is, therefore, possible to agree with Bodlák-ová (2012) that most Czech women do not consider motherhood to be an unfavorable work situation, at least in terms of its negative impact on the development of their work competencies. On the other hand, women who had to find a new job or retrain felt the loss of their competencies slightly more than women who reported that they had no problem returning to work.

The greatest limitation of the current research is that it does not investigate and distinguish the specific time periods when women in the sample were on parental leave, except for the group of women who were on parental leave with a young child directly during the research period. Consequently, it is not possible to unequivocally determine whether the situation of mothers regarding returning to work in the Czech Republic has improved or worsened over the years. Additionally, the research does not provide much room to differentiate the varied experiences of individual women when returning to employment in the case of their first, second, or subsequent children.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the contribution was to present the results of primary research focusing on the experiences and perceptions of Czech women regarding their return to work after parental leave. Simultaneously, it involves a comparison of theoretical opinions from selected authors and experts on the topic with the results of descriptive analysis. The goal of our research was to examine women's views on returning to the work environment after parental leave, the barriers associated with continuing their career and professional path, and last but not least, the reduction of qualifications during parental leave. As mentioned earlier in the analytical-empirical section and the discussion, the issue of women's reintegration into the workforce cannot be generalized. Crucial factors include age, and whether it is the first parental leave or a subsequent one. The level of education attained, work experience, and the length of work activity before taking maternity leave are essential factors, along with a woman's marital status, whether she is single or married.

Respondents who had no problems returning to the workforce after parental leave were generally older (41-60 years old, 34%), had secondary education with a high school diploma (43%), had been employed for more than 21 years (48%), worked solely in the public sector (48%), lived in a city with two children (46%), were usually married (77%), did not work during parental leave (52%), had no experience with unemployment (54%), and did not feel that motherhood/parenthood reduced their work competencies and qualifications significantly (93%).

One can also debate with the opinions of experts and the criticism from the EU that the Czech Republic has the longest parental leave, which directly negatively affects women's return to the workforce and causes their disadvantage in the labor market. The results of our research indicate women's

work activity during parental leave, especially women with tertiary and secondary education with a high school diploma, particularly if they have a healthy and strong connection with their employer. Ultimately, the decision is always up to each woman, whether she wants to stay at home with her children for the full four years or return to the workforce sooner.

The primary research has yielded interesting results that will be qualitatively analyzed subsequently. Respondents, deliberately selected and filtered by age, differ in their perception and experiences in motherhood, parenthood, and the return to employment. This directly correlates with socio-political, demographic, and economic changes in society, but at the same time, it may represent a certain specification of the Moravian-Silesian region. In the context of further research, it will be interesting to broaden the circle of respondents to include other regions and compare perceptions and experiences with the return to employment with the Moravian-Silesian region. The conclusions of our research bring forth additional research questions and, with them, further research objectives.

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Sažetak

POVRATAK RADNICA NA POSAO NAKON RODITELJSKOG DOPUSTA: ANALIZA SITUACIJE U ČEŠKOJ REPUBLICI

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Tema ovog rada je pitanje povratka žena na posao nakon roditeljskog dopusta u Češkoj Republici i čimbenici koji otežavaju položaj žena na tržištu rada. Ovom se temom bave češki i inozemni stručnjaci i autori publikacija vezanih uz položaj žena na tržištu rada, majčinstvo, roditeljstvo te čimbenike koji otežavaju povratak žena na posao nakon roditeljskog dopusta s naglaskom na češko okruženje. U radu se prikazuju odabrani rezultati deskriptivne analize kvantitativnog istraživanja žena iz Moravsko-šleske regije u Češkoj Republici koji ukazuju na iskustva i percepcije vezane uz povratak žena na posao nakon roditeljskog dopusta. U istraživanju je korišten značajan uzorak ispitanica (470), a rezultati djelomično potvrđuju, ali i opovrgavaju teorijske nalaze. Rezultati primarnog istraživanja prikazani u radu doprinijet će aktualizaciji trenutne slike o povratku žena na posao u Češkoj Republici i ujedno stvoriti temelj za buduća kvalitativna istraživanja o iskustvima i percepcijama žena vezanim uz povratak na posao u kontekstu njihovih kulturnih, socijalnih i ekonomskih okruženja. Cilj rada je prikazati rezultate primarnog istraživanja s naglaskom na iskustva i percepcije Čehinja o povratku na posao nakon roditeljskog dopusta. Istovremeno, u radu se nastoji usporediti teorijske pristupe koje predlažu odabrani autori i stručnjaci s dobivenim rezultatima deskriptivne analize.

Ključne riječi: Češka Republika, položaj žena na tržištu rada, roditeljski dopust, roditeljski dopust, socijalno osiguranje, istraživanje.