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Children, Mothers and Doctors

– A History of Childcare Services in Poland before the Second World War

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STREAM 4: Gender Equity and Social Policy - Historical Institutionalism and Gendering Social Policy.

Historical roots of social policies in the post-communist remains still an under-researched field, though different authors have already begun to recognise the importance of historical developments for explaining persisting differences between welfare policies in this part of Europe.

One of the examples of such surprising results of intra-regional comparison are indicators concerning provision of childcare institutions in Poland, placing the country as an outlier with its low coverage rates in kindergartens as compared with most of the other countries of the region. I believe that such results should be explained by institutionalist analysis of the historical evolution of these services in Poland.

The main goal of this paper is to present ideational and institutional continuities in the evolution of childcare institutions in Poland, beginning from the 19th century (during the Partition) to the first years of the communist regime. As I would argue, the legacies concerning the development of childcare years before the unification of the country in 1918, as well as the policies of the early phase of Polish statehood after the First World War represented an important resource (lack of resource) for the communist rulers. Thus, the generally low level of childcare services was a less advantageous condition for the policies of de-familialisation that was to mobilise female labour during the first years of the communist rule. This would be complemented by a brief follow-up to the present situation.

The paper uses a historical institutionalism approach for depicting the path-dependent character of evolution of childcare in Poland, with a special focus on continuity of institutions and ideas on family and gender. On the empirical side, the paper's contribution relates to the presentation of historical data and information that has not been revealed so far, but could critically explain the roots of Polish implicit version of familialism. On the theoretical side, the contribution of the literature on institutional evolution is made, as the agent-based model of institutional evolution presented here complements the 'usual' arguments using the logic of path-dependency, by pointing at the 'driving force' working behind it.