Let’s Talk about Sex: Gender, Nation, and Sex Education in Contemporary Poland

THESIS

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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue in Poland, the confluence of the Roman Catholic Church, historically entrenched ideas about gender and gender roles, and feminist’s inability to successfully challenge these norms converge in sex education policy. I trace the development of sex education through the pre-World War II era to contemporary policies, and consider current legal and cultural issues preventing the implementation of comprehensive sex education.

I analyze secondary sources and when available, primary sources. Sex education policy is contentious, especially in recent years with fears of gender ideology and pedophilia being introduced in classrooms through sex education.

NGO’s do exist to advocate for comprehensive sex education policy, but face obstacles through the government, conservative social norms, and the Catholic Church. The Church capitalizes on its social currency earned in the Communist period and conservative mores about sex to implement its preferred policies. Sex education policy is unlikely to change if these mores continue to persist, even as the Polish public becomes more frustrated with Church policy and influence.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my family.
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Fields of Study

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# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................ ii

Dedication....................................................................................................................................... iii

Vita.................................................................................................................................................... v

Fields of Study ................................................................................................................................ v

I. Introduction.................................................................................................................................... 1

II. The WHO and AVERT definitions of sex education ......................................................... 4

Polish beliefs about sex challenging these guidelines ............................................... 6

III. The Development of Sex Education in Poland .......................................................... 9

Pre WWI and Interwar Sex Education ........................................................................... 9

Sex Education and Abortion under Communism ...................................................... 12

Post-communist sex education ............................................................................. 13

Current legal and cultural issues .......................................................................... 14

IV. The reality of sex education in Poland .................................................................. 17

Technical requirements for sex education .......................................................... 17

Content in the classroom ..................................................................................... 18

The struggle for qualified teachers ....................................................................... 22

Lack of established curriculum and required texts ........................................... 24

Media as a source of information ........................................................................ 25

Case studies in why sex education matters ....................................................... 28
V. Current Debates around Sex Education ........................................ 32
  Gender Ideology ............................................................................ 33
  Pedophilia and Perceived Deviance .............................................. 36
  How NGO’s push against the Church and State ........................... 39

VI. Looking Toward the Future ......................................................... 42

Bibliography .................................................................................. 48
Introduction

Comprehensive sex education challenges what it means to be Polish in the pluralistic and tolerant world of globalization and the European Union. I argue the struggle for the inclusion of comprehensive sex education in Poland stems from the Roman Catholic Church’s profound influence on social policy, historically entrenched ideas about conservative gender norms, and feminism’s inability to challenge these gender norms on a societal level. In this thesis, I will discuss the guidelines the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU) suggest for comprehensive sex education. I then discuss what the Church and its conservative allies recommend as appropriate education. I assess what sex education actually entails in Poland. I trace the development of contemporary sex education from the pre-war period to the present day. In addition to the Church, I discuss the relationship between education and gender norms, and consider current controversies about sex education and its connection to gender ideology, pedophilia and religious education.

Much of what is available now in Poland is through informal interviews, memoirs, and what little data exists from the communist and pre-World War II
era. I conducted an interview with Anka Grzywacz, in person over the summer of 2014 and through several subsequent emails. She works at *Federacji na rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny* (Federation for Women and Family Planning), works as an activist with Ponton, a leading sex education awareness group, and is a member of Catholics for Choice. As many sources are not available, I use analyses of sources, and when available, some of those primary sources such as blog posts, newspaper articles from *Gazeta Wyborcza* and Polskie Radio, among others.

In Poland, the language used to discuss sex education is similar to kind used to discuss abortion, which is not surprising given gender and nation have always deeply intertwined. Abortion, and not the myriad of other social and economic issues facing post-communist government collapse, was the first issue brought to discussion in the nascent “democratic” society. Many have written about the tumultuous politics of the abortion debate, the role of the socially conservative Solidarity movement, the language and rhetoric surrounding abortion, and the implications of not allowing those who would be affected most too fully participate in the discussions surrounding reproductive issues. For example, Agnieszka Graff (2000, 2003, and 2011), Malgorzata Fuszara (1997, 2000, 2005, and 2010), Barbara Einhorn (1993), Elenora Zielinska (2000), and numerous others have examined abortion, reproductive rights, and the state of feminism in Poland. Fuszara, along with several others, questions how
democratic Poland can truly be if so many of its citizens are excluded from the public sphere (2010).

While there has been substantial focus on abortion politics, less attention has been paid to sex education and sexual autonomy. Yet, sex education is part of the larger debate about reproductive rights in Poland. Often overshadowed by abortion, all the major changes in the abortion law in the 1990’s and proposed changes in the 2000’s also affected the content and availability of sex education classes. Sex education plays into the discourse surrounding gender and women in the Polish nation. Abortion is explicitly about the ways a woman transgresses her duty to her family and nation, but school is where these values are instilled. Education is a place to form citizens and is a statement of values-- that is, of what is important enough to pass on to the next generation of Poles. Limiting the conversation around sexual and reproductive health to just abortion reduces the concept of what sexual and reproductive is. The WHO takes a robust opinion on this topic, including sex education. Sex education is a way to include other topics such as sexual violence, domestic violence, and a language of consent. Examining sex education also reveals other kinds of tensions around sex, which are not readily apparent from the conversation around abortion.
II. The WHO and AVERT definitions of sex education

Guidelines issued by WHO and AVERT, an HIV charity, are simple but robust. AVERT says sex education is “the process of acquiring information and forming attitudes and beliefs about sex, sexual identity, relationships, and intimacy. It is about developing young people’s skills so they make informed choices about their behavior, and feel confident and competent about acting on these choices” (Simon and Kanabus, 2005). The WHO states sexual rights are fundamental and universal human rights, and sex education is one fundamental aspect of complete control of one’s sexual and reproductive health. More specifically, the WHO defines sexual health as:

the highest attainable standard of sexual health, including access to sexual and reproductive health care services; **seek, receive and impart information related to sexuality; sexuality education; respect for bodily integrity**; choose their partner; decide to be sexually active or not; consensual sexual relations; consensual marriage; decide whether or not, and when, to have children; and pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life (2002, 5).
Sex education should try to impart these values. Gunta Lazdane, the European regional director of the WHO for sexual and reproductive health said, “What we need is a new approach to sexuality education. This is what new guidelines are all about. They place facts in the broader context of values, knowledge and life skills and so forth, so health-related aspects can be understood in the broadest terms” (Press release, 2010). The WHO’s guidelines emphasize more broadly sexual autonomy, and knowledge about one’s body as crucial to exercising control over one’s body and choices. Sex education is a place to introduce information, ideas about sexual and gender preference, as well as to give students a language to express what they want in a healthy manner. The WHO's guidelines rebuke the notion women are only meant to produce children. Rather, all people are implicitly autonomous sexual creatures who need and deserve information to make informed choices about their bodies and their lives.

The European Union in a 2010 Education, Audiovisual, and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) thematic report said “education is most often seen as an important means of socializing children and young people and therefore is a realm where it is especially significant to design policies that aim at achieving greater gender equality” (2010, 16). Education empowers students to question the status quo, but also creates “a critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change. Empowerment education is a student-centered program for multicultural democracy in school and society. It approaches individual growth as an active, cooperative, and social process, because the self and society create each other”
(Shor 1992, 3). NGOs such as the WHO, as well as supranational organizations such as the EU see sex education as an essential component of one’s sexual health and development.

Polish beliefs about sex challenging these guidelines

Roman Catholic theology restricts sex to a purely procreative act, unlike Judaism and Islam which allow the pursuit of sexual satisfaction within a marital union. Catholicism forbids sex without the intent to procreate, even within marriage, because of sexuality’s contamination by the ‘original sin’. The Church forbids coitus interruptus and condom use because it amounts to the ‘destruction of seed’ (Mishtal and Dannefer 2009, 233). These beliefs bleed over into policy making and the creation of social norms and go a long way in explaining the Church’s reticence to make any serious liberal changes in its stance on abortion. Sex education is a way to teach young Poles about proper family roles, especially teaching young women their major contribution to the country is their children. Parents would like to see sex education in schools but do not necessarily have the political avenues to express those desires. The Church capitalizes on its social currency earned in the Communist period and conservative mores about sex to implement its preferred policies.

The Church argues for a curriculum espousing particular ideas about the body and gender. The major difference is the information and values transmitted.
The Church conceptualizes the family as only with a man and woman and their children, with specific ideas about motherhood and fatherhood, which inevitably spill into the public sphere. Mothers should stay at home to take care of the children, while fathers are to enter the workforce to earn money and to take care of the family unit.

These beliefs affect policymaking and social norms and explain the Church’s reticence to seriously consider any changes in its stances on women, especially regarding abortion and reproductive health. Conservatives invoke fears of a demographic crisis in Poland, as birth rates across the region remain lower than hoped. If only Polish women focused less on themselves and their careers and more on the nation, this disturbing trend could reverse! “Common imagery in the media and political discourses depicts Poland as ‘depopulated’ – indeed, the nation has experienced negative population growth for the 20 years since state socialism collapsed” (Mishtal 2012, 154). Sex education is a way to teach young Poles about proper family roles, but it especially teaches young women their major contribution to their country is their children. Challenges to this all-or-nothing binary constitute existential threats to the Polish national identity by decoupling the Church from the Polish nation. Sex education conforming to European standards and explicitly aims to challenge this binary constitutes a threat to the Church.

Most Poles view issues relating to sex and sexual and reproductive health a topic that should remain within the private sphere. Legislators on the left as well
as the right resist introducing any measures that would bring sex into the public eye. The resistance to sex education may have as much to do with the Church's interference as it does with a strong sense of resistance to the European Union “telling” Poland what to do. The UN and the WHO, as well as supranational organizations such as the EU, view sex education as an essential component of one’s sexual health and development.

Alexandra Gerber (2010) and Anne Marie Kramer (2007, 2009) have written about the underlying concerns regarding the power of the European Union on Polish legislation as they relate to abortion. Poland has lost several cases brought by Polish plaintiffs to the European Court of Human Rights, but there still has not been significant change in the policies that led to the plaintiffs bringing their cases to the court in the first place. Conservatives are loath to see anything from the WHO implemented in schools, because the WHO is not Polish. National reluctance to introduce foreign elements into classrooms reveals some of the tensions about who makes decisions regarding Poles, and what kinds of conversations are occurring under the surface.
III. The Development of Sex Education in Poland

Pre WWI and Interwar Sex Education

Information on sex education in Poland before 1989 is scarce. Information about the specifics of sex education including who is teaching it, what they are teaching, and what kind of curriculum was followed in the communist period is rare and difficult to find. A wealth of information on the values informing sex, abortion, and sex education is available. These norms come from old ideas about sex and proper gender roles. The myth of the Matka Polka looms over all conversations about education and reproductive rights in general. She is the perfect symbol to imbibe with meaning, as she is both static and timeless. Poles have felt the Roman Catholic Church’s influence over Poland for centuries, and the influence of Mary has been an especially important, if contradictory, presence in the shaping of gender roles. Motherhood and nationhood are deeply connected, and mother’s wombs are seen as spaces for regeneration in a nation so prone to loss, disconnect, and non-existence of national space. To abort is an unforgivable transgression, because the womb is where Poland rebuilds. Put more succinctly, “the ‘Polish Mother’ thus [takes] central stage in the symbolic representation of Polish patriotism; ‘the kind of sufferings she embodies became
the personification of the motherland, which had lost its sons in numerous uprisings” (Ostrowska, 1998, 421). Slawomira Walczewska notes for women, the only way of joining the national community is through motherhood: "Motherhood is realized through giving birth to a son and raising him in the patriotic tradition" (Walczewska 53). Regarding women and their pregnancies, the important expectation is the Polish Mother will suffer. The motherland, now imbued with female warmth, becomes a sustaining emotional experience. The mother is seen as calling for help to challenge those who would deny Polish identity and existence, rather than being a figure of power within those familiar structures, which regulate the domestic sphere (Ostrowska 498, 1998). This traditional outlook on motherhood is contradictory in its underpinnings—a human mother meant to birth a divine man. Metaphorically, the Polish motherland birthed the divine right of Poles to rule over the land.

Despite other conservative tendencies, feminists in pre-World War II Poland did not hesitate to outline what information they thought was appropriate in sex education. Feminists and health professionals mainly focused on curbing the spread of venereal disease, “which was perceived, along with alcohol and drug abuse, as an essential factor in the process of degeneration” (Gawin 2009, 218). They also focused on “pre-marital abstinence, moral purity, and attention to physical health” (219). The debate eventually evolved in the inter war period into when, how, and what a child should be taught. Educators recommended “the facts of life be conveyed when children’s natural curiosity was aroused, and when
they raised the subject, this timing should not be artificially hastened or delayed. The overriding need was to tell the truth without creating an atmosphere of embarrassment or indiscretion” (219).

The clergy took an opposite view, even while liberal educators and priests agreed education should enhance a moral upbringing. In the interwar period, a diversity of opinions flourished, even amongst the clergy. Priests thought teaching sexual knowledge should occur in a private setting, with the onus of responsibility on the mother for actually teaching children. The consensus generally held sex education should be in the realm of the private sphere, and efforts be made to keep it out of schools (223). More conservative priests outright rejected this conception of the class, saying the “will power and faith protected one from depravity and not sexual education”, and emphasis should be placed on mother’s sacrifices during and after childbirth (223). Even now, this sentiment is echoed in speeches and classes. Mothers are expected to suffer and sacrifice, neatly tying into the themes of the Matka Polka, emulating her example as the site of literal rebirth for Poland. By the inter war period liberal educators advocated for some kind of sex education to be included formally in schools. Polish women gained voting rights and admission to schools, even if at the same time, men consistently denied them from being in public offices and professions not deemed women's work.
Sex Education and Abortion under Communism

Sex education under communism existed, but information about the particulars of classes is not available. As in many Communist countries, abortion was a major form of birth control in Poland because of the difficulty in obtaining contraceptives. Since 1956, abortion was legal and easily obtainable. According to Wanda Nowicka, “In the 1950’s abortion was legalized in Poland and other countries in the region as part of a needs-based approach to women’s health and lives. The fact many women were dying as a result of illegal and often unsafe abortions convinced decision-makers a change in the law was necessary to save women’s lives” (2004,174).

According to Welling and Parker, the melding of Marxist and Catholic politics made creating comprehensive and effective sex education nearly impossible. In the late 1950’s, Towarzystwo Rozwoju Rodziny (TRR /Polish Family Association), led the charge for getting sex education into schools. The Polish government, unwilling to step into the political arena, happily let the NGO implement their curriculum. In 1966, each province implemented its own distinct design. The extent of a student’s education depended heavily on what province they lived in, and to a large degree, this remains the case. Occasionally teachers took time out of class to lecture about the biology of reproduction, but very little beyond those topics. During “sex education”, teachers separated boys and girls. Materials, if they were available, were limited to film. The government implemented a class called “Preparation for Life in the Socialist Family” which did include some topics
one might expect to find in “modern” curriculum, such as the biology of sex and attitudes about sexual behaviors. The name of the course eventually changed to "Preparation for Family Life" in 1975.

In 1986, compulsory courses for pupils of 11-14 years were set up in primary and secondary schools (two hours per month). Mikolaj Kozakiewicz, the former president of TRR, said in a 1990 letter concerning the status of reproductive health rights in Poland, “sex education in the narrow sense of telling pupils ‘where do babies come from?’ and so has been compulsory since 1972. Nevertheless, real sex education that tackles the subjects of sexuality, contraceptives, and different forms of sexual behavior has only been compulsory (Kozakiewicz, 1990).

Post-communist sex education

Since the collapse of the communist regime, sexual and reproductive rights exploded into contentious issues. In 1993, significant changes concerning women’s reproductive rights were introduced in Poland, namely the banning of abortion throughout the country. To conform to the Church’s requests, the Sejm also changed the sections regarding sex education in 1993, saying the curriculum should include “knowledge considering sexual life, conscious and responsible parenthood, family values, life in prenatal phase, and methods of conscious procreation’ (Ministry of Education, Sport, and Youth). The law was re-codified
in 2002, under the Family Planning, Human Fetus Protection and Permissible Conditions of Abortion Law. The Sejm liberalized the abortion law for a short period of time in 1996. The law was restricted again in 1997. In an article from 1995 in the Chicago Times, Tom Hundley suggests pro Church and conservative legislators “compromised” on sex education in public schools. Legislators recognized the necessity of sex education, as abortion would no longer “correct mistakes.” In 1998, after the ban was de facto written back into legislation, sex education was renamed “Education in Family Life,” and “Knowledge of Human Sexual Life” was struck from law.

**Current legal and cultural issues**

According to recent studies, 90% of Poles define themselves as Catholic and about half of them regularly attend mass. Thus, in Poland politicians would be shortsighted if they do not reckon with the Church and its numerous believers. The Concordat, a special agreement between the state and the institutionalized relations between the Church and the state and obliges the state to finance religious institutions, including universities. This relationship became problematic in 2004, as Poland joined into the European Union. Some Polish feminists questioned the relationship. Wanda Nowicka wrote a letter criticizing this agreement, a letter also signed by 100 other feminists (Dzronek 2004, 3). Officially, the Church and the government denied any such informal agreement, but Leszek Miller, former Prime Minister of Poland, and Cardinal Józef Glemp
released statements saying their conversations had progressed warmly and favorably. The EU did not have in 2004 specific laws regarding sexual and reproductive health, although its 2000 report on the state of young people’s health does mention sexual and reproductive health as a goal to be worked towards. The EU talked about sexual and reproductive health in the framework of public health policy, and more generally human rights. Astra’s 2004 report on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights in European Union also frames sex education as a public health good and a human right, suggesting directives explicitly mentioning sexual and reproductive health. Also present is the idea sexual autonomy should be respected. Legislation protecting and encouraging choice can and should be pursued.

One of the leading pro-life lobbying firms, Polish Association for the Protection of Human Life, released their own report in 2007 assessing the state of sex education and declared the rates of abortion and rates of HIV/AIDS infection in Poland were much lower than in Sweden, Germany, and Great Britain (Kluzowa, Palus, Wronicz 2007, 2). They also made recommendations for further policy action, emphasizing the need for “improving the quality of teaching, educational programmes and teaching aids, enhancing skills of sex education teachers, improving collaboration between parents and teachers, reducing the negative impact of media on teenagers” (Kluzowa, Palus, Wronicz 2007, 5). This statement does not seem to conflict with what most liberal
educators say they would like implemented in schools. The conflict is over content and curriculum. According to this group, introducing comprehensive sex education as outlined by the WHO would bring devastating results to Polish youth, ruin them morally, and encourage sexual deviance and abortion.
IV. The reality of sex education in Poland

Technical requirements for sex education

Preparation for Family Life, the curriculum currently taught in schools, promotes abstinence only education, the rhythm method as the Church’s preferred method for contraception in marriages, basic biology, and sexual and reproductive health. The law, as written in 2002, states “sex education classes should impart knowledge considering sexual life, conscious and responsible parenthood, family values, life in prenatal phase, and methods of conscious procreation.” Starting in the fifth grade, principals schedule a class called Knowledge about Society, for fourteen hours over the course of the year. In high school, Knowledge about Society and Preparation for Family Life classes are mandated. Yearly, ten hours are set aside for Preparation for Family Life, while fourteen hours are designated for Knowledge about Society. Class attendance is not obligatory, and parents must give explicit permission for their children to be in these classes. One comprehensive textbook for these classes does not exist. Instead, teachers choose from a list of recommended titles for teaching materials based on their discretion.
Young Poles are sexually active and request sex education. According to 2012 World Bank statistics, the adolescent fertility rate remains relatively high in Poland, at twelve births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 in 2012 compared with four births in Germany or five in Denmark (World Bank 2012). When compared to other countries, Polish girls and boys are less sexually experienced. The average age of sexual initiation stands at 18.8 in case of women and 18.7 for men. A gap exists between “generations spanning three years, which means representatives of the youngest generation enter into this important area of life experience being socially and emotionally immature” (Youth 2012, 201). What young Poles request to learn and what they actually learn rarely converge.

**Content in the classroom**

Ponton is a sexuality education advocacy group based in Warsaw. In 2009, a seventeen year old boy wrote to the group to express his displeasure with the content of Preparation for Family Life classes. As a result, the group decided to release a survey. Over 600 individuals across the country responded and detailed what Preparation for Family Life class looked like, what was taught, who the teachers were, and general attitudes about gender, gender roles, and sex. This survey remains influential, and activists still cite the results of the survey when talking about sex education. Ponton reissued the survey in 2014, and released the results in 2015. Few statistics changed, and much work remains in updating curriculum and implementation. The 2009 report is exhaustive and exposes
many gaps in the curriculum. According to Ponton’s findings, when Preparation for Family Life is available, the “issues taught include: how the body is built, information about puberty, hygiene, sexuality, contraception (especially natural family planning), pregnancy, STIs, relationships and family” (2009, 7). Ponton’s findings follow, at least minimally, the standards from the WHO. However, the information disseminated about these issues, as reported by respondents of the survey, starkly contrasts with WHO standards.

For example, on the topics of the value of a family, a teacher told one student “children from families where there is no father or no mother grow up to be abnormal, before [the student] made her realize 11 out of 13 students in class were being brought up by single mother” (12). On the topic of birth control, and especially condoms, students report being told “condoms are not an effective method, because a condom can cause constriction to the penis, cutting off the blood supply, which can lead to lifelong impotence” (15) and “only the rhythm method can prevent pregnancy, because condoms are the invention of Satan” (13). Other myths persist which are harmful to the body. Wanda Nowicka elaborates many students believe

“that it is harmful to wash during menstruation, that masturbation is physically and mentally harmful, that one cannot get pregnant from the first intercourse, that prevention of pregnancy is a woman’s problem, that contraceptives are harmful, that withdrawal is 100 percent effective in preventing pregnancy, that alcohol has contraceptive influence, and that pregnancy can be prevented by covering the genitals with vinegar, and taking
a hot bath after intercourse or inserting soap in the uterus” (Nowicka 2007, 26).

None of these proposed methods of avoiding pregnancy have any basis in facts, and other methods reinforce stereotypes about how women’s bodies are unclean, putting the onus of preventing pregnancy on the person able to get pregnant. One religion teacher told their class “girls they shouldn’t use tampons because they can grow into your vagina” (Ponton 2009, 10). Some teachers refused to use the medical terminology for body parts (Ponton, 10). Conservative teaching practices perpetuate negative ideas about the female body being shameful and unclean and make teaching the methods of contraception the Church prefers difficult.

All teachers promote the Church’s abstinence-only stance on pre-marital sex. One child reported on the topic of contraception, “In secondary school they told us that only the rhythm method can help prevent pregnancy because condoms are a devil’s idea” (Ponton 2009, 8). The Church does not believe in forms of contraception other than the rhythm method, which involves tracking the fertility cycle and abstaining from sex on days when a woman is most likely to become pregnant. This method requires an extensive knowledge of one’s body, recognition fertility patterns vary from month to month, and knowledge of the many ways a body changes before, during, and after ovulation. Polish children are barely educated about their bodies, so it is unlikely they have the knowledge and patience to chart their fertility patterns. Teachers add stigma to other forms of contraception as another student reports:
“When I argued that contraception, steady partner and faithfulness reduce the risk of STI infection she said I’m not well educated and gave me a lecture on the negative aspects of using condoms (which have pores through which viruses can travel so it’s useless to buy them anyway) and added that in our age it’s a shame to buy such things, especially for girls” (Ponton 2009, 9).

This attitude teaches girls they are responsible for not getting pregnant, and further, they should not seek out the tools known to reliably prevent STI's and pregnancies in the first place. Moreover, their education teaches them to be ashamed about their desires, creating an environment where children cannot ask technical questions about how to properly find and maintain charting their cycles. Essentially, “conservative policy makers successfully shaped sex education content to propagate pro-family rhetoric, assuming all young Polish students would eventually marry and have children (Federa 2013, 42), and the curriculum reflects this, as the Ponton 2009 report demonstrates. Sex is only for creating children in this environment.

Students also reported subjects they wished teachers would broach or at least talk about more sensitively, such as rape or the non-procreative sex. About homosexuality, one student reported, “My secondary school classes were run by a teacher of Catholic Religious Education. She said about homosexuals that there is no place for them in the world, that homosexuality is a kind of disease and that it is not possible that emotions are involved in it” (Ponton, 17). Discussions of rape and domestic violence propagated rape myths, especially about how women brought the violence onto themselves. According to one student, a teacher said “when a girl is raped, it's her own fault, she should suffer and she should be
excommunicated” (Ponton, 18). Other students reported hearing dressing a certain way would lead to becoming a prostitute. Preventing violence and degradation are the responsibilities of women. These instances show insensitivity to issues important to students and propagate damaging ideas in what should be a safe space.

How teachers instruct students may influence content. The 2009 SAFE Project report (Sexual Awareness for Europe run by the International Planned Parenthood Federation) notes, “many methods are used, such as peer education, lectures and workshops. The choice of method depends on the style of individual teachers and the profile of the school.” The report goes on to say “Primary, secondary and high schools tend to favour workshop-style lessons, whereas profile schools, which are mainly for boys, use lectures and visual and mass media (70).” This evaluation is consistent across reports and reveals schools’ preference for male education. It is doubtful whether girls are learning anything related to their bodies, information which could help them access better medical care, or the warning signs for domestic violence, rape, and abusive relationships.

The struggle for qualified teachers

Nearly a quarter of teachers, when teachers are there, also teach the Catholic Religious Education classes (Ponton, 2009, 6) or are otherwise not prepared to teach the subject. According to Ponton’s 2009 study on the issue,
many instructors spend class time discussing their personal beliefs as opposed to actual instruction. Secondary schools schedule the class after normal school hours so many students opt out of attending. Ponton’s 2009 report notes students felt as though there were certain topics they could not be bring up in class ever, the teacher was uncomfortable explaining sex in the first place, struggled to maintain their composure, or the time meant to discuss sex education was used to talk about literally anything else: “teachers would rather talk about such things as first aid, alcohol addiction, smoking and other bad habits...There were also reports of classes about: interior decoration, home security, good manners at the table, skin and nail care etc.” (6). None of this information pertains to sexual and reproductive health.

As often happens in secular alternatives to religious education classes, administrators simply do not offer them, schedule them at ridiculous times, and assign unprepared and often unwilling teachers to teach them. The majority of Preparation for Family Life instructors is priests or other religious figures. Occasionally, biology or other STEM teachers will find their way into the classroom, but more often than not, the people who teach these classes have little to no previous knowledge related to the topic. TRR, Ponton, and SPUNK teach teachers how to instruct pupils and develop materials for use in teaching sex education. Part of SPUNK and Ponton’s focus is creating content; much of what they instruct is their materials, which are in line with international standards. The reality is teachers and administrators selectively implement, if not outright
Feminists view sex education as one avenue to teach and model healthy relationships, skills building, and offering language to young people to express how and what they want. What the Preparation for Family Life course teaches, many sex educators like Anka Grzywacz argue, is a woefully inadequate framework that does not reflect realities of a sexually active teenager. The current curriculum in Poland for sex education does not reflect any of the WHO's commitments to the sexual autonomy of people and their rights to information, free of prejudices, to make healthy and informed decisions. Feminists come back to this concept often. Sexual autonomy is of utmost importance and information presented should give students the skills to make choices for themselves.

**Lack of established curriculum and required texts**

According to many NGOs, textbooks are not factual, and are rare. One of the most popular textbooks, *Strolling towards adulthood: Education on Family Life Classes I-III of Middle School* by Teresa Król, perpetuates many myths about female sexuality and gender identity. CEDAW contends this text lacks any accurate information about biological sexual development, as well as any information for those who do not fit into the gender binary presented in Poland. The issues of textbooks as both sources of information and teaching tools have consistently derailed the introduction of Preparation for Family life classes.
Teachers are reluctant to teach without them and schools are reluctant to offer the class without them. Textbooks are also tools in myth making, obscuring or eliminating altogether objective facts. Teachers may explain or teach around these myths, and sometimes their attitudes bleed into the classroom lessons. Such is often the case with Preparation for Family life classes, where neither a textbook nor curriculum is readily available. As a result, prudish attitudes prevail in the classroom.

In politically charged environments, especially with controversial topics, many teachers find teaching with a textbook more comfortable. The government has said the information is acceptable and experts have agreed. Thus, the teacher can avoid trouble by following the approved book. Furthermore, since many teachers simply do not have prior knowledge about general content, a textbook is an easy way to introduce material in a non-threatening way to teachers and pupils alike. A textbook about a topic like sex education is appealing and important as it ensures all the proper authorities agree upon the information presented. Barring this, students find information from other sources.

**Media as a source of information**

An increasingly sexualized media exposes Polish children to conflicting messages about sexuality, namely the ideals promoted by the Church about sex, modesty, and ideal relationships. Grzywacz notes children internalize ideas about
sex and sexuality from the media. She believes media sources are not always the most factual sources of information (Interview 2014). Idzebski agrees: “I have the feeling some people think: if we talk about sex with young people that means that they’ll start having sex earlier. To me, that’s a wildly erroneous and primitive attitude. Many young people use the internet as well as their peers as their main sources of sexual knowledge, and that is worrisome” (Cosmopolitan Review, 2014). In addition, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health points out that,

“We are always sexually informed, that we are inundated with information intentional or not, at school, in the family, through the media, Internet or other informal paths. Not offering comprehensive sexuality education at schools is “opting for an omissive form of sexual education that leaves girls, boys and adolescents on their own as regards the type of knowledge and messages, generally negative, that they receive on sexuality. When sexuality education is not explicitly provided, in practice education follows the so-called hidden curriculum, with its potential load of prejudices and inaccuracies over which there can be no social or family criticism or control” (2010, 6)

Sex education is crucial, according to this report, for a child’s development because children are already absorbing information and ideas about sex from the world around them. Media and the internet come up frequently as places for young people to learn about sex, concerning many adults who understand how bad information negatively impacts their children.
More importantly, as the internet, media, and friends increasingly become the most reliable sources of information young people have, neither parents nor the Church have the linguistic tools to talk about the hyper-sexual media they consume and internalize. The Church has not been able to cease the incoming wave of increased sexual material from the West, and has most certainly not provided an accessible framework to discuss these materials and how they influence youths’ perspectives on sex and relationships. In the classroom, teachers are often unable to get a handle on the content being taught, becoming embarrassed or unwilling to teach the subject in the first place. The class is not illegal in the technical sense of the word, but authorities do not pay attention to its implementation either, leaving students to learn on their own.

According to Zbigniew Izdebski, a sexuality researcher in Poland, 89% of students and their parents want to see education in schools. Polish parents overall would absolutely prefer sex education be taught in classrooms, even if they do not want to teach their children themselves about sex. Moreover, statistics point to a sexually active group who lack clear and accurate information about sexual activities. The reality is teenagers unprepared for relationships they are told to want and will eventually grow into adults who know little about their bodies and perpetuate the cycle with their children. However, parents are not necessarily the people arguing for sex education. They may agree sex education is important for schools to teach, but lack the language to pressure legislators. NGO’s have the experience and resources to advocate for sex positive legislation,
in a way parents do not. Parents may agree they want sex education, but also may not know what it entails, and would prefer not to talk about sex at all.

**Case studies in why sex education matters**

Sex education has implications for the real lives of real people. Sexual violence is demonstrably not spoken about often, and when it is, women are blamed for what happened to them. Rarely in Ponton’s report are boys and their role in preventing violence against women mentioned. This has practical consequences. For example, 2006, Ania, a young woman from Gdansk committed suicide after her male classmates forcibly stripped her and videotaped it. The incident led to new legislation for teachers, who now must report violent crimes. At no point, did anyone discuss why the boys thought it was acceptable to behave in this fashion. Different values about women might have been taught, namely respect for women’s autonomy. It might have also given the teachers a more effective framework to discuss with other students why those actions were unacceptable.

The explosive case P & S v. Poland found its way into international news in 2008 when hospital administrators denied a young girl an abortion, removed her from her mother’s care, and then charged her with committing statutory rape. In 2011, the European Court of Human rights eventually found Poland kept P from getting an abortion, and awarded her damages. The case centered on abortion, but discussion of other related issues was not present. Raped by a classmate and immediately denied the emergency contraceptive she should have been able to
get, she went to report the incident to the police. The District Family Court interrogated her, concluded she was raped, and signed the certificate allowing P her abortion. P and her mother S went to three different hospitals, and received false and completely unhelpful information on all three instances. One of the hospitals told P she needed a priest and not an abortion and set up an unrequested meeting between her and a Catholic priest.

In the meantime, someone leaked P’s personal information to the press, the Church, and hospital staff without her consent. The priest and other anti-choice groups began harassing P and S to the point where they sought police protection. The police, responded by interrogating P for six hours, and eventually removed her from her mother’s care. Weeks after her rape occurred, and a few days before the twelve-week abortion cut-off mandated by law, P finally received her abortion. The hospital did not register her as a patient and gave her anesthesia without a warning. She also never received any kind of information about post abortion care, and staff told her to leave immediately after the procedure was performed. In July 2008, the Family Court charged P for engaging in statutory rape and for engaging in sexual intercourse with a minor below the age 15, even though she was the one who had been raped. The Prosecutor eventually dropped the charges, and P and her family filed charges against the hospital who leaked P’s personal information. They were not able get an effective remedy, and in May 2009 filed an individual complaint in front of the European Court of Human Rights.
P’s rape arguably may have been statutory, but her pregnancy was still the result of a crime, and there was much conversation about who was responsible for P after she indicated she wanted to obtain an abortion. The focus on abortion completely overshadowed any space for a conversation about whether better sex education might have prevented this whole event from happening.

While in P’s case, it may be useless to speculate retrospectively, millions of children in Poland are similarly at risk of being victims. This case at its core is about is about rape and institutionalized violence against women, but the case famously centered around her abortion. This case is also fundamentally about the ways P was stripped of her autonomy. Her rapist denied her choice when he ignored her, government officials ignored her choice when she requested an abortion; they took her choice away when they took her from her mother, and blamed her for her rape by pressing charges against her. This violates everything the EU and the WHO define as autonomy. If a curriculum with sex education is mandated, perhaps an honest and open conversation about sex will keep it from becoming the clandestine weapon of assault. Many conservatives say the exception for rape might lead to more women falsely claiming rape to obtain an exemption from the ban.

In Ponton’s 2009 report, “sexual violence and date rape drugs are not mentioned at all or not enough discussed. It is worrying so little talk occurs about these situations when so often it is in school where young people cross the line in contacts with their fellow pupils” (2009,11). A young man reports
“At the time we thought it was fun looking at a guy ripping the girl’s clothes off and pretending he’s going to rape her (that girl started crying only after she realised her parents would beat her up for coming home in a broken dress but some other girls were scared right from the start)... We who watched it gave a silent permission to the perpetrators. I had no idea that something terrible was going on. Neither us, kids – we weren’t even teens yet – nor the teachers, nor the parents had any basic sex education (2009,12).

Some students may not realize what they are doing is wrong, and young girls are not taught in their classes now how to speak up and say no. Additionally, the boys in the class are not taught how to intervene. Sex education has powerful implications for rape and domestic violence—what could happen if more men knew how intervene in a potential assault and everyone knew and recognized continuous and enthusiastic consent?

The case of P & S also highlights the assumptions made by some lawmakers about who is having sex. Current laws about sex do not consider the possibility of 13 and 14 year olds have sex, and presume, especially in the case of underage girls, their sexual encounters will be with a predatory older man. Such language and attitudes completely fail to take into account underage boys who have raped or sexually assaulted.
V. Current Debates around Sex Education

Clearly, what students and parents would like to see taught does not correspond with actual curriculum content, which runs quite contrarily to what the Church would prefer. This seems contradictory upon a first glance, but parents do not specify what they want beyond comprehensive sex education. They generally find speaking to their children about sex to be awkward, and would much prefer schools take on the responsibility. Squeamishness about sex is a holdover from Communist sensibilities about the topic, and it is unsurprising parents are still uncomfortable discussing it. Additionally, sex is seen as something, which is very private, which only makes breaching the topic much more difficult. Feminist groups offer language and avenues for parents to learn about sex and talking about sex with their children, but it is those groups pushing for changes. A major legal obstacle for those in favor of having accessible sex education in Polish public schools is the reading of Article 53.3 of the Constitution. It states, “parents shall have the right to ensure their children a moral and religious upbringing and teaching in accordance with their
convictions.” The Church advocates for parents teaching their children, including keeping sex education in schools to a minimum.

The Church faces the same obstacles it faces in other countries—declining numbers in the pews on Sundays and image issues in the wake of scandals with pedophile priests. The Church is still heavily invested in a “Catholic=Pole” Poland, and the state is struggling to accommodate those who do not—or cannot—fit into this model. It insists on influencing social policy as a means to keep Poland Catholic. Sex education and religious education are tools to emphasize this connection.

**Gender Ideology**

Gender and gender ideology are some of the hottest topics for the Church currently. Gender ideology, according the Polish bishops, is the ideology of changing social norms around gender and marriage. The ideology of gender insists gender is something to be chosen, and is dangerous because it defies the traditional and natural way of life. The war between the Church and this new enemy confused many people, from feminists still sorting out how to understand gender in Poland to the average Pole, who does not understand what gender is.

Gender ideology emerged in the beginning of 2013 as the greatest threat to Poland's existence and as something that must be stopped. The Pope's definition of their newest enemy “is a new philosophy of sexuality, where sex is not something we are born with but rather a social role we define for ourselves. It is heavily based in Marxism, and “can lead to people denying their nature” (Our
Sunday Visitor, 2014). Recently, the Church and conservative lawmakers explicitly connected sex education to “gender ideology” and demonized advocates and sex education teachers as people genuinely invested in harming children. Sex education is where gender ideology is taught, and therefore must be stopped in the classrooms.

The Polish bishops in January 2013 issued a pastoral letter, which included the following quote:

“The danger of the gender ideology results basically from its deeply destructive character, both toward the person and inter-human relationships, that is, the whole social life. The man of an uncertain sexual identity is not able to discover fully and fulfill the tasks he is facing both in marital and family life and in his social-professional life. The attempt of equalization of this kind of relations is, in fact, a serious weakness of marriage as a community of a man and a woman and the family, built on marriage.”

The Vatican did not require the letter’s public reading, although it widely was. Statements such as this only serve to reify conservative norms around gender in which the man and the woman have distinct roles to play. There is no space in this Poland for those who do not conform to this binary.

The media has played a large role in tying together gender and sex education. Maria Ryś in the “Idziemy” magazine in the 15 December 2013 issue said, “due to the popularity of gender agenda, sexual education at Polish schools, in its current form, denies the importance of chastity, fidelity and modesty,
promoting harmful models of promiscuous and irresponsible sexual behavior” (Idziemy, 2013). The Church presents gender as something internally dangerous. Its expulsion is necessary for the sake of the common good before Poland will be safe. In 2011, Pope Benedict, in an address to ambassadors, said “sex and civic education is an attack on religious liberty,” adding he could not “remain silent about another attack on the religious freedom of families in certain European countries which mandate obligatory participation in courses of sexual or civic education which allegedly convey a neutral conception of the person and of life, yet in fact reflect an anthropology opposed to faith and to right reason” (Catholic News Agency 2011). Sex education is dangerous because it encourages young people to question the gender roles and preferences they are inundated with. Gender is contradictory and difficult to conceptualize, because in many ways the analysis of gender in Poland never quite made it beyond a second wave understanding of sex.

Anna Odrowąż-Coates conducted a small but revealing study about gender ideology in Poland, with the caveat it is not “representative of the Polish society in general, but should give a notion of the public’s reaction to the church-media gender discourse” (2013, 31). She found overall, Poles are quite unfamiliar with gender (much in the same way Poles are quite unfamiliar with what feminism actually is), but they did want to know more. Elderly individuals and those with no higher education “believed the Church must be right and the gender ideology, whatever it is, as they could not understand it, must be defeated
by all means” (31), and they “associated gender ideology with transgender, transsexual, gay, and they displayed a degree of prejudice against diversity of sexuality and sexual orientation (32). She also found even those with higher educations were also prone to some of these same prejudices, concluding no one was immune from the campaign against gender ideology.

Poland has long had a loud and extreme wing arguing for conservative social policy. The argument has been made young children are uninterested in sex and teaching children about the biological development of their bodies with medically accurate information will lead them to start having sex from an earlier age. Joanna Podgórska writes in a 2013 Polityka article the Church conflates sex education, gender, and pedophilia, as a means to deflect attention from the Church’s pedophilia scandal, saying attacking and deflecting are old defenses, moving the game to an easier target.

**Pedophilia and Perceived Deviance**

Pedophilia and homophobia as deviant acts are often conflated. Zbigniew Izdebski, who has been studying sexuality since at least the 1980’s in Poland, says in an interview with Justina Jablonska the current climate “is very disadvantageous when it comes to sex education, a general misunderstanding not only of the matter of gender in a social-cultural sense but generally regarding various issues are tied into femininity, masculinity and overall, sexuality” (Cosmopolitan Review, 2014). He continues saying when a bill for the WHO’s suggested guidelines came up for implementation in the Sejm,
“Certain issues about children’s sexuality have been taken out of context, misinterpreted. The result is that many parents – and not only parents, but also people who don’t know what is going on – believe that a group of crazed sexual educators (or, as I see it, those of us who study sexual health), have evil intentions towards children. That’s horrifying” (Cosmopolitan Review, 2014).

The policing of perceived deviance is the real target of this kind of conversation. Deviance is the perception of sex educators as malicious individuals who aim to harm children through education. Gender ideology and gender explicitly tie into this because education is the supposed vehicle for indoctrination into this dangerous ideology. Challenging the Church on its binaries and right to knowledge also means challenging the Church’s views on other kinds of deviance, namely those ideas perpetuated about the LGBT community, what domestic and sexual violence are, and ideas about the materiality of bodies.

Wincent Elsner told the Sejm in a fiery debate, “I accuse every one of you, who hides from sex deep under the covers, and don’t allow talk of sex education in school, of a thousand human tragedies. Every one of you who is against sex education in schools, you are guilty of abortion” (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2014). If the country has the capabilities to prevent abortion, and sees abortion as the ultimate sin, then lawmakers should do everything in their power to prevent abortions. It is a demonstrably proven way to reduce the number of unwanted and unintended pregnancies, and if the aim of conservative lawmakers were actually to reduce abortions, this would be the soundest route. Marzena Wrobel, out of the Polish Solidarity party, said in the same debate “the current sex education system is
good, and that it has directly contributed to lowering abortion rates”. The
“Wiedza o seksualności człowieka”, or “Knowledge of Human Sexuality”
introduced by Nowicka to the Sejm Wrobel argues would “devastate the inner
workings of children”, ruining them morally.

A hostile climate led the Church to rhetorically reframe sex educators as
pedophiles, and sex education as a form of pedophilia. This development has as
much to do with the Church’s issue with gender as it does with deflecting some of
the criticism some of Poland’s clergy have received for some clergy member’s lack
of sensitivity in dealing with the actual pedophile scandal that rocked the Church
worldwide. The campaign against sex educators seeks to extend Article 200 of
the Polish Criminal Code, which refers to the age of consent, with the following
two paragraphs: “persons publicly promoting or approving activities of
pedophilic nature would be punished with amercement, restriction of liberty or
imprisonment.” The same punishment would apply to anyone who publicly
“popularizes sexual activity of adolescents below the age of consent or enable
those means to do so” (Astra report 2013). The logic is quite simple although
concerning. Essentially, according to those who believe comprehensive sex
education is a form of pedophilia, teaching children and young people about sex
overly sexualizes them from a young age.

Dariusz Oko, a conservative priest, is known for his views on gender
ideology, and his insistence on tying it to pedophilia. He spoke at a conference
called “Stop Gender Ideology”, where he criticized the WHO for “teaching
toddler how to masturbate” and compared Simone de Beauvoir to Pol Pot as perpetrators of genocide. This thought has considerable sway and figures in the media discuss it at length in leading newspapers and television programs. Poland has long had a loud and extreme wing arguing for conservative social policy.

The WHO suggests age-appropriate sex education be introduced starting around age four or five. Opponents say children do not need this kind of information at such an early age and this knowledge will lead them to have sex at a younger age. Opponents also link explicit and exact vocabulary featured in teaching materials as examples of pedophilia. These materials refer to body parts with medically correct terminology, i.e.: a vagina is called a vagina and penis is referred to as a penis. Finally, opponents of this decision claim this “obsession” with teaching children about their bodies is an example of pedophilia. The Polish children’s advocacy group Nobody’s Children works directly with victims of child abuse and has, more than once, expressed concern and confusion over the liberal use of the term “pedophile.”

How NGO’s push against the Church and State

SPUNK, Ponton, TRR and their allies remain committed to changing attitudes about these topics and a host of other issues such as breast cancer awareness and AIDS prevention programs. Polish archbishops have not softened their position on homosexuality and pedophilia, even as the Vatican has rhetorically inched towards a more humane position. Ponton is committed to providing as much information to young people as possible. According to their
2013 Activity Report, they established a hotline young people can use to ask questions about all kinds of subjects. They also have worked to create a campaign against sexual violence called “I Do Not Agree with Violence!” and various other projects aimed at reducing HIV stigma, awareness for breast cancer, and launching exploratory projects into assessing the state of health care for the trans community in Poland.

ASTRA, an informal network committee monitoring Central and Eastern Europe’s sexual and reproductive rights, in their “Human Right to Sex Education” statement says

“Such education aims to be free of and to eliminate stereotypes, discrimination, and stigma; respect the evolving capacities of children and adolescents; and be tailored to meet the specific needs of particular groups e.g. children with disabilities and those living on the streets. Comprehensive sexuality education acknowledges that children in different environments and cultures, faced with diverse life experiences, acquire competences at different ages” (Astra, 2014).

Acknowledging different children are going to need different things normalizes difference as something natural and makes space for different means of disseminating information.

A quick look at SPUNK’s recommended reading titles reveals how diverse sex education materials can be. Books such as, *A Little Book about Homophobia, Sex in World Culture, The Anatomy of Love, Sex Education*, and even *Vagina Monologues* make it onto the list. In a list of “Co Warto Przeczytac i Obejrzec” (Worthwhile Reading and Watching), “The Little book of feminism,” as
well as movies such as Brokeback Mountain, The Kids are Alright, and Obywatel Milk, made it in as recommended reading and watching materials. Education about sex can happen anywhere and does not need to be limited to just lectures in classrooms.

Changing norms are part of what sexual educators seek to accomplish in the curriculum, but there is recognition parents, as much as the idea of sex might make them uncomfortable, can and should be active participants in their children’s education. Parents do not have language with which to talk to their children about sex. It is possible to see this in Poles’ discomfort in talking about sex at all, the parental preference for sex education to happen in schools, and children’s desire to have accurate information more directly related to their lives. Ponton’s major point is it is not enough for sex education to occur in schools; parents can and should be empowered to talk to their children. Children primarily look to their parents for guidance on how to respond to situations. If what they see from their parents is confusing or non-existent, it leads them to confusion and perhaps even perpetuation of disinterest in modeling proper adult responses later in life.
VI. Looking Toward the Future

The problems with sex education are not limited to the Church’s interference in social policy and feminism’s inability to root itself deeply enough in Polish society to challenge gender norms. Gender in Poland is still a complicated concept. Agnieszka Graff calls the changes since 1989 a paradox. She goes on to clarify much of what Poland in 2006 experiencing looked much like Western Second Wave feminism. It created a contradictory message: feminism never introduced to Poland, except when it was. Feminists were Marxists, outsiders, and champions of a dangerous and decidedly un-Polish doctrine. Graff puts this much more succinctly: “public discourse on women’s rights in Poland is, on the other hand, an odd mixture of backlash rhetoric, postfeminist rambling, and good old misogyny—without any self-reflection whatsoever” (8). The idea of stable binaries persists and backlash occurs to any real or perceived challenges to national myths surrounding the supposed Polish matriarchy.

The language surrounding sex education frustrates many feminists, as it is difficult to mediate a landscape where the rhetorical options are limited to being labeled pedophiles or attempting to explain what comprehensive sex education is.
Part of what is so difficult about sex education being linked to pedophilia is the underlying homophobia. This attitude is something sex educators seeks to change, but in the meantime conflating something no one has a choice over with the actual deviant behavior of pedophilia is problematic at best and harmful at worst.

Comprehensive sex education challenges gender norms in Poland, and subsequently constitutes threats to Church’s power and Polish conception of national identity. The power of the Church continues to haunt Poland, even as a much more complicated picture begins to appear upon further inspection. Various studies reveal the proceeding crisis of Catholic values in Poland, especially distinct in the scope of morality connected with marriage, family and sex life. Generally, the norm assuming marital fidelity is accepted. Young Poles approve of the Catholic norm of preserving the life of unborn children to a lesser extent. The moral awareness of young Catholics regarding marriage and family is undergoing processes of pluralization and relativisation, and strictness in the domain of sexuality is visibly waning (Youth 2012, 67).

However, a change in the impasse about sex education, abortion, and reproductive rights is unlikely to happen until the Church radically rethinks its position on these issues. The crux of much of the debate around sex education is the time and type of instruction of young people. Knowledge is a public good, and students clearly want it. Knowledge about sexual health raises the age of sexual initiation, lowers the number of unwanted pregnancies, and lowers the rates of
the STI's (AVERT 2014). These are demonstrable public goods. Home, perhaps, is the place for moral. It is difficult to ascribe a blanket moral system to a public school system, and arguably in a democracy, questionable to try. The language used by both sides is incompatible with the other. It is difficult to find a common ground when both sides argue for such different conceptions of the subject. If one side argues sex education will bring the downfall of Poland, and the other side argues perhaps curriculum should include more than the basic biology of the body, middle ground is difficult to find.

Young Poles state they want comprehensive sex education as they grow into adults with sexual relationships. Information in the Internet age is not difficult to obtain, but when it is not factually correct or perpetuates stereotypes about women and the LGBT community, information is not useful but actively harmful, as Ponton’s reports demonstrate. Students in the Ponton report had much to say about what they personally thought should be included in education, and it is perhaps best to let them speak for themselves. Many students wanted neutral education, as soon as possible. Ponton illustrates this with this letter “We have been asking ourselves: are we supposed to wait until we want to marry? In effect people would get engaged at the age of 15 or 16 because it is then that guys and girls lose their virginity. I just wanted to add that learning about sex in religion classes is a bad idea and I would like to ask at least for a 20-hour course about sex because three years [period of middle school] is not long and we won’t be able to learn everything by reading magazines”(2009, 16). Students notice the
lack of topics in the classes, know these are problems but also want the tools to be able to properly handle the situations they find themselves in. One letter reports on teachers:

“They completely avoided the very issue of human sexuality and no one even mentioned different orientations, which I find scandalous in our times. We all know that LGBT persons are among us and have always been and since it’s something completely normal I believe we should talk about this. It’s important to make young people more aware. Also, reliable information would help reduce homophobia and be a sign of tolerance and it would let us understand these matters better” (2009 16-17).

Another says “in these classes we should learn about useful things and not just hear preaching and threats that sex is bad. We should learn all about contraception so that we could avoid such situations as in my school where at the beginning of secondary school two girls got pregnant. We should be informed on how it all works, when is the best time to start sexual life, when it’s better to wait and not only hear that we must “wait until marriage.” They had better advise us on how to protect from dangerous infections, how to maintain intimate hygiene and other useful stuff” (2009, 17). Children know so much more than adults give them credit for and they want to understand their bodies and their choices more fully. They want the information, and it should be given to them.

The tools are there- the WHO sexual and reproductive health outlines are robust, easily adaptable, and focus on freedom of choice. The WHO’s sex education standards for sex education are one means of accomplishing gender mainstreaming. They have seen great success in other countries. Germany and
Sweden’s sex education programs are creative and playful, and make serious efforts to consider international standards. Polish sex education advocates look to these efforts as examples of successful policy and curriculum. Germany and Sweden face similar conversations in their respective populations about the appropriateness of some methods of delivery of content, but this is different from a conversation around if sex education should be taught at all. Polish feminists push for this kind of curriculum because it is effective.

As unlikely as radical reform in policy is, it is important to listen to what the people directly impacted by education need and want. Young people need information about their bodies, how to protect oneself against infection, and creating healthier relationships. Comprehensive sex education policy is possible, but given Poland’s reluctance to pass any legislation mandating it, it is very unlikely the current situation will change. Additionally, this raises questions about the power of the EU to compel Poland to make meaningfully changes to the law. Poland has lost several cases in the European Court of Human Rights, paid its monetary dues, yet the laws that led to the court cases in the first place remain. Moreover, this points to the function of the EU as a supranational or international institution. Is an institution such as this a useful or worthwhile endeavor if it cannot influence or compel members to act in accordance with its laws? Poland is already compelled to follow gender mainstreaming polices, those strategies to make sure gender equality is a goal of research, legislation, and advocacy. Ponton and other NGO’s can and do apply for funding from agencies
outside of the Polish government, such as Mama Cash, and look for ways to raise awareness about sexual health outside of official channels such as hotlines, fliers at popular events, and accessible online libraries of information.

It is essential researchers, academics, and advocates continue to push for more comprehensive classes and curriculum. As globalization becomes more entrenched in Poland and its effects become clearer, the Polish government, non-governmental organizations, and academics must ensure human rights beyond the ones espoused by the Catholic Church are respected and guaranteed. It is easy to blame sexual deviance such as pedophilia or pornography, but much more difficult to acknowledge what healthy sexual lives look like when it is not possible to discuss sex and gender in the first place. Students know the curriculum is ideology filled and does not offer them much information, and deserve recognition from the adults who purport to have their best interest in mind. The media landscape left many without a language and framework to have a conversation about sex, and sex education is the most direct way to communicate to young people how to resist those messages and grow into healthy sexually aware adults.
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