

Intensive socio-cultural changes observed in the last few decades in Poland are reflected in new ways of defining and perceiving the role of a mother, and new ways mothers carry out their task. Researchers notice that the „Polish Mother” ceases to be the dominant model of womanhood, and the social expectations about the role and traits of the “Polish Mother” are rapidly evolving. In times of uncertainty dramatic media reports on degenerate mothers hurting their children or women who reject motherhood evoke strong emotions and often stir up fears about the future of motherhood. In this climate of moral panic some women advocate for the return to traditional values and gender roles, while others lean towards liberal vision of women’s roles and their place in the society.

Poland remains one of the most religious countries in Europe. Although The Catholic Church still occupies a dominant position in Polish society, at the same time increasing religious diversity can be observed. One of the small groups that has been growing in the last few decades are converts to Islam. Embracing Islam is often accompanied by negative reactions of social environment. For women who converted to Islam raising children is a particularly challenging task, as they worry that the hostility they are experiencing because of their new religion will also affect their children.

In this context it is particularly important to pay attention to the relationship between religion, mothering and identity of young mothers, since religion often affects the way mothers understand their role. In this research project I will focus on young mothers – women who have given birth to their first child no earlier than five years ago. This choice is based on the observation that the early period of being a mother is the time of most profound changes, when women need to ask themselves “who am I?” and “what is my place in the world?”. I will base my research on the two groups of young mothers – Catholics and converts to Islam. My aim is to explore how religious narratives are shaping mothers’ experiences, how young religious mothers negotiate conflicting expectations, how religion is shaping their identity and what are the differences and commonalities between Catholics and Muslims with respect to these questions.

This type of sociological research projects has not been conducted in Poland so far. My project will therefore fill the gap in the study of religion in contemporary Poland. The answers to the questions mentioned above are important not least because of the politicized nature of motherhood. The influence of traditional approaches to motherhood is discernible in the area of political decisions regulating working rights of mothers, shaping policies on the institutional forms of childcare (nurseries, preschools) and social security policies for mothers who decided to resign from their jobs to look after their children

In this research I will use a number of methods. My main source of data will be interviews with young mothers, and notes from observation of religious groups attracting mothers. Additionally, focus group interviews will be conducted. During these meeting participants will also be asked to complete questionnaires designed to capture the content and organisation of their identity. Finally, the publications of Catholic and Muslim organisations addressed to mothers, as well as publicly available utterances of mothers participating in online religious support groups will be collected in a systematic way

The expected result of this study will be a theory capturing in a convincing way the relationship between religion, mothering and identity of young mothers in Poland. The proposed theoretical model will be original, grounded in empirical data and specific socio-cultural context and based on a careful revision of selected important sociological concepts. During this project I will also test some innovative research methods. From a broad perspective this study will expand our knowledge of the role of religion in the lives of individuals and social groups in contemporary Poland and therefore will contribute to the development of sociology of religion.