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CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ACTIVITIES IMPLEMENTED BY COMPANIES IN THE POWER SECTOR IN THE OPINION OF INDIVIDUAL CUSTOMERS

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the interest in the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has grown among both researchers and entrepreneurs. These activities are often carried out to improve the competitive position. However, it is impossible to make use of the concept of CSR without being involved in cooperation with entities present on the market. The cooperation of stakeholders¹ takes place, for example, through self-regulatory initiatives, such as, the Codes of Good Practice or the Codes of Ethics and as part of the companies' cooperation and dialogue with local environment and customers. Thanks to CSR, companies can, while working with stakeholders, contribute to the reconciliation of economic, social and environmental goals [Energy Regulatory Office 2008]. More often Polish companies from the energy sector engage in CSR activities. Therefore, it seems relevant to look for the answer

¹ Stakeholders are individuals or groups which may influence or are influenced by companies' actions through their products, strategies and manufacturing processes, management systems and procedures [Rok 2004, p. 19].

to the question about the perception of these activities among the entities to which they are addressed, both for pragmatic and cognitive reasons. The study focuses on one of the major groups of recipients – consumers. The aim of this paper is to describe individual consumers' (representatives of households – consumers of electric energy) perception of CSR activities in the power sector in Poland. The realization of the goal was possible thanks to the systematization of CSR activities on the basis of scientific and trade publications and empirical verification of the reception of these activities.

1. THE CONCEPT OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In the literature of the subject, one can find references to different ways of defining the concept of CSR. The transition from its objective presentation to a subjective one can be noted. In the first case, theories and research focus on defining the area and the way of implementing CSR activities, in the second – the focus is on the recipients of these activities. In early scientific concepts, the emphasis was put on objective understanding of corporate social responsibility. CSR initiatives were defined, as part of these concepts, as social, economic, legal or discretionary² commitments [Maignan, Ferrell 2004, pp. 3–19; Carroll 1979, pp. 497–505]. In other research currents, CSR was understood as actions taken as a result of ethical reasons or as a management process [Dąbrowski 2011a, pp. 2–9]. The subjective approach to CSR provides answers to the question of to whom companies are socially responsible, most often taking into account the perspective of stakeholders [Maignan, Ferrell 2004, pp. 3–19; Dąbrowski 2011a, pp. 2–9].

The references to the concept of corporate social responsibility can also be found in the studies on the issues of individual industries and sectors. In the documents from the Energy Regulatory Office (ERO), CSR is characterized as a strategy which harmoniously combines ethical and ecological aspects of business activity with its dominant attribute, that is, effectiveness, great openness, transparency of action, fairness to customers (the calculation of prices, quality of supply and service) and in contacts with other stakeholders (including employees, shareholders, suppliers, local community), self-limitation of monopolistic advantage [*Spółeczna odpowiedzialność przedsiębiorstw energetycznych w świetle III badań ankietowych* 2011].

² Discretionary activities are connected with the companies' voluntary activity oriented to the society. These activities go beyond the binding norms and values in this society [Dąbrowski 2011, p. 3].

In the literature of the subject, one can observe the researchers' interest in the perception of CSR among individual consumers [Brown, Dacin 1997, pp 68–84; Sen, Bhattacharya 2001, pp. 225–243] and marketing practitioners [Singhapakdi, Vitell, Rallapalli, Kraft 1996, pp. 1131–1140 cited in Maignan, Ferrell 2004, pp. 3–19]. The research on specific dimensions of CSR is also undertaken. It includes, for instance, supporting charity actions [Barone, Miyazaki, Taylor 2000, pp. 248–262] or the environmental protection [Drumwright 1994, pp. 1–19].

On the basis of the analysis of the mentioned concepts, it was assumed that CSR activities will be regarded as part of the four areas of responsibility, that is the market, employees, the environment and local communities. These areas can be related to the so-called levels of social involvement of companies which was shown schematically in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The levels of social involvement of the company

Source: own elaboration based on Rok 2004, p. 46.

The basic level of involvement relates to the main activity of the company and includes the effects of this activity on all interested parties. The activities at the basic level are an element of business activity regulated by the law and, therefore, are of an obligatory nature. The remaining levels include voluntary activity which covers commercial undertakings in the social environment (e.g. sponsorship of culture, education or sports), investments in the local community (e.g. cooperation with social organizations, corporate volunteering) and philanthropic activity (such as grants for philanthropic projects [Rok 2004, pp. 1–74].

When engaging in CSR activities, companies expect the effects in the form of improvement of the image and reputation and an increase in profitability and value [Marcinkowska 2010, pp. 7–10; Chodyński 2007, pp. 21–23; Dąbrowski 2011a, pp. 2–9].

2. CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE POWER SECTOR IN POLAND

As already mentioned, in recent years there has been a significant increase in CSR activities implemented by power companies in Poland. The research of the Energy Regulatory Office³ shows that companies from this sector successively develop their own strategies for CSR. In 2010, more than a half of the companies (52%) did not have their own developed formal CSR strategy and only 14% of them claimed they had it. A year later, these proportions were reversed and they were 42% and 16%, respectively. Even more power companies claimed they had included CSR principles in their business strategies (42% in 2009, 65% in 2010 and 84% in 2011).

An equally significant increase appeared in the case of adoption of voluntary initiatives and self-regulations referring to CSR. In 2010, only 30% of power companies claimed they adopted self-regulation and in the next year – more than twice as many (75%) [*Spółeczna odpowiedzialność przedsiębiorstw energetycznych w świetle III badań ankietowych 2011*].

Actions promoting CSR in the power sector are, to a great extent, stimulated by the Energy Regulatory Office thanks to the initiatives, such as, regulations, spread of knowledge about the energy market as part of informational and educational activities or the establishment of *the Team for the Coordination of Works on the Issues of Corporate Social Responsibility of Power Companies in ERO* named *The recipient zone in the power industry*. The enumerated actions have been carried out by the Energy Regulatory Office from 2007 to the present and are aimed at end consumers [Energy Regulatory Office 2009].

The benefits of the introduction of CSR strategies include: increasing consumer and stakeholder loyalty, improvement of relations with the local community, raising the level of organizational culture of companies and ensuring permanent development and growth of the value of companies [Energy Regulatory Office 2008].

The examples of the tools by the use of which power industry companies engage in CSR activities in specific areas were shown in Figure 2 as a reference to the previously discussed concept of CSR.

³ The study *Spółeczna odpowiedzialność przedsiębiorstw energetycznych w świetle III badań ankietowych* was conducted by the Energy Regulatory Office (ERO) in Poland in the years 2009–2011. The study included from 61% (in 2009) to 90% (in 2011) of the power companies on the base of ERO granted concessions. They represented the energy industry sectors, such as, electric power, gas industry, heat engineering. The results of the studies concerning the energy sector were used in this article.

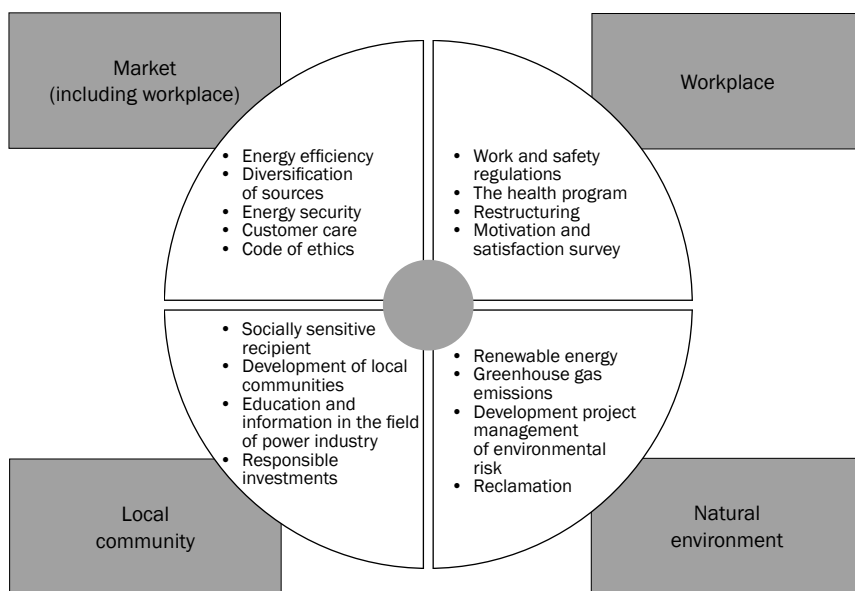


Figure 2. The areas of the implementation of CSR activities by power companies

Source: own elaboration on the basis of PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010.

3. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND SAMPLE

The results of the studies involving individual consumers [Sen, Bhattacharya 2001, pp. 225–243] suggest that the awareness of the company's CSR activities among consumers is a key factor limiting the process of gaining benefits from them. The consumers' skills concerning correct identification of CSR activities of the companies the products of which they consume are actually insignificant.

As part of the presented studies, the focus was primarily on establishing the level of awareness of the implementation of CSR activities by power companies and their assessment among individual electricity users (household representatives of both sexes).

The study was completed in July 2011.⁴ The sample was purposely selected. It was decided to analyse the opinions of consumers of electric en-

⁴ The presented studies are part of the research project entitled *Identification and assessment of CSR in the power sector in Poland* developed at the Institute of Economics and Management at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków as part of the article's authors' own research conducted at the turn of June and July 2011.

ergy in Malopolskie Voivodeship. 140 respondents took part in the study. 136 correctly completed questionnaires were classified for further analysis (Table 1 includes research sample characteristics).

Table 1. The distributions of the most important metrical variables

Variable	Values	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Female	66	48
	Male	70	51
Place of residence	Countryside	56	41
	City up to 100 thousand residents	29	21
	City above 100 thousand up to 500 thousand residents	9	7
	City above 500 thousand residents	42	31
Per capita net income	Below PLN 1000 / person	32	24
	PLN 1001–2000 / person	51	37
	PLN 2001–3000 / person	30	22
	Above PLN 3000 / person	17	12
	No data	6	5
Professional links with the sector	Current professional work	3	2
	Previous professional work	10	7
	No professional links	107	79
	No data	16	12

N = 136

Source: own elaboration.

Most respondents identify the companies from the power sector only as suppliers of electricity. Their contacts with energy companies are limited to paying bills (79% of respondents), contacts with Customer Service (14%) and completing the formalities of connecting to the electricity supply (7%). 3% of respondents indicated that there is no direct contact with the companies from the examined sector.

4. THE RESPONDENTS' EXPECTATIONS OF THE COMPANIES' CSR ACTIVITIES IN THE POWER SECTOR

CSR activities are, among other things, to increase the competitiveness of companies which engage in them, provided that the recipients are able to identify these activities and assess the involvement in them as a valuable attribute matching their expectations.

The results of the conducted studies indicated that in the range of opinions concerning basic objectives realized by the entities of the analysed sector, the respondents notice, above all, the efforts to make and keep a stable profit (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The main objectives of the companies in the power sector in the opinion of responders

N = 342 (dichotomous question)

Source: own elaboration.

More than a half of the respondents (78 people, 57%) believes that companies should engage in ecological activities. What is important is that respondents do not combine the objectives of the companies with ethical actions – these categories received the smallest number of indications.

Most respondents, in their assessment of power companies, did not take into account the activities carried out for the sake of corporate social responsibility. Respondents point mainly to typical market criteria referring to the price (66 cases, 49%) and the service provided (Figure 4).

CSR activity factor which received the greatest number of indications as one of the evaluation criteria of power companies was the contribution to the environmental protection (45 people, 33%) which confirms earlier observations. Expectations concerning the involvement in activities aimed at the widely understood environmental protection are consistent with the answers to the question about the type of actions which should be taken into account by companies from the power sector. Care for the environment and the resulting development and implementation of new technologies were the most often chosen categories connected with CSR (Figure 5). More-



Figure 4. The criteria of the assessment of companies from the power sector used by the responders

N = 373 (multiple choice question)

Source: own elaboration.

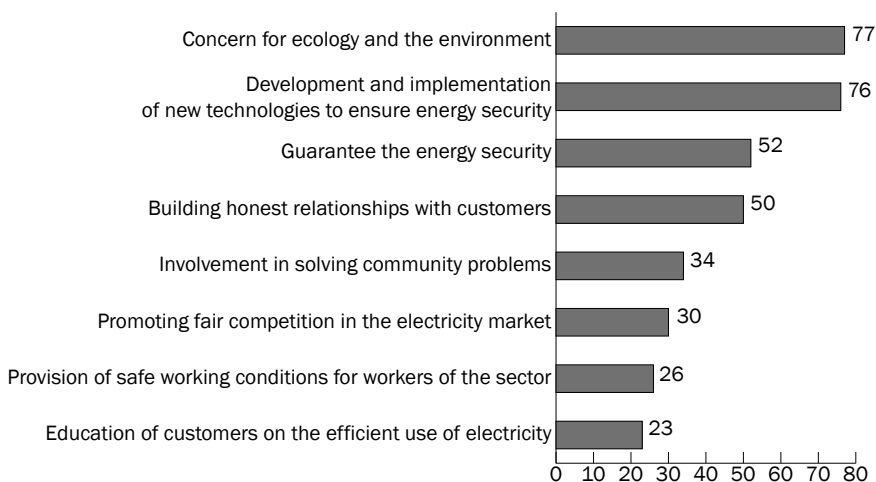


Figure 5. The responders' expectations of CSR activities in the power sector

N = 368 (multiple choice question)

Source: own elaboration.

over, respondents emphasized the importance of commitments made by the companies to individual consumers, expecting to build honest relationships with customers and ensuring energy security. Interestingly enough, respondents expect activities concerning solving problems connected with environmental protection believing at the same time that the activities in the field of environmental education are unnecessary among recipients (the lowest number of indications – 23 persons, 17%).

5. THE FAMILIARITY WITH CSR ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT BY POWER COMPANIES AMONG RESPONDERS

Individual customers are one of the groups of stakeholders for which companies engage in CSR activities using various tools. The results demonstrated very low awareness of this type of activities at the cognitive level. The familiarity with the concept of CSR among respondents in the case of theoretical knowledge and the skills of identifying actual activities of the company are extremely low. Only 26 respondents (19%) made an attempt to define what corporate social responsibility is by combining it with activities aimed at protecting the environment and stakeholders (employees, co-workers and customers). A significant part of respondents (43 people, 32%) had difficulty determining whether the entities in the examined sector engage in CSR activities. Among those who undertook to determine their frequency, only 45 (33%) respondents stated that such activities are frequently carried out (including 7 answers *very often*). Such a low level of awareness of these activities probably explains why they are not used as a basis for the assessment of the companies in the power sector.

As mentioned earlier, CSR actions are often classified as part of the four areas, namely work environment, a local community, the market and the natural environment. In the case of the presented studies, this typology was used in order to determine the level of respondents' knowledge about each category of these activities.

The greatest difficulty for the respondents was the group of activities concerning relations between companies and workers. Respondents are not aware of the implementation of activities aimed at improving working conditions and protecting workers and do not connect them with CSR activities. In the case of all specific categories which were examined, the responses *I don't know* were dominant (Figure 6). On average, 88 (65%) respondents

reported the lack of knowledge about the activities in this area and 10% were quite convinced that such activities are not carried out. Only in the case of the assessment of the care of industrial safety, 50 (37%) respondents claimed that companies in the sector carry out such activities.

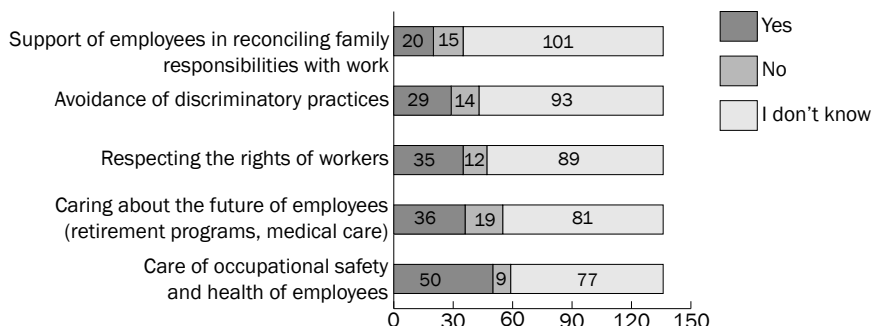


Figure 6. Familiarity with CSR activities in the work environment from the point of view of responders

Source: own elaboration.

The inability to indicate whether a given CSR activity from the field of the relations with workers is carried out by power companies is clearly evident in the case of category of supporting workers in their attempt to reconcile family responsibilities with work. It was decided to determine whether these doubts concern both sexes to the same extent (Figure 7).

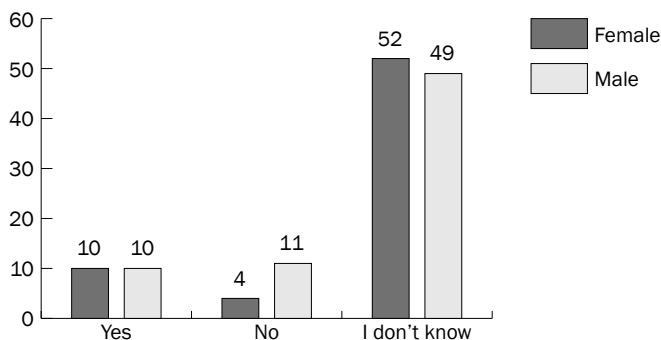


Figure 7. The support of workers in reconciling family responsibilities with work in the opinion of responders

Source: own elaboration.

There appeared little variation in the assessments of the presence of the discussed activity depending on sex. Males showed greater scepticism about the companies' support of employees in reconciling work with family responsibilities; at the same time much fewer females think that such actions are not implemented. The possible interpretation of this observation may be the stereotypical division of gender roles in Polish society, in which, males pay no attention to such practices.

In the case of the remaining specific categories of activities, no significant variation of the responses depending on sex was observed except for men's characteristic tendency to express their opinion. They more often opted for the presence or absence of a given activity in comparison to females whose responses were dominant in the category indicating the lack of sufficient knowledge or the urge to avoid responding (most answers – *I don't know*).

The second analysed area focused on determining the level of knowledge about customer service (the supplier and customer market). In this category of activities respondents showed greater ease of identifying CSR activities probably due to the fact that they themselves were their recipients (Figure 8).

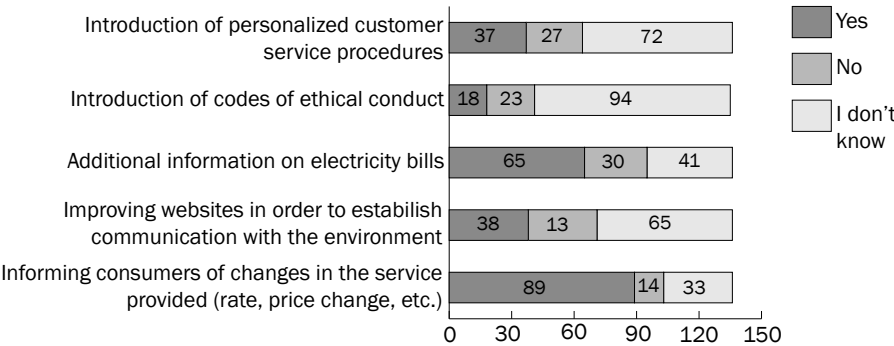


Figure 8. The familiarity with CRS activities within customer service among respondents

Source: own elaboration.

Respondents agreed that power companies carry out activities connected with informing them of the changes in the service provided, including those placed on bills for their services. However, they had huge doubts about the existence of the codes of ethical conduct which regulate the principles of customer service (69% of respondents were unable to clarify their views on this subject).

The tested connections between the variation in awareness of the specific activities in the area of customer service and sex revealed trends similar to those from the previously analysed area (the activities in the work environ-

ment). Females and males similarly assess individual activities. However, women are more equivocal and more often choose the answer *I don't know*. It is worth noting that in the case of the assessment of current informing about the changes in the service provided only 2 women (1%) claimed that these actions do not occur (Figure 9). This may be due to the fact that women are more often burdened with the necessity to pay bills and hence their slightly greater certainty of the presence of this category of activities in comparison to men (12 – 9% responses *The activity does not occur*).

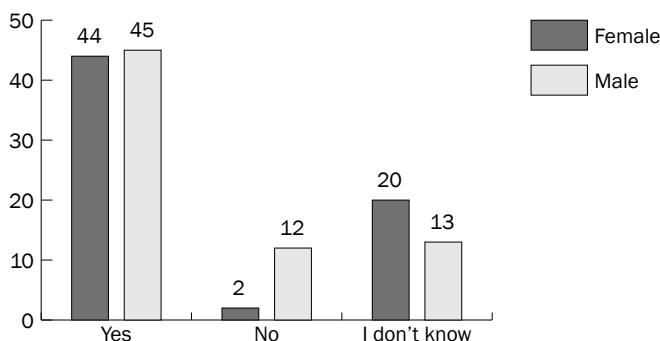


Figure 9. Informing customers about changes in the service provided from the point of view of respondents

Source: own elaboration.

Another analysed area referred to different activities for the sake of the widely understood welfare of the local community. Although the respondents are indirectly the recipients of these activities (especially those with commercial overtones, such as, sponsorship), they had difficulty in identifying their presence (Figure 10). It is interesting that as many as 29 people (21%) believe that companies do not engage in charitable activities.

The greatest number of doubts in the opinion of the responders was raised by the cooperation with public (self-governmental) institutions (72% of the responses *I don't know*) and corporate volunteering (70% of the responses *I don't know*). According to the research results, both men and women were hesitant about the implementation of this kind of activities. However, here (similarly to the previously discussed trend in the distribution of variables depending on sex), women's indications were dominant. Men more often pointed to the presence or non-presence of the activities (Figure 11).

The last area of activities referred to the environmental protection initiatives. Only two categories of activities in this area were examined (Figure 12). It turned out that, despite the previously identified expectations of the implementation of measures to protect the environment, the respondents

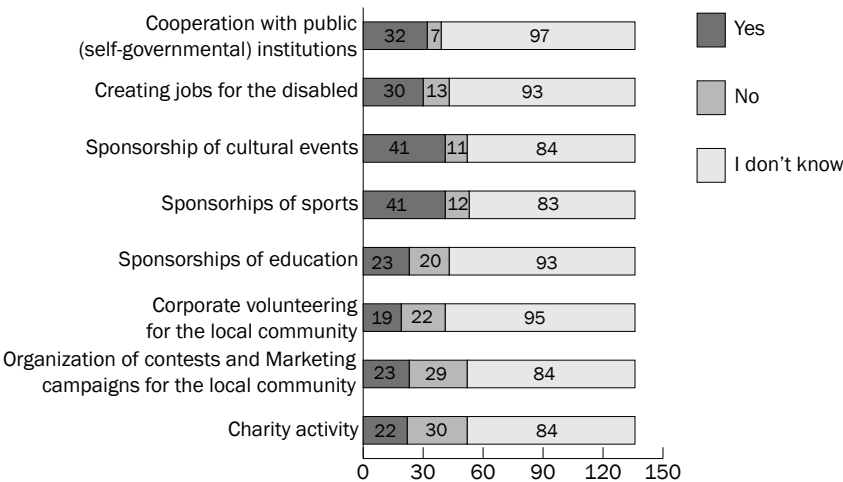


Figure 10. The familiarity with CSR activities as part of the activities for the sake of the local community among responders

Source: own elaboration.

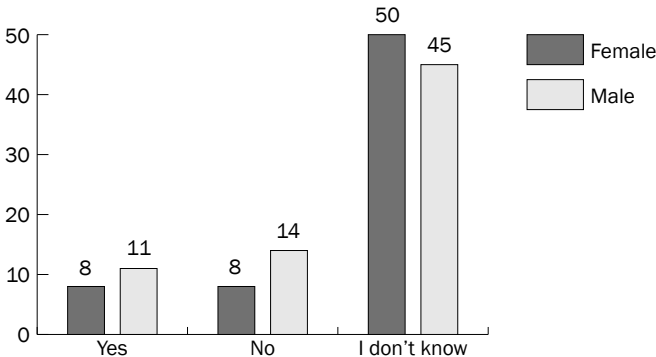


Figure 11. Corporate volunteering for the sake of the local community in the opinion of the respondents with the division into sex

Source: own elaboration.

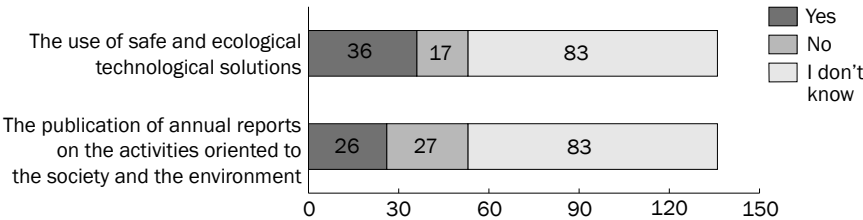


Figure 12. The familiarity with CSR activities oriented to environmental protection among responders

Source: own elaboration.

are unable to name any of them. They only took a position on the categories presented in the research tool and, thus, demonstrated that they are not aware of their implementation (83 people, 61%).

6. THE ASSESSMENT OF CSR ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT BY THE COMPANIES FROM THE POWER SECTOR

As part of the conducted studies, respondents were asked to assess CSR activities carried out by the companies from the power sector. The respondents assessed them as average (the average of the indications 3.15), which may be connected with low awareness of the activities carried out by the companies in this sector. No significant differences were noticed between women's (3.15) and men's (3.16) evaluations.

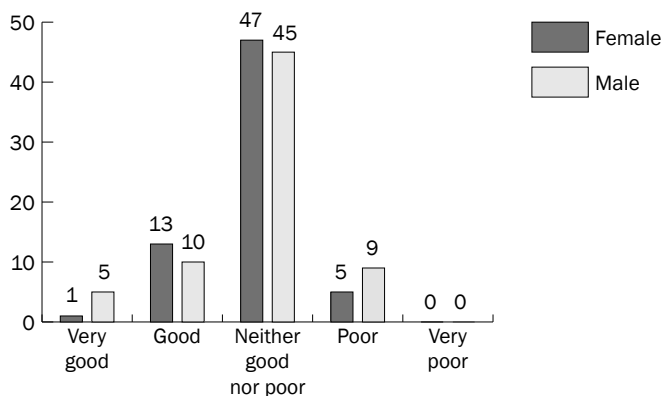


Figure 13. The assessment of CSR activities carried out by the companies from the power sector in the opinion of respondents

N = 135

Source: own elaboration.

Only in the case of positive assessments, the distributions indicate that sex diversifies assessments (Figure 13). Males chose an extremely positive assessment while females on the contrary. None of the respondents assessed the level of the service very negatively. In comparison to this, positive assessments appeared more often.

Similar results were obtained by asking respondents to assess the companies' involvement in CSR activities. In both cases, the respondents assessed these activities as being at a moderate level (average 3.3), males –3.2, females –3.35 (Figure 14).

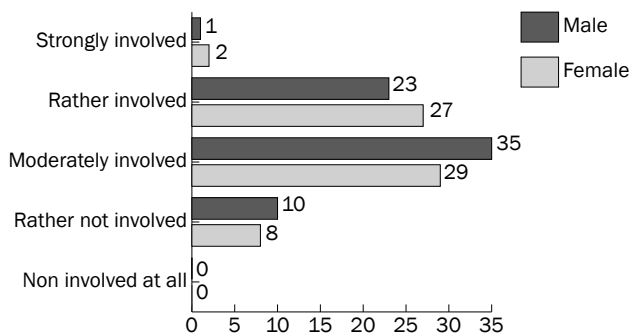


Figure 14. The assessment of involvement in CSR activities carried out by the companies from the power sector in the opinion of respondents

N = 135

Source: own elaboration.

The results show that females evaluate the companies' involvement in CSR as better. Importantly, neither males nor females pointed to the total lack of involvement in this sphere of activity.

It was assumed that the assessment of CSR activities can correlate with the assessment of the quality of the service provided, which would be consistent with the results of earlier research on the basis of which the creation and implementation of CSR activities were recommended to those who offer a high standard of service [Vlachos et al. 2009, pp. 170–180]. The results confirmed this correlation (Figure 15).

Respondents who assessed the level of service quality as low also negatively assessed CSR activities carried out by the companies from the sector. However, in the case of the respondents satisfied with the purchased service, there appeared a trend towards a higher assessment of CSR activities. This can be explained by the *halo effect* in which a positive evaluation of the purchased service translates into a favourable attitude towards other activities carried out by the company.

The intentions ascribed to the activities carried out by companies were also examined. For this reason, respondents were asked to assess the activities using a semantic scale (Figure 16). The average assessment rate was most often chosen which may result from a small amount of knowledge about the activities, as shown above.

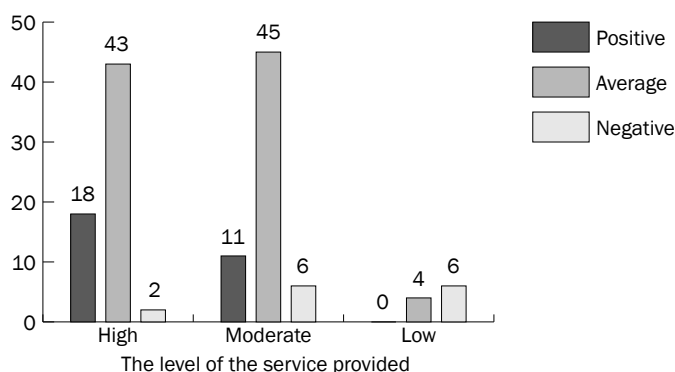


Figure 15. The assessment of CSR activities of power companies vs. the level of satisfaction with the service

The average assessment ratio of the service provided by companies – 3.45

Source: own elaboration.

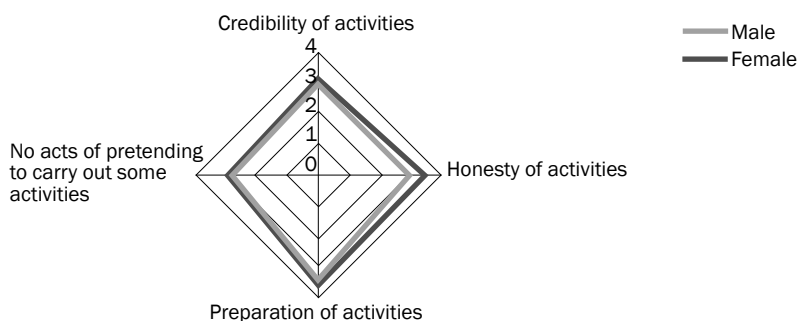


Figure 16. The assessment of CSR activities carried out by companies in the power sector with the division into sex

Source: own elaboration.

There appeared small differences in assessing the fairness of the activities depending on sex. Males showed greater scepticism by more often ascribing dishonest intentions to CSR activities. Males also provided lower assessments of the credibility of the implemented activities.

Despite a large percentage of people who could not identify CSR activities in the four areas (work environment, the local community, supplier and customer markets and the natural environment), the level of assessment of these activities was determined with taking into account the responses of people who pointed to such activities.

In the case of the assessment of the activities aimed at individual service recipients, the similar level of assessment of individual types of activities was observed. Average assessment rates ranged from 3.3 to 4.0 on a five-point scale (Figure 17).

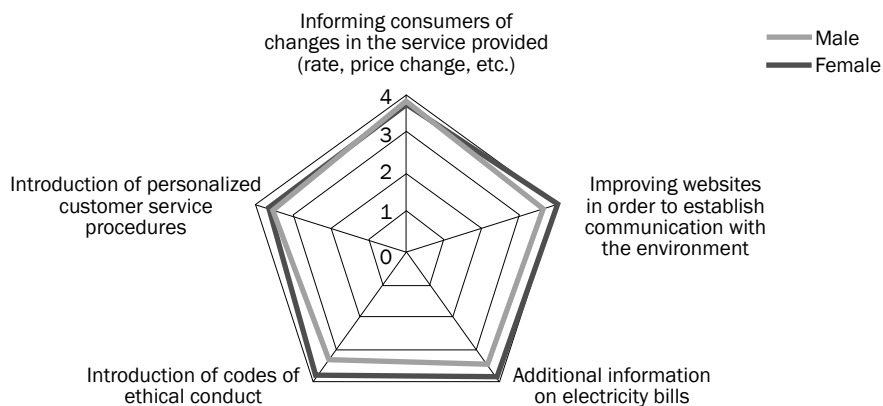


Figure 17. The assessment of CSR activities in customer service with the division into sex
Source: own elaboration.

There appeared differences in assessments depending on sex. In all cases, women provided higher assessments of the implementation of the activities than men. This result is consistent with the distribution of assessments of involvement in CSR activities in which women provided higher evaluations of the variable.

As part of this category, the greatest variation in the assessment appeared in relation to the codes of ethics. Out of 18 respondents who assessed the activities, men (13 people) were the majority. Despite greater ease of identifying the activities, they assessed them more negatively (3.31) than women (3.8).

The assessments of CSR activities aimed at employees were also analysed. As previously noted, in this case due to the activities' being aimed at stakeholders, respondents had a problem with identifying the activities. However, those who indicated that the actions are implemented made relatively high assessments (the average close to 4) (Figure 18).

As it appears from the data analysis that the assessments of the activities depend on sex. However, in this case, men made higher assessments of individual activities. The largest variation can be seen in the case of the evaluation of avoidance of discriminatory practices. Men positively assess these activities (4.25), while women evaluate them as average (3.4). This result can be explained by a different professional situation of men and women and unequal treatment of employees because of sex.

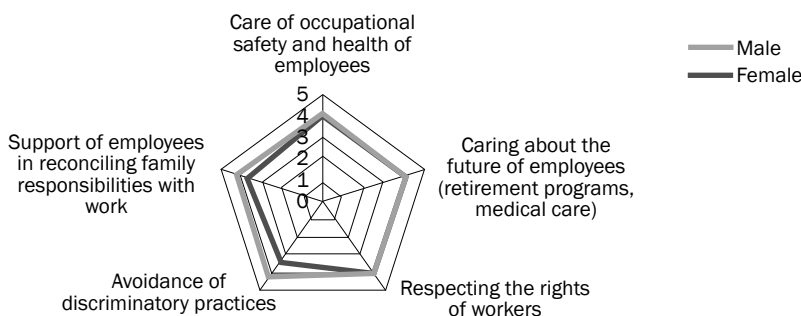


Figure 18. The assessment of CSR activities in relations with employees with the division into sex

Source: own elaboration.

Differences in assessments were also observed in relation to specific activities for the sake of the local community. In most cases, in this category men evaluated the implemented activities higher (Figure 19).

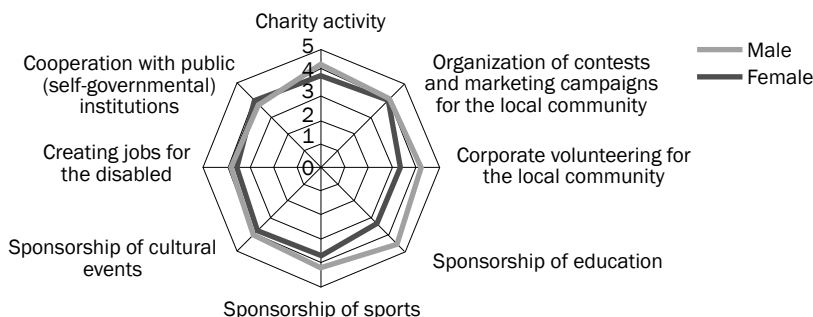


Figure 19. The assessment of CSR activities oriented to the local community

Source: own elaboration.

The differences are especially evident in the assessment of corporate volunteering and sponsorship of education. Women proved to be more sceptical. In the case of the assessment of corporate volunteering, there appeared a difference in one assessment (women 3.37 – *average*; men 4.2 – *good*). Larger differences appeared in relation to the assessment of the sponsorship of education. In this case, men assessed the activities as *very good* (4.58) and women as *average* (3.33).

The activities oriented to the environmental protection were the last analyzed area. In this case, there appear differences in the evaluation of the activities depending on sex (Figure 20).

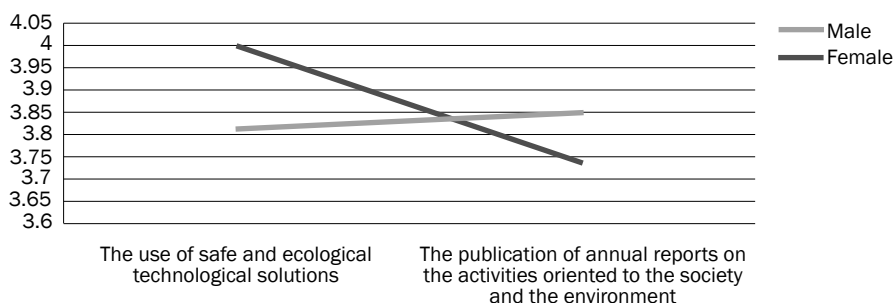


Figure 20. The assessment of CSR activities oriented at the environmental protection with the division into sex

Source: own elaboration.

Women assessed the efforts to implement safe and ecological technological solutions higher. Men, on the other hand, made higher assessments of the reports of the activities oriented at the environmental protection. Men's lower evaluation of the implementation of proecological technologies may be linked to their greater knowledge of the functioning of the sector.

CONCLUSIONS

Companies implementing CSR activities should pay more attention to informing and educating the recipients of these activities. The analysis showed that a great number of CSR activities in the power sector does not go along with raising the awareness of these activities in the opinion of individual consumers. The results showed differences in assessments at the cognitive and affective level. In the case of little familiarity with the activities, the assessments are comparatively high. However, women are more equivocal in their answers concerning their familiarity and they more often chose the answer *I have no opinion*. There is no reason to interpret the result as a manifestation of a smaller amount of knowledge. The reason being that men more often answered that the activities do not exist, although they are actually implemented by the companies of the analysed sector.

It seems a valuable conclusion seems that the assessment of CSR activities depends on the quality of the service provided. It appears that only in the case of positive assessment of the quality of service, consumers value the company on the basis of other attributes.

What is important is that sex modifies the assessment of the implemented CSR activities. Women have a tendency to make higher assessments of them. The exception included the activities from the area of the work environment and local community, in which men evaluated the implemented initiatives higher.

The obtained results are not fully consistent with other studies on this subject according to which consumers have higher and higher expectations of a corporation and are becoming more demanding and aware of its behaviours [EURO RSCG Poland 2008]. Low awareness of the implemented CSR activities may be connected with the specificity of the analysed sector.

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