



ISSN: 2543-6821 (online)

Journal homepage: <http://ceej.wne.uw.edu.pl>

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To cite this article

Matysiak A., Mynarska M. (2021). Motives for Combining Motherhood with Employment: Evidence for Medium and Highly Educated Polish Women Around the EU Accession. *Central European Economic Journal*, 8(55), 63-78.

DOI: 10.2478/ceej-2021-0005

 To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.2478/ceej-2021-0005>



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Motives for Combining Motherhood with Employment: Evidence for Medium and Highly Educated Polish Women Around the EU Accession

Abstract

This article provides insights into employment decisions of mothers and mothers-to-be in a post-socialist Poland around the entry to the EU. Previous studies for this country continuously pointed to a strong determination among mothers to be employed during the economic transformation, despite increasing obstacles to combining paid work with childrearing over the 1990s. We analyse in-depth interviews to explore women's motives to work for pay. We investigate how these motives are related to women's childbearing experiences and intentions. Our analyses show that motherhood was central in women's lives at this point in Polish history, but females sought to combine it with employment. We also find that women's perceptions about their ability to balance work and motherhood were strongly related to the meanings that they attached to paid work.

Keywords

fertility | women's labour force participation | motives for work | qualitative interviews | transition economies | Central and Eastern Europe

JEL Codes

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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 women's employment and childbearing has been mostly found to be negative, although the magnitude of this negative relationship varies depending on the country studied (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2008). This phenomenon was usually attributed to the cross-country differences in the conditions for combining paid work and care (Muszyńska, 2007; Matysiak & Węziak-Białowolska, 2016). Where these conditions are better, i.e. parents get good access to public high-quality childcare and flexible well-paid parental leaves, mothers are more likely to be in paid employment (Nieuwenhuis, Need,

& Van Der Kolk, 2012; Baranowska-Rataj & Matysiak, 2016) and the gap in earnings between mothers and non-mothers is lower (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). In these countries, having a job is less likely to constitute a barrier to childbearing (Greulich, Guergoat-Larivière, & Thévenon, 2017). By contrast, in social contexts with rigid working hours and poor public childcare provision mothers are less likely to be in paid employment and return to work later (OECD, 2017; Zoch & Hondralis, 2017). Furthermore, in such social contexts working or highly educated women are more likely to postpone childbearing and even end up with smaller families (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2013; Baizan, Arpino, & Delclòs, 2016).

Studies from some post-socialist countries during the transition period challenge these findings. However, they show that during the economic

transition employed women were more likely to enter motherhood than those out of work (Kantorová, 2004 for the Czech Republic; Kreyenfeld, 2004 for East Germany; Matysiak, 2009 for Poland; Róbert & Bukodi, 2005 for Hungary) and were more likely to be back to full-time work when their children reached the school age than women in many Western European countries (Matysiak & Steinmetz, 2008; Matysiak, 2011, pp. 31–32). These findings were obtained even though the conditions for combining paid work and care worsened substantially during the economic transformation of the 1990s with an increase in the labour market competition on the one hand and deterioration of public childcare on the other (Rostgaard, 2004; Szelewa, 2012; Pascall & Manning, 2000). Furthermore, mothers continued to receive little care support from their male partners as childcare and housework remained a woman's duty (Pascall & Kwak, 2005; Ukhova, 2020).

In this article, we aim at understanding this phenomenon, i.e. at understanding why during the economic transformation women in peak reproductive ages were so determined to work for pay despite the increasing difficulties with combining paid work and care. Although financial reasons are obvious for women's involvement in paid employment in the turbulent economy, they cannot fully explain this determination. Previous studies showed that compared to their western counterparts, women from transition economies see investment in work and childbearing as parallel and not competing activities (Bernardi, Klärner, & von der Lippe, 2008). To fully understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to investigate women's motives towards paid work and how these motives are discussed in connection with childbearing. This is where our study contributes to the literature.

Our study is situated in Poland around the time of the EU entry, which marks an important moment in the process of the economic and political transformation by which Poland introduced major legal and institutional reforms and met the requirements of EU membership (Gomułka, 2014). Poland constitutes an excellent case for this study. Even though public support for working parents deteriorated in the 1990s, increasing the incongruities between mother and worker roles, various studies from the 1990s and early 2000s consistently found a strong determination among Polish women to participate in paid employment (Kotowska & Sztanderska, 2007; Matysiak & Steinmetz, 2008).

In our research, we employ qualitative methodology as it is well suited for studying people's motives, values and beliefs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The importance of this approach for studying values behind work and family preferences has been already emphasised in the literature (Duncan, 2005). We start our paper with a brief review of past studies that addressed the role of women's work attitudes and preferences. In the following chapter, we describe the context in which Polish women made their decisions about fertility and employment during the economic transition. We continue by summarising quantitative evidence on women's fertility and employment behaviours in Poland during this time and draw upon these findings in formulating our research questions. In the next step, we go into greater depth by exploring the work-related attitudes and beliefs of medium to highly educated Polish women, thus supplementing the previous quantitative evidence with qualitative findings.

2 Women's Preferences Towards Paid Work in Connection with Childbearing

Women's attitudes and preferences towards paid work in connection to women's fertility plans and experiences have been already investigated in sociological studies. Already in the 1970s, the American sociologists started exploring women's work commitment and the way women balance their work and family identities (Bielby & Bielby, 1984; Bielby & Bielby, 1989; Kalleberg, 1977; Marsden, Kalleberg, & Cook, 1993). These early studies suggested that even though women's overall work commitment and effort is not necessarily lower than men's, 'women balance work and family identities in a way that gives causal priority to identification with the family role' (Bielby & Bielby, 1989, p. 784), a finding which was also confirmed by later studies (Danzinger & Eden, 2007). At the same time, the question was raised on women's ability to form a strong commitment to both family and work (Bielby & Bielby, 1988; Bielby & Bielby, 1989). In her preference theory, Catherine Hakim argues that the key issue here is about women's attitudes and values whether they actually wish to combine work and family or rather prefer to give the priority to one of them (Hakim, 2000).

While Hakim recognises different women's preferences, she is not concerned with their origins. Other sociologists made attempts in this direction and tried to explain these preferences by referring to social ties, gender norms, attitudes towards a gendered division of work and women's moral responsibilities towards family (Crompton, 2002; Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Duncan, 2005; Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds, & Alldred, 2003; Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds, & Alldred, 2004). Nevertheless, this literature focuses mostly on how women see their roles as mothers and workers. The question of why it is exactly that mothers decide to undertake jobs in the labour market is not addressed directly in the above-mentioned studies. Women's involvement in paid work is regarded as linked to labour market changes, normative and ideational transformation and to women's growing strive for independence (cf. Crompton, 2002). This interpretation might hold true for Western Europe but not necessarily for the post-socialist countries, where women's employment was already high before the fall of communism and linked to economic necessity (Kallenberg & Stark, 1993). Since individual differences in women's motivations for paid employment have not been systematically analysed in post-socialist countries, we are still missing a significant part of the picture. As was shown by Matysiak and Mynarska (2020), different motives for paid work may lead to different labour market strategies and different patterns of balancing work and family life.

Women's motives for paid employment have been studied in much detail by organisational psychologists. They analysed how men and women differ with respect to work-centrality (Sharabi & Harpaz, 2011; Warr, 2008) and job attribute preferences (Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, & Corrigan, 2000; Warr, 2008). They also explored differences in work-related attitudes over time and space (Gunkel, Lusk Edward, Wolff, & Li, 2007; Sharabi & Harpaz, 2011). In general, they showed that work is less central for women than it is for men (Sharabi & Harpaz, 2011; Warr, 2008) and that there are clear gender differences in motives for paid work, with women placing greater emphasis on professional growth (Bigoness, 1988), interpersonal relationships (Warr, 2008) or good working hours (Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, & Corrigan, 2000; Wiswall & Zafar, 2018) and men attaching greater value to salary, promotion, leadership and power (Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, & Corrigan, 2000; Wiswall & Zafar, 2018). Finally, Corrigan and Konrad (2006) demonstrated that women's job attributes are influenced by their

family situation and that women with a working spouse have a lower desire for well-paid jobs that offer good advancement opportunities and a higher preference for jobs which are interesting. The same authors revealed that the presence of children increased the preference for income and flexibility and lowered the desire for having an interesting work. This latter study thus showed that women's work centralities and job attribute preferences are strongly intertwined to women's fertility plans and choices and that the gender differences in motives to work may result from the gendered division of labour. Nonetheless, all these studies focused on Western economies most of all.

This article links the two perspectives, i.e. the sociological and that of organisational psychology, by investigating motives that drive women's decisions to participate in employment and the meanings women attach to paid work in connection with childbearing plans and preferences. By contrast to the majority of available research in this field that focuses on Western economies, we conduct our study in the context of Poland during the period of economic transformation.

3 Fertility and Women's Labour Supply in Poland during the Economic Transformation: 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 incompatibilities between paid work and family life (Frejka, 2008; Kotowska, Józwiak, Matysiak, & Baranowska, 2008). In comparison to the centrally planned economy, employment in the capitalist system 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 were not alleviated by public policies. Instead, childcare supply declined even further: the proportion of children attending creches halved in the early 1990s to 2% and started to increase only slightly in the early 2000s (Szelewa, 2012). At the time of the EU entry, only 2.8% of children aged 0–2 and 38.3% of children aged 3–5 attended public day care (OECD Family Database), which gave Poland one of the lowest positions in the EU in that respect. Parental leaves were reformed

substantially only in the early 2010s when parents obtained the right to a 1-year-long parental leave paid at 80% of their previous earnings. Before that, women had a right only to a 4–6 month-long maternity leave, paid 100% of the pre-birth earnings, followed by a parental leave of 3 years, which was strongly means-tested and consequently unpaid for the majority of women. Only mothers in the highest need could obtain a flat-rate parental leave benefit (Balcerzak Paradowska et al., 2003). For many women, such leaves did not constitute an attractive option—in 2005, only 50% of mothers (and 2.6% of fathers) who were entitled to the leave made use of at least a part of it (Matysiak, 2007). As women continued to work, they had to rely largely on family support for childcare (Matysiak, 2007). The tensions between fertility and paid work in Poland were exacerbated by the low degree of flexibility of work arrangements, reflected in a dearth of part-time jobs (around 10% of all jobs held by women since the early 1990s) as well as in a high degree of rigidity in working hours (Eurostat, 2007).

It could have been expected that this increase in work–family tensions would have led to a deterioration of labour force participation of women, in particular mothers, which was relatively high during the state socialism. This did not happen, however. The labour force participation of women aged 25–49, i.e. in the peak childbearing and childrearing ages, did not fall during the economic transformation (Matysiak, 2009: 257). In addition, women increased their educational attainment; from 1992 to 2004, the proportion of tertiary-educated women among those aged 25–34 tripled, and this increase was much stronger than among men (Matysiak, Słoczyński, & Baranowska, 2010). As a result, in 2004, there were 156 women per 100 men with a university degree. It appears that Polish women chose to continue their economic activity and even intensified their efforts to obtain higher education, although the tensions between work and family increased (see also Kotowska & Sztanderska, 2007). Instead, they seemed to have responded to the increase in work–family tensions by postponing family formation (Kotowska et al., 2008; Frejka, 2008). As a result, the period TFR dropped severely during the economic transformation, from 2.09 in 1989 to 1.22 in 2003, the year preceding the EU entry. This change in childbearing patterns was observed, although Poles remained strongly attached to family values and women perceived motherhood as central in their lives (Giza-Poleszczuk & Poleszczuk, 2004; Mynarska, 2009; Pongracz & Spéder, 2008; Stankuniene & Maslauskaitė, 2008).

The determination of Polish women to participate in paid employment was further confirmed by in-depth analyses on micro-level data. In particular, a study by Matysiak (2009) on women's employment and childbearing behaviours over the 1990s and early 2000s showed that women treated employment as an important prerequisite for childbearing. In a comparative study of Italy and Poland, Matysiak and Vignoli (2013), documenting the situation in a similar time period, demonstrated that women's employment was a facilitator to childbearing in Poland, but an inhibitor in Italy. This finding was obtained although in both countries the conditions for work and family reconciliation were particularly difficult at that time.

Polish women not only displayed high determination to have a job before they formed families, but they were also very much 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 at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, Polish mothers were less likely to reduce their involvement in the labour market on a full-time basis than their German counterparts, even though Polish women had less access to public childcare and part-time jobs.

Although previous studies revealed a strong determination of Polish women to combine work and family during the economic transition, yet they could not reveal the reasons behind this determination. Is women's behaviour driven solely by financial necessity? Or is it triggered by a desire to pursue family and work careers in parallel, irrespective of the material situation? 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 drive behind the desire to work. Nevertheless, the substantial growth in women's educational attainment might have resulted in the increasing importance of higher-order needs, such as self-esteem and self-actualisation. Results from the social survey Social Diagnosis from 2007, shortly after the Poland's accession to the EU (Czapiński & Panek, 2007)¹, seem to suggest that good pay was indeed the most important aspect of a job for the vast majority of the women aged 20–35, irrespective of the education level. Among other factors, respondents also enumerated low levels of stress and high levels

1 The survey 'Social Diagnosis' is a panel survey which was carried out every two years in the period 2000-2015 on a representative sample of Polish households, and on the individuals living in those households aged 16 or above.

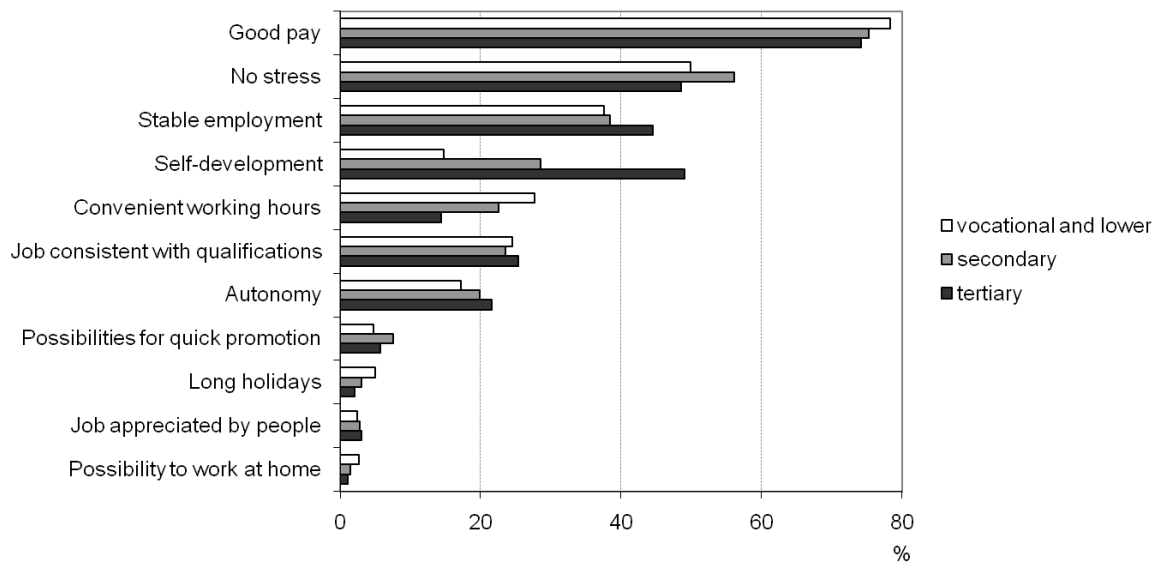


Fig. 1. What are the most important aspects of professional work? Women aged 20–35 by education, Poland 2007. Notes: Respondents could choose up to three options. Source: Authors' calculations on Social Diagnosis

of security. Additionally, favourable opportunities for self-development were also important for the high-educated women. The latter job attribute was, however, less important for low-educated women (Figure 1).

The above-mentioned data provide a general picture of women's job preferences at the dusk of political and economic transformation in Poland. They tell us what kind of job was desired by and satisfactory for women. With the qualitative analyses, we want to explore women's motives for paid employment in depth. How different job attributes related to women's motivation to enter labour market? How were these motives related to childbearing plans?

Thus, first of all, we ask (Q1) what motives for paid employment were perceived by women? How were these motives discussed? Can they explain the determination of Polish women to participate in paid employment, despite the difficulties they faced in combining family and work?

Next, we want to explore (Q2) how women's motives for paid work were linked to their perceptions of being a mother or a worker? We will investigate how women discuss employment in relation to their childbearing experiences, plans and aspirations.

4 Methodological Approach

Our research questions are explorative and seek to investigate women's subjective perspectives. Qualitative methods are best suited to tackle such questions, as they are inductive and concentrate on individual subjective perceptions of the world. The qualitative data used in this study include in-depth interviews with 26 women conducted between 2004 and 2005, i.e. around the time when Poland was admitted to the EU. The interviewed women lived 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. These interviewees represent information-rich cases, given our research purposes, as the conflict between childbearing and women's self-realisation in the professional sphere is likely to be most profound in such a sample. Moreover, 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; thus, it is a particularly important group to study. Finally, this specific group of women grew particularly strong in Poland during the economic transformation. Thus, our respondents can be perceived as forerunners in the post-transitional labour market behaviour.

Tab. 1. Sample structure. Basic characteristics of the interviewed women ($n = 26$)

Characteristic	Categories	Number of women
Parity	Childless	19
	One child	7
Union status	Married	13
	Cohabiting	6
	No co-resident partner	7
Education	Tertiary education (BA, MA)	13
	Secondary general	7
	Secondary professional	5
	Primary	1
Economic activity	Employed full time/part time	16
	Self-employed	2
	Unemployed	4
	Studying	3
	Parental leave	1

Among the interviewees, there were 19 childless women and 7 mothers (with 1 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 (in a living apart together (LAT) relationship). The women in the sample varied in their economic activities, which provide 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 parental leave. The remaining four women were combining education with temporary jobs or were employed part-time. The sample structure is displayed in Table 1. More detailed characteristics of each respondent are presented in Table A1 in Appendix.

For the study, we employed semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview guideline included a wide range of questions related to partnership, family formation and motherhood (for the complete interview guideline, see Mynarska, 2009). 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. Noteworthy, as most of the respondents were childless at the moment of the interview, they had not yet experienced the actual demand for work and family reconciliation. This should be taken into account as we interpret our findings.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. In the first step, all passages related to work and childbearing were identified in the interviewees’ narrations. Within this material, by the means of ‘bottom-up’ coding, we categorised and defined the different attitudes towards and motives for paid employment and the views of our respondents on paid work in relation to motherhood. The map of concepts, reconstructed by the coding, allowed identifying the most central meanings of paid work that constitute key motives for women to enter the labour market (research question 1). Next, by means of a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965), we investigated how these motives were discussed in relation to childbearing. We explored what job features were mentioned while respondents talked about work and having children and how the two concepts were linked with each other in the narrations (research question 2).

5 Results: Women’s Motives to Work

In the interviews, we identified three dominant discourses related to work. They are centred on three different concepts—three different meanings of work: a source of financial security, an attractive activity, and a professional career. The three motives intertwine in the interviews but they occur in a different context in the narrations. They are discussed using different languages and in relation to different job attributes. Their concise overview is presented in Table 2. In the following sections, we describe them in detail, documenting the process of concept formation. This process constitutes the first level of theorising in qualitative analysis (LaRossa, 2012). Advancing our analysis to the next levels, we explore how the subjective importance of the identified motives relates to childbearing plans and experiences.

5.1 Work as a Source of Financial Security

Not surprisingly, first and foremost, our female respondents perceive employment as a source of income. Financial aspects are mentioned in all interviews, and they are given as the main motive for women to join the labour force. There are three key aspects discussed here. First, the interviewees believe that income allows a woman to become independent of her family of origin and self-sufficient. In fact, in

Tab. 2. Different meanings of work described in the in-depth interviews

Meaning of work	Source of income	Attractive activity	Professional career
Motives for work	Financial security—to become self-sufficient and to provide for a family; social and health insurance	A break from domestic chores—to be around people, to develop, to do something more challenging than housework	To pursue ‘a career’—to achieve self-realisation through work, high income, high positions at work (promotions)
Most central attributes (dimensions) of work	Stability, security	Interesting job (in line with one’s interests), lack of stress, good working environment	High salary, long working hours, deep involvement in work
Relation to motherhood	A necessary prerequisite to childbearing	Activity compatible with motherhood	Activity incompatible with motherhood

respondents’ perception, taking up paid employment constitutes the very first step in the transition to adulthood. It precedes other life events, which are usually considered as markers for the entry into a role of an adult (e.g. leaving parental home, getting married or having children, Billari, 2001). For the interviewed women, it is important to have their *own money*. At times, this motivation is so strong that it encourages women to break education and concentrate on work, as a result of *a craving to earn and to be independent*.

Second, income from paid employment is important for women because it ensures financial security. Women emphasise that, given the level of salaries at the time of the interviews, it was not possible for one person to sustain a family. Some interviewees noticed that it might have been difficult even with two salaries. As one respondent put it,

Today both partners may work and they still cannot afford to cover their living expenses. (W018, married, 29, childless, university degree)

The financial security granted by employment is additionally strengthened as job provides access to social insurance, health care system and maternity benefits.

The relation to childbearing becomes apparent here. A job—as a source of income, material security and social benefits—was seen (unanimously) as a crucial prerequisite for childbearing. The respondents emphasised that a decision to have a child should be made when parents-to-be are certain that they can afford to have a child. In addition, if sustaining a family might be difficult even with two salaries, women’s employment is taken for granted. For the interviewed women, it was natural that they had to take responsibility for the financial issues, like in the following example,

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 [that I am pregnant], 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.’ (W025, cohabiting, 29, childless, university degree)

Another respondent summarised a role of social benefits for a childbearing decision, once again showing how work is crucial for it,

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/social insurance]. (W004, married, 25, childless, primary education)

The respondent quoted above clearly gave priority to security and stability of a job. Indeed, when a decision to have a child is concerned, the interviewed women emphasised the importance of having stable work. Some of them admitted explicitly that when planning to have a child, it is better to stay in a job that does not satisfy them fully, but that provides stable income and security. A good example came from the interview with the respondent, who complained a lot about her work (part-time, poorly paid, she was not happy about the working environment). At the same time, however, she planned to have a child soon, and she was aware that this was not the right moment to search for a new job. She said,

I hesitate now, whether to go and search for a new 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. (W003, married, 26, childless, university degree)

The above-mentioned quotation illustrates a strategy that most of our interviewees talked about: a woman has to work for a given company for a couple of years before she decides to get pregnant. She needs to *secure her position*, or *settle down in a job*, as our respondents put it. In summary, a paid job was perceived as a chief source of financial and social security, which allows an individual to be self-sufficient. Such a job is an important condition for a decision about parenthood.

5.2 Work as an Attractive Activity

As our female respondents continued talking about their experiences and expectations regarding employment, they moved away from the material side of it and moved on to discussing its importance for breaking from domestic chores and giving them an opportunity for doing something *more ambitious*. Non-financial motives for working were especially apparent when women presented arguments against being a housewife. Staying at home was perceived as *boring*, *limiting*, and socially isolating and the respondents frequently said that they would *go crazy* if they stayed at home for a prolonged period of time. Participation in labour market seemed crucial for women's well-being. Work was perceived as a break from housework routine, a chance to do something interesting and challenging and to be around people. The following passage is a typical example of the respondents' opinions:

Q: If you could afford to, would you like to become a housewife?

A: I don't think so (...) I like it when something happens. I don't like sitting at home. I really get tired of sitting 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. (W901, LAT relationship, 25, childless, secondary professional education)

Noteworthy, all respondents were asked whether they would prefer to exit the labour market if they could afford to do so and stay at home to look after a house and children. The respondents quite unanimously gave a negative answer to this question (with just one exception and two undecided respondents). The women stated a clear preference for a lifestyle that would allow them to balance work and family life. The following quote excellently summarised our respondents' opinions on the matter:

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! It is always a chance to go out, 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. (W019, married, 29, childless, studying).

As the respondents wished to combine work and childbearing, a natural question arose about the means to do so. There were two main strategies, envisioned or already applied by the interviewed women. First, whenever possible child's grandmothers were seen as a valuable source of support. Second, the respondents considered various flexible work arrangements (such as self-employment, working shifts or part-time) and sharing care responsibilities with the child's father. Nursery was mentioned as a possible solution in three interviews only and only one woman perceived it as an attractive option. In general, institutional childcare entered women's considerations for older children.

From the interviews it became apparent that three years' time was the maximum women considered staying at home with a child, but generally, they planned to return to work directly after maternity leave or use only a small part of the parental leave. Even if some women said it would be optimal to stay with a child until he or she reaches the age of three, they also admitted that such a long break might cause problems with returning to the labour market. Only three mothers in our sample stayed out of labour market longer, but involuntarily—due to difficulties in finding a job.

It is to be noted, however, that the majority of women in our sample were childless. We may thus speak only of their preferences and expectations as regards work and family reconciliation. The reality might have turned out different for them. However, the general position of our interviewees was that they strived for a balanced life, where children and work concurred. Moreover, they believed, they would be able to achieve it. They said that *it's an issue of a good organization*, in a couple of interviews similar statements occurred, *if other women could manage, so shall I*.

Overall, women's determination to combine the two activities was evident. On the one hand, material arguments are certainly still valid here, but as the respondents discussed their life-style preferences another job attribute appeared in their narrations. They wanted to have an interesting job, in line with their interest and education, and a job that would give

them a feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment. They wanted to experience new challenges and develop. Some women said that it would be a *tragedy* or a *disaster* for them to be in a job that they did not find interesting. Moreover, the interviewees emphasised that they wished to work in a friendly environment, and a job was frequently perceived as an important platform for social contacts. It was a chance to *go out, meet people*, and socialise. Some respondents said explicitly that the good working atmosphere was far more important for them than a high income. One woman explained it as follows,

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. (W913, LAT relationship, 20, childless, studying)

Taking into account our results presented in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, one can notice that interviewed women perceived paid job not only as a source of material stability but also as an attractive activity that increased their quality of life. They wanted to combine motherhood with employment even if a financial need is absent. They wanted a job in line with one's interests, challenging but also with a good working environment. Furthermore, based on our findings, it might be hypothesised that different job attributes were pivotal at different life stages. Women who considered having a child in the near future gave priority to the stability of the job, described in the previous section. Other job features, such as *better, more ambitious* and *more interesting* job seemed to be more important after the child was born. In some cases, the women explicitly admitted that they wanted to look for such a job after having a child. One interviewee said,

I want to have a child, and only then will I think about and focus on doing things that I enjoy [at work]. (W911, LAT relationship, 24, childless, studying)

Importantly, an attractive job—as described by the respondents—should not have been too demanding to be compatible with a role of a mother. If a woman became too work-oriented, she could not combine employment with childbearing and faced a choice: work or family. This choice was related to the third concept, revealed in the interviews.

5.3 Work as a Professional Career

In the analysed narrations, we identified one more reason or motive for paid employment that our respondents recognised, but did not approve of, namely, they expressed negative attitudes towards women, who strived for a professional career. The concept of 'professional career' was associated with a whole new set of job attributes in the respondents' narrations. It was related to promotion opportunities and high salary (earning *big money*) but also to long working hours and concentration on and devotion to work. The interviewed women disapproved of such career and declared that they did not enter labour market with this motivation in their mind. As one interviewee explained it,

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. (W025, cohabiting, 28, childless, University degree)

Importantly, the interviewees emphasised that they perceived professional career (as characterised above) and motherhood as mutually exclusive. Combining paid work and childbearing seemed natural to them, but professional career demanded too much woman's time and energy. Consequently, it made raising a child difficult, and they did not want that to happen. As one respondent said,

I don't struggle to have a professional career (...) 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'm sure I would not like it. (W016, cohabiting, 24, childless, university degree)

The respondents believed that a woman needs to choose between having a professional career and motherhood, and the above quotes show which choice they believed to be the right one. The women were generally very clear about it: they would never focus on work and career and sacrifice childbearing. Pursuing a professional career without children was perceived as being a self-centred pursuit that delivers benefits only in the short run.

As one respondent put it,

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. (W102, married, 26, 1 child, studying)

A strongly negative picture of voluntarily childless women adds to this picture. They were seen as *abnormal* or even *degenerate*. According to the respondents, there was probably *something wrong* with any woman, who wished to have no children. On the whole, although paid employment was important for various reasons (income, break from domestic chores), it was not and never could be given priority over childbearing in the respondents' opinion. As we have shown, women's too deep involvement in paid work was clearly disapproved.

6 Summary and Discussion

The objective of this article was to gain deeper insight into how women's decisions about childbearing and participating in the labour market were intertwined in Poland by the end of the economic transformation. In particular, we aimed to detect the meanings women attached to employment and explore how these meanings motivated women's labour force participation and how they were linked with individual fertility choices. 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 certain behaviour. Conducting such a study in a transition CEE country is particularly informative, as women in this part of Europe have been found to exhibit an extraordinarily strong orientation to paid work despite the pronounced barriers to combine employment with childrearing.

Our qualitative findings show that around the time Poland entered the EU, economic activity played an important role in the lives of Polish women who tended to reject the male breadwinner model. At the same time, in the respondents' opinion paid work could not be given priority over childbearing. Consequently, their preferred life-style included both: children and paid jobs.

Using qualitative data, we identified three different meanings that paid employment had for women and these meanings constitute three main motives why women joined the labour force. Most importantly, we showed that women discussed paid employment and

its relation to motherhood differently, depending on which of the motives they considered.

First, paid work was seen as a source of income, financial independence and material stability, and in this sense it was perceived as an important prerequisite for childbearing. It provided safe conditions for family formation, also because one income—that of a man—would not be sufficient. Second, paid work was viewed as an attractive activity and women wanted to work to take a break from domestic chores, meet people, develop, and do something more interesting and challenging than housework. It is clear from the analysed material that women did not wish to be only mothers and believed that it was possible to combine childrearing with a job that is attractive to them. The third motive behind paid work, which was recognised by the interviewees but at the same time strongly rejected, was a desire to pursue a professional career. Women saw having a professional career to be too demanding and too time-consuming to be combined with other activities they highly valued, i.e. childbearing and childrearing, which they highly valued.

Our qualitative results contribute to the literature on women's labour force participation and its relation with motherhood in several ways. First and foremost, they depict a picture of motives underlying women's paid employment that is much more nuanced than the one offered by quantitative studies. While statistical data allow describing behaviours, the key advantage of the qualitative approach is that it provides an opportunity to make sense of these behaviours 'in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 3). We show that work might have different meanings for women and the consequences of these differences for women's lifestyle preferences should be taken into consideration in future research. It is not sufficient to ask whether a woman wants to combine work and childbearing or wishes to concentrate on one of these activities only, as her answer might vary depending on what meaning of work she has in mind.

Second, our findings provide insights into employment behaviours of women in Poland. They suggest some interpretations of why Polish women chose to struggle to combine work and family during the economic transition although the state support for working parents in Poland had declined. Our study shows that participating in the labour market meant far more for women than just meeting financial necessity. On one hand, women felt responsible for supporting

their families and did not want to rely entirely on men in this respect. However, for women in our sample, paid work was not only a source of income. It was also an important first step into adulthood and an important element of their identity. It is remarkable how negatively the respondents evaluated being a housewife in our study. While women wanted to spend their child's early years at home, they believed it would be a limiting and boring experience in a long run. A woman who stays at home with her child was described as 'sitting at home', which suggests that she does not do much.

This negative image of a housewife is likely to be rooted in Poland's socialist past when women's participation in the labour market was strongly promoted: similarly as in other socialist countries of Europe women in Poland had a right and an obligation to work. Consequently, women's role as a worker is strongly embedded in Polish culture and language and work is an important part of women's lifestyle. Indeed, our findings obtained 15 years after the collapse of the state socialism are consistent with those of Łobodzińska (1995) daing by the end of the socialism. She showed that financial considerations were not the only motive for women's employment at that time already and that women valued paid work also because they perceived it as 'a basis for personal, out-of-home relationships' (Łobodzińska, 1995, p. 531-532).

While the image of the working mother seems to be rooted in the socialist past, it might have been reinforced over the last decades of the market economy. The women interviewed in our study declared they would have liked to remain active in the labour market even if there was no financial necessity for that. At that time, their view was shared by 34% of the Polish women, while more than 50% of them support it now (CBOS, 2018). A similar shift can be observed in how working women and housewives are perceived. While in 2006 42% of Poles (33% of men and 51% of women) believed that working women enjoy higher esteem in the Polish society (CBOS, 2013), in a study conducted in 2016 in Lublin, 57% of women expressed that view (Szyszka, 2016).

The question remains open, to what extent the above shift can be related to more women striving for a 'professional career' nowadays. In our study, 15 years ago, we identified no women tempted by such a prospect. Noteworthy, our sample was selected with a bias towards young, better-educated women living in the metropolitan area and we expected career-orientation to be particularly relevant for

them. Instead, our respondents rejected the concept of a 'professional career'. They associated it with being a 'business-woman' or getting promoted to high positions with high salary, and this is perceived as strongly competing with childbearing. The fine distinction between 'attractive job' and 'professional career', made by our respondents, is intriguing and calls for further investigation. It is feasible that women's beliefs in that respect were linked to social norms. The interviews indicate that women, who deliberately decided to have no children were seen as egoists, hence if a woman wanted to concentrate on a professional career, she might be indirectly and automatically viewed as an egoist as well. Women might feel it is more acceptable to say that they want to have an interesting and well-paid job, while they still give priority to motherhood. In this respect, our findings complement the results presented in the sociological literature on Western societies. Duncan (Duncan, 2005; Duncan et al., 2003, 2004) or Crompton and Lyonette (2005) discuss how social norms or moral obligations underlie women's responsibility to be main care providers for children, regardless of women's involvement in the labour market. Our study shows how different meanings of work might be intertwined with social norms, preventing women from getting too much involved (i.e. at cost of childbearing) in paid employment. Further studies to understand relations between different meanings of work and social norms are certainly required. For example, it would be important 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. As already indicated, it would be equally tempting to investigate whether and how the perceptions of paid employment in relation to childbearing have changed in Poland over the last 15 years since Poland entered the EU.

Overall, our study generated a number of research questions and hypotheses to be addressed with quantitative data. It also demonstrated that there is a large need in the field of population studies to consider individual values, beliefs, and perceptions in empirical research to gain a better understanding of individual choices. To this end, a collection of relevant data is necessary. Qualitative research could help to formulate questions regarding preferences, motives, meanings and life goals and it should become a standard practice to implement such questions in survey questionnaires so that they could be used in statistical and econometric

models besides the variables that describe individuals' resources and constraints.

Acknowledgements

This paper was completed thanks to the financial support from the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange within Polish Returns 2019 Programme.

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Appendix

Tab. A1. Basic characteristics of the 26 interviewed women

ID	Age	Education	Employment status	Relationship status	Parity (age of a child)
W003f	26	Master	Employed part time	Married	0
W004f	25	Basic (8 years)	Self-employed	Married	0
W009f	22	Bachelor	Employed full time	Married	0
W016f	24	Master	Employed full time	Cohabiting	0
W017f	25	Master completed and studying	Employed full time (fixed term contract)	Married	0
W018f	29	Master completed and studying	Employed full time	Married	0
W019f	29	General secondary completed and studying	Employed full time	Married	0
W020f	27	Master	Employed full time (trial period)	Married	0
W023f	26	General secondary	Employed full time	Cohabiting	0
W024f	24	Secondary professional	Employed full time	Cohabiting	0
W025f	28	Master	Employed full time	Cohabiting	0
W026f	29	Bachelor	Employed full time	Married	0
W102f	26	General secondary completed and studying	Self-employed	Married	1 child (1)
W105f	29	Secondary professional	Employed full time	Married	1 child (8)
W106f	27	Secondary professional	Parental leave	Married	1 child (2)
W107f	28	Master	Unemployed	Married	1 child (3)
W110f	26	Secondary professional	Unemployed	Married	1 child (4)
W112f	28	Master	Employed full time	Cohabiting	1 child (2)
W114f	30	General secondary	Unemployed	Cohabiting	1 child (4)
W901f	25	Secondary professional	Unemployed	LAT	0
W908f	22	General secondary completed and studying	Studying	LAT	0
W911f	24	Bachelor completed and studying	Employed full time	LAT	0
W913f	20	General secondary completed and studying	Studying	LAT	0
W915f	23	General secondary completed and studying	Studying	LAT	0
W921f	28	Master	Employed full time	LAT	0
W922f	28	Master	Employed full time	Single	0

LAT, living apart together.