

Barcelona Seminar June 6, 2016

Centro de Estudios Demográficos - CED

(Centre for Demographic Studies)

Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona

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Title: The Low Fertility 'Trap': Gender and Demographic Politics in Poland.

Abstract: Fertility decline is not new when considered globally, however the situation in Eastern Europe is particularly dramatic because fertility plummeted rapidly across this region only after the fall of the Soviet Union. In Poland birthrates during the state socialist period, 1948-1989, stayed above replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, but after the state socialist regime collapsed in 1989, the nation's total fertility rate plummeted within a decade to below 1.3 children per woman. Since then, Poland continues to maintain what demographers identify as one of the 'lowest low' birthrates in Europe.

The case of Poland is especially interesting and distinct in the East European region in that it is the nation with the highest affiliation with the Catholic church, which condemns fertility control and calls on women and couples to have more children. The right-leaning administrations in Poland are also escalating pronatalist rhetoric calling on women to increase childbearing in the name of averting an economic collapse of an aging society and saving the Polish nation from 'extinction'. Severe restrictions on family planning, including limits on abortion, contraception, and sex education in Poland have been justified by the church and the state in moral and demographic terms. The Polish state's attempt to 'engineer' reproductive outcomes has also been evident in the 'Profamily Program' but with no results thus far.

Based on 23 months of anthropological research in Poland between 2000 and 2015 with women, healthcare providers, and women's rights advocates, this presentation explores the social and political dimensions of declining fertility in Poland. I argue that understanding Poland's drop in fertility requires attention to the institutional context—in particular the role of the Catholic church, the conservative state administrations, and the nationalist discourses—within which women negotiate their circumstances, and must explore women's experiences and perspectives on motherhood before the observed macro-demographic population trends can be theorized and understood. Furthermore, I argue that 'pro family' policies which have enjoyed partial success in France and some Scandinavian nations, are unlikely to offset the discouraging effects of the morality politics that have flourished since 1989 and which underpin fertility decline in Poland.