Hungarian Historical Review 15, no. 3 (2026): 464–493

Knowledge in Circulation: Methods of Birth Control among Slovak Women in the 1920s and 1930s

Eva Škorvanková
Comenius University, Faculty of Arts
eva.skorvankova@uniba.sk

This study considers the dissemination of knowledge about methods of birth control among Slovak women in the 1920s and 1930s. Focusing on practices based on tracking the menstrual cycle and periodic abstinence, it draws on contemporary statistical data, ethnographic research, and a wide range of sources, including health-education literature, women's periodicals, and the activities of social organizations. The article analyses the multiple channels through which such knowledge circulated, from medical discourse and church environments to informal networks among women. It argues that, despite the Catholic Church's rejection of birth control, these methods became part of women's birth control strategies, revealing tensions between medical knowledge, moral norms, and everyday practice. In doing so, the study adds to the historiography of reproductive health and gender by highlighting women's agency in the negotiation of competing normative frameworks.

Keywords: natural birth control, reproductive health, women's agency, interwar Czechoslovakia, knowledge circulation

While the decline in fertility in the Carpathian Basin had already begun by the turn of the twentieth century, population development in interwar Czechoslovakia[1] was subsequently affected by the consequences of World War I and the Great

1 Census data indicate that the population of Czechoslovakia, including Subcarpathian Rus, was approximately 13.6 million in 1921. According to the 1930 census, this figure had risen to 14.729 million. Srb, *Obyvateľstvo Slovenska*, 14 and Kučera, *Populace České republiky*, 8–11.

DOI 10.38145/2026.3.464 http://www.hunghist.org

Depression.[2] The birth rate in Slovakia[3] reached its peak in 1921 and gradually declined until the end of 1938.[4] However, birth rates varied considerably across distinct regions of Slovakia, remaining low to very low in the southern part of central Slovakia, Bratislava, and its immediate surroundings.[5] The number of births rose slightly again only in 1938, when women born during the baby boom following the end of World War I reached reproductive age. According to analyses of interwar censuses, a comprehensive transformation in reproductive behavior and a reduction in the size of the Slovak family had already taken place.[6] According to demographers Pavol Tišliar and Branislav Šprocha, in the northern regions of Slovakia the model of the three-child or four-child family continued to prevail, whereas in the southern part of central Slovakia, the model of the one-child or two-child family became increasingly common. In the districts of southwestern Slovakia, two-child and three-child families were most common.[7] The model of simple and reduced reproduction had already begun to emerge more distinctly in certain areas of Hungary by the end of the eighteenth century.[8] It is precisely the southern regions of what is now central Slovakia that can be included among these areas.

Differences in reproductive behavior also had a social dimension. Ethnological research indicates that artisan families increasingly frequently tended to have two to four children, while in some localities a large number of children

2 In the interwar period, natural population reproduction in Europe approached stagnation. Fertility closely followed economic development and regional differences (the contrast between Western and Northern Europe on the one hand and the less developed Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean on the other). Bacci, *Populace v evropské historii*, 204.

3 At the time, Slovakia did not exist as an independent state but formed the eastern part of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938). Throughout this article, the term Slovakia refers to the territory of present-day Slovakia within interwar Czechoslovakia. Unless otherwise specified, references to women in Slovakia denote all women residing in this territory, regardless of their ethnic or national affiliation, rather than exclusively ethnic Slovak women. Because interwar Slovakia was ethnically and religiously diverse, distinctions between particular ethnic or religious groups are made only where they are relevant to the analysis.

4 The birth rate in Slovakia was 38.91 per 1,000 inhabitants in 1921 and declined steadily over the following years, reaching 23.76 per 1,000 inhabitants in 1937. For a closer look at population development in Slovakia, see Šprocha, "Populačný vývoj Slovenska," 100–11; Šprocha and Tišliar, *Plodnosť a celková reprodukcia*, 18.

5 Šprocha, "Populačný vývoj Slovenska," 103–4.

6 Between 1921 and 1937, the average number of children a woman would have during her reproductive period decreased from almost 5 to 2.8 children. Šprocha and Tišliar, *Plodnosť a celková reprodukcia,* 37.

7 Šprocha and Tišliar, *Plodnosť a celková reprodukcia*, 59.

8 Vásáry, "'The sin of Transdanubia': the one-child system," 429 and 443; Koloh, *"Szántani lehet, de vetni nem muszáj"*; Botíková et al., *Tradície slovenskej rodiny*, 151.

was regarded as the cause of an artisan's failure.[9] Efforts to raise the standard of living of one's family and provide social prestige and financial security for one's offspring (and thus to regulate fertility) were characteristic in the interwar period not only of civil servant couples or women with higher education. These regional differences were shaped not only by patterns of landholding, inheritance practices, and the organization of agricultural production. In the prosperous agricultural regions of southern Slovakia, fertility limitation served as a strategy to prevent the fragmentation of family estates through inheritance. In contrast, in the northern regions, where smallholdings predominated, this economic rationale appears to have been less significant, and this contributed to the persistence of larger family models. At the same time, the interwar period witnessed the gradual spread of modern lifestyles, urban values, and new ideas about family life, accompanied by increasing female education and emancipation. These broader processes of modernization exerted an ever stronger influence on reproductive behaviors across social groups, making fertility decisions less dependent on economic considerations alone. Nevertheless, regional patterns cannot be explained solely by agrarian structures and inheritance practices. The interwar period was also characterized by profound processes of social and cultural modernization. Urbanization, expanding educational opportunities, changing gender relations, and the gradual emancipation of women contributed to new perceptions of marriage, parenthood, and family size. These shifts, in turn, meant that reproductive decisions were increasingly shaped by modern lifestyles rather than solely by traditional economic considerations and familial strategies.[10]

The gradual drop in the number of children per family and the growing predominance of a smaller family model were inevitably linked to birth control and the use of various contraceptive practices.

The topic of fertility and its regulation was considered an intimate matter for women and was not deemed appropriate for public discussion. Gradually, however, interest in sexuality began to enter specialist literature and the public sphere. It attracted the attention of doctors and sociologists, particularly in connection with the problem of declining birth rates, as well as that of artists, educators, and activists.

9 See Mlynka, "Diferenciačné znaky," 79.

10 These developments were also documented in the 1924 reports submitted by local administrative authorities on population trends in individual regions of Slovakia. Reports on the Phenomena of Depopulation. SNA, fund EMVZTV, box 74.

In the interwar period, abortion became part of public political and social debates, in which women themselves actively participated.[11] In the liberal and democratic environment of the Czechoslovak Republic, women gained new opportunities to express their political views publicly, assert their capacity to make independent decisions about their own lives, and discuss the intimate lives of both sexes. Liberal and left-wing activists sought to implement fully the constitutional principle of equality between women and men and to promote the decriminalization of abortion. They also agitated for social legislation aimed at protecting working women and mothers.[12] Although public debates on birth control were predominantly shaped by male political, medical, and religious elites, this article demonstrates that women also played an important role in formulating and disseminating competing views on reproduction, contraception, and abortion. By analyzing their participation in political movements, healthcare, women's organizations, and the press,[13] the article considers the rolls of women not only as subjects of reproductive policies but also as active contributors to interwar public discourse.

What, however, was the lived reality? What methods of birth control did women in Slovakia actually use to achieve a certain degree of reproductive control? In this study, I seek to answer these questions and to demonstrate how knowledge of natural methods of birth control spread among women and, not least, how various political, medical, and ecclesiastical authorities reacted to these processes. Although the analysis focuses on the territory of present-day Slovakia, the developments under discussion cannot be understood in isolation from the broader Czechoslovak context. Political and public debates, the process of modernization, and medical and legal discourses on birth control largely evolved at the state level and shaped developments throughout the republic, including Slovakia.

11 Between 1920 and 1927, left-wing women deputies in the National Assembly of the Czechoslovak Republic (Communists and Social Democrats) introduced several bills seeking the decriminalization of abortion. None of these initiatives, however, was successful in parliament. Parliamentary and press debates on the issue culminated between 1925 and 1927. Škorvanková, "Otázka regulácie pôrodnosti," 25–29.

12 See Nešťáková, *Be Fruitful and Multiply*. For discussions on the liberalization of anti-abortion legislation in Czechoslovakia, see Feinberg, *Elusive Equality*, 129–58.

13 The interpretation of the periodical press also takes into account its material characteristics, including the format, editorial organisation, and intended readership, as these factors influenced the presentation and circulation of information on birth control.

That is Not Something One Talks About

Women's reproductive health and sexual life were among the topics that were not discussed in either rural or urban Slovak communities. This was true not only in public but also in private. Based on ethnological research, menstruation, childbirth, and abortion were also regarded as taboo subjects.[14] Only sporadically did earlier ethnographic studies encounter indirect references to the sexual relations of women who lived in rural areas.[15] In older sociological and ethnological literature, there were only brief mentions of the reproductive behavior of various local communities, while topics such as menstruation and sexuality received no attention at all.[16]

Based on extensive research, ethnologists Marta Botiková and Kornélia Jakubíková concluded that "as far as the traditional rural environment in our country is concerned, we have almost no information about sexual life within and outside marriage."[17] As these topics were long considered taboo, they were not the subject of systematic ethnological research.

In her current research on the medicalization of the female life cycle, anthropologist Tatiana Bužeková has also addressed menstruation and sexuality. Testimonies from respondents in her research sample who were born before 1945 suggest that, in the past, knowledge about menstruation simply was not passed on in any form from one generation to the next. The older women explained this silence in the same way: menstruation was perceived as "disgusting," and people were ashamed to talk about it.[18] One respondent stated that mothers were embarrassed to speak to their daughters about regular monthly bleeding, while daughters, in turn, were too ashamed to ask their mothers.[19] As a result, neither the women nor their partners had any knowledge of the menstrual cycle.[20]

14 Horváthová, *Úvod do etnológie*, 121.

15 Falťanová, "Vidiecka žena," 57.

16 Šmakalová, *Integrálna dedina*, 39, 46.

17 Botíková and Jakubíková, "Sexualita a výchova," 42.

18 Bužeková, "Medikalizácia životného cyklu," 178–79.

19 For a more detailed examination of the interpretation of menstruation in Slovak society and within anthropological scholarship, see Beňová, "Žena v tradičnej kultúre Slovenska."

20 One respondent in the research noted that her husband believed the bleeding was caused by "crushing." He had no information about his wife's regular monthly cycle. Bužeková, "Medikalizácia životného cyklu," 179.

To date, there are no published relevant sources on the intergenerational transmission of knowledge about the menstrual cycle in urban settings. However, an analysis of the women's association Živena's[21] educational and awareness-raising activities reveals only very general guidance on personal hygiene and health care. Živena, the oldest women's association in Slovakia, was founded in 1869. It focused on supporting and organizing educational and awareness-raising activities among Slovak women in both urban and rural areas. The association's members and trained teachers, who led so-called "people's courses" for women in rural areas, concentrated on practical skills traditionally associated with women, including household management, cooking, handicrafts, financial matters, hygiene, and health education.[22] Most of the association's members were middle-class women.

In their interactions with women in rural areas and female workers, members of the association often adopted a somewhat distant and condescending attitude. The association's adherence to conservative values and ideals also constituted a limitation.[23] Within the framework of health and hygiene education and public courses, members and instructors avoided topics such as personal hygiene, female anatomy, and birth control.[24] When cases of sexually transmitted diseases were identified in a village during their courses, they delivered lectures on the supposed necessity of following Christian morality and moral conduct.[25]

The situation began to change, at least in part, during the interwar period. Basic information about female anatomy was published, for example, in the fortnightly magazine *Proletárka* (The Proletarian Woman),[26] which was aimed at female workers and women who might have communist sympathies. Individual issues usually were only 10–12 pages long and were printed in a newspaper-style multi-column layout, which necessarily limited the length of individual articles. More extensive educational texts were therefore occasionally published as separate supplements enclosed with the magazine, allowing the editors to present

21 The activities and work of Živena have been systematically analysed in various academic and popular studies. See Tkadlečková-Vantuchová, *Živena*; Kodajová, *Živena: 150 rokov spolku*; Kodajová, "Živena – spolok slovenských žien," 215–32.

22 Rišková and Botíková, "Materiály spolku Živena."

23 Dudeková-Kováčová, "Živena v politických režimoch," 182.

24 SNA, fund Živena, box 99. Courses for Women in Slovakia, School Year 1932/1933, inv. no. 382.

25 Hroboňová, *Ľudové kurzy pre ženy*.

26 *Proletárka* was in publication between 1922 and 1927. This periodical, which was the first political magazine of Slovak communist women, was published in Vrútky. It articles present ideologically defined and revolutionary views on working women and their issues.

more detailed discussions of birth control and reproductive health than the regular format permitted. The editors reproduced educational articles by the well-known British palaeobotanist, women's rights activist, and advocate of birth control Marie Stopes.[27] In a series of articles titled *Protection against Pregnancy*, Stopes introduced women to the structure of the female reproductive organs. The editorial team added a detailed description of the menstrual cycle and called for improved hygiene and greater care for one's body, including among working-class women.[28] At the same time, the editors encouraged working women to monitor their menstrual cycles and to pay attention to their bodies, as irregularities could indicate pregnancy or health problems.

Modern views on female sexuality were also presented in the anthology *Žena novej doby* ("The Woman of the New Era"), which was intended to educate the modern democratic woman about public life, private life, the household, marriage, and paid employment. It was therefore primarily aimed at young women who aspired to obtain an education, secure paid work, and play more independence roles, both publicly and privately. The vision of modern partnership and family life presented in the anthology reflected the influence of the progressive ideals of the interwar period. It was prepared for publication by Alžbeta Göllnerová[29] and Jarmila Zikmundová[30] and was published in the autumn of 1938. By that time, however, the situation in Slovakia had deteriorated significantly. The authors were first required to revise the volume, and it was later completely withdrawn from libraries and distribution. The anthology presented views on the importance of an active sexual life within marriage that were strikingly progressive in the context of the conservative Slovak society of the time.[31] An important contribution to the volume was made by Nina

27 Marie Charlotte Carmichael Stopes (1880–1958) was a British palaeobotanist and also a supporter of eugenics and advocate of contraception and family planning. She published the journal *Birth Control News*, wrote works on sex education (*Married Love*), and founded the first birth control clinic in Britain. She opposed abortion but promoted prevention through contraception and family planning. Despite the controversial and polarizing nature of her views, her advocacy contributed significantly to the development of modern reproductive healthcare. However, based on the research conducted thus far, I have been unable to establish why or how her texts came to be published in *Proletárka*.

28 Stopesová, "Ochrana proti tehotenstvu," 7–8.

29 Alžbeta Göllnerová-Gwerková (1905–1944) was a Slovak literary historian and translator from Hungarian. She studied history, Czech, and Hungarian at Charles University.

30 Jarmila Zikmundová was a high school teacher who also worked in Slovakia and took care of the young Alžbeta Göllnerová, who was an orphan.

31 Bláhová, "Žena manželka."

Wollmanová-Fajnorová.[32] She called on women, particularly mothers, to pay attention to sex education. In her view, every conscientious mother should educate her child during puberty about sexual life and the physical changes associated with adolescence. She promoted a healthy understanding of sexuality and emphasized the need to become familiar with both the female and male body. In her article, she devoted considerable attention to the sexual dimension of marriage. She drew attention to women's right to harmonious sexual fulfilment and equality in intimate relations and partnership.[33]

Midwives and maternity assistants were also important sources of information about the anatomy of the female body and reproductive organs.[34] Midwives were educated and trained professionals qualified to manage childbirth, advise mothers on breastfeeding, and treat common conditions affecting women. They also had general knowledge of how to diagnose common diseases and provide first aid, and they were expected to provide advice on sexual and marital life. Their role was further expanded by Czechoslovak Act No. 200/1928 Coll. on Midwifery Practice and the Education and Training of Midwives, which required them to carry out regular home visits to mothers and newborns and to provide guidance on maternal and infant care. In practice, this made midwives the functional equivalent of health visitors. In the predominantly rural and agrarian environment of interwar Slovakia, where many women worked in agriculture and access to formal education and written health information remained uneven, these visits enabled midwives to establish relationships of trust and to enter the intimate sphere of women's lives. Through their involvement in pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period, they often gained detailed knowledge of women's health, family circumstances, and reproductive experiences that was not necessarily shared with other members of the household, including the women's husbands. Consequently, they were particularly well placed to disseminate information on fertility regulation and methods of birth control.

32 Nina Wollmanová-Fajnorová, born Anna (1902–1984/5), was a publicist and representative of the women's movement in interwar Czechoslovakia. She was also married to literary historian and Slavist Professor Frank Wollman, though they later divorced.

33 Wollmanová-Fajnorová, "Pomer dnešnej ženy k mužovi."

34 For more on the education and status of midwives and birth attendants, see Falisová and Morovicsová, *Pôrodné asistentky a ošetrovateľky*.

Midwives were highly regarded by both the medical community and the public. They played a key role in spreading health and hygiene awareness, and their working hours were not limited.[35]

As part of their training, midwives used the *Učebnicu pre pôrodné asistentky* (Textbook for Midwives) by the Czech gynecologist František Pachner[36] and the legal expert Richard Bébr. In the medical section of the textbook (Part 1. *Auxiliary Sciences*), students learned about the anatomy and functions of the female reproductive organs. Graduates of the course thus had a precise understanding of the menstrual cycle. The table below illustrates the exact course of ovulation and subsequent menstruation in cases in which fertilization and pregnancy did not occur. The table graphically indicated so-called fertile days, when, in a typical 28-day cycle, ovulation occurs around the fourteenth day and lasts until approximately the eighteenth or nineteenth day of the cycle.[37] The chapter "On Women's Diseases and the Sexual Life of Women," acquainted midwives with various ways in which to intervene in marital sexual life, providing advice and support regarding pregnancy, the regularity of sexual intercourse between spouses, and various illnesses and disabilities as obstacles to parenthood. Midwives were also expected to be prepared to intervene in matters concerning contraception.[38]

Contraceptive Practices

The gradual drop in the number of children within the family and the maintenance of a narrow model of reproduction was necessarily linked to birth control and various contraceptive practices. Ethnological research has revealed some of the contraceptive methods and practices that were in use at the time.[39] In addition to the application of various magical rituals (so-called magical contraception), various natural substances were commonly used (applied in some way to the vagina) in the hope that they would prevent pregnancy. In the Slovak society of

35 Peťková, *Od liečiteľov k medicíne*, 89; Peťková, *Duša ženy*; Peťo, *Lúčanská babica*; Štúrová, *Spomienky na babku*.

36 František Pachner (1882–1964) was a Czech physician, gynaecologist, and obstetrician. A lecturer at Masaryk University in Brno, he published extensively on women's reproductive health, including infertility, contraception, and maternal care.

37 Pachner and Bebr, *Učebnice pro porodní asistentky*, 74. Figure 61, Representation of the Cycle of Sexual Activity (Menstrual and Ovulatory Cycle).

38 Pachner and Bebr, *Učebnice pro porodní asistentky*, 465–67.

39 Botíková et al., *Tradície slovenskej rodiny*, 156–57.

the time, older ethnological research from the Horehronie region reports that women inserted the root of elecampane *(Inula helenium)* into the vagina.[40] Since antiquity, lemon juice, lactic acid, honey, and cedar resin were also used in this manner, and plant peels were sometimes introduced as a form of barrier contraception.[41]

Protection against pregnancy, especially in areas where not only symbolic but also real results were expected, had to have a rational basis. Practices aimed at inducing abortion were also considered "women's remedies," but they posed a high risk to a woman's physical health (these practices included decoctions (liquids made by boiling plant material, such as roots, bark, seeds, or herbs, in water to extract their active substances), baths, abdominal massages, and intentional falls). In central Slovakia, women seeking to terminate a pregnancy drank decoctions made from beech wood mixed with water, strong alcohol, or a decoction of common clubmoss *(Lycopodium clavatum)*.[42]

If these methods proved ineffective, women sometimes resorted to abortion by attempting to injure the fetus with a spindle or another sharp object or by using water enemas or some form of abdominal massage.[43] Although the present study does not examine these cases in detail, criminal court records from the territory of present-day Slovakia provide valuable evidence on the circumstances under which such procedures were performed and their medical, legal, and social consequences.[44]

Separate sleeping arrangements for spouses were also a common and reliable practice, accompanied by marital sexual abstinence and withdrawal *(coitus interruptus)*.[45] The practice of having newlyweds sleep separately was undoubtedly coordinated by an older woman (the housewife), who represented an important authority within the family and household. She supervised the postponement of pregnancy among young couples and helped uphold economic and social prosperity[46] In the case of withdrawal, we must assume some shared understanding of the functioning of male and female reproductive organs. These practices were, according to numerous ethnological studies, widespread in rural environments and clearly shared, as evidenced by folk sayings, such as "they

40 Mjartan, *Horehronie*, 311.

41 Lenderová, *Žena v českých zemích*, 235.

42 Mjartan, *Horehronie*, 311.

43 Botíková, "Kultúrno-spoločenské reflexie," 63–64; Sigmundová, "K otázke tradície."

44 Nešťáková, *Be Fruitful and Multiply*, 26–38 and Nešťáková, "Žena proti štátu," 31–52.

45 Botíková et al., *Tradície slovenskej rodiny*, 157.

46 Ibid., 148–60.

do it on cloth," "I prefer to wash sheets than nappies," "thresh the rye in the barn, shake the rye in front of the barn," and "don't wait for the final anointing."[47]

After World War I, however, sexual restraint, late entry into marriage, and self-control came to be regarded as insufficient means of preventing pregnancy, and both experts and the public began to call for systematic birth control through the wider dissemination of knowledge about contraception. During the interwar period, commercially distributed and advertised methods of contraception were found in Slovakia. Condoms were probably the most accessible means of preventing conception, and they were also promoted as protection against the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (both in premarital and extramarital life). They were sold in city streets and gradually in rural areas by so-called Bosniaks (Cheap Joes), or in other words, itinerant peddlers.[48] These small-scale traveling traders offered their goods (knives, small haberdashery items, combs, razors, face creams, mirrors, hairpins, ribbons, and condoms) stored in wicker baskets, which they carried suspended in front of them with straps.[49] They moved through towns, pubs, and entertainment venues.

Condoms were advertised in newspapers, private interactions, lectures, advertisements, counseling centers, medical practices, and pharmacies and also by midwives during visits. Large advertising boards and illuminated displays in pharmacy and drugstore windows were particularly irritating to opponents of contraception.[50] The public promotion and display of contraceptive methods, especially in front of children and young people, was continually criticized, particularly by conservative opponents of birth control.

The editorial board of the aforementioned periodical *Proletárka* provided a comprehensive overview of available contraception. Throughout its publication, this fortnightly devoted attention to issues of birth control among working women. These issues were viewed through the lens of communist ideology,

47 Botíková, "Jedno dieťa a dosť!," 110.

48 Door-to-door traders, called "Bosniaks" in Slovakia, came from countries of the former Yugoslavia. They were active in Slovakia and the Czech lands already at the end of the nineteenth century. The term "Bosniak" became standard for this type of door-to-door merchant, regardless of whether they came from Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, or Macedonia. Door-to-door sales by men from the Balkan region expanded despite their illegal activities, because after 1918, as foreign nationals, they could not obtain permits for door-to-door trade in Czechoslovakia. Many interested parties from today's former Yugoslavia were issued business licenses for trade. For more, see Falťanová, "Podomový obchod a cudzí obchodníci."

49 Luther, *Z Prešporka*, 128.

50 The drugstore on the corner of Dunajská and Kempelenova streets in the Farmers' House, opposite the girls' secondary school and the school for women's professions, was one subject of criticism. Fourteen advertising signs for condoms were displayed in the window. Chura, *Slovensko bez dorastu?*, vol. 1, 156.

superficially inspired by developments in population policy and attitudes towards motherhood in the Soviet Union (about which the editors had only limited knowledge, however). Nevertheless, many of the positions and opinions presented by *Proletárka* to Slovak women must have provoked considerable controversy. In 1925, the journal published a series of articles promoting contraception and sex education, including protection against pregnancy.[51] The articles drew on the work of the aforementioned Marie Stopes. In the series of articles titled *Protection Against Pregnancy*, Stopes addressed the issue of safe, effective, and "non-intrusive" contraception. According to her, marriage often became the grave of romance, partly as a result of "a woman's inability to prevent successive pregnancies and the resulting necessity for spouses to use some form of preventive method."[52] At the same time, she cautioned women that no single contraceptive method was completely effective, but that "if two methods that are each fairly reliable are combined, it is possible to achieve almost complete safety."[53] Stopes focused on describing suitable contraceptive methods and their use. She gave a very detailed account of female mechanical (barrier) contraception (specifically, the pessary). She explained in detail how such devices should be applied (correct insertion, appropriate size, and proper function), as well as the hygienic requirements for use. However, she recommended combining it with a soluble "quinine pessary" as a spermicidal contraceptive in order to achieve maximum effectiveness. This particular method was presented as the most practical, as it "did not destroy the feeling of spontaneous and uninterrupted intercourse."[54] The editor of *Proletárka* added an explanatory and supplementary commentary to Stopes's text, aiming to ensure that women learned how to use this type of contraceptive device correctly so that its application would become routine. As she noted, "only parents who are indifferent to how they will provide for their children bear them without responsibility or consideration."[55] In a subsequent text, the editor recommended separate sleeping arrangements for husband and wife as a suitable way to prevent frequent pregnancies. Aware that working-class families often could not afford separate bedrooms, she suggested placing beds in distant corners of the same room: "Separate beds should be

51 Stopesová, "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom," 5–6; Stopesová, "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom," 5; "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom," 4; "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom," 7–8.

52 Stopesová, "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom," 5–6.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Stopesová, "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom," 5.

recommended as a hygienic measure; it is one of the means of protecting against frequent pregnancy."[56]

In the concluding educational articles, drawing on Marie Stopes's ideas, the editor also addressed the issue of unwanted pregnancy. In this context, she clearly spoke out against abortion. She pointed out that wealthy women could afford such an "operation," whereas poor women lacked the means to do so. She therefore advised women to prevent pregnancy in advance, to be cautious, and to "use methods that prevent fertilization."[57]

She further emphasized that the contraceptive methods sold in pharmacies and drugstores were not prohibited, whereas terminating a pregnancy was forbidden by law and strictly punished. According to the editorial stance, women had the right to exercise free will and could responsibly decide for themselves whether they wanted to have a child or not.[58] In addition to the series of articles on contraceptive methods, the editorial board also provided tips and practical advice on how to prevent pregnancy. They recommended[59] (albeit with reservations) a brochure by H. Rossen titled *Protection Against Motherhood*,[60] which was distributed by the *Proletárka* editorial office.[61] However, the editors were not entirely satisfied with the content of this brochure. They criticized, for example, its highly scientific style and the use of Latin terminology in descriptions of the reproductive organs. They also found disappointing its critical evaluation of all contraceptive methods known at the time. As a result, the editors drew attention to the method of protection against pregnancy that Rossen considered least harmful to women's health: the condom.[62] In his publication, Rossen also briefly mentioned the method of regulating birth by monitoring a woman's menstrual

56 Ibid.

57 "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom," 4.

58 "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom," 7–8.

59 The print run of individual issues has not yet been established. The bi-weekly *Proletárka* was meant for women, especially working women (laborers, smallholder farmers, servants, clerks), in line with the program and goals of the Communist Party. The magazine went out of print in 1927 due to financial problems. The editors of Proletárka were active members of the Communist Party. They participated in political activities and pursued educational programs and campaigned among Slovak women. Their reports, opinions, and speeches, which were published in the pages of the aforementioned magazine, offer an interesting perspective (and also, given the state of the secondary literature at the moment, essentially the only perspective) on the communist feminine discourse in Slovakia in the 1920s, when the communist movement in Czechoslovakia was trying to spread its ideas against a backdrop of tough competition with other democratic and socialist parties under the liberal democratic regime.

60 "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom."

61 "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom," 6.

62 Rossen, *Ochrana před těhotenstvím*, 60.

cycle. However, the editorial board did not elaborate further on this method in their recommendation.

For the editors of *Proletárka*, Rossen's publication was not considered suitable for working-class women and communists. The author himself was labeled bourgeois. Nevertheless, they still recommended the publication to their readers and their husbands, as it was the only widely available source.

In September 1925, the editorial board began publishing, as a supplement to the fortnightly, a brochure titled *The Blessed Family, Prevention of Conception, Expulsion of the Foetus* by Fritz Brupbacher.[63] Brupbacher presented the issue of birth control through the lens of social conflict. Referring to Marx's *Capital*, he sharply criticized the fact that birth control among the bourgeoisie was a privilege or even, they suggested, a kind of monopoly. In contrast, the working class was seen as a tool, expected to reproduce and have many children in order to continually replenish the labor force. Any attempt to limit births, they contended, was therefore portrayed as unpatriotic behavior among workers.[64] Brupbacher focused particularly on the immense physical burden that frequent pregnancies placed on poor, hard-working women. As a result of repeated pregnancies, these women were often exhausted, weakened, and undernourished. They also aged rapidly and suffered from various health problems. According to Brupbacher, "overly blessed families" were the greatest obstacle to the "personal development and free growth of working-class women."[65] As a physician, he paid particular attention to the medical aspects of pregnancy among working-class women, who often performed heavy labor and suffered from malnutrition, deficiencies in vitamins and minerals, and overall physical weakness. He also noted the consequences these factors had for birth weight and the health of infants born to working-class women, including the issue of high infant mortality in this social group. He therefore called for the abolition of the "monopoly of the wealthy" on contraceptive methods and access to legal abortion in medical facilities. At the same time, he advocated state support and care for pregnant women and mothers, as well as free counseling centers which would provide information and means of contraception. Brupbacher also described the advantages and disadvantages of individual methods of contraception.

63 Fritz Brupbacher (1874–1945) was a Swiss physician, writer, and libertarian socialist. A prominent advocate of birth control, sexual reform, and the legalization of abortion, he became an influential figure in European debates on reproductive rights and social reform during the first half of the twentieth century.

64 Brupbacher, "Požehnaná rodina," 3–4.

65 Brupbacher, "Požehnaná rodina," 7.

He discussed methods which, in his view, were the most well-known but least used (namely, abstinence). This was more common in urban environments, though in some regions of Slovakia, it was also practiced in rural areas where spouses had separate sleeping arrangements. According to Brupbacher's brochure, the most widespread form of contraception was coitus interruptus. He rejected claims about its negative psychological effects, although he acknowledged its lack of popularity.

As alternative methods, various forms of chemical contraception (spermicidal solutions and powders) were proposed, alongside barrier methods such as the condom, pessaries, and intrauterine devices, as well as surgical procedures, including the ligation of the fallopian tubes or vas deferens. In the case of condoms, Brupbacher pointed out a fundamental drawback, noting that "they are used by men, and in sexual matters men are not always the more reliable or rational party."[66] In conclusion, he also addressed the issue of abortion, which he did not approve of, but he called for the abolition of laws that punished it. He drew attention to the large number of unqualified abortions carried out for social reasons. These unsafe procedures had serious health consequences, and therefore, in his view, the role of physicians should be to prevent unwanted pregnancies and to replace unsafe abortions with professional clinical interventions.[67]

In the 1920s, the women's communist press published key articles, which educated ordinary working women about female reproductive health, the anatomy of both the female and male body, and the menstrual cycle and also provided concise information about various contraceptive methods, their advantages and disadvantages, as well as the risks associated with their use. The women's communist press can thus be regarded as an important source of information on birth control in the Slovak context. However, the editorial focus of *Proletárka* was on a specific social group: women who sympathized with the communist movement, predominantly those employed in industry or agriculture. An important component of these educational texts was, therefore, the emphasis on the necessity of revolutionary and social transformation, presented as the solution to the oppression of women and their position as subordinates to men.

The most effective source of information on women's reproductive health for all social groups in Slovakia, however, was midwives. These women operated

66 Brupbacher, "Požehnaná rodina," 20.

67 Ibid., 23.

within their assigned districts, had an excellent knowledge of local economic and social conditions, and were familiar with the local communities. They regularly entered households and, based on preserved and published memoirs, midwives enjoyed the trust of the locals, especially women, with whom they maintained regular contact.

Thanks to their education and practical experience, midwives helped pregnant women, ensured the course of pregnancy and childbirth, monitored women's health during the postpartum period, and helped new mothers care for their newborns. Many were willing to spend long hours with women in labor, provide necessary material assistance, and even intervene within the family when needed. During their training, midwives were given guidance concerning sensitive and caring involvement in family life, particularly when women confided in them about emotional or physical problems.[68] At the same time, they were also trained in matters of contraception and the prevention of conception. However, in the midwifery textbook, author František Pachner emphasized that a midwife could only provide advice on birth control if it was in accordance with her conscience, for example, in the case of a woman who was ill, exhausted from repeated childbirth, or a mother of many offspring who could no longer care for another child. She was not permitted to do anything that might encourage or imply support for immorality, promiscuity, or a dissolute lifestyle.

Midwives were educated[69] about commonly available mechanical and chemical contraceptive methods (condoms, pessaries, spermicidal suppositories and sponges), the unreliability of withdrawal, as well as surgical methods (such as operations on the fallopian tubes).[70] However, the textbook clearly warned graduates of midwifery courses that under no circumstances were they allowed to provide instructions or advice on terminating a pregnancy, nor were they permitted to perform such procedures themselves. Their role was to direct the woman to a physician or, if possible, to dissuade her from making such a decision.[71] Despite the undoubtedly positive role of midwives within local health care systems, some were also involved in activities that were technically crimes, as they performed illegal abortions. According to Act No. 200 of 1928 regarding auxiliary midwifery practice and the education and training of

68 Pachner and Bebr, *Učebnice pro porodní asistentky*, 465.

69 During the interwar period, two schools of midwifery operated in the territory of present-day Slovakia, one in Bratislava and the other in Košice. Falisová and Morovicsová, *Pôrodné asistentky a ošetrovateľky*, 43–51.

70 Pachner and Bebr, *Učebnice pro porodní asistentky*, 467–70.

71 Ibid., 471–72.

midwives, a midwife's diploma could be revoked, temporarily or permanently, if she carried out an abortion or was found to be complicit in one.[72]

In his trilogy *Slovensko bez dorastu* (Slovakia without young people), in which he focused on the child and youth population and provided a statistical-demographic overview of Slovakia's population, the prominent Slovak pediatrician Alojz Chura[73] accused midwives of providing women with information on contraception and methods of birth control during home visits or while working in counseling centers for mothers and children. Chura may have been particularly concerned about the presence and influence of midwives in rural communities simply because in these communities, midwives were one of the few sources of reliable information about contraception, pregnancy, and birth and thus enjoyed the trust of most of the women.

Naturally, formal "contraception clinics" of the kind that existed in Great Britain did not operate in Slovakia in the interwar period. In Prague, however, around 1935, the Czechoslovak Society for Birth Control was established at the initiative of Senator Betty Karpíšková[74] and the physician Jarošová. A sexual counseling clinic also operated at the Second Gynecological Clinic in Prague's Podolí district, where married couples could consult on methods of birth control (mechanical, chemical, combined, and in extreme cases even sterilization of one of the partners)[75] In the Slovak context, it was most likely midwives who fulfilled this role. According to Chura, it was precisely midwives who, in prenatal clinics and counseling centers for mothers and children, were able to effectively advise women on how to prevent conception and in some cases even "prevented conception themselves by inserting pessaries or distributing irrigators."[76]

72 Specific cases are documented in the records of the Branch of the Ministry of Public Health and Physical Education in the Slovak National Archive and the holdings of the Regional Court in Bratislava at the State Archive in Bratislava. SNA, Fund EMVZTV, box 67; State Archives in Bratislava, Fund Krajský súd v Bratislave (Regional Court in Bratislava), Criminal Records 1938–1940, no. 1248/38. For further details, see Falisová, "Remeslo či milosrdenstvo?"

73 Alojz Ján Chura (1899–1979) was a physician and pediatrician, and also head of the Clinic for Children's Diseases at the Faculty of Medicine, Comenius University in Bratislava. He was the founder and organizer of modern Slovak pediatrics.

74 Betty Karpíšková (1881–1942) was one of the most prominent figures of Czechoslovak social democracy. She was a politician, journalist, and activist and also served as chair of the Union for Birth Control. She was a member of parliament and later senator of the National Assembly.

75 Lenderová, *Žena v českých zemích*, 238.

76 Chura and Kizlink, *Slovensko bez dorastu?*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 908.

In addition to mechanical or barrier contraception, the specialized literature also mentions so-called "chemical" methods in the form of vaginal tablets.[77]

Given that midwives possessed strong practical knowledge of the course of the menstrual cycle in women, they were able to pass on information about the calendar method of birth control, the so-called Ogino-Knaus method.[78] Based on Chura's analyses, we now know that it was precisely midwives and staff at mother-and-child advisory centers who educated women about so-called lactational amenorrhoea (the temporary infertility of women during breastfeeding) as well as the method of coitus interruptus. Knowledge of the connection between breastfeeding and the temporary inability to conceive was also present in the Slovak context as part of folk medicine.

Unlike political activists, midwives and traditional birth attendants had direct contact with women from all social strata. Moreover, their clear advantage lay in their sound knowledge of the female body and the course of the menstrual cycle. They accompanied women through the most intimate moments of their lives and had insight into their sex lives, the course of pregnancy, and their family and social circumstances. At the same time, in their work, midwives had to contend with many prejudices and rituals that accompanied pregnancy and childbirth in rural settings. Thanks to the trust and sympathy they enjoyed within the community, they were able to pass on valuable advice and information. Undoubtedly, in doing so, they had to confront the authority of the local priest, as well as older, more conservative members of the community and family, who did not always agree with their efforts of their approach.

Opponents of Birth Control

There was also a sizeable group of people who were opposed to contraception and the regulation of birth. Conservative political circles in Slovakia provided a particularly strong pillar of support, especially representatives of Andrej Hlinka's Slovak People's Party.[79] In public discourse, the issue of population

77 Chura, *Slovensko bez dorastu?*, vol. 1, 174.

78 The Ogino–Knaus, or calendar, method of natural family planning was developed in the early 1930s. It built on the independent discoveries of Kyusaku Ogino in Japan and Hermann Knaus in Austria concerning the timing of ovulation, while the first practical calendar method was formulated by the Dutch physician Johannes Nicolaas Smulders in 1930.

79 The Slovak People's Party (Slovenská ľudová strana), renamed Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana, HSĽS) in 1925 after its founder Andrej Hlinka, began to take shape in 1905 and was formally established on July 29, 1913 in Žilina, with Hlinka elected as its chairman. Its political program

policy was closely linked to questions of morality and adherence to religious and ethical principles, and politicians readily espoused and exploited this moral agenda. Motherhood was presented as a "duty" of a Christian woman, and if her health permitted, she was expected to bear as many children as possible as a sacrifice on the "altar of the nation."[80] A child was regarded as a gift from God, and therefore, birth control was not considered acceptable. Human beings were not to "interfere with God's plan," even in cases of social hardship.[81]

In conservative political circles, motherhood was viewed as the pinnacle of female virtue. It was a heroic[82] form of sacrifice.[83] Considerable criticism was therefore directed at the cult of the modern woman, which was seen as a product of the modern lifestyle of the interwar period and was disparagingly labeled comfortable and carefree, particularly in the case of young women in urban settings.

The issue of abortion in the Slovak context was examined in the long term by the aforementioned Chura. In his *Slovensko bez dorastu*,[84] Chura analyzed a number of factors which, in his view, had contributed to the decline in marital fertility. Among the most significant, he identified decreases in marriage and increases in divorce and marital separation. He criticized what he characterized as the moral decline of his time and contended that it had led to a crisis in married life. He also wrote about the dangers of alcoholism, suicide, seasonal migration, and emigration.[85] He addressed the economic and social factors behind declining birth rates. Economic conditions affected fertility both directly and indirectly: they led to greater participation of women in the workforce, and in times of hardship, a wife's income became essential for family survival. According to Chura, this weakened family bonds, as daughters no longer had the opportunity to learn household management and childcare alongside their mothers.

centerd primarily on the demand for Slovak autonomy, while the party explicitly identified itself with Catholicism and conservative values. During the interwar period, it emerged as the strongest political party in Slovakia in terms of electoral support.

80 H. S., "Je reč o rodine," 3.

81 Gabriela, "Bezdetné rodiny," 3–4.

82 "Minister Jozef Sivák," 4.

83 "Materinská reč," 1.

84 Chura, *Slovensko bez dorastu?*, vol. 1; Chura, *Slovensko bez dorastu?*, vol. 2, pt. 1; Chura and Kizlink, *Slovensko bez dorastu?*, vol. 2, pt. 2.

85 Approximately half of the marriages that ended in divorce were childless. Chura, *Slovensko bez dorastu?*, vol. 1, 162.

Chura directed some of his strongest criticism at economically active, unmarried women, whose independence, he argued, caused a decline or weakening of the "desire for family life."[86] He also criticized prolonged education and professional training for women. Girls, he believed, should be guided towards sexual restraint, early marriage, family life, and motherhood. In his writings, Chura promoted morality, modesty, and what he characterized as a sense of modesty among women, as well as fidelity within marriage and complete sexual abstinence before marriage.[87]

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of the Czechoslovak Republic, was also one of the critics of birth control. Masaryk regarded the limitation of conception as an evil of modern society.[88] The conservative and Catholic segments of both the medical profession and the general public also voiced opposition to any efforts to recommend contraception and thereby prevent the emergence of new life.[89] Similarly, the Evangelical Church condemned the one-child system as a "pathological phenomenon" and a profound social crisis. It feared that declining birth rates among the Lutheran population would weaken its cultural and political position and contribute to the "re-Catholicization" of Slovakia. The Church attributed restricted reproduction to materialism, inheritance practices, and moral decline, arguing that these factors promoted abortion and undermined the Christian understanding of children as gifts from God. To reverse this trend, Evangelical intellectuals advocated public education, taxation of families with few or no children, and the excommunication of anyone who provided an abortion.[90]

Church teachings condemned as sinful any sexual intercourse that was not directed towards procreation.[91] Any form of birth control was considered to be in conflict with the papal encyclical *Casti connubii* (On Christian marriage),[92] issued by Pope Pius XI on December 31, 1930. The encyclical condemned eugenics, emphasized the sacramental nature of marriage as a source of divine grace, rejected birth control, and reaffirmed the prohibition against abortion. It maintained that the primary purpose of sexual relations within marriage was

86 Chura, *Slovensko bez dorastu?*, vol. 1, 144.

87 Ibid. Is it correct?

88 Ibid., 161.

89 Chura, *Slovensko bez dorastu?*, vol. 1, 902.

90 Majo and Volanská, "The one-child pest is now affecting the body of the Slovak nation."

91 The Catholic Church itself regulated fertility by forbidding sexual intercourse during periods of fasting and on mandated church holidays. Lenderová, *Žena v českých zemích*, 236.

92 *Casti Connubii.*

procreation, while also recognizing the mutual good of the spouses. Consequently, marital intercourse was understood as inherently ordered toward the conception of a child, and any deliberate attempt to hamper its natural procreative purpose was regarded as contrary to natural law and intrinsically immoral. Sexual abstinence, when freely and mutually agreed upon by both spouses, therefore remained the only morally acceptable means of limiting births.

A shift away from this fundamental position did not occur until the publication of the encyclical *Humanae vitae* (On the regulation of birth),[93] issued on July 25, 1968 by Pope Paul VI. This encyclical signaled an acceptance of the idea of responsible, natural family planning.

In interwar Czechoslovakia, the topic of contraception and birth control resounded within the context of intense debates and political struggles over the decriminalization of abortion. The issue of abortion had already entered public discussion before World War I, particularly in newspaper advertisements offering various "guaranteed" means of terminating pregnancy.[94] From the beginning of the twentieth century, there were increasing calls for the legalization of abortion, especially in response to the tragic consequences of illegal procedures. It became clear that the practice of abortion, which was against the law, could not be prevented solely through repressive measures. Rather, it would be necessary to improve social support for families and single mothers and to eliminate inequalities between legitimate and illegitimate children.

The issue of birth control was also present in the women's emancipation movements in Europe and the United States. In the Czech context, the publicist Alois Hajn addressed this issue. He pointed to the health risks of abortion, particularly for working-class and impoverished women who could not afford professional gynecological care and were therefore dependent on unqualified abortionists and herbalists. Abortions were most often sought by women living in poverty, who were motivated by economic hardship, social pressures, and fear of losing employment, as well as by unmarried women who were often pressured into such decisions by their partners. Hajn criticized the harsh penalties imposed

93 On the proper way of giving human life / regulating fertility, also called the so-called "pill encyclical" (referring to the contraceptive pill). The encyclical addresses marital love and responsible parenthood. It confirms and develops the traditional stance of the Roman Catholic Church on sexuality and planned parenthood. It rejects methods of birth control that deliberately prevent the fertility of the sexual act (contraception) as well as artificial termination of pregnancy (abortion). The novelty was the acceptance of responsible family planning using natural methods, when "spouses make use of natural dispositions." *Humanae Vitae*.

94 Lenderová, *K hříchu a k modlitbě*, 112.

for undergoing abortion. At the same time, however, he rejected the views of radical German feminists who argued that a woman alone bore responsibility for pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing and therefore had the right to decide about her own body and whether to bring a child into the world. Instead, he proposed the introduction of measures that would help women prevent unwanted pregnancies, such as premarital and sex education, information about protective methods, access to contraception, and fundamental social reforms.[95]

In interwar Czechoslovakia, the issue of abortion engaged lawyers, doctors, sociologists, politicians, and women activists, as the number of abortions (which remained illegal) continued to rise. The democratic state offered greater opportunities for the more liberal segments of society to openly discuss birth control and to call for changes in attitudes towards contraception, sex education, and the regulation of reproduction. There were increasing demands to improve social provisions for pregnant women (particularly unmarried women) and to eliminate inequalities between children born within and outside marriage. In these debates, three principal currents or perspectives on the issue of abortion emerged. One current called for the complete decriminalization of abortion. A more moderate current supported conditional criminalization and specified circumstances under which the act would not be punishable (namely, when it was a response to hygienic, eugenic, and social considerations). Conservative and religious circles, in contrast, upheld the demand for a total and unconditional ban on abortion, with full criminal liability.[96] Advocates of the complete decriminalization of abortion based their arguments on women's right to self-determination in matters of pregnancy and childbirth. They rejected the notion that women who underwent abortion due to adverse social conditions should be punished. It was precisely the so-called social indication (abortion as a response to a woman's difficult socio-economic situation) that became the subject of the most vigorous debates among politicians, physicians, and sociologists.

Support for a more liberal legal framework on abortion, as well as for the introduction of sex education in schools, wider access to contraception, and comprehensive care for mothers and newborns, was championed particularly by left-wing women members of parliament, including Louisa Landová-Štychová,[97]

95 Hajn, *Ženská* otázka, 182–91.

96 See Nikšová, *Nedovolené prerušenie tehotenstva*, 71–82.

97 Louisa Landová-Štychová (1885–1969) was an activist in the anarcho-communist and women's movement. She was also a member of the National Assembly, and she submitted proposals for several laws

Irene Kirpal,[98] Franziska Blatny,[99] Maria Deutsch,[100] and the deputy and later senator Betty Karpíšková.[101] In the first half of the 1930s, the issues of abortion, contraception, and care for pregnant women and mothers with children were also addressed by the Women's National Council.[102]

In late 1938, by which time other dramatic changes had taken place, the political struggle over the decriminalization of abortion, the regulation of birth control, the introduction of sex education, and access to contraception remained unresolved. Following the declaration of Slovak autonomy and, subsequently, the establishment of the Slovak State, the earlier debates gave way to a nationalist pronatalist discourse that placed the promotion of fertility at the center of state policy. Pronatalist measures were directed not simply at increasing the birth rate but at strengthening the Slovak nation, as demographic growth was regarded as essential to national survival and state-building. Within this ideological framework, conservative political and social circles pursued a policy of restricting all forms of birth control, imposing an absolute ban on abortion, and prohibiting the sale and distribution of contraceptives. These measures were justified by concerns about depopulation and by the conviction that the growth of the Slovak population was indispensable to efforts to ensure that the nation enjoyed a prosperous future. Elements of this rhetoric have remained present in Slovak political discourse to the present day.[103]

---

concerning the protection of motherhood, women's education, social policy, and family law. She became a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1925.

98 Irene Kirpal (1886–1977) was a member of the Austrian Social Democratic Party and a long-serving member of the National Assembly.

99 Franziska Blatny (1873–1949) was an activist and member of the Austrian Social Democratic Party. She was repeatedly elected to the National Assembly.

100 Maria Deutsch (1882–1969) was a member of the Austrian Social Democratic Party. She was elected to the National Assembly in 1920 and was active in German social democracy and the women's movement.

101 Musilová, *Z ženského pohledu*, 77.

102 The Women's National Council was a representative non-political association of women's associations and prominent figures. It was established at its general meeting on April 8, 1923 in Prague. Its goal was to ensure the equality of women, in principle guaranteed by the constitution, and to put constitutional policy into practice. It also sought to harmonize the activities of public bodies and offices with the needs of women and mothers. The organization published its own magazine, *Ženská rad* (Women's Council), and was part of the International Women's Council, which brought together similar national organizations. Burešová, *Proměny společenského postavení*, 59–89.

103 Škorvanková, *Strážkyne rodinných kozubov*, 236–43.

Conclusion

In the interwar period, Czechoslovak society encountered a range of modernizing and liberal trends that spread across interwar Europe and were linked to efforts to come to terms with and overcome the consequences of World War I. Universal suffrage, women's emancipation, the sexual revolution, advances in medicine, the employment of women, and the democratization and liberalization of public life increasingly shaped the everyday lives of both urban and rural communities in Slovakia.

The demographic transformation that became evident after 1918, which found manifestation in declining fertility and the regulation of birth rates, is clearly reflected in population censuses. However, its detailed mechanisms, as well as the ways in which knowledge about birth control spread and was shared among the general population, remain a major challenge for historical-anthropological, medical, and sociological research. The study of beliefs and practices concerning taboo subjects such as menstruation, sexuality, and the use of various contraceptive methods is particularly demanding, as it requires careful comparison of diverse sources.

It is also essential to consider the overall conservatism of Slovak society, its economic, social, and sanitary conditions, the mobility of different population groups, and their access to information and education. Based on these factors, it may be assumed that midwives played a key role in the dissemination of information about sexuality and contraception. In many areas, they may have taken over the roles and competencies of older, experienced but untrained women who assisted with childbirth and practiced traditional healing methods. Midwives possessed expertise and practical experience, and they were often able to gain the trust of local communities. Moreover, the sources suggest that, alongside trust, they also enjoyed a degree of authority among local communities. Even male members of the community respected and cooperated with them. These women also facilitated communication between patients and qualified physicians.

Among working-class women, an important source of information was the women's communist press, which offered essential knowledge of the female reproductive cycle and sexuality. It also advertised and recommended publications that were not primarily intended for working-class women but rather targeted middle-class urban audiences. Without such references, working-class women

would have had little opportunity to acquaint themselves with issues concerning modern contraception and sexuality.

Young female activists also spread modern ideas about sex education and sexuality within marriage. In the Slovak context, however, they did not cross the implicit boundary between a conservative yet modern understanding of sexuality within marriage (viewing spouses as equal partners) and a more liberal perspective on female intimacy and sexual emancipation.

A greater understanding of the tensions between modern women's more open attitudes towards their bodies and sexuality and the prevalent conservative expectations of their communities in which they lived could undoubtedly be enhanced by historical-anthropological analyses of ego-documents, particularly women's correspondence and diaries. Thus, the scholarship on this subject is hardly complete.

Archival Sources

Slovenský národný archív, Bratislava [Slovak National Archives] (SNA)
Fund Živena. Courses for Women in Slovakia, School Year 1932/1933
Fund Exposition of the Ministry of Public Health (EMVZTV)
Štátny archív v Bratislave [State Archives in Bratislava]
Fund Krajský súd v Bratislave [Regional Court in Bratislava]. Criminal Records 1938–1940

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Bláhová, Eliška. "Žena manželka" [Woman as wife]. In *Žena novej doby*, edited by Alžbeta Göllnerová, and Jarmila Zikmundová, 228–32. Bratislava: Tatra, 1938.

Brupbacher, Fritz. "Požehnaná rodina, zamedzenie oplodnenia, vyháňanie plodu" [Blessed family, prevention of conception, expulsion of the fetus]. *Proletárka,* Appendix from September 15, 1925 till January 15, 1926.

Casti Connubii. Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Christian marriage. http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121930_casti-connubii.html. Last accessed on January 20, 2026.

Chura, Alojz, J. *Slovensko bez dorastu?* [Slovakia without youth?]. Vol. 1. Bratislava: Roľnícka osveta, 1936.

Chura, Alojz, J. *Slovensko bez dorastu?* [Slovakia without youth?]. Vol. 2, part 1. Bratislava: Roľnícka osveta, 1939.

Chura, Alojz, J., and Karol Kizlink. *Slovensko bez dorastu?* [Slovakia without youth?]. Vol. 2, part 2. Bratislava: Roľnícka osveta, 1939.

Gabriela. "Bezdetné rodiny [Childless families]." *Nová žena,* March 3, 1940, 3–4.

H. S. "Je reč o rodine" [It's about family]. *Nová žena,* February 9, 1941, 3.

Hajn, Alois. *Ženská otázka v letech 1900–1920* [The women question in the years 1900–1920]. Prague: Pokrok, 1939.

Hroboňová, Elena. *Ľudové kurzy pre ženy na Slovensku v školskom roku 1934/1935* [People's courses for women in Slovakia in the school year 1934/1935]. Turčiansky Sv. Martin: v.n., 1937.

Humanae Vitae. Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the regulation of birth. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html. Last accessed January 20, 2026.

"Materinská reč" [Mother tongue]. *Slovák* May 21, 1939, 1.

"Minister Jozef Sivák: 'Kto rozvracia rodiny, rozvracia spoločnosť ľudskú'" [Minister Jozef Sivák. "Who destroys families destroys human society]. *Slovák* May 28, 1940, 4.

"Ochrana proti tehotenstvu" [Birth control]. *Proletárka* February 15, 1925, 4.

"Ochrana proti tehotenstvu" [Birth control]. *Proletárka* March 1, 1925, 7–8.

Pachner, František, and Richard Bebr. *Učebnice pro porodní asistentky* [Textbook for midwives]. Prague: Min. veřej. zdrav. a těl. výchovy, 1932.

Rossen, H. *Ochrana před těhotenstvím: Z lékařského a sociálního stanoviska* [Protection against pregnancy: From a medical and social perspective]. Prague: B. Kočí, 1922.

Stopesová, Marie C. "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom" [Protection against pregnancy]. *Proletárka,* January 1, 1925, 5–6.

Stopesová, Marie C. "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom" [Protection against pregnancy]. *Proletárka,* January 15, 1925, 5.

Stopesová, Marie C. "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom" [Protection against pregnancy]. *Proletárka,* February 15, 1925, 4.

Stopesová, Marie C. "Ochrana pred tehotenstvom" [Protection against pregnancy]. *Proletárka,* March 1, 1925, 7–8.

Šmakalová, Iva. *Integrálna dedina: Štúdia slovenskej zemianskej dediny v Turci* [Integral village: A study of the Slovak gentry village in Turiec]. Prague: Sociální ústav ČSR, 1936.

Wollmanová-Fajnorová, Nina. "Pomer dnešnej ženy k mužovi" [The relationship between today's woman and man]. In *Žena novej doby*, edited by Alžbeta Göllnerová, and Jarmila Zikmundová, 233–40. Bratislava: Tatra, 1938.

Secondary Literature

Bacci, Massimo-Livi. *Populace v evropské historii* [The population of Europe: A history]. Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2003.

Beňová, Kamila. "Žena v tradičnej kultúre Slovenska: menštruácia, panenství, materstvo (so zameraním na nečistotu a tabu)" [Woman in traditional Slovak culture: Menstruation, virginity, motherhood (with a focus on uncleanness and taboo)]. *Antropowebzin,* no. 3 (2010): 161–67. https://www.antropoweb.cz/webzin/index.php/webzin/article/view/108/108 Last accessed on January 20, 2026.

Botíková, Marta. "Jedno dieťa a dosť! Zúžená reprodukcia a jej protirečivosť v historicko-etnologickej perspective" [One child and that's enough! Narrowed reproduction and its contradictions in historical-ethnological perspective]. In *Proměny společenského postavení českých žen v první polovině 20. století*, edited by Jana Burešová, 59–89. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2001.

Botíková, Marta. "Kultúrno-spoločenské reflexie zúženej reprodukcie na základe etnologického výskumu v lokalitách juhu stredného Slovenska" [Cultural and social reflections of restricted reproduction based on the ethnologic research in the villages of south central Slovakia]. In *Populačné štúdie Slovenska,* vol. 7, edited by Pavol Tišliar, Terézia Šprochová, and Lenka Vargová, 57–66. Bratislava: Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo, 2015.

Botíková, Marta, and Kornélia Jakubíková. "Sexualita a výchova" [Sexuality and education]. In *Rodové aspekty v etnológii: Učebné texty*, edited by Marta Botiková, Kornélia Jakubíková, Zuzana Kiczková, and Marianna Szapuová, 41–43. Bratislava: Centrum vzdelávania MPSVR SR, 2014.

Botíková, Marta, Soňa Švecová, and Kornélia Jakubíková. *Tradície slovenskej rodiny* [Traditions of the Slovak family]. Bratislava: VESA, 1997.

Bužeková, Tatiana. "Medikalizácia životného cyklu ženy: tradičné normy a morálne emócie" [Medicalization of female life cycle: Traditional norms and moral emotions]. In *Biotické výzvy a súčasnosť: z pohľadu nových poznatkov a trendov*, edited by Zlatica Plašienková, 167–89. Bratislava: STIMUL, 2021.

Dudeková-Kováčová, Gabriela. "Živena v politických režimoch 19. a 20. storočia" [Živena in the political regimes of the 19th and 20th centuries]. In *Živena: 150 rokov spolku slovenských žien,* edited by Daniela Kodajová, 99–182. Bratislava: Slovart, 2019.

Falisová, Anna. "Remeslo či milosrdenstvo? Kriminálne potraty v medzivojnovom období" [Craft or mercy? Criminal abortions in the interwar period]. In *Storočie procesov: súdy, politika a spoločnosť v moderných dejinách Slovenska*, edited by Valerián Jablonický, 51–65. Bratislava: VEDA, 2013.

Falisová, Anna, and Eva Morovicsová. *Pôrodné asistentky a ošetrovateľky na Slovensku v rokoch 1918–1938* [Midwives and nurses in Slovakia in the years 1918–1938]. Bratislava: VEDA, 2015.

Falťanová, Ľubica. "Podomový obchod a cudzí obchodníci (Gréci, Arméni, Macedónci, Turci, Židia, bosniaci) v meste" [Door-to-door sales and foreign merchants (Greeks, Armenians, Macedonians, Turks, Jews, Bosnians) in the city]. http://lfaltanova.blog.cz/0812/podomovy-obchod-a-cudzi-obchodnici-greci-armeni-macedonci-turci-zidia-bosniaci-v-meste. Last accessed on January 20, 2026.

Falťanová, Ľubica. "Vidiecka žena v neroľníckych zamestnaniach prostredníctvom biografií" [Rural women in non-agricultural occupations through biographies]. In *Žena z pohľadu etnológie*, edited by Hana Hlôšková, and Milan Leščák, 48–63. Bratislava: Prebudená pieseň, 1998.

Feinberg, Melissa. *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006.

Horváthová, Emília. *Úvod do etnológie* [Introduction to ethnology]. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského, 1995.

Kodajová, Daniela. *Živena: 150 rokov spolku slovenských žien* [Živena: 150 years of the Association of Slovak Women]. Bratislava: Slovart, 2019.

Kodajová, Daniela. "Živena – spolok slovenských žien" [Živena – Association of Slovak Women]. In *Na ceste k modernej žene: Kapitoly z dejín rodových vzťahov na Slovensku*, edited by Gabriela Dudeková, 215–32. Bratislava: Veda, 2011.

Koloh, Gábor. *"Szántani lehet, de vetni nem muszáj": Az ormánsági egykézés történetei (1790–1941)* ["You can plow, but you don't have to sow": The stories of the Ormánság one-child system in the region Ormánság, 1790–1941]. Budapest: Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, 2021.

Kučera, Milan. *Populace České republiky 1918–1991* [The population of the Czech Republic, 1918–1991]. Prague: Česká demografická společnost, Sociologický ústav Akademie věd České republiky, 1994.

Lenderová, Milena. *Žena v českých zemích od středověku do 20. století* [Woman in the Czech Lands from the Middle Ages to the 20th century]. Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2009.

Lenderová, Milena. *K hříchu a k modlitbě: Žena v minulém století* [On sin and on prayer: Woman in the past century]. Prague: Mladá fronta, 1999.

Luther, Daniel. *Z Prešporka do Bratislavy* [From Prešporok to Bratislava]. Bratislava: Albert Marenčin Vydavateľstvo PT, 2009.

Majo, Juraj and Ľubica Voľanská. "The one-child pest is now affecting the body of the Slovak Nation (Bazovský 1929): On restricted reproduction in southern Slovakia in the first half of the 20th century." *Ethnologia Slovaca et Slavica* 37 (2015): 41–58.

Mjartan, Ján. *Horehronie*. Bratislava: Veda, 1974.

Mlynka, Ladislav. "Diferenciačné znaky remeselníckej rodiny na slovenskom vidieku v prvej polovici 20. storočia" [Differentiating features of craftsmen families in the Slovak countryside in the first half of the 20th century]. In *Neroľnícka rodina na Slovensku: Zborník príspevkov z rovnomenného seminára*, edited by Marta Botíková, Ľubica Herzánová, and Miroslava Bobáková, 76–92. Bratislava: Prebudená pieseň – združenie, 2007.

Musilová, Dana. *Z ženského pohledu: Poslankyně a senátorky Národního shromáždění Československé republiky 1918–1939* [From a woman's point of view: Members of parliament and senators of the National Assembly of the Czechoslovak Republik 1918–1939]. České Budějovice: Veduta, 2007.

Nešťáková, Denisa. *Be Fruitful and Multiply: Slovakia's Family Planning Under Three Regimes (1918–1965)*. Marburg: Verlag Herder-Institut, 2023.

Nešťáková, Denisa. "Žena proti štátu: 'Kriminálne' potraty v čase Slovenskej republiky 1939–1945" [Woman against the State: "Criminal" abortions during the Slovak Republic 1939–1945]. In *Tisovi poza chrbát*, edited by Jozef Hyrja, 31–52. Bratislava: Hadart Publishing, 2020.

Nikšová, Gabriela. *Nedovolené prerušenie tehotenstva v československom trestnom práve* [Illegal abortion in Czechoslovak criminal law]. Bratislava: Veda, 1971.

Peťková, Viera. *Od liečiteľov k medicíne v Gýmeši* [From healers to medicine in Gýmeš]. Nitra: Garmond, 2021.

Peťková, Viera. *Duša ženy* [The soul of a woman]. Nitra: Garmond, 2023.

Peťo, Vladimír. *Lúčanská babica "Strynka" z Lietavského panstva* [The Lúčanská midwife "Strynka" from the Lietava estate]. Lietava: Združenie na záchranu Lietavského hradu, 2015.

Rišková, Katarína, and Marta Botíková. "Materiály spolku Živena a obraz zdravotných a hygienických pomerov v slovenských obciach v rokoch 1918–1938" [Materials of the Živena Association and the state of health and hygiene in Slovak villages, 1918–1938]. In *Populačné štúdie Slovenska*, edited by Pavol Tišliar, 81–107. Bratislava: Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo, 2016.

Srb, Vladimír. *Obyvateľstvo Slovenska 1918–1938* [The population of Slovakia, 1918–1938]. Bratislava: Inštitút informatiky a štatistiky, 2002.

Štúrová, Anna. *Spomienky na babku z Liesku* [Memories of my grandmother from Liesek]. Martin: BERISS, 2018.

Sigmundová, Marta. "K otázke tradície jedného dieťaťa v rodine" [On the tradition of one child in the family]. *Slovenský národopis* 31, no. 3–4 (1983): 561–68.

Škorvanková, Eva. "Otázka regulácie pôrodnosti na stránkach ženskej komunistickej tlače na Slovensku" [The issue of birth control in the women's communist press in Slovakia]. In *Populačné štúdie Slovenska,* vol. 10, edited by Pavol Tišliar, 17–43. Bratislava: Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo, 2017.

Škorvanková, Eva. *Strážkyne rodinných kozubov? Ženy v ideológii a politike Slovenského štátu* [Guardians of the family hearth? Women in the ideology and politics of the Slovak State]. Bratislava: VEDA, 2021.

Šprocha, Branislav, and Pavol Tišliar. *Plodnosť a celková reprodukcia obyvateľstva Slovenska v rokoch 1919–1937* [Fertility and total reproduction of the population of Slovakia in 1919–1937]. Bratislava: Stimul, 2008.

Šprocha, Branislav. "Populačný vývoj Slovenska v rokoch 1938–1945" [Population development of Slovakia in 1938–1945]. In *Populačné štúdie Slovenska*, vol. 1, edited by Pavol Tišliar, 91–166. Cracow: Towarzystwo Słowaków w Polsce, 2013.

Tkadlečková-Vantuchová, Jarmila. *Živena – spolok slovenských žien* [Živena – Association of Slovak Women]. Bratislava: Epocha, 1969.

Vásáry, Ildikó. "'The sin of Transdanubia': the one-child system in rural Hungary." *Continuity and Change* 4, no. 3 (1989): 429–68. doi:10.1017/S0268416000003799.