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# Female Breadwinners in State Socialism: The Value of Women's Work for Wages in Post-Stalinist Poland

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## Abstract

This article examines popular opinion about women's wage work in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Poland, using letters to institutions and sociological research from this period. It introduces the notion of female breadwinning as a useful category to describe the understanding of women's wage work under state socialism. Opinions on women's wage work varied, but all of them were based on gender assumptions. Women's and men's work were valued differently. Men's work had an indisputable, independent position. Women's work was evaluated in the context of family. Women could be breadwinners, but not equal to male ones; their wage work was perceived as secondary.

In the name of Silesian women miners, we ask comrade [Władysław] Gomułka on what grounds we are going to be dismissed from underground work. There are many women among us who have worked seven or eight years underground. We also need to support our families. Among us there are many widows, divorced, who have children to support. We also want to feed and dress our children, just like miner fathers do. We didn't start underground work for pleasure or luxuries, but for our lives and those of our children, for the sake of our homeland.

The authors of this letter were a group of underground female miners arguing against their dismissal to Władysław Gomułka, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*; PZPR), in Spring 1957.<sup>1</sup> When October 1956 had marked the symbolic end of Stalinism in Poland, Gomułka, who had been previously imprisoned, came to power as the new party leader with wide societal support.<sup>2</sup> The end of Stalinism opened up a space for public discussion of the social and economic impact of Poland's rapid industrialisation since the end of the Second World War. One consequence of this 'Thaw' (1955–7), however, was a backlash against gender equality. Women were excluded from working underground, a reversal of the preceding six years when they had been encouraged to take up underground mining jobs.<sup>3</sup>

In their letter to the head of the state, the fourteen women workers drew attention to their roles as breadwinners and their equality to male workers. Their arguments touched on the economic, moral, social and ideological dimensions of their professional work. Economically, they simply needed money

<sup>1</sup> Biuletyn nr 23/191, 27 Apr. 1957, 237/XX/22, Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej [Central Committee of Polish United Worker's Party, KC PZPR], Archiwum Akt Nowych [New Documents Archive, AAN], Warsaw, 22. Władysław Gomułka was the first secretary of the Central Committee of Polish United Worker's Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*; PZPR) in the years 1956–70.

<sup>2</sup> About the 'Thaw' in Poland see: Paweł Machcewicz, 'The Polish 1956', in Carole Fink, Frank Hadler, Tomasz Schramm, eds., *1956: European and Global Perspectives* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006), 141–91.

<sup>3</sup> Malgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Post-war Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

‘to feed and dress’ themselves and their families, and furthermore the state needed their work. Morally, they considered their work legitimate since they did not spend their wages on ‘pleasure and luxuries’. Socially, they pointed to their roles in the family, especially in cases of bereavement or divorce. Moreover, they alluded to the emancipatory slogans of state socialism, which promoted women’s professional identities but also their traditional roles: they were professionals, workers, but also simultaneously mothers. The rhetoric of ‘breadwinning’ came up repeatedly in women’s letters at that time, because it could be interpreted in moral, social and economic terms, putting working mothers on a par with working fathers. The miners’ letter was just one of many voices that publicly discussed women’s work for wages in the context of wider debates about industrial work in Poland during the ‘Thaw’.

This article focuses on the popular understandings of women’s work for wages in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Poland. Asking how different social actors argued for or against women’s waged work and how gender difference was constructed, it seeks to understand how breadwinning was conceptualised, and how working women related to the idea of breadwinning. The period discussed in this article – namely the ‘Thaw’ and a few subsequent years until the early 1960s – is particularly interesting for two reasons. First, it was a time of ideological and political chaos when even the principles of the political system could be questioned. This moment of relative openness made many ordinary people comment on everyday life issues, and women’s wage work became a widely-discussed public issue which generated a spontaneous response from below. Second, focusing on this period helps us to better understand the consequences of the upheavals that Polish society lived through during the war and the revolutionary period of Stalinism.

The concept of breadwinning has been widely used in both sociological and historical studies on gender. The breadwinner is defined as the person who financially provides for the family or ‘the sole or main income provider’. Breadwinning is often associated with men and, as such, is frequently discussed in the context of a ‘male breadwinner’ ideology and policy prescription, or as the basis of masculine identity.<sup>4</sup> The reality of the male breadwinning family model – based on men’s paid work and women’s household (unpaid) labour – has been questioned by historians who discovered diverse patterns of women’s participation in wage work and their economic roles. However, the family model based on male breadwinning has been a powerful ideology and ideal that shaped mechanisms of women’s exclusion from paid employment.<sup>5</sup> This ideology has served as the basis of state policies and social practice. In spite of the fact that this ideal originated in the West and has been associated with industrialisation and capitalism, its impact is clearly visible further afield. In Poland, which remained peripheral to industrialisation until the end of the Second World War, the breadwinner family ideal was very present among workers and the middle classes. How, then, was male breadwinner ideology reshaped under state socialism, as women’s participation in paid employment became common?

Under state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, the male breadwinner model was challenged both by official ideology and social policies. Women were declared equal to men in production, and paid employment was seen as a way to women’s emancipation. Employment politics encouraged women to take up waged work, and families to rely on the work of both men and women, because a single wage was too low to sustain the whole family. As Susan Zimmermann argues, the socialist family model was based on the principle of ‘one male earner – one female earner and unpaid housekeeper’.<sup>6</sup> As a result, women living under state socialism had relatively better professional opportunities than in the West, where the traditional figure of the male breadwinner prevailed.<sup>7</sup> Many studies

<sup>4</sup> Tracey Warren, ‘Conceptualizing Breadwinning Work’, *Work, Employment, and Society*, 21, 2 (2007), 317–36.

<sup>5</sup> Angélique Janssens, ‘The Rise and Decline of the Male Breadwinner Family? An Overview of the Debate’, *International Review of Social History*, 42, S5 (1997), 1–23.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Zimmermann, ‘Gender Regime and Gender Struggle in Hungarian State Socialism’, *Aspasia*, 4 (2010), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Francisca de Haan, ‘Women as the “Motor of Modern Life”: Women’s Work in Europe West and East since 1945’, in Joanna Regulska and Bonnie G. Smith, eds., *Women and Gender in Post-War Europe. From Cold War to European Union* (London: Routledge: 2012), 87–103.

have shown that women were empowered by these work opportunities, and that their lives improved considerably as a result.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, inequalities persisted: women had unequal access to paid work, were less skilled and less well paid and had to face negative opinions about them as workers. 'Inclusion in paid employment brought many changes to the lives of women', Zimmerman remarked, 'but little gender equality'.<sup>9</sup>

As Lynne Haney has pointed out, communist states mobilised women because they needed workers, and to achieve this mobilisation they abolished the family wage. At the same time, though, they also imposed gender segregation and lower salaries for women workers.<sup>10</sup> As von Oertzen and Rietzschel have shown for the two Germanies, a male breadwinner ideology existed on both sides of the Iron Curtain, albeit in different forms.<sup>11</sup> In Poland, as Fidelis argues, the Stalinist state modified gender differences rather than abolished them; protective legislation developed in the post-war period also stressed gender differences.<sup>12</sup> Eva Fodor points out that under socialism in Hungary women were included in paid work, but policymakers still conceptualised them as different from men, as 'less reliable and not sufficiently devoted'.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, many policies strengthened women's maternal identities rather than their professional identities; for example, in Poland in 1957 mothers (and not fathers) were granted two days of paid leave to take care of children under fourteen.<sup>14</sup> Existing literature on women's work under state socialism thus points to ambiguities: the traditional gender division of labour was considerably challenged and transformed, but at the same time the idea of gender difference was not effectively undermined. As Joanna Goven argues, even under Stalinism, women 'were never normatively or symbolically defamilialised'.<sup>15</sup> These features can be seen across all state socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, although certain policies were shaped and reshaped differently (for example, maternity leave in Poland was considerably shorter than in Czechoslovakia, Germany and Hungary until the 1970s, and fewer childcare facilities were available).<sup>16</sup>

This article seeks to further explain the position of women in paid employment under state socialism by offering a closer look at how women's work was understood. Unlike most studies, it does not explore the conceptualisation of gender through official discourses and policies. Instead, it focuses on opinions about women's work voiced by different actors: ordinary citizens, but also party and state

<sup>8</sup> Jill Massino, 'Constructing the Socialist Worker: Gender, Identity and Work under State Socialism in Brasov, Romania', *Aspasia*, 3 (2009), 131–60; Eszter Zsófia Toth, '“My Work, My Family, and My Car”: Women's Memories of Work, Consumerism, and Leisure in Socialist Hungary', in Jill Massino and Shana Penn, eds., *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 33–44; Fidelis, *Women, Communism*.

<sup>9</sup> Zimmermann, *Gender Regime*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Lynne Haney, 'From Proud Worker to Good Mother: Women, the State, and Regime Change in Hungary', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 14, 3 (1994), 113–50.

<sup>11</sup> Christine von Oertzen and Almut Rietzschel, 'Comparing the Post-War Germanies: Breadwinner Ideology and Women's Employment in the Divided Nation, 1948–1970', *International Review of Social History*, 42, S5 (1997), 175–96.

<sup>12</sup> Malgorzata Fidelis, 'Equality through Protection: The Politics of Women's Employment in Postwar Poland, 1945–1956', *Slavic Review*, 63, 2 (2004), 301–24. Fidelis, *Women, Communism*.

<sup>13</sup> Eva Fodor, *Working difference. Women's Working Lives in Hungary and Austria, 1945–1995* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 150.

<sup>14</sup> Natalia Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru. Robotnice w Polsce w latach 1945–1960* [Women of Marble. Female blue-collar workers in Poland in the years 1945–1960] (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2015), 106–18. More on benefits for working mothers see Piotr Perkowski, 'Wedded to Welfare? Working Mothers and the Welfare State in Communist Poland', *Slavic Review*, 76, 2 (2017), 455–80.

<sup>15</sup> Joanna Goven, 'Gender and Modernism in a Stalinist State', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 9, 1 (Mar. 2002), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Percentage of children attending childcare facilities in Poland was the lowest among state socialist countries both in the 1960s and 1970s, and in 1973 in reached only about 25 per cent (whereas in neighboring Czechoslovakia it was 35 per cent and in East Germany 60 per cent). Perkowski, 'Wedded to Welfare?'. Paid maternity leave in Poland lasted twelve weeks and was extended to sixteen in 1972 (one-year unpaid leave introduced in 1968), while in Czechoslovakia it was eighteen, extended to twenty-two weeks in 1964 and to twenty-six in 1968.

officials.<sup>17</sup> This article follows an everyday life history approach (*Alltagsgeschichte*), which focuses on the subjective experiences of individual actors, values and mentalities, and offers fruitful perspectives on gender history.<sup>18</sup> The investigation draws on collections of letters to state institutions, mainly the Polish United Workers' Party and Polish Radio, in which citizens expressed their opinions on the effect of the state's policies on their personal situation. It also uses party and parliamentary commission documents in which decision makers discussed gender roles. Furthermore, it refers to opinions recorded by sociologists in their field work throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s. Research on workplace hierarchies and everyday factory life flourished thanks to the revival of sociology in the late 1950s.<sup>19</sup> In national poll surveys people were asked about their opinions on employment and social policy, and about women's work. This empirical material is treated as an expression of popular opinion on women's work. It is important to stress that most of these opinions (apart from those gathered by sociologists) were never published and can be treated as raw data on individual opinions. The letters I have used were written to state and party authorities. Scholars who have studied such expressions of opinion under state socialism, namely letters of complaint, analyse them within the framework of support/dissent and point to their importance for the state as a source of information on public mood and opinion.<sup>20</sup> As Sheila Fitzpatrick underlines, letters to authority written during Stalinist period in the Soviet Union did not necessarily reflect what people really thought, as they were acts of performance in which authors 'cast themselves in particular roles and drew on established social stereotypes and rhetorical conventions in acting them out'.<sup>21</sup> In these Polish sources from the post-Stalinist period there are certainly examples of authors using arguments present in public discourse. Nevertheless, they should be seen as more than just ritual expressions, particularly in the context of the general atmosphere of the 'Thaw' which made expression of popular opinion more diverse and free.<sup>22</sup> With these constraints in mind, I combine this kind of source with others (the already mentioned sociological studies) which can provide a wider and more nuanced picture of public opinion.

I argue that women's and men's wage work was valued differently, and that this gendered perception of work was essential for shaping opinions on women workers. This article introduces the figure of the female breadwinner, the woman who is admitted into the workplace in the role of breadwinner, but who nevertheless remains 'female'. Her position remains dependent on and relative to male breadwinning. This construct was broad and could be employed either to encourage women to work, or to discourage them, not least when their work was a threat to male breadwinning. It was also used by women to legitimise their own paid work. The concept of female breadwinner helps to conceptualise

<sup>17</sup> As Christine von Oertzen and Almut Rietzschel have observed, opinions expressed by state officials in East Germany revealed persistent traditional understanding of gender, in spite of official gender equality principle. It was reflected in the language, as women's family roles were called 'duties'. These observations are true also for Polish state and party officials, especially after 1955. That is why I decided to include opinions expressed by state officials on closed meetings as part of popular opinion, different from the official public discourse expressed in laws and speeches. Oertzen and Rietzschel, 'Comparing the Post-War Germanies', 186.

<sup>18</sup> Maria Bucur, Rayna Gavrilova, Wendy Goldman, Maureen Healy, Kate Lebow and Mark Pittaway, 'Six Historians in Search of *Alltagsgeschichte*', *Aspasia* 3, 1 (2009), 189–212.

<sup>19</sup> Małgorzata Mazurek, 'Between Sociology and Ideology: Perception of Work and Sociologist Advisors in Communist Poland, 1956–1970', *Revue d'histoire en sciences humaines* (Dossier: Quelle sociologie derrière le 'rideau de fer?'), 16, 1 (2007), 11–31.

<sup>20</sup> Martin K. Dimitrov, 'Tracking Public Opinion Under Authoritarianism: The Case of the Soviet Union During the Brezhnev Era', *Russian History*, 41 (2014), 329–56.

<sup>21</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear Off the Mask! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 172.

<sup>22</sup> One of the convincing examples of the use of letters during the 'Thaw' is the case of letters about abortion. Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, *Rodzina, tabu i komunizm w Polsce* [The family, taboo, and Communism in Poland] (Kraków: Libron, 2016). Recent study on methodological approaches to letters to the authorities in state socialist Poland: Dariusz Jarosz, Ewelina Szpak, Krzysztof Gajewski, Anna Adamus, Grzegorz Miernik, Kovacs Csaba, eds., *Listy do władzy 1945–1989* (Warszawa: IH PAN, 2019).

women's employment under state socialism, as it reflects the reality of high women's employment rates and the persistent discourse of gender difference.

In the following section, I first give an overview of changes in policies and women's employment in post-war Poland, and I then discuss the sources in more detail. The second section presents arguments that were used while discussing women's wage work and explains how the idea of female breadwinner was shaped. The third section addresses the emergence of a new discourse that conceptualised women's work beyond breadwinning.

### Women's Wage Work in Communist Poland

Poland emerged from the Second World War considerably damaged and impoverished. It had suffered great population losses and border changes moved the country to more industrialised territories, although it still preserved its mostly rural economic structure. As a consequence of war and occupation, women's engagement in both formal and informal employment grew considerably. In the immediate post-war period women comprised around 30 per cent of workers outside agriculture, working increasingly in industry and services rather than as domestic servants (the largest female professional group in the interwar period).<sup>23</sup> Women's participation in paid employment was thus perceived as a consequence of the war and the demographic situation.

The communist party that took power in 1945 – and strengthened its power after the falsified elections of 1947 – declared equality between men and women as one of its main goals. Women's emancipation was to be achieved through their inclusion in productive labour and advancement in the workplace. Not only were they called to waged work, but the state also aimed to disrupt gender divisions and hierarchies in the world of labour.<sup>24</sup> Propaganda efforts and policies which had begun in the late 1940s intensified after 1949, when the Six Year Plan (a plan of accelerated industrialisation) was introduced. The party-state projected that women's employment would grow by 1.2 million (more than half the number of new workers that were needed), doubling the number of employed women. To achieve this goal, the party-state started to mobilise women through propaganda and employment campaigns, as well as by introducing special policies aiming at raising employment and training new female workers.<sup>25</sup> At the end of the Six Year Plan, women comprised 33.5 per cent of all workers outside agriculture, and the total number of female workers almost reached the previous estimates (nearly 2 million). New workers had been recruited mainly from among urban housewives and peasants. Although policies during Stalinism in Poland (1948–56) did not overcome inequalities based on gender, they brought a significant change, both quantitative and qualitative, because many women started to work in skilled and better paid jobs.

From 1955, Poland was entering the period of the so-called 'Thaw', which was characterised by decreasing ideological pressure and political repression, and gradual opening to critical opinions. The 'Thaw' between 1955 and 1957 was characterised by a backlash on gender equality: women's employment was criticised and discussed within the framework of the crisis of family life.<sup>26</sup> Press discussions focused on negative effects and social pathologies, with many voices advocating women's 'return home' and the 'return of the male breadwinner'.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, women were targeted by policies of reduction of overemployment and experienced dismissals and unemployment.<sup>28</sup> Protective legislation was tightened, causing the dismissal of many skilled female workers (for

<sup>23</sup> For the immediate post-war period there are different statistics available, and it is not possible to give exact figures of women's employment. However, the growth of women's participation in wage work was recognised and widely discussed after the war. Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 45–9.

<sup>24</sup> Fidelis, *Women, Communism*.

<sup>25</sup> Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 106–18.

<sup>26</sup> Fidelis, *Women, Communism*, ch. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Fidelis, *Women, Communism*.

<sup>28</sup> Natalia Jarska, 'Gender and Labour in Post-War Communist Poland. Female Unemployment 1945–70', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 110 (2014), 49–85.

example, in mining). New policies discussed in the period 1955–7 aimed at reducing women's participation in employment, especially in case of mothers. The state considered longer maternity leaves and raising family allowances for both wives and children of workers. However, due to economic shortages, this generous welfare policy was impossible to introduce, and family allowances were raised only marginally.<sup>29</sup>

Although communist policies of increased female employment generated discussions and were revised during the 'Thaw', the trend of women's inclusion in paid employment continued. Although women's employment stopped growing between 1955 and 1958, in 1960 there were already over 2.2 million women employed, and in 1965 nearly 3 million. In the early 1960s the state again introduced measures to increase women's employment.<sup>30</sup> These female entrants into the workforce included many married women and mothers. In 1950 married women comprised only 18 per cent of working women (outside agriculture), whereas ten years later the figure was 55 per cent.<sup>31</sup> As many as 25 per cent of working women declared (in a representative poll) that they were the only breadwinners.<sup>32</sup> At the same time employment policies tended to place women in feminised and low paid professions (such as trade), perpetuating the model in which women worked but their salaries were secondary for the family budget. Women earned about 30 per cent less than men.<sup>33</sup> They also carried out more unpaid work than men, as housework remained women's domain. According to studies on time budgets in the early 1960s, working women spent sixty to ninety minutes daily on travelling to work and back home; housework took them four to six hours a day.<sup>34</sup> The number of childcare facilities increased considerably in the years 1945–56, but in the 1960s places in kindergartens covered only 50 per cent of estimated needs.<sup>35</sup>

It is important to stress that opinions on women's work appeared to vary according to social class and gender. (Ethnicity, although important in Stalinist project of 'productivisation' of women and ethnic minorities such as Roma,<sup>36</sup> does not appear as significant in public debates on women's employment.) Women with higher education seemed to have a far more positive attitude towards work.<sup>37</sup> Skilled and educated workers more often returned to work after having the first child. This tendency was similar in many Western countries, for example in France.<sup>38</sup> However, female blue-collar workers also expressed attachment to work based on non-economic grounds. Women workers who originated from the countryside had different ideas about wage work than women who were born in blue-collar families, not least because they were less familiar with the model of male breadwinner which dominated workers' culture.<sup>39</sup> In general, working-class cultural norms favoured keeping women in the home, but – pre-war as well as post-war – this was possible only for a small percentage of skilled workers' families (who considered themselves a separate group called 'craftsmen').<sup>40</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 233.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>32</sup> Zbigniew Drozdek and Anna Preiss-Zajdowa, *Stosunek kobiet do pracy zawodowej* (Warszawa, 1962), TNS OBOP Archive, Warsaw, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 244.

<sup>34</sup> Hanna Strzezińska, 'Praca a dom w świetle badań budżetu czasu' [Work and home in the light of a study on time budget], in Antonina Kłoskowska, Jerzy Piotrowski, Krystyna Wrochno-Stanke, eds., *Kobieta, praca, dom. Problemy pracy zawodowej kobiet i rodziny współczesnej. Materiały z konferencji naukowej zorganizowanej przez Zarząd Główny Ligi Kobiet w dniach 25–27 marca 1965 r.* [Woman, work, home. Problems of women's professional work and contemporary family. Materials from a conference organised by the League of Women], (Warszawa, 1967), 380–2.

<sup>35</sup> Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 251.

<sup>36</sup> Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia. Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society 1949–56* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> Drozdek and Zajdowa, *Stosunek kobiet*.

<sup>38</sup> Claire Duchon, *Women's Rights and Women's Lives in France, 1944–1968* (London: Psychology Press, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> Natalia Jarska, 'Rural Women, Gender Ideologies, and Industrialization in State Socialism: The Case of a Polish Factory in the 1950s', *Aspasia*, 9 (2015), 65–86.

<sup>40</sup> Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 56–7.

Men were usually more attached to the traditional model of family and presented more hostile attitudes towards women's employment. In a representative survey in 1960, 46 per cent of men declared that they were unhappy about the fact that their wives worked for wages.<sup>41</sup> Blue-collar workers, asked about their attitude towards women's employment, declared themselves against, but at the same time many of them valued positively their wives' work. In a Warsaw plant, 53 per cent of husbands of working wives expressed positive evaluations, while 26 per cent were negative; in 15 per cent of cases the answer was 'she must'.<sup>42</sup> These divergent opinions reveal a conflict between values: the traditional model of family (and the figure of male breadwinner), and the economic advantages that the work of women provided for the family budget.

### (De)legitimising Women's Work

The discussion of women's work for wages focused on two areas: the economic reasons for women joining the workforce and the role of women in the family. These two dimensions, nevertheless, were strongly interrelated, as economic values were often – in the case of women's work – dependent on their civil status and family situation. One of the most frequently expressed arguments in public discussion about women's work for wages was that they were forced to work, meaning that they worked only for economic reasons and that it was a necessity, not an act of emancipation (as official propaganda tried to claim). In a statement published in the women's magazine *Kobieta i Życie* in 1956, a female member of parliament argued that 'for many years, women's professional work was treated as a key element of emancipation. We must admit now this sad truth – we've missed the fact that most women start working because they are economically forced to'.<sup>43</sup> Opposing emancipation on economic grounds was a typical characteristic of mid-1950s discourse, and it allowed a critique of employment policies. Economic motives were considered 'sad' because taking up work – presented by official Stalinist propaganda as a free choice – turned out to be compulsory. Although the economic function of work might seem self-evident, in the case of women it was perceived as something unwelcome. This discourse was present in Poland since well before the Second World War. In the interwar period, feminist discussions about women's work did not even consider servants and female blue-collar workers, since their work was not understood as a realisation of a right.<sup>44</sup>

Just like the female miners quoted earlier, many women also emphasised their need to work for economic reasons alone. 'The head of our department has announced that all women are going to be dismissed, and especially those who are married, regardless of the number of children. I've got six children. My husband's earnings are not enough to afford modest clothing and food. Many women from the country work here, and they have land there. Their husbands work too. It's like they are living in paradise',<sup>45</sup> explained one woman in a letter to the PZPR in 1957. This woman tried to convince readers that her work was legitimate, as it was necessary to feed and clothe her family. She contrasted her situation with that of better off peasant women whose additional resources in the form of land and food meant that – in her eyes – their work could no longer be seen as bread-winning.

The author of the letter referred to the widespread phenomenon of dismissing women that took place after 1955, a phenomenon which arose in response to growing unemployment. After several years of workforce shortages unemployment reappeared, and although levels were relatively low this

<sup>41</sup> Drozdek and Zajdowa, *Stosunek kobiet*.

<sup>42</sup> Jerzy Piotrowski, ed., *Struktura robotniczej załogi w jednej z fabryk warszawskich* [The structure of workers' community in a Warsaw factory] (Warsaw: Centralny Instytut Ochrony Pracy, 1961), 147.

<sup>43</sup> 'Rozpoczynamy dyskusję o zatrudnieniu (wypowiedź Marii Jaszczuk)' [We begin a discussion on employment (Maria Jaszczuk's voice)], *Kobieta i Życie* [Women and Life] 34 (1956), 2.

<sup>44</sup> Magdalena Gawin, 'Głosy krytyczne w sprawie pracy zawodowej kobiet 1918–1939 (w świetle publicystyki)' [Critical voices on women's professional work in the years 1918–1939], in Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarz, eds., *Kobieta i praca. Wiek XIX i XX* [Woman and work: 19th and 20th Centuries] (Warsaw: DiG, 2000), 314–5.

<sup>45</sup> Biuletyn nr 8/176, 1957, 237/XXV-21, KC PZPR, AAN, 89–90.

created fear and distrust. These circumstances led to critical discussions about which groups should be deprived of work in order to guarantee employment for those who ‘needed’ it. In this context, ‘women’ (especially married women and mothers) and ‘peasants’ were the most frequently mentioned categories. A poll carried out in 1958 showed that public opinion shared these attitudes: 74 per cent of respondents agreed that the national economy suffered from ‘surpluses of employment’; 60 per cent pointed to peasants working in industry as the first who should be dismissed; nearly 50 per cent said that ‘wives of husbands that earn well’ should not work. However, the survey also indicated that female breadwinners could be acceptable in popular opinion, since a difficult material situation for the family legitimised their employment.<sup>46</sup> Facing scarcity of work, some women and men pointed to working women who had relatively well-paid husbands and therefore their work was not needed, and this strategy is not surprising in the light of this poll.

In the discourse on women’s work, the motive of legitimate versus illegitimate needs was ever present. According to commentators, some women worked because of boredom, a search for entertainment, and especially illegitimate material needs. The domestic economy was clearly understood in moral terms: ‘modest’ living was considered decent, whereas ‘luxuries’ (‘living in paradise’) were condemned. ‘During the recent reductions [in our office] several breadwinners have been dismissed, while there are women who work only for clothes and because they are bored’, a white-collar male worker wrote to the national radio broadcast in 1958.<sup>47</sup> Here, (male) breadwinning was placed in direct opposition to (female) consumption. Women who worked without a dire economic imperative to do so raised suspicions. When a sociologist asked the view of a worker in a metal factory in Warsaw, he responded by saying: ‘those women who work but who are not forced to by a difficult material situation, work only because they are lazy and unwilling to sit at home’.<sup>48</sup> This statement also implied that ‘sitting at home’ meant hard domestic work which women were trying to avoid. Could one conclude that unpaid housework was strongly valued? Going into details on the question of unpaid work is beyond the scope of this article, yet often the argument about hard domestic work served to both excuse or accuse women of poor productivity in the workplace.

Moreover, women were given the blame for unemployment, low wages and threatening the male breadwinner model: ‘women took the work of men, who now cannot earn so much as previously’.<sup>49</sup> One worker reported to the Central Committee of PZPR:

In our office where eighteen white-collar workers are employed there are five ladies, whose husbands earn more than 2000 a month and whose children go to kindergarten. At the same time people who have families [to maintain] are dismissed and this is a tragedy for them. There is something wrong. I talk to people and we all agree that if married women whose husbands’ earnings would be sufficient to afford normal living are dismissed, the unemployment of white-collar workers will diminish.<sup>50</sup>

Working women were supposed to resign while unemployment reappeared, even if their work was beneficial and not necessarily an ‘evil’. A high functionary of the Ministry of Labour and Social Care claimed:

One of our greatest achievements is enabling women to be employed. This is real progress, but the situation we must face now [unemployment] – because of our mistakes – makes us rethink this issue. One of these painful operations is to revise the number of working women. I would

<sup>46</sup> Wesołowski, ed., *Ankieta o stosunku do redukcji (opracowanie częściowe)* [Poll on the attitudes towards the reductions of employment] (Warszawa, 1958), TNS OBOP Archive.

<sup>47</sup> Biuletyn nr 34, May 1958, 1050/24, Ośrodek Dokumentacji i Zbiorów Programowych TVP [Archive of the Centre of Documentation and Program Collection of the Polish Television, ODiZP TVP], Warsaw, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Piotrowski, *Struktura*, 138–9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>50</sup> Biuletyn nr 8/176, 1957, 237/XXV-21, KC PZPR, AAN, 82.



think of such incentives which would allow the worker to maintain the family, so that his wife doesn't have to work.<sup>51</sup>

The fact that the male breadwinner remained the dominant figure meant that married women needed to legitimate their need to work on the grounds that they, too, were breadwinners. Women wrote that their husbands' earnings were not enough to afford 'normal' living, that they had to maintain a disabled husband or parents, or that they had many children. Working women rarely referred to the value of work in non-economic terms. Consequently, they placed themselves in the position of the pre-war female proletariat. The difference – according to many commentators – was that now, in state socialism, many more women were 'forced' to take up jobs, so many more were included in this unhappy, suffering group. 'In our country women are martyrs, have to work for wages and work at home like a horse. What does equality mean when you must struggle to buy bread and you must leave your children at the nursery? I would prefer that also here [in Poland] a woman could work at home, that such a tradition would prevail.'<sup>52</sup> The author of this letter most likely referred to Western countries, in which, she believed, married women did not work for wages.

The individual household economy was not the only economic dimension in play. The party-state functionaries were also concerned about the national economy, which had been in decline since the end of Stalinism. 'Ordinary people' also had their views on how to improve it, mostly presenting these in the framework proposed by the official media. The overarching question was: is women's work needed by the state, or is it instead a burden? What happens to the national economy if women 'return home?' Public opinion was not unanimous in this respect.

First of all, many felt that the state spent too much on kindergartens and nurseries, and that these were harmful for children.<sup>53</sup> The aforementioned functionary of the Ministry of Labour and Social Justice continued his argument, pointing to the opinion that women were 'unproductive' in the workplace: 'in the national economy there is a huge number of working women who in fact don't work at all or work little, because if we look at the number of days per year that women are burdened with children work, it will show how many days' sick leave they take on account of their children'.<sup>54</sup> A similar argument about women's inferior productivity was also raised in East Germany a couple of years later.<sup>55</sup>

Women's work for wages was seen as inseparable from their private lives. Workers from a Warsaw factory believed that women were poor workers 'because at work they think about home'.<sup>56</sup> Women – especially blue-collar workers – were often said to work less than men. Sociologists who researched social relations on the shop floor in a metal factory in the capital city reported that most of the managers and male workers were convinced that women were less productive than men for several reasons: they lacked qualifications, were absent more frequently or were 'less resourceful'. They did, however, differentiate between women according to their family situation, saying that widows and divorced women worked better.<sup>57</sup> Employing fewer women, it was felt, would thus make a factory more

<sup>51</sup> Notatka stenograficzna z posiedzenia kolegium MPIOS [A shorthand note from the meeting in the Ministry of Labour and Social Care], 21 June 1956, 42, Ministerstwo Pracy i Opieki Społecznej [Ministry of Labour and Social Care], AAN, 73–4.

<sup>52</sup> List podpisany 'pokrzywdzona jedna z wielu' do Komisji Kobiet [A letter signed 'one of many' to Women's Commission], 4 VII 1959, 100, Komisja Kobiet Centralnej Rady Związków Zawodowych [Women's Commission of the Central Council of Trade Unions], Archiwum Ruchu Zawodowego [Archive of Trade Unions Movement], Warsaw.

<sup>53</sup> 'The state spends millions on nurseries, kindergartens, while the child suffers from the lack of love and warmth'.

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, in subsequent years Polish scholars (economists, sociologists) investigated the 'real' differences in work effectiveness between men and women. The results and conclusions drawn from these investigations were ambiguous. Detailed analysis showed that the widespread assumptions of women's work as less valuable were exaggerated, although some differences – for example in absences at work – were noticed. Women took more sick leaves, which is understandable, because leaves for care of sick children were granted exclusively to mothers. Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 255–7.

<sup>55</sup> Oertzen and Rietzschel, 'Comparing the Post-War Germanies', 185.

<sup>56</sup> Halina Najduchowska, *Pozycja społeczna starych robotników przemysłu metalowego (fragmenty opracowanych badań)* [Social position of old blue-collar workers of the metal industry] (Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1965), 65.

<sup>57</sup> Piotrowski, *Struktura*, 134.

productive. According to this line of argument, while the state had to maintain facilities that helped women to take up jobs, their work was not worth it.

Still, there were voices that argued the opposite: women should work to contribute to national welfare 'for the sake of our homeland', as the Silesian miners put it.<sup>58</sup> 'In my opinion it is wrong to raise [family] allowances, because our country is still under reconstruction. We, mothers, cannot be a burden on the state. This raise could be spent on new schools, hospitals and housing', argued one unemployed woman in a letter to the Polish Radio in 1957.<sup>59</sup> Like her, many women were trying to convince public opinion that their work had strong economic value. Indeed, that had been the message they had received during the years of rapid industrialisation, when the first secretary of the Central Committee of PZPR, Bolesław Bierut, claimed that 'building socialism' would not succeed without the work of women. Sometimes women who feared dismissal argued that they worked hard and were not a 'burden for the state'.<sup>60</sup>

If opinions about the economic value of women's employment were diverse, economic reasons continued to be the strongest legitimisation of women's work for wages. The situation in which the male breadwinner was absent or could not fulfil the duty of financially maintaining his family – a situation which was criticised but was quite common – offered women the needed justification for working. Certainly, this legitimisation depended on civil status and family situation. Female breadwinning was strongly related to discourses about women's roles in family and household.

Workers interviewed by sociologists revealed significant attachment to the model of male breadwinner with his wife responsible for household activities. 'The best profession for a woman is marriage' said one blue-collar worker.<sup>61</sup> Among wives of high-qualified workers, not needing to work for wages was considered a source of social prestige. These women 'recounted with pride that they had never seen a factory interior, that their husbands had always been able to earn enough money and had never made them work for wages'.<sup>62</sup>

Certainly, such a model was a reality only among a small percentage of workers, even white-collar ones. Nevertheless, many working women expressed their willingness to 'return home' quite often. 'Let our husbands earn more, and we will willingly go back to our children and families' demanded workers at a steelworks factory meeting in 1958.<sup>63</sup> A poll carried out in 1960, entitled 'Attitudes of Women Towards Professional Work', revealed that 68 per cent of those who worked would give up working 'if the husband earned more'.<sup>64</sup> Women expressed such opinions even if in general they had rather positive experiences of working. Salaries they considered sufficient (a family wage) were, nevertheless, unreachable; the model of the male breadwinner was an unattainable goal.

Many social commentators advocated policies that would prevent mothers from wage-working. Workers demanded higher family allowances for families with more than two children.<sup>65</sup> 'For women burdened with children to have no reason to work' was a target for social policy in the mid-1950s.<sup>66</sup> As party-state leaders commented, if it turned out that the 'return home' was impossible in the case of married women, mothers at least should give up working for wages.

There were several motives for such opinions, not only an idealistic longing for a realisation of a model deemed traditional and 'natural'. There were strong practical and moral implications. As the editors of the women's magazine *Kobieta i Życie* summarised the results of an inquiry among readers:

<sup>58</sup> Biuletyn nr 23/191, 27 Apr. 1957, 237/XX/22, KC PZPR, AAN, 22.

<sup>59</sup> Biuletyn nr 11, 12 Feb. 1957, 1050/22, ODiZP TVP.

<sup>60</sup> Biuletyn nr 3 [an abstract from a letter], 5 Jan. 1957, 1050/22, ODiZP TVP.

<sup>61</sup> Najduchowska, *Pozycja społeczna*, 66.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>63</sup> Informacja [Information], 11 Apr. 1958, 237/VII-3839, KC PZPR, AAN, 19.

<sup>64</sup> Drozdek and Zajdowa, *Stosunek kobiet*.

<sup>65</sup> Several workers' resolutions, eg. Rezolucja uchwalona na poszerzonym plenum Zarządu Okręgu [Resolution adopted on the plenum of the district board of the chemical industry trade union], 15 Nov. 1956, I/708, Central Council of Trade Unions, AAN, 54.

<sup>66</sup> Notatka stenograficzna, 68–9.

'Some women write that, if their material situation allows it, they would give up working and take care of their children and the household'. They gave several reasons for this: low wages, overburdening with work (additional hours), conflicts in the workplace, the necessity of fulfilling household duties, difficulties in improving their professional skills because of their family situation.<sup>67</sup> The 'double burden' of wage work and household duties stood at the centre of this discourse. The role of women in the household was questioned very rarely, and household activities were generally described as tough and time-consuming. Women described their everyday life as endless activity, leaving them just a few hours to sleep. 'One goes back home, on the way spends some time in a queue to buy something for dinner, at home cooks, washes at night', said a blue-collar worker describing the burden of household activities.<sup>68</sup> 'We have enough labour at home', said another female worker, who had worked for forty-five years.<sup>69</sup>

Was household activity considered work? Interestingly, although in general household duties were understood as essentially different from wage work (as they were essentially different in the light of official Marxist doctrine), there were some attempts at describing household activities in terms of work. The 'second contract' started to be used as a synonym for working women's household duties. Women should 'work at home', suggested a worker.<sup>70</sup> In the mid-1950s a journalist came up with an idea of remunerating women's work at home, which he recognised as productive. Everyone would be happier, he argued: 'women would raise children better, men would be better workers, complaints about working women would end, and there would be more job positions. The productive forces of society would be better distributed'.<sup>71</sup> This idea – rather isolated at this period – can be understood as an attempt to exclude women from professional work (for wages), without reducing them to the household sphere which until then had been neglected and deemed responsible for women's 'backwardness'.

In subsequent years, women often expected the state to help them in managing the 'double burden' of wage working and housekeeping, and used the shortcomings (or ineffectiveness) of such policies as an argument against the widespread employment of (married) women. 'She [the woman] should not lose her work, but the state should help her fulfil her duties as a mother and housewife. In Sweden many women work not because they are economically forced to, but because they are interested in professional work. But household management is well organised there', argued a member of parliament, Maria Jaszczuk.<sup>72</sup> Many social commentators expressed the opinion that mothers, especially of little children, needed to give up working for the sake of their children. 'Married women should take care of household and children, otherwise the children become "devils", because the mother cannot raise them properly'.<sup>73</sup> More than a few authors of letters agreed with the argument presented in the press that children of working mothers turn into 'hooligans', and public nurseries provide a very low standard of care (citing the fact that children often fell sick). The discourse about children suffering from their mothers' professional engagement was related to discussions on the low moral standards of young people.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, women themselves often expressed the need to dedicate themselves entirely to raising children, which for many was impossible due to their financial situation. Even in Łódź – a city with long traditions of women's professional engagement (in the textile

<sup>67</sup> *Kobieta i Życie* 32 (1956).

<sup>68</sup> Janina Waluk, 'Postawy kobiet wobec własnej pracy zawodowej' [Attitudes of women towards their professional work], *Studia Socjologiczne* [Sociological studies], 3 (1963), 140–1.

<sup>69</sup> Najduchowska, *Pozycja społeczna*, 131.

<sup>70</sup> Renata Siemińska, *Nowe życie w nowym mieście* [New life in a new city] (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1969), 47–57.

<sup>71</sup> Lech Froelich, 'Fantastyczny przyczynek do kwestii równouprawnienia kobiet czyli o problemie dodatków rodzinnych słów kilka' [Fantastical contribution to women's equality question, or on the problem of family allowances] *Życie Gospodarcze* [Economic life] (1957).

<sup>72</sup> Protokół z 27. posiedzenia Komisji Pracy i Zdrowia [Protocol of the 27th session of the Commission of Labour and Health], 18 Oct. 1956, 23, Kancelaria Sejmu [Parliament Office], AAN, 407.

<sup>73</sup> Biuletyn nr 12, 18 Feb. 1954, 1050/9, ODiZP TVP, 4.

<sup>74</sup> *Rozmowy o sprawach dziecka. Głos ma Jadwiga Blond, naczelnik Wydziału dla Nieletnich w KG MO* [Conversations on children's issues. Interview with Jadwiga Blond, head of Warsaw's Milicia department is speaking], *Kobieta i Życie*, 1 (1957).

industry), and with the highest percentage of women workers – 97 per cent of those interviewed (men and women) declared that women should give up working for some time after maternity leave, which lasted twelve weeks.<sup>75</sup>

More interestingly, those who supported widespread women's employment pointed to the same argument but reversed. Like the female miners quoted at the beginning of this article, they argued that mothers worked precisely for the wellbeing of their children. A sociologist who talked to female workers at a Warsaw factory concluded that most women took up jobs because of economic reasons, but these were 'related to the family'. 'Women work not to achieve individual economic independence, but as a kind of breadwinner for their families', he explained. Family matters stood at the centre of their interests.<sup>76</sup> The figure of the mother was surprisingly powerful in post-war communist Poland. Mothers, and especially working mothers, were feared by the party-state because their complaints revealed the weakness of social policies.<sup>77</sup> Referring to maternal duties in the discourse about women's work could therefore have been another strategy for arguing for change. Still, it seems very likely that family was indeed the central value for many working women, a central identity that could be strengthened by professional work.

The ideal of motherhood as women's principal identity was strengthened by the Catholic Church, which maintained its position in society during the period of state socialism. Malgorzata Fidelis has stressed the role of the Catholic Church as the guardian of the figure of the 'Polish Mother' in the pre-war and immediate post-war years.<sup>78</sup> The Church saw paid work as an option for women, but one that should not affect their fundamental 'mission' that was motherhood. In a meeting with priests in 1957, the primate of Poland Stefan Wyszyński declared:

On the one hand, capitalism searched for a cheap labour force, hence – the women's work. . . . On the other hand, materialistic collectivism [Wyszyński referred here to official ideology] searched for a labour force at any price. We experienced it also here [in Poland], when many girls were pulled out from the countryside and made to work in production. . . . Mines, heavy industry and those so popular tractor drivers – these are areas not suitable for women's psyche and their psychophysical construction, because sometimes they simply make impossible the fulfilment of women's most important task – transferring life.<sup>79</sup>

The primate went on to suggest that there were jobs more suitable for women, and that women who did not feel a vocation for family life should have an option to work. Motherhood, therefore, was not seen as the only legitimate role for women. Nevertheless, he argued that for those who want to have a family, work should be secondary and subordinated to the principal mission of raising children. The primate's view that 'male' jobs in particular were not suitable for women was based on their (supposed) negative effects on maternity. The opinion of the Catholic Church seems therefore quite similar to the general understanding of women's identities. Women could be workers, but they were above all mothers, and the context of family life must be considered whenever women's issues were raised.

In women's letters to party-state institutions the family situation was the principal argument for women's professional activity. Being 'the only breadwinner' gave them – in the eyes of the society – the right to be employed. Widows, divorcees, wives of drinkers – they all 'had' to work because of the need to support their children. Married women, whose motivation to work was questioned, argued that their work was beneficial for children. Family roles thus stood at the centre of the discourse about women's wage work. They determined the right to be employed, as married women

<sup>75</sup> Zofia Zarzycka, 'Absencja a sytuacja rodzinna kobiet zatrudnionych w przemyśle' [Absenteeism and family situation of women working in industry] *Studia Demograficzne* [Demographic studies], 3 (1963), 79.

<sup>76</sup> Piotrowski, *Struktura*, 22.

<sup>77</sup> Padraic Kenney, 'The Gender of Resistance in Communist Poland', *American Historical Review*, 104, 2 (1999), 399–425.

<sup>78</sup> Fidelis, 2010, 24–5.

<sup>79</sup> Stefan Wyszyński, *Kobieta w Polsce współczesnej* [Woman in contemporary Poland] (Poznań–Warszawa: Pallotinum 1978), 181–3.

and mothers were expected to stop working. These 'family arguments' were strongly related to economic ones. Women's roles as mothers and housewives – never questioned – could be used both against and in favour of their employment. Women's identities very often placed work for wages as secondary to their family roles. As many social commentators believed, women's work was essentially different from men's work. Moreover, all these arguments were incorporating moral, social and economic elements. This complex justification of gender difference affected women's position in paid employment and made it dependent on an extra-professional context. Men's work had, in contrast, indisputable, independent and primary position.

### Beyond Female Breadwinning

Women's work could be called breadwinning, and therefore equal to men's, but it was always conditioned by the family situation: whether the male breadwinner was present or not, and whether he earned enough.<sup>80</sup> Female breadwinning was also based on the idea of maternal duties; being a mother could legitimise women's work. This discourse was coherent, although it could serve to support women's employment or to question it. The mainstream discussion was focused on the question of whether women should work for wages, but it did not challenge the difference in perception of women's and men's work. However, another discourse – albeit a marginal one – attempted to divorce the evaluation of women's wage work from the family context.

Some people pointed to the fact that there were many women satisfied with their work: 'it is true that most women treat professional work as an evil, but there are also those who have qualifications, like their work and would like to continue to work'.<sup>81</sup> In the letters, some women referred to the idea of emancipation through employment. 'In Wałbrzych a rumour says that from the first of January 1956 family allowances will be raised, so that working mothers will give up their jobs, and the state will close nurseries and kindergartens, because they are too expensive. This rumour may please the 'Nazi 3-K (*Kinder, Kirche, Küche* – children, church, kitchen) supporters, and our enemies. . . . Thanks to social facilities our state enables women to enjoy real equality' one woman argued in a letter to the communist party.<sup>82</sup> Maria Jaszczuk, quoted above, thought: 'women found a lot of satisfaction in their jobs. In these circumstances arguing that women's work is harmful is a mistake. This is not simply an economic issue. Women who work are becoming independent from men.'<sup>83</sup> A young female blue-collar worker explained to sociologists that 'women should work professionally, because then men treat them differently'.<sup>84</sup> 'Differently', here, meant better.

There were voices that simply advocated women's right to choose, and their right to work. 'We will fight for appropriate family allowances which would free those women who are mothers from the necessity of working. At the same time, we can't allow questioning of women's right to work. Those women who want to work and who have skills can't lose their jobs', stated a functionary of the League of Women.<sup>85</sup> Qualifications achieved by women were perceived as a source of value, not only for themselves, but also for the state (the work of skilled female workers was not believed to be ineffective). Indeed, detailed research on women's attitudes towards work showed that the higher

<sup>80</sup> Male breadwinning was also associated with the family, but in different ways to the case of women. Male breadwinning was perceived as rather self-evident, and as men's primary duty towards the family. However, hierarchies between male workers could have been also affected by the family situation, as workers with numerous families could be considered as more 'in need' to work.

<sup>81</sup> Biuletyn no. 18, 25 Mar. 1958, 237/XXV-25, KC PZPR, AAN, 180.

<sup>82</sup> Biuletyn nr 70/106, 1955, 237/XXV-16, KC PZPR, AAN, 120.

<sup>83</sup> Protokół z 27. posiedzenia Komisji Pracy i Zdrowia [Protocol of the 27th session of the Commission of Labour and Health], 18 Oct. 1956, 23, Kancelaria Sejmu [Parliament Office], AAN, 407.

<sup>84</sup> Waluk, 'Postawy kobiet', 142–3.

<sup>85</sup> 'Wybory a nasze sprawy' [Elections and our issues], *Kobieta i Życie*, 2 (1957).

their level of education, the stronger their motivation to work (or to continue their professional careers after having a child).<sup>86</sup>

Nevertheless, blue-collar workers also often expressed attachment to wage work based on motives other than economics. 'I have been informed by the foremen that all married women will be dismissed. I've worked for three years, I got used to my work, I can't live without it', one worker complained.<sup>87</sup> A female blue-collar worker in a Warsaw metal factory – where women generally occupied lower positions and performed unskilled work – did not want to give up working despite her traditional opinions.

You ask, when I want to give up my job. During the war I believed that my husband would return, and I would give up. Now, even if he returned, or I married another man, I'm not sure whether I would return home. I love my home. But I got used to the factory, to my job. I was the fourth worker of this factory after the war, you understand, this created an emotional tie. I pulled out chairs from the ruins, because there was no place to sit.<sup>88</sup>

These examples suggest that another discourse was possible, and that it was beginning to emerge. It was a discourse which tried to find another legitimisation of women's work other than family budget. It referred to socialist ideals of women's emancipation and all citizens' right to work and used an individualistic argument of personal fulfilment. Still, very rarely did the dialogue about women's professional engagement attempt to compare men's and women's work in the same terms. The only possibility of this comparison was drawn from the figure of the female breadwinner.

## Conclusions

The discourse about women's work for wages in Poland in the late 1950s and early 1960s comprised many different opinions. Women's work was discussed from a range of perspectives, including its individual, family, social, moral and economic aspects. The most important questions were: should women work for wages? And if so, which women should be working? In the public discussion about women's work, two discourses appeared: one in favour and one against women's wage work. However, as this article has shown, many nuanced opinions also existed in between.

While shaping these discourses, several contextual factors mattered. Two million women worked (outside agriculture), among them many married women and mothers. Many of them had taken up their jobs recently, not least during the Six-Year Plan (1950–5). In that period, official ideology and propaganda claimed that the massive employment of women would liberate them. The reality turned out to be far more complicated. Moreover, unemployment reappeared, and although it was considered against the principles of the 'socialist' economy, some groups had to be dismissed. All these circumstances had an impact on perceptions of women's work. In the very particular moment of political thaw (1955–7), women's massive employment needed justification and legitimisation.

Women's right to work was questioned. In the context of the principle of 'full employment' and the right to work included in the Polish People's Republic constitution of 1952, gender inequality was implicit in the discourse. In the case of women, the right to work was considered secondary to their 'rights' of fulfilling family and household duties. Moreover, these discourses reveal the importance of the notion of social justice, which is where the figure of male breadwinner appears. His work would always be more 'just', hence his right to be given preference in employment in the first place.

Although pluralistic, positive and negative attitudes towards women's work were based on the same assumptions, work had different meanings for men and women. Men's work usually did not need

<sup>86</sup> Adam Kurzynowski, 'Przemiany wzorców karier zawodowych kobiet w latach 1950–1989' [Changes in patterns of women's professional careers in the years 1950–1989], in Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarc, eds., *Kobieta i praca. Wiek XIX i XX* [Woman and work: 19th and 20th centuries] (Warsaw: DiG, 2000).

<sup>87</sup> Biuletyn nr 10, 8 Feb. 1954, 1050/9, ODiZP TVP.

<sup>88</sup> Piotrowski, *Struktura*, 152.

legitimation, but if it did it was breadwinning. Women's wage work was valued according to their civil status and family situation. After more than a decade of socialist rule in Poland, and despite intensive propaganda for gender equality in production, traditional ideas about gender and women's and men's work were widespread, including the notion that breadwinning was a masculine preserve.

Women could be breadwinners, but only in cases where there was no male breadwinner, or he was not able to earn enough. Women's earnings were always perceived as secondary to the family budget, despite the fact that significant numbers of women were sole breadwinners. A working father continued to be more important than a working mother. The notion of breadwinning was not solely associated with men, but it was still gendered, as female breadwinning was defined in different terms. 'Just as miner fathers do' was the argument that women miners formulated in order to preserve their jobs. This strategy could work in cases where the male breadwinner was absent, otherwise it was of limited use. Nevertheless, demanding acceptance as breadwinners was the most effective strategy women could employ while fighting dismissals and claiming the right to work. Female breadwinning was strengthened by women's role as mothers. When in 1962 unemployed women wrote letters demanding work to the Committee of Work and Pay, they were categorised according to their status: whether they were or not 'the only breadwinners'.<sup>89</sup> Female breadwinning fitted into both traditional and socialist values of the family and women's roles as mothers, but also women's right to work based on legitimate economic needs. Only a few women used arguments that went beyond breadwinning.

This article has reinforced the idea that the process of massive women's employment growth in post-war Poland must be characterised as 'change without change'. As sociologist Janina Waluk wrote:

It is difficult to find a sphere in which progress and new patterns would co-exist so closely with backwardness and with established opinions and habits maintained by a large part of the population, as in the case of women's wage work.<sup>90</sup>

The idea of the female breadwinner reflects the gender ideologies dominant in post-Stalinist Poland. Given the fact that policies in other state socialist countries were similar, the concept of the female breadwinner is likely to be more broadly applicable. It explains the ambiguous effects of socialist policies that incorporated women into paid employment earlier than in many Western countries but at the same time constructed women's wage work as different from men's. Already in the late 1960 polls in Poland and East Germany (in contrast to West Germany) showed broad acceptance of married women's professional work, but it was still perceived as secondary and conditioned by the 'special duties of women'.<sup>91</sup>

Discussions on women's wage work, especially on the employment of married women and mothers, were held also in the West in the 1950s. The male breadwinner ideology was also challenged in the West, although the legal framework of women's professional work and welfare policies followed divergent patterns.<sup>92</sup> The diversity of women's employment in Western countries makes overall comparisons with state socialist countries difficult. Nevertheless, as this article confirms, the male breadwinner ideology that was often more explicit in Western countries also persisted under state socialism and could even be strengthened by socialist ideals.

<sup>89</sup> Informacja dotycząca skarg i wniosków w KPiP za okres od sierpnia do 31 grudnia 1962 (Information about complains and demands in the period from August to December 1962), 6/49, Komitet Pracy i Płac [Committee of Work and Pay], AAN.

<sup>90</sup> Janina Waluk, *Placa i praca kobiet w Polsce* [Pay and work of women in Poland] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1965), 7.

<sup>91</sup> Oertzen and Rietzschel, 'Comparing the post-war Germanies', 186. *O sprawach kobiet – komunikat z badań* [On women's issues. Report from a survey], Sept. 1974, TNS OBOP Archive.

<sup>92</sup> Oertzen and Rietzschel, 'Comparing the Post-War Germanies'.