

Female empowerment and masculinity – a cultural trait? Evidence from the CEE countries

Aleksandra Gawel and Katarzyna Mroczek-Dąbrowska

Department of International Competitiveness, Poznan University of Economics and Business, Poznan, Poland, and

Malgorzata Bartosik-Purgat

Department of International Management, Poznan University of Economics and Business, Poznan, Poland

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Abstract

Purpose – As women’s position in the economy and society is often explained by cultural factors, this study aims to verify whether the observed changes in female empowerment in the region of Central and East European (CEE) countries of the European Union (EU) are associated with masculinity as a cultural trait.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors apply the k-means clustering method to group CEE countries into clusters with similar levels of female empowerment in two time points – 2013 and 2019. Next, the authors examine the clusters and cross-reference them with the national culture’s masculinity to explore the interrelations between female empowerment and cultural traits in the CEE countries and their development in time.

Findings – The analyses reveal that female empowerment is not uniform or stable across the CEE countries. The masculinity level is not strongly related to women’s position in these countries, and changes in female empowerment are not closely linked to masculinity.

Originality/value – Despite the tumultuous history of women’s empowerment in the CEE countries, the issues related to gender equality and cultural traits pertaining to the region are relatively understudied in the literature. By focusing on the CEE region, the authors fill the gap in examining the independencies between female empowerment and cultural masculinity.

Keywords Female empowerment, Masculinity, Cultural dimension, Central and East European countries

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Gender equality is a part of a long historical struggle to create democratic and equal conditions for functioning in business and society. Although it is typically associated with women’s movements and rights, it has a wider notion referring to gender difference and justice, self-realization and fuller use of their potential (Hearn and Husu, 2016).



The level of gender equality increases as females more often participate in the workforce and males do more domestic work (Alsos *et al.*, 2016); however, some disparities are still observed being an important problem for countries of all development stages (Bilan *et al.*, 2020). From the economic perspective, the most visible aspects of gender inequality include the gender pay gap (Coron, 2020; Ravazzini and Chesters, 2018), female underrepresentation in power positions, or female under- or overrepresentation in some occupations (Damelang and Ebensperger, 2020; Hernik and Antonio Minguéz, 2020).

Based on the notion of female economic empowerment, we seek to analyse how this position has changed in recent years and to which extent it is related to national culture traits. We focus on the Central and East European (CEE) countries, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia [1], as since the transition to market economies, they have experienced the “golden age of growth”. The countries have grown economically, societies enhanced their quality of life and economies were able to establish sound and stable institutions. Yet, after three decades of constant progress, the countries are losing development momentum based on labour-cost advantages and traditional industries. The CEE countries have started to seek their competitive advantage in innovation and sophistication factors rather than in the efficiency enhancers (Mroczek-Dąbrowska and Kania, 2020). Although these countries have either reached the innovation-driven development path or are transitioning towards it, it also means that they can no longer benefit from cost-driven advantage.

The CEE countries, with over 30 years of experience since the collapse of communism, pose an interesting region to reflect on and analyse female empowerment (Gwiazda, 2021). In the economic context, they tend to be perceived as a homogenous entity, yet these countries are quite diversified with respect to the quality of institutions (Dorożyński *et al.*, 2020). They share similar eras of development after World War II: the communist or socialist systems, the post-communist or post-socialist transition and, finally, the accession to the EU (Rožanova and Mikheev, 2020; Timár, 2019). Gender equality and female emancipation is a long-standing declaration rooted in the communist era, when the “top-down” form of feminism was introduced with the idea of the worker-mother societal model (Stoilova, 2010; Rugina, 2019), but also with remaining gender inequality (Stoilova, 2010). During the post-socialist transformation, female empowerment lost its bearing to a new wave of traditionalism (Dawn Metcalfe and Afanassieva, 2005; Alas and Rees, 2005; Rugina, 2019). Women’s empowerment, as a shared value of the European Union, should finally be revived, however, there is both a rise in populism (Graff and Korolczuk, 2021, p. 16 and next) and more active women’s movements (Vojvodić, 2021), resulting in the CEE countries being the least gender equal in the EU (López-Martínez *et al.*, 2022).

A tumultuous history of women’s empowerment in the CEE countries justifies our study addressing the development path towards women empowerment of the CEE economies and its relationships with the masculinity level observed there. To the best of our knowledge, the issues related to gender equality and cultural traits concerning the CEE region are relatively understudied (Madsen and Scribner, 2017; Jaklič *et al.*, 2020). We analyse whether informal institutions – in the form of cultural expectations – are relevant for women’s position in the labour market, asking the following research questions:

RQ1. Do differences within female empowerment exist among CEE countries?

RQ2. Is the female empowerment related to cultural background?

The research methods used in this paper are twofold: a literature study to draw the conceptual and geographical context, followed by statistical analysis with the use of k-means clustering

method implemented to test whether the countries studied differed significantly in their approach towards female empowerment. We compare the delineated clusters of countries based on the cluster analysis with the level of their masculinity (Hofstede's index) as the trait of national culture to discuss the question of how much women's empowerment is related to masculinity. We contribute to the understanding of the independencies between female empowerment and cultural masculinity, as well as to gender studies in the CEE region.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, we present the theoretical contributions on women's position in economics, business and society with focusing on empowerment issues and informal institutions such as cultural expectations. Next, we discuss historical and cultural background of women's positions in the CEE countries, indicating why the issue requires in-depth analysis. Following, the research method and the results of the research are presented, then concluded by a discussion part and implications.

Women's position in the Central and East European countries – a cultural perspective

Women's position in economics, business, society and their empowerment

In recent decades, global progress has been made in empowering women in the society, but their unequal opportunities and treatment remain a problem in a number of countries and industries (Madsen and Scribner, 2017). Female empowerment has become an important part of a country's development strategy since a positive correlation can be observed between women's position in the society and the nation's development level (Duflo, 2012; Anderson, 2022).

Female empowerment is a multidimensional and complex construct (Persson *et al.*, 2021; Anderson, 2022), mostly defined as a process of equipping females with more control over resources and assets to become independent, and of changing power relations and receiving greater control (Persson *et al.*, 2021). The acquisition of power refers to the interrelated types of power: "power-over" as the power to control, "power-to" as the power to act and "power-from", meaning the power to resist being controlled by others (Wolf *et al.*, 2015; Ng *et al.*, 2022). Female empowerment is related to both possessing power and using it for changes in the process of making life strategic decisions (Çınar, 2019), which depends on resources, values and traditions and decision outcomes (Ballon, 2018).

Female empowerment is highly context-specific and multi-dimensional process (Rožanova and Mikheev, 2020). Different dimensions of women empowerment can be identified as mostly political, economic, academic, social and managerial ones (Al-Qahtani *et al.*, 2020). Economic empowerment looks at the process from the point of view of control over income opportunities, while political empowerment from the perspective of the ability to participate and influence the decision-making process of the society (Lewellyn and Muller-Kahle, 2020).

From the perspective of the labour market, female empowerment is understood as the process of becoming economically independent, women's participation in the labour market and their earnings raise their bargaining power and provide them with resources (Alves and Quirino Steiner, 2017). The most frequently addressed aspects of female inequality from the economic perspective are gender pay gap, female under- or overrepresentation in certain occupations and female underrepresentation in power positions (Madsen and Scribner, 2017).

Females are under- and overrepresented in certain professions and, thus, typical women-typed jobs are lower paid with fewer career opportunities (Sidani, 2013; Symeonaki and Filopoulou, 2017; Damelang and Ebensperger, 2020). As the theory of labour market segmentation explains, there are primary and secondary labour market segments with

limited possibility to move between them (Mora and Muro, 2015), marked by earnings, working conditions or promotion opportunities significantly better in primary segments than in secondary ones (Daw and Halliday Hardie, 2012). Men more often concentrate on primary segments, while women remain in secondary ones (Jamali *et al.*, 2008; Campos *et al.*, 2017).

Another aspect is the female underrepresentation in power positions, which can be seen both from the managerial perspective, as female representation at managerial position, and from the political perspective, as female participation in political forces. From the managerial perspective, power and wealth are held by corporate directors and corporate boardrooms, and the share of female directors is not equal to male directors (Lewellyn and Muller-Kahle, 2020). Similarly, female participation in political authority is unequal, although we observe the increase of women's access to political power (Alexander *et al.*, 2016). The problem of women's political empowerment is not only related to the presence of women in politics, but also to power distribution as female deputies are often involved in the legislative decision-making process in traditional women-specific spheres (e.g. family policy, culture and childcare) (Rozanova and Mikheev, 2020).

Education can impact empowerment, however, it is also gendered and multi-dimensional. Generally, the gender division of education is still observed by the over- or underrepresentation of women in certain fields, i.e. women are more likely to be educated in health sciences (Wu and Li, 2019), while less likely in academic science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Sattari and Sandefur, 2019).

There are several traditions of explaining the gender difference in the labour market, mostly within neoclassical, institutional and radical tracks (Karamessini and Ioakimoglou, 2007), although some ideas are overlapping. The human capital perspective explains the differences in positions in the labour market by invoking differences in competences, while the institutional theory – through regulative, normative and cognitive pillars of institutions or formal and informal institutions (Wu and Li, 2019).

Since gender equality largely depends on the national context, mainly because of legislation as a formal pillar and social norms as an informal pillar of institutions (Ringblom and Johansson, 2020), the institutional theory is accepted in the paper as the theoretical framework of the research. The theory studies the influence of the institutional environment, consisting of social beliefs, norms, structures and social actors, on the behaviour of individuals and organizations (Forrester and Neville, 2021). Within the institutional theory, culture is treated as one of informal institutions. Social norms, as integrated components of the national culture, represent collective beliefs about people's expectations toward one another in functioning in social groups (Cislaghi *et al.*, 2019). In many countries women are stereotyped as caring for families rather than managing a business (Rubio-Banón and Esteban-Lloret, 2016), which embedded gender beliefs in the business logic (Forrester and Neville, 2021), and finally causes female underrepresentation in the positions of power, and gender gaps in wages and labour force.

Masculinity level and female empowerment

Female empowerment is often embedded as part of informal institutions, allowing that women's position in the society is partly determined by cultural traits. One of the key constructs used to identify and describe these social institutions is masculinity, which “draws on a binary definition of gender and defines men's roles and responsibilities as the opposite of women's” (Connell, 1987). Operationalizing and measuring masculinity remain a challenge since capturing the essence and limits of masculinity is highly questionable. One of the international studies aiming at the identification of cultural characteristics in which a

very large number of countries participated was conducted under the supervision of Hofstede. The authors distinguished six cultural dimensions – individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, long-term orientation and indulgence (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). The role of women and men in society has been reflected in the feminine and masculine dimensions (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010).

There is a polemic in the literature on the Hofstede's research and its methodological shortcomings, e.g. geographical bias, origins of the concept, sample selection (Dorfman and Howell, 1988; Moulettes, 2007; Hernik and Antonio Mínguez, 2020). Despite the critics, the concepts of Hofstede's research are still widely used (Rubio-Banón and Esteban-Lloret, 2016; Lewellyn and Muller-Kahle, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2021; López-Cabarcos *et al.*, 2021). Most quantitative measures on culture still refer to at least one dimension that is conceptually similar to those of Hofstede's (Gerlach and Eriksson, 2021) as replications of the study have also revealed (Taras *et al.*, 2012) that in majority of cases they closely matched the country variation originally observed by Hofstede. That in turn spoke of the reliability of the Hofstede's original dimensions. As the data erodes in time, Hofstede's data set has also been validated since the first publication. Moreover, the existing body of literature does not provide broad cross-cultural research that would not only discuss, but also operationalize and measure the roles of men and women in society. The cultural dimension – femininity/masculinity – highlighted by Hofstede represents one of the few studies in this area.

Hofstede (1998) generalized and transferred the gender roles and stereotypes of women and men from the individual and group level to the level of culture and nation. The research scope of the Hofstede's study included statements about work-related values, e.g. earnings, challenges, cooperation, job security, career, use of skills, work, way of spending time, etc. The women who participated in the research chose terms such as: "working with people who can cooperate" or "being in good contact with a superior" in higher numbers than men. In turn, men were closer to statements such as: "be able to earn high earnings", "have a chance to be promoted to higher positions in the workplace." These results confirmed the traditional separation of gender roles, i.e. the male attitude towards success and female community orientation (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010).

In feminine societies, there is an equality of gender roles that overlap (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Both a woman and a man can take care of the family because, in such societies, people regard the care for and protection of others as a fundamental value. Friendly relationships between people are the most important, and women and men can show tenderness and care for interpersonal relationships. Moreover, both women and men can work in the same professions, hold the same positions in a workplace, and engage themselves in political, social and other activities (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Making a career is a free choice for both genders. There is greater participation of women in the professional labour market (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010).

Masculine societies value material success; money and related material goods are a significant element of their life (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). The divisions into specific roles in the society are also clearly marked in masculine cultures (Lewellyn and Muller-Kahle, 2020). In these societies, it is women who should show tenderness and care for interpersonal relationships while men should take care of living matters (e.g. fathers in families). In masculine cultures, few women hold political positions, because making a career is the responsibility of men and the free choice of women (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Carrasco *et al.* (2015) indicate that the higher level of masculinity in the countries under research, the lower proportion of females on corporate boards. In line with that statement are the results of Hernik and Antonio Mínguez's (2020) analysis emphasizing the negative correlation between women's participation in the European parliament and the masculinity index.

Culturally, the CEE countries of the European Union are quite diversified. Based on Hofstede's study, masculinity is captured with use of the Masculine index (MI). There are significant differences in the MI among the CEE countries: they can be divided into three cultural groups (Figure 1). In Hofstede's research, cultures are classified into groups that achieved the highest score of the MI (called masculine cultures), the lowest score of the MI (referred to as feminine cultures) and those with a moderate level of the MI. Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia belong to the masculine cultures. High scores mean that gender roles are specified; status and the symbols that it underlines are important.

Countries with moderate levels of masculinity include Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia. People stress "working in order to live" as well as equality among people, including gender. The CEE countries with the low level of masculinity are represented by Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia and Estonia. They are highly tolerant with reference to the cultures of other societies. The gender roles overlap, the highest positions (like the president or prime minister) in the country are held by women (e.g. Estonia) and the focus is on "living in order to work" (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010).

Women in the Central and East European countries

From the economic perspective, the CEE countries are often perceived as a homogenous entities, but research shows that they are actually quite differentiated with respect to the quality of institutions (Dorożyński *et al.*, 2020). After World War II, all CEE countries shared three major "development periods" impacting their economic and social interactions in general and women's position in particular: the communist or socialist systems, post-communist or post-socialist transition and EU membership (Rožanova and Mikheev, 2020; Timár, 2019).

Women's empowerment in the CEE countries has had a tumultuous history. The communist and socialist systems were marked by the official declaration of gender equality

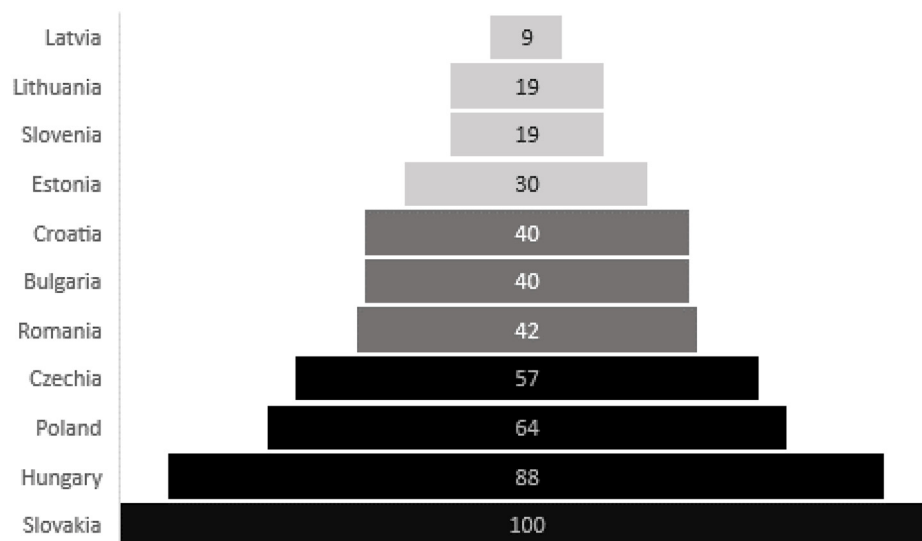


Figure 1.
Masculine index
among cultures from
CEE region

Source: Own elaboration based on data www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool

and female emancipation. Equality in politics and work was the underlying feature of the socialist system in CEE (Dawn Metcalfe and Afanassieva, 2005), resulting in the creation of the idea of a socialist woman – simultaneously a worker, an activist and a mother (Stoilova, 2010; Rugina, 2019). However, socialist governments were not effective in combating gender inequality; women were required to work, but experienced wage inequality, occupational and sectoral segregation, remaining primarily responsible for household and family duties (Stoilova, 2010). Under this system, women experienced a certain “top-down” form of feminism, initiated and led by the communist governments, granting women rights to – amongst others – abortion and free education, which resulted in the significant reduction or even total absence of women’s movements (Vojvodić, 2021).

The collapse of socialist economy entailed the necessity of re-defining the economy and women’ position. During the post-socialist transformation in Eastern Europe, the rejection of the socialist ideals was observed (Rugina, 2019). Instead of nurturing the idea of a working socialist mother, a new wave of traditionalism forced them to leave the labour market (Dawn Metcalfe and Afanassieva, 2005; Alas and Rees, 2005), marginalized them in the public policymaking process and masculinized the public sphere and labour market – all of which happened without independent feminist movements (Stoilova, 2010) and within anti-feminist cultural environment (Dawn Metcalfe and Afanassieva, 2005). In consequence, according to several analyses of gender equality in European countries for the years 2007–2015 (Castellano and Rocca, 2014; López-Martínez *et al.*, 2022), the CEE countries were generally marked by the lower level of female position in society than the EU average.

The transformation of the CEE countries accelerated with their accession to the European Union. The re-definition of the position of females was shaped, to some extent, by the EU membership with gender equality as shared value. Thirty years into transformation, anti-liberal ideas became again evident in some parts of the CEE region (Coman and Volintiru, 2021). The rise in the popularity of populist parties can be observed throughout the EU, but in the CEE region, such parties, especially right-wing ones, are stronger than in the West, enjoying a significant increase in support and their representation in government (Santana *et al.*, 2020; Gwiazda, 2021). An important element of the right-wing populism is related to the mobilization against “gender ideology” and the anti-gender campaigns (Graff and Korolczuk, 2021). The rise of conservatism and populism mobilized activist movements, the example of which were the protests of Polish women against the restriction on access to abortion, which culminated on Black Monday (October 3, 2016) (Bernhard, 2020; Shields, 2021).

Research methods

To verify whether female empowerment in the region of the CEE countries is in any way associated with masculinity, we studied a sample of 11 CEE countries in terms of their development in regard to women’s empowerment. We conducted study for two separates timepoints: 2013 and 2019. We chose 2013 since, at that time, all the countries under analysis belonged to the European Union (Croatia, as the last country from the research sample, entered the EU in 2013), and the long-lasting effect of the Global Financial Crisis subsided. The year 2019 was chosen as the last pre-pandemic year for which relevant data was available.

The grouping of countries was based on the k-means clustering method, which enabled us to see whether the countries under study differed significantly in their approach towards female empowerment. We operationalize female empowerment by referring to their situation in the labour market. Initially, we considered a relatively wide set of variables showing female empowerment in two aspects: as female potential in the labour market (females with higher education, female early leavers from education, females at-the-risk of poverty), and as female position at the labour market (female entrepreneurship, female unemployment, females inactive

because of family duties, females in the national parliament, females in the national government, females at senior management positions and gender pay gap). The choice of initial variables was related to the factors of possessing and using the power (Çinar, 2019). The MI indicator did not form part of the grouping factors – we cross-referenced the results of cluster analysis with the masculinity level of countries at a later stage.

The clustering was carried out twice, separately for 2013 and 2019. Firstly, based on Ward's minimum variance technique, we identified the adequate number of clusters for each of the analysis, which in both cases amounted to four. From the group of 10 initial variables, based on the F-values [2], we narrowed down the list of variables to four variables being statistically insignificant in the clustering of countries (Table 1).

Variables as females with higher education (only for 2019), females in the national government, females at senior management position and pay gap are those variables of female empowerment which lead to cluster CEE countries into homogenous groups. The F-values allows us to settle how strongly the discussed variables differentiated the distinguished clusters. By doing so, we identified the clusters of countries that were similar to one another within a group and, at the same time, differed from other clusters as much as possible. Table 2 presents to what extent the particular factors that were eventually included into the study influenced the grouping – both in 2013 and 2019.

Women empowerment in the Central and East European – the results of the empirical study

We identified four clusters that differed in terms of women's potential and position in the labour market. The number of clusters was not pre-assumed and was established based on the data analysis procedure. Overall, the groups were not stable in time (Table 3). The changes were not immense, but we can observe that, with time (2013 compared to 2019), polarization increased. In more countries, however, women enjoy better prospects as far as their careers are concerned.

A closer look at the 2013 situation reveals that in the majority of the countries under analysis, women in general had an inferior position in the labour market (Figure 2). In 2013, the potential – tertiary education level – was not a differentiating factor; therefore, it was excluded from the analysis. That can be well understood since the means for all clusters are relatively close and overall low or moderate at best. Czechia, Estonia and Hungary revealed the worst situation with the highest pay gap and low women's participation in both public and private prominent positions. Similar conclusions can be drawn for Slovakia, where we observe the lowest educational potential and women's position was only appreciated in senior management. The other two clusters "performed" better, although only Bulgaria,

Variable description	Measure
Females with higher education	Female graduates of tertiary education (% of population 15+)
Females in national government	Three-year average share of female members of parliament (%)
Females at senior management positions (board members)	Three-year average share of female members of boards in largest quoted companies, supervisory board or board of directors (%)
Pay gap	Difference (%) in mean monthly earnings (PPS) between men and women (annual average)

Table 1.
Variables applied for
the k-means cluster
analysis

Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data

Variable	Between clusters	df	Within clusters	df	F-value	Signific. <i>p</i>
<i>2013</i>						
Females with higher education	27.02	3.00	151.71	7.00	0.42	0.75 (*)
Females in national government	885.51	3.00	79.85	7.00	25.88	0.00
Females at senior management positions (board members)	331.21	3.00	123.63	7.00	6.25	0.02
Pay gap	290.29	3.00	204.11	7.00	3.32	0.09
<i>2019</i>						
Females with higher education	118.75	3.00	91.06	7.00	3.04	0.10
Females in national government	660.90	3.00	145.47	7.00	10.60	0.01
Females at senior management positions (board members)	399.52	3.00	189.59	7.00	4.92	0.04
Pay gap	282.99	3.00	197.14	7.00	3.35	0.09

Notes: (*) The *F*-value of the “females with higher education” variable in 2013 exceeds the allowed threshold and, strictly from the methodological point of view, should be excluded from the analysis. However, we aimed to make cross-comparison between the results in 2013 and 2019 and, therefore, we do not include it as a grouping variable, but reference the grouping results against the higher education rate in [Figure 2](#)

Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data

Table 2.
Between and within cluster variance

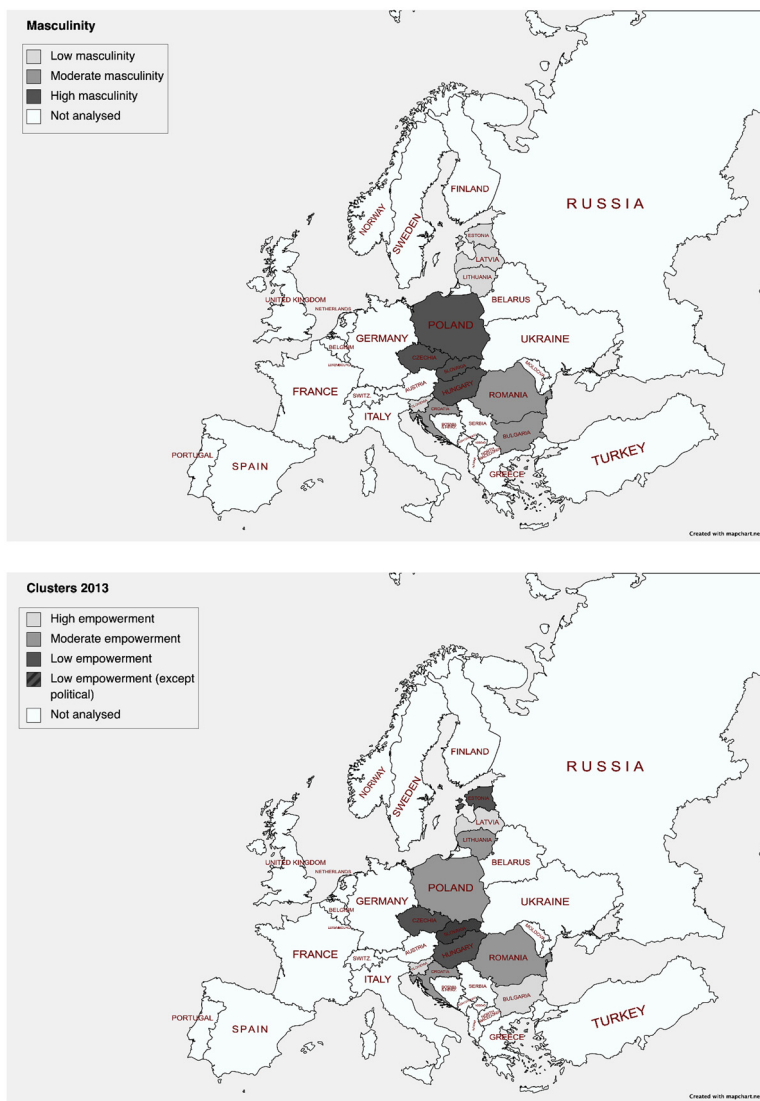
Variable and countries	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
<i>2013</i>				
Countries	Czechia, Estonia, Hungary	Slovakia	Croatia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania	Bulgaria, Slovenia, Latvia
Females in national government	8.13	8.30	21.60	30.40
Females at senior management positions (board members)	9.97	24.00	12.83	22.30
Pay gap	22.83	20.74	11.49	11.96
<i>2019</i>				
Countries	Hungary and Romania	Czechia, Croatia, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia	Estonia	Bulgaria, Slovenia and Lithuania
Females in national government	15.95	22.38	13.30	35.60
Females at senior management positions (board members)	12.75	25.90	9.40	18.37
Pay gap	10.33	17.91	29.14	12.93

Table 3.
Means for grouping measures in the respective clusters

Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data

Slovenia and Latvia at that time appreciated women by striving to close the pay gap and accommodate women in senior positions – both public offices and in business.

The overall performance of 2019 shows an improvement compared to the previous period. In most CEE countries, women’s position has improved and, today, the educational potential has definitely become a factor that differentiates the identified clusters. Overall, the potential is



(continued)

Figure 2. Countries of CEE based on masculinity as cultural dimension and female empowerment

said to have increased. However, there are still countries – like Estonia – where even though women are better educated, they still struggle with employment inequity. The pay gap between men and women increases and their involvement in senior positions is still insufficient. Hungary and Romania have not deteriorated, but neither have they made significant improvement. However, these countries are on a path to closing the pay gap and accommodating more women in senior positions.

We aimed to verify whether the identified groups of CEE countries based on female empowerment are homogenous in terms of their masculinity perception. That is why we



Figure 2.

Sources: Own elaboration based on Figure 1 and Table 3. Created with mapchart.net

compare maps of the CEE countries both in the context of masculinity and the clusters of female empowerment in 2013 and 2019 (Figure 2). A culture perceived as more feminine should, by nature, be expected to more easily reach or at least strive towards employment equity. This trait proved true in the case of Slovenia, and partly Latvia and Lithuania – countries with the most feminine attitude towards roles played by men and women in society. The only exception here is Estonia, which is a country with relatively low masculinity perception, and which, neither in 2013 nor in 2019, reached or improved its female empowerment. On the other hand, highly masculine societies (such as Czechia, Hungary or Slovakia), characterized by low female empowerment in 2013, also managed to bridge some of the inequality gap between men and women and become moderate in female empowerment. Poland, as masculine country as well, belonged to the cluster of countries with moderate female empowerment in both years.

All these comparisons imply that this cultural dimension does not have to pre-determine the success of the female empowerment. As masculinity is rather persistent trait of national culture, female empowerment has changed over time without strict patterns related to masculinity.

Discussion and conclusions

The problem discussed in the paper is both significant and sensitive in nature, but it is also undervalued in the research and scientific literature. Among the most suggested ways to fight gender inequality are providing access to education, empowering women in the labour market and politics or ending violence and sexual assaults. However, once particular regions reach certain level of equality, these general actions start varying in their effectivity. According to World Economic Forum, the CEE countries hold a strong position in the rate of closing the gender gap (WEF, 2021). Therefore, with our analysis we aimed to see how particular countries from the CEE region perform in terms of reaching equality and whether

some of them display similar features and what differentiates the observed groups. Moreover, we wanted to see whether the popular claim on the cultural dimensions – the masculinity perception – was true in the case of the CEE region. The question here is not to assess if the CEE countries “perform” better or worse in terms of equality than countries from other regions, but to see whether they are homogenous in their approach and how much progress they have made with time. The region may not be homogenous, but the countries share similar historical context, institutional background, EU membership and, in many cases, a similar cultural approach; therefore, comparisons are justified.

The analysis enabled us to see that, overall, the CEE region has made significant progress in closing the gender labour inequality gap, most recently with Bulgaria, Slovenia and Lithuania in the lead. To some extent, our reflections are in line with the findings showing the importance of social capital, including networking, as one of the key factors supporting females’ empowerment (Persson *et al.*, 2021). Our results are also in line with the observation of the diversity of the CEE countries in the area of institutions’ quality (Dorożyński *et al.*, 2020).

Limitations

As with all research, our study is not free of limitations. Firstly, the analysis was conducted among the CEE countries, which, on the one hand, allowed us to highlight their heterogeneity, but, on the other, did not enable the cross-comparison of the empowerment level with other countries, e.g. Western Europe. Secondly, due to the availability of data, the study could only be restricted to country-level analysis without any further breakdowns, e.g. generation-level discrepancies. Thus, future studies could seek to contextually validate the measurement constructs or probe and empirically study the generational bias within each economy. Thirdly, our study captures a snapshot of the development path of the situation, while a comparative longitudinal analysis, including the most recent disturbances, would provide a more detailed perspective. At present, the CEE countries are – politically and economically – at the crossroads, facing numerous challenges stemming from the COVID-19 aftermath and the ongoing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. These challenges, including an influx of female refugees to the CEE countries, are bound to stir the situation of women. As such, it is recommended that future studies incorporate those factors to analyse the changes in empowerment in a holistic way.

Theoretical implications

The countries perceived as masculine were expected to have a higher gender equity gap, but in terms of the labour market such a trait did not seem to play a significant role. However, it is true that “feminine countries” (except for Estonia) all performed well in closing the gap, whilst “masculine countries” varied in their efforts. Countries with lower level of masculinity do not always represent the higher level of female empowerment and the same, there is no common pattern of how the level of female empowerment change over time depending on the national masculinity, as it might be expected from theoretical point of view.

Our results contribute to the theoretical discussion on gender studies in the context of cultural influences as informal institutions, answering RQ2 whether the female empowerment is related to cultural background. Although we deeply discussed the impact of national culture on women’s position in the society, our research shows that female empowerment is not directly related to masculinity as the cultural trait of a country, but rather depends on other factors.

In addition, nowadays, generational changes are affecting the labour market and the way women are involved in professional matters. The most active women in the labour market are the representatives of Gen X, Gen Y and even Gen Z. In contrast, Hofstede’s research in

terms of masculinity levels was conducted in the CEE region in the 1990s, when the older generations of women were active in the labour market (Baby Boomers, Gen X) (Kolman *et al.*, 2003). Their way of being, their perception of the world, and their degree of involvement in professional and family matters were and are different.

Another contribution is related to methodological issues and the measures of empowerment. Contrary to the female empowerment index explored in the human development index, which consisted of variables showing the level of education and representation in parliament, we initially considered a relatively wide set of 10 variables showing female empowerment in two aspects: as female potential in the labour market and as female position in the labour market. Such results provide insight into the discussion of how female empowerment should be measured in modern economies, based on the importance of its various aspects.

Implications for policymakers

Our results indicate cross-country similarities and differences in women’s empowerment, answering the RQ1. They can provide an issue for discussion in companies employing women on bridging differences and striving for balance. They can also be a guideline for various institutions responsible for sustainable policies within the areas identifying women’s empowerment. All EU Member States agreed to be committed to eliminating gender inequality and further these core values to become legal standards. The EU has adopted a Directive on improving the gender balance among directors by setting specific aims for EU companies listed on the EU stock exchanges. The matter can be approached in different ways, including legislation, binding quotas, softer measures or no precise tools at all. Some countries introduced policies where companies are bound to address gender imbalance in the boardrooms of all companies and politics (by imposing quotas). Other Member States introduced such measures for public companies, but failure to comply with them is not accompanied by real penalties. The majority of the newest Member States, however, decided to limit their actions to “urging” and “motivating” companies to ensure gender equality, leaving the specifics to companies’ discretion. In the case of the CEE countries, in general, no compulsory actions were taken (except for Slovenia and Poland) and yet the improvement is evident. Although that does not resolve the debate on the efficiency of the quota system, it does imply that the changes observed in the CEE labour markets and women’s position are not directly related to mandatory legal regulations (Table 4).

Such conclusions might be misleading for future reference, though. Women in the CEE economies have historically experienced more difficulties in gaining empowerment. The changes in Clusters 3 and 4 seem more market- and society-driven as the observed improvement is not caused by formal requirements. Although, the progress made in

Criteria	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
	Hungary and Romania	Estonia	Czechia, Croatia, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia	Bulgaria, Slovenia and Lithuania
Boardroom quotas	None	None	None except for soft measures in Poland	None except for soft measures in Slovenia
Electoral quotas	No	No	None except for Poland and Croatia	None except for Slovenia

Table 4. Legal requirements on gender quotas in 2019 clusters

Source: Own elaboration based on Table 3 and Eurostat data

previous years is significant at the same time, it is more likely to lose its momentum. Lessons learned from introducing gender quotas as legally binding indicate that such solutions help close the gender gap in earnings, but they also benefit companies allowing them to “reshuffle” the set-up of the boards, appoint new members (both men and women) and, by doing so, introduce individuals that share similar professional endowments (Casaca *et al.*, 2022), which would be especially beneficial for countries in Cluster 1 and 2. It has been observed that quotas have also indirect impact on pay gap. Although it might become a necessity for the CEE countries to take up binding measures, such a solution is unlikely to be welcome considering the regress in democratic values observed there (e.g. Poland and Hungary). As the study indicated, the masculinity level is not the predominant determinant of female empowerment and, as such, cultural traits have limited bearing on the promotion of political agreements on the issue.

Notes

1. The 11 countries were chosen by the use of the CEE definition presented by the *Institute National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques* (www.insee.fr/en/metadonnees/definition/c2055), where CEE is interpreted as the region consisting of those markets.
2. Due to study context and sample size, we allow for $p < 0.10$.

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About the authors

Aleksandra Gawel is Professor of economics at the Poznan University of Economics and Business. She is the author or co-author of over 120 publications, her research includes areas of female entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial education, innovation, business cycle, labour market and regional development. Aleksandra Gawel is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: aleksandra.gawel@ue.poznan.pl

Katarzyna Mroczek-Dąbrowska is Associate Professor of economics at the Poznan University of Economics and Business. She is the author or co-author of over 60 publications, her research includes areas of international business, institutional economics, transaction costs and uncertainty.

Malgorzata Bartosik-Purgat is Professor of economics at the Poznan University of Economics and Business. She is the author or co-author of over 60 publications, her research includes areas of acceptance of innovations in the consumers' decisions, significance of new media in corporate marketing and personal communication and cultural aspects in international business.