

Magdalena Herzberg-Kurasz¹

ORCID: 0000-0002-4523-8640

Faculty of Social Sciences; Institute of Sociology;
Department of Sociology of Everyday Life, University of Gdańsk, Poland

Motherhood in the empty nest – a lack of social recognition?

Abstract

This article explores a socially and sociologically unrecognised stage of motherhood when adult children leave the family home. Regarding family policies, social context, and individual attitudes towards this stage and reconfiguration of a mother's social role of a mother – there is still a notable gap in the research on family issues. Becoming a mother in an empty nest is an individual process following considerable life changes. Despite its importance, it appears to be treated with less validity than the experiences of mothers who are navigating through the early stages of motherhood. Therefore, this paper shows what happens in the lives of women whose role as mothers is being transformed. It complements research on the family life course by focusing on the reconfiguration of the maternal role and the experience of motherhood at the stage of an empty nest. The article is based on empirical material collected between 2019 and 2021 within a 36-month longitudinal qualitative study of individuals and couples in Poland whose adult children had left the family home.

Keywords: motherhood, post-motherhood, mother's role, empty nest, empty nest syndrome

¹ **Corresponding author:** Magdalena Herzberg-Kurasz, Faculty of Social Sciences; Institute of Sociology; Department of Sociology of Everyday Life, University of Gdańsk, Bażyńskiego 4, 80-309, Gdańsk, Poland; email magdalena.herzberg-kurasz@ug.edu.pl.

Introduction

It is often assumed that women find it more difficult (than men) to process the moment when their adult children leave the family home (Spence & Lonner, 1971; Dennerstein et al., 2002; Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009; Wojciechowska, 2009; Bouchard, 2014). This is mainly due to the social role of women, in which they are seen as full-time parents and caregivers. In Poland, women are credited with constructing their identity based on the mother's role. In traditional discourse, a woman moves smoothly from the role of a mother to the role of a grandmother (Pustułka & Ślusarczyk, 2016; Radziwinowiczówna et al., 2018; Gajewska et al., 2023a). Linking the female role exclusively with offspring and home may be the reason why the empty family nest is a source of severe stress and identity crisis for women (Wojciechowska, 2008 after Oleś, 2000). Meanwhile, research (including the study that is the subject of this article) does not confirm the emergence of the crisis at all but also does not always point out the possibility of reorganisation within the life priorities of mothers of adult children (see liminality in the maternal role in Gajewska et al. (2023a) and the latent role of the mother in Herzberg-Kurasz et al. (2023b)). Thus, it seems that the social roles played by women affect the experience of the empty nest. Consequently, positive approaches to ending active parenthood seem to create more dilemmas for mothers than for fathers (Sheriff & Weatherall, 2009).

Women in the “third age” (Bonvalet et al., 2021; Gullette, 1995) who have accomplished the “rush hours” (Coelho et al., 2021) stage of life, might be of interest not only to social policy planners in all European Union countries but also the entire health system including family therapists. The “late working life stage” (50–65 years) is when women still spend more hours on unpaid work than men (around 5–6 hours a week in the case of Polish women) (Coelho et al., 2021) and the different ages of retirement entitlements create various risks for men and women regarding their unequal positions in older age. Women's workloads are most often considered in the context of balancing maternal and professional roles, while also serving as caregivers for ageing parents (the sandwich generation) or grandchildren (recently named the panini sandwich generation) (Kotowska et al., 2016; Slany, 2019)². Between its components, there is no space or freedom to act, no freedom to choose – in many cases one's own meaningful life goals. Fulfilment of the norms of the caregiving role has a deeply rooted power of duty in Polish culture, manifested as a paramount family value (Slany, 2023). Existing research on the subject is limited, although there is significant social demand to address the dilemmas experienced by mothers during the post-maternal period of their life course³. The group of mothers of adult children included in the study have little visibility in research on family issues.

² Performing tasks and having obligations towards family members from different generations was referred to as the sandwich generation. Over time, with the overloading of the generation with the aforementioned responsibilities and the density of duties a new term emerged – the panini sandwich generation (Slany, 2023).

³ Post-maternal in the sense that adult children have moved out of the family nest.

The paper aims to identify the changes in the meaning of the mother's role during their life course. It will also show how the mothers in an empty nest perceive their maternity and how the scripts of their behaviours change. Women participating in the study referred to their memories of relationships with their children growing up in full nests. Then, they matched those memories with their more recent experiences of adult children leaving their family homes. The article attempts to note the existence and name the period after which adult children leave the nest, in which women continue to be active participants in their social life. The period that so far has not received a name (that would be commonly used in sociology) and is largely defined by the reconstruction of the mother's role.

The article explores the self-identification experiences of mothers, by looking at both transformational processes – being a mother in a full nest towards the perspective of letting the role of the mother become latent. It seems like there is no script of behaviours in the empty nest as well as adequate post-maternity rituals (as a maternal roadmap), corresponding with those existing within the culture of women who are becoming mothers (manifested in, e.g., the organisation of baby showers or arranging group support for other young moms) (Nelson, 2006). If “motherhood is work that must be learned” (Hays, 1996 in Titkow, et al. 2004, p. 207) it seems reasonable that it should also be present in the context of post-maternity, or the “post-child” stage of women's lives.

Motherhood is seen as something that is continuously created by each society member. How motherhood is perceived and experienced in society results from the processes of social construction (Badinter, 1998; Wall, 2001). Its perceptions are, e.g., produced through everyday social interactions, discourses, and practices (Glenn, 1994). Therefore, e.g., ideas about a “good mother” have been changing throughout history. Studies on the social construction of motherhood attempt to make it more visible how dominant meanings or common connotations of motherhood have emerged, changed, and are continually (re)produced by members of society (Badinter, 1998; 2013; O'Reilly, 2010). At the same time, there are as many definitions of motherhood as there are mothers. Each mother approaches the performance of this role in a unique way and carries it out in her own distinctive manner (Badinter, 2013; Kasten, 2013).

The paper has been divided into five sections. I start with a section dedicated to mothers in the post-maternal midlife phase. The next section is a description of the changing meanings of motherhood and research on motherhood in the Polish context, where a cultural perspective on the subject has been presented. These two parts provide a theoretical framework for the article. The article then describes the methodological issues of the study. Ultimately, I present the results of the analysis carried out by presenting examples concerning different valuations of motherhood, the lack of post-maternal rituals and the strong cultural influence of the Polish cultural concept on post-maternal period experiences of women. What should be emphasised at the beginning, and what will also be illustrated in the empirical material, is that the departure of an adult child from the family home does not automatically lead to a release from the mother's role. It can sometimes affect its intensification, by changing its nature. It feels more appropriate to speak about the role which has

become irregular, no longer on a day-to-day basis. Even if there is no co-presence, the role of a caregiver does not appear to have an end.

Mothers in the post-maternal midlife phase

The phrase “empty nest” is used most commonly and repeatedly to name the period of family life when adult children have left the family home. It might carry a pejorative connotation when it is treated synonymously with the concept of empty nest syndrome. These two terms should be approached independently because while the empty nest is used to name an objective event of the family life course, empty nest syndrome refers to the subjective experience (most often negative) of experiencing the departure of adult children. More often than not, it is used to refer to women’s experiences. Many researchers support the idea that empty nest syndrome is accompanied by a period of emotional anxiety, identity conflict, depression, guilt, fear, stress, and loneliness (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009; Bouchard, 2014; Grover & Dang, 2013). Focusing solely on the empty nest syndrome, one can miss the whole range of experiences mothers have when their adult children leave the family home. In addition, it is not entirely true that a nest becomes empty while a married couple or a single parent (sometimes also with a new partner) continues to live in it (Bouchard, 2014). Some researchers accuse the phrase “empty nest” of being too colloquial (Spence & Lonner, 1971). On the other hand, the widespread use of the statement allows immediate association with a specific moment of the family life course. What also remains to be discussed is the terminology and whether the use of the term “**post-maternity**” (post-maternity and post-motherhood which are used interchangeably in the manuscript) is appropriate and adequate in the context of emptying the nests, mainly due to the fact that it may be mistakenly associated with the end of motherhood. The study being conducted indicates a reduction in the burden of household chores related to offspring, but it also shows their transformation into tasks performed remotely.

The stage of the empty nest, although it does not start nor end abruptly (it happens that children sometimes return to their family homes – boomeranging) (see: Gaviria, 2016, Żadkowska & Herzberg-Kurasz, 2022b) occupies only a small part of an extremely extensive period (midlife stage) of the life course that is enriched with various experiences that can last more than 30 years (Mitchell, 2006). In the manuscript, the post-maternal phase refers to the time when motherhood changes from everyday, intense motherhood, engaged in thorough physical co-presence, to occasional motherhood, realised remotely. The use of the “post” prefix does not mean that the role of the mother ceases to exist. Motherhood in relation to adult children changes its nature, and the lack of co-presence does not always mean less intense relationships with their children.

Combining the traditional approach associating the female role exclusively with tasks directly related to children and the home, excluding one’s interests or professional life, may be the reason for the widely held assumption that the empty nest is a source of severe stress and an identity crisis for women (Badinter, 2013; Wojciechowska, 2008; Hryciuk & Korolczuk, 2012). The responsibility for the home and the adult

children leaving it is mainly taken by the woman-mother. There is no empirical evidence directly confirming the emergence of a crisis. They indicate, however, the possibility of a reorganisation within the life priorities of mothers of adult children. Wojciechowska (2008) draws attention to the possibility of the emergence of a feeling of emptiness in the nest, which for many years was buzzing with family life. She speaks about “ineffective coping with the new situation” Wojciechowska (2008) which is about adapting to a new formula of family life. At the same time, she points out that the research projects carried out so far, do not allow to determine whether the stage of adult children’s departure from the family home is linked to a partial loss of identity for the woman or, on the contrary, is combined with a sense of relief, full acceptance of it and a smooth shift towards the formation of a new self (Wojciechowska, 2008). The role of women as mothers of adult children remains undiscovered in sociological and social discourse. The emptying nest and lack of rituals that would answer the ambivalence about how to go through this stage of family life shed light on the lack of post-maternity culture. Empty nest syndrome seems to affect those women for whom the fact of being a mother has remained paramount throughout their lives (before their adult children moved out). When a woman defines herself solely by the role of mother the presence of children makes fullness, and their absence makes emptiness (De Singly, 2023). Several researchers validate the concept that parents with limited social relationships as well as those who became parents at a young age, exhibit a greater intensity of empty nest syndrome (Bouchard, 2014; Grover & Dang, 2013; Harkins, 1978; Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). Therefore, for some mothers, the departure of an adult child will mean an empty nest, while for others, the child’s departure will mean a redefinition of roles such as that of mother, parent, and partner – without including the empty nest syndrome aspect (De Singly, 2023). Other studies suggest that post-maternity issues are not at all relevant to modern women because they are not as connected to the home domain as previous generations of women were (Sheriff & Weatherall, 2009).

The starting point of the post-maternal phase can only be subjectively determined by the individual woman, who defines it in relation to her own experiences. The reference point can be both the first and the last offspring. There can be a variety of indicators – the child’s first job, a certain age, going to college, leaving home, marriage, or more subtle signs of maturation, it will not always be the attainment of legal adulthood (in the view of the law). Others suggest that the empty nest is associated with gradual changes involving self-reliance rather than a specific event (Randhawa & Kaur, 2021).

According to Spence and Lonner, a mother will not truly enter the post-maternal phase when she is not sure whether her child is successfully realising an adult life. Moreover, this adult child may also make it difficult to step out of the mother’s role by constantly involving her in the challenges of adult life (Spence & Lonner, 1971). The lack of precise guidance on how to act as a mother of adult children can create uncertainty, which will generate a sense of role strain (Wojciechowska, 2008); transition into liminality (after Gajewska et al., 2023a) or reconfiguration of a mother’s role into a latent role (Herzberg-Kurasz et al., 2023b), activated remotely, e.g., when children come to visit (Rancew-Sikora & Skowrońska, 2022).

Post-maternity is a term, proposed by Margaret Gullette (2002), describing a woman's living situation after her adult children have become independent and self-sufficient. Historically, the term refers to the social changes that began in the late 19th century in the United States, starting with the decline in fertility. As part of the family's life course, it inaugurates new relationships with adult children. As Gullette claims:

To resist the endless condescension of our culture towards women who raise children at the time of their lives when their children become adults; to enable these women to become new autobiographical subjects, themselves defining the differences made by the coming-of-age of their offspring; to dislodge the term "postmenopausal" and other forms of sexist middle ageism; and, in general, to enable more women to look forward to their future life course, I propose a category, "post maternal women" (Gullette, 2002, p. 553),

which also seems to create room for a new relationship with "herself" – post-maternal woman (see: Gajewska et al., 2023a). It brings to mind the permanent end of a certain phase of family life (which, as shown, does not end but changes and reformulates) but also focuses attention on women's lives (after the adult children have moved out). The experience of adult children moving out of the family home creates space for re-shaping the mother's role and her other roles. This is a new stage in life, especially for women who were heavily involved in the role of mother before their children moved out (even if it was not a role that fulfilled them). As part of my analysis, I emphasise gender in the empty nest and show that a woman (as well as a man) has a distinct life course in the family because of the roles performed.

Motherhood in the Polish context: changing meanings of motherhood

Scholars propose different patterns of motherhood, which are based on the combination of clear separation of femininity and the fulfilment of the mother's role. Among them affirming mothers and ambivalent mothers (Budrowska, 2000), the I-ideal and I-real mother (Olcoń-Kubicka, 2009a), a mother who understands her role in modern and traditional ways (Wojciechowska, 2002a; 2002b), a mother who is good and bad (Waldman, 2014), a mother who follows adaptive and emancipatory strategies of functioning. The models indicated above represent two oppositional approaches with the fulfilment of the mother's role – in a traditional or a modern approach (Maciąg-Budkowska & Rzepa, 2017). Although they relate to the beginnings of motherhood, they can be successfully incorporated into an analysis of the experiences of mothers of adult children whose role as mothers undergoes recomposition, entering the phase of an empty nest (Herzberg-Kurasz et al., 2023b). Wojciechowska, in her work on the well-being of mothers of adult children, attempted to distinguish different patterns of separating from adult children, referring to women's personalities, social conditions (placement of the parental role), and demographic factors such as age, the mother's education, age, and gender of the children. Wojciechowska has also considered the time factor as an important element in differentiating the forms of separation.

The time factor is understood as the period that has elapsed since the adult children moved out of the family home (2008, p. 12).

In Poland, motherhood forms the essence of ideals of femininity and national identity. The discourses and practices of motherhood are strongly influenced by symbolic figures important in the country's society and culture (the Polish Mother, Poland as Mother, and the Madonna) (Korolczuk, 2010; Titkow, 1995; Imbierowicz, 2012). The figure of the Polish mother is rooted in Polish traditionalism, the values of the Catholic Church and conservatism (Imbierowicz, 2012). Motherhood represents a period in life leading to changes in women's identity. The whole process can begin as early as becoming pregnant or even at the stage of planning a pregnancy (Budrowska, 2000; Kasten, 2013; Afflerback et al., 2014; Badinter, 2013). The uniqueness of this transition comes from the fact that although the identity and experiences of every mother are very complex – if you “do” motherhood, you automatically become a member of the culture of motherhood (Nelson, 2006). Nelson's research supports the argument that motherhood is a social construction and ritualised interactions among mothers recreate the existing culture. It is also underlined that motherhood requires preparation and it creates a shared identity among mothers. Lesińska-Sawicka (2008) defines motherhood as “the process of becoming and being a mother”. The model of intensive motherhood described by Hays (in the context of the American upper class) set the model for the proper upbringing of offspring in Western societies, putting the child at the centre of attention, and remaining highly absorbing for mothers (Hays, 1996). Both concepts described seem to contain elements of the current model of motherhood in Poland, where expectations of mothers are constantly raised. Children, in turn, are treated as an indicator of “mothers' parenting efficiency” (Bieńko, 2015, p. 95). At the same time, alongside the stereotype of the Polish Mother, we have the model of the perfect woman, living under the pressure of being accomplished, and submitting to endless social expectations (Titkow, 1995; Boguszewski, 2013). The role of the mother is reduced to an aspect of duty (Lewicka, 2021), both by mothers themselves and those around them. Like the “managerial matriarchy” described by Titkow or “macho mothering” (after Lewicka, 2021) in the context of Polish culture (Titkow, 1995).

The quality of motherhood implies what kind of person the child will become (among other things, while becoming an adult) (Maciarz, 2004). Motherhood as a means of female fulfilment, the ideal maternal love construct, and responsibility for the child's complex development are strongly connected with the crises within the mother's role (Włodarczyk, 2017). A woman stepping into the role of a mother becomes a member of the culture of motherhood. Within it, women are united by the experience of motherhood, which they can share: “The kind of commonsensical idea of motherhood as a natural and inevitable aspect of womanhood is a type of social mandate” (Sheriff & Weatherall, 2009, p. 90).

Ideas about motherhood and the symbolic role of the mother are still deeply ingrained within Polish culture, where the imperative of self-sacrifice functions. In traditional discourse, being a mother is still perceived as a woman's primary role (Budrowska, 2000). The role of the mother and her caregiving domain has its extension in the role of the grandmother as well as the caregiver of sick, ageing parents (sandwich

generation) (Slany, 2019; Pustułka & Ślusarczyk, 2016; Gajewska et al., 2023a). The public debates taking place in the first decades of the 21st century regarding abortion, infertility and in-vitro procedures reveal the patriarchal construction of motherhood in Poland. At the same time, it shows the potential for social shift and changing women's empowerment (O'Reilly, 2010).

Women's abandonment of the above-mentioned, traditional model, the blurring of markers for entering adulthood including delaying the decision of marriage and giving birth may enable the emergence of other maternal patterns, and the realisation of culturally assigned norms for women in a different, individualised manner (beyond caregiving roles) (Arnett, 2000; Galland, 2003, Kudlińska-Chróścicka, 2019; Winogrodzka & Sarnowska, 2019). The Polish mother figure seems to be mentioned in scientific discussions and public debates on too many occasions to explain the complicated, ambiguous role and position of a mother(s) in modern Poland (Hryciuk, 2012; Kotlarska-Michalska, 2021). The straightforwardness of women's choices related to the role of a mother (taking it up and the ways to carry it out) is no longer as obvious as it was a few decades ago (Włodarczyk, 2017). As Sikorska points out, writing about the new mother, who has many motherhood patterns to choose from, modern motherhood is not equated with a woman's mission and her destiny. Motherhood is more "the result of factual choices" (Sikorska, 2009, p. 176).

Historically, women have been socialised to be dependent and subservient, usually to fathers, husbands, and male representatives. However, in a modern model which occurred, women were allowed to be autonomous and self-reliant, making their own choices in combining motherhood with employment (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2021; Ennis, 1997). The essential question is whether there is a problem in balancing motherhood with employment or ambiguity and guilt with contrasting models that mothers are struggling to successfully incorporate (Maher, 2004). Professional roles have only sustained the existing pattern of how Polish women function, which assumes heroism and sacrifice. Eastern Europe's characteristic apparent managerial matriarchy (shaped by the interaction of tradition and history) gave women a sense of being irreplaceable managers of family life, performing tasks that could successfully be a burden for more than one person (Titkow, 1995). At the same time, it led to a situation in which this apparent gratification in the form of power at home was paid for by extreme exhaustion, overwork, and chronic lack of sleep (Titkow, 1995). Titkow emphasises: "thanks to the interaction of history, culture, and economic changes, women have formed their identity, framed around the model of the Polish Mother" (1995, p. 35). The model of the Polish Mother, while shaping the minds of society, at the same time strengthened the view of the most important task of a woman, which is to be a wife and a mother. This shaped not only the social status of women but also, most significantly, their image of themselves (Packalén-Parkman, 2017). Articulating the more difficult sides of motherhood does not come across in the media, but it is an integral part of the maternal experience (Włodarczyk, 2017). Hryciuk points out that one element of exceptional resilience is imperative for mothers to be self-reliant and self-sufficient, and the belief that a willingness to make sacrifices and provide for children is integral to the construct of good motherhood (2017, p. 284). For several years now, in response to idealised messages (including images) about motherhood,

the voice of mothers has been heard in Poland pointing out the gaps in the dominant, idyllic discourse on motherhood (Hryciuk & Korolczuk, 2012).

Data and method

The article is based on empirical material collected within the scientific project Sonata Bis 8 funded by The Polish National Science Center: *Till death do us part... Everyday life practices of 50–64 year old couples with at least 20 years of common life experience*, UMO-2018/30/E/HS6/00159. It is a 36-month longitudinal qualitative study of individuals and couples whose adult children have left the family home (both in-depth-dyadic-interviews with couples and in-depth-individual interviews with women and men). The study was conducted between 2019 and 2021. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Gdańsk. Standard ethical requirements (Mizielńska et al., 2018) used in sociology were introduced into the research process. Participants either signed a consent form or gave verbal consent to participate in the study. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised.

Qualitative research is an effective tool for capturing the multifaceted dynamics associated with children leaving the family nest (Bouchard, 2014). In this study there were 73 Polish women (aged 44–68, who reside in both large cities and smaller towns (non-agglomeration areas)) whose children had left home: 58 were in relationships with at least 20 years of common life experience with fathers of their children; and 15 were in a new relationship or lived on their own (divorced, widowed). In the study group some of the mothers had already experienced the transition to an empty nest while others were either at the beginning or in the middle of it. The group of mothers (of adult children) included in the study has little visibility in research on the family. At the same time, the situation of women in the empty nest may have a considerable impact on family studies and potential social policies. The women who were included in the study pursued their motherhood outside of policies that support the idea of shared parenthood. They represented the upper and lower middle class and had tertiary or secondary education (in comparable proportion). Some of them were not professionally active when their children were young (ca. 30%).

The general aim of the whole project was to present a picture of the daily lives and practices of couples (pre-retirement) whose children had left (or were just leaving) the family home and to answer questions about changes within their relationships and practices caused by the shift towards an empty nest. In the context of the pandemic COVID-19, the research team faced the need to conduct individual in-depth interviews online (to find out more about reflecting on a new quality in the researcher-participant relationship, see: Żadkowska et al., 2022a). Despite the challenge we were left with, we managed to complete fully qualitative in-depth individual interviews with Zoom.us software using microphones and cameras. Online interviews consisted of “virtual walks” in the households, which was possible thanks to an additional tool used by the research team – emotional maps (Żadkowska et al., 2022a).

The analysis of the gathered material was a multi-step process. At first, I extracted and analysed parts related to maternity experiences where children were small. Then,

I distinguished several categories in the maternal context related to their work activity, the burden of maternal duties, household chores, relationships with children, and time spent together. It was also important to grasp the attitudes of mothers towards the listed categories and to follow their personal reflections (from the perspective of time that had passed). At the same time, I read the remaining parts of the interviews to maintain the context and to find other mentions closely related to motherhood in the empty nest.

Results

Motherhood is experienced very differently by mothers and is influenced by a whole range of factors. Experiencing motherhood is a very individual and often intimate experience. While analysing the collected material, it was determined that the experiences of mothers in the empty nest, similarly, have many common points of contact but are also very diverse. A woman in an empty nest “happens” to be a mother in selected situations – when she realises the role of a mother remotely when the children come to visit and at other moments arranged by herself or her adult children. Daily practices without children make the mother’s role go into a latent state. The situation stands in contrast to the time of the full nest when being herself occurred incidentally (or was in a latent state). As an example of herstories of mothers of adult children, I created categories that helped me organise mothers’ narratives on motherhood in the empty nest. The issues related to this phase of family life revolved in two thematic areas: (1) the different valuation of motherhood through the prism of the subjective experience of mothers, and (2) the lack of post-maternity recognition through the prism of the environment and social norms (which mothers internalise).

Post-maternity: different valuations of the same social role?

Analysis of the empirical material indicates the existence of different valuations of the same social roles. Elżbieta, who is 68 years old, has two sons (aged 41 and 34), who moved out 10 and 12 years ago. Elżbieta is a teacher by profession, and she has worked at home a lot. She had a heavy workload, which is why her husband took over many of the household chores. She is currently still working, despite having retired:

Elżbieta: About changing the apartment to a smaller one, after our sons moved out: [...] and here my husband showed great skills of persuasion – it was he who led us to the fact that this apartment we have is wonderful... And it makes us incredibly happy. And the happiest thing that has happened is that our children live close by [...] (7-IDI-ZOOM).

What can be observed here in the case of Elżbieta is a sense of joy in raising children, independent, and self-reliant on the one hand and, on the other, a lack of readiness (despite the long time that has passed since their departures) for them to move too far away. She represents an attitude where the greatest happiness for

the mother of adult children is the fact they live in a nearby neighbourhood after their departure.

Felicja, the mother of three children, very accurately defines the emerging kind of ambivalence that she became aware of at a certain stage of her empty nest experiences. The youngest child, a daughter, lives outside of Europe. Remembering this experience, Felicja recalls:

Felicja: [...] that I felt something so amazing, that this is such a paradox of this [maternal] love; that when you love someone very, very much and well, you want this person to be happy. And here, out of that love, you are supposed to say “Go”. And it’s so against what the heart feels (DDI_P_29_F_M).

On the other side of the wide range of experiences, we have a situation where for Agata (52 years old), the empty nest is the end of maternal “service”:

*Agata: [...] This is one thought – another – a stage in which **a sense of service will end**. Really – that’s how I often perceived it. Now it’s kind of less, but it’s kind of like **such a service, worked-off motherhood**. My most popular saying is that **motherhood is highly overrated**. And I think you shouldn’t, as I said earlier, make such an artificial family for children [she refers to the crisis in the couple and the artificial maintenance of marriage for children]. This is 100% what I thought – and while being married I thought quite the opposite, that it should be done for the children (IDI-34-ZOOM).*

Agata is divorced and after separation from her husband, she stayed at home with her two sons. The older son moved out right after high school graduation (when he was about 18), he was away a lot (an athlete); the younger son is in the process of moving out for college, but he was “stopped” by the COVID-19 pandemic. She considers herself a hard-working person, after her divorce she took additional jobs to provide “the same level” for her children. In the example above, Agata also points to a change in her approach, which was very different during her early stages of motherhood, when the children were younger. Moreover, she concludes with the socially and culturally overrated nature of motherhood. Perhaps the burden of parental responsibilities as a single mother influenced her experience. She made it very clear that she had to take every job and she felt the pressure that her children had to have the same standard of living maintained (as before the divorce). Likewise, Teresa sees having a child as a sacrifice which disappears with the emergence of adulthood:

*Teresa: Now, I can’t imagine going back to the stage of the sandbox, walking with a stroller... I mean, this independence, this freedom that I have now. I can really, I have so much free time. And actually, very few responsibilities related to raising a child who is already an adult and who is already starting a life on her own. **I know how much time and dedication it requires. I, at all times, perceive it as a sacrifice. Because I have never derived any great joy from such contact with young children**. It’s only as this child gets older I think, it’s more fun and this miracle happens (IDI-26-ZOOM).*

Teresa (46 years old), did not give up her job while raising her daughter, however, she was strongly supported by her parents (especially after her divorce when extra care help was very much needed).

Even if in the spatial dimension mothers feel and notice an emptiness, in their personal experience the emptiness is a promise for a proper, eagerly awaited, change. It was not possible during the presence of children in the family home. Bogna (50 years old) started working when her children were 11 and 13 years old. She has two daughters (Nela, 25 years old, and Kasia, 23 years old), who moved out when they started college, about four years ago:

Bogna: [...] *And when the girls moved out, it was the first time I felt such peace and could breathe, that this is a time only for me. I just didn't have that suddenly... yes, I wrote that there was emptiness because the rooms were empty and there was peace and quiet. But these were not for me... we laugh that now I'm a bad mother and it shouldn't be like that, but for me, it is a time of such peace and quiet and now my time has come [...]* (8-IDI-ZOOM).

Similarly for Barbara (mother of two daughters), the empty nest means **an expansion of her privacy, her "asylum"**:

Barbara: [...] *And this private space – now mine – has expanded all over this floor, as the children left home two years ago, my private space has expanded, and grown, in a positive way. Also, this desk I'm sitting at, I got it from my daughter – she left it, I set myself up at it, organised it myself, I even have my mess on this desk, I have found myself. Also, for me, the empty nest means an expansion of my privacy, my asylum – that's the way to put it* (IDI-29-ZOOM).

For some mothers, the empty nest is a time when overwhelming concentration on children gets uncomfortable, and its absence is associated with pleasant tranquillity, like in the case of Wioletta, the mother of Przemek and Bogna (her children moved out quickly because they lived in dormitories while they were at high school):

Wioletta: *You know what, it may sound selfish, but there is peace of mind. Well, in the sense that we are calm about them and we live peacefully here. We don't worry, thank God precisely, that they will be healthy, that they will do well. And that's how it is! And we have the so-called peace of mind! If we want to, we go out, if we want to, we cook, if we want to, we go out for dinner. Such things! [...]* (DDI_P_33_F_M).

Post-motherhood is also a kind of inauguration of new relationships with adult children. As Tamara (57 years old) explains how she perceives it now:

Tamara: *So sort of referring to the slogan "empty nest", then yes, the empty nest stage changes the relationship undoubtedly. What I said was that it changes the relationship, it should change and that was my assumption, to a more friendship-based relationship. It gives me a lot more free time for me, but at the same time, it also gives me*

the opportunity to establish these partnership relationships. And partnerships, also with that kind of special sensitivity to each other, right? That's it. Well, we sense each other's moods, but we also know a lot about each other – in the sense of facts, right? [...] well, I enjoy my children's fresh perspective on my relationships with my friends, that they can tell me what it looks like from their side. I would say that in a way we are also like psychotherapists for each other really (IDI-31-ZOOM).

Although the presented examples have points of convergence, at the same time, each herstory is truly unique and there are very diverse experiences behind them. While some, when thinking about motherhood, remember it as a time of sacrifices and a lot of burdens, a time they did not quite enjoy, others remember the joy of being able to be at home with their children. Consequently, the latter will feel an emptiness when the children are gone too far away. They give different meanings to the same period of their lives, while, at the same time, processing the separation of their now-adult children in other ways as well. Interestingly, when talking about the joy they derive from life after the departure of their children, they sometimes describe themselves as “selfish”. Nevertheless, they appreciate the time they have gained for themselves and recognise the benefits of this stage of family life. Both for themselves and their new relationship with their now-adult children.

Lack of social recognition?

The lack of a post-motherhood culture might be confirmed in the lack of social recognition for mothers for whom the role of the mother is going through a period of reconfiguration (Herzberg-Kurasz et al., 2023b). Mothers seem to experience a similar situation at the beginning of the maternal journey when the first child is born and the woman becomes a mother for the first time. The analogy between releasing the first child into adulthood and the birth of the first child seems appropriate while pointing to the transformative nature of both experiences. Both stages – becoming a mother and becoming a post-mother – bring a tremendous change in the life of any woman and it also takes time to process it individually. For Basia, the first departure was perceived as a very difficult experience, even if later on it worked out totally differently with the other children:

*Basia: I have to say that after some time it passed – that first time was terrible and it was hard, there was no one to talk to. I even tried to talk to my friends and various acquaintances about it, but people just shrugged their shoulders, **I could find understanding with hardly anyone. Everyone said that it was normal and it would work out somehow, etc., and I was experiencing it hard and lacked someone who understood.** Even my female colleagues who had experienced it also took a swipe at it. I even have colleagues at work who said they envy me because I have peace of mind now [...] and I actually thought to myself that my situation had good aspects, and **it took me about two years to come to accept it.** During the first year, it was a harsh struggle, I suffered because of it, but in the second year it started to calm down, and in the third year my*

husband and I came to the conclusion that actually it was already okay because we had raised the children, we now had time for ourselves [...] (DDI_P_4_K_M).

The least helpful were the comments of those closest to her, which highlighted her atypical approach to experiencing the empty nest. Basia emphasises the frustrating lack of someone she could talk to which would help to move through this stage of family life as a mother more smoothly.

Despite the maturity of the mother's role (midlife stage of life), social influences and a typical Polish evaluation (most of the time being judgmental) remain strong. The value of the collective patterns regarding the role of the mother (importance of what others think about their maternity, how they judge them as mothers of adult children, what they say about them as mothers) seems very strong:

*Basia: I told Bartek when he was going back to Wroclaw **that everyone probably had a tray of cake from their mom, and he didn't**. But when Bartek leaves, I always try to prepare something for him. I make him such fruit mixes, some pomegranate... whenever he leaves, he has some picked fruit, mandarin oranges peeled, pomegranate peeled, so that he knows that his mom is thinking of him (DDI_P_4_K_M).*

A strong sociocultural influence of the Polish mother concept operates from two sides. In the study, mothers presented it as a downside but, at the same time, it was seen as something to be proud of. Following the general assumption: if one replicates it, it means she is a good mother. If one performs a different motherhood, one's own way, she might not be considered a good mother anymore. As a result, one might feel like they do not fit into the pattern of social expectations.

Maria, recounting the difficult relationship with her younger daughter, refers to the ideal of the Polish mother, which she recognises she is not. Participating in the study brings to her a reflection on the nature of her marriage, which prevented her from following this social model of the ideal mother, as she treated her relationship with her daughters differently than it would have been expected from a "good" mother.

*Maria: In our family, the arrangement was that **Dobromil [husband] and I are very important to each other, probably the most important, and they, as our daughters, are a consequence of our relationship** – our relationship and love. And it seems to me that this arrangement has always been there, that is, **they have never felt equal... this may also be my Polish Mother complex** – I don't notice that Dobry [husband] and I have gained emotional space through the fact that we have reared children and now have more of each other – there is no such thing. It seems to me that we have been similarly close to each other all the time, but perhaps that's because we didn't let the kids get too close to us. This is also the bedroom, which for them was always closed symbolically. There hasn't been a time in our family's life when they have been able to barrack with us in such a way that they are simply the centre of our world. They always had this message that Dobromil and I are the centre for each other (9-IDI-ZOOM).*

Mothers of adult children no longer have to reconcile professional activity with the ambitions and preferences of a woman who wants to fit into the ideal mother model (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2020) yet Ewelina speaks directly about the fact that her joy and relief about the empty nest is rather culturally unpopular and she would be cautious about openly communicating her experience, even in the presence of her friends and acquaintances:

*Ewelina: I will also say something like this – this will be unpopular... it's hard for me to admit it, but I'll tell you this, I'm waiting for my second daughter to move out as well, I mean, not forever, but in this sense, because I have a need for such an independent life. [First], both with my husband, and [second], professionally for myself, because a new perspective is opening up for me there, too [...] some kind of longing, a dream to do something more for myself has been there in me all the time, and I'm already gradually realising it somehow, but I'm aware that if my younger daughter was also already somehow living on her own and that I wouldn't be worried about her, and she's a completely different personality, so I don't know, I would be relieved. Really. **I don't know if I could say that to any friend. I don't know if I would admit to myself that I'm waiting for that empty nest moment [...]** (IDI-19-ZOOM).*

It seems that both talking about the challenges of motherhood (in terms of feeling a loss of one's own time, life, and self) and showing relief and joy of having adult children move out of the family home – are a social taboo.

Interestingly, despite their reluctance to replicate the same maternal patterns they were exposed to during their childhood, it turns out that they themselves were trapped in those patterns. They use similar socialisation models which are a continuation of previous generations, as with Hanna, who is divorced. Her daughter has recently come back, and her son moved out a long time ago:

*Hanna: You know what, for sure, it was worthwhile doing many things differently, but it seemed to me at the time that this was the right thing to do. It also comes from what kind of home you came from. My mother, e.g., did not work professionally at any time of her life, never, and literally, everything was done by my mother. **This is also probably related to the fact that I was brought up with such a pattern, that a mother, a woman does everything.** But I also worked professionally, and it was too much for me sometimes, but I was used to a woman doing everything – that was the pattern I had. Now I think it would be worthwhile doing things differently, to get other relatives more involved in responsibilities, e.g., [...] I have such a pattern from home, which has affected me a lot, because I come from such a family, where my dad worked and earned good money and took care of the material side, while my dad also did nothing at home, at all – he didn't even make his own tea, everything was done by my mother, everything was done around him. To me it seems that I had imbibed that a woman has to do everything, today, I see it from a completely different perspective, but then, 30 years ago [when the children were little], that's how I saw it (IDI-16-ZOOM).*

Guilt burden caused by “sacrificing” time with her daughters for work. This was the case for Honorata, mother of Inga and Kaja, 41 years of marriage, working in a school for 40 years and now retired. She has a granddaughter:

Honorata: *I felt so guilty, thinking about this conversation... I thought about it so much, because I, first of all, was working a lot – with my nose in those notebooks. When I came back home, after all, there was so little time when I was at home, after I came back from school [...] a lot of this work I brought on myself, because that’s what a Polish teacher has, unfortunately. **And I always had such a guilty conscience about not having time for my girls** (IDI-12-ZOOM).*

There were also those who chose to stay home with their children until they were school-age, like, e.g., Ewelina (52 years old), who decided when it was time to take care of herself:

Ewelina: *For the first 12 years I did not work and was with the girls. I was at home all the time and took care of the girls, their education and their activities. And it wasn’t until after those 19 years that I decided that this was my time – what I could give them was the best, I’ve already given them, and now I’m on the sidelines all the time, as it happens, as they grow those wings, as they land a little on the ground there I help them. But I don’t interfere, I watch from the side, I monitor how life is going for them, if necessary, I react [...] (IDI-19-ZOOM).*

Interestingly, having a job has been identified as an important factor, helping to adequately deal with the empty nest, as evidence that there is a need for proper care support (institutional) to provide conditions for professional development, which would not be occupied by greater inequalities (because there remain domestic responsibilities, children, and then sick, elderly parents):

Magdalena: *No, somehow – if you work it’s also different because I’m terribly busy. I work at the university, I work at [name of private university], I do courses, additional classes – simply something there all day. And sometimes I don’t have time to think that my child is gone and I miss him. **I think it will be much more difficult for me when I retire** (DDI_P_3_K_M).*

Discussion

The analysis of the collected material showed a wide variety of experiences regarding the stage of motherhood when adult children leave the family home. It showed that just like entering everyday motherhood, leaving active motherhood is a subjective experience that needs support and sharing of experiences. Some mothers remained in a parent-child relationship with their adult children (without any signs of a collaborative, equal relationship, without increasing the autonomy of the child).

This may be due to the blurring of markers indicating young adults' entry into adulthood where moving out is not always a definitive event and young adults sometimes return to their family homes. It may also result from a different form of transition through the empty nest stage and a need for longer adaptation. Mothers participating in the study clearly emphasised their need and willingness to share their experiences, as well as their personal reflections. They viewed talking to the researchers as a kind of closure of some unfinished processes. This might indicate the need for systemic support. Additionally, there was also a strong need to compare and discuss their post-maternity experiences. It indicates a lack of post-maternity culture within which group support and the exchange of individual experiences could take place, functioning in the same way as with the beginning of the maternal journey.

The analysis of herstories showed that social expectations of how to fulfil the maternal role still accompanies mothers of adult children. Indeed, it turns out that showing joy when adult children leave the family home can raise ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, there is pride and relief, on the other there is either sadness or guilt that they should not feel joy at such a moment of the life course.

Professional work was an important element of women's stories in the context of full nests. Female respondents very often referred to the entanglement with family responsibilities, and the need to perform domestic duties in parallel with work activity. They also mentioned the mental burden of responsibilities as an additional aspect. It was not only about performing them but also about planning, allocating, and checking them (including remembering). It is thus something indisputable that combining work with motherhood affects the shape of both. Most mothers from the study were economically active and benefitted a great deal from their parents' help when their children were small. Some mothers also had the experience of remaining on maternity and parental leaves. In these cases, the mothers either started working or returned to work only at the stage when the children went to kindergarten or elementary school. The help that some mothers get with their young children in order not to stop their professional development later needs to be reciprocated in the form of care for ageing, ailing parents and providing home assistance for them (sandwich generation).

One of the limitations of the analysis in making comparisons is the very large time span that had elapsed since the departure of the children. Some of the herstories presented very fresh experiences, while some related to the past because the departure had taken place 10 years earlier. Consequently, there was a necessity to reach back not only to the time when the nest was full but also to the moment when the adult children had left the family home.

Closing remarks

Motherhood as a social practice is entangled in stereotypes, conflicting expectations, and evaluations. The ever persistent assumption in Polish society that successful motherhood is the essence of women's identity leaves no room for diversity. Departure of an adult child from the family nest does not necessarily lead to a release from the mother's role. What is more, it can affect its intensification, by changing its nature

to a remote role that can become much more challenging and burdensome to manage (Herzberg-Kurasz et al., 2023b). Handling it can be even more ambiguous. The situation of women in the empty nest and the analysis of various accounts of post-maternity can help create possible social policies. The women in the study are not a group that often appears in sociological research. Such a study brings us closer to gaining more knowledge on an unexplored topic. The divergent experiences of mothers are the result of social differentiation and their life choices, *the role of the mother [...] is a role that, much more often than other family roles, is subjected to social assessment and evaluation by publicists, as well as researchers involved in moral evaluations of social phenomena* (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2020, p. 238)

Despite a greater freedom in how mothers of adult children arrange their personal life scenarios, they are not uninfluenced by social judgment, so they always try to perform at their best. Although the role of the mother continues to be the subject of political discourse, a new perspective on the role of the mother should not be overlooked. As there is now a clearer tolerance for women's individual choices (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2020). Subject to sociocultural changes, patterns of motherhood are also affected by the way mothers of adult children perceive their own role. Perhaps the younger generation of mothers passes on their knowledge to their elders.

In the context of women's participation in the labour force, there is also a discussion about women's unpaid work. It is seen as a cultural norm, valid within the social script of the role (Raclaw, 2020). In implicit familism which is the case in Poland, there is a lack of any instruments of support, thus the family needs to provide care because of the lack of alternatives (Furmańska-Maruszak & Suwada, 2021). Poland does not have a well-functioning, developed long-term care system for the elderly and benefits for both caregivers and the elderly are often considered inadequate. Homecare assistance is not well developed either (Furmańska-Maruszak & Suwada, 2021). As stated in the introduction, the post-parental phase might be of interest not only to social policy planners in European Union countries but also to the entire health system including family therapists. As the empty nest is a phase that most families with children go through, it is an issue of awareness in terms of family functioning and coping mechanisms. The issues presented create a space to look for adequate solutions from the field of care or, more broadly, social policies and perhaps individual support as well. Measures to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work are also advisable.

As the decisions young adults make to have families (and children) has shifted, not all of the respondent mothers are making a smooth transition into the role of grandmothers. Besides, their increased work activity in the "Third Age" does not allow them to give their grandchildren too much attention.

With the departure of children, time is released for mothers to pursue their individual and professional needs. While the mother's role shifts from everyday mode to a latent or out-of-everyday mode – the caregiver role (which is part of the mother's role) does not seem to have an end. Mothers of adult children remain trapped in the panini sandwich generation, which forces them to care for their parents, in-laws, and sometimes, even their partners themselves. It is not easy to predict the duration and intensity of the necessary assistance. A natural consequence of the physiological ageing

process affects the continuation of entanglement in responsibilities. There are not just remote maternal duties (towards adult children), but also extra duties as daughters of ageing parents.

Not only is it challenging to define the period of the empty nest because it is subjective and dependent on external factors, but at the same time, there are also many doubts about the term for motherhood in relation to adult children. This only demonstrates the fact that while entering the role of mother can be defined as a specific moment, leaving behind the role of mother at the empty nest stage is no longer clear-cut or obvious. It feels more appropriate to write about the role of the mother which is present occasionally, but no longer on a daily basis.

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