

The International Corner

Storm of Changes: Reconciling Work and Family Life in Poland

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Poland has experienced dramatic changes over the last 20 years. As a country, we made a successful transformation from socialism to capitalism and from one-party rule to democracy. The revolution of all aspects of individuals' and families' everyday lives began in 1990. Prior to that time, women of working age participated in the labour market almost to the same extent as men and the participation rates were even higher than those of the widely recognized "women employment friendly" Scandinavian countries. There was a rule of guaranteed—indeed, obligatory—employment, and the vacancies outnumbered the job seekers. Compared to Western countries, Poland had a relatively high fertility rate. Women had their first child at an earlier age and most children were born to married women. Despite the importance attributed to female employment, policies had very limited consequences for the division of unpaid labour and care responsibilities in the home. Women bore the lion's share of these responsibilities. There was an enormous inequality between the earnings of men and women, and men were treated as breadwinners and, a priori, as "non-carers". The gender wage gap was larger in the years immediately prior to the end of Soviet Union than in the late 90's. Labour market participation of women of childbearing age was relatively high, mostly due to concentration of women in professions that provided them with convenient working hours.

Then, a social and economical earthquake came. In 1990, the process of economic restructuring began, with significant consequences for female labour force, family life, and work-life balance. At the beginning of 1990s, the Communist policy of full employment became a thing of the past. For the first time, Poles faced the risk of unemployment. Social benefits were restricted in an attempt to raise female labour force participation. Low wages, which made women's employment necessary for family well-being, and the closure of hundreds of kindergartens and crèches made the reconciliation of work and family life even harder. The conditions of economical instability, the risk of poverty for many, and economical chances for well-educated, career-oriented individuals all led to an increase in importance for women's education and professional experiences. As a consequence, we observed a dramatic change in childrearing behaviour. Polish women now have children later (although still earlier than in most EU countries) and give birth to fewer children; the fertility rate in Poland fell from 2.04 in 1990 to 1.24 in 2005.

How does reconciling work and family life look nowadays? Crèches' open spots dropped by two-thirds between 1990 and 2000. In 2008, the estimated coverage rate for children aged 0-3 is one of the lowest in Europe—3%. Although there are long waiting lists for spots in crèches in many large towns, this form of child care is rather less socially accepted. Parents prefer their children to be cared for by grandmothers or nannies

and crèches represent a 'last choice option'. Despite this fact, that the number of places in kindergartens has remained relatively stable, we can observe some rise in coverage rate over the years. This is mostly due to the substantial decline in the number of births. The coverage rate for children aged 3-6 is 60% (2007).

The family obligations related leaves in Poland are, at least formally, designed both for mothers and fathers, except the 20 weeks fully paid maternity leave. The paid parental leave (36 months, flat rate income-tested benefit) is a family right that both mothers and fathers can use. However, the beneficiaries of the system are predominantly women, although men's attitudes towards taking parental leave have been changing slightly.

Poland has low employment rates for both females (47%) and males (62%), mostly because of early retirement. Among those who are economically inactive, 20% indicate "family obligations" as a main reason (2008). The registered unemployment rate is 10.5% (2009) and part time employment is not common (8.5%). The fertility rate has been rising, but still remains on low level of 1.39. We observe a great change in attitudes towards education and employment in females' biographies, but at the same time family and motherhood remains a great value.

There is a public debate on a shift in policy measures from those aimed at reducing the financial costs of children to measures that diminish incompatibilities between work and family. This argument is strengthened by the facts that Poland needs both higher fertility and increased employment of men and women. Rigid labour market conditions, traditional patterns of sharing family responsibilities which limit men's use of different gender neutral measures related to childcare, and deeply underdeveloped childcare services result in strong incompatibilities between work and family. Since both structural and cultural causes for these incompatibilities have been identified by experts, gender roles receive more attention, and the role of employers is highlighted as well. The term 'family-friendly employer' has started to appear in public debates.

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