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Marriage, gender and demographic change: managing fertility in state-socialist Poland

Abstract

This paper explores fertility management practices in state-socialist Poland and investigates post-war demographic change through the lenses of gender and modernization. Using personal narratives in oral histories and memoirs, we examine reproductive decision-making processes from the 1940s to the 1980s, focusing on motivations, norms and the means employed to achieve a desired family size. Our analysis reveals the ambiguous nature of both modernization and women's emancipation in regard to reproduction. We argue that acceptance of the two-child model and the need to effectively manage fertility increased in Poland through the second half of the 20th century, but was highly dependent on levels of spousal communication and equality. Personal narratives demonstrate how women's reproductive choices were shaped by social pressure, and at times considerably limited by male violence and domination. As our analysis shows, gender relations in marriage and the modernization of fertility management in state-socialist Poland were deeply interrelated.

history of the family, history of sexuality, state-socialist Poland, history of contraception, gender history

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Introduction

When the Main Statistical Office's 2019 demographic report revealed the three-decade-long "state of birth depression" in Poland had continued, it was met with dismay.¹ The 2016 introduction of the "500+ Family" program, providing monthly payments of 500 PLN (c. 120 euros) for every second and consecutive child and later extended to first children, had failed to boost the birthrate. A divergence between population policies and people's reproductive strategies is certainly not novel in Poland. We examine this phenomenon by exploring personal choices and trajectories in fertility management through the narratives of heterosexually active men and women in state-socialist Poland.

Although Poland had experienced major baby booms in the immediate postwar years and early 1980s, both times of economic and social crises, state-socialist and overwhelmingly Catholic Poland underwent significant demographic change as a result of shifting cultural norms. We demonstrate how limiting family size became embedded in understandings of modernity, related to economic considerations and conditioned by women's individual goals.

While emphasizing the particularities of the country's demographic transition process and discussions about gender and family planning, we argue that Poland underwent an entanglement between "modern" and "traditional" ideas about fertility practices in the second half of the 20th century. To support this, we explore personal

¹ Main Statistical Office, *Demographic Situation in Poland up to 2018. Families creation and dissolution* (Warsaw, 2019), 17.

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narratives to illuminate the persistent links between reproduction and marriage in Poland; perceptions and practices of “family planning” as modern fertility management; social and individual ideas about the ideal family size and stated motivations for envisioning and attaining this; and analyze the ways in which these practices and motivations were gendered.

State-socialism, gender and population policies in postwar Poland

While West European countries experienced a marriage and baby boom during the 1950s, fertility sharply declined in Central and Eastern Europe (henceforth CEE) as the two-child family model became increasingly accepted. Rapid urbanization, industrialization, increased education, and widespread employment of women were key in fertility decline throughout the region. Access to and use of effective contraceptive methods, such as the pill and IUD, varied across CEE, and traditional methods such as withdrawal remained widespread. Abortion, legalized in most of the region during the mid-1950s, was widely accepted as a means of birth control.²

The situation in Poland was distinct in several aspects. Significantly higher fertility rates up to the mid-1950s have been interpreted as compensation for extensive demographic damage during WWII.³ Marriage not only became far more common than

² Jerzy Berent, “Causes of Fertility Decline in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union II: Economic and Social Factors,” *Population Studies* 24, no. 2 (1970): 247-292; Henry P. David and Robert J. McIntyre, eds. *Reproductive Behavior: Central and Eastern European Experience* (New York, 1981); Tomáš Sobotka, “The Stealthy Revolution? Birth Control, Reproduction, and Family under State-Socialism in Central and Eastern Europe,” in Lutz Niethammer and Silke Satjuko, eds. *Wenn Die Chemie Stimmt. Gender Relations and Birth Control in the Age of the Pill* (Göttingen, 2016), 121–50.

³ Béla Tomka, *A Social History of 20th Century Europe* (London, 2013); Barbara Klich-Kluczewska, “Making up for the Losses of War. Reproduction Politics in Post-War Poland,” in Maren Röger and Ruth Leiserowitz, eds. *Women and Men at War. A Gender Perspective on World War II and Its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe* (Osnabrück, 2012), 307–28.

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during the interwar period, people were marrying at a lower age.⁴ As Barbara Klich-Kluczewska has shown, divorce, legalized in 1945 but consistently stigmatized, remained significantly less common than in neighboring countries.⁵ The Catholic Church retained far more influence in Poland than the rest of CEE, and actively opposed the state's moderate anti-natalist population policies of the late 1950s and 1960s. However, despite the vast majority of Polish people identifying as Catholic, use of abortion and contraceptive technologies continued.

Illuminating these ambiguities from within people's narratives of their personal experiences, our study dialogues with expanding research on gender, sexuality and the family in socialist states, particularly on the relationship between modernization and changing gender regimes in CEE countries in the second half of the 20th century. Socialist states attempted to reshape gender relations in marriage through legal equality, divorce and civil marriage. These policies had transformative power, but substantial limitations: unpaid domestic labor remained symbolically attached to and exercised by women.⁶ Enduring marriages with children remained the primary goal of policies and intensified during the late 1960s and 1970s, when most CEE countries started to address a perceived demographic crisis and abandoned more progressive discourses.⁷

⁴ Jadwiga Komorowska, ed., *Przemiany rodziny polskiej* (Warsaw, 1975).

⁵ Barbara Klich-Kluczewska, *Rodzina, tabu i komunizm w Polsce* (Cracow, 2015).

⁶ Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton, 2007); Susan Zimmermann, "Gender Regime and Gender Struggle in Hungarian State Socialism," *Aspasia* 4, no. 1 (2010): 1–24; Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (Cambridge, 2011); Jill Massino, "Something Old, Something New: Marital Roles and Relations in State Socialist Romania," *Journal of Women's History* 22, no. 1 (2010): 34–60.

⁷ Ulf Brunnbauer, "'The Most Natural Function of Women.' Ambiguous Party Policies and Female Experiences in Socialist Bulgaria," in Shana Penn and Jill Massino, eds. *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe* (New York, 2009), 77–96; Kateřina Lišková, "Sex under Socialism: From Emancipation of Women to Normalized Families in Czechoslovakia," *Sexualities* 19, no. 1–2, (2016): 211–235.

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In Poland, population policies fluctuated between pro-natalism and moderate anti-natalism. Immediately postwar, attempts to compensate for population loss included free healthcare for mothers and children and protective legislation for working mothers. From 1948, new mothers were awarded 12 weeks of fully paid leave and could not be dismissed during pregnancy or leave.⁸ A state-run network of nurseries and kindergartens had been developed by 1956, but never fully met demand. Family benefits were kept low to encourage women into work. Abortion, according to the 1932 law, was illegal except in a narrow set of medical and criminal conditions.⁹ During the Stalinist period (1949–1955), there was no public discussion on family planning and sexuality. Illegal abortion was widespread, but birth rates remained high. Following public debate, abortion was made legal and free in “difficult life conditions” in 1956, and in 1959, practically accessible on demand in public healthcare.¹⁰ Simultaneously, the state enabled creation of the Society for Conscious Motherhood in 1957, which popularized knowledge on sexuality and birth control by issuing many publications and establishing family planning counselling; its activities continued throughout the state-socialist period.¹¹ Between 1956 and 1970, official discourses and policies promoted moderate anti-natalism; limiting family size was viewed as beneficial for both families and society.¹² Despite attempts to

⁸ Malgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism and Industrialization in postwar Poland* (Cambridge, 2010); Malgorzata Fidelis, “Equality through Protection: The Politics of Women’s Employment in Postwar Poland, 1945–1956,” *Slavic Review* 63, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 301–24.

⁹ Ewelina Ciaputa, “Abortion and the Catholic Church in Poland,” in Christabelle Sethna and Gayle Davis, eds. *Abortion across Borders. Transnational Travel to Access Abortion Services* (Baltimore, 2019), 278–309.

¹⁰ Agata Ignaciuk, “In sickness and in health. Expert discussions on abortion indications, risks and patient-doctor relationship in postwar Poland,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* no. 95 (2021): 83–112. Preprint available from: <https://preprint.press.jhu.edu/bhm/sites/bhm/files/ignaciuk.pdf>

¹¹ Natalia Jarska, “Modern Marriage and the Culture of Sexuality: Experts between the State and the Church in Poland, 1956–1970,” *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (July 1, 2019): 467–90.

¹² Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska, “Marx or Malthus?” Population Debates and the Reproductive Politics of State-Socialist Poland in the 1950s and 1960s,” *The History of the Family* 25, no. 4 (2019): 576–598.

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restrict abortion in the early 1960s and 1970s, the law was not altered until 1993. The availability and quality of contraceptives fluctuated in the centrally-planned economy.¹³ Studies show that men and women relied mostly on withdrawal and periodical abstinence, interpreted by experts as unmodern fertility management and proof of the limited impact of state modernizing efforts.¹⁴

With increasing concern about the effect of absent working mothers on small children, the development of nurseries and kindergartens slowed after 1956. During the 1960s, only half of children eligible for pre-school secured a place and nurseries were largely unavailable.¹⁵ The Catholic Church was developing its own campaign against abortion and promoting its conservative sexual ethics.¹⁶ In 1968, one-year unpaid maternity leave was implemented and, four years later, paid leave extended to 16 weeks and unpaid leave to three years. The 1970s witnessed increasing promotion of the 2+3 family model, and policies such as child benefits targeted at large families, part-time job opportunities for women, and benefits for young married couples. Although the state encouraged the building of new cooperative flats in large numbers, significant housing problems continued. As Piotr Perkowski observed, during the 1980s the state “continued to focus on maternity leave at the expense of care facilities”.¹⁷ Following demands by

¹³ Agata Ignaciuk, “Proven and the ZETs. Conceiving contraception in state-socialist Poland, c.1957–1970,” *Technology and Culture* (forthcoming).

¹⁴ Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, “Biopolitics and (Non-)Modernity. Population Micro-Policy, Expert Knowledge and Family in Late-Communist Poland,” *Acta Poloniae Historica*, no. 115 (2017), Zbigniew Smoliński, *Dzielnosc kobiet w Polsce* (Warsaw, 1980).

¹⁵ Natalia Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru. Robotnice w Polsce 1945–1960* (Warsaw, 2015), 251.

¹⁶ Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska, Agata Ignaciuk, “Family Planning Advice in State-Socialist Poland, 1950s–80s: Local and Transnational Exchanges”, *Medical History* 62, no. 2 (2020): 240–266.

¹⁷ Piotr Perkowski, “Wedded to Welfare? Working Mothers and the Welfare State in Communist Poland,” *Slavic Review* 76, no. 2 (2017): 476.

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Solidarity, three-years paid maternity leave was implemented in 1981, yet childcare facilities remained underdeveloped.

As this summary shows, the turning point for family planning came in 1956, and for maternal and family benefits during the 1970s. Although a clear shift towards pronatalism occurred from the late 1960s, no repressive measures to boost birthrates were implemented. Incentives for childbearing coexisted with persistent housing and childcare shortages. The inconsistent and often ambiguous policies after 1956, left considerable space for individual choice on family size, as this article will discuss.

Sources and methodology

Narratives by ordinary people, as Szreter, Nye and van Poppel have shown, illuminate the pathways and rationale of demographic change, enabling access to otherwise obscured tacit or explicit negotiation mechanisms relating to reproduction, whether on the level of the couple or between an individual and cultural, religious and legal norms regulating access to birth control and benefits.¹⁸ They also allow us to explore ideal family size expectations and their realization, and the historical in/stability of attitudes to marriage and family across generations, the rural/urban divide, and educational levels. Our analysis contributes to the embryonic history of reproductive decision-making in Poland, which, apart from early exploratory work by Agata Ignaciuk, has yet to systematically include narratives.¹⁹ The narratives used here reveal both individual motivations linked to fertility

¹⁸ Simon Szreter, Robert A. Nye, and Frans van Poppel, "Fertility and Contraception During the Demographic Transition: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, no. 2 (2003): 141–54 (141, 153).

¹⁹ Agata Ignaciuk, "Reproductive Policies and Women's Birth Control Practices in State-Socialist Poland (1960s-1980s)" In Lutz Niethammer and Silke Satjuko, eds. *Wenn Die Chemie Stimmt. Gender Relations and Birth Control in the Age of the Pill* (Göttingen, 2015), 271-94; Agata Ignaciuk, and Teresa Ortiz

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management and the ways in which the often transparent cultural norms relating to family and reproduction operate in relation to this management.

Our analysis is based on two types of personal narratives: reproductive life stories and contest memoirs. The former were collected during a two-stage oral history project between 2012 and 2019. The primary scope of the exploratory stage (2012–2014) was women’s experiences with “modern” contraceptive methods such as the pill; the second (2017–2019) focused on wide-ranging reproductive life stories by men and women. Open-ended, semi-structured interviewing strategies were employed to record participants’ sexual and reproductive experiences, including sex education, early relationships, marriage, and family planning. The key criteria for participants were heterosexuality and having lived part of their reproductive age (15–45) under state socialism. Participant dates of birth ranged between 1930 and 1974. All became sexually active and/or married between the early 1950s and 2010s. In total, the material presented originates from 48 interview participants, including five men and 14 individuals not residing in major cities.

Our second source of narratives are “contest memoirs”: responses to competitions announced in the press and available at the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw. Contest memoirs (*pamiętniki konkursowe*), rooted in the biographical method developed in Polish sociology during the interwar period, became a popular form of communication

Gómez. *Anticoncepción, Mujeres y Género. La "Píldora" en España y Polonia (1960–1980)* (Madrid, 2016).

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between journalists, experts, and ordinary people under state socialism.²⁰ Contests covered many issues, including war and work, and received many entries. The jury, usually journalists and experts, rewarded the memoirs judged “most interesting”. While it is clear some authors attempted to fulfil the jury’s expectations, the memoirs reveal a diversity of experiences, ideas and opinions that diverge from official policies and ideology. As family and marriage were widely discussed in Poland after 1956, several contests referred to family life. This analysis utilizes 450 original memoirs from four contests: *What are you like, family?* (1962), *Young Marriage* (1964), *Husband and Wife* (1965), all conducted by the popular nation-wide daily, *Life in Warsaw* (*Życie Warszawy*), and *My Marriage* (1974) by a weekly for rural youth (*Embers, Zarzewie*). References to managing fertility appear in around 100 memoirs, by authors born between 1920 and 1953 and married between the late 1930s and early 1970s. Although memoir authors had diverse social backgrounds, the majority were educated to at least secondary level and resided in urban areas.

While personal narratives cannot be treated as representative of wider society, they do illustrate individual experiences of fertility management. Our source material has broad generational and social scope: memoirs reveal the experiences of people born during the interwar period putting fertility management into practice during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, while younger interview partners reveal reproductive decision-making during the last two decades of Polish state socialism (1970s–1980s). Although the urban, educated population is overrepresented, accounts by less educated, rural populations are

²⁰ Agata Zysiak, “The Polish Method–Sociology, Diary Competitions and the Working Class’s Recognition in the Twentieth Century Poland” (draft); Małgorzata Szpakowska, *Chcieć i mieć: samowiedza obyczajowa w Polsce czasu przemian* (Warsaw, 2003).

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present, and suggest significant differences in fertility management that merit further exploration.

In order to situate these narratives within broader changes in fertility management and show how qualitative sources relate to quantitative studies, we refer to selected opinion polls and sociological studies, such as post-1956 opinion polls carried out by the research institute OBOP and 1970s Family Surveys.

“Marriage means having children”

In this section we show that an obligatory interrelationship between marriage and children endured and remained stable between the 1940s and 1980s in state-socialist Poland. This relationship was reciprocal: marriage continued to be considered the only legitimate site for reproduction and the desire for children continued to be an important motivation for marriage.

Two narratives of working-class urban women born twenty years apart exemplify this norm. As one of the oldest interview partners, a textile worker born in the large industrial city of Lodz in 1933, summarized: “When you got married, you had to have a child”.²¹ Another interview partner from Lodz, born in 1953 and trained as a waitress, recalled pressure from family and friends to become pregnant within a few months of marriage. Her first child arrived in 1973, the year she underwent a religious wedding, having had a civil ceremony the previous year.²²

²¹ DPA1K interview.

²² DPB1K interview.

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Higher education appears to have given women tools to resist these pressures. A 1960 memoir by a woman with higher education, born in 1939, four years into her marriage, revealed the couple's desire to complete degrees and secure independent housing before reproducing, despite societal pressure: "People make our lives harder, some of them say I'm sterile, others that so is my husband."²³ A male conservation worker born in 1965, married in 1988, noted intrusive looks from "neighbors [who] would count the months after marriage and see whether this was not a 'forced' marriage."²⁴ This extract encapsulates social pressure on childbirth timing: soon after marriage, but not too soon as this revealed a "restoratory" or "shotgun marriage", which, according to demographic surveys, increased considerably between the late 1960s and late 1980s. A 1970 Family Survey (*Ankieta Rodzinna*) discovered 24 percent of women gave birth less than eight months after marriage.²⁵ Two decades later, around 38 percent of brides in cities, and 48 percent in rural areas were pregnant.²⁶ The narratives reveal negotiations leading to such "restoratory" resolutions of unplanned pregnancy, and gender and generational differences between those married immediately after the war and from the 1960s onward.²⁷ While one man deliberated alone over whether to marry his girlfriend in the late 1930s, this decision tended to be made by couples from the 1960s to 1980s. An engineer born in 1920, married in 1939, felt religious pressure to marry his 17-year-old pregnant girlfriend: "I decided to go to confess. There immediately the [Catholic] priest was very clear....His tough words overwhelmed me. When asked if I agreed to marry the

²³ Archiwum Akt Nowych (Archive of Modern Records, henceforth AAN), Society of Memoir Writing, *Young Marriage* (henceforth YM), 10604.

²⁴ MUC2M interview.

²⁵ Barbara Łobodzińska, "Dobór małżeński jako społeczny proces kojarzenia partnerów," in Jadwiga Komorowska, ed., *Przemiany rodziny polskiej* (Warsaw, 1975), 236–237.

²⁶ Piotr Szukalski, *Małżeństwo: początek i koniec* (Łódź, 2013).

²⁷ Klich-Kluczewska, *Rodzina, tabu i komunizm*, 117–118.

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girl as soon as possible, I answered ‘yes’.”²⁸ Two decades later, an engineer born in 1936 framed his early 1960s “restoratory” marriage as a joint decision: “We were going to marry after she’d graduated. But something we had not predicted happened. One and a half years before my wife would finish her studies, she got pregnant. We decided not to terminate the pregnancy and get married.”²⁹ Similar framing of pregnancy-induced marriage as a shared decision persisted in narratives produced by urban female interview partners born in the early 1950s and married in the 1970s: “When we got to know each other better, unfortunately I got pregnant [laughs], so there was the wedding, unplanned. We had to decide something, so we got married” (female accountant born in 1951).³⁰ These narratives show persistent social pressure to “do the right thing” even if partners had not yet made plans for a shared future.

Of the two alternatives to “restoratory” marriage, abortion and single motherhood, the latter attracted more stigma. Klich-Kluczewska has emphasized that, despite out-of-wedlock children being granted the same rights as those born within marriage from 1946 onward, single motherhood remained taboo.³¹ Unlike the GDR and Soviet Union, where single motherhood was officially supported from the 1950s onward and increasingly socially acceptable, it continued to be perceived as immoral and unmodern in Poland, and institutionally erased or omitted.³² In this context, family could simultaneously condemn

²⁸ AAN, Society of Memoir Writing, *Husband and Wife* (henceforth HW), 10379.

²⁹ YM 10606.

³⁰ DUB12K interview.

³¹ Klich-Kluczewska, *Rodzina, tabu i komunizm*, 95–108.

³² Dagmar Herzog, “East Germany’s Sexual Evolution,” in Paul Betts and Katherine Pence, eds. *Socialist Modern. East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor, 2006), 71–95; Amy E. Randall, ““Abortion Will Deprive You of Happiness!”: Soviet Reproductive Politics in the Post-Stalin Era,” *Journal of Women’s History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 13–38. Klich-Kluczewska, *Rodzina, tabu i komunizm*, 119. While single motherhood through formal and informal divorce or separation was not uncommon, births out of wedlock remained low throughout the entire period (6.3 percent in 1955 and below 5 percent at the end of the 1980s).

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and support a single woman, as a female administrative worker born in Lodz in 1952 related. Having met her partner in 1976, their on/off relationship continued until she became pregnant in 1980, when he left for Germany supposedly to “earn money for the wedding” but never returned. She tearfully related being rejected by her brother for being a “maiden with a child” but receiving unconditional support from her mother. This lone narrative of single motherhood in our material showcases the emotional, and doubtless economic burden faced by women who took this option, well into the final decade of state-socialism.

Two narratives are by urban women who opted for abortion. Both were university students at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, thus the same generation and background as the single mother above, but with higher educational levels. An academic lecturer from Warsaw born in 1947, despite practicing moderately effective contraceptive methods such as the rhythm method and coitus interruptus, had three abortions between 1968 and 1970. She and her partner married in 1970 and went on to have two intentionally spaced children.³³ An engineer from Lodz, born in 1953, terminated a first pregnancy when her relationship was in difficulty, then became involved with another man she would later marry.³⁴ Although personal fulfillment became an important factor in deciding between abortion and marriage for younger women, this dilemma was faced by all generations of authors and respondents, including those with unwanted pregnancies before abortion was legalized.

³³ DUB2K interview.

³⁴ DUB6K interview.

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Can a family be planned?

In this section we explore perceptions of family planning in state-socialist Poland, demonstrate how the idea of “modern” fertility management proliferated and argue that the often imperfect attempts to put it into practice did not prevent widespread acceptance.

A 1958 poll by OBOP revealed significant support for contraception and legal abortion.³⁵ Rejection of “regulation of births” declined significantly between two generations: from 20 percent among married women born in the 1920s, to 11 percent among those born in the 1940s.³⁶ Use of contraception increased in the subsequent decades: surveys show that in the late 1950s, 50 percent of women used birth control methods; two decades later this figure reached 75 percent.³⁷ However, Family Surveys conducted in the 1970s revealed an ongoing preference for periodic abstinence and withdrawal (30.3 percent and 49 percent of married women surveyed in 1972). Declared use of the rhythm method increased, perhaps due to its growing popularization in mainstream and Catholic media.³⁸ A decline in the stated use of withdrawal was most pronounced in younger generations and those with higher education.³⁹ The use of “modern” methods like the pill did not change substantially and remained marginal (only 6.9 percent in 1977).⁴⁰

³⁵ Jan Malanowski, *Stosunek społeczeństwa do przyrostu naturalnego* (Warsaw, 1960), 32.

³⁶ Zbigniew Smoliński, „Stosunek mężatek do regulacji urodzeń”, *Problemy Rodziny* 6 (1974), 24.

³⁷ Hanna Malewska, *Kulturowe i psychospołeczne determinanty życia seksualnego* (Warsaw, 1967); Zbigniew Smoliński, “Przemiany dzietności w Polsce w XX w.” in Jadwiga Komorowska, ed. *Przemiany rodziny polskiej* (Warsaw, 1975), 145–149. Contraceptive use varied greatly according to education level and locality: between 59 percent in rural areas to 84.5 percent for women in urban areas (in the late 1970s).

³⁸ Agata Ignaciuk, *Sensing nature. Expert discussions on “natural family planning” in state-socialist Poland (1950s–1980s)* (manuscript in preparation).

³⁹ Zbigniew Smoliński, *Dzietność kobiet w Polsce*, 163.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 160–177.

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Memoir narratives illuminate the personal perceptions of rationality and modernity attached to the idea of family planning. A pre-school teacher from a small town near Warsaw, born in 1926, married in 1947 and mother of two, directly addressed this association: “We were driven by rationality, we decided we would raise no more than two children with an age difference of three years”.⁴¹ These ideals overlapped with those promoted in public discourse on family planning in the post-1956 period, when the Party-State sponsored an intense public health campaign popularizing contraceptive knowledge and methods. Rational family planning adapted to specific economic situations was represented as essential for the health and prosperity of families and the nation. Narrative authors were familiar with the idea of planning family size and applied the notions of planned and unplanned pregnancies/children to their own experience. Acceptance of family planning ideals, widespread in the generation that came of age after the mid-1950s, extended to previous generations who projected this on past experiences, identifying the lack of access to abortion and contraceptive advice before state-sponsored family planning.

Accepting family planning and putting it into practice, however, were different and often diverging enterprises. Memoir narratives relate how failed attempts resulted in unplanned pregnancies before and within marriage; people accepted a certain degree of fortuity, an acceptance that endured into the 1980s. A German language teacher born in Tychy in 1958, married in 1983, considered it typical for her generation “to plan and desire the first child, and conceive the second by accident—or the other way round”.⁴²

⁴¹ YM 10604.

⁴² MUC3K interview.

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“Unplanned” pregnancies were not necessarily “unwanted”. The memoir of a man with higher education, born in 1930 and married in 1958, showcases the aforementioned complexities: a desire for planning, an enduring attribution of pregnancy to “fate”, acceptance of an unplanned first pregnancy and a successfully planned second:

We planned to enlarge the family four years after marriage, when we had got our own flat.... Fate meant that my wife became pregnant ... Our son was born in 1960, and we were even happy about it.... We were very happy when our daughter was born in 1962, because then we had ‘everything’. In the existing material conditions, two children are enough.⁴³

This narrative also sheds light on the varying intensity of family planning in particular moments of family history. Family planning strategies, thus, became more or less flexible according to circumstances. A flexible strategy could entail the use of less reliable methods, such as the rhythm method or coitus interruptus, and/or using them inconsistently. An unplanned, swift second pregnancy could cause a couple with limited resources to adhere to the rhythm method more consistently, or switch to more effective methods such as condoms, the pill or an IUD. The narrative of the German language teacher illustrates this switch in strategies: giving birth to daughters in 1985 and 1986 took a heavy toll on her career opportunities and mental health:

We planned just one child. The second one happened. I got pregnant by accident, and in my opinion too early.... It may sound bad, but we didn’t want it [the second child].... I had almost finished my degree, and was thinking about what to do with

⁴³ YM 10613.

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my life, starting a career, which was something I was really looking forward to.

And then, it turns out, my baby is eight months old, no thesis, no career, and the pregnancy—it all, all my plans fell apart.⁴⁴

This honesty about initial rejection of the second pregnancy, excused by the expression “It may sound bad”, relates to an ongoing glorification of parenthood and the nuclear ideal, which we discuss below. Having accepted the pregnancy—“I didn’t consider an abortion, which was legally accessible”—she and her husband intensified their precautions—“I did everything not to have more children”—and as the pill produced unpleasant side effects, used a combination of coitus interruptus and condoms.

Many other interview partners did resort to abortion to space childbirth or maintain family size, despite expert advice throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s consistently representing abortion as a dangerous and irresponsible way of achieving family goals.⁴⁵ Abortion on request, available from 1959, became a normalized method of birth control. Between the early 1960s and early 1970s, however, the official number of abortions per 100 births declined slightly, from 33 to 22.9.⁴⁶ The official abortion ratio in Poland (number of abortions per 1000 births) was lower than in Czechoslovakia and Hungary.⁴⁷

There are no comprehensive data on abortion users for the entire period under study. According to a small study conducted in the Polish capital in the second half of the 1960s,

⁴⁴ MUC3K interview.

⁴⁵ Agata Ignaciuk, “Ten Szkodliwy Zabieg: Dyskursy na Temat Aborcji w Publikacjach Towarzystwa Świadomego Macierzyństwa/Towarzystwa Planowania Rodziny.” *Zeszyty Etnologii Wrocławskiej* 2, no. 20 (2014): 75–97.

⁴⁶ AAN, Ministerstwo Zdrowia i Opieki Społecznej, 19/475, Raport o stanie zdrowia i opiece zdrowotnej nad kobietami oraz program działania na lata 1976-1980. The official numbers, however, did not include data on private abortion services, which expanded during the final decades of state-socialism.

⁴⁷ *From Abortion to Contraception. A Resource to Public Policies and Reproductive Behavior in Central and Eastern Europe from 1917 to the Present*, ed. Henry P. David and Joanna Skilogianis (Westport, 1999), 15.

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a woman seeking abortion in the Warsaw public healthcare system in the late 1960s tended to be a professional woman with a family who wanted to either space children or have no more.⁴⁸ Extrapolating this abortion-seeker model to other contemporary urban settings and further into the 1970s and 1980s, it would make sense to speculate that, within marriage, abortion was a decision partners made together. An example appeared in the narrative of an administrative worker born in Lodz in 1948, married in 1968, who terminated her third pregnancy in 1982 “because we didn’t have the right circumstances and did not want another child”. She explicitly described the decision as something “they” made in response to a shared perception of economic circumstances and lack of desire for a 2+3 family.⁴⁹

While for some women, abortion was a partnership decision, for others it was a tool to deal with the consequences of sexual violence. A number of memoir narratives include sexual violence and subsequent unwanted pregnancies, leading to either excess childbearing or multiple abortions.⁵⁰ One such experience was related by a female teacher from a small town, born in 1924, married in 1945 and a mother of seven: “Our problem was having many children (*wielodzietność*). The reason was obvious: his low level of culture of sexuality, and lack of contraceptives.”⁵¹ This narrative epitomizes the perceived links between lack of planning and “lack of culture”, in this case sexual. A “culture of sexuality”, a notion widely used and popularized by Polish sexuality experts from the late

⁴⁸ Zbigniew Sternadel, Anna Pęksa, and Andrzej Łysikiewicz, “Przerwania Ciąży w Warunkach Klinicznych (Studium z lat 1968–1973).” *Ginekologia Polska* 45, no. 7 (1974): 871–75.

⁴⁹ DUBIK interview.

⁵⁰ HW 10384, YM 10605, 10612 and 10613.

⁵¹ HW 10381.

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1950s onwards, referred to modern sexuality management.⁵² In expert discourses on sexuality and contraception during the 1960s and 1970s, those who failed to embrace this “culture of sexuality” were most often men not controlling their sexual urges.⁵³ As the narratives show, this “uncivilized behavior” or “lack of sexual culture” was outright sexual violence. Women in rural areas were more likely to experience sexual assault. A female farmer born in 1953 and married in 1976, resident in a small village in North Poland, summarized the lack of “sexual culture” of rural men in the following way:

One had to run. Because when a man was drunk, different things could happen. You had to run. I would go to another room and only get back to bed when he was asleep. It’s not a joke. Men in the countryside were like this. And women in the countryside did not have an easy life.⁵⁴

Alcohol abuse was one important factor aggravating sexual violence, in both rural and urban settings. A female teacher, born in 1935 to a peasant family and married in 1961, resident in Warsaw and mother to one child, had to resort to abortion a number of times due to marital rape: “I have already had several abortions (*skrobanki*), because when he is drunk he doesn’t reflect on anything, I must have intercourse with him, because when I resist he beats me heavily, he gets very angry.”⁵⁵

These narratives illustrate the clash between awareness of “modern” family planning strategies and the fact these strategies necessitated some degree of consensus.

⁵² Agnieszka Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland*. Translated by Marta Rozmysłowicz (Bloomington, 2021).

⁵³ Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*; Agata Ignaciuk, “No Man's Land? Gendering Contraception in Family Planning Advice Literature in State-Socialist Poland (1950s–1980s),” *Social History of Medicine* 33, no. 4 (2020): 1327–49. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkz007>.

⁵⁴ RB2K interview.

⁵⁵ YM 10613.

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Denouncing sexual violence and alcohol abuse in Poland between the 1950s and 1980s, family planning experts suggested women use reversible contraceptive methods, undetectable to their partner, such as a cervical cap or the IUD. Although sterilization was illegal, doctors did at times offer the procedure to women for health or “social” reasons.⁵⁶ After giving birth to her fourth child in the late 1960s, a female farmer was offered tubal ligation, perhaps because of her family size and violent marriage; doctors advised her not to tell her husband.

The perfect family

In this section we examine visions of the “perfect family” during state socialism in Poland and the ways in which couples pursued this ideal. We show how this “perfect” family increasingly became a two-child model, despite intense state promotion of a “2+3” family during the 1970s, and explore perceptions and realizations of non-majority families, such as those with a single child or four and over.

Following WWII, the two-child family model became increasingly common across Europe,⁵⁷ including in Poland, although acceptance of the three-child model persisted in the country well into the 1970s. The aforementioned 1970s Family Surveys revealed that while people generally accepted both the two-child and three-child model, they were having less children themselves.⁵⁸ Personal narratives confirm the dominant imagined

⁵⁶ Ignaciuk, “No Man’s Land?”; Waclaw Wieszczycki and Zbigniew Łapiński, “Sterylizacja kobiet w świetle polskiego ustawodawstwa,” *Ginekologia Polska* 41, no. 10 (1970): 1153–1156.

⁵⁷ Yulia Hilevych and Caroline Rusterholz, “Two Children to Make Ends Meet. The Ideal Family Size, Parental Responsibilities and Costs of Children on Two Sides of the Iron Curtain During the Post-War Fertility Decline,” *The History of the Family* 23, no. 3 (2018): 408–425.

⁵⁸ The actual total fertility rate (dziećność rzeczywista całkowita) varied between 2.1 and 2.4 children per urban woman born since 1940. Among older women, this was 2.4 per urban woman, showing gradual change between the generations born in the 1930s and 1940s–1950s, and 3.5 in rural areas. Smoliński, *Dziećność kobiet w Polsce*, 30–117.

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and practiced ideal family had two children; a relatively stable ideal perceived across generations to fulfill both social expectations and individual desires. A female public servant born in Lodz, mother of two daughters born in 1956 and 1959, framed this in the following terms: “People say, when you have two children, you pay your dues to God as well as the people”.⁵⁹ Another interpretation of the “2+2 model” was that it reconciled providing children with siblings and a proper education. A male blue-collar worker from Gdansk and in the same generation as the public servant above, emphasized the latter as a major motivation for the “2+2” model:

A year after marriage, suddenly and unexpectedly our first and beloved child was born....After a year, our daughter was born. And then we decided we would stop and wouldn't have more children. We came to the conclusion that two in marriage is enough, we have to bring them up and educate them properly.⁶⁰

In the subsequent generation, the two-child ideal persisted despite the pronatalist turn in Party-State population policy and intensive promotion of three-child families during the 1970s. The narrative of a female teacher born in 1947, married in 1970 and residing in Warsaw, shows how these promoted ideals were disregarded if they could not be negotiated into carefully planned professional and material goals:

I remember, when I finished my degree the imperative was the 2+3 model. That there were not enough children. Women were encouraged to stay at home and have children. For me it was bullshit. I knew I had to graduate first, later get a job

⁵⁹ DUA1K interview.

⁶⁰ AAN, Society of Memoir Writing, *What are you like, family?* (henceforth WLF), 9872.

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and finally get married. And a flat somewhere in between. And I will have two children. Only two. And this plan worked.

For the generation born in the 1970s, having two children continued to be a norm one inherited and reproduced.⁶¹ In the words of a nurse born in Lodz in 1970: “I wanted two children, siblings. Everybody had two children. My mum had two. My sister had two”.⁶²

Beyond the two-child ideal remained smaller and larger families, both stereotyped but in different ways. In expert advice on family planning—secular and Catholic—circulating in Poland from the late 1950s onwards, representations of only children ranged from being disadvantaged in relation to those raised with siblings, to egocentric, and even “perverted” (*spaczone*) individuals that would inflict somewhat deserved suffering upon their parents.⁶³ Echoes of this can be found well into the end of state socialism in Poland in narratives of women who had more than one child to prevent the first-born becoming an egoist.⁶⁴ However, the youngest generation of female interview partners born in the 1950s onwards, particularly those who had been to university and lived in large cities, revealed a greater acceptance for the one-child model. One academic teacher born in Lodz in 1969, framed having one child as the “most manageable option”. Her own son, born in the early 1990s, was carefully planned:

⁶¹ Interviews DUB113K, DUC3K, DUC5K, MUB3K-MUB3M.

⁶² DUD1K interview.

⁶³ W. Czaplńska et al., *Katolik a planowanie rodziny*, 3 ed. (Cracow, 1964), 23; Jan Lesiński, *Przed i za progiem małżeństwa* (Warsaw, 1959), 4–5; Wydział Duszpasterstwa Kurii Metropolitalnej Warszawskiej, *Spotkania z narzeczonymi w punkcie poradnictwa rodzinnego* (Warsaw, 1978), 10.

⁶⁴ DUD2K interview.

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I wanted to highlight that I planned to have just one child.... And I wanted to focus on quality, not quantity. I knew I could handle [*zapanuje*] one child, I will feel good, the child will feel good too.

This narrative reveals a shift in meanings attached to single children: they enabled women to fulfill maternal desires without having to relinquish other ambitions.

While having a single child was problematic, especially during the early decades of the period under analysis, having many children was viewed as irrational and the result of lack of planning. According to the 1958 OBOP poll, over a half of respondents believed the main reason for large families was the “unawareness of the parents”; thus, having many children was associated with backwardness.⁶⁵ Memoirs testify that it was often a result of lack of birth control, particularly in rural areas. The narrative of a male farmer from Eastern Poland, born in 1938 and married in 1964, reveals the tension between accepting the need to limit births and practical rejection of any birth control methods. His wife became pregnant when the couple already had four daughters:

Again in 1970 twin boys were born. We were happy about it, but our situation was getting very difficult. But eventually we had to accept this reality. Maybe we should have prevented it, by terminating the pregnancy, or by using some kind of contraceptives. But I felt an aversion towards them, and I couldn't listen about abortion.... I also thought that whatever will be, will be.... [In 1971] my wife gave birth to the seventh child. Our situation became critical.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Malanowski, *Stosunek społeczeństwa*.

⁶⁶ AAN, Society of Memoir Writing, *My Marriage* (henceforth MM) 9942.

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In urban settings from the late 1960s onward, those who had large families—of more than two children—could face ridicule. A female engineer born in 1948 in Lodz, believed women who bore many children received greater stigmatization than those who terminated a pregnancy—“They’d say, this silly one, look at how many children she has”—while men risked being mocked at work and dubbed “childmaker” [*dzieciorób*].⁶⁷ A nurse from Lodz born in 1969 and married in 1991, planned to have three children but eventually gave birth to four, the last when she was 48 and entering menopause:

The first two, appeared spontaneously, the third one was planned, the fourth was a ... tragedy, shock, surprise. Nobody plans to have four children... Four children, it was considered a pathology.⁶⁸

This particular example is a testimony to the shift in abortion law and access during the Polish democratic transition. From 1993 onward, abortion became legal only in the public healthcare within a narrow set of medically and criminally defined circumstances. Illegal abortion initially remained widely available in the white-coat underground, particularly in large cities, but as stigmatization increased became progressively more expensive and difficult to obtain.⁶⁹ This nurse, who cited no religious motivation for having a large family, was unaware that abortion had been legal at the time of her own birth and a widely used family planning resource.

⁶⁷ DUB10K interview.

⁶⁸ DUD3K interview.

⁶⁹ Joanna Mishtal, *The Politics of Morality. The Church, the State and Reproductive Rights in Postsocialist Poland* (Athens, 2015); Agata Chelstowska, “Stigmatisation and Commercialisation of Abortion Services in Poland: Turning Sin into Gold,” *Reproductive Health Matters* 19, no. 37 (2011): 98–106.

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Catholicism was a significant factor for most couples who consciously chose to have more than two children. A male memoir author with secondary education, born in 1934, married in 1958 and a father of three, claimed he and his wife, both religious, had planned a large family:

My wife showed a lot of initiative [in family planning]. We will be original and not trendy. We decided to have five children. Why five? Because my earnings allowed for this and my wife was ready for the required childrearing.⁷⁰

A link between practicing Catholicism and having a non-standard, larger family, was evident in the aforementioned opinion polls and demographic surveys throughout the state-socialist period. The 1958 OBOP survey found a correlation between religiosity and the readiness to have many children, and with less acceptance of limiting births.⁷¹ Personal narratives reveal a rejection of abortion and tensions relating to different forms of contraception among practicing Catholics. A male conservation officer born in 1965, married in 1988 and resident in Warsaw, claimed his four children were carefully planned. Defining himself and his wife as practicing Catholics, he explained the planning occurred through a combination of “nature” and contraception: in their case, the pill. This narrative showcases the ambiguous meanings and interpretations of “family planning” for deeply religious couples who chose to employ contraceptive methods rejected by the Polish Catholic hierarchy.⁷² However, for Poles who were baptized and married in the Church but did not intensely practice their religion—the vast majority—the tensions and doubts

⁷⁰ YM 10617.

⁷¹ Malanowski, *Stosunek społeczeństwa*, 32.

⁷² MUC2M interview. Agnieszka Kościńska, “*Humanae Vitae*, Birth Control and the Forgotten History of the Catholic Church in Poland,” in Alana Harris, ed. *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945–1975* (Basingstoke, 2018), 187–208.

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about the “morality” of contraceptive methods were rare. These ambiguities require further exploration that we hope to fully address in future work.

Drives and motivations for a particular family size

In this section, we explore how notions of perfect family size were implemented and the range of motivations behind this implementation. In particular, we look at interpretations of “living conditions”, and the diverse ways in which housing situations could influence reproductive choices. We argue that motivations related to economic constraints and welfare deficiencies were significant and persisted throughout the entire period, yet should be understood as personal evaluations of a family’s situation and expectations that led to the invention of diverse strategies. We show that in late socialism, motivations for limiting family size increasingly included women’s wellbeing and professional aspirations.

Demographic and family planning surveys have demonstrated that economic considerations continued to be declared as a primary motivation for limiting family size throughout the period under study.⁷³ For the memoir authors of all generations, economic motivations were paramount and included whether the couple could afford another child, the risk of losing a wife’s salary, and whether purchasing major consumer goods would have to be postponed. These constraints affected decisions to have a first child or further children alike. A woman with secondary education, born in 1936 and married in 1956, cited the need for her and her husband to work as crucial in their decision to postpone having children:

⁷³ Malanowski, *Stosunek społeczeństwa*; Maria Trawińska, “Jak małżeństwa warszawskie pojmują planowanie rodziny,” *Problemy Rodziny* no. 3 (1972).

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We did not have children for a couple of years, because we did not have the conditions. We lived in a shared house, and both of us worked, saving money for a flat, and to be able to have a child.⁷⁴

The tension between reproductive and productive facets of marriage—giving priority to producing children or producing prospective or actual wealth—were tangible in testimonies of both those who decided to postpone reproduction and those who opted to have children immediately after marriage. The narrative of a female post clerk, born in Germany in 1945 to a couple of Polish *Zivilarbeiters* (forced laborers), but long-term resident in Lodz, showcases this tension. While agreeing on the cause-effect relationship between marriage and children—“You start a family to have children. This is what life’s like”—she emphasized that pregnancy immediately after marriage appropriated financial resources that could be employed elsewhere: “If one had been more reflexive, our first asset as a married couple [*dorobek*] would not have been a child”.⁷⁵

Housing issues were frequently cited in memoirs as a major factor in family size, with couples deciding to have children when they considered their housing situation to be satisfactory or, at the very least, improving.⁷⁶ Contemporary studies have demonstrated a clear connection between the decision to have subsequent children—but not the first—and a couple having their own flat. However, the size of the flat has little influence: many families have preferred to invest in their living conditions rather than more children.⁷⁷ A

⁷⁴ HW 10379.

⁷⁵ DPB2K interview.

⁷⁶ YM 10606, WLF 9872 and 9886.

⁷⁷ Dariusz Jarosz, *Mieszkanie się należy... Studium z peerelowskich praktyk społecznych* (Warsaw, 2010), 135–138.

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female editor born in 1936 explained the dilemma she and her husband faced when living in a cottage with no facilities:

It turned out that soon there will be three of us. We spent a lot of time thinking whether we had the right to give life to our child. The most important arguments were the poverty, lack of household organization, and the fear of spending winter in such primitive rural conditions.... However, I really wanted to have that child, my husband too. And suddenly and unexpectedly, we were given a chance to enlist in a housing cooperative, with a three-year term before receiving a flat. And this made us decide.⁷⁸

State-socialist housing policy, despite considerable investment in flat construction, meant many young married couples cohabitated with their parents, especially during the first years of marriage. In the early 1960s, about 30 percent of young newlyweds in cities lived with one of the spouse's parents.⁷⁹ According to research conducted by Zofia Pindor, between the years 1965 and 1973, 66 percent of married couples lived with parents for the first two years of marriage.⁸⁰ One female memoir author, married in 1972 and expecting to wait eight years for a cooperative flat, decided to terminate her second pregnancy.⁸¹

Throughout the state-socialist period, family size was one of the many criteria determining the size of flat that could be assigned, and some couples incorporated their

⁷⁸ YM 10605.

⁷⁹ Ewa Kaltenberg-Kwiatkowska, "Przeobrażenia i potrzeby współczesnej rodziny," in Zarząd Główny Ligi Kobiet, *Kobieta – praca – dom. Problemy pracy zawodowej kobiet i rodziny współczesnej* (Warsaw, 1967), 229.

⁸⁰ Jarosz, *Mieszkanie się należy*, 139. The study was conducted in Warsaw and Wrocław. The latter had a particularly severe housing crisis.

⁸¹ MM 9937.

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desire for a place of their own or a larger flat in their family planning strategies.⁸² One female interview partner, trained as an engineer but primarily a homemaker with two children in the late 1970s, stated that she and her husband had conceived the second child with the explicit aim of being upgraded to a larger flat.⁸³

Those who postponed living independently did gain benefits from prolonged cohabitation with parents. While personal space was often restricted, with grandparents, parents and children confined to, at best, one room each, the main advantage was extensive childcare support. A female textile worker from Lodz born in 1933, cohabitated with her parents for the first 10 years of marriage, between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, and received substantial help from her parents and grandmother raising her only son, born in 1956.⁸⁴ A female medical technician from Lodz born in 1961 cohabited with her in-laws for 6 years after getting married. She carefully planned her pregnancies in 1985 and 1988 to merge two three-year periods of paid maternity leave. Her husband and his parents worked outside the household but were home during the afternoons and evenings, making her early childbearing years “calmer” as “there was always someone at home”.⁸⁵

As these examples show, reproductive choices often depend on the availability of childcare and the possibilities of combining work outside the home with motherhood. State-run childcare facilities for children aged 0 to 3 and for older children were scarce throughout the period under study. In 1956, only 5 percent of children under the age of 3 had access to a nursery, and 19 percent to pre-school.⁸⁶ The amount of children attending

⁸² From 1974, young married couples without children could be granted a three-room flat. Jarosz, *Mieszkanie się należy...*, 65

⁸³ DUB11K interview.

⁸⁴ DPA1K interview.

⁸⁵ DUC1K interview.

⁸⁶ Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*.

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childcare facilities in Poland only reached around 25 percent in 1973 and continued to lag behind other state-socialist countries.⁸⁷ Another reason for limiting family size was the desire to “raise children correctly”, a concept which could relate to material commodities and/or non-material factors such as parental attention. Limiting the number of children was also associated with a wife’s wellbeing and/or her professional aspirations. A study carried out in Warsaw in the early 1970s on motivations for family size other than economic factors confirms the importance of both these reasons.⁸⁸ One female memoir author with a university education explained her reasons for not having a third child:

I had a termination (*zabieg*). I could not agree to striking my life plans, aspirations. I was raised in a large family, abandoned by the father ... and experienced that “God gives children, but he does not provide for the children”.... I look on my mother’s broken life, my father’s broken life, and the lack of love among us, the siblings, and I am terrified.... How can you be a wife, lover and a friend when you give birth every year, and you lose teeth, health and happiness?⁸⁹

Although this author alluded to economic factors, her main motivations were the belief that having many children conflicted with marital and familial happiness, and that a third child would threaten her own plans and wellbeing.

Motivations relating to women’s freedom, wellbeing and career aspirations were rare among the memoir authors born in the interwar years. In the narratives of urban interview partners born from the 1950s onwards, however, they were far more frequent. One

⁸⁷ Perkowski, “Wedded to welfare”, 473.

⁸⁸ The study found that 36 percent believed it was easier to bring up fewer children, and almost 15 percent cited the wife’s “wellbeing” as a factor in limiting family size. Trawińska, “Jak małżeństwa,” 7,9.

⁸⁹ YM 10606.

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example is the narrative of an engineer born in Lodz in 1953. Having got married in 1981 and had a son, she spent long periods working in Africa during the 1980s while her husband and mother took care of the child. She explicitly linked having a single child with career aspirations:

[The number of children] depends on one's purpose in life. Some girls did not speak of getting a degree, they just wanted a family. So they'd have two children. Those who wanted professional fulfilment, did not have two.⁹⁰

This narrative illuminates the difficulties of reconciling a demanding career with motherhood and, again, the strong roots of the “2+2” model: according to this interview partner, even those women who did not want to work would not have more than two children.

Gendering reproductive decisions

In this section we focus specifically on ways in which reproductive decision-making in Poland has been gendered. We reveal how communication and negotiation processes relating to family size have been based on the assumed responsibility of women for child raising and domestic duties, regardless of professional roles.

Many historians have used personal narratives to enquire into gendered aspects of the reproductive decision-making process.⁹¹ Our narratives reveal a complicated

⁹⁰ DUB6K interview.

⁹¹ Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter, “‘They Prefer Withdrawal’: The Choice of Birth Control in Britain, 1918-1950,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XXXIX, no. 2 (2003): 263–91; Karina Felitti, “‘En Sus Propias Palabras’: Relatos de Vida Sexual y (No) Reproductiva de Mujeres Jóvenes Mexicanas durante las Décadas de 1960 y 1970,” *Dynamis* 38, no. 2 (2018): 336–61; Hilevych and Rusterholz, “‘Two Children to Make Ends Meet’”; Caroline Rusterholz, “Reproductive Behavior and Contraceptive Practices in Comparative Perspective, Switzerland (1955–1970),” *The History of the Family* 20, no. 1 (2015): 41–68; Yuliya Hilevych, “Abortion and Gender Relationships in Ukraine, 1955–1970,” *The History of the Family* 20, no. 1 (2015): 86–105.

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relationship between gender and family planning in Poland. Most authors emphasized spousal agreement on intended family size. Communication within the couple, both before and after marriage, was common when deciding how to deal with an unplanned pregnancy. Lack of such communication, as shown in the memoirs of spousal abuse victims, was regarded as irresponsible behavior. When taking “living conditions” into account, one spouse might take a leading role. A female civil servant born in 1933 in Lodz and married in 1954, claimed her husband proposed they have no more than two children, a decision she accepted.

In narratives of male interview partners, decisions about family size were often delegated to their wives in recognition of their deeper—yet largely unquestioned—engagement with childrearing. This gendering of reproductive decision-making emerged cross-generationally and reflected mainstream discourse on family planning popularized after 1956, when the interwar notion of “conscious motherhood” was widely used in press and family planning organization publications.⁹² A male physician, born in 1939 in a small town near Lodz, spent most of his career in a village in Southern Poland and was interviewed with his wife, a midwife born in 1946. They married in 1968 and had two children, born in 1971 and 1973. When he admitted to wanting more children, his wife interrupted and emphasized that, due to the limited help she received, two children were more than enough:

Sometimes, I was in the bathroom, washing, cleaning till 4 AM, till the dawn. It was hard for one person alone, and my husband didn't help. And I also had a small

⁹² Ignaciuk, “No Man’s Land”.

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garden to tend, I made preservatives, cooked, baked, prepared. So I didn't want more [children].⁹³

The assigning of childrearing duties to wives appeared in narratives crossing generations, geography and social class. Although men were becoming more engaged in fatherhood during the state-socialist period, especially from the 1970s, women still devoted many more hours to childcare and few fathers took advantage of the parental leave available from the 1980s.⁹⁴ An administrative worker with higher technical education born in Lodz in 1953, had little expectation that her husband would be involved in childrearing. Married in 1976, two children “created on her initiative” were born in 1979 and 1983; her construction engineer husband was often away “building socialism”.⁹⁵

When unplanned pregnancies were experienced by memoir authors, couples would consider different solutions, but the final decision was usually made by women. Born in 1939 and married in 1959, a male blue-collar worker let his wife decide as there were “issues the woman should have her own opinion on I knew how much effort it would cost me.”⁹⁶ A female economist born in 1924, married in 1949 and mother of two, described her husband accepting her decision “in silence”.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, cases of husbands imposing their own decision to have an abortion or not can be found in our material, across social classes, from the interwar period, the

⁹³ MUA1M and MUB2K interview.

⁹⁴ Natalia Jarska, “Men as husbands and fathers in postwar Poland (1956-1975): towards new masculine identities?,” *Men and Masculinities* 2020; Piotr Perkowski, “Ojcostwo w Polsce Ludowej” in: *Mężczyzna w rodzinie i społeczeństwie – ewolucja ról w kulturze polskiej i europejskiej*, vol. 2, eds. Edyta Głowacka-Sobiech and Justyna Gulczyńska (Poznan 2010).

⁹⁵ DUB13K interview.

⁹⁶ YM 10622.

⁹⁷ YM 10612.

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postwar period up to 1956 when abortion was illegal, and the post-1956 period.⁹⁸ Power relations in marriage were, therefore, of crucial importance in reproductive decision-making.

Conclusions

This exploration of personal narratives on reproductive decision-making helps us understand the evolution of norms and practices, and the process of demographic change experienced in Poland from the mid-1950s onward. The memoirs and interviews analyzed reveal both modernization and the persistence of more traditional practices, plus a complex relationship between population policies and individual choice: the two-child model became widely accepted despite pro-natalist policies and incentives during the 1970s. Narratives also highlight how fertility management in Poland has been shaped by era, social position, degree of urbanization and Catholicism.

These personal narratives reveal that family planning was used to both limit family size and space childbirth, and that couples tended to use effective contraceptive strategies alongside withdrawal and/or abortion. They also show that success in these endeavors was generally achieved through effective spousal communication. As this analysis reveals, family planning experiences were similar in urban areas of all sizes: modernization of practices was clearly related to urbanization and education. Large families were stigmatized as unmodern and unplanned but having more than two children—especially in urban areas and families starting in the 1960s onwards—was generally a conscious decision, often supported by a Catholic worldview.

⁹⁸ HW 10396, YM 10605, YM 10617.

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A strong association between reproduction and marriage, in line with both state policies and Catholic teachings, persisted throughout the postwar period and is a unique feature of demographic change in Poland. Although reproductive decisions were often influenced by social control and pressure, abortion was normalized and widely practiced even before legalization in 1956. Many women resorted to abortion to avoid births out of wedlock but also—and often in agreement with their husbands—to space children or limit family size. While family planning was becoming increasingly effective, couples, especially from older generations, accepted a certain fortuity and unpredictability. Some traditional features can be related to Catholicism, but religious motivations were rarely explicit. While the complex relationship between Catholicism and sexuality in postwar Poland requires further research, we argue that family planning practices in this period evolved more in spite of Catholicism than because of it.

This study provides new insights into gender relations in postwar Poland. Despite the increasing importance given to communication in decision making, the narratives reflect the feminizing of birth control in the period under study and a continuing assignment of childrearing responsibility to women. Women's narratives testify to evolving motivations behind reproductive decisions, and the increasing importance of professional choices and wellbeing that point to individualization and emancipation. Nevertheless, male violence and domination considerably limited women's reproductive choices. As our analysis shows, gender relations in marriage and the modernization of fertility management in state-socialist Poland were deeply interrelated.

Between the lines of continuity and change, Poland experienced an important shift in the values relating to reproduction in the second half of the 20th century, particularly

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towards the ideal of a small nuclear family and an increasing acceptance of women's emancipation. The post-socialist period brought about further changes in reproductive patterns, such as an increasing number of births out of wedlock, women becoming first-time mothers at a more advanced age, and, in the final decade, the predominance of one-child families. The ensuing fertility decline has been consolidated and cannot simply be reversed through financial incentives.