

# More Women First Chairs

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*Absence of evidence  
is not evidence of absence.*

— Carl Sagan

# First Chairs at Trial

*More Women Need Seats at the Table*

## REPORT

American Bar Foundation  
& ABA Commission on Women  
2015

## AUTHORS

Stephanie Scharf  
& Roberta Liebenberg

## METHODOLOGY

First empirical study  
on gender disparities  
among lead counsel at trial

## Key findings

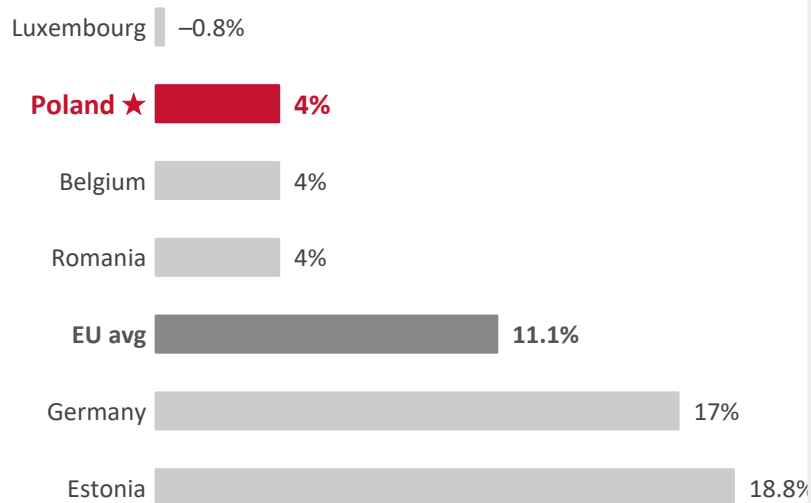
- Women are significantly underrepresented as lead counsel in civil and criminal proceedings
- The disparity persists regardless of seniority and professional track record
- **Lack of data = invisibility of the problem**

# The Gender Gap in Numbers

EU overview — Gender Pay Gap & Women in Leadership (Eurostat 2024)

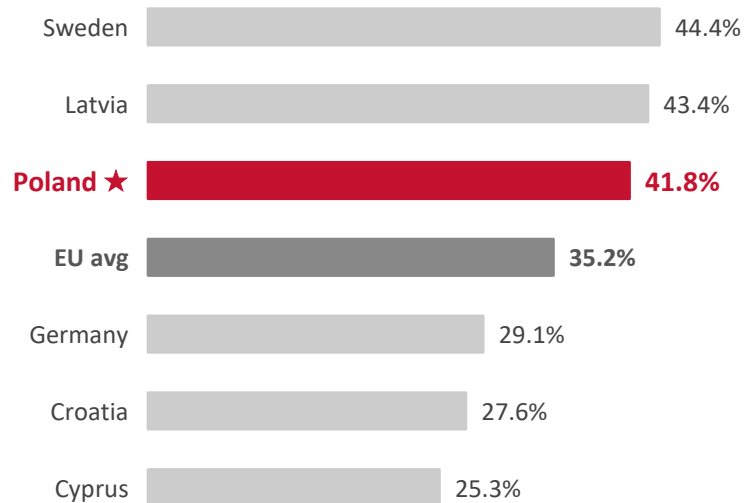
## GENDER PAY GAP

(unadjusted, gross hourly earnings)



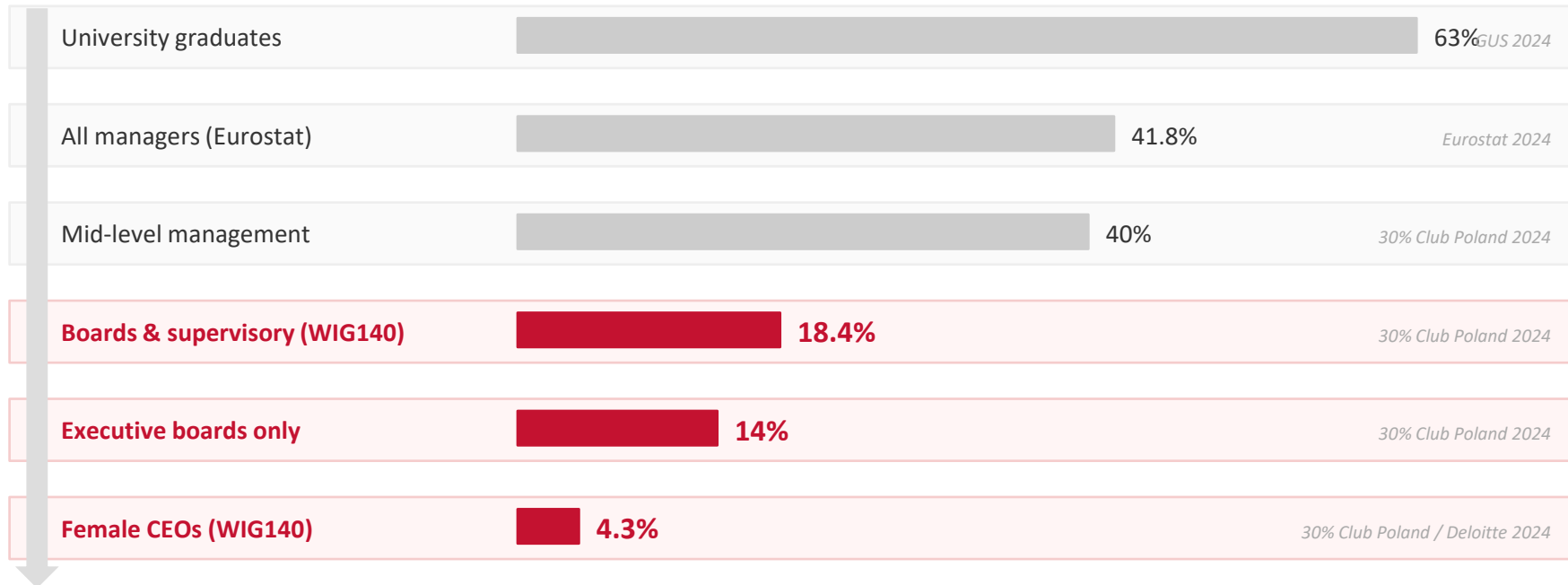
## WOMEN IN MANAGERIAL POSITIONS

(share of total managers)



# The Devil Is in the Details

*Poland's leadership paradox: the higher the position, the fewer women*



*Poland ranks 3rd in the EU for women in management — but only 19 companies (out of ~400 listed) have a female CEO. In 1 in 5 companies, every board seat is male. The data looks good until you look closer.*

# Poland: No First Chair

*The concept does not exist — and neither does the data*

## WHAT EXISTS

- Polish Bar Council (NRA) Women's Committee
- NRA Equal Treatment Commission
- General diversity declarations in bar association communications

## WHAT IS MISSING

- No tracking of who holds leading roles in proceedings
- No empirical data on women's courtroom roles
- No systematic research on gender in trial advocacy
- No equivalent to the ABA First Chairs report

*If you don't count it, it doesn't count.*

# Women in the Legal Profession

*What the research tells us — Women in Law / PwC Report 2022 (n = 577)*

**85%**

of female lawyers reported their  
competence  
being questioned or undermined

**61%**

reported experiencing  
mobbing in the workplace

**~30%**

of law firm partners  
are women

*Despite women comprising the majority of law school graduates, leadership roles remain disproportionately male.*

# High-Profile Cases: Who Leads?

*A review of landmark Polish criminal, political and financial proceedings*

## THE DOMINANT PATTERN

Skóra case	attorney Chojniak
Amber Gold (prosecution)	attorney Komorowski
Palikot case	attorney Dubois & attorney Malicki
Czarnecki case	attorney Giertych
Kamiński / Wąsik case	attorney Zuchmantowicz
Szczyrk explosion (2019)	all defence counsel: men

## EXCEPTIONS

### **attorney Anna Żurawska**

One of defence counsels  
in Amber Gold case

### **attorney Agnieszka Walczak**

Counsel at  
Palikot's arrest

*The absence of women in leading roles in high-profile cases is not coincidental — it reflects a systemic pattern.*

# Where Women Do Appear as Lead Counsel

*Patterns observed in media coverage — not yet measured empirically*

## CHF / Franking Cases

Consumer litigation against banks over Swiss franc mortgage clauses. A notably higher presence of women as lead counsel — possibly linked to the client base and the mass-litigation model enabling newer entrants.

*△ Observation based on media & practitioner visibility*

## Animal Rights

The most visible specialists are women: attorney Karolina Kuszlewicz (author of the leading commentary on the Animal Protection Act) and attorney Katarzyna Topczewska ('the animals' lawyer'). A values-driven niche with a distinctly female public face.

*△ Observation based on media coverage*

## Family Law & Children's Rights

Divorce, custody, child maintenance and parental authority proceedings show high female representation at the bar — though largely invisible in high-profile media coverage, and structurally different from criminal or commercial lead roles.

*△ Observation based on market & media patterns*

## Personal Injury

Attorney Jolanta Budzowska is the defining figure of personal injury practice in Poland — the first lawyer to specialise in this field and the person who shaped it as a discipline. A rare example of a woman who built and owns an entire practice area.

*△ Named figure — recognised in legal media*

*These patterns are hypotheses, not findings. Their absence from the data is itself the problem — Poland has no systematic research on gender and lead counsel roles.*

# Causes & Remedies

*Why it happens — and what can change it*

## CAUSES

### Lower risk appetite

Women are less likely to put themselves forward for high-stakes lead roles. This is not lack of ability — it is a learned reluctance to claim space, rooted in how girls are socialised to defer rather than assert.

### Imposter syndrome

Women disproportionately believe they are 'not qualified enough' — even when objectively overqualified. Research consistently links this to gendered upbringing: girls are praised for compliance, boys for ambition.

### Extended maternity leave

Poland offers generous parental leave — yet in practice it is taken almost exclusively by women. Career gaps at the associate-to-partner transition stage are disproportionately female, compounding long-term exclusion from high-profile mandates.

## REMEDIES

### Rethinking how we raise girls

The most structural remedy is the earliest one. Girls should be raised to take up space, embrace risk and see ambition as a virtue — not a liability. This is a generational shift, but it begins at home and in schools.

### Mentorship from women who lead

Women who have achieved lead roles in litigation have a unique responsibility: to make that path visible, to share war stories, and to actively sponsor younger women for high-profile mandates — not just offer encouragement.

### Equalising parental leave in practice

The right exists. The cultural norm does not. Normalising parental leave for fathers — and penalising firms that penalise women for taking it — would remove one of the most concrete structural barriers at the critical career stage.

*None of these remedies require waiting for the law. Some require only a decision.*

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# The first step is to count.

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*If Poland does not measure who leads in court,  
it cannot know what needs to change.*

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