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Women's determination to combine childbearing and paid employment: How can a qualitative approach help us understand quantitative evidence?

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide deeper insight into women's fertility and employment decisions through the exploration of women's values and beliefs. For our research, we selected Poland, where quantitative studies continuously point to a strong determination among mothers to participate in employment, despite marked institutional obstacles to combining work with childrearing. We demonstrated that motherhood is one of the major goals in women's lives. Nevertheless, women seek to combine it with employment, and their ability to do so depends on the meaning attached to paid work. Using qualitative data, we identified three such meanings. "Work as an income source" and "work as an attractive activity" are considered desirable and compatible with motherhood, whereas "work as a professional career" precludes childrearing, and is rejected. In addition, our study illustrates how considering values and beliefs can contribute to our understanding of human behaviours, and demonstrates the usefulness of the qualitative approach for this purpose.

Keywords: fertility, women's labour force participation, values and beliefs, qualitative approach, methodological triangulation

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1. Introduction

The interdependency of fertility and women's labour force participation has long been a central theme among demographers, sociologists, and economists. The micro-level relationship between work and childbearing has been mostly found to be negative, although the magnitude of this negative relationship varies depending on the country studied (Matysiak and Vignoli 2008). This phenomenon was usually attributed to the cross-country differences in the opportunity costs of childbearing, an explanation which is consistent with the micro-economic theory of fertility and women's labour supply (Engelhardt et al. 2004; Rindfuss et al. 2004). Researchers generally agree that these costs are larger in countries with rigid labour markets, a pronounced insider-outsider divide, and low levels of public support for working parents (Esping-Andersen 1999).

Recent micro-level research has, however, challenged this conventional wisdom by showing that, in some countries, employed women are more likely to give birth to a child than those out of work, despite the substantial barriers to balancing occupational obligations and family life. This evidence comes mainly from post-socialist countries (Kreyenfeld 2004 for East Germany; Robert and Bukodi 2005 for Hungary; Matysiak 2009 for Poland), and suggests that, in some contexts, women's employment may function as an important prerequisite for childbearing. These findings call for a deeper investigation into how decisions about fertility and work are intertwined.

We take on this challenge by exploring women's preferences regarding family and work, as well as the underlying motives for their decisions. These issues have been hardly addressed up to this point, with the works of Hakim (2000, 2003) and Barber (2001) constituting notable exceptions. Instead, empirical research has focused on the relationship between women's employment and fertility behaviours, without looking into the motives underlying the observed actions. Given that women anticipate the consequences of their actions in the process of decision-making, and evaluate them from the perspective of their needs and abilities, focusing on the outcomes of women's choices tells us only part of the story. The failure to account for women's preferences regarding work and family is most likely due to the lack of relevant quantitative data that is available in longitudinal form. In this paper, we demonstrate how qualitative data on individual values and beliefs can be used to supplement quantitative findings, and to shed new light on the studied phenomena.

The proposed approach is applied in the context of Poland. This low-fertility country constitutes an interesting case study. Despite the clearly limited public support for working

parents in Poland, and the marked incongruities between mother and worker roles that result from this lack of support, various quantitative studies have consistently found a remarkably strong determination among Polish women to participate in paid employment (Matysiak and Steinmetz 2008; Matysiak 2009; Kotowska and Sztanderska 2007). The reasons behind this high degree of determination have not, however, been sufficiently explored. We also do not know how attitudes towards work influence Polish women's reproductive choices, and how occupational and fertility careers are perceived in relationship to each other. These gaps in our knowledge call into question our understanding of women's fertility and employment choices in Poland, and point to the need for an in-depth investigation.

We start with a critical review of the theoretical considerations that have so far dominated the research on fertility and women's labour supply, and provide arguments for our approach. In the following, we describe conditions in Poland, the context in which the fertility and employment decisions of Polish women are made. We continue by summarising quantitative evidence on women's behaviours in these areas, and draw upon these findings in formulating our research questions. In the next step, we go into greater depth by exploring the attitudes and beliefs that lead to the choices made by medium to highly educated Polish women, thus supplementing the available quantitative evidence with qualitative findings. In the final step, we juxtapose our empirical results with representative data on values and attitudes from opinion surveys. This provides a means of testing whether the opinions expressed in our in-depth interviews are uncommon or peculiar. The paper concludes with a discussion of our findings, and elaborates on the usefulness of the qualitative data in the area of population studies.

2. Fertility and employment choices: The role of preferences

Empirical research on the interrelationships between fertility and women's employment has been dominated by the economic approach proposed by Mincer (1963) and Becker (1965), known also as a 'price of time model'. The proponents of this model have mainly focused on investigating the impact of financial constraints on women's behaviours. Measuring women's time by the wage a woman could attain in the market, they explained cross-country differences in the association between fertility and women's labour supply by the cross-country variation in the opportunity costs of childbearing. This theoretical model worked fairly well in explaining the cross-country differences in fertility and women's employment levels in Western developed countries (Ahn and Mira 2002; Engelhardt and

Prskawetz 2004), as well as the variation in the micro-level association between family and work in that part of the world (Matysiak and Vignoli 2008). It failed, however, to explain why working women in some of the post-socialist countries of Europe, like East Germany, Poland, or Hungary, tend to be either no different from non-employed women, or to be even more likely than non-employed women, to give birth to a first child; while in the majority of other countries, except for Nordic countries, a negative micro-level relationship between childbearing and women's work is usually observed (see Matysiak and Vignoli (2008) for an overview of the empirical studies on this topic). These findings are especially notable given the fact that Central and Eastern European countries experienced a severe decline in public support of working parents (Stropanik 2003), and a marked increase in labour market competition (Frejka 2008), as both of these developments led to an intensification of tensions between work and family. In Poland, for example, where the degree of incompatibility between childbearing and work is as strong as in Italy, employed women display the same intensity of entering motherhood as non-employed women; while in Italy, a clearly negative relationship is observed (Matysiak and Vignoli 2010).

This failure of the economic model to explain the interrelationship between fertility and women's work in post-socialist countries might be due to the fact that women's decisions depend not only on the contextual opportunities for, and constraints on, the balancing of professional and child care duties, but also on women's preferences and attitudes towards behaviours in these areas. In the price-of-time model, these elements of decision-making were collapsed into a one-dimensional concept of utility that was assumed to be time-invariant and identically distributed across women (Siegers 1991; Pollak and Watkins 1993). Consequently, the structure and heterogeneity of women's preferences was often disregarded in empirical studies.

Few economists attempted to overcome this shortcoming (e.g., Easterlin 1980 or Macunovich 1996). Their theoretical models concentrated on financial needs, while taking no notice of other motives, like self-actualisation, that can trigger women's behaviours (Siegers 1991; Willekens 1991; Pollak and Watkins 1993). A different approach was taken by Hakim (2000, 2003). She recognised the role of the need for self-fulfilment, and pointed out that women are heterogeneous in their approaches to satisfying this need. In short, she concluded that family-centred women, who experience self-actualisation through strong attachment to the family, make different fertility and employment decisions than work-centred women, regardless of the conditions they face.

Although Hakim's model recognises and describes heterogeneity in women's preferences, it does not explain how those preferences are formed. In other words, it "places attitudes and values at the centre of causal explanations" (Hakim 2003, p. 351), but does not explore what attitudes and beliefs underlie a given set of lifestyle preferences. These issues are better conceptualised in socio-psychological models of human behaviour. For instance, according to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991), a model that has recently attracted some interest among demographers working on reproductive behaviours (e.g., Billari et al. 2009; Philipov et al. 2006; Speder and Kapitany 2009), attitudes are one of the most important forces driving people's actions. They are defined as positive or negative evaluations of the behaviour under consideration, which are based on individual's beliefs about possible outcomes of a certain behaviour (behavioural beliefs) and the values attached to that behaviour. The model assumes that people get involved in a given behaviour when they expect the outcome of the behaviour to be beneficial for them (value-expectancy model, Edwards 1954, 1961). Notably, individual attitudes are not sufficient determinants of intentions to perform an action. The model also showed that individual beliefs about whether the opinion is respected by an individual's social network are important (subjectively perceived norms along with normative beliefs, Ajzen 1991). These beliefs might be tightly intertwined with individual behavioural beliefs, which are usually shaped in a certain context. Self-efficacy (Bandura 1977, 1982), or perceived behavioural control (see Ajzen 2002 for nuances of terminology), is another important element of the model, and it also influences intentions to perform certain actions. Consequently, according to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, women form intentions to perform a certain behaviour by anticipating the consequences of their actions and evaluating them from the perspective of their values and beliefs, as well as by assessing their abilities to perform this behaviour. The final decision about whether to enter labour market, motherhood, or both depends on the positions fertility and employment take in the hierarchy of women's value systems, and on women's opinions about their ability to combine the two activities. In this paper, we follow this socio-psychological approach, investigating women's beliefs about motherhood and economic activity, as well as their subjective perceptions of their ability to combine family and work, with the aim of understanding Polish women's employment and fertility choices.

3. Fertility and women's labour supply in Poland: Context, facts, and questions

Studies have repeatedly shown that the economic transformation that started in Poland in 1989 led to a considerable intensification of the incompatibility between paid work and family life (Balcerzak-Paradowska et al. 2003; Kotowska 2004; Kotowska et al. 2008; Frejka 2008). The reconciliation of work and family under state socialism was facilitated by strong job guarantees and a right-to-a-job ideology. These conditions changed dramatically after the centrally planned economy had been replaced by the capitalist system. Employment was no longer guaranteed, job security ceased, and the importance of education for earning income and achieving personal success increased substantially. The challenges associated with combining paid work and family have not been alleviated by public policies. The child care provision in Poland is one of the lowest in the EU: in 2007, only 24 places per 1,000 children up to three years old, and 619 places per 1,000 pre-schoolers were available in the public day care centres. While parental leaves, which can last up to three years, are long, they are unpaid in the majority of cases. In 2005, approximately 50 per cent of mothers who were entitled to the leave made use of it. The remainder of women continued to work, relying largely on family support for child care. According to data from the Eurostat's 2005 survey on the reconciliation between family and work, as many as 40 per cent of working mothers with children up to age 14 receive child care support from relatives, while only 20 per cent make use of public child care (Eurostat 2007). The tensions between fertility and paid work in Poland are exacerbated by the low degree of flexibility of work arrangements, reflected in a dearth of part-time jobs (around 10 per cent of all jobs held by women since the early 1990s), as well as in a high degree of rigidity in working hours. For example, as many as 42 per cent of Polish employees in the already mentioned Eurostat survey admitted that they were not allowed to vary the start and the end of the working day, and 57 per cent declared that they could not take a day off due to family reasons (even though Polish parents are legally granted a childcare leave of two days per year). For comparison, in Finland, where the survey found the greatest degree of flexibility in working hours, the respective figures were 17 per cent and 14 per cent (*ibid*).

Following the Western pattern, where low fertility coexists with low levels of economic activity among women, it may be expected that the increase in work-family tensions in Poland would depress fertility, and reduce the labour supply of women relative to men. In terms of childbearing patterns, Poland indeed experienced a rapid decline in fertility in the years following the collapse of socialism: the period TFR dropped from 2.09 in 1989 to

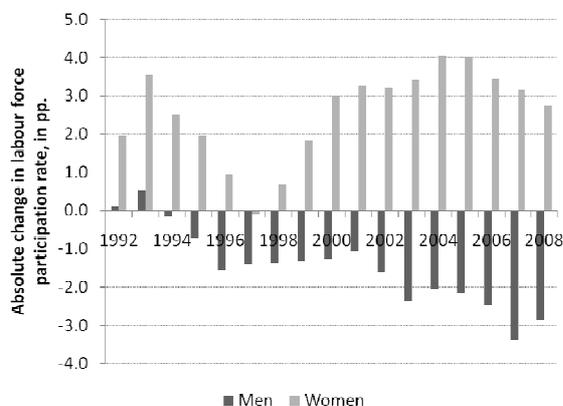
1.22 in 2003, placing Poland among the lowest-low fertility countries. A slight improvement in fertility has been observed only in recent years: period TFR had risen by 0.08 by 2007. This change in childbearing patterns was observed despite the strong attachment to family values among young Poles that has been consistently demonstrated in various empirical studies (Pongracz and Spèder 2008 and Stankuniene and Maslauskaitė 2008 on the International Population Policy Acceptance Study; Giza-Poleszczuk and Poleszczuk 2004: 207 on the European Value Study).

The expectation that women's labour force participation would decline has not, however, come to pass. Although the overall rate of women's economic activity did fall more substantially than that of men, this was not the case among people aged 25-34; i.e., among potential parents of small children. In fact, the labour force participation of women in that age group has consistently been above the pre-transformation levels, despite the fact that, for men, exactly the opposite was observed (Figure 1). As a result, in 2008 the labour force participation rate of women was around three percentage points higher than in 1988, while among men, an absolute decline of a similar magnitude was recorded. Gender differences were also observed in the decline in employment rate. Employment levels decreased for both sexes, although the absolute decline was similar in magnitude until 1999. Thereafter, it intensified, and became stronger for men (Figure 2). Even though the situation in the labour market started to improve after 2004, the employment rate of women in 2008 was three percentage points lower than in 1988, while for men, it was almost nine percentage points lower. It should be mentioned here that the data for 1988 is not ideal since it is disturbed by hidden unemployment which was present in Poland before the collapse of the socialist economy. This explains the strong decline in employment rates of both sexes. However, there are no reasons to expect that hidden unemployment was less common among women than men which would lead to a weaker decline in the employment of women than men.

These labour market trends were accompanied by a rapid increase in women's educational attainment: over the period 1992–2008, the proportion of tertiary educated women among those aged 25–34 rose by a factor of 4.5; while for men, an increase by a factor of 3.5 was recorded. As a result, in 2008 there were 152 women per 100 men with a university degree. It thus appears to be the case that Polish women have chosen to pursue economic and educational activities, despite the increasing tensions between work and family, as well as their strong attachment to family values. Some studies have even suggested that Polish women have chosen to reduce the size of their families in order to maintain their

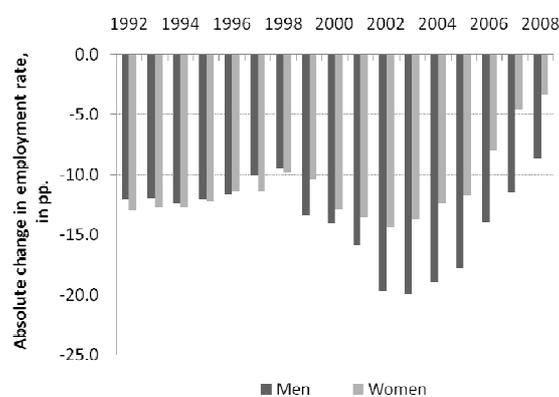
positions in the labour market (Sztanderska 2005; Kotowska and Sztanderska 2007).

Figure 1. Absolute changes in labour force participation rate over 1992-2008 compared to 1988 in percentage points, men and women aged 25-34, Poland



Source: LFS data for 1992-2008 and Population Census for 1988, retrieved from ILO Laborsta Database

Figure 2. Absolute changes in employment rate over 1992-2008 compared to 1988 in percentage points, men and women aged 25-34, Poland



Source: LFS data for 1992-2008 and Population Census for 1988, retrieved from OECD Employment Database

The remarkable determination of Polish women to participate in paid employment was further confirmed by in-depth analyses on micro-level data. In particular, the recent study by Matysiak (2009) showed that women treat employment as an important prerequisite for childbearing. By estimating jointly transition to birth, employment entry, and employment exit, she found that women select themselves to enter employment before giving birth. The data she used did not, however, allow her to test whether this behaviour is driven by financial necessity, or by a desire to pursue family and work careers in parallel, irrespective of the material situation. More detailed insight into the problem has been provided by Matysiak and Vignoli (2010), who showed that employment is a vital factor in the decision about whether to have the first child among tertiary educated women. This finding is particularly important as the share of tertiary educated women among those in reproductive ages is steadily increasing.

Polish women not only wish to have a job before they form families; they are also determined to return to work after birth. In a comparative analysis of women's employment patterns in East Germany, West Germany, and Poland, Matysiak and Steinmetz (2008) showed that, among the analysed countries, having children is least likely to have a negative impact on a mother's decision to take up full-time work in Poland. This is despite the fact that Polish women have less access to public child care than in Germany.

Several questions emerge in this context. First, (1) what motives are behind the strong determination of Polish women to participate in paid employment, despite the difficulties they face in combining family and work? Given the increase in employment instability, as well as the deterioration in men's employment levels, it may be expected that financial necessity would be the main driver behind the desire to work. On the other hand, the substantial growth in women's educational attainment may have increased the importance of higher-order needs, such as self-esteem and self-actualisation. Regardless of the motives behind women's decisions to work, women's determination to participate in paid employment is an established fact. Depending on how women perceive the two activities in relation to each other, they may decide to pursue the two careers in parallel, or to focus the majority of their time and energy on one of them. Therefore, our second research question (2) refers to women's perceptions of their ability to reconcile childbearing and childrearing with market work, and asks whether the two life goals are seen as competing and mutually exclusive, or, rather, as compatible. Finally, and for the reasons mentioned above, we believe that women's employment and fertility choices also depend on the position that children and economic activity take in a woman's value system. Therefore, our last question asks about (3) the relative position of paid work and motherhood in each woman's hierarchy of values. These three questions are addressed in our empirical study.

4. Methodological approach

We address the questions outlined in the previous section using qualitative data. Qualitative research is an umbrella term, covering a wide range of methods which are explorative, inductive, and process-oriented. They concentrate on individual subjective perceptions of the world, and seek to interpret the world "in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, p. 3). Qualitative methods allow researchers to gain insight into the motives behind people's decisions to engage in certain behaviours, as well as into people's perceptions and emotional reactions to possible actions. Importantly, the qualitative approach is primarily interested in the mechanisms and dynamics of the events and behaviours. It aims to explore the process of actions, and to reconstruct the relationships between the elements of this process (Maxwell 1996). Therefore, we find it particularly suitable to our research needs. It should be noted, however, that we do not seek to draw any conclusions of a representative nature, but rather to understand the mechanisms underlying women's employment and fertility choices, and to supplement the numeric representative

findings of other studies on the topic. The supplementing of quantitative evidence with qualitative data has been increasingly advocated in the social sciences in general (e.g., Bryman 1984, 1988; Sale et al. 2002; Steckler et al. 1992), and also in the field of population studies (e.g., Bernardi and Hutter 2007; Calldwell 1985; Knodel 1997; Obermeyer 1997; Randal and Koppenhaver 2004). Using different approaches, as well as different methods and data sets within each paradigm (methodological triangulation), allows researchers to formulate more valid and deeper interpretations of social phenomena.

The qualitative data used in this study covers in-depth interviews with 26 women that were conducted in 2004-05. The women were living in Warsaw, were between 20 and 30 years of age, and were medium to highly educated. Our qualitative sample is thus selected with a bias towards better educated women living in a large city. There are, however, several reasons why focusing on this particular group of women appears to be justified. First, respondents with these characteristics are likely to be the “early knowers” of any innovative attitudes and behaviours (Rogers 1995). Therefore, they not only represent information-rich cases, given our research purposes (the conflict between childbearing and women’s self-realisation in the professional sphere is likely to be most obvious in such sample); they might also be considered forerunners of new patterns of behaviours. Second, the human capital lost during the career breaks is expected to constitute a larger loss for the national economy if the break is made by the better educated women. Finally, this particular group of women has been growing continuously in Poland, given the rapid increase in women’s educational attainment since the early 1990s.

Among the interviewees, there were 19 childless women and seven mothers (with one child). Half of the women were married, while six cohabited with their partners. Seven women did not have co-residing partners, but most of them were in a stable relationship at the time of the interview. The women in the sample varied in their economic activities, which provides us with a good overview of various employment careers. The majority of them (15 interviewees) were employed full-time, although in two cases with fixed-term contracts. Two women were self-employed, four were jobless and looking for a job, and one respondent was on a parental leave. The remaining four women were combining education with part-time or temporary jobs.

For the purposes of the study, we employed problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000), which combine methodological openness in the data collection with a specific theoretical focus on one or more topics. The interview guideline covered several thematic

areas, providing rich information on the history of the respondents, on their current situation, as well as on their desires and intentions, with a special focus on the family sphere. Each interview started with biographical questions aimed at reconstructing the respondent's educational and occupational histories, along with relevant opinions, preferences, and attitudes. The interview guideline also included a wide range of questions related to partnership, family formation, and motherhood. Importantly, it covered questions on work-family balance, including questions about the woman's preferences, intentions, and attitudes related to being a mother and an employee. All questions were formulated in an open form, which allowed the interviewer to be receptive to the respondent's story, and to her perceptions and opinions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using the coding procedures of the "grounded theory" approach, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998, cf. Glaser and Strauss 1967). In the first step, all passages related to work and childbearing were identified in the interviewee's narrations. Within this material, by the means of *open* and *axial* coding ("bottom-up" coding, Straus and Corbin 1998) we subsequently categorised and defined the different attitudes towards paid employment and the views of our respondents on paid work in relation to motherhood, and vice versa.

5. Qualitative findings

We identified three meanings of work, as perceived by our female respondents. These meanings represent three main reasons for women's paid work (they are key behavioural beliefs). We also found that the relationship between paid employment and motherhood is seen differently, depending on which meaning of work is considered. Therefore, we present answers to our first and second research questions in parallel. In the next step, we describe in more general terms our findings on the position of work and motherhood in the value systems of the women interviewed.

5.1. Work as a source of income

Not surprisingly, first and foremost, our female respondents perceive employment as a source of income. Financial reasons are the main motivation for women to join the labour force. The interviewees distinguish two aspects here, however. First, they believe that income allows a woman to become independent of her family of origin. For the interviewees, it is important that a woman has her "*own money*," and is self-sufficient.

Work as a source of income – independence:

“For me it’s important to have a good job. Because money is important to maintain oneself, to have a decent life.” (Fem, 24, dating, childless)

“I didn’t start the university, because I had enough of school (...) and I really wanted to have my own money; I had a craving to earn and to be independent.” (Fem, 27, married, 1 child)

Second, women emphasise that, given current level of salaries, it is not possible for one person to sustain a family. Thus, women’s – as well as men’s – employment is taken for granted. Notably, in regard to a dual-earner family model, a comparison with the socialist past is frequently made. The respondents say that, previously, a mother “*could afford*” to stay at home and take care of her children for a longer period of time. Even though standards of living were generally low, our respondents recall that such a solution was feasible, while nowadays it is completely ruled out.

Work as a source of income – enforced dual-earner family model:

“It used to be better, in a sense that... For instance, like my mother’s case: a woman could stay at home and take care of the kids while the man was working. He didn’t earn a huge amount of money, but it was enough to live a normal life. There was always something to put in the pot. Today both partners may work and they still cannot afford to cover their living expenses.” (Fem, 29, married, childless)

In the next step, we explore the respondents’ beliefs regarding the relationship between work, understood as a source of income, and motherhood. We find that, for our female respondents, having a job is perceived (unanimously) as an important prerequisite for childbearing. Work supplies the financial means necessary for childbearing, gives the possibility to afford a flat which is another important condition of family formation. It also provides access to the health system and to maternity provisions (health insurance, maternity leave and maternity benefit).

Work as a source of income – a prerequisite for childbearing:

“I knew I had to grow up for that. First you have to have a flat; you have to have a job. I’ve never said ‘if it happens, then it happens.’ (...) I say, first education, a flat, a job, so that I wouldn’t have to go, I don’t know, to my parents and ask them for money for the rent or for

food or anything else.” (Fem, 29, cohabiting, childless)

“The situation was good enough... I could afford to think about children. I think that an idea: the wedding rings and children, that is the family first and money and house later (...) this is the wrong sequence (...) one doesn’t think about a child first but rather about a permanent job. Most women think about having a permanent job, they know that they have to have a permanent job so that they could afford to have a child. They do not have to earn lots of money but they want it to be permanent. It is about ZUS [health insurance, maternity provisions].” (Fem, 25, married, childless)

The last quote also indicates that the respondents pay special attention to the stability of work. Indeed, the respondents quite unanimously emphasise that, in their opinion, a woman should be in a stable, secure job before she enters motherhood, even if this means having a lower income. Ensuring a stable income source is thus crucial for childbearing.

Work as a prerequisite for childbearing – stability of work:

“I hesitate now, whether to go and search for a new job, to leave my current job. Because [in a new job] if I get pregnant, they will fire me right away. You know how it is. And here... there is some security. I’ve been working here for several years and they will not get rid of me right away.” (Fem, 26, married, childless)

Even though a job that provides a stable income is perceived by women as a crucial prerequisite for having a child, money is certainly not the only motive for wanting to be employed, and stability of employment is not the only work characteristic that is important for the respondents.

5.2. Work as an attractive activity

A systematic analysis of the interviews shows that women also want to have an interesting job that is in line with their interests and education, and a job that gives them a feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment. They want to experience new challenges and develop. Some women say that it would be “a tragedy” or “a disaster” for them to be in a job that they do not find interesting. They also wish to work in a friendly environment, and a job is frequently perceived as an important platform for social contacts. Generally, they believe that paid work is not only a source of income, but also an attractive activity that is important for

their well-being.

Work as an attractive activity - preferences for interesting work:

“A job that is in line with what I want – I would like it a lot, but to have just ANY job... well... that’s another story... I am not too much into it (...) Having a job that didn’t interest me would be a disaster for me.” (Fem, 22, dating, childless)

“At the beginning I was very happy [at my job]. Well, true, they didn’t pay well at first, but I was happy because I was learning a lot!” (Fem, 26, married, childless)

Work as an attractive activity - preferences for a good working environment:

“Generally I don’t imagine I could earn big money because I don’t imagine working in a sick atmosphere. And you can earn really good money only in a job where everyone wants to stab a knife into your back”. (Fem, 20, dating, childless)

"If I had a nice job, if I liked it and if the atmosphere was nice at work - I would not want to quit it." (Fem, 26, married, childless)

Non-financial motives for working are especially apparent when women present arguments against being a housewife. When women explain the reasons why they would not want to stay at home, they give arguments that complement the above-mentioned aspects: staying at home is seen as “boring,” “limiting,” and socially isolating. Paid employment seems crucial for women’s well-being and happiness: the respondents frequently say that they would “go crazy” if they stayed at home for a prolonged period of time. Work is perceived as a break from domestic chores, a chance to do something interesting and challenging, and to be around people.

Work as an attractive activity – negative views on being a housewife:

“I would not like to spend my whole life at home, to be a housewife. No, no, no. It’s not what I studied for.” (Fem, 26, married, childless)

Q: “And if you could afford that, would you like to become a housewife? To stay at home with a child?”

A: “I don’t think so, no (...) I like it when something happens. I don’t like sitting at home. I really get tired of sitting at home (...) I cannot sit at home. This is fine if I have some holidays; to have some rest for a week or two. But longer? I would probably go crazy if I was

staying at home! So – no! Absolutely no.” (Fem, 25, dating, childless)

Q: “If your husband earns a lot, would you like to quit job and stay at home with a child?

A: “Oh no! No, no! (...) I love people, to talk to them, to be around them, to be... somewhat in a centre of their attention.” (Fem, 29, married, 1 child)

Importantly, all respondents were asked whether they would prefer to exit the labour market if they could afford to do so. In the vast majority of cases, we got a negative answer. Only three women (out of 26) said that, if their partners had a good salary, they would leave the job market to take care of their home and children. Only one of them finds this solution attractive. For two others, staying at home “*would be fine,*” but they do not strive for this situation. The respondents instead stated a preference for a life-style that would allow them to balance work and family life, as summarised in the following quote:

“I would not manage, simply I would not manage and I would not want to sit at home and only take care of a child. I cannot even imagine that! I would like to work, even if it was a job like the one I have now... because... it is always a chance to go out, this allows me to have contact with people. This is not just sitting, cleaning, and laundry. One can find pleasure in these things too, but in the right proportions.” (Fem 29, married, childless).

All in all, work and motherhood are perceived as two natural elements of a woman’s life. Work, as a source of income, is a prerequisite for childbearing. But work, as an attractive activity, is important even after a child is born. The view that a woman should get an attractive job before she becomes a mother is only expressed by a few of the youngest, unmarried respondents, for whom motherhood is still a very distant prospect. For the majority of interviewees, the stability of employment appears to be crucial for their decisions to become a mother. Interestingly, four respondents spontaneously and explicitly say that they would rather stay in a stable, but less satisfying job before they enter motherhood, but that they want to look for something *better, more ambitious, and more interesting* after having a child.

Work as an attractive activity – after childbearing:

“I want to have a child, and only then will I think about and focus on doing things that I enjoy [at work].” (Fem, 24, dating, childless)

“Maybe it would be better... to have a child already? A child would get a little bigger and I could start doing something [about my work]... I could maybe find some better job.” (Fem, 26, married, childless)

The respondents see work as an attractive activity that is important for a woman’s well-being, and that can be parallel to or compatible with motherhood. In the interviews, we identified one more reason or motivation for paid employment that our respondents appear to recognise, but do not approve of: namely, they believe women should not strive for a professional career.

5.3. Work as a professional career

Our respondents are rarely interested in working with the intention of pursuing a professional career in the sense of being a “businesswoman,” getting promoted, earning “big money,” or being totally concentrated on and devoted to work. Moreover, even if they mention work in that way, they emphasise that they do not work in order to have a “career,” and that they are not “career-oriented.”

Work as a professional career – not career-oriented:

“I work in order to live and do not live in order to work. I’m not a businesswoman type, who would realise herself at work in some way and who would realise her life plans only through work.” (Fem, 29, cohabiting, childless)

The women indicate that they are not interested in pursuing a professional career, but they also emphasise that they perceive career and motherhood as mutually exclusive. A child is perceived as a potential “obstacle” to a women’s career, and the respondents believe that a woman needs to choose between having a professional career and motherhood. They are also clear about which choice they believe to be a right one. The women declare that they would never focus on work and career and sacrifice childbearing. Pursuing a professional career without children is perceived as being a self-centred pursuit that delivers benefits only in the short run.

Work as professional career – alternative to motherhood:

“A child obviously would be a kind of obstacle to having a professional career, especially for

a woman (...) She would gain materially, in work, get a better position [if she remains childless].” (Fem, 24, cohabiting, childless)

“There are women who realise their professional ambitions and they do not have time, or they do not have any desire to have children. But I believe majority of them will regret it sooner or later.” (Fem, 26, married, 1 child)

The above opinions are not surprising if we consider that, all in all, to our respondents, motherhood is far more important than work.

5.4. Work and motherhood in women’s value systems

Childbearing is absolutely central in our respondents’ value systems. Although paid employment is crucial to women for the reasons described above, the interviewees make it clear that, for them, motherhood is far more important. Women cannot imagine their lives without children, and motherhood is perceived as inevitable. Women who do not want to have children are usually perceived as being egoists, and their choice is not really understood (for a detailed analysis of values that our respondents see Mynarska (2009a,b)).

Motherhood more important than employment:

“Sure, I would like to earn some money, but if as a result I couldn’t dedicate myself to my child’s upbringing, then I am sure I would not like it.” (Fem, 24, cohabiting, childless)

Motherhood as the most important life goal:

Q: “What would happen if - touch wood - you couldn’t have children?”

- “I think that there is no such a thing as ‘I couldn’t have children.’ I think that if I couldn’t have my own, I would adopt. There is no such option – to live without children!” (Fem, 20, dating, childless)

“Women, who do not want to have children are doing themselves a great harm, because for me... a woman is born to have babies, well I don’t know, I didn’t experience this feeling yet but for me it’s the most beautiful thing and it’s the most important goal in my life to have children.” (Fem, 24, dating, childless)

Negative opinions on childless women:

Q: “What would you think of a person who does not want to have children?”

- “I wouldn’t think anything good. That he or she is an egoist. That’s what I think. Because such people are egoists.” (Fem, 27, married, childless)

“I think ‘Oh God, she is somehow abnormal, degenerate; she doesn’t want to have children, she is horrible’. I don’t quite understand it (...) I don’t understand how on earth someone could not want to have children.” (Fem, 24, dating, childless)

Clearly, even if paid employment is important for various reasons, motherhood is given the highest priority. The respondents unanimously expressed the view that work – regardless of its meaning – is not and never can be given priority over childbearing. As a source of income, having a job should precede motherhood. As an attractive activity, work should be combined with having a family. But labour force participation can never exclude motherhood. Therefore, our respondents clearly hold negative opinions about having a professional career, as this is seen as a goal that can be pursued only at the expense of family and children. Because children are highly valued, our respondents do not approve of professional careers for women.

6. Instead of a summary: Qualitative findings and representative surveys

Our qualitative results illustrate the situation of middle-class women who live in Warsaw. Even though the selection of this sample is, in our opinion, justified (compare Section ‘Methodological approach’), it is not representative of all Polish women. With this limitation in mind, we decided to compare our findings to representative quantitative survey results. This will enable us to investigate whether any of the beliefs related to work that were voiced in the interviews have also been expressed by young Polish women in general. The quantitative information we can extract from the available surveys is not as detailed and nuanced as our qualitative findings. Nevertheless, it allows us to examine whether the opinions shared by our interviewees are uncommon or peculiar.

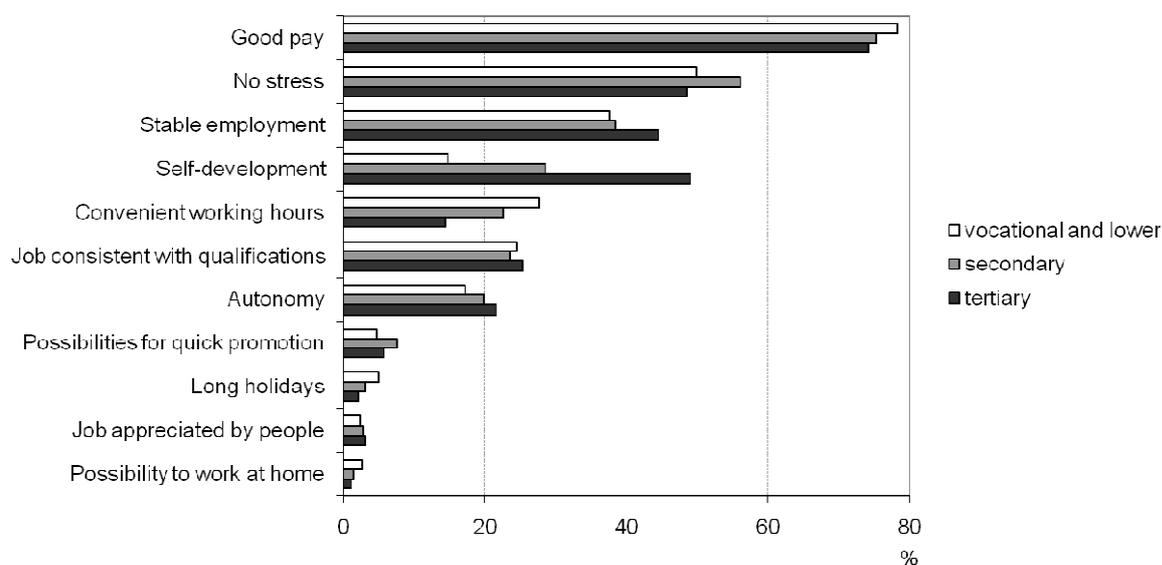
To this end, we used the study “Social Diagnosis,” which is a panel survey carried out every two years on a representative sample of Polish households, and on the individuals living in those households aged 16 or above. The survey is designed for the purpose of monitoring the quality of life of the population. In 2007, it covered 5,532 households, and individual interviews were conducted with 12,641 persons. It included questions on the aspects of

professional work which are most important to the interviewees, as well as on the position that children and paid employment take in respondents' value systems. From this survey, we extracted a sub-sample of 1,912 women aged 20-35 at the time of the survey. These women, like the interviewees of our qualitative study, were at the life-course stage when reproductive choices are usually made, and when women are most likely to make decisions about how paid work is to be balanced with family life.

For the vast majority of respondents from the survey sub-sample, good pay is the most important aspect of a job (around 75 per cent of women in our sample). In addition, a good job should offer low levels of stress (53 per cent) and high levels of security (38 per cent). Having the opportunity to satisfy the need for self-fulfilment is considered less important: 34 per cent of the women surveyed value having a job that gives them opportunities for self-development, 23 per cent want to work in occupations consistent with their qualifications, and 17 per cent want autonomy at work. The importance of self-development clearly rises with education level, however (Figure 3). Only a minority of respondents value having access to rapid promotion, long holidays, a job appreciated by people, and the opportunity to work at home. These survey results are largely consistent with the information gathered in our qualitative interviews. In both data sources, women above all appreciate financial aspects of work and its stability. Nevertheless, they also value having jobs that are attractive, produce little stress, allow for self-realisation, and are in line with their qualifications. Promotion prospects are hardly important, since, according to our qualitative findings, women are not interested in having professional careers.

Consistent with our qualitative findings, the survey data confirm that paid employment holds a high position in women's value systems, but that family is more important. The key preconditions for a happy life, according to the respondents, are health (64 per cent) and a successful marriage (61 per cent), followed by children (45 per cent). Professional work and money take the fourth and fifth positions, respectively (33 per cent and 28 per cent). These five issues are, in general, the most important determinants of a happy life, outdistancing such aspects as friends, God, education, optimistic attitude, sympathy and respect, honesty, strong character, or freedom. Interestingly, there are no large differences in women's value systems with respect to education, with one important exception – tertiary educated women place far less weight on having children than less educated women (Figure 4). Still, even for women with a university degree, having a job is not shown to be more important than motherhood, a finding which is in line with our qualitative findings.

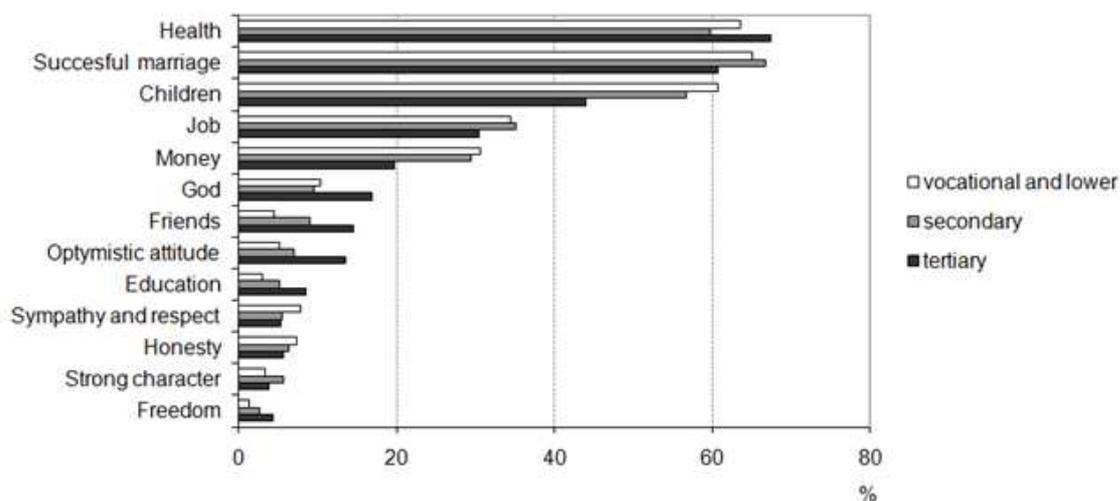
Figure 3. What are the most important aspects of professional work? Women aged 20-35 by education level, Poland 2007



Notes: Respondents could choose up to three options

Source: Authors' calculations on Social Diagnosis (2007)

Figure 4. What do you consider to be the most important precondition for having a happy life? Women aged 20-35 by education level, Poland 2007.



Notes: Respondents could choose up to three options

Source: Authors' calculations on Social Diagnosis (2007)

In sum, the survey results presented here largely support the conclusions we drew on the basis of our in-depth interviews, adding to their credibility and providing at least a

moderate degree of certainty that the beliefs about paid employment expressed by the interviewees, are not biased or distorted.

7. Discussion

The objective of this paper was to gain deeper insight into how women's decisions about childbearing and participating in the labour market are intertwined through the exploration of women's beliefs about, and values attached to, childbearing and economic activity. In particular, our aim was to detect the meanings women attach to employment and fertility, and to discover how they perceive and interpret certain employment- and fertility-related behaviours. Because we did not seek to provide numeric representative information on women's attitudes and beliefs, we determined that the qualitative approach was most suitable for our research purposes. The decision to conduct this study was driven by the belief that focusing merely on the outcomes of women's choices tells us only part of the story, as women evaluate the possible consequences of planned actions from the perspective of their preferences, needs, and abilities before they decide to engage in a certain behaviour. For the purposes of our study, we selected Poland, a country where, in defiance of the economic theory of fertility, employment has been found to constitute a prerequisite for childbearing; and where young women, including mothers, display a strong degree of determination to participate in the labour force, despite strong institutional obstacles to combining motherhood with occupational obligations.

In line with available quantitative evidence, our findings illustrate that economic activity plays an important role in the lives of the interviewed women, who tend to reject the male breadwinner model. Nevertheless, they believe that participation in the labour market cannot be pursued at the cost of childbearing and childrearing, which are undeniably far more valued than economic activity. What women seek is work-family balance. The ability to combine the two life spheres depends on the meaning women attach to paid work. Three such meanings were identified with our data.

First, work is important since it provides income, gives access to health system and maternity provisions, and creates possibility to afford a flat. In this sense work is perceived as an important prerequisite for childbearing. For women, it is important that they have a stable source of income before they realise their fertility plans. Second, work is viewed as an opportunity to take a break from domestic chores, to meet people, to develop, and to do something more interesting and challenging than housework. These aspects of employment

gain in importance after a child is born. It is clear that women do not wish to be only mothers, even though they consider childbearing to be far more important than paid work. Being a housewife is perceived as limiting, and is not appreciated. Instead, women strive for a balance between motherhood and employment, and believe that it is possible to combine childrearing with a job that is attractive to them. The respondents do not, however, approve of women who have a professional career. A desire to pursue a professional career is the third potential motive for employment, and, while it was recognised by respondents, it was also strongly rejected. Women see having a professional career to be too demanding and time-consuming to be combined with childbearing and childrearing. In other words, having a professional career is viewed as strongly competing with motherhood.

Our qualitative findings are consistent with quantitative survey data on attitudes towards and motives for paid work. These data show that economic activity takes fourth place in women's value systems, and is preceded by good health, a successful marriage, and motherhood. Although having a good salary is seen as the most important aspect of market work, other job characteristics are considered important as well. In particular, women value jobs that are stable and entail little stress, and jobs that offer opportunities for self-fulfilment. The latter aspect clearly gains in importance with women's educational attainment. By contrast, promotion prospects are rated as a less important aspect of market work, probably because of the low level of interest among Polish women in pursuing a professional career.

Although the quantitative survey data provide us with representative numeric information on women's attitudes toward and opinions about employment and childbearing, the advantage of taking a qualitative approach is that it gives us a more subtle and in-depth insight into the meanings and values women attach to economic activity and motherhood, as well as to women's emotional reactions to combining work and family, or to discarding one potential path in favour the other. This information allows us to better understand the observed quantitative relationship between women's employment and fertility. More specifically, our qualitative findings suggest several explanations for why women in Poland so persistently attempt to combine paid employment and childbearing, despite the strong barriers to reconciling mother and worker roles. Women declare that they: (a) need to work to maintain the family, (b) definitely do not want to become housewives, and (c) absolutely do not intend to realise their life goals only in one life sphere. Instead, women say they want to have a family as well as an occupational career. Having a job that meets a woman's expectations (i.e., is well-paid and attractive) is, in their minds, compatible with motherhood.

We argue that such an in-depth investigation of women's perceptions of work in conjunction with fertility would be difficult if quantitative data were used exclusively, without any prior qualitative exploration.

Our study has also produced an intriguing finding that requires more in-depth investigation. Specifically, it appears that women want to have an interesting and attractive job, and wish to combine work with motherhood, but nonetheless decisively reject the pursuit of a professional career. A possible explanation for this finding is that there is a strong social norm in Poland that discourages women from admitting they are interested in having a professional career. Since pursuing a professional career is thought to erect barriers to family formation, and women who deliberately decide to have no children are seen as egoists, those women who declare their desire to have a professional career may be indirectly and automatically viewed as egoists as well. The consequences of such a social norm for a woman's psychological well-being, as well as a woman's performance in the labour market, can be enormous. Our explanation for this apparent reluctance among women to pursue a professional career requires further investigation. It would, for example, be interesting to explore attitudes towards careers among men, as well as in countries where women's employment is more socially accepted, and where it receives institutional support; i.e., in the Nordic countries.

Finally, in addition to contributing to our understanding of the interrelationship between fertility and women's employment in Poland, an important advantage of this study is that it illustrates a more general need in the field of population studies to consider individual values, beliefs, and perceptions in empirical research, in order to gain a better understanding of individual choices. So far, demographic research, largely influenced by the economic theory of fertility, has mainly relied on analysing the impact of individual and contextual constraints on individual behaviours. We do not deny the validity of this approach, but argue that it should be widened to account for individual preferences and preference formation. Relevant quantitative data are required for that purpose, but qualitative approach could provide us with information about what kind of data should be collected.

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