

# MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT PREFERENCES IN POLAND AND SLOVAKIA

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the preferences of men and women towards maternal employment, focusing on mothers with pre-school-age and school-age children in Poland and Slovakia and utilising data from the Family and Changing Gender Roles V module (2022) in the International Social Survey Programme. Despite progress in achieving gender-equal access to paid leave and the increasing number of pre-school facilities, maternal employment has remained low in these countries, especially among mothers with children aged 0–2. The results indicate that Poles exhibit a stronger preference for mothers with a child under school age staying at home, while Slovaks are more supportive of maternal employment, particularly on a part-time basis. For mothers with school-age children, full-time employment is broadly supported in both countries. These findings highlight persistent cultural barriers in Poland and the positive impact of policy measures implemented in Slovakia to increase and support maternal employment.

**Keywords:** maternal employment, gender roles, traditional and egalitarian attitudes, parental leave, pre-school facilities, family policy, work-life balance

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## INTRODUCTION

Maternal employment plays a key role in supporting gender equality, individual well-being, and family economic security. It provides economic autonomy, facilitates access to health, pension, and social security benefits, and offers opportunities for both social and personal development (UNICEF, 1999). In addition to being beneficial for child development (e.g. cognitive skills or academic achievement), maternal employment can promote a more equitable distribution of childcare and household responsibilities between partners (e.g. Bernal, 2008; Hsin – Felfe, 2014; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2010; Yu – Lee, 2013).

The collapse of the communist regime led to major political, economic, and social transformations in Central European countries, which particularly influenced the balance between paid work and childcare and domestic responsibilities for women (Saxonberg – Sirovátka, 2006). In CEE countries, including Poland and Slovakia, the employment of women was actively promoted by the state during the communist era. This state-promoted employment was often framed as emancipation, but, in reality, it primarily served the economic need for female labour to sustain communist industrial growth (Pascall – Kwak, 2005; LaFont, 2001).

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Comprehensive social welfare programmes established by the governments in these countries facilitated the return of women to the workforce after childbirth. These initiatives included maternity leave and accessible, affordable childcare facilities (*Hašková – Saxonberg*, 2016).

The transition to a market economy in the 1990s precipitated significant changes in the labour markets and social policies in these countries, including maternal employment (*Szikra – Tomka*, 2009). These changes led to increased unemployment rates and economic instability (*Deacon*, 2000). In response to economic restructuring, governments consciously chose to limit state involvement in family support and adopted re-familisation policies as part of their welfare reforms (*Saxonberg – Sirovátka*, 2006).

Cuts were made to public funding for childcare services, which resulted in a decline in their availability and quality (*Matynia*, 1994). Consequently, the absence of affordable and accessible childcare options became a barrier to maternal employment in numerous Central European countries, as this decrease in support made it more challenging for mothers to return to work after childbirth (*Koucká, 2002*).

Poland and Slovakia's accession to the European Union in 2004 prompted reforms in parental leave and childcare policies, as both countries aligned with EU directives supporting work-life balance and gender equality (*De La Porte et al.*, 2020; *Chierigato*, 2020). Nevertheless, in Poland and Slovakia, employment rates among mothers with children under age two remain among the lowest in the OECD (*Plomien*, 2004), partly owing to the length of parental leave and the enduring strength of traditional gender norms in childcare and household roles (*Thévenon – Solaz*, 2013).

Poland and Slovakia were selected for comparison owing to their shared socialist past and differing trajectories in family policy and gender norms since the 1990s. While both countries experienced similar ideological frameworks during the communist era, they have adopted contrasting approaches in recent decades – making them suitable cases for a comparative analysis of public attitudes towards maternal employment.

Previous research has confirmed that public and maternal attitudes towards employment in Poland reflect a persistent tension between evolving prefer-

ences and structural limitations. Between 1994 and 2012, Polish mothers increasingly expressed a desire to engage in paid work, particularly part-time, yet found it difficult to fulfil these preferences because of limited labour-market flexibility and a lack of institutional childcare. At the same time, Poland experienced a partial resurgence of traditional family values and anti-feminist discourse, which may have reinforced conservative public attitudes (*García-Faroldi*, 2021). In the case of Slovakia, research shows that maternal employment during the first three years after childbirth remains relatively low, largely owing to structural barriers such as insufficient childcare provision, a lack of flexible work arrangements, and long parental leave with limited paternal involvement (*Hidas – Horváthová*, 2018).

This study examines the impact of cultural norms, gender role attitudes, and sociodemographic factors on the perception of maternal employment. By focusing on the general adult population (men and women, childless and with pre-school-age or school-age children) the analysis aims to identify the differences between Poland and Slovakia, particularly in relation to traditional versus egalitarian perspectives, and people's preferences for full-time, part-time, or no maternal employment depending on the child's age.

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP 2022) provides harmonised, high-quality cross-national data on public attitudes towards family roles and gender norms. Its standardised format makes it especially suitable for comparing societal preferences across countries with differing cultural and policy contexts. The 2022 wave provides the most recent cross-national data available at the time of writing and allows for post-pandemic insights into public attitudes, particularly in the context of recent policy reforms implemented in both countries during the 2010s.

The article is structured into four sections. Following the introduction, the theoretical concepts and contextual background are presented, encompassing gender roles, maternal employment, and paid leave. Descriptive statistics and the results of the regression analysis are presented in the analytical section. The fourth section provides a final review and summary of the results of the analysis in the context of the stated study objectives.

## THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

### **Welfare State Typology and Family Roles**

Comparative welfare state research underscores the influence of policy frameworks on women's employment patterns (Kreyenfeld, 2015). While CEE countries are considered welfare states today, the term historically referred to Western capitalist democracies with high living standards (Aidukaite, 2009).

Esping-Andersen's typology remains a widely used and influential framework in welfare regime theory, distinguishing three ideal types: liberal regimes (e.g. US, UK) with minimal state intervention and market reliance; conservative regimes (e.g. Germany, France) preserving traditional family roles; and social-democratic regimes (e.g. Sweden, Denmark) promoting equality through universal benefits (Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, this framework was not designed with CEE countries in mind, and scholars have long debated how these countries fit into or deviate from established typologies (Aspalter et al., 2009).

Since the early 1990s, Poland and Slovakia have undergone major socioeconomic and political transformations that have reshaped their welfare systems. Common challenges included high unemployment, falling living standards, and limited funding for maternal support and childcare infrastructure (Ferrarini – Sjöberg, 2010).

Aidukaite (2011) summarises four major approaches to classifying CEE welfare regimes. One perspective suggests these countries are gradually aligning with Esping-Andersen's conservative or liberal models. Another views them as forming a distinct 'post-communist' or 'Eastern European' regime, marked by a blend of socialist legacies (e.g. family-centred care) and emerging market features (Fenger, 2007; Aidukaite, 2009). A third strand emphasises similarities across CEE countries based on a shared history and institutional patterns. The fourth argues for internal differentiation, emphasising socioeconomic differences and unique welfare outcomes that resist simple typology (Aidukaite, 2011).

Building on Esping-Andersen, Lewis (1992) introduced a gender-sensitive lens through the male breadwinner model. She distinguishes strong male breadwinner states, modified models that allow limited female employment, and dual-earner/carer regimes

that promote gender equality through policies like universal childcare and parental leave.

Family policies in CEE countries have long aimed to support both fertility and maternal employment. However, cross-country differences persist, both historically and in the post-socialist era, complicating any singular classification (Ferrarini – Sjöberg, 2010).

The generally accepted classification of family policies in CEE countries is the one presented by Frejka and Gietel-Basten et al. (2016). They divide family policies in these countries into four groups. The first of these is the comprehensive family policy model, in which the authors include, for example, Estonia and Slovenia, and which is characterised by accessible and sufficient institutional care for young children, support for the employment of mothers with children, and a range of other financial and material benefits for mothers and fathers. The second group of countries, such as the Russian Federation and Belarus, represent a pro-natalist policy model, which is characterised primarily by efforts to increase fertility, especially with the help of generous financial support. The third model, the temporary male breadwinner model, to which the authors assign Slovakia and the Czech Republic, is characterised by long paid parental leave, where institutional care for children under the age of three has been virtually abolished in these countries. Women/mothers are often discriminated against in the labour market and finding ways to successfully combine childcare and employment is difficult. The last model, the conventional family policy model, which includes, for example, Poland and Hungary, is characterised by a considerable amount of existing support for raising and caring for young children, but this support is very inadequate, and, as with the preceding model, it is difficult for mothers in these countries to combine childcare and employment.

We compare two countries that differ within this typology primarily in terms of financial generosity and institutional support: Poland provides relatively higher financial assistance to families but offers limited support for maternal employment, whereas Slovakia offers less financial support and exhibits even weaker structural conditions for combining work and childcare.

MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS IN POLAND AND SLOVAKIA

Table 1 shows the employment rates of women aged 20–49 by the age of their youngest child in Poland, Slovakia, and the EU in 2012 and 2022. In both Poland and Slovakia, maternal employment increased across all child age groups. In Poland, the employment rate of mothers with children under six rose from 58.4% to 71.3%, and in Slovakia from 34.4% to 68.8%. Among mothers of children aged 6–11, in Poland their employment rate rose from 72.3% to

79.5% and in Slovakia from 74.9% to 79.0%. Among those with children aged 12 and over, the rates rose from 71.9% to 79.5% in Poland and from 74.8% to 78.2% in Slovakia.

Compared to the EU average, which saw more modest increases (e.g. from 60.9% to 67.0% for children under six), both countries – especially Slovakia – show significant convergence towards or even surpass EU levels. The data confirm a continuing pattern of higher employment with increasing child age, but also point to a narrowing gap across child age categories over time.

Table 1 The employment rate of women aged 20–49, by age of the youngest child, Poland and Slovakia, in %						
	Less than 6 years		From 6 to 11 years		12 years and over	
	2012	2022	2012	2022	2012	2022
Poland	58.4	71.3	72.3	79.5	71.9	79.5
Slovakia	34.4	68.8	74.9	79.0	74.8	78.2
EU	60.9	67.0	68.7	75.4	67.8	72.2

Source: Eurostat, 2025.

Family policies are a key determinant in shaping women’s employment decisions. They influence the ability of women to balance work and family responsibilities by encouraging mothers to remain in or re-enter the workforce after childbirth (Vuri, 2016). In this context, Gornick and Meyers (1997) developed a comprehensive framework to analyse the relationship between maternal employment and social policies, particularly regarding work-family balance. Their model emphasises the role of both the availability of parental leave and affordable childcare services in shaping women’s employment outcomes. Countries with generous leave entitlements and robust childcare systems show higher maternal employment rates, as these reduce the work–care conflict. Their theory also reflects prevailing cultural attitudes towards gender roles and women’s economic participation (Gornick – Meyer, 1997).

Since 2010, Poland has introduced significant reforms to its system of parental leave. Additional maternity leave was introduced and gradually extended – from two weeks in 2010 to six weeks by

2013. A key innovation was the introducing the possibility for fathers to take a portion of maternity leave once the mother has taken at least 14 weeks. In 2011, a 2-week paternity leave was added. A major reform was implemented on 16 June 2013 granting parents an additional 26 weeks of parental leave. In total, families can access up to 54 weeks of leave, with the option of receiving 80% wage compensation for the entire period or 100% during the first half and 60% during the second. Initially, the reform excluded women who had given birth in the first quarter of 2013, but following public protests, these mothers were granted access to parental leave as well. As of 2016, additional maternity leave and parental leave were merged into a single category termed ‘parental leave’. These changes sought to address Poland’s low fertility rate, the relatively low employment rate among women, and the shortage of formal childcare services for children under the age of three, while also encouraging the greater involvement of fathers in early childcare responsibilities (Zajkowska, 2019).

In Poland in 2022, the period of maternity leave was 20 weeks, with up to 6 weeks to be taken before birth and at least 14 weeks required postnatally. Mothers could choose between full compensation (100% of prior gross earnings) or a lower flat rate (81.5%), which influenced the level of compensation received during their subsequent parental leave. Maternity leave could be extended in cases of multiple births (up to 37 weeks) and partially transferred to the father if the 81.5% option was selected (*Kurowska – Godlewska-Bujok – Michoń, 2023*).

Paternity leave offered fathers two weeks of fully paid leave at 100% of their average gross earnings, available at any point within 12 months after childbirth, and it could be split into two one-week periods. Eligibility mirrored maternity leave requirements. Parental leave extended to 41 weeks in total, of which 23 weeks were a shared family entitlement and 18 weeks were reserved individually – nine for the mother and 9 for the father. The payment structure depended on the earlier maternity leave option: those who received 100% during maternity leave were paid 70% during parental leave, while those who chose 81.5% continued at that same level. Leave was flexible and could be divided into up to five periods and extended through part-time work (up to 82 weeks proportionally), and it was available until the child reached the age of six. In special cases, such as multiple births or when the child had a life-threatening condition, leave could be extended to 43 or even 67 weeks (*Kurowska – Godlewska-Bujok – Michoń, 2023*).

Between 2011 and 2022, Slovakia undertook a series of reforms to strengthen financial support and caregiving entitlements for families as well. In 2011, maternity leave was extended across several categories: from 28 to 34 weeks for standard cases, from 37 to 43 weeks for mothers of multiple children caring for mothers caring for at least two children. The maternity benefit was also increased from 55% to 60% of the daily assessment base. Subsequent financial improvements followed: in 2016, maternity benefits rose from 65% to 70% of the daily base, resulting in an effective net replacement rate of over 91% of prior income. In 2017, the benefit was further increased to 75%, allowing most parents to receive nearly 100% of their net pre-leave earnings. By 2019, legislative changes allowed both parents to receive maternity benefits concurrently

if the father was caring for one child while the mother simultaneously was caring for another. In compliance with EU Directive 2019/1158, in 2022 fathers gained the right to a two-week paid maternity-type benefit within six weeks of the child's birth in 2022, regardless of whether the mother was receiving maternity or parental benefits (*MPRiPS, 2025*). Although Slovakia introduced a daddy quota in 2011, it has remained relatively unknown and underutilised. As noted by *Dančíková (2023b)*, the policy was originally tailored more for adoptive fathers, rather than having been designed to promote broader gender equality in caregiving.

In Slovakia, in 2022 maternity leave was set at up to 34 weeks, with 6–8 weeks taken before childbirth and 26–28 weeks after. At least 14 weeks were mandatory and could not end earlier than six weeks post-birth. The benefit amounted to 75% of the mother's average previous net earnings, capped at €1,851 per month, and was funded through sickness insurance (*Dančíková, 2023a*).

Paternity leave entitled fathers to 28 weeks of leave after the child's birth. Within the first six weeks, they could take two weeks of compensated paternity leave, also at 75% of previous net earnings. Fathers were additionally eligible for a non-transferable maternity benefit during the remainder of their leave, by which the mother's entitlement was correspondingly decreased. If not taken concurrently, the maternity benefits could still be drawn while the father was on paternity leave. Paternity leave could be extended to 31 weeks for single fathers and 37 weeks if they were caring for two or more children. Like maternity benefits, payments were tax-free and funded from sickness insurance (*Dančíková, 2023a*).

Parental leave was available until a child reached the age of three and was non-transferable between parents. It could be interrupted and resumed multiple times and combined with full- or part-time employment. The parental allowance, set at €413 per month, was available to parents who had previously received maternity benefits; those without such an entitlement received €301. The benefit was provided to just one parent at a time (*Dančíková, 2023a*).

Another crucial aspect is the expansion of child-care services, particularly for children under the age of three. Table 2 shows the enrolment rates of children in early childhood education and care services

in Poland, Slovakia, and the OECD, based on their age group (0–2 and 3–5 years) for selected years. In Poland, the enrolment of children aged 0–2 increased from 10.9% in 2012 to 17.1% in 2022. In Slovakia, it declined from 4.7% to just 2.6%. In contrast, the OECD average for this age group was significantly higher at 35.9% in 2022. For children aged 3–5 years, enrolment is much higher across all countries. Poland reached 87.0% in 2021 and Slovakia 77.4%, and both these figures are relatively close to the OECD average of 86.4%. Overall, while enrolment rates for children aged 3–5 in Poland and Slovakia are comparable to the OECD average, participation among the youngest children (0–2 years) remains low – especially in Slovakia.

One of the primary programmes in this context in Poland is the ‘Toddler+’ initiative, launched in 2011 by the Polish Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. It was designed to support the development of childcare infrastructure for children under the age of three. The programme’s primary objective was to expand access to early childhood care by financially supporting municipalities in the creation and operation of nursery schools, children’s clubs, and day-care facilities. With an initial

allocation of PLN 40 million, the programme offered co-financing for the construction, adaptation, furnishings, and equipment of childcare facilities (*MPRiPS*, 2019).

In 2022, the programme underwent a major reform, shifting from an annually operated initiative to a long-term, multi-year strategy. As part of the new edition, the programme was allocated a budget of PLN 5.5 billion, which is expected to result in the creation of an additional 102,000 childcare places for children under the age of three. At the time of the reform, Poland had approximately 8,000 nurseries and children’s clubs, offering around 228,000 places, a significant increase from 2015, when there were fewer than 3,000 facilities providing only 84,000 places (*MPRiPS*, 2022).

Like in Poland, modifications have also been made to the pre-school education system in Slovakia. Slovakia had long been the subject of criticism owing to the low enrolment of children in pre-school facilities, as this participation rate had long been one of the lowest in Europe (*European Commission*, 2023). A new law introduced in Slovakia in 2021 made pre-school attendance compulsory for all children who had turned age 5 by the month of August in a given year

Table 2 Enrolment rates in early childhood education and care services in Poland and Slovakia, 2010–2022, in %<sup>2) 3)</sup>

	0–2 years		3–5 years	
	2012	2022	2010 <sup>4)</sup>	2021 <sup>5)</sup>
Poland	10.9	17.1	59.6	87.0
Slovakia	4.7	2.6	71.2	77.4
OECD	X	35.9	X	86.4

Source: OECD, Family Database – Enrolment in childcare and pre-school, 2024.

2) Percentage of children enrolled in early childhood education and care services (ISCED 0 and other registered ECEC services), 0- to 2-year-olds – ‘Data for Poland and Slovakia are OECD estimates based on information from EU-SILC. Data refer to children using centre-based services (e.g. nurseries or day care centres and pre-schools, both public and private), organised family day care, and care services provided by (paid) professional childminders, and exclude those using unpaid informal services provided by relatives, friends or neighbours’ (*OECD*, 2024b).

3) Percentage of children enrolled in early childhood education and care (ISCED 2011 level 0) or primary education (ISCED 2011 level 1), 3- to 5-year-olds.

4) Data for the year 2010 were used because they are the earliest available for both Poland and Slovakia.

5) The year 2021 represents the most recent year for which comparable data are available.

(*slovensko.sk*, 2021). This policy was implemented with the aim of ensuring that children are ready to join primary school education by the time they enter the formal education system. This compulsory pre-school year has greatly increased the number of children attending pre-school facilities, as every 5-year-old is adequately prepared to start school (*Ministerstvo Financíí Slovenskej Republiky*, 2022). However, Slovakia continues to face a severe shortage of places for children and high fees, a high proportion of children living in poverty, regional variations in the quality of facilities, and violence among children. The newly implemented National Strategy for the Development of Early Intervention and early care 2022–2030 aims to address these problems (*Eurochild*, 2023).

## HYPOTHESES

In relation to the selected conceptual framework and previous research, we formulated the following hypotheses:

1. In line with Frejka and Gietel-Basten's typology of family policy models, we expect Slovak respondents to be more supportive of maternal employment – especially part-time – compared to Polish respondents, reflecting differing institutional frameworks and gender role expectations. Slovakia is classified as a 'temporary male breadwinner' model with slightly more structural support for combining care and work, while Poland belongs to the 'conventional model', with stronger financial incentives but weaker institutional childcare infrastructure. These differences are likely to be reflected in public attitudes.
2. Women, younger respondents, and individuals with tertiary education will show greater support for maternal employment than men, older individuals, and people with lower educational attainment.
3. Respondents who believe that both parents are equally suited to care for young children will be more likely to support maternal employment,

while those who believe mothers are inherently better suited will be less likely to support it. Beliefs about parenting roles reflect deeper gender ideologies. Traditional beliefs about maternal caregiving are strongly associated with a preference for stay-at-home motherhood, as shown in earlier studies and in our own regression results.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data presentation

This study utilises data from the Family and Changing Gender Roles V module of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) in 2022. This module covered a wide range of subjects, such as gender ideology, attitudes towards female employment over the life-cycle, the gendered division of housework, social policy, and the preferred and actual division of paid and unpaid work. We used descriptive statistics in the first part of the analysis to examine individual attitudes towards the employment of mothers with a pre-school-age child and mothers whose youngest child is of school age in Poland and Slovakia. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for these variables. The sample size was 1711 respondents; 921 from Poland (437 males, 484 females) and 790 from Slovakia (391 males, 399 females). The age range of respondents is 18–91 years (18–91 years for males, 18–91 years for females). The method of data collection used in both countries was CAPI (face-to-face). The sample used included a representative stratified clustered sample of adults registered as residents in Poland and Slovakia.

### Dependent variables

Our first dependent variable, **the workload of a mother with a child under school age<sup>6)</sup>**, was derived from the following item: *Do you think that women should work full-time, part-time, or not at all under the following circumstances? – When there is a child under school age*. Answers were coded into three categories: work full-time, work part-time, and stay at home. We derived the second dependent variable, **the workload of a mother whose youngest child is in school<sup>7)</sup>**, from

6) Under school age means under the age of regular/compulsory school attendance (i.e. 0–5 years).

7) Above school age means aged 6–17 years.

the following item: *Do you think that women should work full-time, part-time, or not at all under the following circumstances? – After the youngest child starts school.* Answers were coded into three categories: work full-time, work part-time, and stay at home.

This wide age range represents a limitation, as public attitudes towards maternal employment may vary depending on the specific age of the child. It is likely that respondents will differentiate, for example, between mothers of infants and mothers of older preschoolers, or between mothers of young schoolchildren and teenagers. However, the ISSP dataset does not allow for more detailed age-specific distinctions.

#### *Independent variables*

The selection of independent variables such as gender, age, education, and traditional gender role beliefs reflects previous studies that have shown these factors to be critical in shaping attitudes towards maternal employment. The sociodemographic variables measured as dummies include **sex** (0 = male [Ref.], 1 = female), **country** (0 = Poland [Ref.], 1 = Slovakia), **marital status** (0 = not married [Ref.], 1 = married), **children in the household by age** with 4 categories (0 = no child, 1 = child (ren) below school age, 2 = child(ren) of school age, 3 = both, child(ren) below and above school age), and the **provider of childcare for a child below school age**, which was constructed from the question *‘People have different views on childcare for children under school age. Who do you think should primarily provide childcare’* and has two categories: 0 = family and other providers,

1 = state. Age was coded into three categories: 1 = 18–44 years, 2 = 45–64 years, and 3 = 65+ years. We categorised **education** into two groups: 0 = primary/secondary, 1 = tertiary.

The variable **impact on the family** was constructed from the statement: *‘All in all, family life suffers when the woman[mother] has a full-time job’*. It has three categories: 1 = agree, 2 = neither agree nor disagree, 3 = disagree. **Which parent is better suited to look after children** reflects responses to the question *‘Is the mother or the father better suited to look after children’* and the answers were recoded into three categories: 1 = The mother is much better, 2 = The mother is somewhat better, 3<sup>8)</sup> = the mother and father are equally suited.

#### **Method**

To examine preferences regarding the working time of mothers with pre-school-age children and those whose youngest child is already in school, we applied a multinomial logistic regression. This statistical method makes it possible to compare the likelihood of choosing different categories of the dependent variable relative to a designated reference group, while simultaneously accounting for multiple predictors. We selected ‘stay at home’ as the reference category owing to its theoretical importance and prevalence in the data. This approach allowed us to explore how sociodemographic factors and personal attitudes relate to preferences for part-time or full-time employment, in contrast to the more traditional choice of unpaid caregiving.

8) Due to a lack of responses in categories 4 = Fathers are somewhat better suited and 5 = Fathers are much better suited, these responses were recoded as mother and father equally.



Table 3 **Descriptive statistics on the dependent and independent variables**

	Poland		Slovakia	
	N	%	N	%
<b>Dependent variables</b>				
<b>Workload of a mother with a child under school age</b>				
Full-time	201	21.8%	284	35.9%
Part-time	246	26.7%	331	41.9%
Stay at home	474	51.5%	175	22.2%
<b>Workload of a mother whose youngest child is in school</b>				
Full-time	642	69.7%	512	64.8%
Part-time	226	24.5%	229	29.0%
Stay at home	53	5.8%	49	6.2%
<b>Predictor variables</b>				
<b>Country</b>	921	100.0%	790	100.0%
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	437	47.4%	391	49.5%
Female	484	52.6%	399	50.5%
<b>Age</b>				
18–44 years	339	36.8%	272	34.4%
45–64 years	326	35.4%	302	38.2%
65+ years	256	27.8%	216	27.3%
<b>Education</b>				
Primary/Secondary	705	76.5%	646	81.8%
Tertiary	216	23.5%	144	18.2%
<b>Marital status</b>				
Not married	372	40.4%	371	47.0%
Married	549	59.6%	419	53.0%
<b>Child(ren) in the household by age</b>				
No child	625	67.9%	600	75.9%
Child (ren) below school age	62	6.7%	36	4.6%
Child (ren) above school age	177	19.2%	120	15.2%
Both, child (ren) below and above school age	57	6.2%	34	4.3%
<b>Impact on the family</b>				
Agree	233	25.3%	261	33.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	123	13.4%	181	22.9%
Disagree	565	61.3%	348	44.1%
<b>Which parent better suited to look after children</b>				
Mothers much better	160	17.4%	199	25.2%
Mothers somewhat better	224	24.3%	292	37.0%
Mothers and fathers equally	537	58.3%	299	37.8%
<b>Provider of childcare below school age</b>				
Family and other providers	786	85.3%	323	40.9%
The state	135	14.7%	467	59.1%
<b>N</b>	921	100.0%	790	100.0%

Source: ISSP, 2022.

RESULTS

Descriptives

Impact on the family

Figure 1 displays the distribution of the answers of Polish and Slovak respondents to the question ‘All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job’. There are statistically significant differences in the responses between the two countries. Poles (61.3%) are more likely to disagree with this statement compared to Slovaks (44.1%). Conversely, Slovaks (33.0%) exhibit a greater tendency to agree with the statement compared to Poles (25.2%).

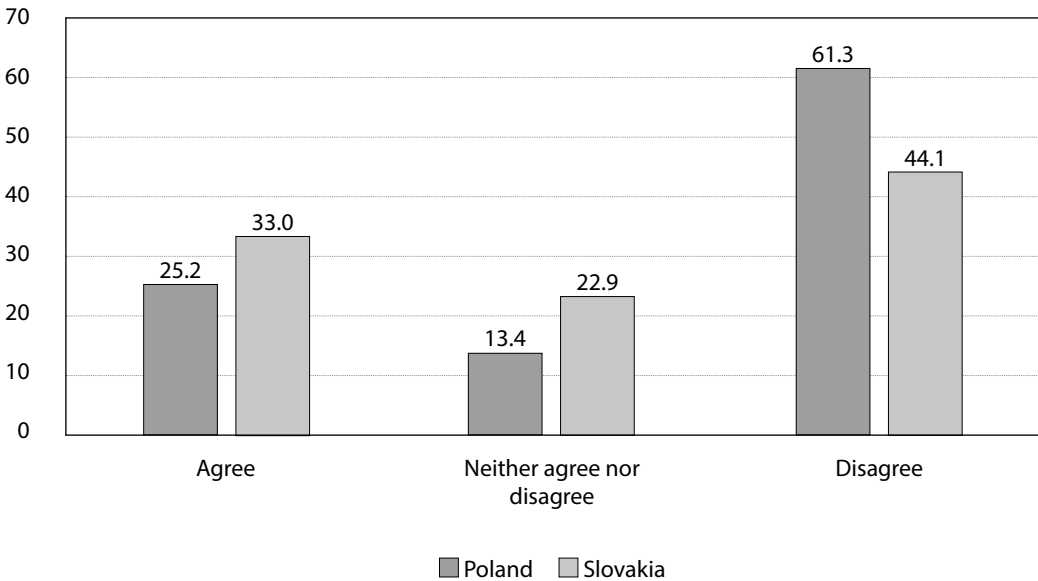
Regarding gender<sup>10)</sup>, a greater proportion of men (31.2%) agree with the statement compared to women (26.7%). Conversely, 57.8% of women disagree with it, in contrast to 48.7% of men.

With respect to age<sup>11)</sup>, the youngest are more likely to disagree with the statement (59.2% of those aged 18–44) compared to the oldest generations (47.5% of those aged 65+). In contrast, 23.2% of those aged 18–44 years agree with the statement, compared to 35.0% of those aged 65+.

If we look at the differences in attitudes for the two countries separately, there is a statistically significant<sup>12)</sup> difference in the attitudes of men and women in the case of Poland. Men (30.0%) are more likely than women (21.1%) to agree with the statement, while women (66.7%) are more likely to reject the statement (vs 55.4% of men). No statistically significant difference between men and women was found for Slovakia.

Statistically significant differences<sup>13)</sup> among age groups were found in the case of Poland, but not

Figure 1 Attitudes to the statement ‘All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job’, in %<sup>9)</sup>



Source: ISSP, 2022.

9) Statistically significant – p-value < 0.000.

10) Statistically significant – p-value < 0.01.

11) Statistically significant – p-value < 0.000.

12) Statistically significant – p-value < 0.01.

13) Statistically significant – p-value < 0.01.

Slovakia. Here, the group of respondents aged 18–44 most often disagreed with the statement (68.1%), while 18.3% of this group agreed. In the case of the oldest age group 65+, 54.7% of respondents disagree with the statement, while 31.6% agree.

*The preferred workload for a mother with a child under school age*

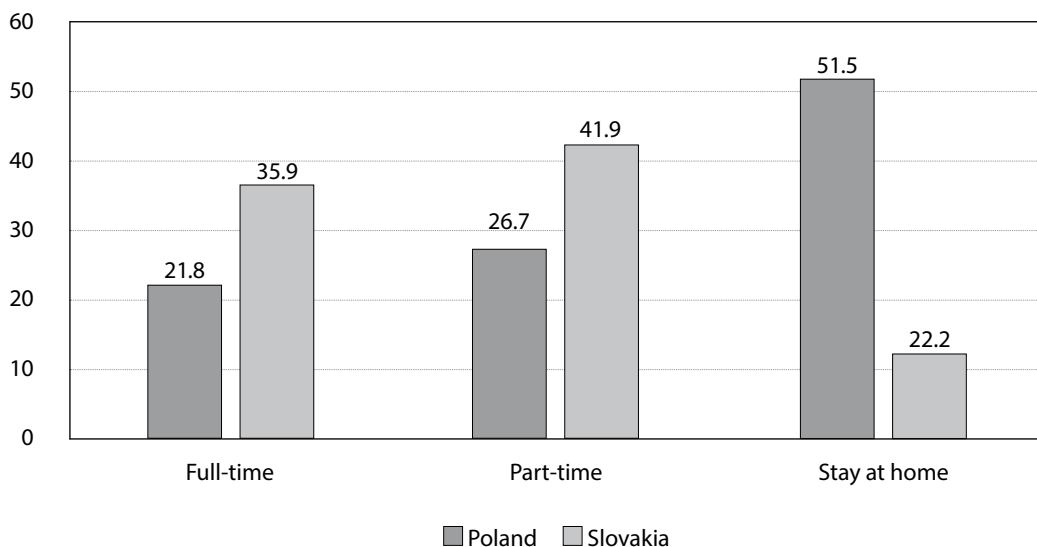
Figure 2 illustrates the preferred workload for a mother with a child under school age in Poland and Slovakia. Differences in preferences can be observed between countries. In Poland, over half (51.5%) of respondents believe that a woman should stay at home with a pre-school-age child, in Slovakia the predominant response is that she should work part-time (41.9%). The least frequent response among Slovaks is that with a child this age she should stay at home (22.2%), while in Poland the least frequent response is that she should work full-time (21.8%). These results indicate significant disparities in opinions regarding the employment of women with a pre-school-age

child, with Poles adhering to a traditional stance that a woman should stay at home, while Slovaks tend to support women's employment, both part-time and full-time.

Gender-based differences in preferences are statistically significant.<sup>14)</sup> Men are more inclined (42.9%) than women (33.3%) to endorse the view that a mother with a child under school age should stay at home. Conversely, women (30.1%) are more inclined than men (26.4%) to support full-time time and part-time employment (36.6% of women vs 30.7% of men), which indicates that women's attitudes towards the employment of mothers with pre-school-age children are more progressive.

In terms of age<sup>15)</sup>, statistically significant differences between age groups were observed. Individuals aged 65+ predominantly hold the belief (45.8%) that a woman with a child under school age should stay at home. One-fourth of respondents in this age category think she should work full-time. Respondents in the 18–44 age group are the ones most inclined to believe

Figure 2 The preferred workload for a mother with a child under school age in Poland and Slovakia, in %



Note: Statistically significant – p-value < 0.000.

Source: ISSP, 2022.

14) Statistically significant – p-value < 0.000.

15) Statistically insignificant – p-value < 0.000.

that a woman with a child under school age should work part-time (39.0%), while 31.6% think she should stay at home. Those aged 45–64 are the most likely to say women should stay at home (38.2%), while 32.5% say they should work part-time. The findings suggest that the younger generations endorse at least the partial involvement of women in the labour market when they have a pre-school-age child.

*The preferred workload for a mother whose youngest child is in school*

While there are differences in preferences between countries in the employment of mothers with a pre-school-age child, the differences are not significant for a school-age child. In both Poland (69.7%) and Slovakia (64.8%), more than half of the respondents believe that a woman with a child of this age should work full-time. Approximately a quarter of respondents believe that a woman with a child this age should work part-time (see Figure 3).

In terms of gender, there are statistically<sup>17)</sup> weak differences between men and women. Women (70.1%) are more likely than men (64.6%) to think that a mother with a school-age child should work full-time, while men (7.5%) are more likely than women (4.5%) to think that a woman should stay at home.

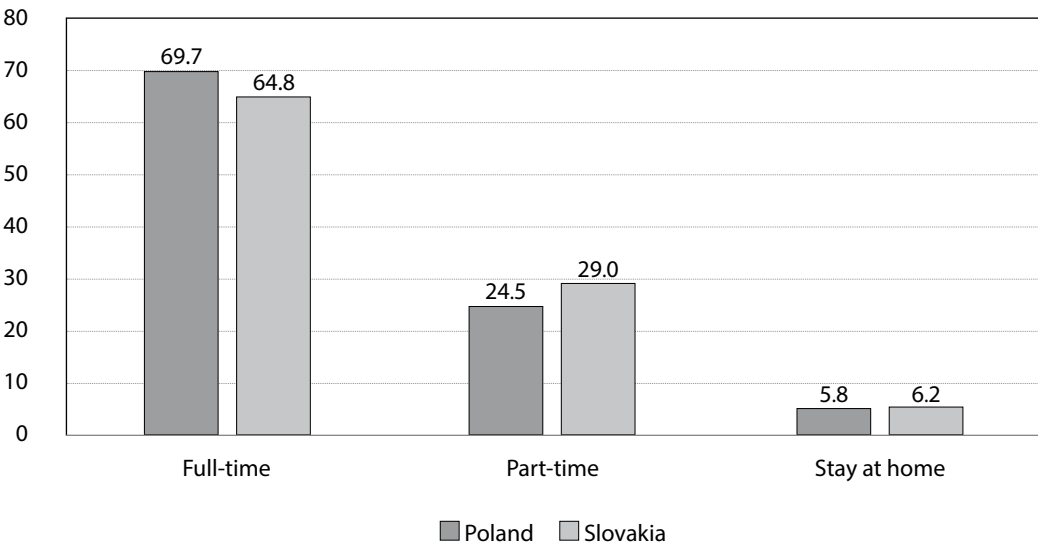
In terms of age<sup>18)</sup>, respondents aged 18–44 are more likely to think a woman should work full-time (70.9%) compared to respondents aged 65+ (59.3%), who are then more likely to think a woman should stay at home (10.0%) than are respondents aged 18–44 (4.1%).

**Regression results**

*The preferred workload for a mother with a child under school age*

Model 1 in Table 4 displays the outcomes predicting the preferred workload for a mother with a child under school age in 2022. The analysis reveals that Slovaks, compared to Poles, exhibit a greater inclination towards both full-time and part-time employment

Figure 3<sup>16)</sup> The preferred workload for a mother whose youngest child is in school in Poland and Slovakia, in %



Note: Statistically significant – p-value < 0.05.  
Source: ISSP, 2022.

16) Statistically insignificant – p-value > 0.05.  
17) Statistically significant – p-value < 0.05.  
18) Statistically significant – p-value < 0.000.

for women with a child under school age. Examining gender disparities, women demonstrate stronger support for part-time work arrangements than men. Education emerged as a crucial variable, as respondents with tertiary education are significantly more likely to support both full-time and part-time work for mothers compared to those with primary or secondary education. Other sociodemographic characteristics, such as marital status and the age composition of children in the household, were not statistically significant. However, age showed a significant effect in the case of part-time work preferences: respondents aged 18–44 were more likely to prefer part-time employment for mothers with a child under school age compared to those aged 65 and older.

Another statistically significant variable is the impact of women's paid work on the family. Respondents who agree with the statement that 'All in all, family life suffers when a woman has a full-time job' are less likely to favour the full-time employment of mothers; similarly, those who maintain a neutral stance are less inclined to favour full-time employment compared to those who disagree with the statement. The same results also apply to the part-time employment category. Both respondents who agree with the statement and those who take an undecided position are less likely to favour part-time employment for mothers with a pre-school-age child than respondents who disagree with the statement.

Additionally, respondents who believe that mothers are much better suited to look after children are significantly less supportive of both full-time and part-time employment for mothers. A less extreme but still negative association was found among those who think mothers are somewhat better suited. Also, respondents who think that care for pre-school-age children should be provided by the state are more likely to support part-time employment for mothers with pre-school-age children than those who think that care should be provided by the family.

#### *The preferred workload for a mother whose youngest child is in school*

Model 2 in Table 4 presents the results predicting the preferred workload for a mother whose youngest child is in school. The results show that a statistically significant difference in preferences emerged between

men and women, with women more likely than men to support full-time employment for mothers with a child at this age.

In this model, age becomes significant. Respondents aged 18–44 and 45–64 are more likely to favour full-time employment for mothers with a school-age child compared to those aged 65+. These age groups also show a preference for part-time work. Education level again plays a significant role. Respondents with tertiary education are more supportive of both full-time and part-time employment than those with primary/secondary education.

The results show that respondents who believe that the family suffers if a woman works full-time are less supportive of both full-time and part-time employment. A weaker but still significant negative association is also seen among those who have a neutral attitude towards the statement. Interestingly, respondents who perceive mothers as somewhat better suited to childcare than fathers are significantly more likely to support part-time employment, while those who view mothers as much better suited tend to oppose full-time employment, though their view on part-time work was not significant.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined public attitudes towards maternal employment in Poland and Slovakia using data from the 2022 ISSP module on Family and Changing Gender Roles. The main objective was to explore whether, and how, sociodemographic factors, beliefs about caregiving roles, and the national context shape support for the employment of mothers with pre-school-age and school-age children.

The results confirm that attitudes towards maternal employment remain differentiated along both cultural and structural lines. In line with our first hypothesis, Slovak respondents were significantly more likely than Polish respondents to support maternal employment – both full-time and part-time – but this difference was only observed in relation to mothers of pre-school-age children. No statistically significant difference was found between the two countries in attitudes towards the employment of mothers of school-age children.

The second hypothesis was also supported. Gender, age, and education proved to be significant predictors

Table 4 Results of the multinomial logistic regression (odds ratios)

	Model 1: Preferred workload for a mother with a child under school age		Model 2: Preferred workload for a mother whose youngest child is in school	
	Work full-time (ref. stay at home)	Work part-time (ref. stay at home)	Work full-time (ref. stay at home)	Work part-time (ref. stay at home)
Country				
Poland	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Slovakia	9.406***	5.055***	1.164	1.137
Sex				
Male	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Female	1.285	1.524***	1.623*	1.496
Age				
18–44 years	1.160	1.704**	2.281*	1.974*
45–64 years	1.119	1.237	2.311**	1.713*
65+ years	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Education				
Primary/Secondary	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Tertiary	2.799***	2.435***	5.350***	3.463*
Marital status				
Not married	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Married	1.266	1.128	1.189	1.012
Child (ren) in the household by age				
No child (ren)	1.506	0.891	1.677	1.325
Child (ren) below school age	1.278	0.648	1.671	1.146
Child (ren) above school age	1.222	0.780	0.969	0.668
Both, child (ren) below and above school age	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Impact on the family				
Agree	0.112***	0.426***	0.114***	0.418**
Neither agree nor disagree	0.252***	0.628**	0.271***	0.623
Disagree	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Parent better suited to look after children				
Mothers much better	0.190***	0.462***	0.423***	0.628
Mothers somewhat better	0.455***	0.995	1.510	1.882*
Mothers and fathers equally	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Provider of childcare below school age				
Family and other providers	Ref	Ref		
The state	1.188	1.400*		
N	1,711	1,711		
Nagelkerke R	0.328	0.190		

Source: ISSP, 2022.

of support. Women, younger respondents, and those with higher levels of education were more likely to support maternal employment, which is consistent with findings from previous studies.

The third hypothesis focused on the role of individual beliefs about caregiving. The analysis showed that respondents who believe that both parents are equally suited to provide care are substantially more likely to support maternal employment. In contrast, those who see mothers as the primary caregivers were more likely to oppose it, especially in the case of pre-school-age children.

These attitudinal differences also reflect broader value orientations and cultural expectations shaped

by both institutional arrangements and post-socialist legacies. As discussed earlier, both Poland and Slovakia inherited a legacy of high female labour force participation from the socialist era. However, in the decades following 1989, their trajectories diverged. Slovakia introduced policy measures that, while not fully supportive of dual-earner families, allowed for a certain level of reconciliation between work and care – placing it within Frejka and Gietel-Basten’s ‘temporary male breadwinner’ model. In contrast, Poland followed a more conservative path, with policy emphasising maternal care and financial support for families, but offering limited institutional childcare, which places it in the ‘conventional’ model.

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