

**Women's Attitudes towards competing Careers:  
Can Public Policies increase Fertility and Women's Labour Force Participation in Poland?**

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## **1. Background of the study**

Interdependencies between fertility and women's labour force participation are a prominent research issue in demography, sociology, and economics. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the changing age structure of populations in an increasing number of countries, posing a serious threat to the sustainability of social security systems, economic growth, and social cohesion. An increase in women's labour force participation in the short-term and demographic renewal in the longer term could alleviate the negative consequences of population ageing (European Commission 2005, 2006, 2007). It is, however, unclear whether it is possible to increase women's labour force participation and fertility at the same time.

On the one hand, the macro-level developments in fertility and women's labour supply across the Western developed economies in the last two decades suggest that high women's labour supply can co-exist with high fertility while low birth rates prevail more often in countries characterised by low economic activity of females (Ahn and Mira 2004, Engelhardt et al. 2004, Engelhardt and Prskawetz 2004, Brewster and Rindfuss 2000, Rindfuss et al. 2004, Castles 2003). On the other hand, however, the micro-level relationship between childbearing and paid work is still negative (Matysiak and Vignoli 2008). From the theoretical perspective the latter finding is not

surprising – fertility and women’s labour force participation are incompatible careers, competing for woman’s scarce resources, such as energy and time (Willekens 1991). In order to allocate these resources between the two activities women anticipate the consequences of their actions and evaluate them from the perspective of their life goals. The final decision depends on several factors (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980, Ajzen 1988, 1991). First is the amount of the resources available to a woman (behavioural control), which is often determined by the opportunities and restrictions provided by the macro-context. Second are woman’s orientations towards family and work, that is, her attitudes and subjectively perceived norms, which fuel the motivation to invest available resources in a chosen activity: childbearing or professional career. As the result she might either select one career or attempt to share the resources among both activities. The attitudes towards childbearing may also influence the attitudes towards work and vice versa (Barber 2001). Consequently, relevant behavioural control and woman’s motivations towards the competing behaviours need to be explored if fertility and employment choices are to be understood.

The impacts of the context-related opportunities and constraints on women’s childbearing and employment behaviours have been already widely studied. Empirical research provided broad evidence that well available and cheap childcare as well as flexible work arrangements ease the incompatibilities between childrearing and paid work and facilitate women’s (re-)entry to the labour market after birth. The efficiency of these policies depends strongly on whether they are in line with women’s orientations, however. Are women indeed interested in pursuing work and having children? What attitudes and beliefs underlie their preferences? Do they opt for work mainly for financial reasons or some higher-order needs, like self-realisation, come into play here? How women’s attitudes towards childbearing affect their intentions towards work and vice versa? Which position do children and paid work take in women’s value system?

These questions are addressed for Poland. During the 1980s this country was still characterized by relatively high fertility and high women’s labour force participation. However, right after the economic transformation had begun it experienced a rapid plunge in childbearing and economic activity. As a consequence it belongs currently to the lowest-low fertility countries and displays relatively low female employment compared to the rest of EU-27. In this context it is not surprising that one of the key policy issues in Poland is to facilitate childbearing and women’s work. This issue gains additional relevance taking into account that family policies in Poland are generally considered unsupportive of combining parenthood with market work (Balcerzak-Paradowska et al. 2004, Kotowska et al. 2008).

Various empirical studies have pointed out at high attachment of the Poles to the family values (Fokkema and Esveldt 2008, Pongracz and Spèder 2008, Stankuniene and Maslauskaitė

2008, Kotowska et al. 2003). Children, family and home are perceived as sources of happiness and self-fulfilment and childbearing is one of the most important life-goals (Mynarska 2008). The recent study by Matysiak (forthcoming) has shown, however, that in spite of the strong incompatibilities between fertility and work in Poland women are interested in both, professional career and family. By estimating jointly transition to birth, employment entry and employment exit she found that women try to establish their position in the labour market before they give birth, which suggests that they treat market work as a pre-condition rather than a barrier to childbearing. The data does not allow to test, however, whether the selection to employment before birth is caused by financial necessities or a desire of women to pursue family and work careers in parallel, irrespective of the material situation. If the former hypothesis is true, an improvement in the economic situation of the households may lead to a deterioration in women's labour force participation, irrespective of the generosity of the reconciliation policies.

**Against this background this paper explores Polish women's preferences towards two competing careers: work and childbearing. To this end quantitative approach is combined with a qualitative one. Based on the empirical findings the ultimate goal of the study is to formulate empirically grounded recommendations for the policies aimed at successful encouragement of fertility and female labour force participation.**

## **2. Data and methods**

An important advantage of the paper is undoubtedly its methodological approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The mixed-method approach is advocated with an increasing frequency in social sciences in general (e.g. Bryman 1984, 1988, Sale, Lohfeld and Brazil 2002, Steckler et al. 1992), and also in the field of population studies (e.g. Bernardi and Hutter 2007, Caldwell 1985, Knodel 1997, Obermeyer 1997, Randal and Koppenhaver 2004). Using different approaches, as well as different methods and data sets within each paradigm (methodological triangulation), allows for formulating more valid and deeper interpretations of social phenomena.

First, we review the existing quantitative studies exploring the interdependencies between fertility and women's labour supply in Poland. The review is complemented by a descriptive analysis of the available data providing information on women's values, attitudes and preferences towards childbearing and employment. Since there is no one exhaustive data source on the topic of our interest we combine information stemming from three different representative surveys: European Social Survey (2<sup>nd</sup> round of 2004 and 3<sup>rd</sup> round of 2006), Polish Population Policy

Acceptance Study (2001) and Special Survey on Economic Activity, Education and Family (2005) and Social Diagnosis (2007).

The quantitative analysis can give us a detailed characteristic of women's behaviours but only a general overview of underlying motives. Therefore, in the second stage of our empirical study we explore women's attitudes and beliefs towards childbearing and paid work more deeply by complementing the quantitative data with a qualitative analysis. The qualitative study will allow us to capture our research topic from a different angle and to contextualise and improve our interpretation of the statistical findings. It will provide us with more detailed and in-depth information on the position of children and paid work in women's value system. With the qualitative data we will identify the links between these attitudes and intentions towards employment and fertility and finally we will address a question whether childrearing and market work are perceived as mutually exclusive or women are rather interested in combining these two spheres of life.

The qualitative data covers in-depth interviews, conducted in 2004-2005, with 26 young women, living in Warsaw, between 20 and 30 years of age, and medium to highly educated. The respondents of such characteristics are likely to be the "early knowers" of any innovative attitudes and behaviours (Rogers 1995). Therefore, not only are they the information-rich cases, given our research purposes (the conflict between childbearing and women's self-realisation in the professional sphere is likely to be the strongest in such sample), but also they might be considered the forerunners of a new patterns of behaviours.

### **3. Preliminary findings**

Our first results confirm the previous findings of Matysiak (forthcoming) – Polish women are strongly interested in combining work with motherhood. Interestingly, although they often find it to be a difficult task, they mainly opt for full-time jobs. However, market work is perceived by women as subordinate to family. Even the strongly work-oriented do not want to pursue professional career at a child's expense. Material aspirations are found to be an important motive for women's labour force participation. This finding is not surprising given the economic developments that occurred in Poland after 1989. On the one hand, they led to a rise in individual responsibility for securing the living standards and an increase in aspirations as to its quality. On the other hand, insecurity in the labour market has increased. The female respondents in our study clearly see stable employment as a prerequisite to motherhood.

Nevertheless, economic aspects are not the only motives for women's paid work. We also find that Poles hold the house-wives in relatively low-esteem. It turns out that professional work is

also perceived as a source of social acceptance and respect. In our data it is clear that women expect other benefits from paid work but only financial ones. They strive for a “good” job that is considered to be in line with women’s interests and gives an opportunity to learn new things and to develop new skills. The respondents quite unanimously declare not only a need but also a clear willingness to work for pay. They declare they would continue working even if they could afford financially not to. Nonetheless, they underline they would not sacrifice family for professional career. While women perceive work and childbearing as two natural elements of their life, the sole orientation at work career, which often requires harsh competition and climbing a steep promotion ladder, is evaluated as something negative since it would have to be pursued at the expense of family and children.

Altogether these preliminary findings seem to suggest that family and children are the most important life goals, but women want to combine them with economic activity. This means that policies aimed at easing incompatibilities between childbearing and women’s work are highly desired and could lead to some increase in both: fertility and employment in Poland. With the complete analysis we hope to suggest the most effective measures, i.e. meeting women’s preferences towards work and family.

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