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# Regendering Childbirth: Catholicism, Medical Activism, and Birth Preparation in Post-War Poland

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## Abstract

This article examines the work of the gynaecologist Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, the key promoter of preparation for childbirth in communist and early democratic Poland. From the late 1950s until the 1990s, Fijałkowski developed a childbirth preparation training protocol that served as an inspiration for childbirth preparation schools across the country. Through analysis of Fijałkowski's publications in medical journals, books aimed at both professional and lay readers, visual aids for childbirth training, and archival material, we demonstrate that a specific vision of gender roles and relationships lay at the core of Fijałkowski's psychoprophylactic project. This vision represented a re-definition and re-essentialisation of femininity and masculinity, and motherhood and fatherhood, while simultaneously advocating for radical change in the relationship between women in labour and obstetric professionals. Fijałkowski's ideas and advocacy were intimately connected with a humanization of the embryo and foetus from the earliest stages of pregnancy, and we show how his work became an important transmission medium for the gradual mainstreaming of anti-abortion ideas within public discourse in late-communist Poland.

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### Keywords

Psychoprophylaxis; preparation for childbirth; communism; state socialism; post-socialist transformation; Poland; history of gynaecology; Catholicism; anti-abortion activism; gender history

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### Introduction

In 1982, the Polish Ministry of Health and Social Security commissioned two short films on preparation for childbirth and family life. The director of both films, Zbigniew Skonieczny, collaborated closely with the gynaecologist Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, the main Polish authority on childbirth preparation at that time. One of the films, entitled *In the Childbirth School*, opens with a scene of childbirth delivery in a hospital. The male narrator describes the baby being “born in dramatic circumstances ... In this moment of a dramatic breakthrough, the tender help of the mother becomes necessary. The better prepared the mother is for childbirth, the better she will fulfil her maternal duty”. Most subsequent scenes take place in a childbirth school.

Fijałkowski, seated amongst pregnant women, most accompanied by their partners, leads a discussion about contraception, which, according to him, is problematic. The “natural regulation of conceptions” is described as an issue for both parents as part of a natural lifestyle, which also includes, “natural breastfeeding.” A discussion then follows on whether a partner should participate in childbirth. When one woman announces she feels it is not her husband’s place to

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be with her through labour, Fijałkowski stresses that male participation is required to ensure the birth is not “taken away” from the father, as it is from women themselves during medicalised childbirth. The final scene shows a group of pregnant women leaving the childbirth preparation class alongside a new mother, a guest who related her childbirth story in one of the sessions.

The male narrator concludes: “Motherhood cannot be an escape from reality. Childbirth school prepares women for this effort full of sacrifice (*do ofiarnego wysiłku*), so that the child’s journey to the new world is the fastest and most comfortable possible.”<sup>1</sup> This short film, produced by the Educational Film Studio in Lodz, epitomises the main features of Włodzimierz Fijałkowski’s childbirth preparation programme: the intimate links between childbirth preparation and natural family planning, and the benefits for mothers and fathers (to-be) as well as—or, rather, above all—the baby.

*In the Childbirth School* is clearly a product from the golden age of childbirth training in communist Poland. This golden age began in the late 1960s when, in line with the Party-State’s pronatalist population policy, the status of the field was elevated through governmental support. This, in turn, was applauded by the Catholic Church hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> During the 1980s, a politically turbulent decade that witnessed the rise of the Solidarity movement, almost two years of martial law (1981–1983) and an economic and political crisis, the number of childbirth preparation schools proliferated across the country. Many were based on Fijałkowski’s model, initially

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<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Skonieczny, *W Szkole Rodzenia* (Lodz: Wytwórnia Filmów Oświatowych, 1982), 13:44 min.

<sup>2</sup> Ministerstwo Zdrowia i Opieki Społecznej, *Raport o Stanie Zdrowia i Opiece Zdrowotnej nad Kobietami Oraz Program Działania na lata 1976–1990* (Warsaw: Ministerstwo Zdrowia i Opieki Społecznej, 1975); Konferencja Plenarna Episkopatu Polski, *Memorial Episkopatu Polski do Rządu w Sprawie Zagrożeń Biologicznych i Moralnych Narodu Polskiego* (1970), reproduced in Peter Raina, *Kościół w PRL. Dokumenty 1960–1974* (Poznan: W Drodze, 1995); *Komunikat Konferencji Plenarnej Episkopatu Polski o Sytuacji Społeczno-Moralnej w Kraju* (1978); Episkopat Polski, *Memorial Konferencji Episkopatu Polski Skierowany do Premiera P. Jaroszewicza o Problemach Rodziny Polskiej* (1978), reproduced in Peter Raina, *Kościół w PRL. Dokumenty 1975–1989* (Poznan: W Drodze, 1996); Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, “Biopolitics and (Non-)Modernity. Population Micro-Policy, Expert Knowledge and Family in Late-Communist Poland,” *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 115 (2017): 151–74.

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developed in the late 1950s in Lodz, a large industrial city in central Poland. His model promoted childbirth as part of a holistic lifestyle, centred in natural family planning and the belief that life begins at conception.<sup>3</sup> In addition to implementing and popularizing preparation for childbirth, Fijałkowski also wrote prolifically about other issues, including natural family planning and marital relations.<sup>4</sup>

We argue that at the core of Fijałkowski's form of birth preparation lay a particular vision of gender roles and relationships that represented a simultaneous re-definition and re-essentialization of femininity and masculinity, and motherhood and fatherhood, while at the same time advocating radical change in the patient-doctor relationship and, more specifically, the relationship between women in labour and obstetric personnel. While others have used the term "re-gendering" to refer to the top-down promotion of specific gender roles during the economic reorganisation of communist regimes, we focus on a bottom-up redefinition of gender roles, which, in Fijałkowski's work, was intimately linked to humanization of the embryo and foetus from the earliest stages of pregnancy.<sup>5</sup> This humanisation was present in Fijałkowski's publications for physicians and the general public in an increasingly explicit way from the 1970s onward, and his work was an important transmission medium for the gradual mainstreaming of anti-abortion ideas in late-communist Poland.

This article contributes to the dynamically developing historiography of preparation for childbirth across the Iron Curtain in post-war Europe and the Americas. Historian Paula

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<sup>3</sup> WOM, "Włodzimierz Fijałkowski", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Feb. 17, 2013, retrieved from <https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/2002044/WLODZIMIERZ-FIJALKOWSKI>  
No author, "Rodzić po ludzku", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Dec. 22, 1994, retrieved from <https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/170858/Rodzic-po-ludzku>

<sup>4</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, "Założenia Prokreacji Ekologicznej," *Studia nad Rodziną* 5/1, no. 8 (2001): 141–46.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, Piotr Perkowski, Małgorzata Fidelis, and Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989: Nowoczesność, Równouprawnienie, Komunizm*. (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2020).

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Michales' monograph on the development of childbirth preparation ideologies and methods has meticulously shown how these relied on the international travel of people and ideas between East and West. Earlier and subsequent studies, such as Marilène Vuille's on France, Amaya García Arregui's on Franco's Spain and Ema Hrešanová's on communist Czechoslovakia, have focused on the implementation of local childbirth preparation programmes, revealing the imprints of international scientific discussions in specific social and political contexts, both democratic and non-democratic.

This body of scholarship will benefit from our focus on Catholicism as an “internationalizing” element in the history of childbirth preparation. The leading champion of childbirth preparation in post-war Poland, Fijałkowski was a vocal Catholic, and his avid opposition to abortion—legal in Poland between 1956 and 1993—had serious repercussions for his professional career, blocking his promotion at Lodz Medical School and prompting his eventual dismissal in 1974. A proposal for his re-admission six years later was prevented by the implementation of Martial Law, and Fijałkowski eventually retired from the Medical School in 1985 having never been offered a tenured post.<sup>6</sup> Despite the apparent lack of support in his academic position, Fijałkowski was a consultant for Ministry of Health-sponsored educational outlets as well as a prolific writer and researcher, whose books were published by the state medical publisher and articles appeared frequently on the pages of top Polish medical journals. While Fijałkowski was not explicit about his religious beliefs in scholarly writings for medical professionals and expectant couples under the communist state, we argue that his model of childbirth preparation implicitly incorporated Pope Pius XII's ideas on psychoprophylaxis, framing childbirth as a “crucial maternal experience”.

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<sup>6</sup> Tadeusz Pisarski, Marian Obara and Edmund Waszyński, *Szkoły i Twórcy Współczesnej Ginekologii Polskiej* (Poznan: Polskie Towarzystwo Ginekologiczne, 1991), 207.

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Childbirth preparation advocacy and natural childbirth movements in general have been highly influential in the history of health activism. In contrast to other health-centred movements, such as feminist health activism, proponents of childbirth preparation in the West, while intending to revolutionize labour pain management, have rarely addressed the “authoritative knowledge of the clinical encounter.”<sup>7</sup> Despite championing the active role of a woman in her own birthing experience, these campaigners have consistently subordinated her agency to that of a (male) physician. Fijałkowski advocated from within Polish gynaecology for a radical change in obstetric care, based on de-pathologizing physiological labour and elevating the authority of childbearing women.

In these terms, childbirth preparation had the potential to redefine the relationship between the “patient” and birth professionals, as well as that between future parents, and between them and their “unborn child”; all relationships infused with gender ideologies and hierarchies. In her study of the visual cultures of childbirth preparation in France, Britain and the US between the 1950s and 1980s, Paula Michales has shown how films used in birth preparation courses reproduced and promoted established gender relationships: although subordination shifted to partnership within the couple, subservience remained firm between the labouring woman and the (male) doctor. Michales, Marilène Vuille, and Amaya García Arregui, have also revealed another gendered relationship in childbirth preparation activism: the entirely feminized midwifery and, depending on local context, more or less masculinized gynaecology involved in the development and popularization of such training in the Soviet Union, France and Spain.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Paula A. Michaels, “The Sounds and Sights of Natural Childbirth: Films and Records in Antenatal Preparation Classes, 1950s–1980s,” *Social History of Medicine* 31, no. 1 (2017): 24–40; Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Jennifer Nelson, *More Than Medicine. A History of the Feminist Women's Health Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Amaya García Arregui, “Psicoprofilaxis y Educación Maternal. Historia de la Preparación al Parto en España” (PhD diss., Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2019); Marilène Vuille, “Le Militantisme en

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This article follows this line of enquiry by analysing the framing of gendered relationships between future parents, and between women and health professionals, in a communist and implicitly Catholic childbirth preparation model. By doing so, it contributes to an expanding scholarship that problematizes the historical constructions of gender in communist East Central Europe and Poland in particular.<sup>9</sup> An important strand in this literature has examined these constructions in expert discourses, revealing persistent tensions between modernizing and traditional visions of femininity and masculinity in sexological and family planning literature, an issue we examine in more detail below.<sup>10</sup>

This article also contributes to the nascent social and cultural historiography of reproductive health in communist Poland. It brings together historiographic themes: debates about the legalization of abortion, and expert knowledge on reproductive health.<sup>11</sup> Although the historiography of childbirth in communist Poland is still underdeveloped, notable exceptions

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Faveur de L'accouchement Sans Douleur," *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 24 (2005): 50–67; Paula A. Michaels, *Lamaze: An International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Natalia Jarska, "Men as Husbands and Fathers in Postwar Poland (1956–1975): Towards New Masculine Identities?," *Men and Masculinities* 24, no. 4 (2021): 630–51; Małgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Agnieszka Kościańska, "Sex on Equal Terms? Polish Sexology on Women's Emancipation and 'Good Sex' from the 1970s to the Present," *Sexualities* 19, no. 1–2 (2016): 236–56; Agata Ignaciuk, "No Man's Land? Gendering Contraception in Family Planning Advice Literature in State-Socialist Poland (1950s–1980s)," *Social History of Medicine* 33, no. 4 (2019): 1327–49.

<sup>11</sup> Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska, "Walka z 'Babkami' o Zdrowie Kobiet: Medykalizacja Przerwywania Ciąży w Polsce w Latach Pięćdziesiątych i Sześćdziesiątych XX Wieku," *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały* 15 (2017): 189–215; Aleksandra Czajkowska, "O Dopuszczalności Przerwywania Ciąży. Ustawa z Dnia 27 Kwietnia 1956 r. i Towarzyszace Jej Dyskusje," in *Kłopoty z seksem w PRL. Rodzenie nie całkiem po ludzku, aborcja, choroby, odmienności*, ed. Marcin Kula (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012), 99–186; Michael Zok, "Wider Die 'Angeborene und Nationale Mission Der Frau?' Gesellschaftliche Auseinandersetzungen um Abtreibungen in Polen seit der Entstalinisierung," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung/Journal of East Central European Studies* 68, no. 2 (2019): 249–78; Katarzyna Jarkiewicz, "Primum Non Nocere. Stanowisko Środowiska Medycznego Wobec Problemu Aborcji a jego Relacje z Kościołem w Okresie Wielkiej Nowenny (1956–1966)," *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 2, no. 30 (2017): 398–433; Katarzyna Jarkiewicz, "'W Obronie Życia Nienarodzonych'. Głos Kościoła i Środowisk Katolickich w Debacie Okołoaborcyjnej w Okresie Wielkiej Nowenny (1956–1966)," *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 1, no. 29 (2017): 137–75; Natalia Jarska, "Modern Marriage and the Culture of Sexuality: Experts between the State and the Church in Poland, 1956–1970," *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2019): 467–90.

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include Elżbieta Kassner's contributions to the social history of midwifery and Agnieszka Wochna-Tymińska's analysis of birthing experiences in the early 1990s.<sup>12</sup> In her analysis of communist biopolitics in Poland, historian Barbara Klich-Kluczevska cites birth preparation as an example practicing the modern socialist self, especially regarding fathers' participation in courses.<sup>13</sup> This article problematizes this argument by highlighting simultaneous aspirations towards modernization and traditionalization intertwined in Fijałkowski's birth preparation ideology. Fijałkowski presented his birth preparation programme, and the associated new relationship between a woman and obstetric professionals, as modern; a modernity that at the same time discarded the pharmacological management of childbirth. Such management of the pain and, later, pace of childbirth have been key technological innovations in obstetric care in countries such as the US and Britain for over a century.<sup>14</sup>

This article is based on medical and popular Polish literature on childbirth preparation. We conducted a systematic manual review of publications on childbirth preparation in general and, for the period under analysis, of the only specialist journal for gynaecology and obstetrics in Poland, *Ginekologia Polska* [*Polish Gynaecology*]. Specific articles in other medical journals, such as *Polski Tygodnik Lekarski* [*Polish Medical Weekly*], a magazine for broad sectors of the medical profession, and *Pielęgniarka i Położna* [*Nurse and Midwife*], were also reviewed, along with Fijałkowski's publications between the mid-1960s and early 1990s for doctors and the

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<sup>12</sup> Agnieszka Wochna-Tymińska, "Zakład Produkcji Dzieci. Oddział Połoniczy w Polsce Przełomu Lat Osiemdziesiątych i Dziewięćdziesiątych XX Wieku," in *Kłopoty z Seksem w PRL. Rodzenie Nie Całkiem po Ludzku, Aborcja, Choroby, Odmienności*, ed. Marcin Kula (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012), 187–239, 189; Elżbieta Kassner, "Między Kontynuacją Tradycji a Nowymi Wyzwaniami. Położne w Nowej Rzeczywistości 1945–1960," in *Kobiety w Medycynie. W Stulecie Odzyskania Niepodległości 1918–2018*, ed. Maria Ciesielska, Anna Marek and Magdalena Paciorek, (Warsaw: Uczelnia Łazarskiego, 2019), 206–30; Elżbieta Kassner, "Sukces Zawodu. Historia Izby Porodowych w Polsce," *Magazyn Pielęgniarki i Położnej* 5 (2007): 40–41.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, "Biopolitics and (Non-)Modernity."

<sup>14</sup> Jacqueline H. Wolf, *Deliver Me from Pain: Anesthesia and Birth in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.



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general public, including those on birth preparation and parenting. We also included documentaries and educational films produced in the 1980s and 1990s on Fijałkowski and his work.

In what follows, we first trace the ideas and practices surrounding birth preparation and psychoprophylaxis in Poland during the early 1950s and situate Fijałkowski's childbirth preparation model within this framework. We then discuss ways in which reproductive expertise in communist Poland defined gender order, before examining the gendering of childbirth and parenting in Fijałkowski's childbirth school ideology. We focus on the definition of masculinity and spousal relations he proposed through this programme, and his approach to women's agency and labour pain. Finally, we analyse how Fijałkowski's childbirth school constituted a site for the creation and proliferation of "pro-life" views and identify ways in which the gendered models he proposed were catholicized.

### [Psychoprophylaxis and preparation for childbirth in post-war Poland](#)

The first "natural childbirth" system, developed in the 1930s by the British physician Grantly Dick-Read, gained popularity across the English-speaking world over the following decades. Dick-Read believed childbirth pain originated from fear and tension, which could be counterbalanced through physical conditioning and relaxation techniques. While he promoted childbirth without fear, psychoprophylaxis was all about women achieving "childbirth without pain".<sup>15</sup> The origins of psychoprophylaxis date to the period between the 1920s and the 1940s, when the Kharkov-based psychologist, I. Z. Vel'vovskii applied Pavlov's theories and hypnosis to labour pain management, which he considered a historically and culturally constructed

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Make Room for Daddy: The Journey from Waiting Room to Birthing Room* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 154–5; Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 72.

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collective reflex. The psychoprophylactic method he and his collaborators promoted attempted to dissolve the historical connection between labour and pain, and recondition women's responses to contractions from pain to relaxation.<sup>16</sup> Vel'vovskii's method was widely implemented in the Soviet Union from the late 1940s onward. Although Soviet governmental support and scientific research into the method had diminished, psychoprophylaxis had become established in other countries by the time of Stalin's death in 1953.<sup>17</sup> In the wider region, the implementation of psychoprophylaxis was linked to both a post-war pronatalist population policy and the inability of states to provide pharmacological pain relief, an argument that historian Paula Michaels has made for the Soviet Union.

Sociologist Ema Hrešanová has interpreted the intense promotion of the method in communist Czechoslovakia during the early 1950s as a propagandistic example of the "Sovietization" of domestic science. In France, psychoprophylaxis was transformed and popularized by the gynaecologist Fernand Lamaze, who learned the principles of the method in the Soviet Union and adapted it by promoting certain breathing patterns and installing husbands as indispensable support figures for women in labour.<sup>18</sup> In Spain from the 1950s onwards, several health professionals, including the gynaecologist Ángel Hernández Jiménez, midwife Consuelo Ruiz Vélez-Frías and interdisciplinary physician Álvaro Aguirre de Cárcer, developed and advocated various versions of psychoprophylaxis. This required mitigating the method's communist origins in a country under the nationalistic regime of General Francisco Franco and the ideological governance of the Catholic Church.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Michaels, "The Sounds and Sights of Natural Childbirth," 28.

<sup>17</sup> Michaels, *Lamaze: An International History*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> Ema Hrešanová, "The Psychoprophylactic Method of Painless Childbirth in Socialist Czechoslovakia: From State Propaganda to Activism of Enthusiasts," *Medical History* 60, no. 4 (2016): 534–56, 555, 534, 536; Wolf, *Deliver Me from Pain*, 155.

<sup>19</sup> García Arregui, "Psicoprofilaxis y Educación Maternal."

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In Poland, psychoprophylactic childbirth preparation began in the early to mid-1950s, as the medicalisation of childbirth intensified and the hospital ward became the approved site for birth.<sup>20</sup> Initially, Polish psychoprophylaxis was practiced by gynaecologists who were concurrently engaged in other strands of reproductive health activism and promotion. The first training courses were initiated in 1951 by Jan Lesiński, a professor of gynaecology with communist leanings who played a key role in founding the state-sponsored family planning association, the Society for Conscious Motherhood (SCM), and pioneered birth preparation training based on the Soviet model. He implemented psychoprophylactic training from a clinic in the obstetric department of Szczecin Medical School, in north-western Poland, and later in two clinics based in Warsaw: the Mother and Child Institute and the Municipal Hospital on Madalińskiego Street.<sup>21</sup> It was Ewa Supronowicz, a female gynaecologist linked to the Szczecin and Warsaw psychoprophylactic endeavours, who first used the term “childbirth school” (*szkoła rodzenia*), a more readily acceptable title for the lay public. The term would become an umbrella denomination for Polish childbirth preparation training, whatever the guiding methodology.<sup>22</sup>

In 1956, a third pioneering childbirth school was established in Cracow’s industrial district of Nowa Huta by Jadwiga Beaupre, a female gynaecologist with links to the Polish family planning movement. Acknowledging Lesiński’s influence on the training she offered, Beaupre

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Klich-Kluczevska and Piotr Perkowski, “Obiekty Biopolityki? Zdrowie, Reprodukacja i Przemoc,” In *Kobiety W Polsce 1945-1989*, 337–405 (352–9).

<sup>21</sup> Jan Lesiński, *Profilaktyka Bólów Porodowych* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich 1956); Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, *Szkoła Rodzenia* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1977), 177.

<sup>22</sup> Ewa Supronowicz, “Ogólne Wyniki Stosowania Metody Psychoprofilaktycznej w Prowadzeniu Bezbolesnych Porodów,” *Ginekologia Polska* 27, no. 1 (1956): 785–89; Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, “Rola Szkoły Rodzenia w Kształtowaniu Postawy Macierzyńskiej,” *Ginekologia Polska* 37, no. 4 (1966): 381–86; Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, ed. *Poród Naturalny po Przygotowaniu w Szkole Rodzenia* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1981).

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claimed her psychoprophylaxis “exceeded even the French method”.<sup>23</sup> Merging mother-centred childbirth preparation with elements of psychoprophylaxis, the school claimed to offer “modern baby care, family planning and management of health” as well as “painless childbirth”.<sup>24</sup> Like other childbirth preparation advocates, Beaupre faced hostility from other gynaecologists and the authorities, particularly during the late 1950s and early 1960s when the Party-State population policy leaned towards antinatalism.<sup>25</sup> During the school’s early years, this lack of support translated into a lack of financial incentives and persistent restrictions from local authorities. This hostility was fuelled by the argument that the school, used mainly by the intelligentsia, provided nothing for the working-class population of Nowa Huta; childbirth preparation courses would continue to mainly attract women with high school and university degrees over the following decades, even in industrial neighbourhoods. However, Beaupre’s school remained open and popular until at least the mid-1980s.<sup>26</sup> The public lectures held for “pregnant spouses”, a denomination that reflected the participation of husbands, attracted over 200 participants during the early 1970s.<sup>27</sup>

The origins of Fijałkowski’s childbirth training in Lodz, which is central to our analysis, can be dated to 1957. Born in 1918, Fijałkowski studied medicine in Warsaw, continuing his studies covertly during the Second World War before he became a prisoner in Auschwitz and

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<sup>23</sup> Jadwiga Beaupre, *Macierzyństwo. Książka dla Kobiet w Cięży o Przygotowaniu do Porodu i Pielęgnacji Niemowlęcia* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1967), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Krystyna Staniek, “Kultura Mężczyzny i Szkoła Rodzenia. Argumenty Rozmawiają z Dr Jadwigą Beaupre,” *Argumenty*, April 24, 1960. We are grateful to Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska for a copy of this article.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.; Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska, “Marx or Malthus? Population Debates and the Reproductive Politics of State-Socialist Poland in the 1950s and 1960s,” *History of the Family* 25, no. 4 (2019): 576–98.

<sup>26</sup> Klich-Kluczewska, “Biopolitics and (Non-)Modernity”; Towarzystwo Planowania Rodziny, *Towarzystwo Planowania Rodziny. Tradycje-Działalność-Perspektywy*, (1977); Żelisława Golańska, “Postawy Macierzyńskie Kobiet w Cięży Zagrożonej,” *Ginekologia Polska* 57, no. 9 (1986): 605–8.

<sup>27</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, *Szkoła Rodzenia Oparta na Podstawach Psychagogicznych* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1974), 159.

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other concentration camps; after the War he completed his medical studies in Edinburgh and eventually obtained his degree in Warsaw in 1946. Having earned his PhD in Gdansk and worked in Wrocław and Bystrzyca Kłodzka, in 1955 Fijałkowski secured the post in Łódź, where he focused on psychoprophylaxis and preparation for childbirth.<sup>28</sup> In a 1999 autobiographic film, the gynaecologist described this orientation as being inspired by a one-month course on psychoprophylaxis for healthcare professionals he attended in Warsaw, possibly under Lesiński.<sup>29</sup> Fijałkowski would later claim he combined the experiences of Lesiński and other Warsaw gynaecologists heavily influenced by the Soviet school, with Grantly Dick-Read's ideas and his own practice and research into psychoprophylaxis. His version of the method was introduced almost simultaneously in two institutions within Łódź: the II Clinic of Obstetric and Women's Diseases at the Medical School and the Childbirth School attached to the *Ośrodek Matki i Dziecka* [*Mother and Child Centre*].<sup>30</sup>

The training in these childbirth schools, elaborated in 1965 as Fijałkowski's habilitation project and published two years later in a book entitled *Szkoła rodzenia oparta na podstawach psychagogicznych* [*Childbirth School based on Psycho-Pedagogy*], was a six-point programme that re-educated pregnant women about childbirth, teaching them about labour and particular tasks they would face, plus relaxation, breathing, pushing, and enhancing their physical condition through a specially designed physical training programme.<sup>31</sup> This model, the gendering of which will be discussed later, was expanded in the early 1970s to include

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<sup>28</sup> Pisarski, Obara and Waszyński, *Szkoły i Twórcy*, 206.

<sup>29</sup> Bożena Garus-Hockuba, "Moja Droga Do Prawdy," *Telewizja Polska*, 1999, 27:49 min.

<sup>30</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, "[Prace Poglądowe] Reeducacja w Szkole Rodzenia," *Ginekologia Polska* 43, no. 12 (1972): 1435; Fijałkowski, *Szkoła Rodzenia* (1974); Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, "Wpływ Psychoprofilaktycznego Przygotowania Ciężarnych na Dynamikę Przebiegu Porodu," *Ginekologia Polska* 43, no. 11 (1972): 1309–15.

<sup>31</sup> In the Polish higher education system, as in Germany, an habilitation is a mandatory postdoctoral degree. Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, *Szkoła Rodzenia Oparta na Podstawach Psychagogicznych* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1967), 39–40.

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additional tasks such as “deepening the marital dialogue”, encouraging the participation of husbands and “promoting a new cultural mother of motherhood and fatherhood”.<sup>32</sup> By 1972, the Lodz schools had prepared over 1700 women and 700 men for childbirth.<sup>33</sup> Fijałkowski’s model became an archetype for a number of childbirth schools across the country, including those in Gdansk, Bytom and Zielona Gora, all founded between the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>34</sup>

The Polish birth preparation project flourished during the mid-1970s, benefiting from—as has been the case in other countries—a pronatalist turn in official population policy, and received explicit government backing through inclusion in the Ministry of Health and Social Security’s Plan of Action for 1976–1980.<sup>35</sup> Official support facilitated the proliferation of outpatient birth preparation schools, whether attached to hospital obstetric wards or independent facilities. At least fifteen schools were operating in thirteen Polish cities the year the Plan of Action was published; by the end of the decade there were thirty-three schools, Lodz and Warsaw having five each, with a further eleven under construction.<sup>36</sup>

The increase in these schools was also linked to a rising interest among gynaecological professionals. Fijałkowski advocated for his method in the Polish Gynaecological Society and promoted the establishment of a Psychosomatic Section, which he presided over between 1973 and 1984, organizing the first national conference on psychoprophylaxis and kinesitherapy in Lodz in 1975.<sup>37</sup> The expansion and mainstreaming of birth preparation was reflected in a further expansion of schools over the following decade. The SCM owned four schools by 1988, in Pila,

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<sup>32</sup> Fijałkowski, *Szkola Rodzenia* (1967), 129.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>34</sup> Fijałkowski, *Poród Naturalny*, 226; Adam Cekański, Maria Świder and Halina Laska-Dębowska, “[Trybuna Dyskusyjna] W Sprawie Szkół Rodzenia,” *Ginekologia Polska* 48, no. 3 (1977): 315–20.

<sup>35</sup> Wolf, *Deliver Me from Pain*, 54; Ministerstwo Zdrowia i Opieki Społecznej.

<sup>36</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, “[Sprawozdania] Konferencja Naukowa i Dni Szkoleniowe na Temat: Psychoprofilaktyka Porodowa i Kinezyterapia w Położnictwie i Ginekologii,” *Ginekologia Polska* 47, no. 2 (1976): 241–46; Fijałkowski, *Poród Naturalny*.

<sup>37</sup> Pisarski, Obara and Waszyński, *Szkoly i Twórcy*, 208.

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Ustron, Warsaw and Olsztyn, all but the last attached to one of the many premarital and family clinics they operated across the country. Articles on birth preparation in the *Polish Gynaecology* journal also proliferated. Before the 1980s, Fijałkowski had almost a monopoly on scientific discussion of the topic, being the author or co-author of nineteen out of thirty-two articles published between 1956 and 1993, all before 1985. Several other authors and academic institutions became involved in the discussion after 1985, including the gynaecologists Anna Sendecka and Adam Cekański, and the presently (in)famous radical abortion opponent, Bogdan Chazan.<sup>38</sup>

Although the history of childbirth itself requires further research, it appears that development of the network of childbirth preparation schools was not linked to systematic and far-reaching changes in obstetric practice. While husbands participating in labour was quite commonplace during the 1970s in the United States—a transformation resulting from, among other factors, natural childbirth and feminist activism—Polish obstetric wards were more likely to veto all birth companions and visitors well into the 1990s.<sup>39</sup> In an article published in the childcare magazine *Your Child* in 1977 and quoted by Agnieszka Wochna-Tymańska, Fijałkowski lamented that the physical organisation of hospital obstetric wards prevented fathers from participating in their children's birth: “in the larger hospitals of the future, there will be space for the husband by the woman's side”.<sup>40</sup> Despite their likely separation during labour, delivery and immediate postpartum, childbirth preparation training was to include men in its regendering project.

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<sup>38</sup> Elżbieta Cichocka, “W bólach rodzić będziesz?, an interview with Bohdan Chazan,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 14, 2000, retrieved from <https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/1204851/W-bolach-rodzic-bdziesz->; Bogdan Chazan and Maciej Müller, *Prawo do Życia bez Kompromisu*. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Walzer Leavitt, *Make Room for Daddy*, Wochna-Tymańska, “Zakład Produkcji Dzieci.”

<sup>40</sup> Wochna-Tymańska, “Zakład Produkcji Dzieci,” 200.

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## Gender and expert knowledge of sexuality and reproduction under state socialism

In communist Poland, as elsewhere, sexual and reproductive expertise produced and reproduced both existing and desired gender orders.<sup>41</sup> In this section we discuss ways in which this expertise defined femininity and masculinity in Poland, the background against which Fijałkowski framed his educational and transformational childbirth and parenthood preparation project.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of sexual and reproductive expertise in Poland, whether aimed at the general public or the scientific community, was shaped by gynaecologists linked to SCM.<sup>42</sup> From the late 1960s onwards, sexology developed within these circles as an interdisciplinary field of research, therapy and education. This fundamentally secular (with some exceptions) establishment formulated ideas about femininity and masculinity in its popular writings, the implementation of which was intended to guarantee success in family planning and sexual relations.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, the assimilation of a determined gender order was a marker of modernity for individuals, the family and, by extension, the communist State.

Polish family planning experts and sexologists assigned the chief responsibility for managing love, sexuality, reproduction and health to women, an assignation inherited from the nineteenth century tradition of marriage counselling,<sup>44</sup> which re-surfaced in the intense state-

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<sup>41</sup> Yuliya Hilevych and Chizu Sato, “Popular Medical Discourses on Birth Control in the Soviet Union During the Cold War: Shifting Responsibilities and Relational Values,” in *Children by Choice?: Changing Values, Reproduction, and Family Planning in the 20th Century*, ed. Ann-Katrin Gembris and Theresia Theuke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 99–121; Kateřina Lišková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska, “Międzynarodowe Aspekty Działalności Towarzystwa Świadomego Macierzyństwa w Latach 50. i 60. XX W.,” in *Problem Kontroli Urodzeń i Antykoncepcji. Krytyczno-Porównawcza Analiza Dyskursów*, ed. Bożena Płonka-Syroka and Aleksandra Szlagowska (Wrocław: Uniwersytet Medyczny im. Piastów Śląskich, 2013), 265–82; Ignaciuk, “No Man’s Land?”

<sup>43</sup> Agnieszka Kościńska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland*, trans. Marta Rozmysłowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021); Kościńska, “Sex on Equal Terms.”

<sup>44</sup> Robert Jütte, *Contraception: A History*, trans. Vicky Russell (Cambridge: Polity, 2008); Bożena Urbanek, “Poradniki Medyczne o Seksualności Kobiet i Mężczyzn W XIX W.,” in *Kobieta i Małżeństwo. Społeczno-Kulturowe Aspekty Seksualności. Wiek XIX i XX*, ed. Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarc (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2004), 61–72.



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sponsored family planning campaign following the legalization of abortion in 1956. In popular medical literature, a key element of this campaign, contraception was depicted as protecting motherhood rather than enabling women to gain sexual pleasure or personal fulfilment, enhancing the well-being of existing and future children and providing a healthier alternative to abortion, habitually portrayed as a potential threat to fertility.<sup>45</sup>

The prioritization of motherhood persisted in popular medical and sexological discourses during the 1970s. The phenomenally successful *The Art of Love* (1978) by Michalina Wisłocka, a gynaecologist and sexologist connected with SCM, continued to link femininity to motherhood; a motherhood that commenced even before birth. She described pregnancy as “a school of unselfish feeling” and stressed a woman’s interactions with the unborn child: “The child [in the mother’s womb] is a [woman’s] beloved partner”. A pregnant woman should go for walks so the child received “a lot of oxygen” and inhibit her “bad moods” so it could be “tranquil and serene”. Wisłocka claimed the child “responded” to the correct behaviour “by growing and developing.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the sexologist argued that while women needed men’s protection during pregnancy and puerperium/lying-in—“No emancipation can change the fact that a woman is a mother and gives birth to children, and that during motherhood and the nursing period she needs a man’s care”<sup>47</sup>—they should spare men any other engagement in reproductive issues.

The rationale for this advice was two-fold: Wisłocka not only deemed men to be inherently incapable of acting in the reproductive realm in a productive and conscientious manner, she also believed they were highly likely to become discouraged and abandon their wives. The first

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<sup>45</sup> Ignaciuk, “No Man’s Land?”

<sup>46</sup> Michalina Wisłocka, *Sztuka Kochania*, 1st ed. (Warsaw: Iskry, 1978), 17, quoted in Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*, 203.

<sup>47</sup> Wisłocka, *Sztuka Kochania*, 91, quoted in Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*, 103.

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framing, common in Polish family planning literature during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, advocated male responsibility. This responsibility, as Natalia Jarska has shown, was the key element in the broader socialist male model. However, prescriptive literature recognised the limited implementation of the responsible male ideal: “masculinity ... could serve the family ... but mostly it disturbed it, by domination, roughness, and egoism.”<sup>48</sup>

Polish sexology also presented immaturity and irresponsibility as key male features during the 1970s. While some family planners, including the aforementioned Jadwiga Beaupre, advocated for more intense engagement by men in the realm of family planning as a prerequisite for success, and a number of sex experts, particularly the popular Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz, saw the engagement of both partners in family planning as the highest level of “sexual culturedness”<sup>49</sup>, the dominant and enduring discourse was that women needed to manage—even protect themselves from—men’s uncontrollable sexuality.<sup>50</sup> The second framing, characteristic of sexology, conceptualized managing reproduction as an excessive burden for men. The only way to secure a husband’s engagement was through what sexologists termed “women’s diplomacy”: acting clandestinely and avoiding open communication about sexuality and reproduction.<sup>51</sup> This ambiguous understanding of female agency was characteristic of Polish sexology at that time: on the one hand, women were considered capable of controlling sexuality and the family; on the other, they were expected to do this behind the scenes, allowing men to maintain the illusion they were in control.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jarska, “Men as Husbands and Fathers,” 660.

<sup>49</sup> Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*; Jarska, “Modern Marriage”.

<sup>50</sup> Ignaciuk, “No Man's Land?”

<sup>51</sup> Wisłocka, *Sztuka Kochania*, 77–78.

<sup>52</sup> Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz, *Seks Partnerski* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1983); for a discussion, see Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*; Kościańska, “Sex on Equal Terms?”

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Polish gynaecologists, including early proponents of psychoprophylaxis, tended to regard childbirth as an exclusively female issue, not an experience to be shared by spouses. In Jadwiga Beaupre's *Motherhood*, a childbirth and baby care manual first published in 1967 and re-edited four times before the 1990s, women were the only recipients of child(birth)-related advice.<sup>53</sup> Jan Lesiński emphasized that childbirth preparation effectively relied on women's submission to the directions of medical staff.<sup>54</sup> In the first psychoprophylactic experiences in Polish obstetric wards during the early 1950s, this "meticulously fulfilling the orders of the doctor or midwife" was a measure of success of childbirth preparation. For professionals, "conducting birth" in women who did not follow orders was "an exhausting enterprise,"<sup>55</sup> a perception that possibly had much to do with the shift from home to hospital birth, which began in Poland in the 1950s.<sup>56</sup>

With childbirth framed as an encounter between a woman and medical staff, Polish sex and family planning experts kept men at bay. Unlike in West Germany, where childbirth began to be represented as a risk-free, controlled and emotionally rewarding event for both spouses from the 1970s, male participation in childbirth in Poland was marginal in both representation and actuality across the entire period under discussion.<sup>57</sup> In both the 1967 and 1988 editions of Beaupre's *Motherhood*, fathers-to-be contributed by accompanying women to childbirth preparation classes, helping with exercises at home and, once the baby was born, bringing the layette—prepared and packed by the pregnant wife—to the hospital. Mainstream sexological

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<sup>53</sup> Beaupre, *Macierzyństwo*; Jadwiga Beaupre, *Macierzyństwo. Książka dla Kobiet w Cięży o Przygotowaniu do Porodu i Pielęgnacji Niemowlęcia*, 4th ed. (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1988)

<sup>54</sup> Jan Lesiński, *Profilaktyka Bólów Porodowych* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1956), 78.

<sup>55</sup> Ewa Supronowicz, "Ogólne Wyniki Stosowania Metody Psychoprofilaktycznej W Prowadzeniu Bezbolesnych Porodów," *Ginekologia Polska* 27, no. 1 (1956): 785–89.

<sup>56</sup> Klich-Kluczevska and Perkowski, "Obiekty Biopolityki?"

<sup>57</sup> Lutz Sauerteig, "Representations of Pregnancy and Childbirth in (West) German Sex Education Books, 1990s–1970s," in *Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A Cultural History of Sex Education in Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Lutz Sauerteig and Roger Davidson (New York: Routledge, 2009), 129–60.

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advice explicitly argued that men should be kept away from the process, even during the late 1970s and 1980s, when childbirth schools had proliferated across the country and it had become slightly more common—although still quite exceptional—for men to accompany their wives during training and labour. The sexologist Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz, who between 1969 and 1990 ran a popular column on sexuality and marriage in a student magazine *Itd [Etc]*, in 1979, linked men’s insensitivity to women’s suffering during childbirth not only to their ignorance, but also to a fear of blood and the physical dimensions of childbirth in general. Although he encouraged men to participate in childbirth schools and the birth itself, promising positive outcomes for their future fatherhood, he left the task of educating and convincing their partners to do so to women.<sup>58</sup> In 1989, in response to a reader whose husband lost sexual interest in her after participating in the birth of their child, the sexologist evaluated male engagement in childbirth as potentially problematic. Many men engaged in the childbirth experience due to aspirations to modernity but were exposing themselves to a potentially shocking experience. They could be appalled by the bodily aspects of childbirth, as well as their wives’ unexpected reactions, and in consequence suffer from a “postpartum impotence”.<sup>59</sup> Lew-Starowicz’s arguments were by no means unique: as Judith Walzer Leavitt has shown, the idea that childbirth was anti-aesthetic and could have a negative impact on a husband’s sexual attraction towards his wife was used by US physicians to oppose male participation in labour during the 1960s.<sup>60</sup>

Sexologists’ wariness of male participation in reproduction management and, more concretely, in labour and delivery, did not prevent the emergence of a new model of fatherhood between the late 1950s and mid-1970s. While the earlier benchmark of a distant breadwinner

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<sup>58</sup> Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz, “Mężczyźni i Poród,” *Itd* no. 44 (1979): 30.

<sup>59</sup> Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz, “Mężczyźni i Poród,” *Itd* no. 40 (1989): 23.

<sup>60</sup> Walzer Leavitt, *Make Room for Daddy*, 219.

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remained powerful, this new fatherhood “was symbolised by a figure of a man washing nappies—and placed close to the baby and child.”<sup>61</sup> This new figure had been sustained by Catholic literature on sexuality and marriage, which encouraged men to be more involved in reproductive issues. In the influential *Love and Responsibility*, the future Pope John Paul II, Karol Wojtyła argued that husband and wife were jointly responsible for procreation and parenthood and urged men to control their desires,<sup>62</sup> and Andrzej Wielowieyski, an influential lay Catholic author, presented marriage and reproduction as spaces of dialogue in which women should be free to communicate their needs and expectations.<sup>63</sup>

#### (Re)defining gender in Fijałkowski’s preparation for childbirth and parenthood ideology

Włodzimierz Fijałkowski’s childbirth preparation programme, with a new relationship between the parents of an “unborn child” at its core, was another boost for the ideal of an engaged father. In contrast to the traditionally oriented gender order proposed by contemporary experts in sexuality and reproduction, Fijałkowski’s ideas on women’s agency during childbirth, egalitarianism in marriage and men’s committed involvement in family and reproduction matters were revolutionary; even more so as they originated not from secular sex and family planning experts but from a Catholic doctor. In what follows, we analyse the gendering and Catholicizing of Fijałkowski’s preparation for childbirth and parenthood ideology, in which gender equality and hierarchy blend to form a unique vision of emancipation: of women, men and the “unborn child”. This ideology had various components: natural family planning

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 643.

<sup>62</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Miłość i Odpowiedzialność. Studium Etyczne* (Lublin: Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski, 1960).

<sup>63</sup> Andrzej Wielowieyski, *Przed Nami Małżeństwo*, 1st ed. (Krakow: Znak, 1972). More on Wielowieyski can be found in Agnieszka Kościańska, “*Humanae Vitae*, Birth Control and the Forgotten History of the Catholic Church in Poland,” in *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945–1975*, ed. Alana Harris (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 187–208.

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(developed for a Catholic audience from the 1950s onwards and for the general public in the 1970s), childbirth preparation (with writings initially aimed at professionals and from the late 1970s, the general public), and specific conceptions of gender, relationships, parenthood and, particularly, fatherhood (1980s). Historian Michelle Murphy has argued that American feminist self-help clinics of the 1970s were not a place but a protocol.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Fijałkowski's childbirth school could be understood as a protocol, wherein the elements above converged in holistic training for a holistic lifestyle, in which women and men, by relating to each other in a particular way, would achieve their ultimate aim and protect the “unborn life”.

### New masculinity for a new partnership

The key to this holistic lifestyle was the development of a new masculinity, radically removed from the dominant models proposed by contemporary mainstream family planners and sexologists. This masculinity, which, as this section will show, required the embracing of “female” qualities, was a key component in transforming and equalizing gender relations. However, in the case of childbirth preparation, the resulting supposed equality was tainted with subordination: men were to become women's “instructors”.

In his book addressed to the wider Catholic public, *Miłość w spotkaniu płci* [*Love in the Encounter of the Sexes*, 1984], Fijałkowski not only proposed the new model of woman's agency we discuss in the next section, but also a new gender order and roles for men. Elevating wives to the dominant marital position, he encouraged women to explicitly communicate their needs and thoughts to men and encouraged the latter to fully engage with reproduction.

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<sup>64</sup> Michelle Murphy, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction: Entanglements of Feminism, Health, and Technoscience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

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First of all, men should educate themselves about the female fertility cycle. Fijałkowski had developed this argument in earlier books popularizing the “natural fertility rhythm”, cycle-observation-based family planning, oriented towards conception rather than contraception.<sup>65</sup> While the idea that men should know and even actively participate in recognizing the fertile periods of their wives was also present in Jadwiga Beaupre’s childbirth preparation manual, in the aforementioned *Motherhood*, Fijałkowski went further by suggesting that cycle-observation should be a calendar to guide a man’s life and fatherhood. In other words, men were expected to listen to women in order to re-make their masculinity:

Liberating the man from the limitations of his nature may only happen through elevating and embracing everything female. For him, this opens possibilities he could not even dare to dream about. Only then can a woman truly consider him the creator of her maternity, not in the sense of the biological role of sperm, but because he has developed, with difficulty, personality traits that allow motherhood and fatherhood to be combined within him.<sup>66</sup>

In this framework, a woman was encouraged to “raise” a man “ready and capable of seeing her values”,<sup>67</sup> an idea closely related to women’s behind-the-scenes agency promoted by contemporary mainstream sexology. However, Fijałkowski understood this very differently, proposing that to develop as fathers and husbands, men should open up to some feminine qualities and let themselves be guided by women into women’s world.

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<sup>65</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, *Naturalny Rytm Płodności* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1976); Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, *Biologiczny Rytm Płodności a Regulacja Urodzeń* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1971). Also, Agata Ignaciuk, *Catholicising Nature. Medicine and ‘Natural Family Planning’ in State-socialist Poland* (forthcoming).

<sup>66</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, *Miłość w Spotkaniu Płci* (Warsaw: PAX, 1984), 31.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

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Furthermore, in the religious spirit of praising modesty and subservience as a route to self-development—usually connected to women and their spiritual agency in Christian cultures<sup>68</sup>—he encouraged men to subordinate to the feminine element:

A man who takes this path, even if he fails to immediately understand its meaning, will ultimately find the way to his own development and make amazing discoveries. He will understand that an open mind, which recognizes the limits of the male personality, is extremely productive. When a man recognizes his inferiority and surrenders to transformations under the female element, which in a way overcomes him, he can become a true authority and personification of strength.<sup>69</sup>

This gender model was fully developed in his 1994 book, *Fatherhood Re-Discovered*.<sup>70</sup> Here Fijałkowski stressed that men's success in self-development to fatherhood was reliant on listening to and treating women as equals. The author also emphasized the importance of women's work outside the household for their self-realization and criticized men who discouraged their wives from developing careers. He disparaged the idea that men "help" women with children and around the home: these were joint obligations.<sup>71</sup>

This vision of the spousal relationship, developed in the 1980s and 1990s, is deeply rooted in the ideology of childbirth and childbirth preparation that Fijałkowski had been developing since the late 1950s. In contrast to contemporary sexologists, who viewed male participation in childbirth as a threat to the marital bond, but in line with popular childbirth preparation methods including those promoted by Grantly Dick-Read, Fijałkowski argued that men should attend

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<sup>68</sup> Phyllis Mack, "Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency. Reflections on Eighteen-Century Quakerism," *SIGNS* 29, no. 1 (2003): 149–177; Agnieszka Kościańska, "The 'Power of Silence': Spirituality and Women's Agency Beyond the Catholic Church in Poland," *Focaal* 53 (2009): 56–71.

<sup>69</sup> Fijałkowski, *Miłość w Spotkaniu Płci*, 32.

<sup>70</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, *Ojcostwo na Nowo Odkryte* (Pelplin: Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 1994).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–21, 36.



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birth preparation courses as partners and future fathers.<sup>72</sup> These ideas, also present in Jadwiga Beaupre's work, were merged in an argument that birth preparation was a crucial bond-building experience, as explained in the second edition to Fijałkowski's aforementioned key publication on childbirth preparation, *Childbirth School based on Psycho-Pedagogy* (first edition 1967, second edition 1974, third edition 1977):

The scope of psychoprophylactic preparation for childbirth is not limited to the “art of giving birth”. The birth itself is important but it constitutes only an episode in building a bond between the spouses while they turn the “me–you” arrangement into the more complicated one: “we and our child”. In this process, psychoprophylactics allows the mutual “uncovering” of spouses and the achieving of deeper unity through the engagement of their individual and mutual responsibility.<sup>73</sup>

The bond, as defined here, transcended the spouses to include the “child”. This is an example of the explicit foetus humanization Fijałkowski made from the 1970s onwards through repeated claims that a pregnant woman and her husband were already parents, an idea we will discuss in more detail in the final section.

Helping spouses/parents to understand and forge this bond was a key element of Fijałkowski's model of childbirth preparation. The second edition of *Childbirth School Based on Psycho-Pedagogy* in 1974, added a specific gendering of the spousal relationship. In addition to delivering knowledge about pregnancy and childbirth to women, teaching them how to stay fit and actively confront labour, the programme began to include the demand for new social and cultural gender models: engaging both fatherhood and active motherhood for the good of the child. This programme also included aims such as strengthening marital dialogue through joint

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<sup>72</sup> Walzer Leavitt, *Make Room for Daddy*, 14, 101–2, 112–3.

<sup>73</sup> Fijałkowski, *Szkola Rodzenia* (1974), 127.

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involvement in childcare and enabling men to see childbirth from a woman’s perspective.<sup>74</sup> Men attended Lodz Childbirth School from at least 1965 and over 600 received training in newborn care between 1965 and 1972, a participation that at that time was a definite exception.<sup>75</sup>

Fijałkowski’s birth preparation activism in re-defining gender roles can be best summarized by a letter he allegedly received from a grateful father: “during childbirth the place of the husband is by the wife’s side, not with a glass of vodka or in bed with another woman, which happens. I am really grateful for these wonderful moments.”<sup>76</sup> Fijałkowski commented on this and other testimonies he received:

From accounts given by both spouses a new model of the family emerges: this is not the model in which the father is the head and the mother is the heart. We can observe fully dual parenthood (*dwurodzicielstwo*) in which both spouses, although different because of their genders, complement each other<sup>77</sup>

However, the new roles for fathers and gender models Fijałkowski proposed did not fully transgress the existing gender order: his writings on childbirth display certain ambiguities in regard to masculinity. While his childbirth school curriculum stressed the development of “dual parenthood” and new gender models, it also infused the spousal relationship with hierarchies as he repeatedly suggested men should be “instructors” for labouring women:

The household coach—the husband—will surely spot mistakes and imperfections in his wife’s practice of [childbirth preparation] exercises. Most men enjoy themselves in this

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 128–29.

<sup>75</sup> File on the documentary “Childbirth School” (1973–1976). National Archives in Warsaw, APW 2877/I/2054; Wochna-Tymińska, “Zakład Produkcji Dzieci.”

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Fijałkowski, *Ojcostwo na Nowo Odkryte*, 111, 135.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 135.

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role. Their inborn precision and sporty spirit will turn the [childbirth preparation] exercises into an Olympic challenge<sup>78</sup>

This coaching—and supervision—was also conferred onto the intrinsically female task of breastfeeding:

The division of roles between the specifically male and the specifically female should be abandoned. Even breastfeeding without conscious and active participation of the husband often fails<sup>79</sup>

This quotation, combining as it does the paradoxical quest for equality and difference, characterizes Fijałkowski's ideology. It is worth noting, however, that the idea of a husband as labour coach was by no means exclusive to Fijałkowski. In the United States, as Judith Walzer Leavitt has shown, assigning the task of “coaching” to the husband lay at the core of a childbirth preparation system popularised by physician Robert A. Bradley from the mid-1960s.<sup>80</sup> The coach role, appealing to the familiar masculinely gendered space of sports, enabled masculinity to be reconciled into the new space of childbirth, a persuasive strategy also firmly entrenched in Fijałkowski's work.

In addition to coaching, men were expected to protect their pregnant wives, a task also assigned by mainstream family planners and sexologists. In contrast to these more traditional approaches, however, Fijałkowski extended this protection to the foetus. From the first edition of *Childbirth School...* (1967), a pregnant woman was presented as “the elementary site of foetal protection”. The father was expected to proactively defend the foetus, even from the

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<sup>78</sup> Fijałkowski, *Szkola Rodzenia* (1967), 52.

<sup>79</sup> Fijałkowski, *Ojcostwo na Nowo Odkryte*, 69.

<sup>80</sup> Walzer Leavitt, *Make Room for Daddy*, 131, 142, 166–8.

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mother if necessary: “sudden emotional reactions should be tamed before they affect the mother and through her, the foetus.”<sup>81</sup>

Men as instructors and protectors featured even more prominently in *Fatherhood Re-Discovered* (1994); as did ambiguities regarding equality. This equivocal approach to gender roles was also visible in the book within the selection of parent testimonies Fijałkowski had allegedly collected in the 1980s and early 1990s. In one narrative a man described being by his wife’s side during labour: “My wife told me: ‘it is good that you are here, without you it wouldn’t be possible for me to give birth.’”<sup>82</sup> The husband also corrected apparently erroneous breathing instructions provided by medical staff. Common elements in the book’s narratives by women were shame for not being able to follow all the instructions received at childbirth school and fear of failing their husbands. One woman regretted not “being able to handle the pain—such an ordinary physical emotion—and by this I upset my husband.”<sup>83</sup>

### Childbirth and women’s agency, the Catholic way

In contrast to other medical experts dealing with sexuality, marriage, and reproduction, Fijałkowski repeatedly stressed that women were “active agents” and should be free to express and share their bodily and emotional experiences. This emphasis on activity is visible in two areas: with men/husbands in marital life, and in relation to medical staff during pregnancy and childbirth. In this section we explore the notion of women’s agency in Fijałkowski’s childbirth preparation programme and reflect upon Catholic inspirations for his vision.

As Jaqueline Wolf has shown, religious groups have played a prominent role in the labour and delivery management systems that came to be known as “natural childbirth” in the United

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<sup>81</sup> Fijałkowski, *Szkola Rodzenia* (1967), 47.

<sup>82</sup> Fijałkowski, *Ojcostwo na Nowo Odkryte*, 91.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

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States. These groups included the breastfeeding advocate organisation *La Leche League*, funded by a group of Catholic women in 1957, which highlighted women's corporal agency and defended their ability to feed their infants against the frequent mistrust of institutional medicine.<sup>84</sup> Judith Walzer Leavitt has pointed out that, in the United States, Catholic hospitals pioneered incorporating husbands into labour rooms in the 1950s. The rationale behind this included the belief that a husband's leading role in the family could be helpful in reassuring his wife during childbirth. It also included, as Fijałkowski's rationale did, popularisation of the idea that a family started with pregnancy, not when the child was born.<sup>85</sup>

In his articles published in *Polish Gynaecology*, the major Polish journal addressing experts interested in reproductive medicine, Fijałkowski stressed that women should overcome their passiveness and become active.<sup>86</sup> In his opinion, passiveness during labour was the main cause of suffering.<sup>87</sup> In a 1974 article he asserted that a woman in labour was a subject, not object of obstetric care:

According to the Lodz Childbirth School, labour is a task taken up by a mother to protect her birthing child, with complete engagement of her personal responsibility. Mother's participation in labour has to be conscious and active, she is an agent. This aim is achieved by [helping her] to develop the correct maternal attitude as well as undergoing adequate training.<sup>88</sup>

While the gynaecologist linked this agency to "correct maternal attitude", a theme we explore further in this section, he also underscored the importance of medical personnel learning how to

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<sup>84</sup> Wolf, *Deliver Me from Pain*, 139.

<sup>85</sup> Walzer Leavitt, *Make Room for Daddy*, 113, 139.

<sup>86</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski and Magdalena Latosińska, "Analiza przeżyć porodowych i zachowanie się kobiet po przygotowaniu psychoprofilaktycznym," *Ginekologia Polska* 40, no. 5 (1969): 517–25.

<sup>87</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, "[Artykuł redakcyjny] Rola ćwiczeń fizycznych w przygotowaniu do porodu," *Ginekologia Polska* 41, no. 4 (1970): 369–74.

<sup>88</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, "Wpływ psychoprofilaktycznego przygotowania ciężarnych na dynamikę przebiegu porodu," *Ginekologia Polska* 43, no. 11 (1972): 1309–15.

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look at pregnancy, labour and postpartum through a woman's eyes.<sup>89</sup> In the aforementioned 1982 film, *In the Childbirth School*, the gynaecologist claimed that labour “is taken away from the mother,” presumably by medical professionals. Fijałkowski's actual words are “*W szpitalach mówią, odbieranie porodu. Komu? Matce*. This sentence has a double meaning. *Odbieranie porodu* means “attending the delivery” but the literal translation of the word *odbieranie* is “taking away.”<sup>90</sup> In an autobiographical book published in 1991, in which he revealed himself to be Catholic and a pro-life activist, Fijałkowski was even bolder in juxtaposing women and obstetric staff, claiming that “medicine incapacitates women”.<sup>91</sup> The same idea, while attenuated, had been apparent as he encouraged women to speak of their experiences and feelings in his professional writing and practice. In childbirth, these experiences and feelings were to be prioritized over medical interpretations and data generated by obstetric technologies.<sup>92</sup> Women were to be given authority not only to produce data from within their own bodies, they were also encouraged to use their bodily experiences to re-name obstetric terms.<sup>93</sup>

The inspiration for such framing of women's agency is likely to have originated from Fijałkowski's Catholicism. From the 1950s onward he was a key medical authority on natural family planning in Catholic circles and involved in transnational Christian intellectual exchange.<sup>94</sup> Being a doctor in a communist country, Fijałkowski concealed his religious motivations in his scientific writing before the democratic transition, revealing himself as an eager Catholic only in the aforementioned 1991 autobiography. Nonetheless, close reading of

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<sup>89</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, “[Prace pogładowe] Reedukacja w szkole rodzenia.”

<sup>90</sup> Skonieczny, *W Szkole Rodzenia*, 5:15–5:20.

<sup>91</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, *Moja Droga do Prawdy* (Katowice: Księgarnia Św. Jacka, 1991), 111.

<sup>92</sup> Fijałkowski, ed. *Poród Naturalny*, 74.

<sup>93</sup> Fijałkowski, *Szkola Rodzenia* (1967), 18–19.

<sup>94</sup> Jarkiewicz, “W Obronie Życia Nienarodzonych,” 154.

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the childbirth preparation programme reveals the ways in which Fijałkowski drew on Catholic ideas of the time, especially Pope Pius XII's authorization of childbirth preparation for elevating labour as the "crucial maternal experience". As Jaqueline Wolf has discussed, during a meeting with a group of Catholic obstetricians and gynaecologists in 1956, Pius XII emphasised that painless childbirth was not immoral and, therefore, Christian obstetrics should not feel conflicted about the use of psychoprophylaxis.<sup>95</sup> These ideas informed childbirth preparation activists in other contexts, such as Spain under Franco. Amaya García Arregui has traced how Álvaro Aguirre de Cárcer, an interdisciplinary physician and creator of the Spanish school of childbirth preparation, drew on Pius XII's 1956 address on the science and morality of painless childbirth, detaching the programme from Soviet materialism and infusing it with ideas about disciplining the body and preparing for the maternal role through helping Nature: "creating something deeper, an attitude, an aspiration, a different climate of veneration of motherhood". Mothers, Aguirre de Cárcer argued, were to be educated not to focus solely on the labour, but to look beyond and concentrate on the child.<sup>96</sup>

Similar ideas—due to shared inspirations—were promoted by Fijałkowski, who was certainly familiar with Aguirre de Cárcer's work: he reported on papers de Cárcer presented at international conferences on childbirth and psychosomatic medicine and eagerly chronicled de Cárcer's work in his books and *Polish Gynaecology*.<sup>97</sup> In his own version of Catholicizing childbirth, Fijałkowski argued that childbirth school was essential for creating "maternal attitude" (*postawa macierzyńska*). The fact that birth was a "crucial maternal experience" was not always clear to women, even those who attended the school.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Wolf, *Deliver Me from Pain*, 139-140; Pope Pius XII, "Text of Address by Pope Pius XII on the Science and Morality of Painless Childbirth," *Linacre Q.* 23 no. 2 (1956): 39–45.

<sup>96</sup> García Arregui, "Psicoprofilaxis y Educación Maternal," 139)

<sup>97</sup> Fijałkowski, ed., *Poród Naturalny*, 20.

<sup>98</sup> Fijałkowski, "Rola Szkoły Rodzenia."

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This goal of teaching women to interpret childbirth in a way they may not “naturally” agree with contradicts Fijałkowski’s emphasis on women’s agency and championing of their interpretations of bodily processes over those made by medical staff. Women’s active role was limited to the context of motherhood and protection of the child, and only with specific training at childbirth school could women “regain their true identities” as women.<sup>99</sup> In this view, just as in key sexological writings of the time by Wisłocka, femininity equalled motherhood, a motherhood that could be overwhelming:

[Their] ... primary engagement with motherhood was so dominating that educational or background differences vanished. Women were solely mothers.<sup>100</sup>

Motherhood, recognized in the childbirth school and Fijałkowski’s educational programme in general as beginning not at birth but at the onset of pregnancy, was a more primary bond than that of class.

### Catholicizing labour pain

Whether childbirth is “natural” or a pathological process that required medical management and intervention has been one of the central questions of modern obstetrics. Among other arguments, nineteenth-century physicians opposed to the use of anaesthesia in childbirth evoked Christian religious prescription, in particular the Scripture’s “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children”. However, the aforementioned 1956 address by Pope Pius XII explicitly highlighted that “in punishing Eve, God did not wish to forbid—nor did he forbid—mothers to make use of means which render childbirth easier and less painful.”<sup>101</sup> In dialogue with, yet not completely

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<sup>99</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, *Szkola Rodzenia* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1977), 4.

<sup>100</sup> Fijałkowski, *Szkola Rodzenia* (1974), 123.

<sup>101</sup> Pope Pius XII, “Text of Address,” 44.



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embracing this idea, Fijałkowski's system of childbirth preparation linked women's agency to the pain of childbirth. In this section, we show how the gynaecologist framed labour pain within a rhetoric of protecting the child against the potentially harmful effects of artificial anaesthesia.

As anthropologist Talal Asad has convincingly outlined, overcoming pain is modern and secular; religious perspectives on pain can be very different. Drawing on Pamela Klassen's research on natural and home birth among deeply religious Christians and Jews who decided to give birth in pain, Asad argued that pain can contribute to agency and authority within the community: "when pain is a constitutive part of birthing it is not simply the negative *experience* of a patient, as biomedicine tends to regard it, but an aspect of a distinctive social act in which others assist".<sup>102</sup> From a Catholic perspective, pain is an agentic experience. Therefore, he argues, in the context of Klassen's study "pain is not the isolated condition of an individual body to be finally eliminated by chemical or surgical interventions. It is integral to an activity that reproduces and sustains human relationships."<sup>103</sup> This conceptualization of pain has also been apparent in Polish Catholicism. In the first edition of *Love and Responsibility*, Wojtyła stressed that pain was a constitutive element of childbirth. In his view, a woman should be well informed about childbirth and active during the process.<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, this fragment was not included in the 1982 English edition.

Fijałkowski's conception of pain conforms to Asad's interpretation. For Fijałkowski, coping with pain was quintessential for a woman/mother and was undertaken for the sake of the child, as he explained in a keynote speech during the first symposium on psychoprophylactics he organized in 1975:

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<sup>102</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 88. See also Pamela E. Klassen, "Sacred Maternities and Postbiomedical Bodies: Religion and Nature in Contemporary Home Birth," *SIGNS* 26, no. 3 (2001): 775–809.

<sup>103</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 88.

<sup>104</sup> Wojtyła, *Miłość i Odpowiedzialność*, 221.

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[Psychoprophylaxis] means creating a new family model, in which motherhood and fatherhood work in inextricable connection from the beginning of the new human existence, and the conscious, active and effective effort women undertake to protect their child during labor is for them a source of unique satisfaction.<sup>105</sup>

At the same time, Fijałkowski criticized the excessive focus of traditional psychoprophylaxis on managing pain or representing it as a form of anaesthesia. Jan Lesiński, the pioneer of psychoprophylaxis in Poland, believed women who received training but still needed pharmacological relief should be offered anaesthesia.<sup>106</sup> Fijałkowski, by contrast, considered pharmacological anaesthesia “an achievement that is also a form a degradation,”<sup>107</sup> part of the “civilization” of obstetric technology that promoted the loss of women’s “maternal attitude” during labour.<sup>108</sup> It is worth noting, however, that administration of any form of pharmacological anaesthesia during childbirth was by no means common practice in communist Poland.

In Fijałkowski’s opinion, biomedicine increased suffering during childbirth because women had lost their understanding of the protective qualities and meaning of pain. Only through aware, non-anaesthetized and active participation could a woman fully experience labour and adequately protect her child:

Natural childbirth activates and enhances the body to support the physiological norms of the childbirth effort. Therefore, the labouring woman is not excessively tired and can live through labour as a fascinating experience, at the same time guaranteeing the child a “soft landing” in a new, unknown environment<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Fijałkowski, *Poród Naturalny*, 48.

<sup>106</sup> Lesiński, *Profilaktyka Bólów Porodowych*.

<sup>107</sup> Fijałkowski, *Szkoła Rodzenia* (1967), 72.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>109</sup> Fijałkowski, *Ojcostwo na Nowo Odkryte*, 56.

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To this end, Fijałkowski proposed substituting the term “childbirth pain” with “childbirth sensations” as early as 1967, a discursive shift also implemented in the United States during the 1970s, when the American Society for Psychoprophylaxis replaced the expression “labour pain” with “labour work” in all its literature.<sup>110</sup> The term “childbirth sensation” was also used by one of the key natural homebirth ideologues, American midwife Ina May Gaskin, in her 1975 *Spiritual Midwifery*.<sup>111</sup> Fijałkowski summarized the necessary link between childbirth and awareness as “I feel therefore I give birth”, a nod to the Cartesian credo.<sup>112</sup>

Testimonies from the 1980s and early 1990s published in *Fatherhood Re-Discovered* suggest that women attending Fijałkowski’s childbirth schools were as eager to give birth in pain as the women studied by Klassen. But there is another striking element in these testimonies: the role of fathers. One woman described herself as “sleepy and worn out by contractions. My husband was indispensable.” Fijałkowski used this testimony to illustrate that a husband’s help during labour was not only beneficial for the wife, but also a “great step forward in building the marital bond and the bond between the parents and the child.”<sup>113</sup> He also suggested that pain can be an agentic social act that builds social relationships: with a father’s engagement, a mother could build a relationship with her child through pain. Pain therefore contributed to the new model of gender relations. Yet it also highlighted deep-rooted ambiguities about the re-definition of gender order: even here, men were “instructors”.

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<sup>110</sup> Wolf, *Deliver Me from Pain*, 148.

<sup>111</sup> Wendy Kline, *Coming Home: How Midwives Changed Birth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>112</sup> Fijałkowski, *Ojcostwo na Nowo Odkryte*, 57.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 108–9.

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### Creating the (unborn) child

The final Catholic element informing Fijałkowski's concepts of gender roles was his "pro-life" orientation. In this section we show how important the childbirth school programme was in the construction and dissemination of anti-abortion ideas.

Abortion was legalized in communist Poland in 1956 and became available on demand and free of charge in public healthcare facilities a few years later. The Catholic Church reacted immediately, condemning the legislation and attempting to counter its effects. Due to State censorship, however, this early "pro-life" activism was conducted through religious rather than public channels.<sup>114</sup> From the 1970s onward, "pro-life" discourse gained increasing prominence and public visibility in Poland, partially due to an alignment between the population goals of the Party-State under the new leadership of Edward Gierek and the Catholic hierarchy.<sup>115</sup> Support was also received from transnational Catholic and Christian networks.

Fijałkowski's writings reflect this change through an increasingly active construction of the "unborn child", practiced through the activities of his childbirth schools since their foundation, but only made explicit in the public record towards the end of the decade. In 1974, the childbirth school curriculum referred to the child during labour in a rather abstract way: "Shaping a new model of motherhood and fatherhood, with the active involvement of the mother in the protection of the child being born".<sup>116</sup> The curriculum outlined in a 1981 book on childbirth preparation in Poland that Fijałkowski co-edited humanized the foetus in ways that can be

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<sup>114</sup> Jarkiewicz, "W Obronie Życia Nienarodzonych"; Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska and Agata Ignaciuk, "Family Planning Advice in State-Socialist Poland, 1950s–1980s: Local and Transnational Exchanges," *Medical History* 64, no. 2 (2020): 240–66.

<sup>115</sup> Kuźma-Markowska and Ignaciuk, "Family Planning Advice"; Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, "Od Neomatriarchatu do Szpitala-Pomnika Matki Polki. Ideologie Macierzyństwa w Dyskursach Władzy i Opozycji w Polsce (1945–1989)," in *Niebezpieczne Związki. Macierzyństwo, Ojcostwo i Polityka*, ed. Renata E. Hryciuk and Elżbieta Korolczuk (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2015), 45–74.

<sup>116</sup> Fijałkowski, *Szkola Rodzenia* (1974), 129.

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considered characteristic of the nascent “pro-life” rhetoric: “Shaping a new cultural model of marriage, in which the woman and the man participate together in the **development of the child since its conception**, begin a dialogue with the child as early as possible and support each other during the difficult hours of labour” (our emphasis).<sup>117</sup> Almost simultaneously, this rhetoric also appeared in Fijałkowski’s articles in *Polish Gynaecology*, where he was perhaps the first to introduce the idea of “conceived” or “unborn child” to a scientific medium. In a 1984 article in this journal, he underlined that childbirth school clients were “parents during the prenatal phase of their child.”<sup>118</sup>

Furthermore, reports of childbirth school activities in the early 1980s explicitly reflected a “pro-life” consciousness. *Meetings in Childbirth School* [*Spotkania w szkole rodzenia*, 1980], aimed at women interested in childbirth preparation who could not attend specific training, contained a chapter on “The Child During its Uterine Life”. Here, the widespread practice of abortion was attributed to lack of knowledge about foetal development, with claims that “a human being during its life hidden in the womb is not a mass or a jelly” and, in reference to the customary limit for on-demand abortion in Polish public healthcare, “the 12 weeks make no real difference in the child’s development.”<sup>119</sup> Fijałkowski also emphasized that women were receptive to his anti-abortion message, by reproducing a statement allegedly made by a female course participant:

I am shocked by what I heard. My imagination—and those of my fellow participants—  
has been deeply moved. The practical knowledge on the natural fertility rhythm

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<sup>117</sup> Fijałkowski, *Poród Naturalny*, 126–27.

<sup>118</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, “Poród Naturalny w Ekologii Rozrodu,” *Ginekologia Polska* 55, no. 12 (1984): 925–30; Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, “[Prace Kliniczne] ‘Dialogue’ with the Child in the Statements of Childbirth School Participants,” *Ginekologia Polska* 54, no. 4 (1983): 243–46.

<sup>119</sup> Agata Ignaciuk, “In Sickness and in Health. Expert Discussions on Abortion Indications, Risks and Patient-Doctor Relationships in Post-War Poland,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 95 (2021): 83–112.

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becomes a crucial element in the change of mentality of our society and humanity in general.<sup>120</sup>

This statement exemplifies the political dimension of the childbirth school as a transmission medium for anti-abortion ideas. Trainees were not only expected to protect their own “children”—already likely as childbirth schools attracted women and couples who celebrated their pregnancies—but also preach about protection of the “unborn child” to the world.

This teaching contributed to the universal subjectivity of the “unborn child” that emerged in Polish abortion debates from the 1990s onward.<sup>121</sup> The rhetoric of this subjectivity was fully developed in Fijałkowski’s 1991 autobiography, at the height of debates about revision of the communist abortion law:<sup>122</sup>

Some perceive the uncompromising defence of the unborn’s right to life as something that undermines women’s dignity. Why? Because, they say, she needs to have the right to her own body. Shared fertility and shared parenthood are out of sight. In the press discussions [about the abortion law] I have seen no mention of the need to mainstream natural fertility regulation, respect for the biological rhythm of fertility, which should be the basis of taking responsible procreational decisions.<sup>123</sup>

This statement links natural family planning and “pro-life” ideology with Pius XII’s concept of motherhood and displays the ambiguity embedded in Fijałkowski’s “new gender model”: woman’s agency and subjectivity are only possible in the context of motherhood. Women have

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<sup>120</sup> Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, *Spotkania W Szkole Rodzenia, Lekarz Radzi Kobietom* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1980), 50.

<sup>121</sup> Agnieszka Graff, *Świat Bez Kobiet: Pleć W Polskim Życiu Publicznym* (Warsaw: W. A. B., 2001); Janina P. Holc, “The Purest Democrat: Fetal Citizenship and Subjectivity in the Construction of Democracy in Poland,” *SIGNS* 29, no. 3 (2004): 755–82.

<sup>122</sup> Małgorzata Fuszara, “Legal Regulation of Abortion in Poland,” *SIGNS* 17, no. 1 (1991): 117–28.

<sup>123</sup> Fijałkowski, *Moja Droga Do Prawdy*, 58.

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“dignity” and are acting agents only as potential/actual mothers. The subjectivity of the foetus is paramount.

This strong antiabortion message was accompanied by contraception rhetoric and highly gendered natural family planning. Fijałkowski, the key authority on natural family planning in Catholic circles and its populariser amongst the general public and the medical community, perceived contraception as being hostile to women.<sup>124</sup> In *Fatherhood Re-Discovered* he explained his stance:

The division of responsibilities sustains an unhealthy relationship. A woman, temporarily sterile [because of using contraception], has to fulfil the husband’s sexual needs. In this relationship, she is more of a property than a partner. A reverse situation can happen as well—a wife can be using her husband.<sup>125</sup>

Fijałkowski believed that contraception forced wives to engage in what he called “the type of sexual relations dictated by men’s needs” and could lead to infertility in women.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, he argued that contraception inhibited dialogue within marriage. The new gender models Fijałkowski promoted in childbirth schools could only be achieved through natural family planning organized around women’s fertility, and thus required men’s engagement and adjustment to the fertility cycle.

## Conclusions

Fijałkowski’s childbirth preparation and parenting programme, which simultaneously proposed transgressing and reinforcing traditional gender roles, is a unique example of reproductive

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<sup>124</sup> Jarkiewicz, “Primum Non Nocere”; Fijałkowski, *Naturalny Rytm Płodności*; Fijałkowski, *Biologiczny Rytm Płodności a Regulacja Urodzeń*.

<sup>125</sup> Fijałkowski, *Ojcostwo na Nowo Odkryte*, 40.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

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health activism in a communist and Catholic context, and an activism that bore an ambiguous relationship with socialist modernity. During the 1970s, as Party-State population policy took a shift towards pronatalism, the engagement of fathers in childbirth that Fijałkowski pioneered became aligned with communist biopolitics. However, his rejection of anaesthesia and an excessive medicalization of childbirth was at odds with what was considered modern obstetric care and sexological thinking about gender roles within marriage. Fijałkowski's programme was intended to be transformative in a number of sites. In the obstetric ward he proposed a radical re-definition of the stiff hierarchy between a labouring woman and medical staff, a hierarchy that extended to any patient-doctor relationship in communist Poland. This re-definition exceeded the pleas by the Polish social campaigners from the 1990s onward for the humane treatment of women in labour and situated itself at the core of the knowledge production process: women were agents who named and defined what was happening to their labouring bodies, and whose agency surpassed that of the physician, the midwife, and the machine. In the bedroom Fijałkowski's programme encouraged couples to relate to each other in new ways, elevating "femininity" while at the same time subordinating it to male "instruction". In the family men were encouraged and expected to actively embrace fatherhood. Inclusion of men in the reproductive realm came at a cost: merely by entering traditionally female spaces were men granted authority therein. It is also in the bedroom where "pro-life" ideology was seeded and nurtured, in the hope it would disseminate through a Catholic populace that frequently used abortion as a birth control method. We can only speculate how effective childbirth schools were in transmitting "pro-life" ideology across Poland before the 1990s, but Fijałkowski's writings certainly played a role in defining and spreading "pro-life" rhetoric in communist Poland. As with the educational film, *In Childbirth School*, at least some of this rhetoric was spread through channels commissioned by the communist authorities.



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