

IS IT POSSIBLE TO INCREASE THE FERTILITY RATE IN POLAND?

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Key message

Low fertility rates in Poland have been reported since the late 1990s, resulting in population decline as a consequence.

Reasons for the low fertility rate are to be associated with: 1) demographics – the number of women of reproductive age tends to fall from generation to generation; 2) an ineffective and unstable family policy; 3) social factors, such as a sense of insecurity experienced by many young couples and various “costs” of motherhood, which may affect women’s procreative choices (including the situation of mothers in the labour market, their “threefold burden” as well as the model of a “mother’s sacrifice” and the related social pressure).

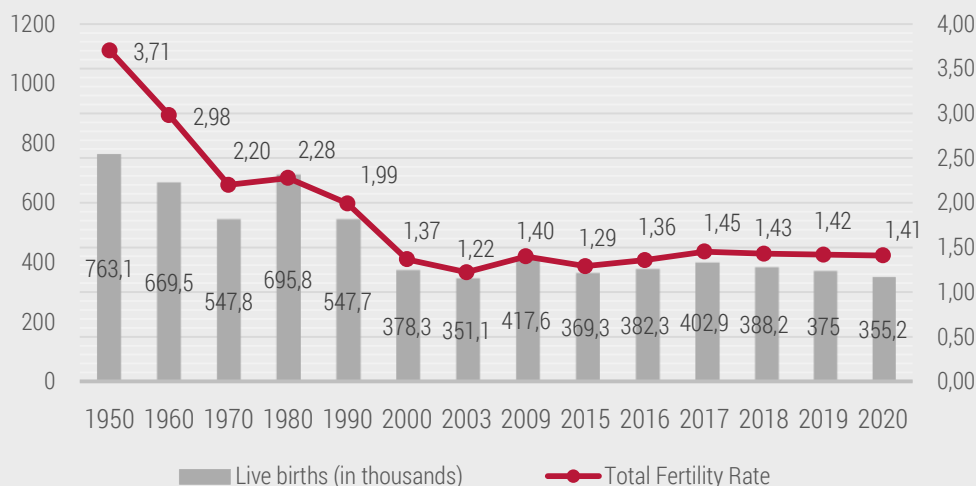
The experience of European countries has shown that the highest total fertility rates are achieved in countries with a stable family policy based on two objectives:

- striving to find a balance between mothers and fathers in terms of parental responsibilities and caregiving;
- helping parents combine work and family.

Facts and figures

- **1.41** – the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in Poland in 2020. Poland has one of the lowest total fertility rates in the EU in the 21st century.
- **20,000** fewer childbirths in 2020 as compared with 2019.
- **Over 70,000** more deaths in 2020 as compared with 2019.
- **50%** – approximate percentage of Polish women and men declaring they want to have two children, and nearly 30% are willing to raise three children.
- **53%** – percentage of families raising a single child.

Total Fertility Rate and (live) births in selected years



Source: own work based on the Statistics Poland data.

1. Introduction

Low Total Fertility Rates have been noted in Poland since the late 1990s. In the first decade of the 21st century, the situation became worse, the rate reaching a historic low in 2003. In the following years, there were slightly more childbirths, the Total Fertility Rate increased marginally in 2009, and then again in 2017. After that, the Total Fertility Rate started to fall again. 2020 saw approx. 20,000 fewer childbirths than in the preceding year.

Starting from the second decade of the 21st century, the birth rate (the difference between the number of births and deaths) has been negative again, which translates into a year-to-year reduction in population size (known as population decline). The second factor affecting the population of the given country is migration and immigration, meaning the number of people leaving and entering the country with permanent effect. In recent years, the rate has been positive (more people have entered Poland than those who have left the country); however, the relatively low surplus does not compensate for the negative birth rate.

The low fertility rate has become an important subject in public and political discourse. One after another, successive governments took various actions in order to increase the fertility rate. Most of these policies have been unsuccessful. And yet, a low total fertility rate translates directly into the organisation of the pension system, the functioning of the labour market and the education system and, more generally, affects the functioning of society both now and in the near and distant future.

The experience of European countries (acting as a point of reference for Poland) has shown that the highest total fertility rates are achieved in countries with a stable and consequent family policy based on two objectives:

1. striving to find a balance between mothers and fathers in terms of parental responsibilities and caregiving (e.g., reserving a part of parental leave for fathers only – referred to as a father's quota);
2. Helping parents combine work and family (e.g., universal access to nursery and kindergarten as well as flexible work patterns).

In the process of deciding to have a baby, it is also important that the family feel secure about their financial and housing situation.

In my report, I have identified factors affecting low total fertility rates in Poland (section 2) and reviewed the family policy provided in our country (section 3). In the summary and conclusions, I have answered the question asked in the title of the paper and I have identified family policy measures which might help increase the fertility rate, or at least stop its decline.

2. Reasons for low fertility rate

In this section, I describe the gap between the preferred and the actual number of children. I also present reasons for the current low fertility rate, referring to public opinion research and to analyses regarding the "costs" of motherhood, which may affect the decision of parents to raise an only child and not to have more children.

2.1. Gap between the preferred and the actual number of children

Since the late 1990s, the total fertility rate in Poland has remained low. And yet, declarations concerning the preferred number of children have basically not changed. About half of the respondents still want to have two children (see Table 1). Moreover, recently – as compared with the previous years – the group of people willing to raise three children has grown. Up to 13% of respondents declared that they want to have one child in 2000. In the most recent research (2019), this option was chosen only by 6% respondents.

Table 1. Declared preferred number of children (in %)

	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2019
None	1	2	3	2	4	2
One	8	13	11	10	10	6
Two	50	49	49	50	49	47
Three	23	22	21	23	25	28
Four and more	10	10	9	9	7	11
As many as life brings	6	2	3	2	2	2

Please note that in the question: "Irrespectively of your marital status, of your age and of whether you have children or not, please state how many children would you like to have in your life", the answer "Hard to say" has not been taken into account. Source: CBOS, 2019.

And yet, among families with dependent children, those with one child prevail (53%). 35% of families have two children, 9% have three, and 3% have four or more¹. The gap between the preferred number of children and actual fertility (Fertility Gap) is not specific for Poland only. However, the gap is particularly vast in our country, and the fact that Polish women and men relatively rarely choose to have the second child or more children is an important reason for the low fertility rate.

In recent generations, the number of childless women has grown. However, the percentage of those declaring that they do not want to have children is relatively low, ranging from 2% (CBOS, 2019) to 6% (Mynarska, Styr, 2014). Among women born in 1945-1955, approx. 8% have not given birth to a child, and among those born in 1975, this figure is 20% (Mynarska, Rytel, 2020)². Hence, there is a difference between the relatively low percentage of people declaring that they do not want to have children (voluntary childlessness) and the growing number of people without children in the next generations. The reason for childlessness usually lies in a concurrence of circumstances: the absence of a good partner, a lack of financial and professional stability, fear of becoming a parent, etc. Fertility problems constitute another important reason. According to estimations, these may affect approximately 15% of couples in Poland (Koperwas, Głowacka, 2017). Without any doubt, the public policy aiming to support growth of the total fertility rate should also offer support for those who have problems conceiving a baby for medical reasons.

¹ According to the National Census; unfortunately, the most recent data are those available from the census carried out in 2011.

² Approx. 5% more than in other CEE countries, and also relatively high in comparison with the "old EU" countries – a similar rate is predicted for Germany, the United Kingdom, Austria and Spain, and a slightly higher one for Italy and Finland (Mynarska, Rytel, 2020).

2.2. Reasons for low fertility rate according to Polish women and men

The main reasons for low total fertility rate in Poland, according to the public, are economic factors and a sense of insecurity. The respondents indicated: a lack of financial stability and insecurity about the future (chosen by 59% of the respondents), housing-related limitations (44%) and, among women, fear of losing their job (42%). The less frequently chosen options were: women's willingness to pursue a professional career and promoting of the model of a financially independent woman (27%), difficulty with combining family and work (26%) and a sense of not being supported by the state (e.g., in terms of education and medical care for children). It should be noted that women – more frequently than men – assumed that women do not choose to have a baby due to their fear of losing their jobs, whereas men – more frequently than women – indicated “convenience, willingness to enjoy life, unwillingness to sacrifice” (CBOS, 2017).

The decision to have the first child is postponed mainly due to sense of instability. In particular, this means a lack of stable employment for both partners (and thus, a relatively secure financial situation) and a lack of housing stability. For women, being married is also important. Marriage makes it easier to decide to have a baby, whereas informal relationships tend to make the decision more difficult (see Mynarska, Styr, 2014). The role of these factors is not as crucial when planning subsequent children, however. Then, the “costs” of motherhood may prove to be of key importance, blocking reproductive plans.

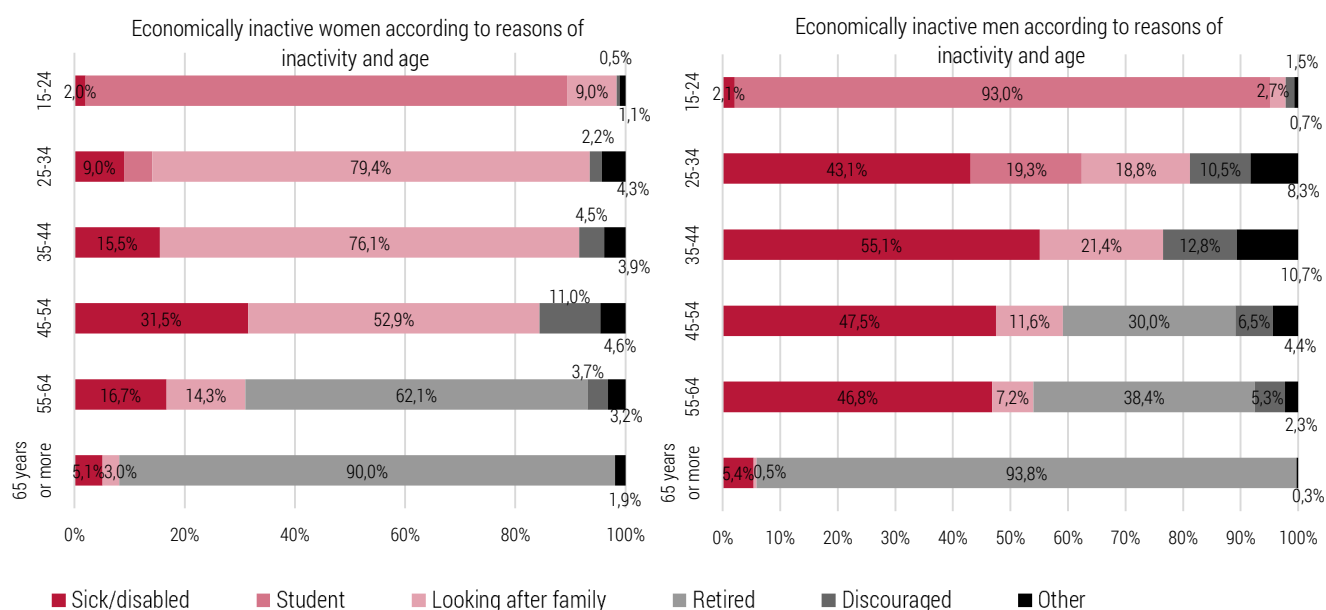
2.3. Reasons for low fertility rate – “costs” of motherhood

Women in the labour market

The economic activity of Polish women, in comparison with women's activity in other EU countries, is relatively low. In 2019, the employment rate of women was 61% in Poland and 64% in EU28 countries. The highest rates were noted in Sweden (75%) and the Netherlands (73%). A high level of women's activity in the labour market is not specific for the “old EU” countries only. There are relatively many women working in the Baltic countries (e.g., 73% in Lithuania) as well as in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia (68% each). In Poland, the rate of employment clearly shows a gender-based diversification. In 2019, 61% of Polish women were economically active, while 75% of the general male population were in employment.

The main reason for the economic inactivity of most women are family obligations (see Fig. 2), which means taking care of children, and for the older age group it was providing assistance for other dependent family members: parents, in-laws and grandchildren. Iga Magda (2020) indicates that in Poland, “more than 75% of economically inactive women are not working or searching for a job because of family and childcare responsibilities. A similarly high rate has been noted in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, which is considerably higher than the EU average of 52%. In Sweden, family obligations are the cause of economic inactivity in 18% of women remaining outside the labour market” (Magda, 2020, p. 7).

Figure 1. Reasons for economic inactivity of women and men



Source: own work based on the Statistics Poland data.

The low level of women’s economic activity may be affected by insufficient availability of institutional care for young children. Although the number of children attending kindergartens has dynamically grown in recent years, the availability of childcare facilities for children below 3 years of age is still limited. In the 2018/2019 school year, only 10% of children at this age benefited from institutional care (nursery, kids club or a childcarer).

The majority of parents need to provide care for their children on their own for approximately two years. The combined maternal and paternal leaves amount to one year, and kindergarten is available only when the child turns 3. During this period, children are taken care of by their mothers on childcare leave, non-working grandmothers or, if the family can afford it, waged nannies and private childcare facilities (Suwada, 2021).

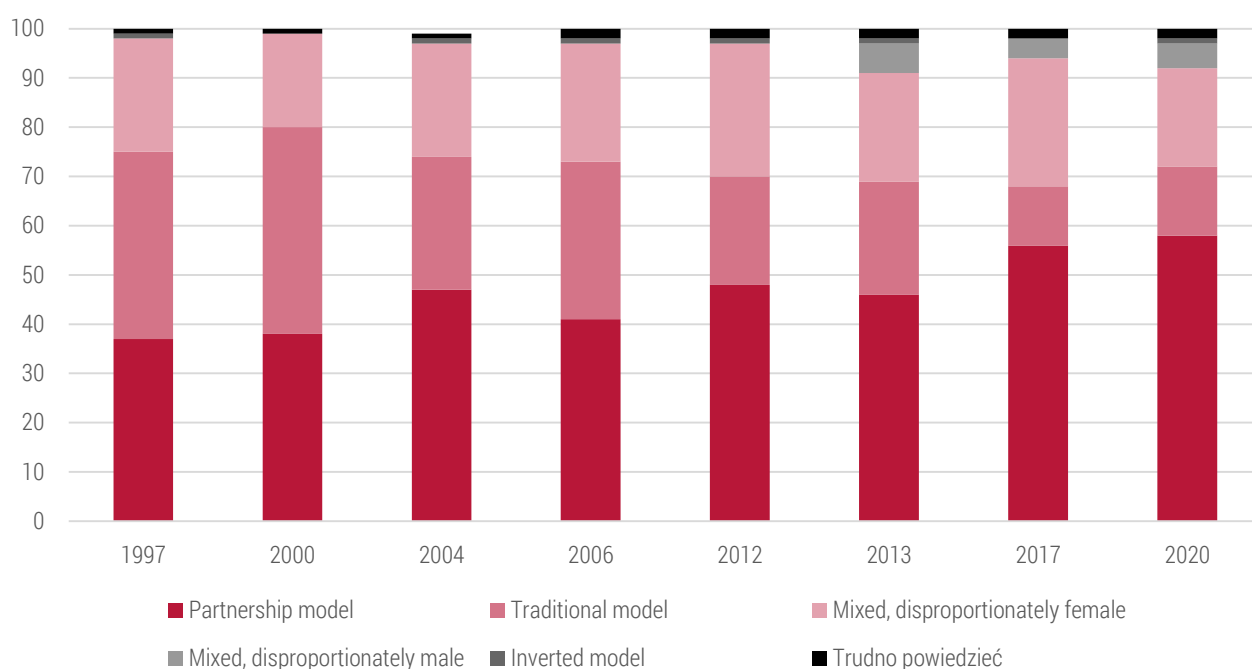
Unequal involvement of mothers and fathers in the provision of care for young children is also reflected by data regarding parental leave. Every year, parental leave is taken only 1% by of entitled fathers. Clearly, the leave taken by women and men has a considerable effect on diversification of their situation in the labour market.

Threefold burden for mothers

Division of household tasks

Social acceptance of the “partnership” division of tasks in the family is growing (see Fig. 3). Currently, nearly 60% of male and female respondents indicate that their preferred model is the one where “the husband (partner) and the wife (partner) spend more or less the same amount of time working and both equally take care of the household and children”. Eight years earlier, the percentage of such couples amounted to 48%, and 22% chose the traditional model, where “only the husband (partner) works, earning enough to satisfy the family’s needs, while the wife (partner) runs the household, raises children, etc.”. Now, this model is chosen by 14% of respondents (CBOS, 2020).

Figure 2. Preferred family model



*Note: *In 1997-2012 research, it was not possible to choose the disproportionately male model.*

Source: CBOS, 2020.

However, declarations indicating partnership as the preferred model for division of tasks are far from the daily practice in families. Only 37% of respondents state that they apply a partnership-like division of tasks in their households (allow me to remind you that nearly 60% perceive the model as the best solution). As for the traditional and the disproportionately female models, there are no significant differences between the desired division of tasks and declarations concerning the reality.

The discrepancy between declarations and family practice becomes even clearer when we consider who does specific household chores. More than 80% of female and male respondents say that in their households, it is mainly women who handle laundry and ironing. More than 60% of the respondents indicate women as the ones who are responsible for preparation of meals and cleaning, and in more than a half of families, they are mainly the ones who take care of deep cleaning and washing the dishes. Chores done together by the partners in most cases are: daily shopping and taking out garbage. Tasks handled definitely more frequently by men than women are: minor repairs (more than 80%) and ordering service providers (60%). However, men are less frequently the ones who are solely responsible for such tasks than in earlier years (see CBOS, 2018).

Division of parenting responsibilities

Research on family practices related with childcare and raising children has confirmed that parenting responsibilities are not equally shared (Sikorska, 2012, 2019; Suwada, 2017, 2020; Godula-Dzwonkowska, 2015).

Mothers may be described as “managers of daily care” and fathers as “fun experts”. While women manage the everyday care, men are usually responsible for playing with children and performing – often under mothers’ supervision – tasks assigned by them. In this sense, fathers act as mothers’ helpers. Mothers almost exclusively handle both the daily provision of care for young children and helping older children with their homework or, at times, “assigning” the tasks to fathers. Mothers are also responsible for “care management” and, for example,

organising medical appointments, monitoring immunisation schedules, attending parent-teacher conferences and organising everyday logistics, such as taking children to kindergarten or after-school activities and picking them up. As for the latter, parents often share the tasks, but it is women who manage everything.

This division of tasks is related with the general belief that mothers are “children experts” because they spend considerably more time with children (especially the young ones) than fathers, for example due to the fact that they take the maternity leave and (much more frequently than men) the parental leave. This leads to the quite frequent assumption that children are much more attached to the mother than to the father.

Fathers are perceived by their partners as not self-reliant and incompetent, and often they also perceive themselves as such. Some mothers – and also fathers – assume that daddy does not do certain things because he cannot, “doesn’t get it” (e.g., the logistics of immunisation, ointments and medications), cannot handle (e.g., dressing the children), tends to forget things (e.g., medical appointments), is not willing to do things (e.g., change nappies), or is afraid of performing certain care-related tasks (e.g., bathing the baby).

Assigning the role of experts to mothers and the role of helpers to fathers results in women's almost complete responsibility for childcare. Parents are often stuck in a vicious circle here: the more mothers are perceived (and perceive themselves) as experts, the more fathers are perceived (and perceive themselves) as incompetent. In an effort to justify the outcome, parents often argue that such a division is “natural” and “very obvious”. Childcare and raising children are still treated as a woman’s domain, intrinsically linked with the “world of women” (mothers, grandmothers, nannies, nursery assistants, teachers, doctors).

Model of a mother’s “sacrifice”

“Sacrifice” is the key to the Polish Mother model, as coined in the 19th century during the Partition period. However, it turns out that the need to “sacrifice” still sets the scene and determines the obligations of many mothers nowadays. In my research, the ability to sacrifice has turned out to be one of the most important attributes and behaviours of a good mother, and also her duty. The respondents mentioned “sacrificing time for children”, “sacrificing oneself for the child” or “sacrificing attention for children”. Respondents claimed that a good mother should “focus on the child and the child’s needs”, “not be focused on herself”, should be able to “postpone her needs”, the child should be “her priority”. The social requirement of “sacrifice” is an emotional burden for mothers and is related with the social expectation that it is women who should be responsible for childcare and raising children.

The Polish Mother model has been enriched with additional social pressure and requirements, turning the model into a “supermother” or the “Polish mother after a facelift” (Sikorska, 2012). A supermother struggles trying to combine her maternal and household responsibilities with her job, where she should be successful and able to find career satisfaction. In addition, she should be neat, attractive (also sexually), fit, have her own passions, etc.

The discourse is dominated by stories of motherhood which emphasise the joy of being a mother and feature motherhood as a “breakthrough moment” in a woman’s life. Problems, tensions and difficult emotions are less pronounced. Photos of celebrity mothers, published in large circulation magazines for women, show neat and relaxed women, with bodies rarely resembling the body of a recently pregnant woman. However, there is also a counter-discourse presenting troubles related with motherhood and, more generally, with parenting – for

example, the “Bachor” magazine³, with a subtitle saying: “Bezradnik dla nieudaczných rodziców” (Anti-guide for unsuccessful parents).

Motherhood involves the constant making of decisions and choices, the consequences of which are at times unpredictable. Mothers are mainly responsible for this part. Fathers are definitely less engaged in this area, often assuming that women know better. Decision-making and the responsibility assigned to mothers involve various fears for women. Mothers’ anxieties are continuous, starting from the most elementary concerns (is my newborn baby going to be healthy, is he/she going to survive the first months of life) through those related to how their daughters or sons will get along with other kids, in kindergarten and at school, and ends with worrying about whether their child will be happy and loved in the future.

3. Public policy for families

In family policy, there are various instruments applied, such as:

- 1) legislative measures (for example, provisions of the Family and Guardianship Code and the Labour Code, regulations concerning granting of leave for parents);
- 2) tax credits and exemptions;
- 3) benefits in the form of services (for example, establishing and supporting childcare facilities, the Large Family Card);
- 4) cash benefits (for example, maternity allowance, newborn allowances, payments under the “Family 500+” or the “Good Start” programmes, etc.).

When designing rules for family policies, the definition of a family applied by authors and legislators is of key importance. The definition will namely determine the groups of beneficiaries. If a narrow definition of a family is adopted, directly referring to the “nuclear family” category, the family policy will be designed for married couples running a household together and raising children. A “broad”, inclusive definition of a family will also include single-parent families, one-generation families (without children), not running a household together or non-heteronormative families.

3.1. Family policy in Poland

The measures adopted in the 21st century under the public policy involve contradictory assumptions. On the one hand, some of the instruments have been designed to help parents combine work and family responsibilities, and thus to provide equal chances for the parents in the labour market (for example, the Early Childcare Act and the “Toddler” or “1 PLN Kindergarten” programmes). On the other hand, there are solutions which have converse effects, such as longer maternity leave and adoption of parental leave without specifying which part of it can be taken by fathers only (the father’s quota). Such a solution aggravates inequalities in women’s and men’s status in the labour market, strengthening the traditional division of household and childcare responsibilities, where mothers are child experts and fathers are only mothers’ helpers.

³The magazine is currently not being published, but a book with the same title was released in 2020.

The state policy for families after the transformation has been incoherent and ad-hoc in its nature. Although several governmental strategies in this area were designed after 1989, “the impact of those instruments on the real direction of family policy should be considered as doubtful. Implementation of the recommendations included in the programmes was limited both due to general instability of the political party system in Poland and frequent change of governments (...) as well as unfavourable climate for implementation of reforms involving higher financial expenditures for money transfers, public services and in-kind benefits” (Sobociński, 2016). Similar conclusions can be found in the Supreme Audit Office’s report dated 2015.

Box 1. Examples of family policy measures implemented in Poland in the 21st century

- 2004 – introduction of a unified family allowance as well as carer’s allowances and benefits,
- 2006 – newborn allowance (“becikowe”) (starting from 2013, depending on income),
- 2007 – introduction of a “pro-family” personal income tax allowance,
- 2009 – extension of maternity leave to 20 weeks upon giving birth to one child and making the length of the leave dependent on the number of children born in a single birth,
- 2010 – introduction of paternity leave (1 week; starting from 2012 – 2 weeks),
- 2011 – the Early Childcare Act and the “Toddler” programme (local government support with the aim to increase availability of childcare facilities below 3 years of age),
- 2013 – introduction of parental leave (32 weeks upon giving birth to one child),
- 2013 – the “1 PLN Kindergarten” programme,
- 2013 – the “IVF Infertility Treatment” programme,
- 2014 – the Large Family Card,
- 2014-2018 – the “Place to Live for the Young” programme,
- 2015 – newborn allowance (“kosiniakowe”) – an allowance of PLN 1,000, paid for 12 months after giving birth to a child, may be applied for by mothers and fathers (fathers under specified conditions) who do not receive the maternity allowance,
- 2015 – the “PLN for PLN basis” (the family allowance with additional benefits will be granted even if the income criterion is exceeded, and the amount of the family allowance will be reduced by the amount of the surplus),
- 2016 – the “Family 500+” programme,
- 2016 – discontinuation of the governmental “IVF Infertility Treatment” programme,
- 2016 – “Programme for Comprehensive Reproductive Health Protection”,
- 2018 – the “Good Start” programme,
- 2019 – amendment of the “Family 500+” programme (allowance paid for every child without the income criterion),
- 2019 – the “Mother 4+” programme.

“Family 500+” programme

The “Family 500+” programme is definitely the most expensive family policy instrument in Poland. The programme consumes more than three times as much as that spent on transfers to families before implementation of the programme. In 2019, PLN 30.5 billion were distributed under the programme (data from Statistics Poland, 2020), whereas in 2015, the transfer expenditures amounted to PLN 8.95 billion (Wojciuk, 2020).

The “Family 500+” programme has not met its initially attributed objective – it has not increased the total fertility rate on a permanent basis. In the years of its operation (except for 2017), fewer children were born than assumed (Table 2). On the other hand, the implementation of the programme had a positive effect on reduction of poverty.

However, only a part of the funds paid under the programme is received by families in a poor financial condition (Magda et al., 2019).

Table 2. Forecasts and actual births in years, 2017-2020 (in thousands)

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Estimated births*	378.2	388.2	380.4	380
Actual births**	402.9	379.5	375	360
Difference	+24.7	- 8.7	-5.4	-20.0

Source: own work based on: *Data from Regulatory Impact Assessments – annex to the act implementing the “Family 500+” programme; **data from Statistics Poland.

4. Summary and public policy conclusions

Is it possible to increase the fertility rate in Poland? In my opinion, it is hardly probable. Why? There are five leading reasons.

The first reason: “whatever happens in the demographic situation of Poland in the future, has already happened now”⁴. Interpreting these words in the context of current and future generations characterised by decreasing numbers of women of reproductive age, and the decreasing (since the 1990s) total fertility rates, one can pessimistically assume that even effective public policies are only able to minimise the population decline.

The second reason: the decision to have children (especially the first child) requires a sense of security related to a stable financial and housing situation. Insecurity experienced by many young people discourages them to have children.

The third reason: being a mother in Poland is bound up with various “costs” incurred by mothers. Experiences with these costs hinder women’s decision to have more children. These include: the worse situation of mothers compared with fathers in the labour market, a threefold burden for women (job, household responsibilities and childcare) as well as the model of a Polish Mother’s “sacrifice” and the related social pressure. Fathers do not incur such costs.

The fourth reason: the family policy in Poland can hardly be considered as coherent and independent on the government members’ world view. The family policy is mixing measures designed to help parents combine work and family (e.g., the Early Childcare Act) with instruments aggravating discrepancies between mothers and fathers, both in terms of their position in the labour market and the division of everyday responsibilities and childcare (e.g., parental leave without reserving a part of the leave for fathers only). The most expensive part of the family policy (the “Family 500+” programme) has not been successful in reaching its fundamental objective, i.e., a permanent growth of the total fertility rate has not been achieved.

The fifth reason: the recently introduced limitation of access to legal abortion may have a negative impact on the decision to have a baby or not. Members of the Committee on Demographic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences found that, among other outcomes, the implemented change “disturbs the family planning process,

⁴ Statement of Prof. Janina Józwiak, a former Vice-President of the Polish Demographic Society.

increasing anxiety of becoming pregnant among women and their partners. It may result in postponing the decision to have a baby, and even to give up one's reproductive plans. There is increased risk that abortions will be performed in inappropriate conditions, endangering the health and lives of women".

4.1. Public policy conclusions

In order to achieve the aim of increasing the total fertility rate or at least stopping its decline, it is worth considering implementing the following measures:

- measures designed to support parents in combining work and parenting, including:
 - more universal access to childcare facilities for children below 3 years of age,
 - increased access to childcare facilities for kindergarten children,
 - adopting measures to support flexible forms of employment;
- policies designed to balance the positions of mothers and fathers in the labour market and in everyday childcare, including:
 - adopting a father's quota – a part of parental leave can be taken by the father only in the first year (or years) after the child is born;
- measures to help increase the availability of housing for young people;
- policies designed to support people experiencing problems with conceiving a baby, including:
 - a generally available programme, reimbursed by the government, with the aim to provide co-financing for in vitro fertilisation procedures (IVF);
- measures to protect the reproductive rights of women in order to increase the sense of security of their reproductive decisions.

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Additional information

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