

Divergent Narratives on Family Planning in Interwar Poland

Between “secret marriage tricks” and “the obligation of maternity”

Elisa-Maria Hiemer¹

“The house becomes a hell, the wife in her thirties is ill, an old woman, physically repulsive; the husband, stunned by the children’s cries, seeing his wife either pregnant or nursing, or both together, runs away from home to the pub, where his drinking makes the family’s misery even worse.”²

Abstract This article explores interwar narratives on birth control across political, educational, and private spheres, revealing conflicts despite public liberalization. It examines expert discourse on unwanted pregnancies, varying educational approaches, and women’s real-life experiences in abortion trials. Highlighting micro-historical sources, it underscores the challenges of singular proof and the necessity of contextual analysis.

This quote from the writer and women’s rights activist Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński not only illustrates roles and gender images in families, it also sheds light on the misery of families with many children in interwar Poland. The country

1 Freie Universität Berlin, Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut.

2 Boy-Żeleński, *Piekło kobiet*, 1930. <https://wolnelektury.pl/katalog/lektura/pieklo-kobiet.html> (05.06.2025).

has been reestablished after 123 years of partition between the Prussian, Habsburg, and Russian empires. The family as a sociodemographic factor was crucial to political and social discussions about Poland's future. In parallel, women's rights activism emerged around 1900 and criticized both the "motherhood mandate"³ and the social and health risks women with children were exposed to and challenged preexisting ideas on female sexuality and unwanted pregnancies.⁴ The "moral reform" with its liberal concepts of motherhood and partnership provoked lively debate in the media and literature, among law and medical experts. Prior to the codification of Polish law in 1932 and its new liberal regulations on abortion, the debates on birth control and family planning had developed vociferously.⁵ New and improved forms of relationships (e.g., dating, cohabitation and "amical marriage")⁶ became more popular and even vending machines with 'hygienic gums' being made available in bigger cities.⁷ These developments ushered in an era where sexuality without reproductive goals became more accepted and detached from the field of adultery – at least gradually.⁸ Nonetheless, the Polish discourse was highly diverse even in a milieu of similar ideological beliefs.⁹

Social history is often told as a history of progress as the anthropologist and specialist for the history of sexuality, Agnieszka Kościańska, pointed out.¹⁰ Based on this observation, the paper scrutinizes the divergent narratives in three overlapping domains: political, educational, and private.¹¹ The process of diversification of interpersonal relations in the interwar period has become a core topic of contemporary research,¹² and since the 2000s, an increase in

3 Russo, Mandate, 1976, p. 143–153.

4 Kałwa, Kobieta aktywna, 2002.

5 Krajewska, Spór, 2013, p. 275–300.

6 Janicki, Hipokryzji, 2015, p. 80.

7 Nonetheless, the fact that condoms would be available day and night even to minors made authorities handle their distribution in a restrictive manner. Archiwum Akt Notnych (AAN): Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej w Warszawie, f. 1582, 72.

8 Gawin, Sex Education, 2009, p. 217–235.

9 Krajewska, Spór, 2013, p. 275–300.

10 Kościańska, Moose 2021. Kościańska, Pleasure, 2021. Kuźma-Markowska, antykonceptji, 2009, p. 603–619; Kuźma-Markowska, Drop of Milk, 2011, p. 131–147.

11 Research for this article has been conducted in the project Familienplanung im östlichen Europa vom 19. Jahrhundert bis zur Einführung der "Pille" funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Science BMBF 01UC1902.

12 Landau-Czajka, Procesy socjalizacji, 2013. Żarnowski, Państwo i społeczeństwo, 2014. Żarnowski und Mędrzecki, Metamorfozy społeczne, 2015.

research on female sexuality and agency¹³ has been noticeable. However, the topic of abortion remains discussed on public levels like politics or intellectual and educational movements only.¹⁴ Approaches on microhistorical level¹⁵ are rare. With a short analysis of the testimonies given during an abortion trial held 1928–1929 at the Suwałki county court, this article wishes to enhance knowledge about the individual's life reality.¹⁶

It shows that the process of liberalization in the public sphere only had a very limited impact on the personal sphere and especially to women living in precarity. To make this divergence visible, I will first shed light on the experts' discourse on unwanted pregnancies. Secondly, I will outline divergent educational approaches in advice literature and finally, I will contrast these findings with the real-life experiences of women as they are presented in trials on abortion. This multi-layered approach intends to raise awareness regarding the character of micro-historical sources in research. Though historical in scope, this text tackles a timely issue: the topic of female self-determination and political decision-making experiences a global backlash nowadays.¹⁷ Abortion is still not considered as means of health care in most of the countries. With Poland being the worst ranked country for years according to the *Contraception Policies Atlas* published by European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights, many countries do not prioritize reproductive health care by reducing the barriers to accessing information, procedures, or reimbursement.¹⁸ Abortion still carries a stigma for women who terminate their pregnancies: in the interwar period as well as today.

13 Żarnowska und Szwarc, Równe prawa, 2000. Sierakowska, Elementy kobiecego dyskursu, 2004, p. 365–380.

14 Slany, Regulacja prawnia aborcji, 2006, p. 139–144. Szlagowska, Świadomym macierzyństwem, 2018, p. 31–47.

15 Like this article shows for a 1949 case: Klich-Kluczevska, Przypadek Marii, 2012, p. 195–209.

16 Hiemer, Maternity, forthcoming.

17 Beláňová, Anti-abortion activism, 2020, p. 395–413. Ziegler, Roe v. Wade, 2022, p. 16–21.

18 European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, Policy Atlas, 2023. https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/Contraception_Policy_Atlas_Europe2023.pdf (05.06.2025).

The Experts' Discourse. Rethinking the *Matka Polka* Topos

The founder and prominent representative of forensic medicine in the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939) was Wiktor Grzywo-Dąbrowski. He argued that there was hardly any other topic in law that was so opposed to society's view as the punishment of abortions. He blamed the patriotic view on motherhood for this problem, and especially the *topos* of *Matka Polka*, the Polish mother as the bearer of a nation that had just emerged after 123 years of partition.¹⁹ The public moral verdict condemned casual sexual behaviour and often considered an unwanted pregnancy to be the woman's fault since "she showed a strong desire to have relations with men",²⁰ as stated in some investigative police material. Indeed, it was harder for a woman who miscarried a foetus out of wedlock to defend her innocence. Like other Polish jurists, Grzywo-Dąbrowski called for a fundamental change in the perception of single mothers. For him, the main aim was to prevent abortions, for example by allowances for non-married women to raise a child born of non-normative relationships.²¹ Whereas in these cases, experts mainly had the same point of view, the topic of abortion remained controversial and the discourses about it showed an inherent paternalist view on the women's body: Even liberal voices, which acknowledged poor living conditions and insufficient social security as main factors for the high rate of illegal terminations,²² acknowledged that there was more than a woman's personal interest to be considered. The lawyer Stefan Glaser identified three groups of interest around which the discussion was centered: the fetus, the state, and third parties (including the woman).²³ However, he concluded that "the state cannot force a woman to carry a child to term and to give birth to it."²⁴ With this statement, he clearly opposed German opinions of that time, e.g.: "if a woman consents to intercourse, she signs a

¹⁹ For the role of Polish women during the partition period and their emancipation see e.g. Walczewska, Feministki, 1999. Staśkiewicz, Polin, 2018, p. 109–117.

²⁰ Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach: Policja Województwa Śląskiego, f. 290, 46.

²¹ Grzywo-Dąbrowski, Przerwanie ciąży, 1926, p. 31.

²² The numbers for the interwar period vary. The Statistical Yearbook of Poland counts between 1233 to 1399 registered cases of illegal abortions in the period 1924–1928. Since the procedure was mainly performed clandestinely, estimates assume up to half a million abortions between 1922 and 1938. See Łodyga, Metody, 2016, p. 244.

²³ Glaser, Kilka uwag, 1927, p. 39–40.

²⁴ Ibid.

contract with the State to give children to it.”²⁵ I argue that questioning the legal regulations of the former partition powers was a crucial part of Poland’s legal emancipation. Glaser was in favor of the woman’s freedom of choice as it assured her physical integrity. But this approach was rather exceptional since the majority of (exclusively male) experts did not ascribe agency to the woman. Grzywo-Dąbrowski for example required the family’s consent to surgery, i.e. the husband’s final decision.²⁶ Additionally, the surgery itself remained reprehensible in moral terms. A member of the Codification Commission, Karol Czałczyński, concluded on the judgement of abortions: “Killing a fetus is a crime. However, we must realize that in this case we are dealing with the intrusion of state power into the domain of the confidential existence of the individual. (...) However, the specific social, economic, and legal conditions play an important role.”²⁷ On the one hand, it is exactly the notion of abortion as a crime that is criticized by female voices who are underrepresented in the legal discourse: The Club of Progressive Women (Klub kobiet postępowych) comments on the draft law.²⁸ On the other hand, the legal institutions realized the need of linking the law to society’s needs. In the 1932 Makarewicz Penal Code, abortion remained criminal, but it allowed an exemption from punishment if the pregnancy threatened the life or health of the woman, as well as for women under the age of 14 and in cases of incest or rape. This juristic progress reflected the democratization of the Polish people in interwar Poland. According to Stephen Robertson, the law is often misunderstood as a tool of the sovereign for ruling the people. Instead, he claims that law also represents the “taught, learned, and accepted customs of people”.²⁹ The representatives of Polish Law indeed took their chance to free this field from German, Austrian and Russian influences and adopted it to Polish reality and Polish legal culture.³⁰

25 J. Janouli cited from Glaser, *Kilka uwag*, 1927, p. 37.

26 Grzywo-Dąbrowski, *Przerwanie ciąży*, 1926 p. 23. Grzywo-Dąbrowski used the term “wives” which explains also his notion of family: a married couple.

27 Czałczyński, *Przestępstwo*, 1930, p. 4–5.

28 Bujak-Boguska, *Pamiętnik*, 1930, online: <https://polona.pl/item/na-strazy-praw-kobiet-pamietnik-klubu-politycznego-kobiet-postepowych-1919-1930,MTc4NjQzNjU/#info:metadata> (05.06.2025), p. 159.

29 Tomlin cited from Robertson, *Law*, 2005, p. 182.

30 Bołdyrew, *Oświata i moralność*, 2013, p. 132.

Education Through Advice Literature, or “The Secret Marriage Tricks”

What did advice literature add to the discussions during the interwar period? At the beginning, translated books from Western experts prevailed and circulated widely. In the 19th century, these publications were initially made for a bourgeois readership which can be concluded by the descriptions of homes with several bedrooms which were not the norm for the majority of people. Therefore, it can be assumed that its influence was higher on the upper societal strata as it required not only literacy but also a basic understanding of biology and terminology.³¹ When taking a look at the language, one finds astonishing differences: Popular advice literature from abroad can often be characterized as misogynistic. The author of *Secret Marriage Tricks* (*Sekretne sposoby małżeńskie*) claimed that ‘wrong intercourse’ without reproductive aims was – in moral terms – equal to murder³² and argued that women requesting contraception were vain because they did not want to harm their beauty by a pregnancy.³³ Popular but ineffective methods like *coitus interruptus* were regarded as the main reason of female hysteria in marriages.³⁴ Others considered the man to be the sole decision-maker in questions of sexuality: “Regarding sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, it is primarily the man who plays the role of the possessive party, desiring to own the woman physically, while the woman is always the submissive and attractive party to the man.”³⁵

This attitude was close to the Catholic view which aimed at constructing marriage as the safe and stable core of the country where intercourse exclusively served the purpose of reproduction. Some priests considered contraception to be “national suicide”³⁶ and an evil promoted by ‘the other’. This nationalist conception considered workers returning from France or Germany a threat

31 School education was compulsory in Poland from 1921. There are massive differences in literacy between the former partition eras as demographic atlases from that time showed, e.g. Główny Urząd Statystyczny: Rzeczpospolita Polska, 1930. Table 41. <https://rcin.org.pl/dlibra/doccontent?id=2495> (05.06.2025).

32 Surbled, Małżeńskie, 1907, p. 8. <https://polona.pl/preview/5432af34-fc8a-41ce-9c40-0d48b91a5dc1> (05.06.2025).

33 Surbled, Małżeńskie, 1907, p. 6.

34 Jackowski, Dzieci, 19XX, p. 20. See also: Surbled, Małżeńskie, 1907, p. 14. Babecki, Eugenika, 1930, p. 24. Gelsen, Nakład Księgarni, 1909, p. 24. Szymański, Ograniczanie urodzin, 1930, p. 31.

35 Eksner, Życie seksualne, 1936, p. 3–4.

36 St. Czarnecki, Zmysły na licytacji, 1932, p. 64.

to the Catholic notion of the family because they brought knowledge about condoms to Polish homes. Besides, Jews were perceived as responsible for the demoralization of the people as they were regarded as profiteers of illegal abortions.³⁷

Advice literature genuinely written in Polish developed fast in the 1930s, and was clearly emancipated from foreign convictions. However, it operated with strong metaphors, too. Feminist voices even called human reproduction “blind powers of nature that have to be subjugated (...) in order not to poison someone's life”.³⁸ Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka and Henryk Rubinraut considered motherhood a powerful instinct that places women above men, since women would decide the size of the nation.³⁹ In their opinion, birth control could turn life into a conscious act by parents who can provide security for their offspring.

Despite the divergent convictions and worldviews, narratives in advice literature always referred to motherhood as the female way to care about the state. The examples tell us more about interpretations of the state of the nation than the actual topic of reproduction. Regardless if a brochure was of progressive or conservative origin, they both spread gender stereotypes (hysteric or passive wife vs. domineering husband). The decision to have or not to have children turned into a national affair.

Real Life Experiences: What Testimonies in Court (cannot) Reveal

The emotional charge of the topic is evident in personal testimonies as presented in the court files, too.⁴⁰ Some documents seem to mirror interethnic conflicts in court at first sight, but the following case demonstrates how social pressure influenced the accused woman's testimony. It is about a 21-year-old housekeeper who becomes pregnant from an affair with a Lithuanian farm laborer. The case was heard at the district court of Suwałki in 1928–1929, which means before the law codification. The abortion was performed by a Jewish and a Polish midwife. Seemingly the decision was made by the women herself for

37 Renz, planowanie rodziny, 1997, p. 119–120.

38 Ślączkowa, Świadome macierzyństwo, without year, p. 15.

39 Budzińska-Tylicka, Przedmowa, 1933, p. 2.

40 Trials concerning abortion in Poland have been presented in a few case studies: Łodyga, Metody, 2016. as well as Klich-Kluczevska, Przypadek Marii, 2012, p. 195–209.

socio-economic reasons. Although the couple initially presented themselves as engaged, this image was damaged during the interrogation. Marja revised her statement that she wanted the abortion when her partner challenged his paternity in court. "He did not deny that he had sexual relations with (her) but he did not confirm that he was the father of the child either, as other boys had also had relations with her. After the defendant [...] found out that [...] had slandered her, she recanted her original testimony before the prosecutor and gave a second one, indicating that he had persuaded her to induce a miscarriage."⁴¹ Antoni's testimony put Marja in a bad light suggesting a frivolous sexual life for which he would not take responsibility. In consequence, Maria claimed to have been forced to terminate the pregnancy by Antoni. The obligation to live an exemplary life in accordance with societal expectations placed more pressure on women than on men. In some cases, this provoked and chain of accusations and counter-accusations. Both the couple and the midwives were given minor suspended sentences and fines. The midwives appealed unsuccessfully. The behavior of the 21-year-old woman in her testimony to the midwives before the appeal court is worth a closer examination.

"This midwife (points to the first midwife) is a Jewish woman, in whose flat on Jatkowa street the operation was performed. The other one (points to the second) is a Polish-Catholic woman, who, it seemed to me, operated on my genitals. I went to the Jewish midwife (...) on the advice of unknown Jewish women, who I asked on the street in Suwałki"⁴² Even if this statement did not have any influence on her own sentence, she seemed aware of the power of her words. First, the deliberate omission of names shows a clear devaluation of the midwives. Second, her statements allude to the notion of a dubious, secretive Jewish abortion network. However, one needs to consider the bigger societal picture before interpreting this statement. In her study about female delinquency in the interwar period, Emilia Płońska states that besides neonaticide, terminations of pregnancy belonged to the most frequently committed crimes of women.⁴³ Trials of dramatic character were popular among the local population. In the interwar period, there was no selection of participants

41 Archiwum Państwowe w Suwałkach (APS): Sąd Okręgowy w Grodnie/Wydział Zamiejscowy w Suwałkach, Serie: 4 Wydział Karny, signature 208, folder 8717, p. 101–102.

42 APS: Sąd Okręgowy w Grodnie. Wydział Zamiejscowy w Suwałkach, Wydział karny, f. 8717, 399. During my research stay in the archive, I could examine 45 cases that were already processed and made available for users in 2019.

43 Płońska, Głośne procesy, 2019, p. 149.

in court rooms, hence the audience consisted of curious neighbors anticipating⁴⁴ an unfolding personal drama. The anti-Jewish statement thus could have been done on purpose to distract from her own responsibility and to raise her credibility alluding to the negative image of the Jew the Polish Church was also spreading at that time.

The case cited here was discussed at the county court of Suwałki, therefore one also has to consider the special situation in small towns where everybody knew everybody knew everybody, at least from hearsay as rumors spread quickly. Reports on court trials and unwanted pregnancies and 'fallen women' also were common topics in the local newspapers. The destinies of children born out of wedlock and especially children of prostitutes were a target for catchy headlines (e.g., "Children in the quagmire of fornication").⁴⁵ Although analysis of local newspapers also evinced a rising awareness of female living conditions and single mothers, one has to assume the high social pressure and the fear of becoming exposed to the local moral verdict that an accused woman had to withstand.

Conclusion

This article dissected the meaning of unwanted pregnancies on three levels: the legal, educational, and personal. For public discourse, it is worth emphasizing that the opinion of Polish law experts tended to deconstruct the notion of motherhood as a national duty, unlike their foreign colleagues. In Polish advice literature – which certainly had a broader audience than the experts' discourse – the ideological spectrum ranged from normative to progressive; but they were without exception emotionalizing. The connection between motherhood and the state remained crucial. The positions in foreign literature that initially influenced the discussion rather pathologized sexuality without reproduction. Polish opinions, in turn (except the Catholic viewpoint), showed solidarity with female readers recommending they take contraception into their own hands.⁴⁶ Considering also the liberalization of abortion regulations unique to Europe at

44 Płońska, *Głośne procesy*, 2019, p. 142. Nonetheless, during my research I came across many court files where a non-public hearing was requested.

45 *Dzień dobry Ziemi Suwalskiej*, January 8, 1933, p. 9. On the importance of Polish local press See: Piwowarczyk, *Model*, 2013, p. 131–136.

46 Janicki, *Hipokryzji*, 2015, p. 340.

that time, I argue that the Polish experts' discourse did not only 'look up' to the Western discourses but emancipated itself from them. Yet the entire codification process is another example of male decision-makers and the way they perceived and judged female topics against the backdrop of the nation building process. For all sources, it is therefore crucial to analyze the narrative potential of the source itself to map the polyphonic reality. Although moral convictions were liberalizing, the language still mirrored a patronizing understanding of women's issues due to the patriotic charge of motherhood.

On the level of individual actors, women were exposed to public opinion that did not change quickly. I argue that the social prejudice about abortions and the unfavorable image of the 'fallen woman' are important to contextualize the spoken word. As the court file showed, negative statements about the Jewish midwife cannot be traced back to actual anti-Jewish beliefs. Primarily, discrediting others during emotionally challenging trials was the last resort to avoid severe judgement both in legal and social terms.

Research with court files thus requires a particular awareness of this type of sources. It is true that law suits on abortion allow us to go beyond the crime itself and to draw conclusions about the personal world. Court files also make voices heard in a way that enables us to visualize former times via listening to normal people "talking about sexual intimacy, power, betrayal, and broken promises."⁴⁷ Despite the captivating character of these testimonies, it is important to remember that the sudden character of the statements originates in the heat of the moment. However, they can provide us with insights into the intersections of interests in court and the moral standards according to which the defendants were judged – legally and socially.

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47 Robertson, Law, 2005, p. 161.

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