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Labour of Love and Silence: Between Legal Non-Recognition and Artistic Representation of Women's Unpaid Work in Poland (1945–Present)

Kamila Naumowicz, Joanna Unterschuetz *

Abstract. This article examines the relationship between the legal non-recognition of women's unpaid domestic and care work and its representation in Polish visual art from the end of the Second World War to the present. Combining legal analysis with art-historical inquiry, it argues that the invisibility of women's labour is produced both through its exclusion from legal definitions of work and through cultural representations that have historically rendered such labour ordinary and unremarkable. The article analyses the concept of unpaid work in the Polish legal framework and discusses recent international developments, particularly within the International Labour Organization, aimed at increasing the recognition of care work. It then traces changing artistic representations of women's labour through the works of Aleksander Kobzdej, Helena Korklińska-Żyrmont, Juliusz Studnicki, Andrzej Wróblewski, Elżbieta Jabłońska, Julita Wójcik, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Katarzyna Krakowiak-Balka and Liliana Zeic, placing them within the broader context of international feminist art. The article demonstrates that while earlier artistic representations often reinforced traditional gender roles, contemporary art increasingly challenges the symbolic invisibility of women's labour. It concludes that recognising unpaid work requires both

* Kamila Naumowicz (corresponding author, email address: kamila.naumowicz@uwm.edu.pl) is Assistant Professor at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (Poland). Joanna Unterschuetz is Associated Professor at the University of Business and Administration in Gdynia (Poland).

legal reform and a broader cultural transformation of how work and social value are understood.

Keywords: *unpaid care work, women's labour, labour law, feminist art, Poland*

1. Introduction

1.1. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach situated at the intersection of legal analysis and art-historical inquiry in order to examine how women's invisible labour has been represented in Polish visual arts from the post-World War II period to the present. The study combines analysis of normative frameworks and cultural representations.

The methodological point of departure is the distinction between the legal recognition of work and its social and cultural visibility. While legal systems define what counts as "work" and determine the scope of protection afforded to different forms of labour, visual art offers insight into how such activities are perceived, valued, or marginalised within a given society. This dual analytical lens makes it possible to identify tensions between the formal exclusion of unpaid domestic and care work from legal categories and its representation - or absence - in visual culture. The article proceeds through a contextual analysis of selected artworks, situating them within their broader historical, political, and economic environments. In particular, it examines how successive ideological frameworks in Poland - from socialist state policies to post-1989 market transformations - have influenced both the legal status of women's labour and its artistic representation. This approach enables the identification of parallels and divergences between the evolution of normative structures and the changing visual narratives surrounding women's everyday activities.

The paper adopts the assumption that visual representations actively participate in the construction of meaning, contributing to the reinforcement or contestation of dominant understandings of gender roles and labour. By combining legal and art-historical perspectives, the article seeks to demonstrate that the invisibility of women's labour is not only a consequence of its exclusion from formal legal definitions, but also a phenomenon reproduced - or critically challenged - within cultural and visual regimes of representation. The invisibility of women's labour should therefore be understood as a phenomenon produced at the intersection of legal exclusion and symbolic representation.

1.2. Invisible Women's Work from a Historical Perspective

The contemporary understanding of work was shaped during the period of industrialization and urbanization, when organizational structures and relationships between employers and employees were being developed. Society has been divided into economically active and inactive individuals, depending on whether they participated in the production of goods and services intended for sale. The development of wage labour transformed the perception of work. Value began to be attributed primarily to activities that could be monetized and traded on the market, and work came to be understood as actions performed in exchange for remuneration. Since the nineteenth century this approach led to the exclusion of reproductive labour, performed mainly within households by women, from economic and political consideration. Women's unpaid activities became invisible. They were not measured nor compared with men's paid labour, which became the dominant and recognized form of work.

In Poland, in the period before and during the Second World War, women were assigned traditional roles in the society: they were expected to be mothers and wives, not actively participating in public life but becoming a symbol: the Polish Mother. During difficult centuries in Polish history of on-going wars and the lost of independence, it was women who managed the household or the family businesses, while men were fighting or imprisoned. A "Polish Mother" was a symbol of a heroic woman capable of bearing any difficulty, as well as to give birth to new generations of Polish patriots¹.

After 1945, the symbol of the Polish Mother underwent a transformation, replaced by another stereotype of the socialist Polish woman: one that can do any type of work, previously assigned to men (e.g. could ride a tractor or produce bricks). Yet, the problem of discrimination rose – regardless of their position or skills, women were paid less for their work, offered lower positions and were still responsible for the majority of care and household duties.

The collapse of communism in Poland opened new perspectives for education and career for women - a new image of the ideal woman emerged, blending elements of the traditional Polish Mother with those of a modern businesswoman. The ideal Polish woman nowadays is expected

¹ A. Imbierowicz, *Matka Polka w defensywie? Przemiany mitu i jego wpływ na macierzyństwo polskich kobiet*, Ogrody Nauk i Sztuk, vol. 2, 2012, 431-432, M. Genzels, *Wyzwania dla Polski wynikające z sytuacji kobiet na rynku pracy*, Zeszyty Naukowe UEK, n. 903, 2013, 7-9.

to successfully balance her professional achievements with a satisfying family life and domestic labour².

Today, the traditional division between women's unpaid domestic labour and men's paid employment has been replaced by what is referred to as *partial specialization* – women now also perform paid work and participate actively in the labour market while simultaneously engaging in unpaid domestic and care work³. Although women's increased participation in the labour market has reduced gender disparities, it has also imposed a double burden on them – combining paid and unpaid work, which, despite its crucial role in societal development, remains undervalued and continues to be excluded from the formal definition of “work”⁴.

1.3. The Concept of Work and Unpaid Work in the Polish Legal Framework

In Polish, work is defined as “a purposeful human activity aimed at producing specific material or cultural goods”⁵. According to the Article 24 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, work is under the protection of the Republic, yet Polish legislation lacks a statutory definition of ‘work’. The concept of work, as used in the Constitution, is understood as an effort directed toward producing a specific good or achieving a specific goal, regardless of the form or type of work performed (piecework, self-employment, agricultural work, or employment based on civil-law contracts, etc.)⁶. It might therefore seem that the Constitution protects all forms of work; however, certain types of activity remain outside its scope of protection – namely, so-called *invisible work*.

In the case law of the Constitutional Tribunal (Judgment of 2 June 2015, K 1/13), an “employee” has been defined as a person performing remunerated work for another, regardless of the form or legal basis of such work, and possessing professional interests that may be collectively

² M. Genzels, *Wyzwania dla Polski wynikające z sytuacji kobiet na rynku pracy*, Zeszyty Naukowe UEK, n. 903, 2013, 8.

³ A. Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz, *Praca kobiet w teorii ekonomii. Perspektywa ekonomii głównego nurtu i ekonomii feministycznej*, Kraków, 2016, 17-19.

⁴ A. Franconi, K. Naumowicz, *Remote Work during COVID-19 Pandemic and the Right to Disconnect: Implications for Women's Incorporation in the Digital World of Work*, Z Problematyki Prawa Pracy i Polityki Socjalnej, vol. 19, n. 2, 2021, 1-20.

⁵ *Dictionary of the Polish Language*, PWN, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/praca.html>.

⁶ P. Tuleja, *Art. 24*, in P. Czarny, M. Florczak-Wątor, B. Naleziński, P. Radziejewicz, P. Tuleja, *Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. Komentarz*, Warszawa, 2023, LEX el.

protected. Invisible work, however, is characterized by the fact that it is unpaid and is not governed by any legal relationship with the recipient of the work, who is most often a family member or another close person. Therefore, it is not regulated nor recognised as “work” in the Polish legal system.

Unpaid care work encompasses all non-remunerated activities performed within a household or for members of the community, including care giving and domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water and fuel, as well as caring for children, older persons, the ill, or persons with disabilities⁷. Beyond care and domestic work, invisible (unpaid) work includes a range of other activities such as educational, emotional, mental, and organizational labour – including engagement in out-of-school learning, emotional support, motivation, logistics, and management⁸.

Until recently, unpaid domestic and care work had not been taken into account in economic policy. Today, however, its measurement is recognized as an important component of labour statistics and a key indicator of gender inequality⁹. It is widely recognized that, in both developed and developing countries, women perform substantially more unpaid work than men – the gender gap in this regard ranges from two to nearly five hours per day¹⁰. Globally, women devote three times as much time to unpaid care work as men. Consequently, unpaid care work constitutes one of the primary barriers preventing women from entering employment and accessing better, decent working conditions.

According to the International Labour Organization’s report *The Impact of Care Responsibilities on Women’s Labour Force Participation*¹¹, as many as 708 million women worldwide remain outside the labour market due to unpaid caregiving responsibilities (compared to 40 million men). Data collected from 125 countries indicate that caregiving obligations are the main barrier to women’s labour force participation, whereas for men, the primary barriers are education or health-related issues. This clearly

⁷ UN Women, *A Toolkit on Paid and Unpaid Care Work: From 3Rs to 5Rs*, New York, 2022, 5.

⁸ J. Czerniak-Swędziol, E. Kumor-Jezińska, *O statusie prawnym osoby wykonującej pracę niewidzialną*, *Forum Prawnicze*, n. 1 (85), 2025, 33.

⁹ <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/unpaid-work/>

¹⁰ R. Antonopoulos, *The Unpaid Care Work-Paid Work Connection*, Working Paper n. 86, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2009, 3.

¹¹ ILO, *The Impact of Care Responsibilities on Women’s Labour Force Participation*, Geneva, 2024, 1-22.

demonstrates that women disproportionately bear the burden of childcare, eldercare, and household management.

These inequalities were further amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistical research indicates that performing paid work from home combined with caregiving responsibilities significantly increased pressure on women and intensified their involvement in unpaid work¹². These responsibilities also affect women's paid employment – the combination of paid work with care giving for children and elderly persons results in lower income levels for women (a phenomenon called motherhood penalty and elderly care penalty)¹³.

Even though invisible work has not been recognised legally in Polish legal system, recently it has increasingly attracted attention in the fields of economics, sociology, and international law. The International Labour Organization has also recognized the issue, urging states to prioritize the measurement of unpaid domestic and care work and to collect relevant statistical data. Such data are crucial for improving the understanding of the phenomenon and for developing policies that support individuals engaged in domestic and caregiving work, both within and outside the labour market¹⁴.

On 14 June 2024, the International Labour Organization adopted the *Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy*. It emphasizes that “Care work, paid and unpaid, is essential to all other work. A well-functioning and robust care economy contributes to a healthier present and future workforce, creates jobs, supports businesses and enhances productivity” and is also crucial for building resilience to crises. The ILO acknowledges that women make up the majority of paid and unpaid care workers worldwide and that the pandemic magnified the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work carried by women. It further stresses that care provision, financing, regulation, and the assurance of high standards of quality, safety, and health are primarily the responsibility of the State. The resolution thus calls on governments and employers to address the unequal gender distribution of paid and unpaid care work, to promote

¹² K. Naumowicz, *The Impact of Remote Work Regulations during COVID-19 Pandemic on Work-Life Balance in Poland*, *Praca i Zabezpieczenie Społeczne*, n. 1, 2022, 23-30; Eurofound, *COVID-19 Pandemic and the Gender Divide at Work and Home*, Luxembourg, 2022, 1-86.

¹³ D. Witkowska, K. Kompa, *Opieka nad dziećmi i osobami starszymi a wynagrodzenia pracowników w Polsce*, *Przegląd Statystyczny*, vol. LXVI, n. 2, 2019, 138-139.

¹⁴ ILO, *The Impact of Care Responsibilities on Women's Labour Force Participation*, Geneva, 2024, 11.

women's economic inclusion beyond care giving roles – including through changing social norms and gender stereotypes related to care – and to raise public awareness of the social and economic value of care work.

2. Art as an Instrument of Social Representation

Feminist scholars Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker emphasized that the image of woman in art is not a reflection of reality but an ideological construct, “a means of perpetuating the division between the private and the public spheres”¹⁵. In *Vision and Difference*, Pollock stressed that an analysis of the female image requires reflection on the viewer - on who looks and how¹⁶.

This understanding may be further deepened by situating art within the broader framework of symbolic communication that underpins both culture and law. For centuries, legal culture has relied on the circulation of symbols in order to shape social attitudes and secure acceptance for existing or emerging normative orders. Law operates through formal rules and sanctions, but it depends on the internalisation of patterns of behaviour that become part of collective consciousness. In this sense, legal norms, much like moral or customary norms, are transmitted through social practices, institutions, and systems of communication, and must be recognised and understood by members of a given community in order to be effective¹⁷.

Symbols and language make possible the accumulation of cultural heritage, determine the content of thought and aspiration, and enable the creation of artistic goods as well as moral systems¹⁸. Therefore they play a crucial role in linking abstract normative frameworks with lived social experience. Social organisation depends as much on the existence of legal rules, as on the shared recognition of symbolic forms that evoke common values and guide behaviour. The effectiveness of law is thus closely connected with how it is perceived, interpreted, and evaluated within society - whether it is regarded as legitimate, just, or worthy of compliance. These perceptions are shaped not only by formal institutions

¹⁵ R. Parker, G. Pollock, *Dawne mistrzynie. Kobiety sztuka i ideologia*, Warszawa 2025, 146

¹⁶ G. Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*, London, 1988, 73.

¹⁷ M. Borucka-Arctowa, *O społecznym działaniu prawa*, Warszawa, 1967, 113.

¹⁸ J. Szczepański, *Podstawowe pojęcia socjologii*, Warszawa, 1965, 103.

such as courts or legislatures, but also by cultural representations that mediate the meaning of law in everyday life¹⁹.

In this context, visual art may be understood as one of the key sites where such symbolic processes take place. Artistic representations reflect social reality and participate in the construction and transformation of the symbolic order within which law operates. By rendering certain forms of labour visible while marginalising others, art contributes to the broader cultural framework that influences whether particular activities are recognised as socially valuable and, ultimately, as deserving of legal protection.

This relationship becomes particularly significant in periods of political and social transformation, when existing symbolic orders are destabilised and new meanings are negotiated. Changes in political regimes are often accompanied by shifts in both legal frameworks and systems of representation, as old symbols lose their legitimacy and new ones are introduced or reinterpreted. In such moments, art can reveal the tensions between continuity and change, as well as the persistence of underlying social hierarchies despite formal legal reforms²⁰.

In this sense, art may be understood as a system for the production of meanings that regulates access to symbolic power and interacts with legal constructions of social reality. The image of woman - whether as worker, mother, or object of the gaze - constitutes one of the key instruments in the construction of social order, not only at the level of cultural representation but also in shaping the conditions under which women's labour is recognised, valued, or rendered invisible within the legal sphere. Depictions of labour - particularly women's labour - constitute one of the most sensitive domains in which art exposes the social structure of its era.

3. The Working Woman in Art before the Nineteenth Century

Labour constitutes one of the oldest themes in the history of art. From harvest scenes in the margins of medieval manuscripts to the monumental depictions of labourers in the age of industrialization, artists have repeatedly sought to capture the relationship between the human being and production, between the body and effort.

Within this long continuum of representations, the working woman generally appeared in a subordinate manner - as a background figure

¹⁹ J. Unterschuetz, *Symbol i alegorie prawa w malarstwie*, *Elbląg*, 2014, 18.

²⁰ J. Unterschuetz, *op.cit.*, 19.

completing the composition, or as an embodiment of specific moral ideals. Her labour was often depicted in a symbolic or allegorical way, devoid of any real economic dimension.

In Medieval and Renaissance cycles of the months (for example, *Labours of the Months* in the miniatures from *Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry*), women appear alongside men, yet their activities - spinning, harvesting, feeding children - are inscribed within the rhythm of nature and everyday life. These actions are not treated as labour in the economic sense, but rather as elements of biological and moral order.

In early modern iconography, women's work acquires a didactic and moral dimension. The woman at the spinning wheel, with the needle or the child, becomes a symbol of virtue, devotion, and domestic order. One may cite, for example, the Dutch series of moralizing prints devoted to the ethics of work²¹. In the series "*The Praise of a Noble Woman*" (Dirk Volkertszoon Coornhert -1522–1590-after Maarten van Heemskerck - 1498–1574), the biblical ideal of the woman is presented. In individual engravings, women are shown engaged in such activities as spinning or serving meals to family members²².

In the seventeenth-century series of prints entitled *House works*—Geertruydt Roghman (1625–1651), women's everyday occupations correspond to the recommendations contained in seventeenth-century household manuals and the duties of a wife listed therein²³. These include sewing, cooking, spinning, and wiping dishes. Conversely, the image of a woman who has fallen asleep at her spinning is associated with vices such as laziness, carelessness, and the abandonment of duty²⁴.

In this way, an iconographic tradition was formed in which women's labour - repetitive, invisible, and every day - was self-evident. These representations correspond to a period in which women's domestic labour remained outside the scope of legal recognition as "work", reinforcing its symbolic marginalisation. Only the emergence of realism and social art in the nineteenth century brought an attempt to break with this convention.

²¹M. Adamska, *Women's Roles in European Prints of the 15th-19th Centuries. A Look at the Concept Behind This Catalogue*, in *Woman's Work Is Never Done*, eds. A. Oleśkiewicz, J. Taylor-Kucia, Kraków, 2013, 38.

²²*Woman's Work Is Never Done*, eds. A. Oleśkiewicz, J. Taylor-Kucia, Kraków, 2013, 58-60.

²³Ibidem. 64.

²⁴L. Nochlin, *Representing Women*, London, 1999, 88-89.

4. The Nineteenth Century – Between Realism and Moralism

In the nineteenth century, with the development of realism and social art, the theme of women's labour acquired new significance. For the first time, women began to be depicted as real participants in economic life, rather than merely as allegories of moral virtues. Yet their representation continued to reflect social ambivalence - on the one hand, a fascination with the reality of labour; on the other, the reinforcement of gender and class hierarchies. Women were often portrayed working in the fields, emphasizing their association with the nurturing realm of nature²⁵. The image of the peasant woman was rendered in a realist convention, illustrating the hardships of agricultural labour, as in Jean-François Millet's "*The Gleaners*" (1857), or highlighting women's strength and progress at work, as in Courbet's "*The Grain Sifters*" (1855).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a new figure appeared - the industrial female worker. Women's labour outside the home was still perceived negatively, and only poverty, which compelled a woman to work in order to fulfill her "natural" role as provider, made such labour deserving of understanding and compassion²⁶. In a sense, representations of factory workers continued the visual tradition of women at the spinning wheel. Santiago Rusiñol's "*Textile Factory*" (1889) portrays women at the looms, dressed in work aprons and headscarves protecting them from dust, within a modern, well-lit interior of an actual textile factory owned by the painter's family²⁷. Artists of the period also drew attention to child labour. For instance, Joan Planella (1849–1910) depicts a "*Girl Worker*" (1882), where the contrast between the fragile figure of the girl and the massive weaving machine is striking.

Constantin Meunier, a Belgian painter and sculptor known for his depictions of workers, also portrayed women labouring in mines alongside men. The motif of the coal bearers (*les hiercheuses*) recurs frequently in Meunier's work - for example, in "*A Coal Miner*" (1887), which presents a woman in work clothes, clogs, and a headscarf, leaning on a shovel beside a cart full of coal²⁸. Likewise, in "*The Return of the Miners*" (1885), among the group of workers returning from labour across the mining landscape, a woman is present. In "*Three Female Miners*" (1885), women are depicted during moments of rest (*Les Hiercheuses*, c. 1885–90), or just before work

²⁵ L. Nochlin, op.cit., 85.

²⁶ L. Nochlin, op.cit., 82.

²⁷ *Arte y transformaciones sociales en España 1885-1910*, ed. J. Barón, Madrid, 2024, 123-124.

²⁸ D. Deplechin, F. Vandepitte, *Constantin Meunier Museum*, Brussels, 2021, 75.

begins (*“Female Miner Descending into the Pit”*, between 1870–1905). Whereas Meunier’s male miners - immersed entirely in their toil - are clearly intended to evoke pity, the *hiercheuses* embody explicitly idealized notions of the grandeur and dignity of labour²⁹. Meunier’s social realism - spiritually akin to Courbet and Zola - created an aesthetic of compassion and solidarity that would find continuation in twentieth-century Socialist Realist painting.

At the same time, in the realist painting of the Scandinavian countries, alongside depictions of women’s wage labour, artists frequently turned to scenes of domestic life, showing women engaged in simple household tasks. For example, Marie Krøyer’s *“Interior with a Sewing Girl”* (not dated) presents a woman absorbed in sewing, seated in a cozy, bright, bourgeois interior. Richard Bergh (1858–1919) painted *“Portrait of the Artist’s Wife”* (1886), showing her gazing at the viewer as if momentarily distracted from her sewing; on one hand she wears a thimble, in the other she holds scissors, and on her lap lies a light, patterned fabric.

The nineteenth century may thus be regarded as a transitional moment: the woman becomes visible as a worker, yet her image still bears the imprint of moralism and aestheticization. This ambivalence - between emancipation and tradition - would become the point of departure for twentieth-century art and the first feminist reinterpretations of women’s labour.

5. Socialist Realism and the Postwar Image of the Working Woman

After 1945, Poland found itself in a new political and ideological context. The political and legal system of the Polish People’s Republic (PRL) underwent Sovietization and was defined by a highly centralized socialist state structure operating under the hegemonic control of the communist party and the political dominance of the Soviet Union³⁰. The social ideals were defined by the communist party, based on the ideological principles of Marx and Lenin, and the workers were considered a new leading class in the society³¹.

²⁹ P. J. Hilden, *The Rhetoric and Iconography of Reform: Women Coal Miners in Belgium, 1840-1914*, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 34, 1991, 429.

³⁰ J. Bardach, B. Leśnodorski, M. Pietrzak, *Historia ustroju i prawa polskiego*, Warszawa, 2009, 676; J. Wrona, *Rola PZPR w państwie i społeczeństwie polskim*, *Remembrance and Justice*, n. 2 (32), 2018, 62.

³¹ J. Wrona, *Rola PZPR w państwie i społeczeństwie polskim*, *Remembrance and Justice*, n. 2 (32), 2018, 64-65

The 1952 Constitution³² expressly guaranteed the principle of formal equality between men and women, including in the sphere of employment. Article 66 affirmed women's equal rights in political, economic, cultural and social life, thereby embedding gender equality as a legally protected component of the socialist labour regime. The adoption of the Labour Code (*Kodeks pracy*) in 1974³³, which entered into force on 1 January 1975, marked the first systematic consolidation of Polish labour law into a unified legal framework. It included a dedicated set of provisions (Chapter VIII) on the protection of women's work, such as maternity leaves, workplace accommodations and protection against dismissal during pregnancy and maternity.

This concept of formal equality, however, operated primarily at the level of legal abstraction and did not necessarily translate into substantive equality within workplaces. Just like in many communist states women were formally guaranteed equal rights with men, female employment rates were high, and public childcare was accessible, women nonetheless contended with traditional patriarchal culture, which valued them primarily for their attractiveness and associated them with domestic and maternal roles. Combined with professional labour, this resulted in a double burden. Despite the officially propagated ideology of equality of the sexes, the preferred sex of workers was an important criterion specified by employers in their job announcements and there were far more job positions offered to men than women –the historical data shows that soon after the war women were 60-70% of all the job seekers³⁴. The Stalinism era and fast industrialisation plans made a significant change in women employment as the party's industrial goals could not be realised “without mass vocational mobilisation of women”. Women were offered jobs typically performed by men, accompanied by communist propaganda and slogans of “emancipation of women through making them part of production”³⁵.

³² Constitution of the Polish People's Republic (*Konstytucja Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej*) from 22 July 1952, Journal of Laws of 1952 n. 33, item 232, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19520330232/O/D19520232.pdf>

³³ Labour Code (*Kodeks pracy*) from 26 June 1974, Journal of Laws of 1974, n. 24 item 141, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19740240141/O/D19740141.pdf>

³⁴ N. Jarska, *Gender and Labour in Post-War Communist Poland: Female Unemployment 1945-1970*, *Acta Poloniae Historica*, n. 110, 2014, 50-54.

³⁵ N. Jarska, *op.cit.*, 61.

Yet, in times of crisis, when the demand for workforce decreased significantly, the dismissal of the workers depended on their family status: employment reduction actions were aimed at married working women, as “possessing additional sources of subsistence” and “number of working persons in the family” were criteria for dismissal³⁶. The unequal treatment of women was evident: their primary role was still seen in the family and household, their professional activity was considered as the economic necessity to contribute to the household budget. In other cases, when women were not forced to maintain a family, a woman’s work would only be considered “will and pleasure”, not a must³⁷. Furthermore, family and marital status influenced how women were perceived as workers: they were mainly employed in low-quality positions as their professional role needed to be subordinated to her family duties³⁸.

The new political and ideological order influenced also the artistic activity. The first decade after World War II was marked by efforts to establish Socialist Realism as the dominant artistic trend. In the period lasting roughly fifteen years, between 1949 and 1955, the new work of art was expected to be realistic, legible, creative, and social. The latter meant that it was to be ideological, imbued with optimism, committed to the “struggle for socialism,” serving society by mobilizing its consciousness for both struggle and labour³⁹.

These political imperatives were widely debated among contemporary artists. Some chose to conform to the new trend, while others steered their work in such a way that they could function within a niche, hoping to survive the darkest period⁴⁰.

The doctrine of Socialist Realism, officially proclaimed in 1949, subordinated artistic creation to the task of building a “new society” - a society of working people united in the common effort of postwar reconstruction. Artists were to depict the world “as it should be,” in accordance with the principle that art must educate and shape class consciousness. In socialist discourse, labour in the strict sense referred to

³⁶ N. Jarska, op.cit., 63-64.

³⁷ N. Jarska, op.cit., 77.

³⁸ N. Jarska, op.cit., 84.

³⁹ J. Szczepaniak, *Sztuka narzucona i wyrzucona. 10 lat galerii sztuki socrealizmu w Kozłowie, in Socrealizm: fabuły, komunikaty, ikony*, ed. K. Stępnik, M. Piechota, Lublin, 2006, 514.

⁴⁰ J. Ilkosz, *Malarstwo realizmu socjalistycznego w Polsce in Sztuka polska po 1945 roku: materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*, ed. T. Hrankowska, Warszawa, 1984, 206-208; *Nowocześni a socrealizm*, vol. 1, ed. M. Świca, J. Chrobak, Kraków, 2000, 35.

productive work, though the analogies with domestic labour - equally monotonous and repetitive - are self-evident⁴¹.

During this period, representations of workers were numerous. A well-known example is Aleksander Kobzdej's painting "*Podaj cegłę*" (*Pass the Brick*, 1950), depicting builders at work.

Kobzdej's "*Brick makers*" portray three women, most likely shown during a work break: one of them appears older and weary, withdrawn or marginalized; the two younger women are engaged in conversation. Unlike the *bierchenses* portrayed by Constantin Meunier, these figures radiate no pride - only fatigue and exhaustion. The dynamic activity of men in "*Pass the brick*" contrasts with the silence and passivity of the women, whose task is to produce the building material (bricks) used by the male "heroes of labour."

Yet, within the art of this period, the motif of the working woman also appeared as both a declaration of emancipation and an instrument of propaganda. An example is the painting created around 1950 by Helena Korklińska-Żyrmont (1900–1984), "*Portret przodownicy pracy ob. Hauptówny Elżbiety (przodownica pracy)*" (*Portrait of Comrade Elżbieta Haupt, Heroine of Labour (model worker)*) On the reverse of the canvas are two handwritten labels, one partly damaged, as well as a certificate reading:

We hereby certify that comrade Elżbieta Haupt, fish-gutter at the Centrala Rybna of Fish Processing Plant No. 1 in Gdynia, exceeded her work norm by 229%. Gdynia, 26 April 1950.

The painting depicts a woman wearing a headscarf and work apron, holding a knife at a table with several fish before her. In the background, through the window, one can see the Gdańsk Bay and the port of Gdynia. Despite its ideological context, the portrait retains warmth and individuality. The artist does not present the heroine in a heroic pose but as a real person - a woman with a fair, serious, and calm face, marked by focus and character.

A similar motif appears in Juliusz Studnicki's "*Gertruda Wysocka – przodownica pracy*" "*Gertruda Wysocka - Heroine of Labour*" (1950). The painting presents the interior of a fish-processing plant, with a woman cleaning a fish as the central figure. Shown frontally, half-length, with a tool in her hands, she looks directly at the viewer. Her calm, self-assured posture and focused gaze lend the scene the character of a psychological

⁴¹H. Bilewicz, *Nostalgia i miseria socrealizmu. Gertruda Wysocka – przodownica pracy Juliusza Studnickiego jako alegoria realna*, *Porta Aurea*, n. 18, 2019, 173.

portrait rather than a purely propagandistic image of a “heroine of labour.” In the background, against a grey tiled wall, other women are visible at work, arranged in a rhythmic horizontal sequence. The subdued, cool colour palette - greys, greens, browns, and blues - corresponds with the theme of daily physical labour. Studnicki’s painterly technique is loose, with a visible texture, especially in the depiction of the fish.

Although created during the Socialist Realist period, the painting is distinguished by its lack of pathos and its authenticity - it is a portrait of a woman in her real environment rather than an ideological apotheosis of labour. As Hubert Bilewicz notes, “*Gertruda Wysocka- Herione of Labour*” is both a reminiscence and a paraphrase of Manet’s *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*⁴² Against the backdrop of other working women, the central figure remains motionless and pensive; her gaze is filled with melancholy, indifference, and inner detachment. This aura of nostalgia - absent from typical, heroizing representations of Socialist Realism - turns Studnicki’s work not into an affirmation of labour but into a reflection on alienation, becoming a “real allegory”⁴³.

6. Andrzej Wróblewski: Portraits of a Daily Life during the Socialist Era

The work of Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–1957) represents one of the most significant turning points in the history of postwar Polish art. After a brief period of alignment with the doctrine of Socialist Realism (1949–1950), the artist consistently developed his own pictorial language - rooted in figuration, symbol, and the experience of everyday life. In his late paintings and drawings, produced between 1954 and 1957, Wróblewski elaborated his own version of genre painting, creating what might be called a “portrait of daily life.” His works, often reminiscent of photographic stills, capture scenes of domestic and external reality. Within these compositions appear members of his immediate family - his wife, Teresa, and their newborn son, affectionately called “Kitek”⁴⁴

Wróblewski’s painting “*Matka i córka. Pranie*” (1956) - *Mother and Daughter. A Laundry*. depicts a seemingly ordinary domestic scene that conceals a profound social commentary. Within a closed interior, two women are shown - a younger one hanging laundry and an older one sitting, half-

⁴²H. Bilewicz, op.cit., 175.

⁴³H. Bilewicz, op.cit., 178.

⁴⁴K. Mieczkowska, *Wystawa jako komunikat społeczny. O odbiorze semiotycznym w praktyce*, in *Wróblewski and After... Art of Direct Realism*, ed. M. Koziel, M. Lachowski, Lublin, 2023, 7.

asleep. The light colour palette and gentle tonality of the composition create an illusion of calm, yet beneath this serenity lies the quiet drama of everyday existence. The colourful fabrics obscuring the women's faces symbolize both a limited perspective and the invisibility of women whose labour - silent and confined within the domestic sphere - remains unacknowledged. Wróblewski presents here two stages of life bound by the same routine: youth absorbed in repetitive tasks and old age suspended in stillness. The scene becomes a metaphor of enclosure and subdued endurance, where daily labour replaces freedom and self-realization. "*Mother and Daughter. A Laundry*" is thus an image of non-productive work - work that creates no lasting material good, but sustains the world through rhythm and order. In this painting, Wróblewski breaks away from the language of Socialist Realism: there are no "heroines of labour," no pathos of progress - only a human being who persists.

In numerous sketches from 1955–1957, Wróblewski portrayed his wife, Teresa Rudowicz, engaged in daily activities - ironing, cooking, reading. The drawing *Teresa prasująca*, "*Kompozycja figuralna nr 646*" (*Figural Composition No. 646*, undated), shows her bent over an ironing board, her face turned downward, absorbed and absent. Depicted half-length and in slight perspective foreshortening, with her hair falling over her forehead, Teresa becomes a symbol of womanly everydayness - unheroic, yet dignified and inwardly strong. In Wróblewski's sensibility, this is not merely a record of gesture but also a subtle emotional portrait - a manifestation of tenderness toward a close person and, at the same time, a reflection on the value of quiet, invisible effort.

A special place in this period of Wróblewski's oeuvre is occupied by the cycles "*Kolejki*" (*Queues*) and "*Poczekalnie*" (*Waiting Rooms*), in which he ironically depicted the gray everydayness of life in the People's Republic of Poland. Operating within the cultural system of his time, the artist used these scenes to comment on the propagandistic slogans of the era, the existential burden, and the sense of confinement. In *Kolejka*, the figures are nearly identical - emotionless, isolated, enduring in passive waiting. Their shared direction, a symbolic march toward an inevitable fate, intensifies the atmosphere of resignation. Particularly striking is the image of a child sitting lifelessly on a bench - like a doll - serving as a metaphor for the loss of spontaneity and freedom. Among the seated and standing figures are also women - shopping, waiting in line - engaged in the kind of labour so integral to the austere reality of the postwar years that it becomes almost invisible. The queue thus becomes a metaphor for a society in waiting - for improvement, for meaning, for the end of struggle. Women sustain the world through their very presence and endurance.

Here, women's labour appears both as an expression of everyday repetition and as an element of the surrounding world that defines the artist's reality. Wróblewski restores the body - the female body in motion, at work, in fatigue, in stillness. This is not the heroism of action, but the heroism of persistence, tenderness, and empathy.

The works presented in this chapter show how the lack of recognition of domestic unpaid reproductive activity as work coincides with representation of women performing daily, mundane tasks as revealing the pieces of intimate household pictures or illustration of tiring social reality.

7. Worldwide Feminist Art on Work

It was only with the rise of feminist thought in the art of the 1960s and 1970s that a new perspective on women's labour emerged: no longer as background, but as a subject in its own right and as an instrument of social critique. Artists such as Judy Chicago and Martha Rosler drew attention to the "invisibility" of women's domestic and emotional work. This perspective would later resonate in the practices of Polish artists after 1990, when the end of the socialist regime facilitated greater access to Western artistic currents. The works discussed below demonstrate that the activity of Polish feminist artists did not emerge in isolation, but developed within a broader transnational context of feminist critique, while at the same time responding to the specific historical, social, and political conditions of post-socialist Poland. Within the international context of feminist reflection on women's labour, the work of the American artist Martha Rosler occupies a particularly significant place. As one of the leading figures of 1970s critical art, Rosler combined performance, photomontage, visual essay, and installation to create works that have since become classics of feminist iconoclasm, while remaining a vital point of reference for contemporary artists. Rosler focused on domestic space - particularly the kitchen - as a site of both physical confinement and potential emancipation through symbolic action.

Her video-performance "*Semiotics of the Kitchen*" (1975) is arguably her most famous work. In it, Rosler - parodying a cooking show - presents successive kitchen utensils, from A to Z, illustrating each with abrupt, mechanical gestures. She uses kitchen tools as symbols of oppression - an alphabet of everyday violence in which a woman speaks only the language imposed upon her. This gesture deconstructs not only the language of domestic "usefulness," but also exposes the violence embedded in routine feminine tasks. As Laure Adler notes, in Rosler's work the kitchen

becomes “an arena of symbolic struggle in which the alphabet of oppression is reversed”⁴⁵.

In subsequent cycles such as “*Bringing the War Home*” (1967–1972), Rosler juxtaposed war photographs - primarily from Vietnam - with colourful, hyper-aestheticized images of American interiors taken from consumer magazines and television advertisements promoting consumerist and sexist ideals and products⁴⁶. These photomontages reveal the brutal symbiosis between global politics and domestic life - depicting women as consumers, caregivers, and instruments of social legitimization. Such juxtapositions expose that women’s labour is not isolated from the mechanisms of structural violence but is instead one of its hidden components, masked by the aesthetics of everyday life.

Rosler - like Polish artists in 2000s - extends the notion of labour to include unpaid, care-based, and prestige-deprived activities. Her works build a bridge between the local and the systemic, showing that the kitchen need not be a prison but can become a laboratory of resistance.

Judy Chicago’s monumental installation “*The Dinner Party*” (1974–79) transforms the acts of cooking and setting the table into a testimony to women’s achievements in culture. The central element of the work is a triangular table, each side measuring nearly fifteen meters, with thirty-nine place settings commemorating women from history, legend, or mythology, and 999 additional names inscribed on a ceramic base beneath the table. Each place setting includes a hand-painted ceramic plate designed by Chicago, along with chalices, utensils, and an embroidered runner corresponding to the historical period and geographic region of each woman represented⁴⁷.

These works overturn the traditional understanding of women’s “calling”: actions once deemed marginal - cleaning, cooking, caring - become artistic and political gestures.

A direct extension of this reflection is Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s “*Manifesto for Maintenance Art*” (1969), in which the artist observed that her everyday caregiving duties - feeding, cleaning, childcare - had vanished entirely from both art and social visibility.

In the Manifesto, Ukeles writes:

⁴⁵L. Adler, C. Viéville, *Beware of the Woman Artist*, Munich, 2024, 80.

⁴⁶K. Hassel, *Historia sztuki bez mężczyzn*, Warszawa, 2024, 267.

⁴⁷W. Chadwick, *Kobiety, sztuka i społeczeństwo*, Poznań, 2025, 392.

Two basic systems: Development and Maintenance.
 The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's
 going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?
 (...)
 I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother
 (random order).
 I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing,
 supporting, preserving, etc. Also (up to now separately) I 'do' Art.
 Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and
 flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them as Art. (...)
 My working will be the work.

Through this declaration, Ukeles exposed the asymmetry between creative labour - associated with progress - and maintenance labour - associated with care and everydayness. In her performance "*Washing/Tracks/Maintenance*" (Whitney Museum, 1973), the artist publicly washed the museum's steps. In her outdoor performance cycles *Washing/Tracks/Care*, she confronted the social perception of those who struggle to reconcile professional work with the duty of care⁴⁸.

8. The Interpretation of Invisible Labour in Polish Art after 1990

The situation of women in capitalist and socialist countries differed considerably. After 1989 Poland faced a political and economic transformation, which profoundly reshaped the conditions of women's labour in Poland, both in the formal economy and the unpaid domestic and care work. The transition from a socialist model to a market-driven system brought significant changes to labour regulations, social protections and employment policies.

High unemployment rates that Poland had to face during the first years of transformation, following reforms to the Labour Code, and the restructuring of the social security system shifted responsibility for economic security from the state to the individual. With the collapse of state-run childcare infrastructure, women vulnerability to dismissals and the feminization of part-time or informal work, it has intensified gender inequalities in both paid and unpaid work. Domestic and care labour continued to be invisible: seen as non-economic activity, remained legally and economically unrecognized.

A situation began to change after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. The legal framework regarding women's labour was

⁴⁸K. Hassel, op.cit., 337.

reshaped by the implementation of EU directives on equality, work-life balance, and social protection into Polish Labour Code⁴⁹. It has expanded anti-discrimination regulations and protections of maternity and paternity aiming at improving women's participation in the labour market and the balance between family and work life of both sexes. One of the major changes was the adoption of Directive 2019/1158/EU which introduced new standards on work-life balance. The amendments to the Polish Labour Code entered into force on 26 April 2023⁵⁰ and modified or added new provisions in terms of paternity leave, parental leave (art. 182¹a–182¹g – extended duration, non-transferable 9 weeks), carers' leave (added art. 173¹), and flexible working arrangements (art. 188¹ – right to request flexible working arrangements such as remote work for parents/carers). Although European integration brought significant changes into Polish legal framework in terms of gender equality, the still existing disparities in gender roles reveal a multi-dimensional issue between legal harmonization and the persistent structural undervaluation of women's invisible labour. The situation of women on the labour market is still conditioned by multiple barriers and stereotypes regarding their family and care duties – women are to be seen by employers as “high-risk” workers while men are more universal employees⁵¹, which European legislator is trying to change by promoting the equal sharing of caring responsibilities between men and women:

The imbalance in the design of work-life balance policies between women and men reinforces gender stereotypes and differences

⁴⁹ The Polish Labour Code lists 34 directives that have been incorporated to the Polish Labour Law, among which Council Directive 92/85/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding (tenth individual Directive within the meaning of Article 16 (1) of Directive 89/391/EEC) (OJ

L 348, 28.11.1992), Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010 implementing the revised Framework Agreement on parental leave concluded by BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC and repealing Directive 96/34/EC (OJ L 68, 18.3.2010, p. 13), Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU (OJ L 188, 12.07.2019, p. 79).

⁵⁰ Act of 9 March 2023 amending the Labour Code and certain other acts, Journal of Laws of 2023, item 641, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20230000641>.

⁵¹J. Czerniak-Swędziół, *Zatrudnienie kobiet w dobie przemian postindustrialnych*, in *Zatrudnienie w epoce postindustrialnej*, ed. B. Godlewska-Bujok, K. Walczak, Warszawa, 2021, 45-46.

between work and care. Policies on equal treatment should aim to address the issue of stereotypes in both men's and women's occupations and roles, and the social partners are encouraged to act upon their key role in informing both workers and employers and raising their awareness of tackling discrimination. Furthermore, the use of work-life balance arrangements by fathers, such as leave or flexible working arrangements, has been shown to have a positive impact in reducing the relative amount of unpaid family work undertaken by women and leaving them more time for paid employment ⁵².

Yet, despite its formal availability, fathers make limited use of parental leave, a pattern shaped both by the family-policy system and by cultural expectations surrounding gender and caregiving. It proves that the existing legal framework is not enough to change the cultural stereotypes and more complex solutions are needed⁵³.

Similarly, in the art world, women's creative output - like women's experience more broadly - was marginalized. New narratives were introduced only with the rise of feminist art history, which in Poland began to develop after the political and economic transformations of 1989⁵⁴.

Comparison of the works of Rosler and Ukeles with those of later Polish artists - such as Wójcik, Jabłońska, Janin, or Krakowiak-Balka - reveals both contextual differences but also striking affinities: the kitchen as a stage, the body as a medium, irony as a strategy. For all these artists, art is not a narrative about women, but an act that exposes the structures of the world - economic, cultural, and aesthetic.

After 1989, within the new reality of systemic and economic transformation, the landscape of art also changed. Polish contemporary art increasingly addressed themes of everyday life, privacy, corporeality, and the relationship between gender and institutional structures. In this context, particular significance was gained by the work of women artists who turned domestic chores and emotional labour into creative media.

In her photographic series "*Supermatka*" (2002–2005) – "*Super-Mother*", Elżbieta Jabłońska depicts herself seated in a domestic setting - kitchen or living room - holding her young son on her lap and dressed as a

⁵²Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers and Repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, Recital 11.

⁵³K. Suwada, *Care Involvement and Power Relations. Parenting and Gender in Contemporary Poland*, Journal of Family Research, vol. 34, n. 3, 2022, 893-895.

⁵⁴K. Majewska-Gude, *Nie ma fal. Międzynarodowa sztuka feministyczna*, in *Chcemy całego życia. Feminizmy w sztuce polskiej*, ed. A. Rayzacher, K. Majewska-Gude, Sopot-Gdańsk, 2024, 47.

superhero, wearing a cape, striking dynamic poses, with a serious expression. The artist assumes the roles of pop-culture icons - Batman, Superman, Spider-Man - thus transforming the figure of the housewife and mother, who performs daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, into that of a hero⁵⁵. Jabłońska thereby exposes the social expectations placed upon women who, despite formal equality, still shoulder disproportionate domestic labour while being expected to embody the roles of perfect mother, diligent worker, and ideal woman. The irony of these works arises from the contrast between form (heroic, comic-book aesthetics) and content (monotony and exhaustion).

In the performance “*Przez żołądek do serca*” (*Through the Stomach to the Heart*, performances organise from 1999-2003), presented during an exhibition opening, Jabłońska draws upon cultural stereotypes of femininity - the “gastronomic mother,” the resourceful homemaker, the ideal housewife - and transforms actions that typically remain behind the scenes into art⁵⁶.

A seminal figure within this current is Julita Wójcik, who in 2001 performed *Obieranie ziemniaków* (*Peeling Potatoes*) at the Zachęta Gallery. Dressed in an apron, the artist sat on a kitchen stool in the middle of the exhibition space, peeling potatoes - a gesture unambiguously associated with domestic, caregiving labour performed by women. Visitors to the gallery were also invited to participate. The act of peeling potatoes highlighted stereotypical divisions between “female” and “male” activities, between invisible and prestigious labour⁵⁷. The performance proved controversial and difficult for some to accept, prompting discussions about the boundaries of art⁵⁸.

These works also align with the concept of “*krzątania*” (domestic bustle), inspired by the philosophical essays of Jolanta Brach-Czaina: “*Krzątania* belongs to our principal categories of being-in-the-world. It is a mode of existence within everyday life”⁵⁹. This idea is continued by Anna Plotnicka, initiator and curator of the exhibitions “*Krzątania 1*” and “*Krzątania 2*”, organized by BWA Awangarda in Wrocław (2001) and

⁵⁵M. Krajewski, *Elżbieta Jabłońska*, in *Nowe zjawiska w sztuce polskiej po 2000*, ed. G. Borkowski, A. Mazur, M. Branicka, Warszawa, 2005, 202.

⁵⁶M. Krajewski, op.cit., 202; W. Chadwick, op.cit., 525-526.

⁵⁷A. Rayzacher, *Transformujemy. O sztuce feministycznej okresu transformacji*, in *Chcemy całego życia. Feminizmy w sztuce polskiej*, ed. A. Rayzacher, K. Majewska-Gude, Sopot-Gdańsk, 2024, 108.

⁵⁸K. Pawelek, *Julita Wójcik*, in *Nowe zjawiska w sztuce polskiej*, ed. G. Borkowski, A. Mazur, M. Branicka, Warszawa, 2005, 322.

⁵⁹J. Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, Warszawa, 1992, 70.

BWA in Zielona Góra (2004). Reflecting on her life and artistic practice, Plotnicka wrote:

Once my daughter asked me: 'When do you make your art? Because I can't see it - you just bustle around and make dinner.'
 Krzątania [domestic bustle] is what I do every day. In the midst of activity I sometimes pause, and then a new idea comes to me, or I recall something extraordinary that once happened. Layers of banal actions sometimes reveal the miraculous through the flashes of insight that come while washing the dishes. (...)
 One can practice art incidentally, in the course of constant busyness, without distinguishing between the two, seamlessly⁶⁰

These artists thus took a clear stance toward the exploitation of women as unpaid providers of care and domestic labour. As Angela Dimitrakaki and Kirsten Lloyd observe:

The requirements of a nineteenth-century art world, where women's immaterial and material labour in the home provided the invisible infrastructure to careers and the marketing of artworks (and which sustained the 'family wage' dream even in the 1970s), find their antithesis in the twenty-first-century 'useful art' - that is, useful artistic (and not least curatorial) labour, which now enters the art institution as the latter attempts to become a visible infrastructure.⁶¹

In the works discussed here, as in Ukeles's performances, one can discern - in often comical stagings of visibility and invisibility that characterize many forms of institutional and social labour - the crucial role of invisible, gendered "maintenance work" (cleaning, repair, caretaking) within the public sphere and the domain of art. These gestures can also be read as satires on the supposed autonomy of art and on the gendered, class-based, and racialized politics underpinning it ⁶². Both Wójcik and Jabłońska deliberately situate their actions at the intersection of private and public space. The kitchen, the living room, and the gallery become arenas where the struggle for the visibility of women's labour unfolds. Crucially, these works also serve as institutional commentary: both artists not only critique social norms but also decode the mechanisms of the art world itself, which

⁶⁰ A. Plotnicka, *Krzątania z Jolantą Brach-Czajną*, Czas Kultury, n. 1, 2022, 118.

⁶¹ A. Dimitrakaki, K. Lloyd, *Social Reproduction Struggles and Art History: An Introduction*, Third Text, vol. 31, n. 1, 2017, 7-8.

⁶² M. Vishmidt, *Marna imitacja produkcji: feministyczne dzieła sztuki na taśmie reprodukcji społecznej*, in *Wszyscy ludzie będą siostrami*, ed. J. Sokołowska, Łódź, 2018, 172-173.

for decades marginalized women's experiences. In this sense, their work participates in the broader current of feminist art that does not speak about women, but shows women in action. Art ceases to be representation and becomes practice - a repeated gesture, a persistent effort, a physical act seeking not applause but visibility. The contemporary woman in art is no longer a "heroine of labour" or a victim; she is a worker in the symbolic economy of visibility, reclaiming her voice and space through irony and performance.

In subsequent years, the theme of labour and care was developed by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas (b. 1978). Her monumental textiles, such as *Re-enchanting the World* (Venice Biennale, 2022), depict the everyday life of Romani women: sewing, cooking, resting, preparing for celebrations. Using traditional techniques of patchwork and embroidery, the artist turns them into media of memory and visibility politics, creating narratives grounded in real experiences. Her work embodies the current of Romani feminism, drawing upon intergenerational sisterhood and community⁶³.

In *Re-enchanting the World*, presented at the Venice Biennale, Mirga-Tas combines personal experience and local stories with the Renaissance frescoes of the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. The lower register of the installation portrays scenes from her hometown, focusing mainly on women, their relationships, and their daily activities. The portraits are built from fragments of fabric drawn from the wardrobes of the depicted individuals⁶⁴. The motif of women's labour - performed at home, outside, and for the benefit of the community - is strongly present in Mirga-Tas's tapestries. Hanging laundry, sewing, preparing food - all become visual metaphors for collective sustenance. As Ethel C. Brooks writes:

Romani people have taken what has been thrown away and made it beautiful, useful - through our work, our skill, and our imagination. Often this work, particularly that of Romani women, has been invisibilized as reproductive labour. (...) This is a particularly feminist space, a product of women's work: the stitching, sewing, quilting, and

⁶³ A. Mirga-Kruszelnicka, *Stwarzając historię. Twórczość Małgorzaty Mirgi-Tas w perspektywie makro i mikro*, in *Wędrujące obrazy. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas*, ed. W. Szymański, N. Żak, Kraków, 2022, 19.

⁶⁴ W. Szymański, J. Warsza, *The Introduction*, in *Małgorzata Mirga-Tas. Re-enchanting the World*, Warszawa-Berlin, 2022, 16.

weaving that form these tapestries come from oft-overlooked practices and forms of gendered, racialized labour⁶⁵

The most contemporary continuation of this lineage is found in the work of Katarzyna Krakowiak-Balka, who operates through the language of sound and architecture. In the exhibition “*Autoportrety*” (Self-Portraits, National Museum in Warsaw, 2023–2024), she presented the installation “*Czysto*” (Purely), based on the sounds of cleaning and scrubbing. The artist used contact microphones to record rustles and shuffles that form an acoustic self-portrait of physical labour.

As described in the exhibition catalogue curated by Tomasz Jeziorowski and Katarzyna Szydłowska-Schiller:

Set in the space of the National Museum, the performative interpretation of the score for the piece titled Purely involves the sonic transcription of the physical activity of cleaning. Played back from a speaker, the pre-recorded sounds made by actors’ mouths mimic those we all know well from doing household chores: sweeping, vacuuming, the clatter of kitchen utensils. This musical score is entirely based on Polish postalveolar and sibilant consonants heard in words denoting actions such as brushing, scrubbing, washing, wiping, and airing. The visitor entering the exhibition is greeted by a jumble of sounds emitted at irregular intervals by a specially programmed apparatus. Krakowiak-Balka creates her self-portrait through the medium she feels most comfortable in. As a woman artist, she combines two roles in Purely: that of domestic caretaker and that of creator of a technologically complex sound installation, thereby compelling us to acknowledge the importance of both⁶⁶

The action of cleaning is also presented in intarsia works of Lilliana Zeic, a young Polish artist using craftsmanship techniques to convey narratives of “trauma, regeneration and the desire to belong beyond established social patterns”⁶⁷. The images of “*Miotlarki*” (Brush-maker women), who order and care for the space around them are smaller in scale than her other works in this technique (around 40 x 20 cm).

Each represents a single nude female figure (rendered in lighter poplar burl) set against a flat, dark, monochromatic background (California

⁶⁵ E. C. Brooks, *WhatIs Re-enchantment? Małgorzata Mirga-Tas and the Palace of Our Dreams*, in *Małgorzata Mirga-Tas. Re-enchanting the World*, ed. W. Szymański, J. Warsza, Warszawa-Berlin, 2022, 119.

⁶⁶ T. Jeziorowski, K. Szydłowska-Schiller, *Autoportrety / Self-Portraits*, Warszawa, 2025, 111.

⁶⁷ K. Różniak Szabelska, *Craftsmanship in Liliana Zeic’s Artisticpractice*, in *Nettlebrides, Weirdos, Spooks: The Art of Liliana Zeic*, (ed.) P. Lisowski, Wrocław 2025, 111.

walnut burl), evoking allegorical figures holding a brush as an attribute. In one work (*Miotlarka 4*, 2025) the woman is mindfully sweeping the floor. Such image appears often as a background figure (e.g. Pieter de Hooch, 1629-1684, *Interior with a woman and Child* 1655; Pieter Janssens Elinga 1623-1682, *Interior with painter, Woman reading and Maid Sweeping* 1668). In others she holds the broom in a dance-like gesture- embracing it as a partner (*Miotlarka 1*, 2025) or raising it above her head and flowing long hair (*Miotlarka 3*, 2025). These figures also evoke the image of a witch with a broom⁶⁸. Mona Chollet further observes:

Because of its phallic shape, the broom on which they rode a stride, in addition to being an inverted symbol of the household, was also meant to testify to their sexual freedom. The sabbath, in turn, was perceived as a site of unbridled lust, subject to no control whatsoever⁶⁹

In the intarsia works of Liliana Zeic the brush-maker women gracefully fulfil their traditional role as cleaner serving the others and ordering the space and a symbol of resistance to dominant narrative and reclaiming the world and search for freedom.

All these projects - from Wójcik and Jabłońska to Janin, Mirga-Tas, Krakowiak-Balka and Zeic - share a common aesthetic of care: an affirmation of repetition, attentiveness, and responsibility. Women's art redefines the meaning of labour, shifting it from the margins of privacy to the centre of social reflection. Washing, cooking, sewing, and cleaning become gestures of visibility - forms of being in the world that confer meaning upon the everyday. At the same time, these gestures - cleaning, stitching, caring, nurturing - are forms of political action that transform the very notion of creativity into one of responsibility.

Conclusions

From both legal and art history perspective, the perception of women's unpaid work has undergone a notable change - from complete invisibility and marginalization to growing recognition of its essential social role. In recent years, international instruments such as the ILO *Resolution concerning Decent Work and the Care Economy* (2024) have begun to redefine the notion of work more broadly, including care, emotional, and household activities

⁶⁸ The earliest known depiction of a woman flying on a broom appears in the margin of the manuscript *Le champion des dames* by Martin le Franc, dating from 1440.

⁶⁹ M. Chollet, *Czarownice. Niezwykła siła kobiet*, trans. S. Królak, Kraków 2019, 20–21.

in its definition and recognizing its importance for economic stability and gender equality. This change of perception toward the unpaid women's work can be noticed also in the approach of Polish decision-makers, and has led to the introduction of some measures and policies recognizing the social and economic importance of care work.

An example of such measures in Poland may be the Act of 31 January 2019 on the Supplementary Parental Benefit, aimed at "providing essential means of subsistence to persons who have resigned from employment or other gainful activity, or have not undertaken such activity, due to child-rearing responsibilities" (Art. 1 of the Act). The benefit, known as the "Mother 4+" programme, is granted to mothers who have given birth to and raised, or have raised, at least four children. In exceptional cases – such as the mother's death, abandonment of the children, or long-term cessation of childcare – the benefit may also be granted to fathers.

As explained in the government's justification of the draft act, the legislator's intent was "to honour and appreciate the period of child-rearing" and "the proposed amendments emphasize the socially important function, primarily fulfilled by women, of raising children – a function crucial for the country's development"⁷⁰. However, this solution has several shortcomings and has already been criticized in the legal scholarship⁷¹. The right to the benefit was granted only to individuals whose pension entitlement did not reach at least the minimum pension amount. Consequently, women who managed to combine raising a large family with paid employment sufficient to earn a minimum pension were excluded from the programme.

Even though this solution has clear limitations, it nonetheless represents an important step toward recognizing the value of women's invisible labour. It signals a growing awareness that unpaid work contributes significantly to social and economic life and the disparities that it has been causing till now. However, it should be underlined that this is only one among many measures that must be undertaken to fully recognise invisible labour as work that deserves legal recognition, institutional protection, and inclusion in public policy.

⁷⁰ Justification of the Draft Act, Parliamentary Paper n. 3157, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm8.nsf/druk.xsp?nr=3157>.

⁷¹E. Kumor-Jezierska, *Rodzicielskie świadczenie uzupełniające – MAMA 4+ – oczekiwania i realia*, *Roczniki Administracji i Prawa*, vol. 21, 2021, 487-496; J. Czerniak-Swędziol, E. Kumor-Jezierska, *O statusie prawnym osoby wykonującej pracę niewidzialną*, *Forum Prawnicze*, n. 1 (85), 2025, 35.

A similar revaluation has taken place in art and can be observed in changing visual representations of women's labour. For centuries, art has been portraying women's domestic activities as acts of rather moral virtue than of social or economic significance. But the feminist art of the XX and XXI century is bringing more attention to everyday women's activities with the scope that legal discourse is also trying to achieve: the recognition of care as a visible and valuable social activity, that deserves to be considered as work. The changes that we observe both in legal discourse and artistic creativity, prove that the struggle to recognize women's unpaid labour is a question of both juridical and cultural nature - that redefines not only the meaning of work, but also the frameworks through which societies notice and value every human activity. It is a question of awareness that care work constitutes an essential value to human well-being and should not be invisible.

This analysis has shown that the invisibility of women's labour is not merely the result of its exclusion from legal definitions, but also of its position within a broader symbolic order that has historically rendered such work self-evident and therefore unrecognised. The gradual convergence of legal reforms and artistic practices suggests that this symbolic order is being reconfigured. In this sense, the recognition of care work emerges not only as a matter of legal adjustment, but as part of a wider cultural transformation that reshapes how societies define value, productivity, and social contribution.

Summary

Unpaid or invisible labour encompasses activities such as household chores, childcare, eldercare, and other forms of domestic work that are not financially compensated. Emotional labour involves managing one's own emotions and those of others to maintain social harmony, often within family and community settings. These forms of labour are predominantly undertaken by women and are essential for the functioning of households and societies.

In the aftermath of World War II, Poland, under socialist governance, promoted women's participation in the workforce as part of broader industrialization efforts. However, despite formal employment, women continued to bear the primary responsibility for domestic duties, leading to a "double burden" of paid and unpaid work.

The transition to a market economy in the 1990s brought about significant socio-economic changes. Economic restructuring led to job losses, particularly in industries where women were overrepresented. This

period saw a reinforcement of gender disparities, with women's unpaid labour becoming more pronounced amid reduced public support.

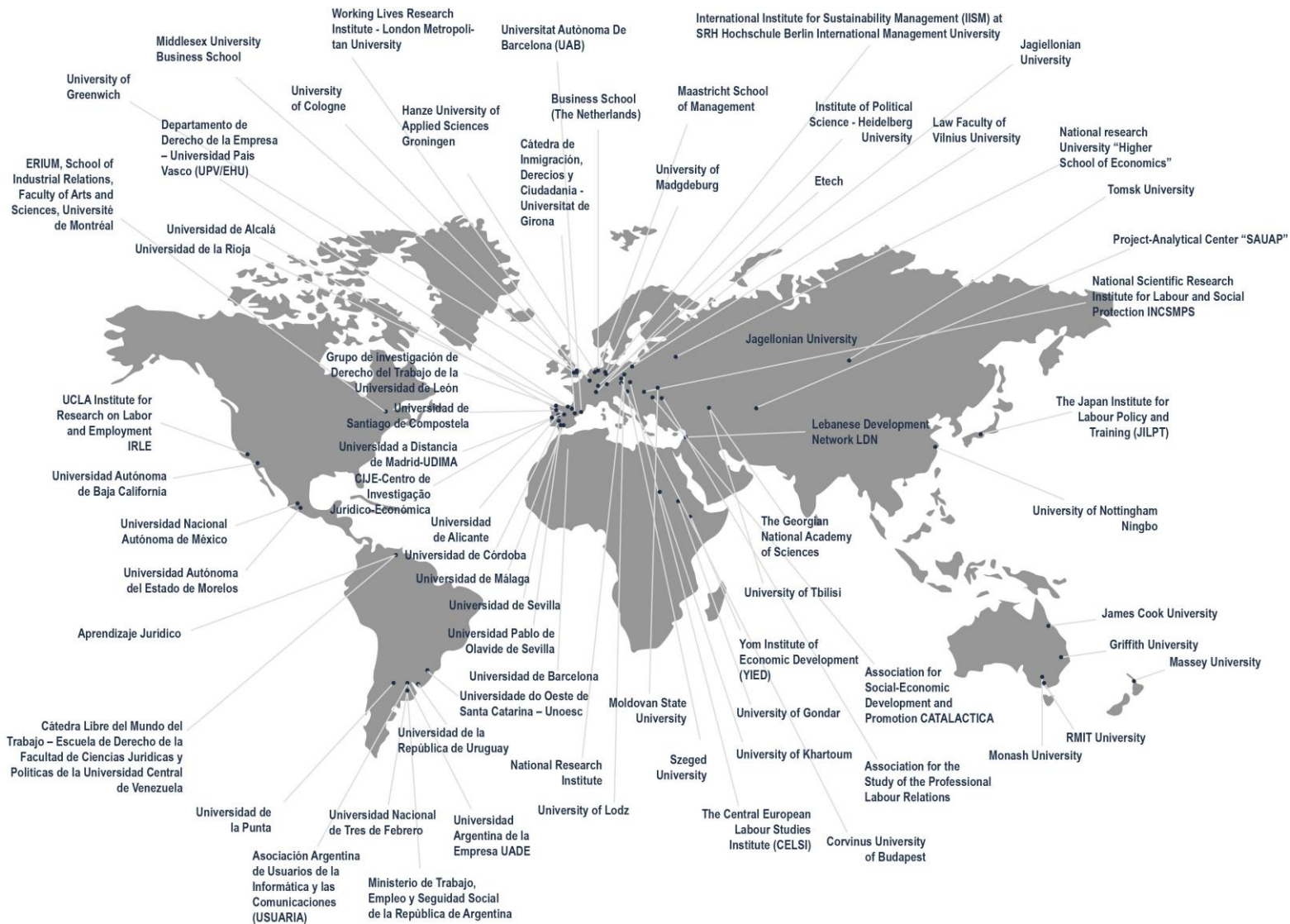
Today, women in Poland continue to perform a disproportionate share of invisible labour. The "motherhood penalty," wherein mothers face wage reductions and limited career advancement opportunities, remains a significant issue, reflecting ongoing biases in the labour market.

On this background the paper presents how the invisible labour of women is presented in visual arts in Poland after World War II until today. The authors intend to demonstrate how the economic and political factors influenced the way women performing their daily chores were represented taking examples of such artists as Aleksander Kobzdej, Juliusz Studnicki, Andrzej Wróblewski, Elżbieta Jabłońska, Julita Wójcik, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Katarzyna Krakowiak-Balka and Liliana Zeic.

Visual arts have long served as a powerful mirror of societal values, norms, and transformations. Furthermore, the gendered division of labour has been a recurring subject in visual arts, revealing societal expectations around men's and women's roles. As discussed by feminist art historians, women were historically depicted performing unpaid domestic work, reinforcing their confinement to the private sphere. However, in the 20th century, especially through feminist and conceptual art, these roles began to be re-evaluated. Artists highlighted the invisibility and undervaluation of women's labour, thereby challenging dominant social narratives and advocating for gender equity.

The art reflects the evolution of generational perspectives on invisible labour. Older generations, shaped by socialist ideals and traditional norms, often accepted the dual role of women as workers and primary caregivers. Younger generations, influenced by global feminist movements and increased educational opportunities, are more likely to challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities.

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