

# FROGEE POLICY BRIEF 4

## Insights from Poland

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Global Gender Gap in Unpaid Care: Why Domestic Work  
Still Remains a Woman's Burden

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The double burden of paid and unpaid work on women in  
Poland

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# Abstract

## Global Gender Gap in Unpaid Care: Why Domestic Work Still Remains a Woman's Burden

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In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic numerous reports point to the fact that women are mainly shouldering the burden of increased domestic care duties. But even before the pandemic struck, women performed more than two thirds of the unpaid domestic care work in both developing and developed countries. The lack of gender parity in the distribution of domestic work is associated with significant economic inefficiencies, as well as considerable social and economic consequences for women – affecting their bargaining power within the household and their labor market outcomes in particular. In the brief I review the literature on both the economic and sociological factors which perpetuate the pattern of gender disparity in unpaid domestic care work. I also summarize the “recognize, reduce and redistribute” policies which could be adopted to help address the problem.

## The double burden of paid and unpaid work on women in Poland

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The vast majority of the Polish population agrees that household duties and childcare activities should be equally shared in a couple. However, in Poland, as in many other countries, the real division of household work and care does not reflect the attitudes towards it. Relying on the information from the Time Budget Survey, in this brief we show that women in Poland spend far more time on household chores and much more often take care of children than men. With relatively high labour market participation rates, and negligible rates of part-time employment, Polish women face the problem of a double burden of paid and unpaid work, commonly pointed out in the literature in the context of the post-communist countries. More equal sharing of domestic work would facilitate greater professional involvement among women and free their time to enjoy more leisure. More active government policies aimed at closing gender gaps along different dimensions could address prevailing constraints as well as social norms and stereotypes, and contribute towards such changes.



## Gender Gap in Unpaid Care: Why Domestic Work Still Remains a Woman's Burden?

The realities of *unpaid care and domestic work* have received much attention lately in policy and academic circles, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Houtven et al., 2020; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Duragova, 2020). Recent surveys and reports confirm that while the unpaid household work burden increased for both genders, women around the world ended up shouldering the lions' share of various household chores and care duties during the pandemic (UN Women, 2020). For many countries, prolonged lockdowns have put a sudden spotlight on the "hidden" side of people's economic lives, not typically reflected in the national accounts data. Unsurprisingly, among the main issues connected with unpaid care work is the highly gendered division of labor in the "household sector" and its consequences for the emotional and economic well-being of families. In this policy brief I explore the current state and the evolution of gender inequalities in unpaid domestic care work worldwide, and discuss the academic literature which addresses the reasons and the consequences behind them. I also discuss potential policy interventions which could promote greater work-life balance and help advance both social and family-level welfare.

### Gender gaps in unpaid care work

The term *unpaid care and domestic work* appears under many terminological guises, including "unpaid care work" "unpaid household work", "unpaid domestic care work" and others. These

terms essentially refer to the same phenomenon – unpaid care activities carried out in the household. They include cooking, cleaning, washing, water and fuel collection, shopping, maintenance, household management, taking care of children and the elderly, and others (Addati et al., 2018). For the purposes of this brief I will use the terms interchangeably, relying mainly on "unpaid care", "domestic work", or "unpaid domestic care" to describe these activities. While the value of unpaid care work is not included in the national income accounts, it can be tracked by time-use surveys carried out by national statistical offices in many countries. According to the most recent surveys, (Charmes, 2019) more than three quarters (76.4%) of unpaid domestic care work worldwide is done by women, while 23.6% is done by men. In developed countries, the women's share is somewhat lower (65%), while in developing and emerging economies, women perform 80.2% of unpaid care. Thus, according to the data, even in developed countries women perform around two thirds of the unpaid domestic care work. Currently, no country in the world seems to have achieved gender parity with regard to the unpaid care distribution in households (U.N. Women., 2019).

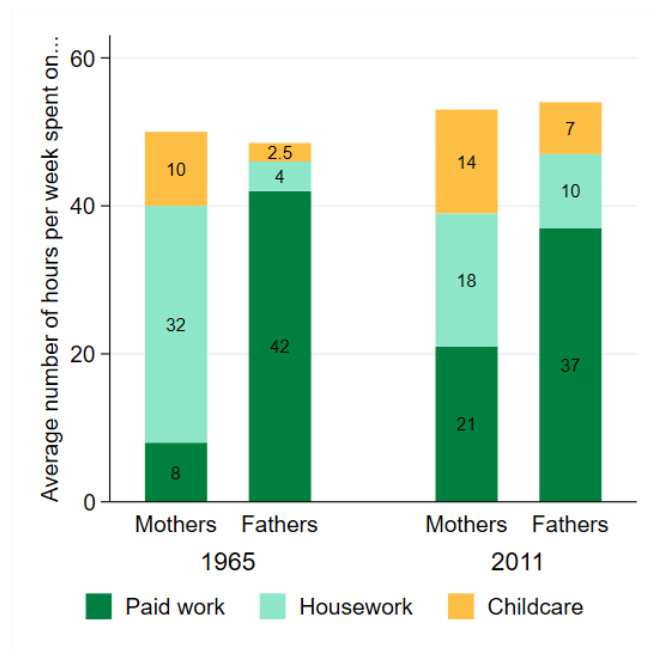
### Is there evidence of convergence in domestic care responsibilities?

Given that the first time use surveys in many countries have been conducted only relatively recently, it may be premature to make claims about changes in the distribution of domestic work and a potential closing of the gender gap. However, evidence from countries with a longer history of time use data, in particular the United



States, suggests that the way mothers and fathers allocate their time between paid and unpaid work has changed dramatically between 1965 and 2011. In particular, as can be seen from the Figure 1 (from Parker and Wang, 2013), in 2011 women spent 2.6 times (13 more hours per week) more on paid work, while men spend 5 hours less than in 1965. The time spent on childcare increased for both men and women. At the same time, domestic work hours decreased significantly for women, while somewhat increasing for men.

Figure 1. *Moms and Dads, the US 1965-2011: Roles Converge, but Gaps Remain*



Note: Based on adults aged 18-64 with own child(ren) under the age of 18 living in the household.

Source: Parker and Wang (2013).

Overall, analysis of time use survey data over a 40 year span shows a degree of convergence in unpaid care work between men and women (Kan et al., 2011; Altintas and Sullivan, 2016). However, as the Kan et al. (2011) study shows, gender inequality is quite persistent over time. In particular, men concentrate their contribution in domestic work to non-routine tasks (i.e. tasks that

generally require less time, have definable boundaries and allow greater discretion around timing of performance than the more routine tasks) such as shopping and domestic travel, while women devote a bulk of their time to routine work (cooking, cleaning, care). Women's reduction in domestic work time (especially in routine tasks) may be largely due to the advancement of household technologies and higher acceptance/demand for women's participation in the labor market (Gershuny, 1983, 2004). Thus, it appears that the "low-hanging fruit" of gender equality within households has already been picked, and, going forward, further shifting of domestic care responsibilities will be a more difficult task, even in developed countries.

### Factors that perpetuate unpaid domestic care as primarily women's responsibility

The factors responsible for perpetuating gender roles in domestic work can be grouped into **economic** (specialization, comparative advantage) and **sociological** (habits, traditions, social perceptions) aspects.

The **economic arguments** that have long been used to explain the unequal division of paid and unpaid care work rely on the **theory of comparative advantage and gains from specialization**. Starting from the seminal work of Becker (Becker, 1985), economic models of the family suggested that a division of labor within the household is driven by different experiences and choices to invest in human capital. Becker argued that efficient households require specialization and the pattern of specialization can be explained at least in part by the differences in



the initial investment in human capital (market skills for men and household skills for women) (Becker, 2009). In this model, men's advantage in paid market activities is explained by historical reasons stemming in part from the more physical nature of market work. And yet, contemporary authors point out that the nature of work has been changing over time, with less emphasis put on physical, and more on cognitive skills. Likewise, the nature of household production has been changing (Greenwood et al., 2017). Birth control gave families a better way to control the number of children (Juhn and McCue, 2017). These changes should make men and women's productivity more equal, and consequently reduce the gender gap between men and women in both types of work. And yet, despite the fact that in developed countries women often achieve higher educational attainment than men (Goldin, Katz and Kuziemko 2006; Murphy and Topel, 2014), it has not been enough to eliminate the gender gap in wages and in the division of unpaid domestic work. Moreover, as the study based on 1992 Canadian data by McFarlane et al. (2000) points out, while the wife's time in housework increases when the husband spends more time in paid work, the opposite is not necessarily true for men (men do not spend significantly more time on household tasks when their wives increase their employment). Alonso et al., 2019, using a sample of 18 advanced and emerging market economies, find that various factors which determine the allocation of time between paid and unpaid work affect men and women asymmetrically. For example, being employed part time vs. full time considerably increases the participation in unpaid

work for women, while for men the same increase is statistically insignificant.

Thus, a purely "pragmatic" economic argument for the household division of labor is not sufficient to explain the persistence of the unpaid care gender gap. Other **sociological factors**, such as gender roles determined by **social attitudes and cultural norms**, tend to play an important role in household labor division (Coltrane, 2000; Juhn and McCue, 2017). Moreover, one can argue that educational choices of women, which contribute to their "comparative advantage" in household production, are themselves not independent of cultural norms and attitudes. These choices tend to be shaped in early childhood and reflect how much a family would invest in/encourage a girl's education vs. that of a boy; whether boys are engaged in certain household chores - cooking, cleaning, caring for young children, etc. (UNDP, 2020). For example, the high gender gap in unpaid domestic work in the South Caucasus can be traced to family patterns. According to survey data (CRRC, 2015) in Azerbaijan, around 96% percent of women were taught in childhood how to cook, clean the house or do laundry, while only 35% of men were taught how to cook and clean. In Georgia, close to 90% of women reported being taught how to cook, clean and do laundry, while less than 30% of men on average reported being taught these skills (UNFPA, 2014).

### **The social cost of gender inequality in the unpaid care work allocation**

Gender inequality is not just an issue of fairness. **Inequality results in considerable resource misallocation**, where women's productive potential is not fully realized. The study by Alonso



et al., 2019 estimates the GDP gains associated with a potential reduction in gender inequality in domestic work to the level observed currently in Norway. Countries like Pakistan and Japan, where the initial gender gap is quite sizeable, would gain around 3 to 4 percent of GDP. Another source of inefficiency is **occupational downgrading**, a situation where women take jobs below their level of qualification (Connolly and Gregory, 2007; Garnero et al., 2013) in order to better balance their home and work responsibilities. The perception of women as being primarily responsible for childcare and domestic labor drives statistical discrimination in the workplace and affects the “unexplained” portion of the **gender pay gap** (Blau and Kahn, 2017). The pay gap, in turn, perpetuates inequality in the division of domestic labor. Moreover, perception of unequal domestic work allocation is found to be associated with **lower relationship satisfaction, depression, and divorce** (Ruppaner et al, 2017). In addition, earlier sociological studies found that **inequity in the distribution**, rather than the amount of work, **causes greater psychological distress** (Bird, 1999).

### **Policies to address the gender gap**

Given the sizeable economic and social costs associated with the gender gap in unpaid care work, policy makers are paying greater attention to gender equality and ways to promote work-life balance for men and women. Currently, most solutions center around “**recognize, reduce and redistribute**” types of policies (Elson, 2017).

The “**recognize**” policies acknowledge the value of unpaid care work done by women through cash payments linked to raising young children (i.e. maternity leave policies). Most countries in the

world adopt publicly funded paid maternity leave policies, although the adequacy of maternity leave payments and the duration of such leaves is still a stumbling block for many countries (Addati et al., 2014). Data suggests that maternity leave of no longer than 12 months has a positive effect on maternal employment, while long leaves (over two years) increase career costs for women (Kunze, 2016; Ruhm, 1998; Kleven et al., 2019)

The “**reduce**” policies, aim at the provision of public services that would reduce the burden of childcare and other forms of unpaid work on women and free up their time for participation in the labor force. Among such policies are investments in publicly funded childcare services (quality pre-schools and kindergartens) and physical infrastructure to support the provision of clean water, sanitation, energy, and public transport. Empirical studies generally find a positive effect of affordable childcare on female employment rates (Vuri, 2016; Lefebvre et al., 2009; Geyer et al., 2014), but with some caveats – in particular, the subsidies may be less effective for female labor supply if affordable childcare just crowds out other forms of non-parental care (such as informal help from family members) (Vuri, 2016; Havnes and Mogstad, 2011).

Finally, the “**redistribute**” policies aim to promote the redistribution of household chores and childcare among men and women. Among such policies are initiatives aimed at making flexible and reduced-hour work arrangement attractive and equally available for men and women. (e.g. shifting standard weekly hours to a more family friendly 35 hours per week, as for example in France); active labor market programs aimed at retaining women in the labor market can also help



reduce hours devoted to unpaid work (Alonso et al. 2019). Moreover, better labor market regulations (e.g. legislation to regulate vacation time, maximum work hours, etc.) would discourage the long working hours and the breadwinner-caretaker gendered specialization patterns within families (Hook, 2006). Other examples include work-life balance policies recently adopted by the EU (EU Directive 2019/1158), and are aimed at providing paid paternity leave and reserving non-transferrable portions of family childcare leave for men. These policies were found to be effective for both increasing father's participation in unpaid care and for reducing the gender wage gap within families in a number of country studies (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2018; Andersen, 2018).

It is important to recognize that more research is needed to identify exactly how and why specific policies may benefit families, and to adapt them to the specific country context. While many of the policies outlined above will not solve the problem of the gender gap overnight, they can be an important first step towards greater global gender equality in the workplace and inside the household.

## The double burden of paid and unpaid work on women in Poland

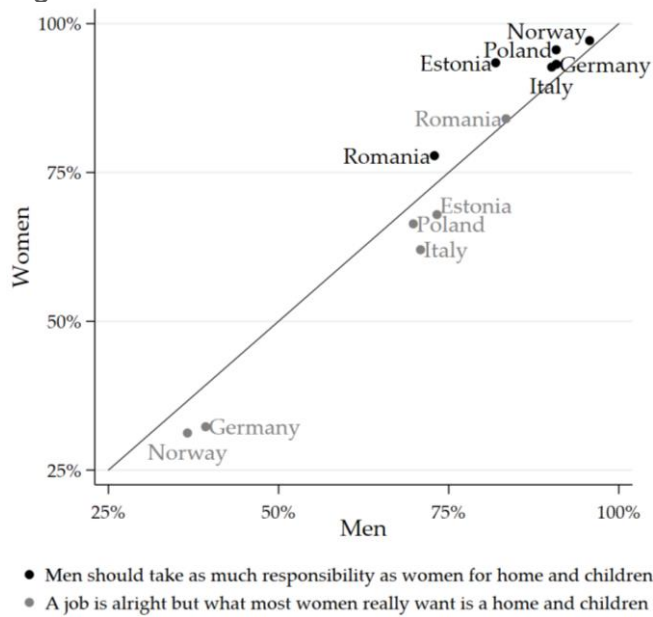
While women in Poland still bear the burden of the majority of unpaid domestic work and childcare in their households, their views on how these duties should be shared within a couple are similar to those of men and women in countries like Italy or Germany. As the data from the European Values

Study show, in 2008 95.6% of Polish women agreed with a statement that men should be equally responsible for such tasks (Figure 1). The share of men who agreed with equal sharing of these duties at home was only marginally lower (90.8%). Interestingly, differences between countries in attitudes towards involvement in housework and care are much smaller compared to those with regard to other traditional gender roles. For example, 69.8% and 66.4% of Polish men and women respectively agreed with the statement that *A job is alright but what most women really want is a home and children* (Figure 1). While these proportions were similar in countries such as Italy or Estonia, in Germany and Norway they were substantially lower (39.3% and 32.3% in Germany, and 36.6% and 31.2% in Norway).

In Poland, as in many other countries, the actual division of household work and care does not reflect the professed attitudes towards it. As we show in this brief, based on the data from the Time Budget and Labour Force Surveys, women in Poland spend far more time on household chores and much more often take care of children than men. Since the labour market participation rate is relatively high in comparison with countries such as Italy, and for the majority this is full-time rather than part-time employment, Polish women are often faced with a double burden of paid and unpaid work. While this phenomenon can be observed in many countries, it is particularly evident in post-communist countries with a legacy of high labour market involvement among women (Saxonberg, 2014), which was not accompanied by the equal sharing of household duties.



Figure 1 Social norms in selected countries



Note: Share of answers "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement.

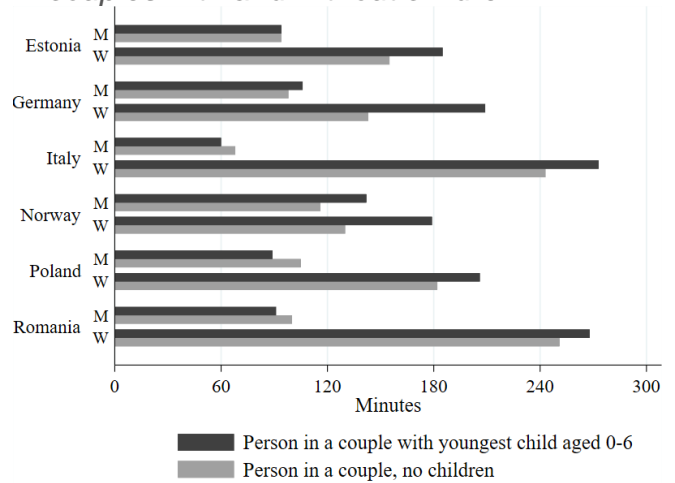
Source : European Values Study 2008.

## Gender gap in time spent on household chores

Data from daily diaries capturing activities performed throughout an entire day, collected in the Time Use studies, allow us to take a closer look at gender differences in the amount of time devoted to household- and child-related activities on an average day. First, using data from the early 2010s, we focus on time spent on various household chores, excluding childcare (Figure 2). We look separately at couples with young children and without children. In all countries presented in the Figure women on average spend much more time on household related activities than men. While in Poland the difference is not as big as for example in Italy, the gap is much wider than in Norway. Polish men in couples with small children devote on average slightly less time to household activities unrelated to childcare (16 minutes less per day) compared to those in couples without children. Given that the opposite

is true for women, the gender gap in the average time spent on household chores is lower among couples without children (77 minutes compared to 117 minutes among couples with children). A wider gap among couples with small children can also be observed in Italy and Romania, the two countries in the sample with the highest female-male ratio in time spent on household chores.

Figure 2 Average time spent daily on household chores by women (W) and men (M) in couples with and without children



Note: Couples without children - up to 44 years old. Aggregated time spent on food preparation, dish washing, cleaning, laundry, ironing, handicraft, gardening, pet care, repairs, shopping, household management. (M) men, (W) women. Source: Time Use Survey, Eurostat, 2008-2013.

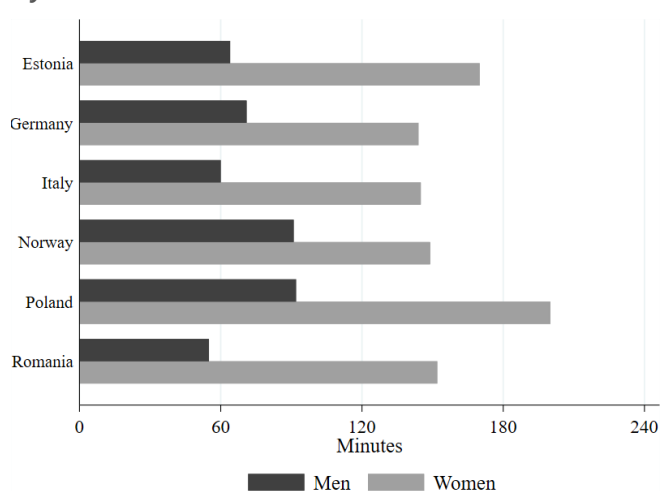
Next we focus only on couples with children aged up to 6 years and compare the average daily time spent by mothers and fathers on childcare (Figure 3). The gender gap in Poland is much wider than in Norway (108 minutes as compared to 58 minutes). This is despite the fact that in both countries men report on average similar and relatively high amounts of time spent with children compared to other countries (ca. 90 minutes daily). This implies that the wider gender gap in Poland comes entirely from a much higher time spent on childcare by Polish mothers. The most likely explanation behind this observed





difference are constraints related to childcare, which for a long time have been a significant challenge for many families in Poland. While in recent years the availability of formal childcare in Poland significantly improved, access for families with children below 3 years old is still among the lowest in the EU (Magda, 2020).

*Figure 2 Average time spent daily on childcare by mothers and fathers*



Note: Aggregated time spent on childcare, teaching, reading, talking with a child and transporting a child. Couples with a child up to 6 years old.

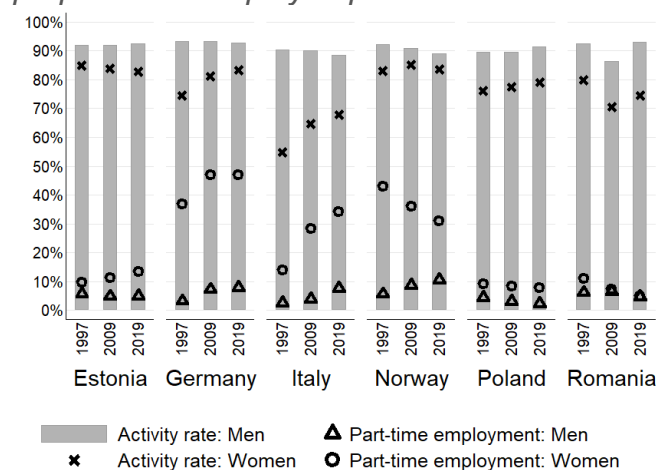
Source: Time Use Survey, Eurostat, 2008-2013.

## Is more time spent on unpaid house and care work compensated with less time devoted to paid work?

Poland, together with other post-communist countries, has a history of relatively high female activity rates in the labour market (Figure 4). While not as high as in Estonia, Germany or Norway (over 82% in all three countries in 2019), the activity rate of 79% among Polish women aged 25-54 in 2019 was substantially higher compared for example to Italy (68%). However, in order to understand the level of involvement of women on the labour market in Poland, we need to complement these figures with another post-

communist legacy - unusually low rates of part-time employment. In 2019 almost every second woman aged 25-54 in Germany and every third in Italy and Norway was employed part-time. On the other hand, in Poland less than 8% of women worked part-time. With a difference in activity rates between men and women of only 13 percentage points, the data confirms that Polish women face an especially heavy double burden of full-time paid work and unpaid household work.

*Figure 4 Labour market activity rates and proportion of employed part-time*



Note: Men and women aged 25-54. Activity rate - people active in the labour market (employed and unemployed) as % of the total population. Part-time employed - based on self-declaration of working part-time as % of total employment.

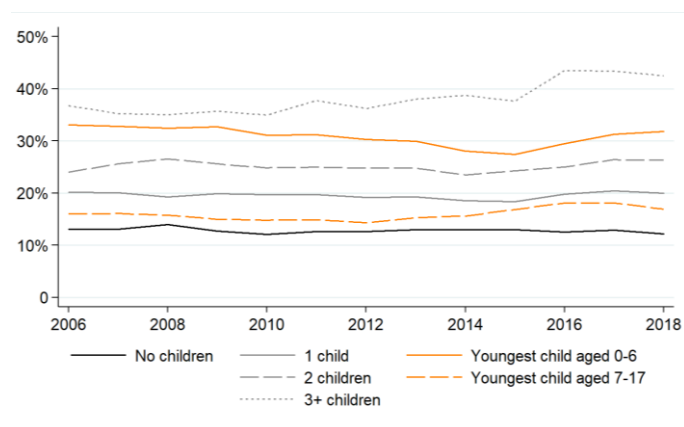
Source: Eurostat based on the national LFS data.

The lack of flexibility on the labour market, in conjunction with continued constraints related to the availability of childcare for small children, make up a combination which limits the activity of women with children on the Polish labour market (Magda, 2020). Despite relatively high average rates of employment, female labour market activity in Poland is heavily differentiated depending on family composition. In Figure 5 we show the proportion of women aged between 25 and 54 that were inactive in the labour market conditional on the number of children and the age



of the youngest child. Among women with one child the inactive proportion has been significantly higher than among childless women. Furthermore, the more children she has, the less likely a mother is to be active on the labour market, and the age of her children is a very important factor. In 2018 32% of women whose youngest child was up to 6 years old were inactive, almost double the rate among women with the youngest child aged 7 years or over.

Figure 5 Proportion of women inactive in the labour market in Poland depending on the number and age of children



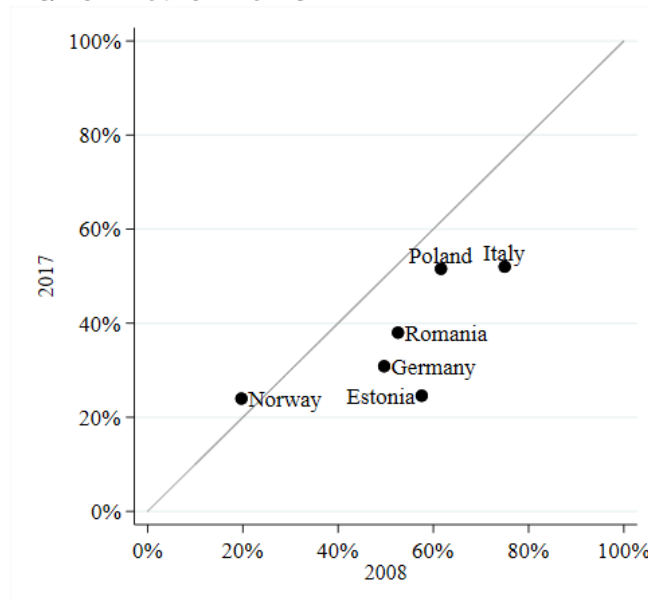
Note: Women aged 25-54. For the proportions of women with 1, 2 or 3+ children, a child is of age 0-17.

Source: Polish Labour Force Survey 2006-2018.

While labour market constraints are the most tangible reasons behind lower labour market involvement among women with children in Poland, the observed employment statistics also reflect to some extent the conservative social norms of the Polish population. In Figure 6 we compared the proportions of those who agreed with a statement that *a pre-school child is likely to suffer if the mother works* across different countries in two waves of the Values Survey, set 10 years apart. In 2008 these proportions in Poland were comparable to Germany, Estonia or Romania. While by 2017 the proportion of people who

agreed with this statement fell in all these countries, the drop in Poland was the lowest, with over 50% of Polish respondents still sharing this view. By 2017 Estonia and Germany came closer to Norway, where only about 20% of the population agreed with this statement.

Figure 6 A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works



Note: Share of answers "agree" or "strongly agree".

Source : European/World Values Survey 2008, 2017.

## Policies addressing the problem so far and room for improvement

A number of policies have been implemented in Poland, which can be identified within the framework of 'recognize, reduce and redistribute', aiming to help decrease the gender gap in unpaid housework (Elson, 2017). These include in particular policies aiming at 'recognizing' and 'reducing' the gender gap in household work, by improving the provision of childcare. However, as the statistics presented above demonstrate, there is still much room for improvement, especially as far as policies of the 'redistributive' type are concerned.



Maternity leave has been in place in Poland since the early years of communism (Durasiewicz, 2012). In recent years a number of reforms have led to extending the available leave, which currently stands at 12 months after birth, with maternity benefits amounting to 80% of the salary. Moreover, a minimum maternity benefit has been introduced to cover all mothers, including those without sufficient social security contributions. In addition, to acknowledge ('recognize') the amount of childcare delivered throughout their life, since 2019 mothers of four children or more are entitled to a minimum pension once they reach the statutory retirement age, regardless of their employment history.

Much has been done in Poland over the past decade or so in terms of the 'reduction' in the burden through the gradual development of the formal childcare system, including opening up kindergartens, and cash supplements to hire a nanny. These types of policies should have a positive impact on labour market participation rates not only among women in reproductive ages, but also among older women, an important source of informal care provision to grandchildren in Poland.

Given the number of concurrently implemented changes, identification of how the reforms have contributed to developments on the Polish labour market and how they affected the degree of the 'double burden' is essentially impossible. Reforms to childcare provision and maternity leave have been implemented alongside changes to the retirement age, the tax system and family benefits. The implementation of a generous universal child benefit and several other recent reforms reflect the priority of the current government to focus more

on direct financial assistance rather than on further improvement of institutional support to families in Poland.

The list of recent policies includes also those of the 'redistributive' type, such as two-week long fully paid paternity leave implemented as early as in 2010, combined with the possibility of sharing parts of the maternity leave between parents available already since 2001. However, the existing policies do not seem to be very popular among fathers. In 2018 only 64% of fathers claimed to have used the paternity leave (pracuj.pl, 2018). Even fewer parents decided to split the maternity leave - in 2019 men accounted for less than 2.5% of the recipients of maternity benefits (Social Insurance Institution, 2019). In 2019, the European Union enforced work-life balance regulations aimed at equalizing the share of time taken off from work by mothers and fathers after childbirth (EU, 2019). According to the new guidelines, there should be a non-transferrable part of the maternity leave, owed to fathers only. EU member states have been obliged to adapt their country legislation to these guidelines within three years, though for the moment these regulations seem an unlikely priority for the current Polish government.

The key challenge to the reduction of the 'double burden' is to facilitate greater labour market involvement *alongside* reductions in household duties. The latter can be achieved on the one hand through easier access to public services, and on the other through more equal sharing of household work within couples. The observed stability of social norms in Poland suggests that noticeable changes might be slow in coming. Thus lifting constraints on the labour market and provision of



care services will continue to be essential policy challenges. It remains to be seen if the current government decides to address these. Its recent focus on familiarization of care, combined with the reluctance to undertake reforms aimed at closing gender gaps along different dimensions, suggest that rapid progress in these policy areas is unlikely. As a result many working women will continue to face the challenges of the 'double burden'.

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