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Article

When Family Policy Doesn't Work: Motives and Welfare Attitudes Among Childfree Persons in Poland

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Abstract

The primary goal of this article was to analyse the welfare attitudes of people self-declaring as childless by choice alongside the exploration of their social experience as childfree persons in the context of a rapid increase in the generosity of pro-natalist public policies in Poland. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 19 respondents recruited via Facebook network groups. Thematic analysis was applied identifying six general themes: “satisfied and never had the need”; “dealing with social pressure”; “family measures—yes, but not this way”; “unfair treatment of the childfree”; “towards welfare state for all”; and “change my mind? Never, even if offered one million dollars.” The research demonstrated that childfree persons present favourable views on state support for families with children. While critical of cash-based family support, respondents have a clear preference for investing in services enabling women to participate in the labour market. Finally, if public policies aimed at removing barriers to parenthood were strengthened, this would not change the respondents’ minds about procreation.

Keywords

childfree; childless by choice; childlessness; family policy; Poland; voluntary childlessness; welfare attitudes

Issue

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1. Introduction

Studies on population ageing often identify policy measures to increase fertility (McDonald, 2002). A common feature of these studies is the assumption that various family support programmes are incentives to have (more) children. The barriers to parenthood, according to the literature, are mostly limited to a couple’s financial capacity, the gender balance concerning unpaid domestic work, or infertility (Brewster & Rinfuss, 2000; Kotowska et al., 2008). Despite heavy investment in family policies, the share of the childless population continues to increase (Sobotka, 2017), where more and more persons are opting for *voluntary* childlessness (Avison & Furnham, 2015).

Existing research focuses on the pathways to the deliberate decision about (remaining) childless and the motivations and personal traits of voluntary childless persons (Fiori et al., 2017; Hagestad & Call, 2007). While the studies above focus on the impact of family policy measures on fertility, employment, or distribution of paid and unpaid work between the parents, the attitudes of voluntary childless populations towards welfare policies remain unexplored. Studying a voluntary childless population could be important for at least two reasons. Firstly, identifying the reasons and motivations behind voluntarily choosing to be childless, which is seriously understudied so far, brings to light a growing population group and their identity as a minority group, often with distinct needs and social roles. Secondly, and more specifically,

a discussion of the needs and attitudes towards family policy measures among the childfree population would focus on this societal group as constituencies, i.e., voters and taxpayers. This is especially interesting in light of the approach of treating children as a public good, generating the obligation to contribute to the cost of raising children among non-parents. The analysis of the Polish case takes into account the specific context of a considerable increase in family policy measures that took place during the right-wing populist party Law and Justice's (PiS—Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) two consecutive terms in office (2015–2019 and 2019–present), including heavy investment in family benefits (in cash).

The study intends to explore the attitudes of voluntary childless persons in Poland towards welfare policies, and their experiences and motivations for staying childless. The analysis was conducted based on interviews with 19 persons who declared that they do not have and do not plan to have children, defined as voluntary childless or childfree persons. Due to avoiding defining the persons that deliberately resign from parenthood with the prefix “less,” the term “childfree” became popular (Harrington, 2019; Helm et al., 2021; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). In this article, the terms “voluntary childless(ness)” and “childfree (persons)” will be used interchangeably.

The article is structured as follows: It begins with a review of existing literature and theoretical background, followed by methodological remarks. Secondly, the Polish context will be briefly discussed. Then an analysis according to the themes identified will be presented and the article concludes with a discussion of the results and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review on Voluntary Childless: Motives and Policy Context

2.1. Voluntary Childless/Childfree: Defining the Group

Childlessness (irrespective of whether voluntary or involuntary) has usually been analysed in the context of population ageing. Policymakers and experts identify various processes, including delaying the first child's birth and an increase in definite childlessness (OECD, 2011; Sobotka, 2017). Historically, the trend toward childlessness in Europe was characterised as a U-shaped pattern among women born between 1900 and 1972, with the lowest levels among the 1940s cohorts (Sobotka, 2017). Currently, various estimates set the share of childless persons at the level of 10% of the whole population, although the trend toward an increase of definite childlessness is not universal, with the lowest levels of childlessness among the East European countries (below 10%) and highest among such countries, as Germany, Italy, Ireland, or Finland, where around every fifth woman born in 1968 remained childless (Sobotka, 2017). Further, differentiating between voluntary and involuntary childlessness is a challenge in itself, and the scale of voluntary

childlessness tends to be underestimated (Berrington, 2017), especially when it comes to projected childlessness of cohorts younger than those born in the late 1960s/early 1970s. A recent Pew Research Center survey revealed that 44% of non-parents from the age of 18 to 49 declared that it was not too or not at all likely that they will have children someday, an increase of seven percentage points as compared to 37% who said the same in 2018 (Brown, 2021). Among this group, 56% say they “just don't want to have children,” while for 44% the three main reasons declared were: medical reasons (19% within the group), financial reasons (17%), no partner (15%), age (10%), state of the world (9%), climate change (5%), and partner not wanting kids (2%; Brown, 2021). Therefore, there are indications that the group is growing in size.

How to differentiate between involuntary and voluntary childlessness? For example, Szalma and Takács (2018) applied the criterion of “no health problems,” which is a wide understanding of voluntary childlessness. Among the reasons for childlessness, the literature points to such circumstances as the inability to find a suitable partner (Berrington, 2017; Szalma, 2021; Waren & Pals, 2013) or orientation toward professional work (Hakim, 2003). Kelly (2010 p. 158) defines voluntary childless women as “women of childbearing age who are fertile and state that they do not intend to have children, women of childbearing age who have chosen sterilization, or women past childbearing age who were fertile but chose not to have children.” The same author proposes to differentiate between childless “by choice” and “by circumstance,” where the latter category would include persons physically able to procreate but choosing not to due to specific circumstances. This would include not being able to find a partner, fear about unequal division of caring responsibilities, difficult material conditions, or professional status often resulting in the person remaining in a transitional phase between postponing, delaying, and a definite (voluntary) childlessness (Kelly, 2010). In this context, researchers also propose to interpret the categories as fluid and processual when referring to “remaining childless” or “becoming childless” (Szalma & Takács, 2015), with another interesting category, i.e., “postponers.” Apart from delaying the decision about having children caused by various circumstances, postponing can also be a strategy to cope with the “internalised pressure about the ‘parenting directive’” (Szalma & Takács, 2018, p. 317). In Hungary, among those that declared themselves as postponers in 2001, only 22% went into parenthood seven years later, although this was twice as many as compared to those who declared themselves as voluntarily childless in the first point in time (11%; Szalma & Takács, 2018). Although the postponers remained in the category (and did not transfer to definite, voluntary childlessness), such results may signal stability of fertility decisions, also among the childfree. A study on childfree persons in Italy showed that an increasing number of women not planning motherhood

declared that the most important reason for their decision is that they would like to spend more time with their partners and that they place much importance on the quality of their relationship (Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). Qualitative studies about childfree persons in Poland seem to characterise the group as being quite stable in terms of the interpretation of their own status and future plans regarding parenthood. In research conducted with childfree couples, it was found that the decision to remain childfree was often made at a very early stage of partnership (Tomaszewska, 2017).

Research on childlessness in Poland mostly focuses on a general group of childless persons, usually aiming at identifying the reasons behind non-parenthood (Anna Baranowska-Rataj & Anna Matysiak, 2012), pathways to definite childlessness (Mynarska et al., 2015; Mynarska & Rytel, 2020), the decision to remain childfree regardless of circumstances. Especially in the early 2000s, when Poland went through a period of high unemployment, childlessness was strongly connected to the possibility of continuing employment and having a stable professional career, especially among women (Slany, 2008). Also, according to Mynarska et al. (2015), the insecure labour market position was one of the key factors leading to childlessness. Mynarska and Styrac (2014) emphasised material conditions as the most important determinants of the decision to have children. Hence, Poland may be characterised by a high relevance of a secure working situation and its impact on the decision to remain childfree or the perception of such by the experts and policymakers.

This could also be viewed in light of the specificity of Central and Eastern Europe, due to relatively low levels of definite childlessness (as mentioned) and a stronger commitment to the parenthood norm (Szalma & Takács, 2018). A comparison of self-perceived social reception of childless women in Lithuania and Poland demonstrated the existence of social pressure to have children coming even from the nearest environment these women were functioning in (Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė et al., 2020). While pointing to insecurities linked to economic status, Hašková (2011) suggested that although work-related issues are important, childlessness in the Czech Republic has also been the effect of a shift in values, an increase in individualisation and more emphasis on personal development.

While this study does not have the ambition to redefine voluntary childlessness, it is taking an approach based on the self-reported intentions of the respondents and their self-definition as childfree, regardless of circumstances. The abovementioned Pew Research Centre's methodology is also useful for defining voluntary childlessness, i.e., a situation where a respondent declares that they "just don't want to have children" regardless of age, material conditions, "state of the world," or when the partner does not want to have children.

2.2. Welfare Attitudes

Childfree persons are welfare policy recipients, taxpayers, and voters who make choices in support of a certain combination of public policies reflected in the political party programmes. Research on support for welfare policies "tells us something about whether or not existing social arrangements are legitimate" (Svallfors, 2012, p. 2). On one hand, self-interest is one of the most important predictors of support for concrete policy measures (Busemeyer & Garritzmann, 2017a; Goerres & Tepe, 2010). In the case of work-life balance policies, parents or potential parents are mostly interested in enacting a generous version of these policies. On the other hand, the support of just one societal group would not guarantee the enactment of policies in the context of democratic governance. Hence, as a system of organising and governing redistribution, the welfare state requires political support from various groups of population who would support welfare policy programs beyond their immediate self-interest (Svallfors, 2012). Other possible factors influencing welfare attitudes include family socialisation/culture, gender attitudes, political ideology, and family involvement (Goerres & Tepe, 2010). Welfare attitudes are most often surveyed among the general population (Busemeyer & Garritzmann, 2017b), but sometimes particular social groups are under research due to the nature of budgetary trade-offs often linked to social cleavages that arise in the process of competing over welfare funding. Especially in the context of an ageing society, the existing research tends to focus on intergenerational tensions and the trade-off between investment in children and the need to finance social security systems for elderly citizens, which poses a challenge in the conditions of a shirking tax base (Gál et al., 2018). Therefore, although elderly persons are not the target of family policies, researchers are interested in attitudes towards these policies among the group and also in the light of their participation in the process of political representation (Gál et al., 2018).

Childless persons are another group whose welfare attitudes should be interesting for the above-stated reasons linked to welfare state legitimacy, as well as budgetary trade-offs and welfare governance model; however, so far, they have not received scholarly attention. Even though (voluntary) childless persons represent only a fraction of society, their views should be treated as a representation of a minority and their interests and opinions should be studied, just like in the case of other smaller societal groups, such as people with disabilities, representatives of sexual and gender minorities and migrants.

2.3. Child as a Public Good

One of the arguments originally coming from the literature on family economics is that children, as future citizens, should be treated as "public goods" because they

produce positive externalities for non-parents (Folbre, 1996). As children are the future workforce and taxpayers, this creates an obligation for non-parents to share the costs of raising children, otherwise benefiting from the children's activities means that non-parents are free-riding on parents (Olsaretti, 2013). Contemporary welfare state literature also refers to the concept, emphasising that in the conditions of population ageing and shrinking of the tax base, falling fertility rates mean that children are "ever-scarcer public goods" (Gál et al., 2018, p. 944). Hence, children are treated as public goods because of their future contribution to the workforce, as well as to financing the welfare state.

There are certain consequences of this argument. Firstly, it justifies the redistribution (at the level of the welfare state) from childless persons to families with children to spread the costs of raising children more equally, including time spent on child raising and lost opportunity costs for parents. Redistribution from non-parents to parents (among others) has been quite common in European welfare states investing in education. Policies such as childcare services, paid parental leave or free healthcare (at least) for children are financed from general taxation or social insurance systems. However, little is known about the attitudes of non-parents towards these policies. Considering the aforementioned understanding of the welfare state as stemming from a democratic rather than a purely technocratic process, the possibly increasing group of childfree persons and the acceptance of their choice may potentially intensify the scale of contestation of (some) welfare policies. Alternatively, childfree persons may have pro-redistribution attitudes and would like to compensate the parents for care work and raising children as long as they (non-parents) do not have to do it themselves, therefore agreeing to a specific division of labour and costs between parents and non-parents. Finally, childfree persons may have preferences in relation to what kind of policies they support or do not, and which policies they will reject.

As argued by Olsaretti (2013), the argument in favour of sharing the costs of raising children by non-parents holds in the conditions, "when benefits of children are socialised" (p. 254) and when "a cooperative scheme is in place" (p. 255), meaning an institutionalised welfare state with its system of redistribution which guarantees that parents get compensated for raising children, but also that children receive access to various services that help them acquire skills and competencies to participate in society in the future.

This may mean that there is some balance between obligations on the side of non-parents to contribute and the benefits they are receiving (collectively) as members of society. However, their willingness to accept these obligations may be shaken when there are new claims that they perceive as excessive. Literature that would confirm this claim was not found, however, I would include here policy measures that are directly penalising childfree persons (or, in fact, the whole childless popu-

lation), for their choice, such as additional and targeted taxes or pension contributions.

2.4. Policies Aiming at Mobilising Childfree People Into Parenthood

Another reason to conduct research on childfree people's welfare attitudes is that even if they declare their preference of not having children, they are still the target of public policies and discourses. This is especially visible when it comes to countries where the political scene is dominated by right-wing populist parties. Concerns over demographic decline have driven policy discourses in Hungary (Szikra, 2014), where leading politicians directly target their pro-natalist discourse toward the childless. As suggested by a leading Hungarian politician, László Kövér, childless people are "not normal" and "stand on the side of death" while "having children is a public matter, not a private one" (Hopkins, 2019). Research on childfree persons in the macro context often focuses on the reception of their choice not to procreate. Childfree women are often viewed as "unproductive," "selfish," or even "immoral" (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016). While for a liberal public or policymakers, such decisions are not linked (or are, at least, less related) to any moral judgement and are mostly perceived as personal choices (that might be influenced through policy), such voluntary childless choices could lead to stigmatisation and penalising the voluntary childless in more conservative policy settings (Harrington, 2019).

Finally, childfree persons may have their own claims over the shape of family policies, also in the context of how work-life balance policies have universally been perceived as policies for working parents (Szelewa, in press). There may be childfree persons prioritising professional work but still needing work-life balance policies. Others will place little emphasis on their professional lives but, at the same time, remain childfree. It is as if the tension between work and private life cannot exist for the voluntarily childless. However, they experience similar conflicts, often intensified by poor work organisation within companies offering few or no family-friendly policies, where childfree persons are additionally burdened in order to compensate for ad-hoc concessions made for employees with children (Bullock, 2019).

3. The Polish Context

After 1989, the main demographic trend in Poland was a decline in fertility: Throughout the 1990s, the total fertility rate dropped from 1.99 in 1991 to 1.3 in 1999, as per data from the Polish Statistical Office. Despite the trend continuing for almost two decades, policy measures favouring support in cash and through the new paid parental leave schemes have been improved only during the recent decade (Kurowska, 2019). The most significant programme was introduced by the PiS-led government in 2016 (amended in 2019), which gives the right to a

monthly benefit of 500 PLN (around 110 EUR) per month to each child until the age of 18. The program is unprecedented and remains the second biggest social spending item in the public budget after spending on pensions. Other changes included a system of discounts for big families, increased tax credits, non-returnable loans as a means to increase access to affordable housing for families with children, etc. Consequently, spending on family policies in Poland increased from 1.5% of the GDP in 2015 to over 2.6% in 2018 (OECD, 2021).

In addition, even though the abortion law was already strict in Poland, it was further limited in 2020, when the possibility to terminate pregnancy in the case of foetus malformation was banned. Altogether, the pronatalist discourse and familistic policies represent specific circumstances. Especially those who declare themselves childfree may feel under pressure as they are targeted by policymakers aiming to mobilise this group to change their decision discursively by shaming their childfree lifestyle and repeatedly presenting policy proposals explicitly penalising childlessness.

Just as in Hungary, conservative discourses and arguments about the selfishness of childfree lifestyles in Poland are strongly gendered, with women often blamed for low fertility, and therefore penalised, or at least incentivised to procreate. Faced with demographic pressures, right-wing (populist) parties may also propose simple solutions, e.g., penalising the voluntarily childless. Conservative think-tanks have discussed an alimony-based pension system where (working-age) children's contributions would directly finance their parents' pensions, or where the number of children would determine the level of one's future pension (Czarny & Kostrzewa, 2013). Recently, the Deputy Minister of Family in Poland suggested the need to reform the pension system in Poland so that the level of benefit would reflect the number of children a given pensioner has ("Emerytalna rewolucja," 2022).

The government's demographic strategy reflects the major concern over fertility pointing to cultural shifts and a decline of the family-centred values, i.e., an increase in the "individualisation popularization of a consumptive lifestyle, reduction of the impact of community, religious and altruistic value" (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej, 2021, p. 55). Postponing the decision to have children is primarily interpreted within this bigger context of cultural changes as causing "permanent obligations, shallow relations and a tendency to leave 'open options' in social life" (p. 55). Another important factor contributing to resignation from parenthood, in the government's interpretation, is (women's) engagement in paid work and a long period of education that coincides with "the best biological time for procreation" (p. 48).

It should also be mentioned that due to restrictive policies with regards to same-sex partnerships, marriages and parenthood rights of the LGBTQ+ population, the group may often fall into the category of involuntary childless, as their procreation preferences may conflict

with the legal system not recognising children born to same-sex parents.

4. Research Questions and Methodology

Although the study does not intend to explore all of the issues discussed above, the following research questions were inspired both by the literature on the motives for remaining childfree and the (scarce) studies focussing on voluntary childless persons' attitudes towards public policies in support of parenthood: What are the motives behind the decision about remaining childfree? What are the experiences of voluntary childlessness in family and social contexts? What are the most and the least favoured policies supporting the family among the childless by choice? Would they respond to policy changes by opting for parenthood?

4.1. Recruitment and Sampling

The study has an exploratory character and is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 19 childfree persons recruited via social media networks. Recruiting via social media for qualitative research has been recognised as a helpful tool to approach populations that are difficult to reach (Sikkens et al., 2017). Childfree persons may be included in this group due to the potential stigma and moral outrage against the voluntary childless (Peterson, 2015), making them difficult to be identified. For example, while it is relatively easy to find big family organisations or parent organisations, child-free groups do not appear as organised communities, therefore matching the criteria of populations that are increasingly recruited via social network sites (Jones et al., 2021). Participants were recruited via two closed Facebook groups in Poland via an advert offering cinema vouchers: *Bezdzietnik.pl* ("childfreedom") and *Childless by Choice*. The response form included a screening question: Do you consider yourself a person that is currently childless by choice and does not plan or intend to have children in the future?

The response needed to be positive to be considered. The group of 19 recruited interviewees included 15 female, two male, and two non-binary respondents, aged 18–24 (1), 25–34 (8), 35–44 (5), and 45–60 (5), living in big cities (10), medium-sized cities (4), small towns (1), and in the countryside (2), and all partnered apart from three respondents. Although the question about education level was not included in the survey and the informants were not explicitly asked about it during the interviews, throughout the interview, it became clear that at least 15 persons completed university studies. The characteristics of the sample confirmed previous research on the socio-economic profile of childfree persons. As compared to the general population, childfree tend to be more often employed full-time (Avison & Furnham, 2015), more likely to have a college education, higher income, and live in urban areas (Waren & Pals, 2013).

4.2. Data Collection

The interview questionnaire was divided into two parts corresponding to the main research questions covering (a) the motives behind the decision and (b) questions related to the policies. The informants were encouraged to come up with their own motives in the first part, while in the second, the researcher provided a brief introduction to welfare support for the families with the request for an opinion. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted via zoom or Messenger and recorded; each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes.

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer's approach was to openly reveal their positionality as a childfree researcher, in line with what Reich (2021, p. 575) argues about how "knowledge and experience are situated, co-constructed and historically and socially located." Revealing the researcher's identity may mistakenly assume common cultural understandings, while the effect of social desirability may bias the interviewees' responses (LaSala, 2003). However, these potential limitations are offset by the advantages stemming from the researcher's (communicated) status as an insider, such as better access to respondents, the interviewees' increased willingness to share as they feel safe and not judged for their minority status, i.e., the "ability to communicate the expressions, sentiments and goals of the group" (LaSala, 2003, p. 18). At the same time, maximising the benefits of the insider requires an active strategy of minimising bias, such as presenting various standpoints and previous research results, debriefing and ensuring joint understanding and asking similar questions in different ways throughout the interview. In this, the interview itself followed the style of reflexive interviewing that facilitates joint understanding of the respondent's perspectives and experiences through such techniques as sharing and reflecting on the understanding of the interviewees' opinions, explaining the background and context for the questions asked and making sure that the message conveyed is not one-sidedly interpreted by the researcher. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

4.3. Data Analysis

All the 19 interview transcriptions were analysed using Atlas.ti software. Several rounds of coding and recoding were applied to systematise the qualitative material. A thematic analysis approach was applied for data analysis and the researcher followed the six steps recommended by Nowell et al. (2017), including generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming them. The most general codes were applied to grasp the reasons for remaining childfree, and the positive versus negative opinions versus family policies. Within these general codes, a more inductive approach was applied to grasp the repeated phrases and statements—one example can be the repeated phrase

"I never felt the need to have children," interpreted as a motive independent of circumstances.

For the reasons of space, only the most outstanding results are present, i.e., whenever the coding process helped identify prevailing themes and interpretations that received a considerable level of saturation. Altogether, six general themes were identified. The respondents' names were replaced by randomly chosen names, while the information about their age was given in brackets.

5. The Analysis

5.1. Satisfied and Never Felt the Need to Have Children

When it comes to the motives behind childlessness by choice, almost all respondents emphasised that they never felt the need to have children and that their reasons are independent of various factors. Especially female respondents stressed that although they felt they were expected to express friendly and warm behaviour towards (especially) small children, they never had any maternal feelings when surrounded by children. The lack of any particular reason for being childfree sometimes causes problems when it comes to communicating the decision to family and friends. As stated by one female interviewee:

I do not like the fact that I even need to justify the decision—it is what it is, I will not be searching for the reasons for it. Why don't you ask people whether they regret not becoming an astronaut, but they still ask you why you don't want to be a mother. And I just don't know why. (Hanna, 33)

It does not mean that the respondents were not referring to other reasons and motives, often pointing out how these other circumstances contribute to their confidence. Respondents were also satisfied with their current life and did not want to change anything. This was often connected with the possibility of living a flexible life, having more time for either socially engaged activities or leisure or having a hobby. Partnered informants often justified satisfaction with the current life situation with high relationship quality. Several of them were proud of their long-term marriage/partnerships and brought the longevity of their relationship as another factor strengthening their decision not to have children, which also cements their relationship. One interviewee specifically mentioned that until she met her current husband, she still planned to have children with her previous partners:

I felt that perhaps I wanted to have children with the previous partners because I wanted to compensate for the lack of affection and love. But with my husband, I understood that I do not need to (have children) because I have the love of my husband. (Alicija, 34)

Many declared having pets, contrasting the inherent need to have pets, and taking care of them with the lack of any desire to have kids. One interviewee, specifically, demanded that childfree persons together with their partners (married or unmarried) and pets should also be recognised as “family” (Agnieszka, 47).

Even when stressing that they “just do not feel the need” to have children, the informants emphasised their decision as considerate and deliberate, contrasting it with many parents deciding to have children as a default option, pressured by society. Several interviewees demonstrated their awareness of the literature and social media networks of parents who regret their decision to have children, pointing to such groups as the Facebook page *I Regret Having Children* or Orna Donath’s book *Regretting Motherhood* (Donath, 2017), which was also translated to Polish. Childfree persons noted that some parents decided to have children due to social pressure despite doubts or insecurities. This is, according to interviewees, also reinforced by the fact that society and media hide the difficult side of parenthood. As argued by Anna (37):

I think it’s terrible that so many people are just unaware of what such true parenting looks like because social media...and friends’ stories show only the good side of parenting.

One respondent added that, according to her, many parents are frustrated, because the childfree persons “are triggering something [the frustration] in them, because they [the childfree] did not have the courage not to follow the social pressure” (Paulina, 45).

The reasons other than “just not wanting to have children” were often brought up in addition to those mentioned above, and only after the researcher listed some hypothetical reasons while waiting for the interviewee’s reaction. Among those that the informants mentioned were the climate crisis and the uncertain future. They expressed concerns about scarce resources and the responsibility of “bringing one more human into this world” (Adam, 25; Renata, 38) or argued they are “not contributing with yet another human that needs to be fed and clothed” (Ariel, 23). Although not exclusively, these were mostly the youngest respondents.

5.2. Dealing With Social Pressure

Most respondents declared they experienced social and family pressure to have children. Usually, this came in the form of repeated questions from the family and relatives about the plans to have children arguing that the childfree relatives “will change their mind.” Simultaneously, the parents of childfree persons often expressed regret that they will not experience being grandparents. Sometimes, the pressure was smaller in the case of those respondents who had siblings with children. Especially the comments about the possible shift in

the decision were perceived as intrusive, and the interviewees often said they felt treated like children, not like adults.

Some of them felt different or even suffered from not being accepted by their peers and society, in general. One respondent, also describing herself as a highly sensitive person, admitted: “I felt that I am so different that something is wrong with me” (Barbara, 34). At the same time, the interviewees stressed that social media networks and the literature by childfree public figures about a childfree lifestyle appear to have contributed to the social acceptance of their standpoint on having no children. A female interviewee commented on her reaction to one of the books promoting a childfree lifestyle: “I finally understood that I do not need to be a mother and that no one has the right to change it” (Iwona, 32).

A couple of respondents mentioned having some bad experiences during their visits to see a gynaecologist, especially when the latter was advising that pregnancy and childbirth will solve female health issues and suggesting that the patient will change their decision in the future, and therefore should not delay. Again, especially younger interviewees were denied their agency. Kamila (26) experienced this several times:

This is the case with older [male] doctors. They are comfortable sharing supposedly funny [sexist] but possibly harmful remarks. I was addressed as a “little girl.” (Kamila, 26)

The childfree persons also experienced social pressure more generally when portrayed as “selfish.” Some respondents expressed their frustration about being labelled as “selfish” and brought in their social engagement or the nature of their professional work. As argued by Ewa (37):

It has nothing to do with any selfishness. I sometimes come across accusations that I do not make any sacrifices for anyone. I am a doctor, and I believe that I dedicate myself enough to others in my work.

Some respondents had caring responsibilities, including caring for their parents (also disabled), siblings or other family members. Others felt the pressure to compensate for their non-parenthood: As noted by one respondent, the family perceived her as more available because of not having her own child, and hence being able to take care of the other family members (Maria, 41).

5.3. Family Support Is Needed, But Not in This Form

When asked about their opinions about welfare policies and family policy measures in Poland, almost all respondents agreed that families should be supported in some forms; however, they seem to have a pretty clear vision of policies they would prefer, and this was certainly not the policy model based on cash transfers.

Hence, the respondents were rather critical of the universal programme of child benefits “Family 500+,” most often pointing to (as the respondents argue) a mistargeted distribution and misuse of the funds. According to Joanna (48):

The beneficiaries do not necessarily spend their money on the needs of their children. Especially in big families, where there is a problem with alcohol, where there is violence, it is not money spent on children, it is money spent on worldly goods.

Two respondents working in HR in their companies also pointed out that it is increasingly difficult to find employees who “openly admit it does not pay off to take a job” (Paulina, 45). Overall, there was a preference for investing in crèches and kindergarten. According to Ewa (37), cash transfers and professional deactivation may lead to women losing their economic independence:

I think that a better idea would be, first of all, to offer crèches and kindergarten...so that a woman would not disappear from the labour market....She would earn herself for retirement, and you don’t need to have to give her any additional pension, just let the woman return to work, let her own money, be independent of her husband. Because a man can say “I can earn well enough,” but this can lead to economic violence: “I’m holding the money, and you have nothing to say.”

Several interviewees also supported introducing more gender equality-oriented measures, such as equal sharing of care responsibilities. The arguments focused on the need to preserve women’s human capital and that sometimes women can have better and more promising professional careers. Linking it to the general idea of partnership within a couple, a male informant emphasised:

[Childcare] is not only a woman’s thing, it’s equally important for both parents. I wouldn’t imagine not participating in this equally. I don’t like saying that the man should “help.” Come on, you can ask for help when you need to move a table or something. I am not supposed to “help.” (Tomasz, 37)

5.4. Welfare State and (Sometimes) Unfair Distribution

Another general theme identified is that the respondents felt they were sometimes treated unfairly at the policy level and in the workplace. The respondents had quite a strong reaction against the policy proposal linking the level of pension benefit with the number of children, pointing to the fact that they already pay their social insurance contributions and taxes while not receiving family support, suggesting that such a solution would lead to “a double penalty” (Sylwia, 47). As noted by Kamila (26):

The problems with long-term financing of the pension system] are not the fault of childless people. I was born barely a quarter of a century ago, and these problems existed much earlier. And this is throwing responsibility again, searching for another khokhol [a straw figure], because it is convenient to rule with fear and dividing, saying: look, this is their fault, they will be punished and then you will all get better.

Paulina (45) stressed that often childfree persons might have high incomes and may have already contributed more to the system through taxation and social insurance contributions:

Saying that I do not have children that would contribute to the pension system is unfounded because I am paying my taxes and perhaps earning even more than many families with children and these taxes are used to support these children. So, I don’t understand these arguments—this is me who is now paying to support someone [else].

When asked about workplace relations and work organisation, about half of the respondents either did not see any differentiated treatment of childfree persons and parents or thought that parents should have some privileges to facilitate their participation in work and family duties. Others pointed to being perceived as always available and on-call, being assigned more duties and having their work scheduled in non-standard hours and days (holidays) due to not having children:

It happens that my husband is called at very short notice...as if he didn’t have any of his own matters. As if when you don’t have children, you do not have any personal life. (Agnieszka, 47)

5.5. Towards Fair Treatment for Everyone

When asked about which policies they would want for themselves, childfree persons emphasised that some policy tools should be available regardless of family status, such as holiday vouchers (in reaction to Covid-19, in 2020, the government introduced vouchers for families with children only). One interviewee explicitly mentioned a universal basic income as a fair solution.

At least half of the informants demanded better access to gynaecological treatment. Kamila (26) specifically emphasised refraining from the word “reproductive” when it comes to childfree women and noted that the approach to gynaecology “is mostly focused on reproduction”:

Therefore, childfree women are second category patients...there is some kind of assumption that if you have a uterus, you need to use it....And when a young woman is visiting a doctor the only cure for

everything is pregnancy as if the whole medicine is about whether a woman will or will not have a child.

Other suggestions were to make sexual education more widespread altogether with access to contraception and voluntary sterilisation. Many referred to the current situation in Poland and the abortion ban as extremely oppressive and demanded liberalisation of the abortion law. Pola (33) associated the abortion ban and the unequal treatment in terms of gender and systemic violence “so that women finally fill in their uterus...that this is such a repressive and objective treatment of women.” Especially two non-binary respondents found the harsh situation with respect to reproductive rights in Poland very disturbing. Although explicit references to the Catholic Church appeared, they were surprisingly rare. However, when making remarks about the current political situation in Poland on the one hand and the decision about remaining childfree on the other, some respondents emphasised that they are either atheists or briefly criticised the Church’s involvement in politics.

Younger respondents also expect better support for people transitioning from education to employment in terms of housing or equal treatment at work. The postulate was also to make the voice of young people heard and to include the younger generation in the conversation about policy reforms and the vision of the country’s future.

5.6. “Change My Mind? Never, Even If Offered One Million Dollars”

The last question was whether the respondents would rethink their decision if they received various forms of state support, if the political circumstances would change and if they lived in an ideal world. All of the informants confirmed this would still not change their minds, often stating this in a very definite way, saying this is “absolutely not possible” or that they would not change their mind “even if offered one million dollars” (Iwona, 32). One respondent said that she was open to the possibility that she would change her mind in the future, but for now she does not see any circumstances that would turn her decision. In general, the respondents were emphasising that their decision is deliberate and independent of any pressures. They also regarded state support and work-life balance policies as additional and not central for making people change their minds about such an important issue. As noted by Ewa (37):

Everything that the state is doing is only a supplement. These are the parents...the biggest pressure is on them—how to socialise the child, prepare them for conflicts, the culture of behaving among people. This is all that the child needs to find at home. No state support can replace it.

6. Conclusion

Increasing numbers of people are either remaining child-free or deciding to remain voluntary childless in the future. Although various aspects of voluntary childlessness have received some scholarly attention, these were mainly about either pathway toward childlessness or the societal perception of childfree people. At the same time, the group is hardly ever the topic of research on welfare attitudes, even though it can be considered a substantial minority, and in the light of the increasing interest in family policies as a response to declining fertility rates. This article contributes to the literature by providing an exploratory view of the reasons for remaining childfree and the attitudes toward welfare policies. The latter’s importance stems from at least two different viewpoints: firstly, when asking childfree persons about their favoured welfare policies for families, it is possible to identify one growing constituency supporting particular reform programs, secondly, pointing to the fact that there is a growing social group that would not react to pronatalist measures.

All informants declared themselves childfree. Reasons for the decision to remain childfree were mainly given as independent of various circumstances or pressures, although other reasons were secondary, including the need to preserve the current lifestyle and a high level of satisfaction with the relationship. This is consistent with previous research done by Peterson (2015), stressing “fifty shades of freedom” valued by childfree individuals, as well as Tanturri and Mencarini’s (2008) research on the childless Italian individuals stressing the relationship quality as important for their decision not to procreate. Although research on the reasons for childlessness often points to the fact of women’s inability to find a suitable partner (Berrington, 2017; Warren & Pals, 2013), in some cases the need to have a child disappeared once a respondent found a happy relationship. In addition, the respondents underlined the deliberate decision-making process when it comes to their childlessness and a conscious decision not to procreate, often contrasting it with the experiences of parents who either find parenthood difficult or regret parenthood as such. Another contrast the interviewees were bringing in was their identification as childfree against the political domination of the PiS party and its conservative, pro-natalist rhetoric.

As for the attitudes towards welfare policies, respondents seemed to favour the support of care and education services over support in cash. The latter view was especially evident in their critical opinion of the program of universal child benefits. Interviewees emphasised the importance of policy tools strengthening gender equality in care responsibilities as well as female employment and independence. While respondents were, in general, not opposed to the idea of investing in children and treating children as a public good, they felt that their contribution to society may sometimes be overlooked. They were also strongly opposing any reforms penalising the choice

of not procreating, while also feeling they already contribute to the system by taxes and social insurance contributions while not receiving the same level of support as families with children do. When asked about which policies would benefit them, childfree persons often mentioned that benefits and schemes should be universal. In addition, female respondents stressed that unbiased gynaecological care is also needed together with better access to contraception. They often mentioned it in the context of the low level of reproductive rights in Poland and the general political climate (although discussion of the political circumstances in Poland was not explored here enough due to the reasons of space). Possible avenues of further inquiry could explore the profile of childfree groups in various welfare regimes, studying various groups of childless persons, but also work towards the understanding of the childfree choice as an autonomous decision, often very difficult to change.

Limitations of this research include the specific political context in Poland with its abortion policy and LGBTQ+ rights restricted to the highest extent as compared to other EU countries. The polarised political scene is reflected by societal cleavages, with all the childfree respondents clearly opposing the current government. Other limitations may stem from sampling and recruitment, in particular, recruitment via social network sites, where respondents who are particularly vocal or willing to share may not be representative of the whole group of childfree persons.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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