The Phenomenon of Women in Managerial Positions in Public Cultural Institutions



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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to explore the organisation of a support system for the professional development of women in public cultural institutions. The deliberations in this paper are based on qualitative research. The research included biographical interviews with ten women who currently work in managerial positions in public cultural institutions in Poland. This research strategy made it possible to get to know the experiences of women who reached managerial positions in their professional career in culture and to attempt an explanation of the observed phenomena as they are seen by people who were part of the system. Research has shown that the support system for the professional development of women in public cultural institutions seems to be largely based on informal solutions initiated within the personal support networks of women who are part of the system, its foundation being interpersonal relations. The main contribution of the paper is the interesting dataset gathered. Moreover, the proposed rhizome metaphor enriches the field of organizational research by suggesting new ideas that contribute to expanding on how we can see and perceive the complexity and variation in organizational phenomena of women in leadership positions and therefore opening up new interpretations and directions.

Keywords: women, cultural organizations, leadership, diversity in organizations

Introduction

On a global scale, researchers increasingly pay attention to the changes that have occurred in defining the organisational roles of women. It is worth underlying that women who were initially identified with lower administrative staff have begun to reach increasingly effectively for specialist and managerial positions in organisations Kadry kultury

(Klenke 2017; Olko, Filip 2016). At the same time, when analysing the structure of the economy, it can be noticed that there are sectors with a high level of feminization. The research run by UNESCO (2017) showed that in 58% of countries with available data (there were data collected from 197 countries) there are more women with cultural occupations compared to non cultural occupations. Additionally, for 69% of countries with available data, there were more self-employed women working in the culture than in other sectors of the economy in 2015. However, as studies show (e.g. Dodd 2012), this does not mean that professional development in this sector is easier for women and there is no dependence suggesting that they more often occupy senior managerial positions. Research conducted in 2021 in Polish public cultural institutions revealed a significant disparity in terms of accessibility of the most senior managerial positions to women. Managerial (executive) positions are by far more often occupied by men. For example, in cultural institutions controlled by the Polish Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sport, women occupy executive positions only in 12 out of the 71 institutions. This is despite the fact that in more than 90% of the examined public cultural institutions, women represent over 50% of all managerial, administrative and technical personnel (Góral 2021).

At the same time, researchers, e.g., Dodd (2012), Aluchna (2013), or Anheier (2009), note that women, who alongside their professional careers are strongly engaged in family life – by far more often than men (CBOS 2018) – are forced to look for and use additional, compared to men, solutions to reconcile their family obligations and their professional development in line with their individual expectations. Thus, the decision to examine the career paths of women in public cultural institutions. The following research problem was posed: How the organization of the support system for the professional development of women in public cultural institutions looks like?

This paper is based on qualitative research. The research included biographical interviews with ten women who currently work in managerial positions in public cultural institutions in one of the major Polish cities. The research is preliminary and serves as an introduction to further, more extensive studies on women in cultural organizations. The results of the research presented in this paper fill in the research gap of the evident lack of scientific data on the functioning of women in public cultural organisations. Caroline Criado Perez (2019) shows in her study that there exist hundreds of studies and analyses on various aspects of life, including organizational life, based on data about men as the default social actors. Meanwhile, the lack of data on women results in their systematic discrimination in all areas of life. Thus, it seems reasonable to explore the phenomenon of gender diversity in Polish public cultural institutions. Presentation of this phenomenon will contribute to deliberations on the organizational roles of women in the context of the changing understanding of the organizational roles of men and women in recent decades.

The paper is arranged in the following manner: The discussion begin with a theoretical reflection based on an analysis of the presence of women in cultural institutions, underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in organizations and the problem of reconciling professional, family and private life. Next, the methodological and results of own studies are presented. This is followed by a discussion and summary.

Literature review

Women in culture sector

It is worth noting that when analysing the structure of the economy, it can be noticed that there are sectors where the path of women to management positions seems faster and easier. An example of this is, among others, the culture sector. In their research, Helmut Anheier (2009) or David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2015) underline the high level of feminization of this sector. According to the latest data of the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS 2018) and studies conducted by Góral (2021) more than half of the organizations in the field of culture, entertainment, and leisure in Poland are women. Meanwhile, it should be noted that, according to GUS (2018) the structure of working men and women in general in terms of education is evidently distinct. Working women usually have higher education (40.3% of the total working population), followed by secondary education (31.6%). Most working men have secondary education (33.5%) or basic vocational education (32.6%). At the same time, the latest data show that, despite being better qualified, women on average earn less per hour of work than men (GUS 2018). They also less often occupy managerial positions in organizations.

It should be noted that, as studies show, public cultural institutions are considered "safe and quiet" workplaces, mainly because of the stability of employment, which is the main object of interest for women (Mc Tavish, Miller 2009; UNESCO 2017). Cultural organizations are also commonly perceived as a working space offering major freedom of activity, creativity, higher democratisation of management processes, and willingness to experiment, manifested for example, by the lack of fixed working hours or the possibility to work in a project mode (Banks, Gill et al. 2013), which, according to many researchers, helps engage the groups that are marginalised in the labour market, including women (UNESCO 2017).

Underrepresentation of women in leadership positions

Despite the common belief that the culture sector is "women friendly", Dodd (2012) notes that working models regarded to be friendly still seem to be problematic for women. This may hinder their professional development, especially in leadership positions in the sector. Importantly, the same problem exists in other sectors of the economy (Holden, McCarthy 2007).

Researchers note that, despite the implementation and promotion of anti-discrimination regulations and a growing awareness of the leadership skills of women, their share of leadership positions in organizations is increasing only at a slow pace (Lips, Keener 2007). According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, the indicator of women's share in leadership positions (not broken down into sectors) has been one of the slowest ones to change over the years, for example compared to such indicators as access to education, medical care or share in the labour market in general.

Researchers note that the lack of gender equality in managerial positions in organizations may have negative implications for organizations, such as the inability to benefit from a combination of different leadership styles offered by a representation of both men and women in managerial positions in organizations (Eagly, Carli 2003; Lips, Keener 2007; Aluchna, Krejner-Nowecka 2016). Weiler and Bernasek (2001) note that restricted access to managerial positions in organizations makes women choose self-employment over work for a corporation, where their possibilities of professional advancement are limited.

Although the scientific literature on the advantages of having women in managerial positions in organizations is quite limited, there are some studies showing that gender diversity in terms of leadership is beneficial for organizations. The research conducted by Adler (2001) and Catalyst (2004) in the USA revealed a positive correlation between the presence of women in managerial positions and the profitability of organizations. The results of the research conducted by Singh and Vinnicombe (2003) in the United Kingdom also highlight a positive correlation between the presence of women in executive positions in the examined organizations and their high market value. Kupczyk (2009), too, notes the importance of women managers for the success of organizations. Women are behind 83% of consumer purchases and companies that employ women, in particular in managerial positions, can better understand the gender complexity of the market and better tailor their products and services to the needs of potential customers.

Reconciling professional, family and private life

Researchers look for the reasons behind the inequality of access to managerial positions in organizations between men and women. One of the reasons might be the different organization of professional and personal life of women and it is noted that the imbalance in career development increases with age. More senior managerial positions are usually achieved in a later age (Skillset 2010; Aluchna 2013). Even though at early stages, the pace of career development is similar for men and women, disparities appear once women decide to have a family and men advance much faster. In many cases, as Orr and Stevenson (2018) note, this gap is never bridged. Working in managerial positions usually requires more time commitment in cultural institutions the working hours are often non-standard - which is a bigger challenge for women who, more than men, have to reconcile professional work and family obligations (Dodd 2012; CBOS 2018). Klenke (2017) notes that the reasons behind this lie in social barriers and the persisting stereotypical perception of the social roles of men and women. Their immediate manifestation is the division of house chores between men and women. Both Polish (CBOS 2018) and European (Eurostat 2018) studies reveal that women spend much more time on doing house chores and on family obligations, even if they are as professionally active as men. A research conducted by Lachowska (2010) shows that the work-family and family-work facilitation is much more intense for women. Similar conclusions were drawn by Chybicka and Zubrzycka (2015) from their research on female leadership in business organizations. Female respondents, much more often than men, noted that family roles impeded their professional functioning. Women are more often forced to choose between professional development and raising a family or have to look for organizational solutions to enable them to reconcile the two spheres of life (Eagly, Johnson 1990; Mullen 2009). However, some research showed that women often depreciate themselves and cut their wings on the way to professional development, which is a result of their own self-marginalization in society and workplaces (Chybicka, Zubrzycka 2015).

Considering this theoretical background, it seems necessary to fill in the research gap of the evident lack of scientific data on the functioning of women in organizations, especially in managerial positions. This is the purpose of the research project, the results of which are presented in this paper.

Method

The research problem is as follows: How the organization of the support system for the professional development of women in public cultural institutions looks like?

To solve this research problem, the following research questions were asked:

- What formal organizational solutions that empower women to develop professionally are used in public cultural institutions?
- What non-formal solutions that support the activity and professional development of women may be identified in public cultural institutions?
- What is the impact of organizational solutions on the development of women's career paths in cultural institutions?

Data were collected for this project through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women working in managerial positions in public cultural institutions (10 women). This research strategy made it possible to get to know the experiences of women who reached at least medium-level managerial positions in their professional career in culture and to attempt to explain the observed phenomena as they are seen by people who were part of the system (Welman, Kruger 1999; Wilhoit, Kisselburgh 2016). A feature that the research participants have in common was the assumption that all organisations they work for are characterized by above-average activity in the field of culture understood, among others, through in the light of the number of implemented cultural projects. My all respondents work in the same major Polish city. I intentionally invited women who started their career path in culture when they were still university students or shortly after graduation and were not yet restricted by the obligation to raise children or look after other dependents. All of my respondents decided to start a family while working in cultural institutions. Thus, it was possible during the conversations to reflect on their personal experiences of the impact the new obligations and the need to look for new solutions to reconcile different spheres of life and professional development had on their professional carriers. The data of research participants were anonymized. The research was conducted from February to September 2021. Each of the interviews lasted for 60 minutes on average. According to Bentz and Shapiro (1998), actual cognition and understanding of the experiences of participants of a certain phenomenon means capturing rich descriptions of the phenomena and their settings, in my interviews, I focused on how our respondents experienced working in culture, what was their professional path and what significance and value it had for them. My questions were "directed to the participants' experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about the theme in question" (Welman, Kruger 1999: 196). The interviews were recorded with the respondents' consent and later they were transcribed.

Name	Current position	Seniority in culture- -related jobs	Family
Source 1	Deputy director at a museum	20 years	1 child in preschool age; husband/ partner
Source 2	Department manager at a theatre	10 years	2 children in school and preschool age; husband/partner
Source 3	Director of a cultural centre	17 years	1 child; husband/partner
Source 4	Department manager at a museum	15 years	3 children in school and preschool age; husband/partner
Source 5	Department manager at a museum	8 years	1 child in preschool age; husband/ partner
Source 6	Deputy director at a theatre	12 years	2 children in school and preschool age; husband/partner
Source 7	Department manager at a cultural centre	6 years	1 child in preschool age; husband/ partner
Source 8	Department manager at a museum	5 years	1 child in the nursery; husband/ partner
Source 9	Deputy director at a cultural centre	9 years	1 child in school age; husband/partner
Source 10	Department manager at a museum	13 years	2 children in school and preschool age; husband/partner

Table 1. Research participants characteristics

Source: own study.

All data obtained from the interviews were coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Coding was conducted on three levels: open, axial, and selective (Strauss, Corbin 1998). First, open initial codes were created based on textual field data. Subsequently, axial coding was adopted to identify and integrate the relationships between codes and to create broader categories. Finally, selective coding was used to define and develop broader clusters of codes and to present a broader story. I coded the material to highlight moments where participants defined themselves and articulated related goals and/or confusions or tensions, gathering these as themes, such as what does it mean to be a woman and to work in a public cultural institution, to be a manager, what kind of support women can find in their workplaces and how to navigate through the work world. Based on this, a narrative emerged that highlighted the convoluted paths women are to follow in developing their professional careers. In the Findings section, interviewees are coded, as presented in Table 1.

It should be noted that the research presented in this paper is limited to some extent. First of all, it is preliminary: It reflects only a small section of the reality. They definitely to be more extensive, both in terms of their range and a more informed

understanding of the sources of the observed trends. This way, a broader picture of the examined phenomenon will be outlined.

Research results

All women participating in my research have worked for public cultural institutions from the beginning of their respective professional careers. Apart from that, three women have simultaneously worked for non-governmental organizations active in the field of culture. They all got involved in the culture sector during their university studies or shortly after graduating. Usually their reason to work in this sector was their personal interest in art and artistic creativity and their desire to develop in this direction. For my respondents, working in the culture sector was a conscious decision. For them, culture had always been important and that is where they saw their future.

Ever since I remember, I have always wanted to work in culture. Why? Because I love art, creativity... I wanted to be a part of that community, I saw opportunities for development there. Not only professional but also personal development. (Source 3)

The respondents noted that at the beginning of their respective professional careers, they enjoyed the organization of work in the culture, by which they meant flexible working hours linked to the schedule of the projects they worked on, the possibility to work outside the office, to travel, to work at weekends and, finally, working with people, especially artists and creators. In their opinion, their work reflected the "spirit of culture", which for them meant freedom and independence.

From the very start I worked for the exhibition department. I liked it when we would sit for hours, discussing new projects, meeting artists or curators, or organizing gallery openings... It did not matter to me back then how long I worked, my work was so engaging. (Source 8)

Work at a cultural centre often means working in the afternoon or evenings, that is, what our patrons need and what we have to accept. It was a matter of fact, I never gave it any second thoughts and I always enjoyed it. (Source 9)

For some of my respondents, the beginning of their work in culture was a time when work and private life were strongly interconnected, which was not a problem for anyone. My interviewees said that they themselves wanted to spend as much time "in the culture" as possible. They emphasized the fact that, having no family obligations back then, they could afford to have their work permeate their family and private life. They started having problems organizing their work and achieving their professional development goals only when they decided to start a family, which meant more family-related obligations.

Formal frames supporting women's professional development

The organizations where my respondents work implement various organizational solutions to promote the professional development of their personnel. These solutions address both work organization and practical support in professional development. Employees can work flexible hours or, in special situations, work from home or part time. These measures are addressed to all employees, not only women. Nonetheless, according to my respondents, women use these opportunities much more often than men, because of the need to reconcile professional and family obligations. This is also true for other formal types of supports, such as co-financing for training courses or post-graduate studies.

My museum offers quite a few solutions like that: flexible working hours, working from home in special situations (...) we also have a training fund. I have used all of these options more or less extensively. Sometimes they were very helpful. (Source 5)

I specifically remember that there was never any problem if I wanted to attend a course or training, even during my working hours. Our director was very supportive, which was important for me, because I could not attend training after work because of my children. (Source 4)

Some of my respondents, especially the ones with longer job seniority, mentioned that the situation has been changing in recent years. Currently, employers are more aware of the need to help their employees reconcile their professional and family life and notice the benefits of it. They, too, in their own families experience the need for support.

When I returned to work after my first maternity leave, I was confronted with a lack of understanding from my boss and an unwillingness to offer me flexible working hours or the option to work from home, even though the terms and conditions of work allowed such solutions. Only after his wife returned to her own work after a break to raise their son did he change his attitude. (Source 10)

Self-help and self-organization

According to my respondents, working in the culture sector is specific. Source 1 says "it is working on the 'creative matter'. It requires creativity in different fields and dimensions. It is not only about the process of designing certain activities, meaning their 'content', but also about organization." Creativity and flexibility are also manifested in designing other solutions to assist women in their workplaces. My respondents highlighted the importance of various informal solutions in their workplaces that make it much easier for them to reconcile their professional and family duties and to pursue their careers.

They all stressed the role of mutual help in the workplace as an important contributor to their functioning in the culture sector and their chances for professional development.

Once, I had to urgently collect my daughter from the nursery. It was a hard day and me and my colleagues had a project deadline. My colleague said she would take care of the project. She saved me back then. Clearly, when she was later in a hard spot, I would help her out, too. (Source 7)

When they closed down schools and kindergartens during the pandemic, we had this informal agreement, with the boss's consent, of course, that we could take our kids to work. All kids played in one of the rooms or in the park and we could do our job. (Source 8)

Source 2 and Source 4 also mentioned that female employees would sometimes bring their children to afternoon or evening gallery openings and they would take turns looking after them, if they had no other choice at a given moment.

Colleagues also frequently provided psychological support. Just being able to talk and to share one problem and not having to worry that one would be judged was essential for my respondents and a motivation to work and develop.

In general, we were all women at the cultural centre. We all either had or planned to have children. This is why we created an atmosphere of mutual help from the start. It was not only about providing specific help at work but about talking and expressing one's concerns. (Source 9)

Apart from organizational, formal and informal solutions, my respondents mentioned the way their time management has changed. They said that, as the number of their different duties increased, they learned to manage their time much more efficiently: They better planned their tasks, which made them more focused on the job at hand and able to complete it in less time, and their multitasking improved. Working and at the same time being responsible for picking children up from school and kindergarten, I manage my time much better than before. I know that at 3:30 p.m. I just have to leave work, no matter what, so I must finish my tasks until then. After, I have time for my children. (Source 4)

My respondents noted that, having to reconcile work and family life, they learned to delegate tasks and better collaborate with others. Even if before they had tended to complete their tasks on their own, having enough space and time for that, their new situation in life forced them to change this. This proved particularly valuable once they were promoted to managerial and executive positions in their respective organizations.

Task delegating and collaboration are a must. You cannot function without them. I understood that only when the time I could and wanted to devote to my work had drastically shrank. I learned to do that and do not regret it. I see how very helpful it is, especially now that I manage the education department and have more duties. (Source 2)

All my interlocutors confirmed that, were it not for the different formal and informal types of support in their workplaces, their career paths would be completely different. For most of them, they were an important addition to the organizational solutions they used outside their workplaces, such as the support of the husband/partner or other family members (mostly grandmothers), nurseries and kindergartens.

(...) This is the reason I did not resign from work, even though sometimes I really had enough. (Source 9)

My respondents stressed that family life and related duties significantly affected the dynamics of their professional life by reducing its pace but sometimes by increasing their motivation to develop.

The multiple family duties related to raising three children had a significant impact on my professional career. I am happy that I still managed to achieve quite a lot – although without children, I would have probably gone much further. I had an opportunity to change my work, but I did not go for it, because I thought I would not manage. I do not regret it, but things would probably different. (Source 4)

Source 3 mentioned that she started thinking about professional advancement and career only after her family situation had stabilized and her daughter had become self-sufficient. Although she had a friendly environment at the cultural centre where she worked, she felt ready to develop professionally only after her workload at home had reduced.

Discussion. Professional development and rhizomatic thinking

Having described the research results, I would like to go on to present and discuss the results of the analysis carried out.

Culture is one of the most feminized sectors of the economy, alongside the social and education sectors. Women dominate among the personnel of cultural organizations and institutions (UNESCO 2017; Góral 2021). My respondents stressed and other studies in this field (e.g. Dodd 2012; Holden, McCarthy 2007) reveal that, for the 'people of culture', cultural organizations are not only a typical workplace but also a way to live. Passionate about culture and artistic creativity, they can spend a lot of time working, often in non-standard hours or in their free time. This is generally accepted and regarded as normal. Such a working mode determines the development of a career path in this sector (Holden, McCarthy 2007), as the professional and private life become start to invade one another and 'compete' for time, as my research suggests. As long as one has no or few personal and family obligations, this is not problematic, as my research has shown. At that time, the professional careers of men and women are similar and the gap only begins to widen with age. Disparities appear once women decide to start a family while men continue to move fast on their careers. Women usually achieve senior managerial positions later in life and with more dedication on their part (Skillset 2010; Aluchna 2013). In many cases, as Orr and Stevenson (2018) note, this gap is never bridged. Only one of my respondents occupied an executive position (the most senior possible) in the cultural institution where she worked. Most respondents stopped at medium managerial positions (department managers). To be successful and to 'survive' all my research participants had to make trade-offs between stability and change, predictability and flexibility, unity and diversity, coherence and ambiguity and efficiency and adaptiveness (Espedal 2021). The challenge, however, was to understand how to balance these conflicting demands. Accordingly, all respondents emphasized the importance of various forms of support that enabled their professional development.

Each of my respondents, to pursue their professional development and at the same time efficiently reconcile their job and private obligations, had to use various formal and informal organizational solutions available in their respective workplaces. Apart from that, my respondents used assistance available outside their workplaces such as nurseries or kindergartens or the help of family members or friends. As regards their workplaces, the informal solutions developed together with colleagues and with people from outside their work – family and friends – were the most important for my respondents. They created organizational networks that changed over time, depending on the needs of their members. Importantly, those networks were initiated and developed by all participants, as was needed. The *rhizome* concept proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1988) was used in an attempt to understand their nature. The researchers in their study titled "A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and

schizophrenia" described and discussed using the *rhizome* metaphor. In Deleuze and Guattari's work, *rhizome* is the philosophical counterpart of the botanical term. Rhizome is a kind of plant that pops out of the ground over an expanding area, giving the impression that many separate plants are emerging in close proximity to one another, but in fact these ostensibly individual "plants" are parts of one big plant, and are interconnected by stems that grow horizontally under or along the ground. They spread with no direction, no beginning, and no end (Espedal 2021).

Deleuze and Guattari in their work stress the horizontal network connections that are being connected within the organizational structures that are being formed. The first is connectivity and heterogeneity, which states that every part of the system is connected to another part in any possible way. With this we may refer to the various relationships that are being formed by women in their environment to reconcile work and family life, both in the professional and private spheres of life (Granovetter 2005). The second characteristic is multiplicity. In a rhizome, all parts are connected to one another and then these to others, and these others to a greater number of others. It is distributed without a centre. It has no beginning or end. It is nomadic, where the process is as important as the outcome (Braidotti 2012). It can be explained as the support in the network appears, when and by whom it's needed. It is, as underlined in my research, based on relationships and human connections. Although it includes also formal, systematic solutions, it has a grassroot nature and as such is being developed.

It is worth underlying that the *rhizome*, as an organizational metaphor that was proposed in this discussion, does not provide normative ideas about organizational structures created by women to balance the conflicting demands coming from their professional and private spheres of life. However, the rhizome seems to be an interesting organizational metaphor that enriches the field of organizational research by suggesting new and interesting ideas that contribute to expanding how we can see and perceive the complexity and variation in organizational phenomena of women in leadership positions and therefore opening up new interpretations and directions.

Conclusions

The research revealed that, despite the numerous changes that have occurred in recent decades in terms of the perception of organizational roles, especially the organizational roles of women, women's share in managerial positions in public cultural institutions is still disproportionately low. Despite social and political efforts to ensure full gender equality in the labour market, women remain in a disadvantaged position regarding professional development. Despite constituting a vast majority of the personnel of cultural institutions, women are underrepresented in managerial positions, specifically in senior managerial positions.

The respondents of the research conducted for this paper feel that the support system for the professional development of women in public cultural institutions seems to be largely based on informal solutions initiated within the personal support networks of women who are part of the system, its foundation being interpersonal relations. My interviewees stressed the crucial role of friendly relations in the workplace for their ability to reconcile professional work and family obligations. The help offered by family and friends outside the workplace was also an important contributing factor. The respondents used the available solutions to develop extensive organizational networks to enable their professional development. Those networks had the characteristic horizontal 'rhizome' dynamics that involved dynamic horizontal growth in a strong relation with the community. These networks were founded on interpersonal bonds developed through shared experiences. They are illustrated in the paper by the 'rhizome' concept proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. For my respondents, the scope and development of those networks were crucial for their career paths. They believed that without such networks, they would not be able to engage in new projects or undertake new challenges of professional advancement. Meanwhile, those networks enabled my respondents to perform their other duties arising from their social roles (of wife, mother, daughters).

As regards organization and management science, the problem outlined in this paper falls within the interest area of diversity management in organizations (Gross-Gołacka 2018; Bassett-Jones 2005; Betters-Reed, Moore 1995). The research presented in this paper contributes to a discussion on what impact the phenomenon of diversity (including gender diversity) in organizations has on entire societies, the organizations themselves as well as individuals, by forming certain standards of action and conduct (Greene, Kirton 2015). It should be noted, however, that the research presented in this paper is limited to some extent. First of all, it reflects only a small section of the reality. They definitely to be more extensive, both in terms of their range and a more informed understanding of the sources of the observed trends. This way, a broader picture of the examined phenomenon will be outlined, including a review of the situation in other economic sectors.

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