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UNDERSTANDING LOW FERTILITY IN POLAND:  
DEMOGRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES  
OF GENDERED DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT  
AND POSTSOCIALIST NEOLIBERAL RESTRUCTURING

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades fertility has declined in most locations around the world, and following the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe in 1989–1990, this region also experienced a similar phenomenon. As a capital-poor system, state socialism relied heavily on labor and created an inflexible employment structure that provided a great deal of job security with virtually no threat of unemployment. This was especially significant for women who were now able to easily enter the job market, interrupt their work for childbearing, and return to their jobs with minimal or no loss of wages. Consequently, gender relations were significantly reconfigured as women pursued careers, financial independence, and greater reproductive and sexual autonomy. The socialist state established itself as the “benevolent father” providing for the basic welfare of all (Verdery 1996, p. 24). Women, however, were the major beneficiaries.

Following the collapse of state socialism in 1989, Eastern European nations underwent profound economic transformations, shifting from the security provided by generous welfare states with guaranteed education and employment to the instability of free market economies marked by large-scale deregulation. The policies which had been critical in encouraging women’s entry into paid employment began to be rapidly dismantled. In particular, maternity leave and subsidies for childcare were substantially reduced, and efforts to privatize healthcare placed fees on many essential services. Employment was no longer guaranteed, unemployment soared, and preferential hiring practices began to favor applicants with inside connections. It is within this context that scholars began to describe demographic trends such as the postponement of childbearing and marriage (Caldwell, Schindlmayr 2003; Frątczak 2004b; Sobotka 2004).

This research study examines declining fertility in Poland and expands the conceptual frame from macro-level postsocialist economic instabilities to include the critical role of gendered dimensions of neoliberal structural transformations, in particular how women have experienced the shifts to privatized job market and reductions in

social services. The findings here have significant policy implications and suggest that, while much of the debate around declining fertility is focusing on refining work-family reconciliation policies (e.g. low-cost childcare, generous parental leave, etc), in the case of Poland there is a need for policies aimed at redressing fundamental gendered discrimination in employment before effective work-family reconciliation laws can be initiated.

#### THE NEOLIBERAL SHIFT: THE MAKING OF A DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS

Before 1989, Polish women's full-time employment rose to 78% during state socialism as a result of multiple factors including policies that supported education, employment, and increased welfare provisions (Fodor et al 2002, p. 371–372). Although little changed within the family – women were still expected to bear the burdens of caretaking – state policies supported maternal employment with a great deal of job security and a considerable relief from care-giving. In Poland, such provisions played an important role in making parenthood less burdensome, as evidenced by the consequences of the post-1989 cuts in these subsidies.

The end of state socialism in Poland in 1989 came about as a result of a decade of mounting opposition waged by Solidarity – the Catholic-nationalist labor union – coupled with a failing economy. The collapse of the system in 1989 led to a series of political and economic transformations; the most detrimental for maternal employment was the shrinking of social services. Ironically, as the upper echelons of the Solidarity labor union took power after 1989, headed by the union's leader Lech Wałęsa, the new government embraced neoliberal economic principles that give market forces primacy in solving all sorts of economic and social problems to the detriment of organized labor and its principles (Ost 2005). Comparative studies of welfare provisions in Eastern European nations show that Poland has had one of the harshest reductions in family and maternity benefits, including cuts or privatization of childcare facilities and reduced family cash benefits (Fodor et al 2002, p. 477–483). Polish women have twice the likelihood of falling below the poverty line (Domanski 2002, p. 393).

The postsocialist neoliberal shift also resulted in the elimination of many health-care subsidies. In particular, access to contraceptives has been reduced as the state eliminated subsidies from the health insurance coverage by 2002 – a policy change strongly influenced by the political power of the Catholic church in Poland. According to the 2006 World Health Report, Polish government expenditure on health care was 9.8% of total government expenditure, the second lowest in the EU after Latvia (World Health Organization 2006). In terms of perinatal health care, the former Minister of Health Ewa Kopacz approved the continued exclusion from state coverage of anesthesia during childbirth. Epidurals are thus placed alongside aromatherapy as extras during deliveries. In fact, some hospitals decline to provide epidurals altogether claiming they lack full time anesthesiologists, but media reports that it is more

likely a matter of savings, as the national insurance pays hospitals the same flat fee for a delivery, whether with or without anesthesia (Klinger 2013). As of 2015, this problem remains unchanged.

In the face of growing female unemployment and disappearing state provisions, many of the women in rural areas are reverting to traditional strategies of relying on kin networks for resources, intensifying home production of clothing and food, and generally surviving on the informal economic exchanges so prevalent during state socialism. Ironically, these practices are returning as key coping mechanisms in the postsocialist neoliberal economy (Pine 2002).

In this politico-economic context, Poland's TFR has plummeted from 2.1 in 1989 to 1.3 in 2012. During the years preceding this slump, fertility had been at or above replacement since WWII. There was a brief increase to 2.3 in 1983 and 1984 which coincided with the socialist government's temporary increase in childcare allowances. The TFR reached its lowest point of 1.22 in 2002 and since then it has increased only marginally to 1.299 in 2012, only to fall again in 2013 to 1.256.<sup>1</sup> Since 2002 Poland has experienced negative population growth compounded by significant emigration after Poland's entry into the EU in 2004.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the traditional family model of early and long-term marriage, as promoted by the Catholic church, was common in Poland, although other family models existed based on class differences, urban versus rural contexts, and historical period. Until recently, childbearing occurred early and within marriage, and deviations from this model were likely to meet with stigma directed toward single or relatively older (late 20s and above) mothers, and toward children born outside of marriage (Frątczak 20014a; Kotowska et al 2008). As recently as the 1980s, the permanence of marriages was remarkable in Poland – 80% of them ended only when one of the spouses, usually the husband, died (Frątczak 2004a, p. 6).

These traditional norms are giving way to new patterns, many of which have been described by scholars as signs of the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, Neels 2002). Statistically, Polish women have postponed having their first child from age 23 in 1989 to age 27 in 2010,<sup>3</sup> the number of marriages systematically dropped since 1989 and the number of children born outside of marriage rose, and divorces have increased in frequency and so has living in relationships without marriage (Caldwell, Schindlmayr 2003; Frątczak 2004b; Sobotka 2004). Also, since cohabitation has grown in Poland and is often viewed as a potential stepping stone for marriage (Mynarska, Bernardi 2006), it is likely that some women and couples simply continue to cohabit or maintain single status in spite of an unplanned pregnancy. In fact, while only 5% of births were extramarital in 1989, by 2003 that number rose

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<sup>1</sup> *Statistical Yearbook of Poland*, 2013, Warsaw: Central Statistical Agency, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> "Demographic Situation in Poland", 2005–2006, Report No. 1. Warsaw: State Committee on Population.

<sup>3</sup> "Podstawowe informacje o rozwoju demograficznym Polski do 2013 roku". Warsaw: Central Statistical Agency, p.4. <http://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/ludnosc/podstawowe-informacje-o-rozwoju-demograficznym-polski-do-2013-roku-,12,4.html> (Accessed: October 10, 2014).

to 16% overall, and to 19% in urban areas. Voluntary childlessness has also increased, though there are no systematic data on the extent of this phenomenon in Poland (Frątczak 2004a).

Scholars have argued that a traditional and religious family ethos is linked with greater gender inequity in the private sphere and constitutes a powerful force driving women's preferences for fewer children (Castles 2003; McDonald 2000). In particular, Peter McDonald (2000) asserts that in locations where education and employment reached a relatively high level of gender equity but the institution of the family, often guided by a religious family model, did not, fertility will continue to fall. Thus far, demographic research in Poland has corroborated findings from the rest of Eastern Europe that fertility barriers include the rising cost of having children and the inability of women to reconcile work and family in the new labor market (Kotowska et al 2008). Cultural changes in Poland regarding ideal family size and gender roles have also weakened the traditional family model (Bühler, Frątczak 2005; Frątczak 2004a).

Given the complexities of the Eastern European situation and the context-specific differences between the nations in this region, anthropologists and some demographers have called for caution in applying unidirectional transition theories which imply a predictable evolutionary process of social change (Bernardi 2007; McDonald 2000; Rivkin-Fish 2003). In fact, anthropological critiques of demography have been consistently concerned about its reliance on economic paradigms and large-scale quantitative analyses as decontextualized, ahistorical, and oversimplified approaches to analyses of complex human motivations and behaviors (Greenhalgh 1996; Krause 2007; Rivkin-Fish 2003). A similar critique also emerged from within demography posed by McDonald who challenged the demographic "armchair approach", calling for an analysis "from the field" including attention to gendered dimension of low fertility (McDonald 2000). Therefore, fertility-related research in Poland requires attention to the institutional and cultural context within which women negotiate their new circumstances, and must explore the motivations and the decision-making behind the preferences that are observed in the macro trends.

In light of the existing scholarship, my research in Poland focused on the factors that influence women's choices to limit childbearing and the ways in which they achieve one of the lowest fertility levels in the EU under circumstances of limited family planning services. Specifically, this project explored the intentionality and barriers regarding childbearing, and the impact of state policies related to parenthood on fertility decisions.

#### RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

I investigated these issues in a research study conducted from May until August 2007 in Gdańsk and the Tricity area. I carried out 55 semistructured interviews with women ages 18–40 in four major healthcare facilities, focusing on the process behind reproductive decision-making. Interview questions probed the intentionality and

barriers regarding the number of children, and religious and cultural attitudes affecting childbearing decisions. Gdańsk and its vicinity were selected because its median income falls closest to the average income of the 13 main urban centers in Poland and its economic base has been diverse, spanning chemical, electronic, and shipyard manufacturing. The study recruited women in four multi-specialty medical facilities that provide general and specialized medical services and serve as the portal of entry for medical care for the population at large. These clinics treat patients with national or private healthcare coverage, as well as patients paying “out of pocket”, however the majority of patients coming to the clinics relied on public health insurance coverage. The research sites were selected from a list of 19 regional clinics from the Tricity area by selecting every fourth clinic on the list.

Interviews were conducted in Polish, and were transcribed and translated into English. Women received a small remuneration of 20 zlotych (zł) for their time. Interviews were transcribed and verbatim transcripts and text were coded by assigning thematic coding categories using Grounded Theory approach, following which the coded text was sorted to identify the predominant themes and subthemes (Strauss, Corbin 1998). The sample's income per month characteristics were: less than 600 zł – 18.2%, 600–1200 zł – 47.7%, 1200–1800 zł – 15.9%, 1800–2400 zł – 13.6%, and more than 2400 zł – 4.5%. In terms of employment, 21.3% were unemployed, 63.8% had part-time employment, and 14.9% reported full-time employment. Moreover, 30.6% of women in this sample had higher education, which is comparable to the national average for this age group.<sup>4</sup> Parity in the sample was: 37% had no children, 37% had one child, 18% had two children, and 8% had more than two children. The average parity of the sample was 1.0, which reflects the urban nature of the sample where the total fertility rate is lower than the national average.

#### “I HAVE ONE CHILD AND I’M DONE”: THE PREDICAMENTS OF GENDERED DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT

The narratives of women in this study reveal that widespread fear of discrimination by employers against pregnant women, new mothers, and women with small children drives women's decisions to postpone or limit childbearing. The majority of women in this study either directly experienced gendered discrimination in employment or knew of women who had. These narratives reported problematic employer practices which had an adverse influence on women's fertility decisions, such as firing women who returned to work following maternity leave or the child-rearing leave, and encouraging or requiring women to sign a contract pledging not to get

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics reported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) based on 2011 data show that 24% of Poles aged 25–64, and 39% aged 25–34 had higher education. The sample in this study is aged 18–40 (with 53% of the sample aged 25–35). Therefore, it is reasonable to take their 30.6% in higher education attainment as a reflection of the national averages reported by the OECD (OECD 2013, p. 3).

pregnant for two to three years as a contingency for their hire. Women also reported illegal practices such as asking female job applicants if they have small children and hiring permanent employees to replace women on maternity leave. As one 33-year-old domestic worker said:

*The main barrier to having another child would be financial because kids are very expensive and I was fired twice from my jobs, with each child, after I returned from maternity leave. As soon as the second kid got sick and I had to call in to say I had to take the day off, the boss fired me. With the first child it took a month before I got fired, but with the second it happened right away. Since then, I've had to do odd jobs that I pick up here and there, nothing steady. I wouldn't be hired for a steady job because of my small kids.*

A 32-year-old human resources officer echoed similar concerns:

*I have two teenage daughters so far, but I'd like to have another. I don't really have any limitations when it comes to good housing or a good partner but the problem is that employers view it as a negative. I've been working at my job for four years and currently I'm the senior manager in the human resources office but I fear getting pregnant and having to tell my boss about it. I've watched it over time. Women who work at my job and have gotten pregnant end up not advancing and they don't get raises because they begin to be treated with less seriousness than other workers. They lose their position from which they could otherwise advance, if they didn't get pregnant.*

Many women reported that employers discriminated against applicants with small children, using the interview process to identify applicants who might miss work because of children. As this 27-year-old sales clerk, who was in the eighth month of her first pregnancy explained:

*My sister-in-law has a one-year old child and nobody wants to hire her! She's been looking and looking but employers keep asking her if she has any small kids, and she says she has one. Employers don't want to bother with her if they can hire someone else. The newspapers say that there's a shortage of labor because people are leaving Poland to get jobs abroad, but that's not her experience, there are always other applicants that employers prefer over her. I've seen it in my own job: my boss never hires women with small children. He always says it's better if the kids are preschool age, like at least six or so.*

A 39-year-old physical therapist declared "I have one child and I'm done", explaining that she would be afraid to have a second child:

*With my son I took my three months of maternity and I added another 26 days of vacation time that I've accumulated from the previous year. I wouldn't dare to take any more for fear of losing my job. Luckily, I had a permanent position as a physical therapist and was able to get my old job back. Currently, I only have a year-to-year contract, so now I would be afraid that they wouldn't renew it if I went on maternity. Foreign companies that set up business in Poland don't fire women like this. For example, Lufthansa. One of my cousins works for a Lufthansa affiliate and she went on maternity leave and returned to her own job. She said that other women are also fine when they get pregnant or have small kids. They don't get fired. These jobs are few but it's worth keeping your eyes open for them.*

A 23-year-old nanny who had no children at the time of the study but wanted to have two in the future, said that her work is unstable as it is and that having a child would make for "an impossible situation", given the problems other women have had:

*[F]inding work if you're pregnant or have small kids is not realistic. Some of my friends and family have lost jobs even after years of work at the same job; they were told they either can't return or that their contracts can't be renewed.*

A number of women described a new practice of harassment or “mobbing”, saying that some employers deliberately foster harassment of pregnant employees in order to make them quit their jobs voluntarily. As one woman, a 33-year-old doctor with two children elucidated:

*Some women are vulnerable at work just by getting pregnant. Have you heard about “mobbing” against a worker? It's when the boss and other managers gang up against her and make her job difficult and her life miserable at work until she quits voluntarily, because by law they can't fire a pregnant woman. The worker has no protection from that.*

A 27-year-old sales clerk, when asked about whether she would have a second child said:

*[A]fter this pregnancy we'll just have to wait and see. I'm not sure if I'll even have my job when I go back. When I got pregnant my boss started to make things difficult for me, all of the sudden he made everything an uphill battle for me – every time I needed to go to the doctor he would make a fuss or with any other requests he always made it look like I was asking for too much; he wanted me out. It just wasn't convenient for him to have any of the employees pregnant. My doctor took me off work when I was in my 4<sup>th</sup> month because it was time for me to get more rest. So I'm now off work with 100% pay and I'm still theoretically employed, but I have a feeling that my job will be gone by the time I return.*

Frequently, women report that employers asked them during job interviews whether they had small children in order to assess whether or not they would be “*dyspozycyjna*” – literally, being “indisposed” and implying that the women would not be sufficiently committed to the job. As one woman, a 32-year-old manager with one child reported:

*[Having a small child] is a big problem because the boss wants you to be *dyspozycyjna* [...] The question inevitably is asked, Are you *dyspozycyjna*?, which translates into, Can your non-job life be subordinated to your work or not?*

A 31-year-old bookkeeper with one child stated:

*I was well aware, based on the example of my sister, that it's extremely difficult to find a job with a small child because employers always look at the situation like this: Is she going to be not *dyspozycyjna*? Some of my girlfriends have had the same experiences – they found it very hard to find jobs because they were always asked at the interviews whether they had small kids. It [having children] is a huge negative.*

Other women said that bosses look at a pregnancy or small children with an “evil eye” (*zły m okiem*) or a “crooked eye” (*krzywym okiem*), indicating a negative attitude. This 18-year-old high school student with no children said:

*Whether it's a pregnancy or small kids, both are huge limitations in getting a job. The bosses look at it with a crooked eye.*

Concerns over job security when women became pregnant were prominent throughout women's narratives. Sometimes they provoke specific coping strategies, as the following 31-year-old woman related:

*I already have a 7 year old son but I'd like a second baby. I was so afraid that I would lose my job. I took the 3 months of the maternity leave and I had 6 weeks of vacation saved up, plus I took another year and 10 months of child-rearing leave, so together I think I had two and a half years. I was so afraid I'd lose my job in accounting that I decided to go to my workplace every three months, taking the baby with me, to talk with the director and to assure her that I'm coming back to work and to ask her not to hire anyone to replace me. This was my way of trying to make sure that I had a job to go back to.*

This 26-year-old economist with one child added:

*I'd like a second child but I just don't want to lose my job [because of a pregnancy]. If I lose my job I'll have nothing while the baby is still an infant. My salary is too small to begin with, so ideally I'd like a better paying job and a job that's secure.*

#### CHILDCARE AND THE *BABCIA* INSTITUTION

The majority of women lamented that lack of childcare makes it difficult for them to reconcile work and family. They explained that for many the only way to be able to hold down a job is to have a *babcia* – literally, a grandmother, and referring to the tradition of having mother or mother-in-law who is available and willing to provide childcare for the grandchild. With the increased mobility after 1989 and the greater push to look for jobs in other cities, fewer relatives are on hand to provide childcare. Women who had *babcias* considered themselves lucky. Here are emblematic responses from two women:

*[T]here is the "babcia institution" that can provide childcare. I finished school without a problem and used my two babcias for childcare during that whole time; I would like a third child but we would need childcare, first and foremost, and second, we'd need a larger apartment. We badly need a babcia! We had a couple of nannies, babysitters, but that didn't go well – one of them burned my child with coffee! My husband helped with the childcare a little bit too. When I was looking for a job one of the employers asked me if I'm planning to get pregnant, and if so, whether I had a babcia at home on hand to do my childcare; I said I didn't. The main reason [that I don't have kids]: no childcare! I have no kids but ideally I would like two. [...] I've been married for 9 years and my mother-in-law lives nearby but I'd never let her do childcare because [...] I wouldn't trust her.*

Dwindling economic opportunities in the rural area in Poland and the resulting urbanization has also contributed to women's lack of childcare resources when they move from the countryside to the cities, many of whom also chose to postpone and limit childbearing until a time when they can establish a secure form of employment and potential partners who might share in care work.



“I’M HAPPY WE’RE HAVING A DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS,  
IT’S WHAT THE GOVERNMENT DESERVES”: MOTHERHOOD  
AND THE ROLE OF THE STATE

The narratives in this study show that the state could have an important role in childbearing decisions as most women conveyed that various forms of state support of motherhood would be necessary before they would decide to have a child. The most frequently mentioned deficiencies were lack of state-subsidized childcare, and severely inadequate social service provisions (especially cash benefits to parents). As a 34-year-old nurse with one child and a desire for a second one explained when prompted to consider whether any change in conditions would encourage her to have a second child:

*I disagree with the current government. Their so-called ‘pro-family politics’ [polityka prorodzinna] are totally unrealistic, they don’t reflect the reality of what we need to support families – they recently reduced maternity leave even more. In 2000 it was still 6 months, in 2002 it was reduced to 3 months. What they need to do is to extend maternity leave and to pay it at 100%. The child-rearing leave is not paid at all, but at least you can take that for up to 3 years. The answer is: we need better social service support and we need the child-rearing leave to be paid, not unpaid, because you can’t manage without the income.*

When asked the same question, a 30-year-old information technician with one child stated:

*We need more preschools and infant care centers. We need the guarantee of childcare by the government. The government needs to increase social service benefits for single mothers because they are having the worst difficulties. The 1000 zlotych bonus they offer doesn’t convince me to have a kid; it’s laughable.*

A 32 year old custodian with three children said:

*The family benefits aren’t getting any larger but everything is getting more expensive [...] The main change we need from the state is to increase family welfare benefits, increase help to mothers by increasing work opportunities. If a single mother can’t work because she has no childcare then why would she want more kids? We need free childcare, first and foremost, we need infant care centers and other childcare centers; I would use them and be able to work.*

A 40 year old information technician with an 18-year-old son responded:

*I’d say we desperately need more state preschools. Right now there’s a one year waiting list to get in. We need inexpensive infant care centers. You see, the state is liquidating all these places, not adding more. They’re privatizing everything. I’m so mad at the government, I think it’s great that we’re having a demographic crisis because the state doesn’t give us any support – no support for women who are pregnant or women with kids. I had my son just before 1989 and it was no problem to have kids back then, even though I was a single mother. So I’m happy we’re having a demographic crisis, it’s what the government deserves.*

Other themes that were prominent in the narratives when women were asked to consider the changes needed to convince them to have a child revealed a strong

desire for state policies to protect women from getting fired or not hired because of pregnancy or small children. Women used these expressions to convey this point: “give women security that they can return to their jobs”, “protection of women at work”, “guarantees that women won’t be fired”, “stop the practice of firing women from their jobs”, “legal protection of women in employment”, and so on. The shortage of housing, cramped living conditions, and difficulties in qualifying for mortgages that would allow young couples to live independently were also cited as prominent barriers to childbearing. Difficult personal financial situations were usually framed in terms of job insecurity, low income, and the fear of insufficient income in the future. Some also spoke of concerns about stalling one’s career due to childbearing and loss of time from work. In general, women were highly aware of the “demographic crisis” and many worried about the future of their retirement pensions and the aging of the society, but almost none of the women felt compelled by the state’s calls for increased fertility because of the ubiquitous perception that the state is not doing anything to facilitate motherhood and employment, and the widespread awareness that the government had dismantled the many social service programs that had been in place under socialism.

Current state’s labor and health policies continue to offer no tangible protection for women in the job market. The main “Profamily Program” response from the Polish state came in 2005 when it introduced a one-time baby bonus known as *becikowe* – literally, money for a baby blanket – of 1000 złotych per newborn. *Becikowe* was restricted in 2009 to only those women who began monitoring their pregnancy under the care of a gynecologist not later than the 10<sup>th</sup> week of the pregnancy, thereby drastically narrowing the eligibility for the benefit.<sup>5</sup> Women in my research deemed the payment “absurd” and “laughable” given the magnitude of financial and employment difficulties they deal with. Since the baby bonus has failed to change the demographic situation, the Polish Minister of Finance and other policy-makers have been debating from time to time eliminating it altogether.<sup>6</sup> As of 2015, the Polish *becikowe* remains at the original 2005 year level of 1000 zł. In 2014, the Polish state extended maternity leave to a generous 52 weeks, however only a small proportion of women who hold a “work contract” [*umowa na pracę*] are eligible. In reality, the majority is hired on what are known as “trash contracts” [*umowy śmieciowe*], which include schemes used by employers to hire women on part-time, temporary, or “per assignment” basis in order to avoid payments toward their social security pension fund.<sup>7</sup> It

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.becikowe.com/> (Accessed: April 11, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Discussions about the declining fertility in Europe are prominent at the level of the European Union, however the EU has no mandate to dictate any particular profamily policies. Thus, each member of the Union devises its own work-family reconciliation policy.

<sup>7</sup> The limited nature of the new maternity leave to only “elite” women with full work contracts was the topic of a press conference titled, “When will young women begin to give birth?”, a press conference held by Wanda Nowicka on May 13, 2014, in her role as the Vice Marshal (Deputy Speaker) of the Lower House of the Polish Parliament. She also expresses a serious concern that the Polish Ministry of Labor and Social Politics fails to collect any data that would indicate how many women enjoy full work contracts and would therefore be eligible for the new maternity leave. See: <http://www.wandanowicka.eu/wydarzenia/1054-kiedy-mlode-kobiety-zaczyna-rodzic.html> (Accessed: April 11, 2015).

is unclear whether these changes will motivate higher births. Thus far TFR remains well below replacement level, and according to the latest available data it has dropped even further to 1.256 in 2013.

## CONCLUSIONS

The narratives of the women in this study highlight how gender inequities, in particular gendered discrimination in employment and the effects of neoliberal post-socialist restructuring, shape women's fertility decisions in Poland. In this study, the majority of women reported that they either directly experienced discriminatory practices by employers because of their pregnancy or small children, or knew of other women who did<sup>8</sup>. Structural conditions which limit women's ability to reconcile work and family such as the lack of legal protection for pregnant women and mothers in the workplace, low availability and access to state-subsidized childcare, and inadequate levels of social service benefits for families and single mothers, have also played a decisive role in motivating women to limit their childbearing.

Against the background of profound destabilization and cutbacks in the protective social services of the pre-1989 era, women in this study speak of new sources of economic instability and concern, exemplified in employer practices that are especially threatening to the job security of pregnant women and mothers. Katarzyna Kurkiewicz, a labor lawyer who specializes in gender discrimination and works closely with a feminist organization, The Network of East-West Women in Gdańsk, and whom I interviewed, corroborated the experiences of the women in this study saying that these practices are increasingly common there. Kurkiewicz explained that even though it is unlawful for the employers to ask women about their pregnancy status, whether they have children, or to request they sign an agreement pledging not to get pregnant for a period of time, these practices have become customary, leaving women with little choice but to answer the questions or sign the agreements. The employer cannot fire a woman who states that she is pregnant; hence harassment techniques are used to drive women out "voluntarily".

Theoretically, once a woman declares that she is pregnant, the employer cannot fire her or decline her maternity leave, and she must be allowed to return to the same job at the same pay. In practice, employers get around these laws by "weeding out" job applicants who *might* get pregnant too soon, in their estimation, during the interview process, and by firing women a month or two after they return from their maternity leave, once the legally protected period ends. Legal recourse for victims has been practically nonexistent due to the extraordinary delays and expenses that accompany legal procedures in Poland. Women's assessment that the state is not protecting

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<sup>8</sup> Similar discriminatory practices by employers have been reported in Russia (Rhein 1998), Bulgaria (Stoilkova 2005), and Czech Republic (Plessz 2009) in the context of postsocialist economic transformations.

them sufficiently from such practices points to a number of loopholes used by the employers and suggests that this area calls for policy-makers' urgent attention.

However sentiments expressing anger squarely directed at the postsocialist policies also reveal that women hold expectations that the state should support families by providing childcare as well as protecting women from discrimination at work. These expectations are significant in that they reflect the socialist-era understanding of the state-citizen relations, rather than the recent neoliberal model.

Similar critiques of the state's failure to ensure social welfare has also been demonstrated in the case of post-Soviet Russia where birthrate has also been very low. In 2007, President Vladimir Putin offered a *becikowe*-like payment known as the "maternity capital" in the amount of 250,000 rubles (approximately 18,205 zł), which was increased in 2012 to 387,640 rubles per woman. Significantly, as anthropologist Rivkin-Fish argues (2010, p. 702), Putin acknowledged "that bearing and raising children has negative consequences for woman's power; he further assumed state responsibility for addressing this inequality". Despite reinforcing the conservative "woman-mother" discourse with assumptions that women care for children and men's role in care work is optional, Putin nevertheless offered a counterpoint to the dominant neoliberal "responsibility" model embraced in Russia (and elsewhere) by recognizing the role of the collective in women's and families wellbeing (Rivkin-Fish 2010, p. 715–716).

This study also underscores the importance of access to state subsidized childcare as a prerequisite to the women's ability to maintain jobs. Bühler and Frątczak (2005) found that Polish married women's social capital involving kin who provide childcare or other resources positively impact their fertility intentions, though this link is highly parity specific – it encourages intentions to have a second child, but not first. Indeed, many women in this study rely on their *babcias* or other relatives for childcare when possible, but the majority nevertheless complained about the absence of state supported venues and stated that they would gladly use childcare centers if such were available. This suggests that kin networks, though desirable to many, cannot serve as an adequate replacement for state-subsidized childcare.

In a case study comparing France and Germany, Rosenbluth et al (2004) show that the types of motherhood-conducive policies that women in this study call for are typically identified with strong left-leaning governments, like those in Sweden and France, and demonstrate that such policies result in higher fertility rates. Ironically, Eastern Europe enjoyed family-friendly policies during state socialism until 1989 – before they were implemented elsewhere in Europe – but these benefits have been systematically dismantled since the 1989 neoliberal turn in economics, and they have simultaneously been discredited in the postsocialist discourse since all things communist have been clumped together as "failed". This is especially evident in Poland where lustration – the "purification" of all public employment positions of former communist informants and secret police members – continues to occupy a central place on the state's agenda, long after other Eastern European nations have moved on to addressing far more pressing problems. The necessary return to more

generous social service provisions and family-supportive policies will undoubtedly be challenging for Poland and other Eastern European states, economically, politically, and symbolically, but is likely to be welcomed by the majority of the population.

This case study contributes a new way of looking at the declining fertility in Poland by expanding the conceptual frame from the often cited broad, national-level post-socialist economic instabilities as reasons for the plummeting birth rate, to include the critical role of gendered dimensions of neoliberal structural transformations. Despite sophisticated theorizing about such causes of fertility decline as work-family reconciliation issues and contrasts between gender equity in some societal domains but not others, in Poland we see fundamental forms of discrimination against mothers who face limited options in harsh economic circumstances. These findings have significant policy implications and suggest that, while northern European nations such as Sweden are refining their work-family reconciliation policies to address declining fertility, in the case of Poland there is a need for policies protecting women's job security designed to redress fundamental gendered discrimination in employment before effective work-family reconciliation laws can be initiated.

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UNDERSTANDING LOW FERTILITY IN POLAND:  
DEMOGRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES OF GENDERED DISCRIMINATION  
IN EMPLOYMENT AND POSTSOCIALIST NEOLIBERAL RESTRUCTURING

Key words: Childbearing decision-making, Poland, Gender equality,  
Employment discrimination, Neoliberal restructuring, Europe, Postsocialism

After Poland's state socialist regime collapsed in 1989, the nation's total fertility rate plummeted from 2.1 to 1.3 by 2013, and is currently one of the lowest childbearing rates in the European Union. Simultaneously, the state reduced motherhood-friendly social services, including subsidized childcare, maternity leave, and healthcare, and restricted access to family planning. This paper draws on research conducted between May and August 2007 in Gdańsk, Sopot, and Gdynia, which investigates Polish women's reproductive decision-making. The findings reveal that discriminatory practices by employers against pregnant women and women with small children are decisive in women's decisions to postpone or limit childbearing. The case of Poland demonstrates the need to redress fundamental gendered discrimination in employment before work-family reconciliation policies can be effective. It also suggests that rather than focusing on broad economic theories as explanatory models, a closer analysis of gendered politics is needed to understand fertility decline in Poland.

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