

Late Motherhood in Poland: the Timing of the First Childbirth in the Context of Educational, Professional and Conjugal Careers

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Introduction

Postponing motherhood is a widespread phenomenon across developed countries and its main reasons such as tendency to pursue professional career or to achieve one's financial and material stability before having a child have been profoundly analyzed (Gustafsson, 2001; Kohler et al., 2002; Sobotka, 2004). But what is still missing is a close look into late motherhood in countries of Eastern Europe - how did the political transformations influence lives of women who entered adulthood in the early 1990's? Over past two decades, fertility rates fell in all Eastern European countries, falling below the replacement level (Philipov, 2002). Mean ages at first birth and at forming first union increased, as well as ratio of births outside of marriage (Philipov, 2002). More and more women remain childless (Frejka, 2008). In this research, benefiting from new sources of individual retrospective data for cohorts that have just finished fertility careers, we aim at understanding the rapid fertility changes that this region underwent over the past twenty years. We focus on one aspect of the change in fertility behaviours, namely motherhood postponement and we use Poland as a case study.

We accomplish this goal by comparing the lives of "*late*" mothers, i.e. women who gave birth *after* turning 35 years old with the lives of "*standard*"¹ mothers - i.e. women who gave birth *before* turning 30 years old. We reconstructed paths of their lives and searched for differences between life trajectories. In the heart of our analysis lies the belief that becoming a mother is a conscious choice but it is also strongly influenced by past experiences and current context of their lives. In the time when sociological research centers more and more on events and actions in their temporal context, there is a necessity to study individual's life as a trajectory of certain states and to study not only what changes took place but specifically when did they happen and in what circumstances. To address the issue of inter-dependencies between the decision about the timing of childbirth and different life spheres, we used assumptions of the life course theory (Elder, 1985).

¹ The term "standard mothers" was chosen out of necessity to differentiate late mothers from their counterparts who gave birth earlier in their lives. It is a strictly working term - it does not reflect any opinions on what a standard age for childbirth should be.

Previous research proved that partnership, employment and educational histories interact strongly with fertility career. Prolonged periods of schooling usually impact the decision about delaying childbirth (Hoem, 1986; Kohler et al., 2002) and higher educated women tend to have children later than women with lower levels of completed education (Kohler et al., 2002; Sobotka, 2004). Labour market activity impacts the timing of first childbirth as mother's withdrawal from the labour market decreases family income and might slow down her future career advancements. Many studies show that motherhood postponement provides considerable earnings returns, especially for higher educated women or those in professional occupations (Van Bavel, 2010; Miller, 2011; Begall & Mills, 2012). Moreover, having a partner is perceived by researchers as an "*intermediate determinant*" (Bongaarts, 1978) of fertility which means that one's relationship status is directly related to fertility outcomes. Experiencing union dissolution or postponing entering a stable union might therefore contribute to delaying motherhood (Corijn & Klijzing 2001; Mills et al., 2011). In this study we account for the complexity of these three life spheres and analyze how they intertwine with each other and how they might influence the decision to become a mother. Our main question is whether late mothers' lives vary from lives of standard mothers.

Methodological approach

In order to incorporate different spheres of one's life into one path, we supported theoretical achievements of life course theory with a statistical method of sequence analysis. The main idea of this method is to represent one's life as a chain of states creating a life trajectory. This technique is not new in social studies (Abbott, 1990) but has not been often used in fertility studies (Baizán et al., 2002; Mynarska et al., 2013). Using sequence analysis enables us to adopt the holistic view on the life-course and to explore variety of paths in women's lives. This way we can escape any assumptions and avoid a "cause and effect" approach - an advantage very useful for my exploratory research. Using sequence analysis we reconstructed life trajectories of Polish women born between 1965 - 1974 who entered their adult lives in the midst of the political transformation of 1989 taking into consideration education enrolment and education attainment, employment careers and union formation processes of standard and late mothers. The observation period we focus on is the central fecundity period - between 15 and 40 years old.

We drew information about Polish mothers from two surveys. First we used the 2011 Generations, conducted on a representative sample of 20,000 individuals. We chose 672 women who gave first birth before the age of 30. Additionally, we consulted the 2011 FAMWELL Survey on Motherhood Postponement from which we retrieved information on 511 late mothers -

women who gave first birth after turning 35 years old. For both samples we chose women with biological children only and our analyses focused on the urban regions.

Case study: Poland

Poland went through a major fertility decline after the year 1989 - the total fertility rate (TFR) fell from 2.1 in 1989 to 1.3 in 2002 reaching lowest-low fertility level (Kohler et al., 2002; Sobotka, 2004). Over past two decades fertility rates were continuously below replacement level (National Statistical Office 2012). We can observe an increase in mean age at first birth (around 4 years over past 40 years, reaching 26.4 in 2011) and a significant growth of the group of "*late mothers*" - the proportion of women who had their first child after turning 35 rose from 2.3% in 2002 to only 5.6% in 2011. Polish women have fewer children and more often than ever before they decide to forgo childbearing plans - the ratio of childless women in Poland rose from 8% among women born between 1945-1955 to 15% among women born in 1970 reaching the highest value among Eastern European countries (Sobotka, 2004).

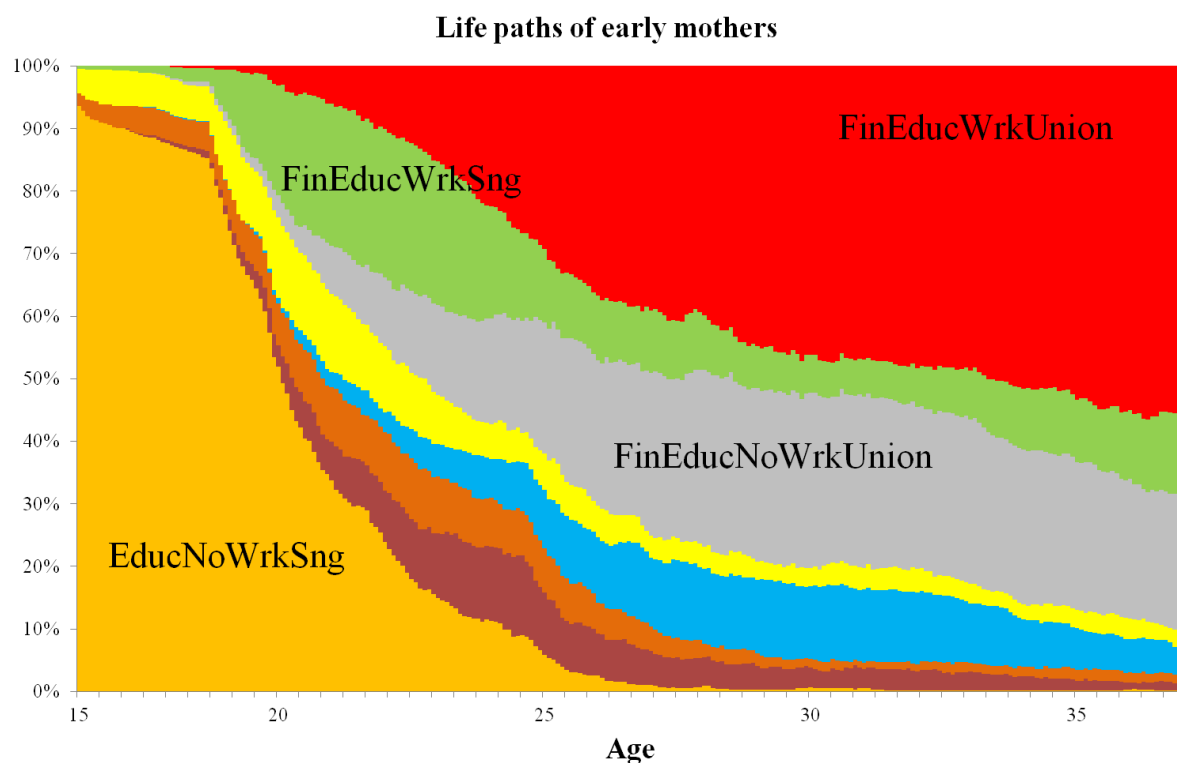
In the same time, tertiary education enrolment among women in Poland is increasing. Among women aged 25 and more, 24% had tertiary education, among men - 19,4% (Bukowski, 2010). Although employment rates among women remain high, researchers observed the decline in economic stability of women on the labour market in Poland (Kotowska et al., 2009). Poland underwent a rapid change in family formation patterns after the market transformation - the mean age at entering marriage rose from 22.4 in 1993 to 25.5 in 2010 for women and from 24.7 to 27.9 for men respectively (Computations based on Eurostat data, 2011). More and more people choose cohabitation as the form of their first stable relationship (Mynarska & Matysiak, 2010). Nevertheless, marriage is still the prevailing form of family in Poland and the majority of children are born in marriages (Mynarska & Styrac, forthcoming). This study aims at studying these rapid changes in the context of motherhood postponement - how education enrolment, professional career and relationship experiences intertwine with the decision about first childbirth?

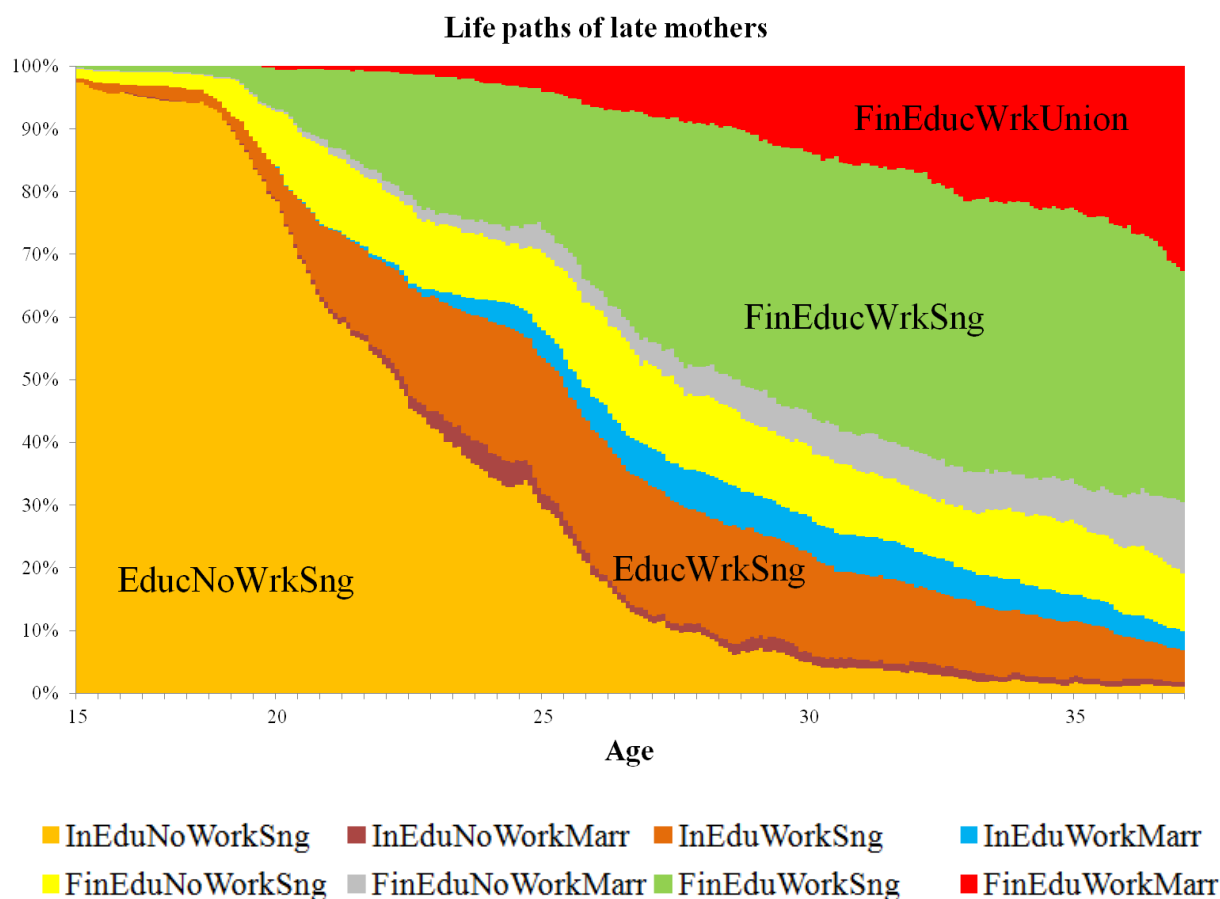
Findings

Our results indicate that there in fact are differences between late mothers and standard mothers in regards to educational career and the process of union formation however there are only slight differences regarding professional career developments. Late mothers spent more time in education – they remained in education on average 3 years longer. Staying in education longer therefore might have contributed to the postponement of first childbirth, which would be in accordance with previous research (Hoem, 1986; Blossfeld & Huinink, 1991). Moreover, Polish late mothers and standard mothers in general spent similar amount of time working.

Although standard mothers started working before late mothers do, we have observed that work was and still is an important part of lives of all mothers in Poland, which is consistent with previous results (Matysiak, 2009). This indicates a strong importance of employment for women in Poland, where female employment ratios were high throughout socialist period. The biggest difference appeared in the comparison of union histories. On one hand there were only few and short instances of entering cohabitation before marriage but late mothers experienced union dissolutions before the first childbirth more often than standard mothers. On the other hand, late mothers spent considerably less time in unions what stemmed from the fact that they entered stable unions markedly later, usually after turning 30 years old. This might support results from previous research (Corijn & Klijzing, 2001; Mills et al., 2011) - delaying forming stable union might have had an impact on the delay of motherhood in case of Polish women. This would imply that postponing motherhood in Poland is frequently directly connected to the postponement of union formation - women delay not only childbearing but also entering stable relationships. It might be due to their own preferences - they might want to focus more on their education and career but they might also encounter difficulties in finding a suitable partner they would like to form a family with. We cannot determine that from the data we have however these results show that understanding the process of delaying motherhood to late ages in Poland should be also analysed in close connection to the process of delaying union formation.

Graphs representing life paths of mothers in Poland





Finally, we can draw another conclusion from this analysis. We compared trajectories of lives of women who gave birth early and later in their lives and we saw that in terms of sequencing, these trajectories look alike. All women follow the same path – they remain in education, then they start working and then they find a partner. Only after having these three careers “settled out”, women pursue motherhood. This behaviour is consistent with theories of sequencing life, chapters of life or transitions to adulthood. The difference is not in the path itself; the biggest differences lie in timing of each phase of their lives and in the time this phase lasts. Therefore we can infer that the main difference between women who give birth earlier in their lives and women who became mothers after the age of 35 is the extension of the length of each transition in their lives - they stay longer in education, they enter employment later and they form unions markedly later than standard mothers.

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