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**Women's employment and marital stability:
the role of the context**

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Abstract¹

A discussion of the effects of partners' labour force participation on marital stability has been part of the demographic debate for several decades. While theorists generally agree that men's employment has a stabilizing effect on marriage, there is considerable controversy about the effects of women's involvement in the labour market on marital stability. This debate has centred on several models and arguments. The most recent contributions have underlined the role of the context in moderating the relationship in question, and our study aims to contribute to this debate. We use the case of Poland, a country that underwent rapid and profound changes in its economic, institutional, and socio-cultural settings. Using GGS-PL data, we estimated a hazard regression of marital disruption, separately for women and men. The effects of employment status were allowed to vary by calendar time in order to determine how the relationship between women's economic activity and marital stability was affected by the transformation of the labour market; the reassignment of responsibility for an individual's welfare among the state, the family, and the market; the change in institutional support for families; and the liberalisation of the gender roles. Our empirical study showed that, after the onset of the economic transformation, working women became significantly more likely to divorce than women who did not have a job. This finding implies that the economic transformation led to a substantial increase in women's dependence on their partners, and made it much more difficult for non-working women to exit unhappy marriages. This conclusion is further corroborated by our finding that, relative to working women, the disruption risk among women on maternity and parental leave declined over time. As expected, men's employment was found to stabilise marriages both prior to and after 1989.

Keywords: marital instability, marital disruption, women's employment, women's economic independence

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I. INTRODUCTION

A discussion on the effects of partners' labour force participation on marital stability has been part of the demographic debate for several decades. While theorists generally agree that men's employment has a stabilising effect on marriage (Becker et al. 1977, Parsons 1940, Oppenheimer 1997, Moffit 2000), there is considerable controversy regarding the effects of women's labour market participation on marital stability. This debate has centred on several models and arguments. Referring to gender norms and the division of labour in the household, some scholars have asserted that women's employment contributes to marital disruption (Becker et al. 1977, Parsons 1940, Cherlin 1979). Recently, however, the appropriateness of these models when applied to contemporary societies in developed countries has been questioned. It has been argued that women's employment has a stabilising effect on marriages, as women's involvement in the labour market is increasingly considered the norm, and the organisation of the households has been shifting from role specialisation to income pooling (Oppenheimer 1997, Cherlin 2000, Stevenson and Wolfers 2007). The most recent studies on this issue underlined the importance of context in moderating this relationship (Cooke 2006, Cooke and Gash 2010, Kaplan and Stier 2010). They have asserted that the direction and magnitude of the relationship depends on gender norms acknowledged in the society, the extent to which the woman's earnings are necessary to satisfy a couple's material aspirations, the level of public support for mothers' employment, and the welfare benefits available to the economically dependent spouse in case of divorce. Despite the abundant empirical evidence on the association between women's employment and divorce, there have so far been relatively few empirical studies that have tested the moderating influence of the specific context on the relationship in question.

Our study aims to contribute to this debate on the role of the country context in moderating the association between women's employment and marital stability. We are fortunate to have marital and employment histories for Poland, a country that experienced rapid and profound changes in its economic, institutional, and socio-cultural settings. We thus look how the relationship between women's economic activity and marital stability was affected by the transformation of the labour market and its ability to provide jobs to individuals; the reassignment of responsibility for individual welfare among the state, the family, and the market; the change in levels of institutional support for families; and the modernisation of gender roles. Although our focus is on women, we also provide some empirical evidence for men. This allows us to better understand the findings for women, and to verify theory-driven predictions regarding the positive effect of men's employment on marital disruption.

In the subsequent section, we provide an overview of the theoretical approaches that seek to explain the effect of women's employment on marital stability. We then describe the Polish context before and after the onset of the economic transformation, and present our research objectives, the data we employed, and our analytical approach. Finally, we discuss our empirical findings.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS STUDIES

The view that women's employment destabilises marital unions can be derived from the role specialisation assumption that is built into the economic model of marriage proposed by Becker et al. (1977) (*role-specialisation model*). According to this assumption, a couple maximises joint utility from a marriage through specialisation in domestic work and paid work. Due to prevalent gender roles and the gender wage gap, women usually specialise in housework and men specialise in income provision. As women's entry into the labour market eliminates these gains from specialisation, the economic activity of women is assumed to destabilise the marriage.

A negative effect of women's employment on marital stability has also been posited in other disciplines. These theoretical approaches referred to the prevailing gender norms in a given society (*gender norms-based models*). For example, Parsons (1940) argued that the labour market involvement of both spouses may lead to status competition between partners, and, consequently, to divorce. Like Becker's model, Parsons' theory did not indicate who should not work in the market or who should work less, as the role assignments were assumed to be derived from the gender role norms rooted in a given society. The destabilising effect of women's employment on marriage was also anticipated by psycho-social theorists, who suggested that a woman's involvement in paid work might be indicative of her partner's poor performance as an income provider, which might lead to further strains between the spouses (Cherlin 1979, Jalovaara 2003).

The gendered division of the household work posited in the role-specialisation model and gender norms-based models leads to woman's dependency on her partner's income. This dependence limits a woman's ability to cope with the financial implications of separation and divorce, and prevents her from living independently after her marriage ends. By participating in the market, a woman gains access to income and is able to support herself outside of marriage. Hobson (1990) and Ruggles (1997) argued that this economic independence gained through paid work does not necessarily affect the quality of a union, but it provides a woman with the resources she would need to exit an unhappy marriage. Consequently, even if the quality of the

marriage is unchanged after a woman enters the labour market, a positive association between the woman's economic activity and marital instability may nonetheless be observed (*independence model*).

Recently, however, these theoretical approaches have been criticised for adopting a traditional model of gendered division of labour and ignoring the changing economic and social roles of women. A number of scholars have argued that the organisation of the household has changed from production and role specialisation to consumption and income pooling, and that two incomes may be often necessary to satisfy a couple's material aspirations (Cherlin 2000, Sayer and Bianchi 2000, Stevenson and Wolfers 2007, Raz-Yurovich 2012). Oppenheimer (1997) formulated an alternative *economic interdependence model*, which posits that economic contributions by both partners to the household budget improve a couple's living standards and allow them to diversify the risk of a job loss by one of the partners, thereby stabilising marriages. Referring to changing gender norms, Simpson and England (1981) argued that, in modern societies in which women no longer spend most of their time at home, engaging in similar economic activities and having similar interests may be more decisive for the durability of a union than gains from specialisation (see also Coltrane 2000, Sayer and Bianchi 2000).

The role of women's economic activity in marital disruption cannot, however, be properly considered without taking into account the context in which employment and partnership decisions are made. Depending on the context, some theoretical models will be more valid and appropriate for predicting and explaining the relationship between women's economic activity and marital disruption than others. Demographic and sociological studies have identified three context dimensions which could be particularly relevant in the debate about what role women's economic resources play in marital stability:

1) gender roles, which define the extent to which a deviation from the gendered division of work is feasible and socially accepted (e.g., Sayer and Bianchi 2000, Cooke 2006, Cooke and Gash 2010, Evertsson and Neramo 2007);

2) the economic situation of households, which determines the extent to which the material aspirations of the couple are satisfied (e.g., Cherlin 2000, Stevenson and Wolfers 2007); and, finally,

3) the institutional context, which defines the extent to which the state supports women's economic independence from their partners, e.g., by providing publically funded childcare and offering financial support to the economically weaker partner in case of a union disruption (e.g., Orloff 1993, Iversen et al. 2005, Kaplan and Stier 2010).

These studies assume that women's employment will be more likely to threaten marital stability in country contexts characterised by more traditional gender roles, and in which men's earnings are on average sufficient to satisfy a couple's material aspirations, the barriers to labour market entry for women are particularly high, and the state offers little support for working mothers or for the economically dependent spouse in case of divorce. Empirical research has so far mainly focused on testing the moderating role of the cultural and institutional dimensions of the country context on the relationship between women's economic resources and marital stability. For example, by comparing seven European countries with similar levels of economic development and different institutional and cultural settings, Kaplan and Stier (2010) demonstrated that women's economic resources tend to destabilise marriages in countries in which welfare policies promote women's dependence on the partner or the market, while in more gender-neutral settings—i.e., in countries in which the government's policies promote dual earning and/or provide more generous welfare support to the economically disadvantaged spouse—women's contributions to the household budget tend to strengthen marriages. A similar approach was adopted by Cooke (2006) and Cooke and Gash (2010), who demonstrated that the negative effects of women's employment on marital stability are most prevalent in Germany and are less prevalent in the UK or US. They attributed these findings to differences in the gendered division of labour between the German-speaking and Anglo-Saxon countries.

This study also aims to investigate how the context affects the relationship between women's employment and marital stability. In contrast to the existing literature, which relies on the cross-country variability of the contextual setting, we use a within-country change in the conditions under which individuals are acting. The case of Poland, a country that experienced a rapid transformation of its political, economic, and social systems, offers a unique framework for conducting such a study.

III. CONTEXT OF POLAND BEFORE AND AFTER 1989

After 1989, Poland experienced pronounced changes in family-related behaviours. These changes began with marked declines in fertility and nuptiality, and were followed by an expansion of non-marital cohabitation and a rapid rise in marital instability. As these changes have been widely described in the literature (Kotowska et al. 2008, Matysiak 2009b, Styrac 2010), we will refrain from outlining them in detail here. Instead, we will look at the changes in those aspects of the country's economic, institutional, and social contexts which, based on the theoretical considerations discussed above, might have affected the relationship between wife's employment status and the decision to remain married. More specifically, we explore the

changes in the welfare provision, the conditions for participating in the labour force and securing income, and gender roles.

The system transformation that started in Poland in 1989 resulted in a reassignment of the functions of the state, employers, and the family, and thus led to a major reorganisation of Polish society (Kotowska 1999, Kotowska et al. 2008). One of its major consequences was a gradual withdrawal of the state from providing individuals with financial support and social services. In the socialist state, basic consumer goods and services, including child-related items, were subsidised; education and health care were free; and families were supported by the universal system of family benefits (Heinen and Wator 2006, Mishtal 2009). Although the quality of these publicly provided goods and services was sometimes poor, this system offered families a modest level of security. Under the budgetary pressures of the economic transformation, these subsidies were gradually withdrawn, the health care and educational systems were partly privatised, and social expenditures on families were sharply reduced (Heinen and Wator 2006). Family allowances—which were the main financial instrument used to support families—were subject to deep cuts in the second half of 1990s, after undergoing several inconsistent changes during the first half of the 1990s. Not only were the family benefit levels reduced in real terms, but also the eligibility criteria were tightened by the introduction of an income threshold, which was subsequently lowered (Balcerzak-Paradowska et al. 2003, Golinowska 2005, Fodor et al. 2002). As a consequence, the previously universal system of family benefits was transformed into a selective system targeted at individuals with the greatest need (Fodor et al. 2002, Heinen and Wator 2006). In parallel to the reduction in financial support for families, the role of the state in providing childcare declined. During 1988-2004, the number of places in crèches decreased 77%, and the number of places in kindergartens fell 25% (own calculations on CSO data). In addition, a portion of the upkeep costs of running childcare institutions (about 30%-40%) was shifted onto parents (Balcerzak-Paradowska et al. 2003:204-205). While some improvement in the number of places in childcare institutions has occurred since 2004, the enrolment rates in Poland are among the lowest in the EU: in 2009, only 2% of the under-threes and 53% of children aged 3-5 attended public day care centres (Multilinks Database).

The withdrawal of the state from the provision of social support affected families as well as mothers. First, it led to a substantial increase in the level of individual responsibility for securing the economic well-being of the family. Individuals became much more dependent on the market and their own ability to earn an income than in the past. Second, the decline in the provision of public childcare led to a substantial increase in the incongruities between paid work and childrearing, which, together with the reduction in family benefits, increased the economic dependence of mothers on their partners.

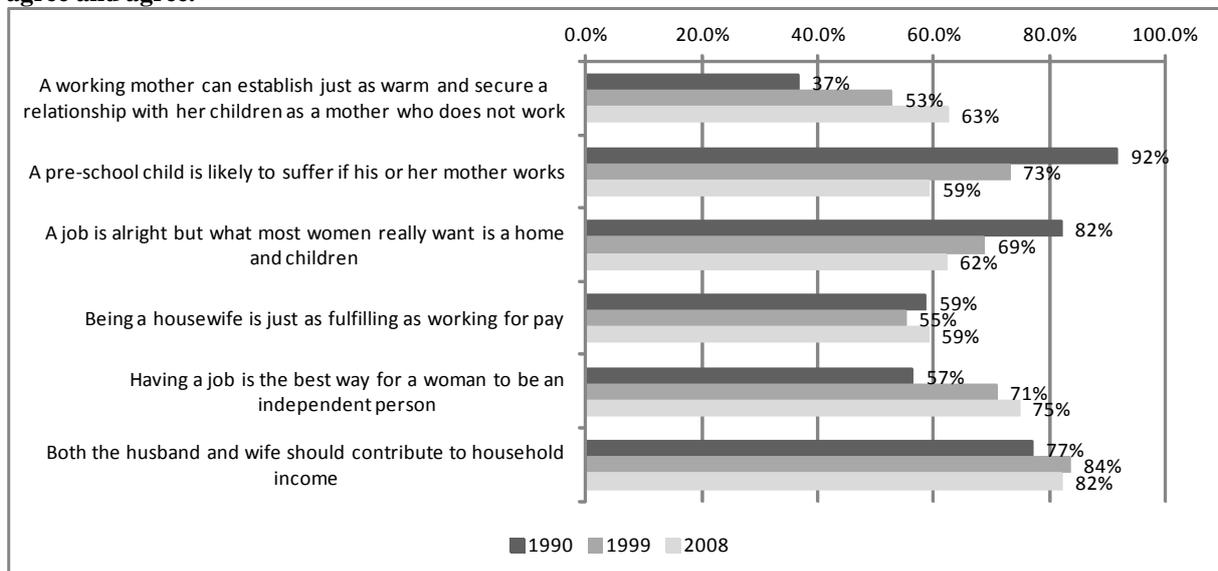
At the same time, earning an income became much more difficult than it had been in the past. The replacement of public companies with private enterprises, as along with the opening of the Polish economy to global markets, led to a surge in labour market competition, and, consequently, to a rapid increase in employers' requirements regarding the skills, mobility, and flexibility of workers (Kotowska 2004). Unemployment, which had previously been unknown, grew rapidly, and temporary employment became widespread starting in the early 1990s. In general, employment instability became a new feature of the Polish labour market after 1989. These developments led to substantial changes in income distribution, and, consequently, to increasing economic and social inequality. Rising rates of poverty and social stratification were combined with the social exclusion of specific groups, and with a decline in feelings of social security (Milanovic 1999).

The increase in labour market instability and the intensification of difficulties in combining paid work and family were, initially, expected to reduce the labour force participation of women. The employment levels of women of childbearing and childrearing ages did in fact decrease, but the decline was not greater than it was for men (Kotowska and Sztanderska 2007, Matysiak 2011). Whereas 95% of men and 78% of women aged 25-44 were employed at the end of the 1980s, these figures were by 11 percentage points lower for men and 10 percentage points lower for women in 1992. On the eve of Poland's entry into the EU, employment rates were, relative to 1988, 18.5 percentage points lower for men and 14 percentage points lower for women (own calculations on data from ILO Laborsta Database and OECD Employment Database). These labour market trends were accompanied by a rapid increase in women's educational attainment (Sztanderska 2005, Matysiak et al. 2010), and were interpreted in the literature as a sign of women's strong determination to keep and maintain a job, despite the difficulties they faced (Kotowska and Sztanderska 2007, Matysiak and Steinmetz 2008, Matysiak 2009a). Financial motives were found to be one of the most important reasons for this behaviour (Matysiak 2009a, Matysiak and Mynarska 2010). In fact, the belief that women should work for pay to support their families is widespread in all post-socialist countries, including Poland (Lück and Hofäcker 2003, Muszyńska 2007), and is likely attributable to the legacy of the socialist state. Even though women still earn less than men on average, their earnings account for one-third of the total income from work earned by Polish couples, and thus constitute a sizeable contribution to the household budget (own calculations on the EU-SILC data 2009).

In parallel to these economic and institutional developments, Poland has also experienced changes in gender norms and in the social acceptance of mothers' involvement in the labour market. Despite the fact that the socialist state encouraged women's emancipation in the public sphere, it also continued to promote the traditional role of women as the main

providers of care and household services (Pascall and Manning 2000). As a result, a dual-earner family model in which women bore a double burden prevailed: women were responsible for providing care to family members and to contributing to the household budget (see also Siemieńska 1997, Frejka 2008, Titkow 1995). Even though this distinctive perception of women’s double roles remains prevalent in Polish society (Matysiak 2011, Muszyńska 2007), there has also been a clear shift toward greater social acceptance of women’s employment over the last 20 years, as documented by the data from three waves of the European Value Survey (EVS) conducted in 1990, 1999, and 2008 (see Figure 1)². The data show that, since the early 1990s, women’s employment has come to be perceived as less harmful for children and the family, and that Poles are becoming less likely to believe that, while it is fine for women to have a job, what women really want is a home and children. Women’s employment has also been increasingly recognised as an important tool for women’s economic independence, and appreciated for its contributions to the household budget. Although the percentage of respondents who say they see unpaid work as a source of fulfilment has remained constant over time, it is noteworthy that the share who support this view has been relatively low compared to other countries, even in the early 1990s (analyses not presented here).

Figure 1. Perception of women’s social roles, Poland 1990, 1999, 2008, percentage of responses: strongly agree and agree.



Note: for 1999 and 2008 weighted data, no weights available for 1990.

Source: authors’ calculations on EVS 1990, 1999, 2008.

² Unfortunately, there are no comparative data on gender norms for the period prior to 1989.

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The socio-economic changes initiated in 1989 created a completely different set of opportunities, incentives, and constraints for people in Poland. In this paper, we are interested in studying whether and how these changes affected the relationship between women's economic activity and marital instability. Based on our theoretical considerations and our context description, we formulated two expectations about the possible directions of change in this relationship.

First, we expect to find that, given the more unstable labour market conditions and the lower levels of public support for families, having two incomes earned by working partners constitutes greater protection against material deprivation and material strain than having one income alone. Being part of dual-earner couple allows individuals to better satisfy their material aspirations, which is particularly important given the rapid increase in consumption that took place in Poland after 1989. Thus, in line with the economic interdependence model, we expect to find that women's economic activity has a more stabilising effect on marriages under the market economy system than it did under state socialism. Following the gender norm-based model, we also anticipate that this effect has been further reinforced by the increasing level of social acceptance of women's employment in Poland.

Yet on the other hand, the withdrawal of the state from providing childcare and financial support for families has increased the dependence of women, especially mothers, on the market and their partners. In the market economy, it has become much more difficult to find and maintain a job, especially for women with young children. While in the past non-working women who decided to divorce could rely on their right to work and on public support, under the market economy system and the reduced welfare state, leaving a partner without having an independent source of maintenance has become a risky behaviour. Therefore, according to the independence model, these changes may lead women to condition their decision to separate on having a job to a much greater extent than was the case under state socialism.

In sum, the arguments presented above suggest that the changes in the economic, institutional, and social contexts of Poland might have affected the association between women's employment and marital stability through two different mechanisms. The first mechanism works through the increase in the economic role of women, and hence strengthens the negative or weakens the positive association between women's employment and the risk of marital disruption, compared to the pre-1989 period. The second mechanism amplifies the economic dependence of women on their partners, thereby affecting the relationship of interest in the opposite direction. Although it is possible that only one of the two mechanisms has been in force,

it is most likely that they have been operating in parallel. In the empirical part of the paper, we investigate which of the two mechanisms is dominant.

V. DATA

To address our research hypotheses, the data from the first wave of the Polish Generations and Gender Survey (GGS-PL) were used. The survey was carried out at the turn of 2010 and 2011 on a representative sample of 18-79-year-old women and men, with a response rate of 55%. The survey was coordinated by the Institute of Statistics and Demography at the Warsaw School of Economics, and the fieldwork was conducted by the Central Statistical Office. The GGS-PL contains retrospective fertility, partnership, and employment histories of the respondents since age 15 (Kotowska and Jóźwiak 2011). Its limitation is, however, that it does not contain information on the employment histories of the respondents' partners.

The process under study was defined as the duration from the first legal marriage until its disruption. The union disruption date was based on reports by the respondent (*de facto* separation); however, if divorce occurred first, the divorce date was considered the end of the process. The marriages were censored at the time of the interview or at the partner's death. We decided to restrict our analyses to individuals aged 18-56 at the time of interview; i.e., to those born in 1955-1993. Older individuals were not considered in order to limit the mortality bias that might have occurred otherwise³. This gave us a final sample of 4824 first marriages for women, out of which 546 were dissolved; and a sample of 3300 first marriages for men, out of which 299 ended with a breakup. The sample composition with regard to our main explanatory variables—i.e., employment status and calendar time—is presented in Table 1. It contains information on the number of months over which our respondents were observed while being in a certain employment status over a given calendar time period (e.g., person-months), and on the number of marital disruptions experienced by persons in a given state (e.g., occurrences).

³ However, we also performed an identical analysis for cohorts born 1945-1993 in order to verify whether our findings are robust to a low number of events, particularly in the pre-1989 period. The findings were in line with the results presented in this paper.

Table 1. Process of marital disruption – exposure and events in the sample by gender, calendar time, and employment status

Characteristics of respondents: sex, period under observation, employment status		Exposure: person-months		Occurrences: number of marital disruptions	
		Absolute number	Relative number	Absolute number	Relative number
Women					
up to 1989	not employed	41727	6.4%	22	4.0%
	working	102876	15.9%	58	10.6%
	on leave	32346	5.0%	20	3.7%
1990s	not employed	71556	11.0%	34	6.2%
	working	139711	21.5%	90	16.5%
	on leave	21801	3.4%	10	1.8%
2000-2011	not employed	79751	12.3%	94	17.2%
	working	135871	20.9%	200	36.6%
	on leave	16813	2.6%	8	1.5%
mis-specified employment status, all periods		6409	1.0%	10	1.8%
Total		648861	100.0%	546	100.0%
Men					
up to 1989	not employed	5925	1.4%	9	3.0%
	working	79575	18.5%	41	13.7%
	on leave	275	0.1%	0	0.0%
1990s	not employed	13137	3.0%	13	4.3%
	working	150157	34.8%	86	28.8%
	on leave	273	0.1%	0	0.0%
2000-2011	not employed	12835	3.0%	21	7.0%
	working	166085	38.5%	125	41.8%
	on leave	319	0.1%	0	0.0%
mis-specified employment status, all periods		2617	0.6%	4	1.3%
Total		431198	100.0%	299	100.0%

Note: For some observation spells, the information provided by a respondent was not sufficient to define employment status. We coded these spells as ‘mis-specified employment status’. They were kept in our analytical sample because they could still contribute to the estimation of the effects of other covariates.

Source: own calculations with GGS-PL data.

Table 1 shows that the status “on leave”—which for women includes mostly maternity and parental leave—turned out to be extremely rare among men, and thus this category was not considered in the analysis for men. The period up to 1989 mainly covers the 1980s due to our cohort selection criteria for the analytical sample. The oldest respondents in the sample were born in 1955 and turned 20 in 1975. As a majority of respondents married in their twenties, the marital histories of the oldest cohort in the sample could be observed only in the second half of the 1970s. For men less than one per cent of the total observation time fell on the 1970s, and for women it was three per cent. Consequently, there were very few marital disruptions in our sample in the 1970s: eight among women and only three among men.

VI. METHOD – PIECEWISE CONSTANT EVENT HISTORY MODELS

Using the GGS-PL data, we estimated a hazard regression of marital disruption for first marriages. The model was estimated separately for women and men since we lacked information on partners' employment status. The baseline hazard was defined as a piecewise constant exponential function, which means that it was allowed to vary across a priori specified time intervals. The covariates were assumed to shift the hazard proportionally:

$$h(t) = h_0(t) \cdot \exp(\beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2(t)) \quad (1)$$

where:

$h(t)$ is the hazard of marital disruption at time point t ;

$h_0(t)$ is the baseline hazard split after the 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 10th years;

x_1 are time-constant characteristics of marriage; and

$x_2(t)$ are time-varying characteristics of marriage.

Our main explanatory variable is the employment status combined with the calendar time. This means that the coefficients for employment status were allowed to vary by calendar period. The effect of employment on the risk of disruption was estimated net of a set of time-constant and time-varying covariates, which were shown in the literature to be correlated with marital disruption. We introduced the following time-fixed variables: place of residence during childhood (urban with 100,000 inhabitants or more, urban below 100 000 inhabitants, rural); the age at marriage; and a set of dummies indicating whether the respondent's parents had divorced, whether the respondent had ever experienced a premarital conception or birth, and whether the current marriage had been preceded by cohabitation with the current or other partner. The time-varying covariates included the following: the number of the respondent's children, the age of the youngest child, and the respondent's educational attainment. Our survey provided us with data on the highest educational level ever achieved, the year in which it was achieved, and whether the person was studying at the time of the interview. This allowed us to reconstruct educational histories for the majority of respondents and code them into five categories: currently in education or the highest educational status achieved after completing education (tertiary, post-secondary non-tertiary and secondary, basic vocational, and primary). Problems arose only among those respondents who were still in education at the time of the survey and whose age suggested that they might have re-entered education after taking a break; e.g., they enrolled in tertiary education or post-tertiary education some time after reaching the previous educational level. As we were not able to assess whether such a break occurred and how long it lasted, we decided to distinguish between respondents who reported being in

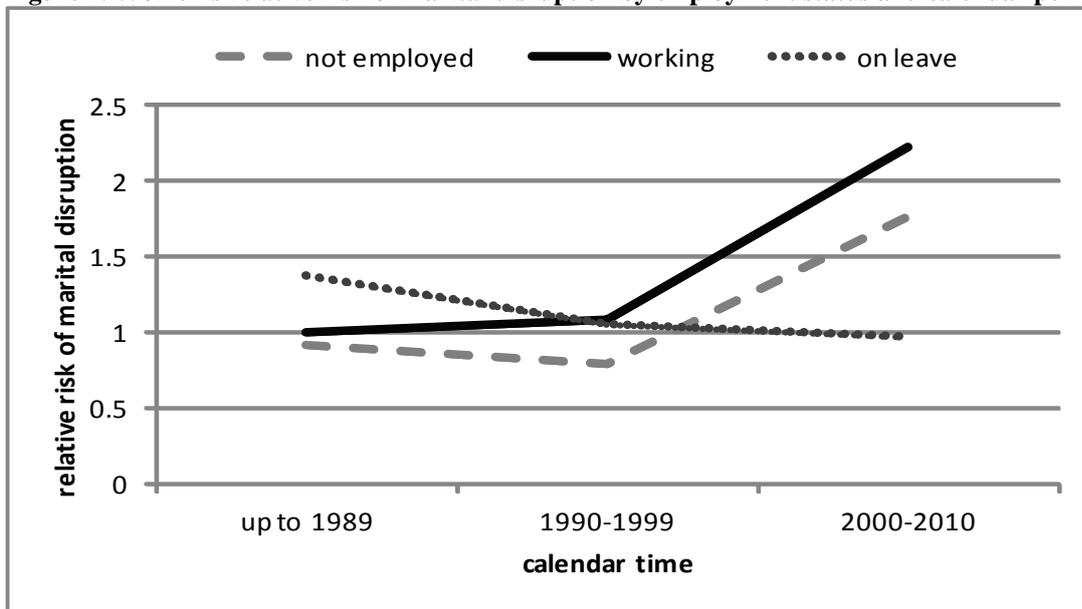
education at the time of the survey and were under age 28, and respondents who were in education and over age 28, based on the assumption that a break must have occurred in the latter group.

VII. RESULTS

In this section, we present only the estimates of the covariates for the main independent variable; i.e., employment status by calendar time for men and women. The full model is presented in the Appendix.

Figure 2 presents the relative risks of marital disruption for women by their labour market status and the calendar period. The analysis showed that, up to 1989, there was no difference in dissolution risks between working and non-working women, but that the picture started to change in the following decades. In the 1990s, the risk of marital disruption among working women started to exceed that among non-working women, although this difference was still insignificant.⁴ In the 2000s, working women were already significantly more likely to end their marriages than women who did not have a job. Hence, our findings suggest that women’s employment did not affect the dissolution risk under state socialism, but had a destabilising effect on marriages under the market economy system.

Figure 2. Women’s relative risk of marital disruption by employment status and calendar period



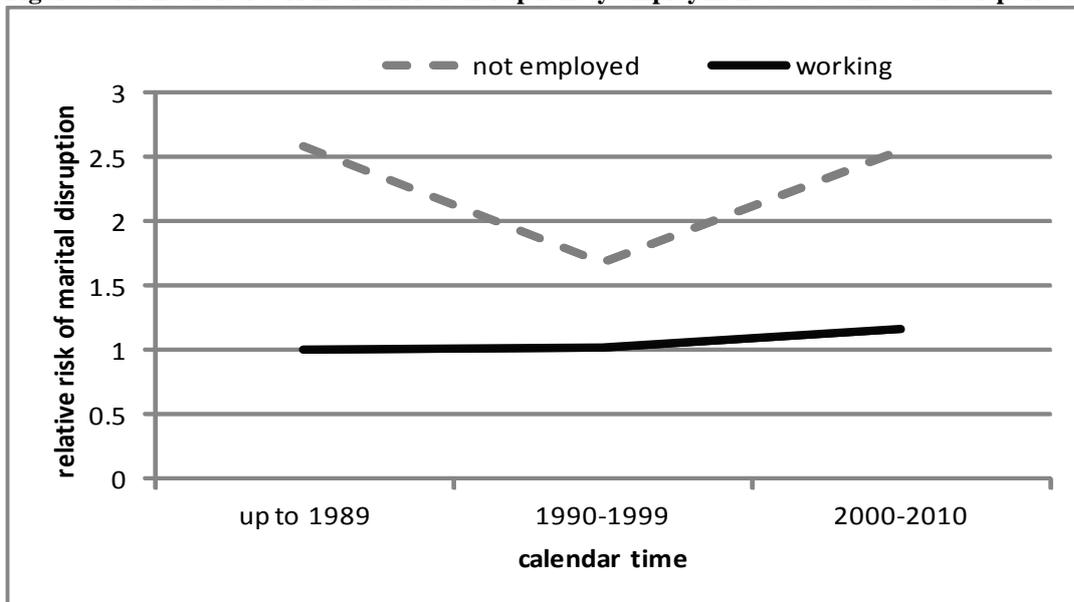
Source: own calculations with GGS data.

⁴ The risk of marital disruption among working women relative to non-working women in the 1990s was quite high (1.38), but insignificant (p-value equalled to 0.117). This phenomenon might result from the fact that there were relatively few events of disruption in the sample during the 1990s, despite a reasonable sample size (Table 1). A low frequency of disruption events is due to the fact that marriages in Poland are relatively stable compared to unions in other post-industrial societies.

Our study also yields some interesting findings for women regarding maternity and parental leave: namely, that women on leave during the 1980s were as likely to disrupt their marriages as working women (the difference visible in Figure 1 was not significant), while in the 2000s the risk of disruption among women on leave was already lower than among working women⁵. This finding may indicate that, under the socialist welfare state, women with young children were much more able to leave unsatisfactory marriage than they were in the 2000s.

Consistent with the theoretical expectations and available empirical evidence, our study showed that non-working men had a higher risk of marital disruption than men who were employed (Figure 3). This relationship between men’s employment status and disruption risk was observed throughout the observation period⁶.

Figure 3. Men’s relative risk of marital disruption by employment status and calendar period



Source: own calculations with GGS data.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

The aim of our study was to contribute to the recently developing line of research on the moderating effects of context on the relationship between women’s employment and marital disruption. We looked at the case of Poland, a country that had very different contexts before and after 1989 due to substantial changes in its institutional, economic, and cultural settings.

⁵ The difference between working women and women on leave in the 2000s is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

⁶ We did not comment on the decline in the relative risk among non-working men in the 1990s because it was not statistically significant.

More specifically, we investigated whether and how this relationship was affected by the transformation of the labour market; the reassignment of responsibility for individual welfare among the state, the family, and the market; the decline in public support for families; and the liberalisation of gender norms. Referring to our theoretical considerations and description of the changes in the country's context, we formulated two expectations based on different mechanisms. On the one hand, given the increasing importance of women's economic contributions to the household budget and increasing social acceptance of women's work, we anticipated an increase in the income-stabilising effect of women's employment on marriages. On the other hand, we posited that the increasing dependence of women on their partners, due to the withdrawal of the state from the provision of family allowances and childcare services, as well as increasing difficulties in finding and maintaining employment, particularly among women, might have intensified the destabilising effect of women's employment on marriages. While we assumed that these two mechanisms likely coexisted, we wanted to determine which of them was dominant.

Our empirical study confirmed that there was a change in the relationship between women's employment and marital disruption after 1989, and that this relationship turned from insignificant to positive. We thus found that, after the onset of the economic transformation, working women became significantly more likely to end their marriages than women who did not have a job. This finding implies that the economic transformation led to a substantial increase in women's dependence on their partners, and made it far more difficult for non-working women to exit unhappy marriages. This conclusion is further corroborated by our finding that, over time, women on maternity or parental leave became less likely to disrupt marriages than working women. It should be noted, however, that our findings do not mean that there was no amplification in the income effect of women's employment on marital stability, but, rather, that the increase in this effect was subordinate to the intensification of the dependency effect.

Although our main research objective was to investigate the temporal change in the association between women's employment and marital disruption, we also looked at the relationship between men's economic activity and disruption risks. In line with the predictions of various theoretical models and the available empirical evidence, we found that men's employment clearly stabilises marriages in Poland.

Our study has also some shortcomings. First, due to data limitations, we were able to study only the effect of women's employment status on disruption risks. Nevertheless, this effect might depend on the level of earnings achieved by the partners. Various empirical studies have

confirmed that the amount a woman earns is more useful than the woman's employment status alone when measuring her economic independence, as they found that it is not necessarily the fact that a woman is working, but rather that she is earning a higher wage than her male partner, which destabilises her marriage (Greenstein 1990, Oppenheimer 1997, Sayer and Bianchi 2000, Jalovaara 2003, Liu and Vikat 2004). Second, our data did not allow us to control for a number of confounding factors which have been recently shown to reduce the positive effect of women's employment on marital instability; namely, the level of satisfaction with marriage (Schoen et al. 2002), the level of commitment of the spouses to each other, and the acknowledged gender ideology (Sayer and Bianchi 2000) or men's involvement in housework (Sigle-Rushton 2010). Finally, although we found that the change in the living conditions of families has affected the association between women's employment and marital stability, we were not able to assess to what extent this change was driven purely by the withdrawal of the state from public support for families, or the extent to which it was influenced by the changes in the conditions of labour force participation or counterbalanced by an increasing social acceptance of women's work. We suspect, however, that the last factor was the least influential in this process, as the economic and institutional changes in Poland were sudden, due to the rapid transition from the centrally planned economy to the market economy; while the cultural changes occurred more slowly. Future research should address these gaps, possibly by using richer individual data and linking them to aggregate-level indicators in a multi-level framework.

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APPENDIX

Table 1A. Estimates of first marital disruption models for women and men

Covariates and their modalities	women		men	
	relative risk	SE	relative risk	SE
Duration of marriage (baseline)				
first and second years	1		1	
third and fourth years	1.69***	0.28	1.50*	0.32
fifth and sixth years	1.85***	0.34	1.48*	0.35
seventh to tenth year	1.87***	0.35	1.66**	0.39
eleventh to fifteenth year	2.16***	0.46	1.42	0.39
Labour force participation interacted with calendar period				
not employed, up to 1989	0.92	0.23	2.58**	0.97
working, up to 1989	1		1	
on leave, up to 1989	1.37	0.37	-	-
not employed, 1990-1999	0.79	0.17	1.68	0.54
working, 1990-1999	1.09	0.19	1.03	0.20
on leave, 1990-1999	1.06	0.37	-	-
not employed, 2000-2010	1.77***	0.31	2.55***	0.72
working, 2000-2010	2.22***	0.36	1.17	0.23
on leave, 2000-2010	0.98	0.38	-	-
Education level				
primary or lower	1.29	0.21	1.34	0.30
vocational	1		1	
high school	0.95	0.11	1.09	0.16
tertiary	1.21	0.19	1.30	0.25
in education, under age 28	1.24	0.21	0.70	0.22
in education, over age 28	1.26	0.21	1.36	0.32
Parity				
0	1		1	
1	0.65	0.26	1.87	1.28
2	0.40**	0.17	1.20	0.84
3	0.29**	0.13	0.86	0.66
4+	0.31**	0.16	2.12	1.65
Age of the youngest child				
before the pregnancy	0.33***	0.11	0.65	0.25
pregnant	1.02	0.14	1.27	0.23
child aged 0-2 years	1		1	
child aged 3-5 years	1.07	0.17	1.30	0.28
child aged 6 years or older	0.83	0.35	3.31	2.33
Premarital conception or birth				
no conception prior to marriage	1		1	
first conception before marriage	1.24**	0.13	1.33*	0.20
first child before marriage	2.04***	0.32	1.09	0.25

Premarital cohabitation				
no	1		1	
yes	1.21*	0.14	1.85***	0.27
Age at marriage				
19 or under	1		1	
20-23	0.67***	0.08	0.31***	0.09
24-27	0.55***	0.08	0.27***	0.08
28 or older	0.56***	0.10	0.23***	0.07
Parental divorce				
yes	1		1	
no	1.98***	0.23	1.70***	0.28
parents never lived together	0.97	0.44	0.84	0.60
Importance of religion for the respondent				
important	1		1	
neither important nor unimportant	1.75***	0.18	1.90***	0.26
unimportant	2.70***	0.39	2.01***	0.34

*** - p-value <0.01, ** - p-value <0.05, * - p-value <0.1

Source: own calculations with GGS-PL data.