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FERTILITY LEVEL AND THE POPULARITY OF SOLUTIONS SUPPORTING WORK–FAMILY LIFE BALANCE IN POLAND

Abstract. The narrowing replacement of generations observed in Poland over recent decades has many causes. A conflict between work and family lives is identified as one of them. A number of solutions in Polish family policy are aimed at mitigating this conflict. This article analyses the level of fertility in Poland since 1990 as well the popularity of solutions that make working time more flexible and social services in the field of institutional childcare for children up to three years of age. Data from the following databases were used in the analysis: Eurostat database, OECD: Human Fertility Database and Eurofound: European Working Conditions Survey. Flexible working time solutions enjoy similar popularity in Poland as in other EU countries. The exception, for financial reasons, is part-time work. The analysis also indicates poor accessibility to institutional childcare.

Keywords: family policy; fertility; work–life balance; flexible working time; institutional care for children under three.

INTRODUCTION

Poland is among the European countries where the total fertility rate (TFR) is one of the lowest. Successive generations of children are less numerous than those of their parents. This leads to a decline in Poland's population, as well as a change in the proportions between individual populations: children, parents and grandparents (Kotowska, 2019, p. 11). The decline in fertility rates also contributes to the ageing of Polish society in general and of the working-age group, too. As the working-age population is set to decrease, potential labour resources will shrink as well. The post-working age population will further grow, which will ultimately lead to an increase in the old-age dependency ratios. These unfavour-

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able trends may be reversed with increased birth rates, among other things. Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer women in successive cohorts that reach childbearing age, and the number of women in their peak fertility age is also falling. Therefore, family policy in the recent years has focused on supporting procreation (Luty-Michalak, 2021, pp. 172-174; Kotowska, 2019, pp. 11-14).

Low fertility rates are conditioned by demographic, social, economic and cultural factors (Fihel et al., 2017, p. 39). Social research conducted in recent years shows that Poles postpone procreative decisions citing in particular their financial situation, costs of raising a child, housing conditions (most often the lack of own flat), uncertainty about the future, unstable job situation, focus on career development (workism), overload with responsibilities, difficulties in combining professional life with raising children, health problems, difficulty finding a suitable partner, insufficient family policy, concerns about the tightening of abortion law, and overpopulation. It is increasingly emphasized that the reluctance to have children stems from the desire to lead a comfortable life and focus on one's own personal growth. In society's perceptions, a child, like a marriage, is no longer necessary to achieve happiness in one's personal life (*Kultura nieprzyjazna macierzyństwu*, 2023; Wadowski, 2023; Gizicka, Michalski, and Szwarz, 2023; Szumlewicz, 2023; ASM, 2021).

Among the non-demographic factors, a conflict between work and family lives is identified as one of the main causes at the micro level that drives fertility decline in Poland (Fihel et al., 2017, p. 60). Parents cite the organization of child care while they are at work as the biggest difficulty (*Zasada równego traktowania*, 2015, p. 33). The impact of women's professional work is highlighted in this context (Ochocki, 2014, p. 3), as the pursuit of their career paths may interfere with parental duties. On the other hand, the focus on professional work may have a negative impact on family life. Notably, however, these observations are also true for men. Parents, especially when their children are still young, often feel a conflict between work and family lives (Kotowska-Wójcik and Luty-Michalak, 2020, pp. 86, 103).

The issue is so important that as early as in 2006 the European Commission promoted the idea of a demographic renewal, "i.e. actions with a view to increasing the fertility rate while it remains at a level below the one that guarantees simple replacement, by supporting parents in balancing their private and working lives" (Kotowska, 2019, p. 15). Poland also takes action in this respect, as the solutions supporting work-life balance addressed to parents, besides the financial incentives, are among the key instruments of national family policy. These include solutions to make the labour market more flexible, social services in the field of institutional child care, and parental leave arrangements (Bronk, 2015, p. 22).

This article sets out to analyze the popularity of selected instruments of national family policy, designed to support the work and family life balance

in the context of fertility and birth rate trends observed in Poland after 1990. Therefore, the article begins with an analysis of fertility rates and changes in the number of births and birth structure, taking into account the increase in the number of Polish women who are childless. Then, a discussion follows of the data on the use of solutions making the labour market more flexible for Poles (part-time work, flexible working time) and institutional care for children aged up to three years. Poland's situation is considered against the background of other European countries. The conclusions highlight the instruments of Polish family policy in the discussed area that need to be modified to provide for parents' ability to balance their work and private lives more easily.

1. FERTILITY AND BIRTH RATES IN POLAND: A DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

In the early 1990s, the total fertility rate (TFR) in Poland reached values close to the simple replacement level, i.e. 2.1 (2.06 in 1990 and 2.07 in 1991); since the end of the last decade of the last century it has stayed below the low-fertility threshold (1.5). Moreover, in the years 2001–2007, 2011–2015 and in 2021, the TFR dropped below 1.35 to enter the lowest-low fertility zone (Kotowska, 2014, p. 32). This demographic development is extremely undesirable.

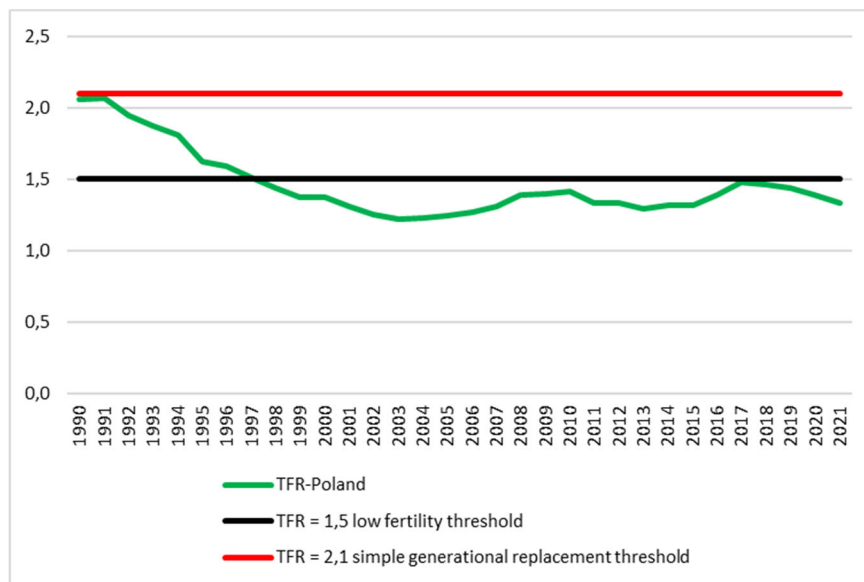


Chart 1. Total fertility rate (TFR) in Poland in 1990–2021

Source: Eurostat (demo_find).

Data published in the Human Fertility Database make it possible to break down the TFR by birth order. Considering the information presented in Chart 2, it should be stressed that in the years 1990–2019 there was a noticeable decrease in third, fourth and subsequent births, just as in first and second births. The most severe decline (by 62%) was recorded for fourth and next births (0.21 in 1990 and 0.08 in 2019), followed by third births (by almost 37%: from 0.32 in 1990 to 0.2 in 2019), second births (by 26.5%: from 0.67 in 1990 to 0.49 in 2019), and first births (by 25.9%: from 0.87 to 0.64).

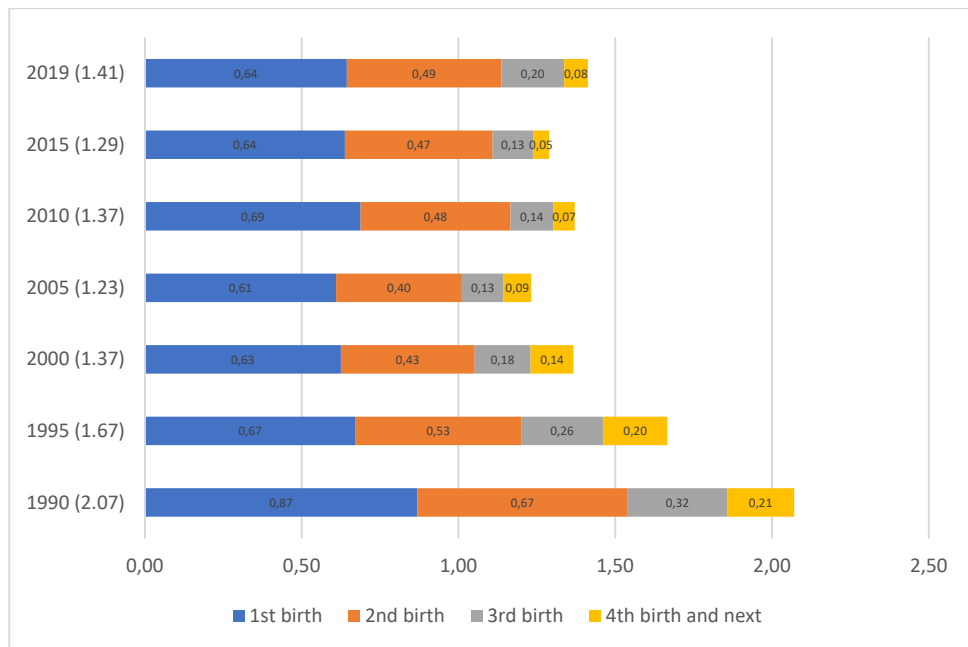


Chart 2. Breakdown of total fertility rate by birth order in Poland in 1990–2019

Source: Human Fertility Database.

The highest crude birth rate is observed among Polish women aged 25–29 and 30–34. By the mother's age, in 2021, the figures for these cohorts were 89.82 and 82.14, respectively. They were also high in the 20–24 age group (39.75 births per 1,000 women) and in the 35–39 age group (36.95 births per 1,000 women) (Eurostat demo_pjangroup and demo_fasec). The analysis of birth-order data for women in the highest birth-rate zone (aged 20–39 years), shows that the number of first births was on the rise in this group until the end of the first decade of the 21st century (from 29.16 births per 1,000 women in 2000 to

33.07 in 2009), and then began to fall, reaching 27.42 in 2021. As for second births, the figure (with minor exceptions) grew until 2017 (28.69 births per 1,000 women) to fall sharply in 2021 (21.77). The number of third births in this age cohort grew initially (from 8.38 in 2000 to 6.44 in 2015), increased from 2016 (up to 10.16 in 2019), to fall again in 2020–2021 (9.28 in 2021). The number of fourth and subsequent births, in turn, fell from 6 in 2000 to 2.35 in 2015, and later rose to 3.68 in 2019 (3.58 in 2021).

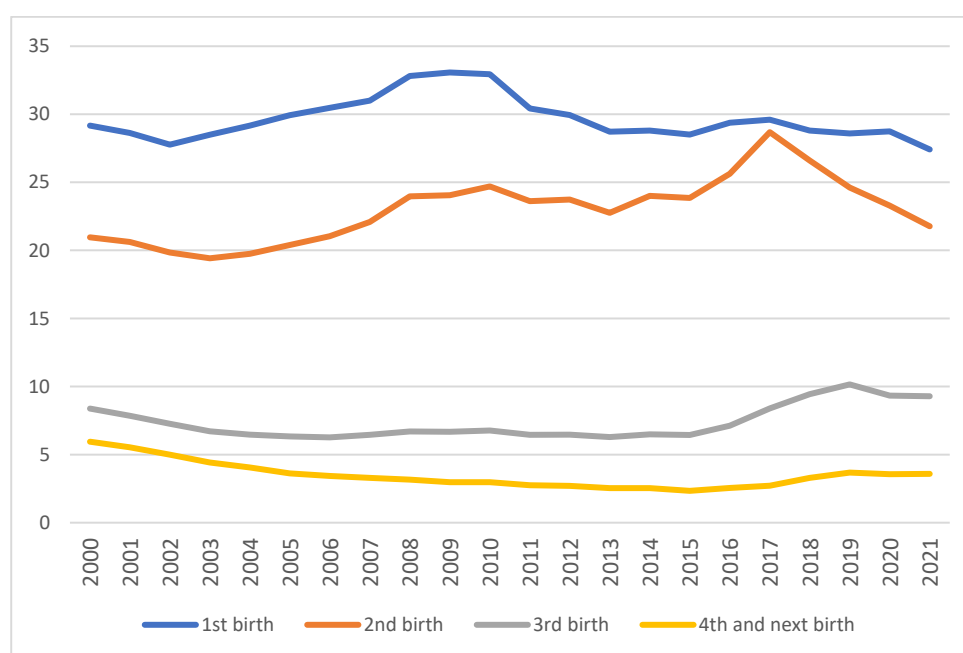


Chart 3. Distribution of births by order in the cohort of women aged 20–39 in Poland in 2000–2021 (‰)

Source: Eurostat (demo_fordagec) and (demo_r_pjangroup).

First births accounted for the largest share in the total number of births in all analysed periods. Their share in total births increased from nearly 40% in 1990 to over 50% in 2005 and 2010. This resulted from a decrease in third births from 16.4% in 1990 to 9.9% in 2010, and of fourth and subsequent births from 12% in 1990 to 4.8% in 2010. In the second decade of the 21st century, the share of first births dropped to 44.2% in 2021, but the share of third births went up to 15.2% and slightly increased for fourth and subsequent births, to 6.3%.

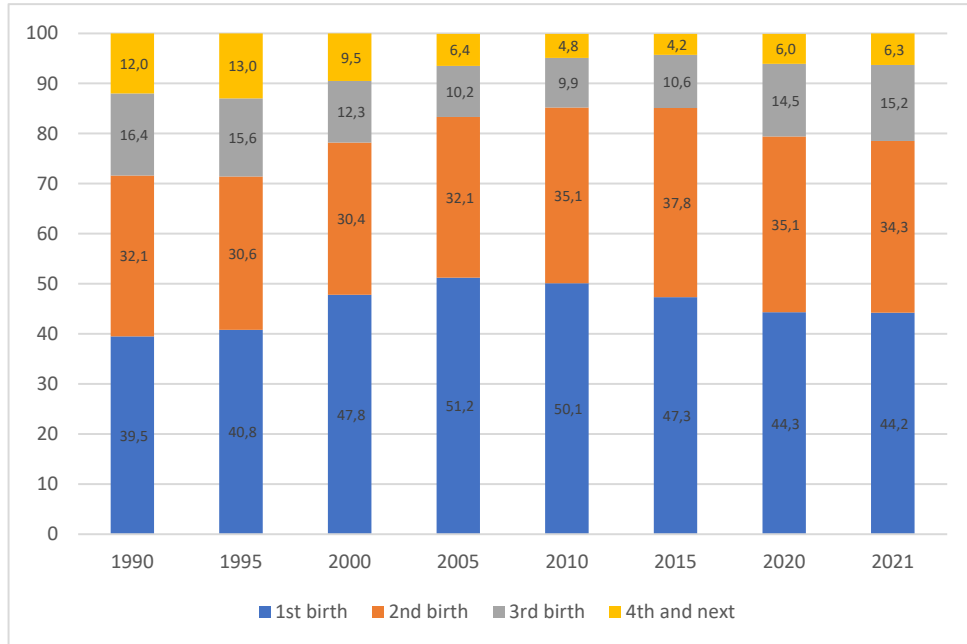


Chart 4. Distribution of births by birth order in Poland in 1990–2021 (%)

Source: Eurostat (demo_find).

The decline in the proportion of first births is also due to the increasing percentage of childless women. Of Polish women born in 1959, 9.3% had no children, and for the 1975 cohort the childlessness rate was already 19.9% (an increase of over 10 p.p.). This should raise our concern because, as research shows, those who already have children are more likely to have more in the future compared to childless persons (Brzozowska and Mynarska, 2018, p. 29-31; Kotowska, 2019, p. 21). Moreover, women born in 1975 will soon be reaching the end of their childbearing years, which means that childlessness in this cohort will remain as high.

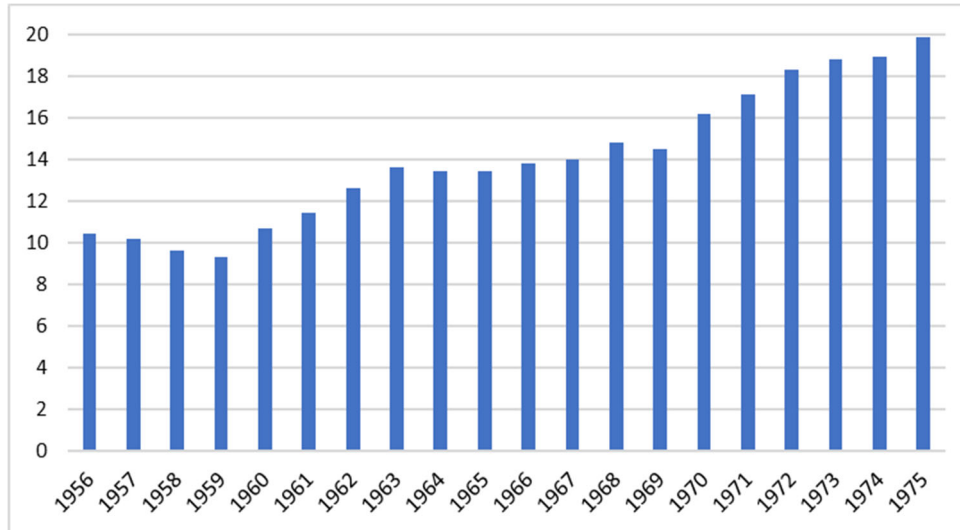


Chart 5. Percentage of childless women by cohort in Poland

Source: Human Fertility Database.

The above demographic analysis indicates the persistence of low fertility in Poland over the last three decades, and the increase in the number of childless women, which leads not only to the ageing of the population, but also to changes in the age structure. To reverse these unfavourable trends is extremely difficult and – as mentioned in the introduction – can be achieved, among others, by increasing the crude birth rates.

Countries with the highest fertility rates in Europe pursue family policies based on two assumptions: equal rights in the area of parental responsibilities and care work, and providing conditions that make it easier for parents to achieve a balance between their work and family lives (Sikorska, 2021, p. 2). That is why it is so important to create the right conditions that will enable the family to perform an economic function, mainly earning money, and combine it with the procreative and care functions (February-Michalak, 2017, p. 187). In other words, the idea is to introduce family policy solutions that will make it easier for parents to achieve work-family life balance. In what follows, we shall analyse the popularity of solutions to make the labour market more flexible, and of social services in the field of institutional child care.

2. SOLUTIONS TO MAKE THE LABOUR MARKET MORE FLEXIBLE

Incentives to encourage parents to work part-time is an important component of the policy of mitigating the conflict between work and family lives (Konradt, 2015, p. 26). Part-time employment of one of the parents is also one of the ways to alleviate the work–family conflict promoted by the European Union (Sadowska-Snarska, 2023, p. 31). This solution has helped to achieve relatively high fertility rates in countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium or Denmark (Bronk, 2015, p. 22), but Poland is not among the top countries where it is popular. In 2022, the most women with part-time employment were recorded in Switzerland (61.6%) and the Netherlands (60.6%). In the EU the share was 27.8% and only 7.7% in Poland. The highest percentage of men working part-time was also recorded in the Netherlands (18.3%) and Switzerland (18.2%). The EU average was 7.6%, while in Poland just over 3% of men were employed on a part-time basis.

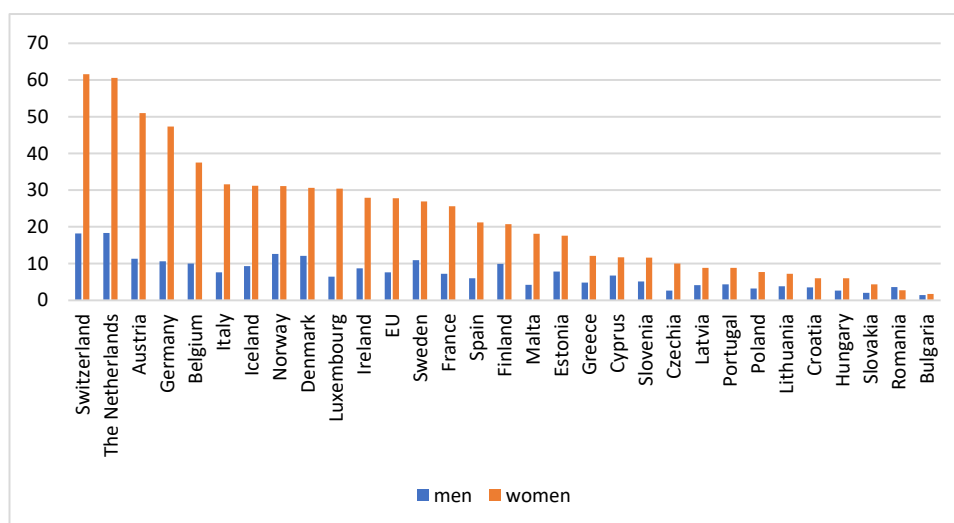


Chart 6. Percentage of those employed part-time in selected countries in 2022

Source: Eurostat, (lfsi_pt_a).

It turns out that the share of women employed part-time in 2022 was lower than in 2009 by almost 2.9 percentage points, and for men by 1.4 percentage points. This means that the option of working part-time is losing popularity among both women and men.

One of the most important reasons for the low popularity of this solution in Poland is a significant drop in disposable income levels of families (Bronk, 2015, p. 22). Another reason is the culture of full-time work in Polish society. Part-time work is treated as worse, lower paid and limiting professional advancement (Sadowska-Snarska, 2023, p. 31).

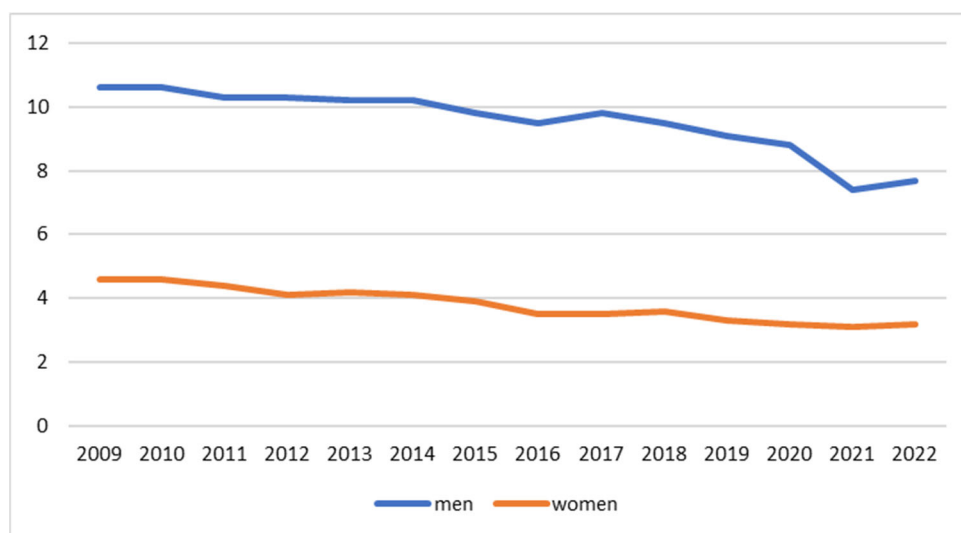


Chart 7. Percentage of women and men employed part-time in Poland in 2009–2022

Source: Eurostat, (lfsi_pt_a).

Data published by the OECD enable an analysis of the employment level only of mothers who have at least one child aged 0–14, taking into account the working hours. Overall, the level of employment of mothers in Poland in 2021 was low (71%) compared to other OECD countries. This employment rate was highest in Slovenia (87%), Portugal (85.5%) and Sweden (82.9%). The EU average was 74.9%. The lowest levels were recorded in Greece – 61.2%, Romania – 60.7% and Italy – 57.2%. In Poland, the rate for mothers working full-time was 63%, and for mothers working part-time 4.4%. For comparison, in the EU the rate was 12.3% for mothers working part-time, and was the highest in Switzerland – 59.9%, the Netherlands – 48.3% and Austria – 40.4%. Crucially, the rate for Poland has decreased since 2005, when it stood at 9.7%.

Magdalena Lipnicka, when comparing the level of part-time employment of Polish and Dutch mothers, concluded that the Polish model is very polarized, as a result of which mothers in Poland either work full-time or give up work. In her opinion, the low popularity of part-time work may also be a legacy of

the communist times. She also notes that mothers' professional work is socially desirable in Poland (2022, p. 157).

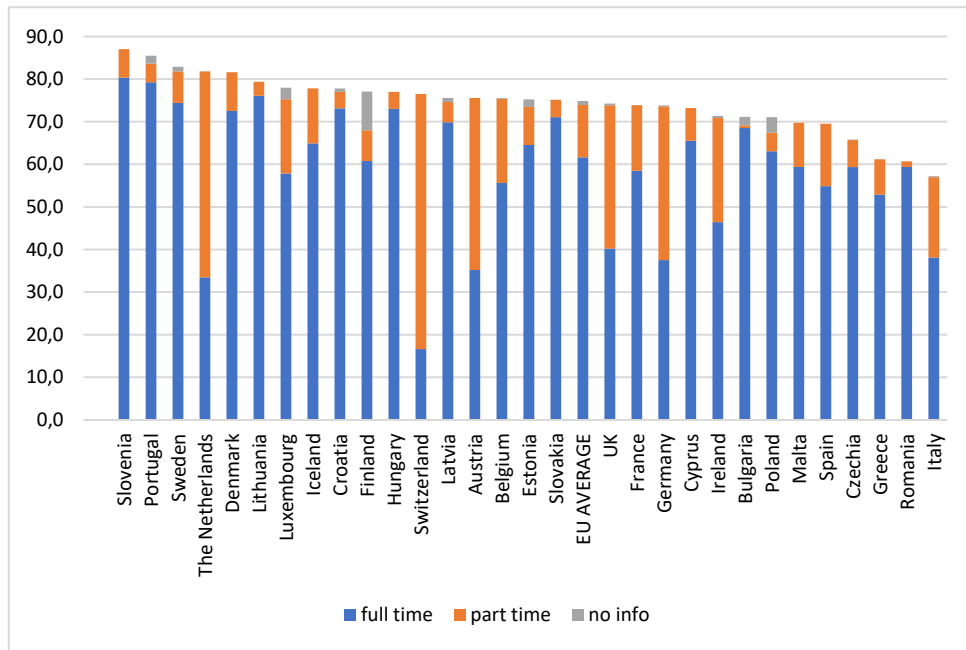


Chart 8. Employment rates (%) of women (aged 15–64) with at least one child aged 0–14, by part-time/full-time work in 2021 or by latest available data

Source: OECD, Family Database.

A solution that does not reduce family income is to make working hours more flexible. Employees' management of their working time positively impacts the balance between work and family lives (Smonder, 2015, p. 41). The results of the *European Working Conditions Survey* conducted in 2015 show that rigid working hours set by the employer were almost as common in Poland as in the EU. This answer was given by 54% of men and 61% of women, while in the EU it was 55% and 58% respectively. The data indicate that women in Poland were much more likely to have rigid working hours compared to men (a difference of 7 p.p.). In the EU, this difference was narrower (3 p.p.). In Poland, women were less likely than men to give answers indicating the possibility of adjusting working hours within set limits (women – 12%, men – 14%) and full freedom in setting working hours (15% and 22%, respectively). In contrast, men were less

likely to indicate give answers indicating the possibility of choosing one of several fixed-hour work schedules set by the employer (men – 10%, women – 12%). The data for Poland do not differ significantly from the EU averages in this respect.

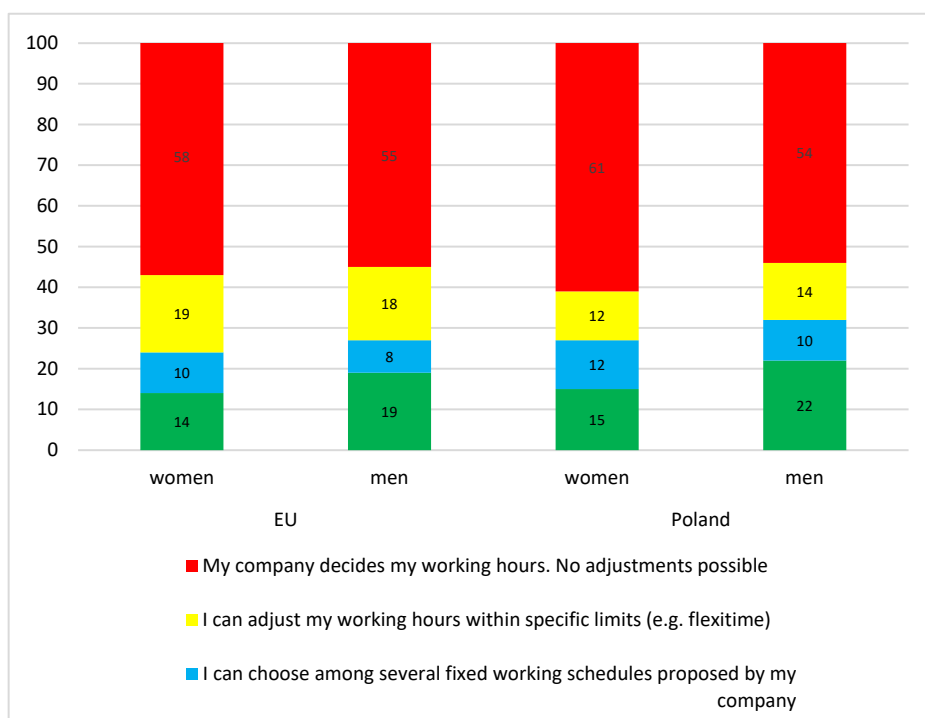


Chart 9. Working time regimes in the EU and Poland in 2015 (%)

Source: Eurofound, European Working Conditions Survey.

3. INSTITUTIONAL CHILD CARE

Social services for institutional child care are an equally important instrument, besides solutions making the labour market more flexible. Access to institutional care for the youngest children under three years of age is particularly important in this respect. In 2020, only 13% of children in this age cohort were in formal care. This is one of the lowest rates among OECD countries. Interestingly, however, over the last several years there has been a significant increase in the proportion of the youngest children in formal care, from 2.8% in 2005. The highest percentage of participation in this form of care was recorded in the Netherlands (69.4%), followed by Luxembourg (63.1%), Iceland (61.1%), Norway (58.3%), France

(58.1%), Belgium (56.9%) and Denmark (55.3%). The lowest level of participation was recorded in Romania (8.4%), Czechia (5.9%) and Slovakia (4.4%). The EU average was 32.6%.

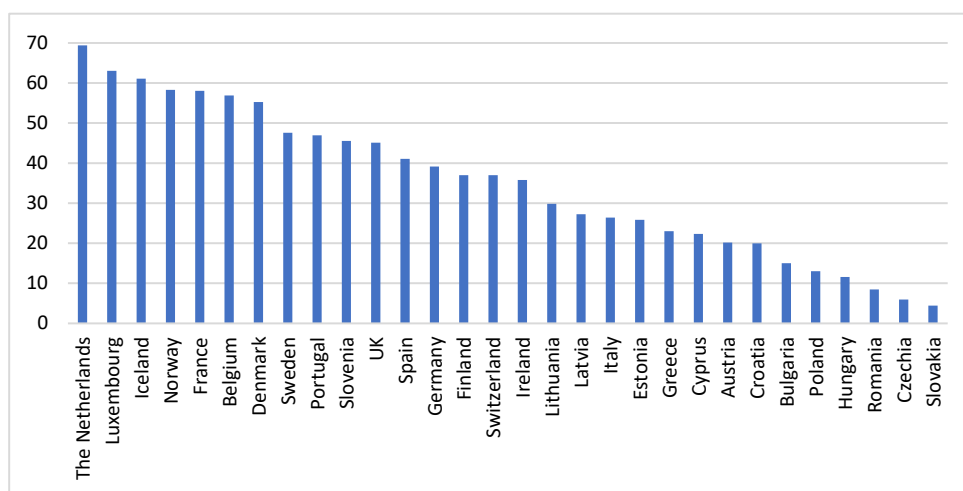


Chart 10. Percentage of children under three years of age participating in formal care and early education in selected countries in 2020. 2018 data for the United Kingdom and Iceland

Source: OECD, Family Database.

In Poland, as in most European countries, the level of participation of young children in formal care increases with the level of household disposable income (lowest income – 7.6%, middle income – 13.6%, highest income – 17.9%). Sweden and Lithuania are the only countries where the situation is different, which means that the lower the level of equivalized household income, the higher the percentage of children covered by formal care. In Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, the highest levels were recorded for middle-income households. The situation is similar with the mother's education level. In most countries, children are more likely to receive formal care when the mother has higher education. There is a similar relationship in Poland. In 2020, the percentage of participating children whose mothers did not have higher education was 6.9%, while in the case of children whose mothers had higher education, it was 21.5%. In Sweden and Denmark, the relationship was reversed, as young children's participation in formal care was higher when the mother had a lower level of education.

Katarzyna Suwada – based on interviews with parents of children aged 1 to 8 years – demonstrates that there is a gap in child care in Poland, which she

defines “as the lack or inadequacy of systemic solutions that would allow parents of different genders and different social and economic situations to provide appropriate care for their children” (2020, p. 156). She also adds that this reinforces gender and economic inequalities. Parents who have greater financial resources at their disposal have more options for providing care for their children and the strategy they often choose is nannies and nurseries. In turn, families with lower incomes cannot afford this type of solutions, which often leads to the need for mothers to temporarily give up work (2020, p. 166). The results of her research explain why the percentage of the youngest children participating in formal care is higher among mothers with higher education and families that earn a higher income. Parents living in rural areas, where access to care facilities is limited, are in a particularly difficult situation (Bronk, 2015, p. 24).

Crucially, access to nurseries and kindergartens has significantly improved. In the middle of the first decade of this century, Poland was among the countries with the poorest access to such facilities. Currently, this only applies to the availability of places in nurseries (Kotowska, 2019, p. 16). A certain solution to this situation was to provide a legal basis for forms of care for children under three years of age, such as children’s clubs, nannies and day-time carers. However, the needs of Polish families in terms of care for the youngest children still remain unmet. This is confirmed by the results of a survey conducted by the Institute of Finance, which showed that 42% of respondents believed that providing access to public nurseries and kindergartens was insufficient, while 28% of respondents were of the opposite opinion. Further, 48% indicated that family policy measures to facilitate combining work with child care were insufficient; only 21% considered them adequate. Moreover, 84% of respondents supported the idea of increasing the number of nurseries and kindergartens. It was the family policy solution that received the greatest support (Bartak, 2023, p. 16-18).

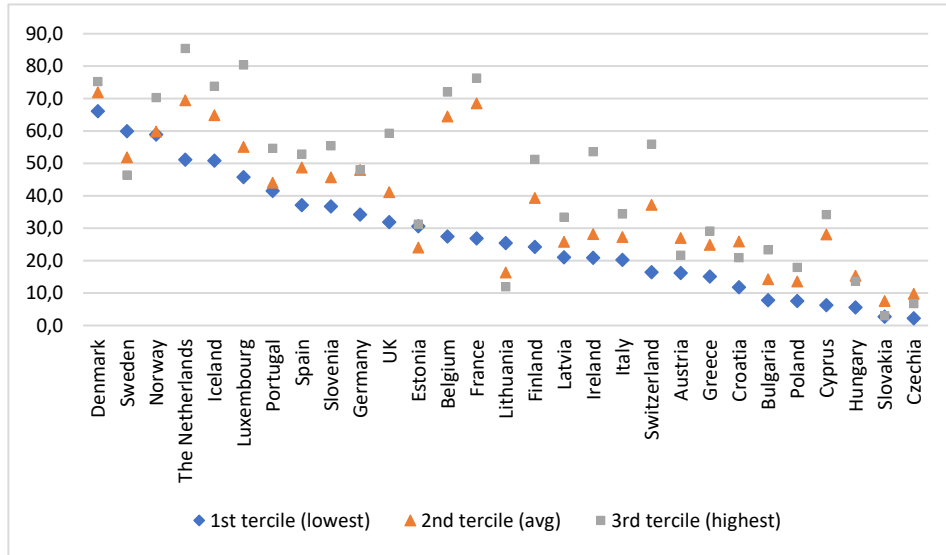


Chart 11. Percentage of children under three years of age participating in formal care and early education by equalized household income in selected countries in 2020. 2018 data for the United Kingdom and Iceland.

Source: OECD, Family Database.

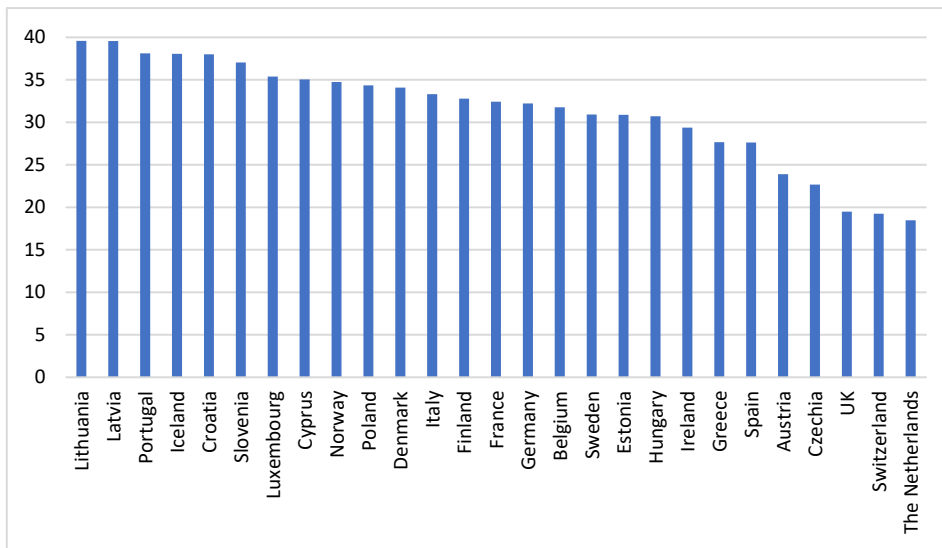


Chart 12. Average weekly hours of formal care for children under three years of age in 2020. 2018 data for the United Kingdom and Iceland; 2019 data for Denmark, Italy and Germany.

Source: OECD, Family Database.

Despite the low share of children under three years of age in institutional forms of care, the average weekly number of hours they spent there was 34.4 hours in Poland in 2020 and was higher than in the EU (32 hours). Children from Lithuania and Latvia spent the most hours in this type of care institutions (39.6 hours per week on average), while the least time was spent there by children in the United Kingdom (19.5 hours), Switzerland (19.3 hours), and the Netherlands (18.5 hours).

CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis of crude birth and fertility rates Poland in recent decades indicates unfavourable trends that, in addition to depopulation, lead to changes in the age structure of the population. Already in 2015, people aged 65 and over accounted for a higher percentage in the total population than people under 15, which means that from that moment on, the share of the elderly in Polish society has been greater than the share of children (Luty-Michalak, 2021, p. 170-171). Another threat comes from the low fertility trap, as “the changes in the age structure caused by long-term low fertility levels may be so profound that returning to a fertility level close to generation replacement becomes impossible, and changes in the structure become irreversible” (Józwiak, 2013, p. 11).

Professional work and parenthood often involve conflicting demands on the individual. Family policy is intended to eliminate or at least mitigate this conflict, through financial instruments on the one hand and solutions that facilitate combining paid work with parenthood on the other (Suwada, 2020, p. 154). Unfortunately, as the analysis shows, the accessibility of institutional care for the youngest children in Poland is very low, and the measures to make the labour market more flexible are only successful as regards working time organization. Part-time work is not very popular among parents for economic reasons.

The right solutions mitigating the work-family conflict have a particular impact on the decisions to have a second child, which is of paramount importance in the case of countries with low fertility rates (Kotowska, 2019, p. 23). The systemic development of institutional care is of the utmost importance in this respect. However, in Poland, given the high level of childlessness, decisions to have the first child are also key. The education level of Polish women is increasing. Most children are born to women with secondary and higher education. The most important thing for them is the possibility to attain a work-life balance, which, unfortunately, is still not easy in Poland. Moreover, the relationship between women’s professional activity and fertility rates has been reversed and is now

positive, which means that professionally active women increasingly want to have children, but they must provide them with appropriate care. Therefore, eliminating the barrier of poor access to institutional care for children may be the single biggest driver of increasing the fertility rate of Polish women (Kotowska, 2019, p. 23-24; Kotowska, 2017, p. 123-124).

Therefore, measures aimed at increasing access to institutional care for the youngest children, also in both cities and rural areas, seem to be crucial. Action should be taken to widen access to institutional care for the youngest children (up to three years of age), and to implement instruments that would enable parents to take up part-time employment, and further such that would make the labour market even more flexible.

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POZIOM DZIETNOŚCI A POPULARNOŚĆ ROZWIĄZAŃ
WSPIERAJĄCYCH GODZENIE ŻYCIA ZAWODOWEGO ORAZ RODZINNEGO
W POLSCE

Streszczenie

Obserwowana w Polsce na przestrzeni ostatnich dekad zawężona zastępowalność pokoleń ma wiele przyczyn. Jako jedną z nich wskazuje się istnienie konfliktu pomiędzy pracą zawodową a życiem rodzinnym. W polskiej polityce rodzinnej występuje szereg rozwiązań, których zadaniem jest łagodzenie tego konfliktu. W niniejszym artykule dokonano oceny poziomu dzietności i płodności w Polsce od 1990 r., jak również analizy popularności rozwiązań uelastyczniających czas pracy oraz usług społecznych w zakresie instytucjonalnej opieki nad dzieckiem do lat 3. W toku analizy wykorzystano dane z następujących baz danych: Eurostat Database, OECD: Human Fertility Database i Eurofound: European Working Conditions Survey. Rozwiązania uelastyczniające czas pracy cieszą się w Polsce podobną popularnością jak w innych krajach UE. Wyjątek, ze względów finansowych, stanowi praca w niepełnym wymiarze czasu pracy. Przeprowadzona analiza wskazuje również na słabą dostępność do opieki instytucjonalnej nad dziećmi.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka rodzinna; dzietność; work-life balance; elastyczny czas pracy; opieka instytucjonalna nad dziećmi do lat 3.