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Changes taking place in the contemporary model of family policy in Poland – Analysis of the phenomena

Abstract. Family policy is a set of legal norms, actions and measures launched by the state to create appropriate living conditions for the family, its formation, proper functioning, and the fulfilment of all its important social roles. Transformation is an intentional process of changing one piece of the environment implemented over a period to create a new and primarily sustainable state of the environment. The author presents demographic data reflecting the process of the individualization of contemporary culture, which translates into changes in the contemporary family model. The main aim of the article is to present the changes taking place in the contemporary model of family policy in Poland and to analyze these phenomena.

Keywords: family policy, social policy, transition period, social institution.

Introduction

A. Durasiewicz claims that the term “family policy” was first used when discussing social policy in relation to family and children during the European period. The term has been combined to describe actions taken by governments on behalf of children and their families. Efforts were made to influence families, especially those who had children, or individuals in their family roles (Durasiewicz, 2009: 57). In 1997, the Family Policy program was created to support the family. The actions taken were treated as an investment in the young generation. In

this way, family policy was to become a key element of the activities aimed at the development of society. It was the duty of the state to provide the family with conditions that would enable the implementation of its tasks, as well as its rights and obligations towards society, and the possibility of choosing the family model, i.e., the number of its members, as well as the rules of intra-family life (Durasiewicz, 2016: 10).

D. Orłowski claims that family policy adapts to the historical, cultural, social, and economic conditions of a given country. Means and methods of operation are subordinated to the population policy, considering the demographic processes taking place in each society. The state, depending on its needs, may, for example, try to increase or decrease the fertility rate through appropriate legal, administrative, and economic solutions regarding marriage and family (Orłowski, 2022: 4–5).

From 2012–2019, there were significant changes in the functioning of the family. Compared to previous years, the average age people getting married increased, more women attained levels of higher education, and the number of marriages also decreased. The main cause of the breakdown of marriage is not the death of one of the spouses, as it was in previous years, but divorce. The article presents the systemic changes that took place in the analyzed period. They concern the process of starting a family, making decisions about divorce, planning children, as well as changes introduced by the state for this social institution.

Divorce process

M. Mynarska (2014: 19) states that the changes related to the process of delaying starting a family first appeared in Scandinavian countries, then they appeared in Western and Southern Europe, and finally, after 1989, also the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. A characteristic feature of the changes concerning the family was their course. The later these changes began, the more rapid they were. Over the last dozen or so years, the age of newlyweds has increased. Although in most cases, men entered marriage before the age of thirty, in 2013, the average age for a man to get married was 29, which is over 4 years more than at the beginning of the 1990s. It was similar in the case of women, in 2013 the average age to get married was 27 years, while in the early 1990s it was 23 years (*Podstawowe informacje...*). Consequently, the age group of the most frequent marriage was shifted from 20–24 to 25–29. In turn, its total share is now 40%, while in 1990 it was 20%.

P. Guja (2016: 41) purports that the level of education of newlyweds has also changed. In 2013, over 47% of brides had higher education, whereas in 1990 this represented only 4%. Women with secondary education constituted about 36%, with basic vocational education 9%, whilst the same group in 1990 represented

35%. According to a report commissioned by the Committee for Migration Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Slany, Ślusarczyk, Krzyżowski, 2014: 17), the number of divorces in the period 2004–2011, following Poland's accession to the European Union, was 519.1 thousand. It accounted for as much as 52% of all divorces from 1990–2011.

M. Skawińska (2013: 21–22) concurs that economic emigration contributed to the dissolution of marriages. According to statistics, in 2013 over 66 thousand married couples got divorced. At the same time, the number of weddings fell by 22 thousand. This number decreased for the fifth year in a row, which resulted in an increase in the divorce rate from 31.6% in 2012 to 36.4% in 2013. Apart from divorce, the main cause of marriage breakdown in Poland is the death of one of the spouses. At the beginning of the 1990s, the death of one of the spouses was the reason for dissolving the marriage in about 80% of cases, in the remaining cases the cause was divorce. In the period 1990–2004, the number of deaths decreased, which was undoubtedly caused by both the extension of the life of the population and the development of medicine.

M. Kuciarska-Ciesielska (2003: 53) pays attention to the fact that in the 1960s and 1970s, until 1984, an annual increase in adjudicated divorces was observed (in 1970, 34,600 divorces were pronounced, in 1980 – 39,833, and in 1984 – as many as 52,900).

Three factors can be distinguished that affect the number of divorces (apart from the legal status, as well as individual-environmental and philosophical determinants of the decision of the interested spouses to get divorced):

1) cohort effect – after 7–10 years from the period when a significant number of new marriages were concluded (which, for example, maybe a consequence of reaching “marital age” by people born in the demographic boom period), the number of divorces is significantly increased “even in the situation of constant preferences as to the frequency of the termination of marriage/divorce” (Szukalski, 2013: 117).

2) the spread of acceptance of divorce as a means of ending a failed marriage. This was particularly important when the legal status did not provide for divorce before or contained very significant restrictions on its availability (the change in the legal status is the reason for the increase in the number of divorces from the 1960s onwards) (Cholewińska-Łapińska, 2017: 47).

3) in periods of instability on the labor market, being married is perceived as a kind of “insurance”, because it is easier to deal with the negative effects of unemployment while being in a marriage (family) (Cholewińska-Łapińska, 2017: 48).

According to the CSO research carried out in 2014, the largest number of divorces took place in 2006. Since 2005, the number of separations has decreased. In 1989–2003, the number of divorces was lower than in 2004–2013. Divorce and separation play different roles in the legal order. A legally valid divorce decree results in the dissolution of the marriage, permanent cessation of the obligation to

provide mutual assistance, the possibility of returning to the previous surname and contracting a new marriage.

P. Guja (2016: 44) thinks that separation, in turn, performs a restitution function: it formally maintains the marriage bond, modifying the content of this relationship so that it is adapted to the new realities of the spouses' separation, and, in some cases, it can stimulate a return to cohabitation. In 2019, more than 65,000 marriages were dissolved by courts. The number of divorces in cities is almost three times higher than in the countryside, and the ratio is almost twice as high, and in the case of separation, it is at least half as high. There are also significant differences in the regional system, i.e., the behaviour of the inhabitants of the south-eastern voivodships of Poland is more traditional, while the least traditional in the western voivodships. Divorced spouses have lived together on average for about 14 years. Over the years, the age of spouses deciding to divorce has also increased.

In 2019, the statistically average divorced man was almost 42 years old and a woman over 39-years-old, i.e., they were about 3–4 years older than in 2000 and 5–6 years older than in 1990. The greatest social effect of divorce is on the fate of minors (children under the age of 18), whose number in divorced marriages in 2019 amounted to 55 thousand. This has significant consequences for the functioning of such families and causes an increase in the number of single-mother-families with children. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that the court more and more often rules for the joint upbringing of children by divorced parents – in 2019 there were over 62% such decisions; custody given only to the mother represented just 33% of rulings (in 2000 this share was 65%), while sole care being granted to the father amounted to only about 3% of cases (*Sytuacja demograficzna...*).

Procreative behaviours of the population

The values of the fertility rate for urban and rural areas are currently very similar, but in traditional rural areas they are higher – in 2018 they were 1.452, and in cities 1.416; thus, relatively more children are born in the countryside. In 2018, the rural birth rate was 10.4‰, whereas in urban areas it was 9.9‰. According to data from the Central Statistical Office of Poland (CSO), the highest level of live births occurs in voivodships related to the areas of the largest, developing urban agglomerations (Pomorskie, Mazowieckie and Małopolskie, Wielkopolskie – the value of the ratio in these voivodships was 11.4–11.1‰ in 2018). It is most likely related to the relatively younger age structure of the inhabitants and corresponds to the spatial range of the actual population increase. In turn, the lowest birth rate was recorded in the Świętokrzyskie (8.6‰ in 2018) and Opolskie (8.7‰) voivodships (*Sytuacja demograficzna...*).

The current number of births depends on the number of women at the reproductive age (15–49 years) and on its structure. Another element influencing the number of births is the procreative attitudes and behaviours of the population. The growing and significantly high number of women of childbearing age may also seem to be a sufficient guarantee of many births or its growth. A measurable indicator of these phenomena is the sizes of partial fertility rates, i.e., the intensity of births in individual age groups of mothers in a given year. The values of these partial measures do not depend on the size of the population or its age structure. They reflect reproductive behaviour in each period and make up the theoretical fertility rate (TFR = sum of partial fertility rates) (*Sytuacja demograficzna...*).

A. Durasiewicz (2014: 106) claims that to maintain the continuity of society, as well as to raise the fertility rate to such a level that it is possible to replace generations, it is necessary to take measures in the area of demographic and family policy. These activities will be aimed at: increasing the fertility rate; reducing infant mortality; supporting one-parent families resulting from the growing number of divorces, as well as extra-marital births; supporting large families; increasing social expenditure for families and their children; increasing the employment rate; lowering the unemployment rate; and increasing the availability of institutional care for small children, especially in kindergartens and nurseries.

The process of forming family policy in the first years of transformation was based on the parents' right to raise and educate their children. In this way, the family became responsible for its fate, and there was also a limitation of responsibility towards the family of external institutions, primarily state institutions. The decentralization of the state's powers in the field of family policy has led to changes in the manner of the functioning of such institutions as nurseries, kindergartens, primary schools, culture, sport, and recreation centres (Durasiewicz, 2017: 113).

The 2013 social diagnosis report "The low fertility rate in Poland in the context of Poles' perception" shows that barriers to parenthood can be divided into 4 main groups:

- reasons related to poor material situation, as well as a sense of instability,
- objective reasons (including the inability to become pregnant, the risk of genetic diseases, attitude of the partner's: that is being reluctant to have children),
- reasons related to insufficient state support for parents,
- reasons related to worldview changes, individualism, and the pursuit of self-realization (*Odpowiedź podsekretarza stanu...*).

P. Bryła (2008) pays attention to the fact that a large family often means resignation from a high standard of living and the necessity to reduce one's own needs and that of the family to a minimum.

Families with many children belong to the group of households most at risk of poverty (regardless of the adopted border). In 2012, "almost every tenth person lived below the minimum subsistence level in the households of married couples with three children and about 27% of people in households of married couples with

four or more children.” Even “people who made up one-parent families were in a relatively better situation” (*Ubólstwo w Polsce...*).

Currently, as a result of the ongoing intra-family transformations, Polish researchers are starting to gradually abandon the use of terms such as incomplete family, single parent, single parenting. The following term is becoming increasingly common: mono-parental family (Piotrowska, 2014: 165).

The most common reasons for the formation of single-parent families are:

- separation, i.e., termination of the parents’ joint life, but without dissolution of the marriage,
- divorce, i.e., legal sanctioning of the previously started process of family breakdown,
- death of one of the parents,
- giving birth to a child outside of marriage, which may be the result of an accident (e.g., unplanned pregnancy, rape) or result from the conscious choice of a woman to have a child and raise it alone,
- abandonment of the family by one of the parents (Gawda, 2016: 38).

Nowadays, the formation of single-parent families is increasingly influenced by social reasons. This group of conditions is primarily associated with socio-economic development, urbanization processes, and moral and cultural changes. Nowadays, the factors determining independent parenthood are quickly modified because of economic and socio-cultural changes (Szlendak, 2012: 247–476).

State activities for the family

J. Auleytner (2004: 11) underlines that despite the high assessment of the Constitution, as well as several social laws, the conditions have allowed only their partial implementation. Despite the impossibility of their implementation, they realized a new, humanistic perspective for the development of a united and independent Poland.

A Durasiewicz (2012: 17–18) pays attention to the fact that the principles of social security in the interwar period were laid down in the Act of August 16, 1923. The law defines social security as the provision of necessary living needs from public funds for those who, permanently or temporarily, with their own material resources or labour could not afford them.

Social services aimed at meeting the needs of families:

- caring for infants, children, and adolescents, especially for orphans, half-orphans, neglected children, abandoned children and children who are at risk of negative influence,
- protection of motherhood,
- strive for the religious, moral, mental, and physical education of children,

- assistance in preparing young people for professional activity (Law of August 16, 1923).

J. Frątczak (2001: 178) mentions that 1994 was proclaimed the Year of the Family by the United Nations General Assembly and provided an incentive for academia, local and religious circles to define the role of family policy actors in a market economy.

In Poland, the “Rodzina 500+” program (Family 500+) is the financial foundation for supporting families. The program entered into force on 1 April 2016 and contributed to a significant improvement in the financial situation of families, strengthened them and gave them due priority. A family-friendly policy was one of the main objectives of the IAS-Us coalition agreement (Szczudlińska-Kanoś, 2019: 55–56). As a result of the launch of the program, the share of spending on family policy in GDP has grown significantly – from 1.78% of GDP in 2015 to 4% of GDP today.

The Family 500+ program is the main instrument of family policy and aims at achieving three main goals: improving the demographic situation, reducing poverty among the youngest, and investing in the family. The Family 500+ program is the most significant and real financial assistance from the state to families raising children. Under the Family 500+ program, families with dependent children are entitled to a parenting allowance of PLN 500 per child under the age of 18 (*Rodzina 500+*). However, it is worth noting that none of the main goals of the creation of this program have been achieved.

J. Szczepaniak-Sienniak (2015: 110) writes how support for large families was also provided by the introduction of the national program “Big Family Card” (in force since 2015 in addition to the programs of local self-government of this type, which have been developed since 2005). According to the Minister of Labor and Social Policy (*Family policy in Poland*), this program is a “flagship project [...] for families with at least three children.” The purpose of introducing this tool is to directly support families, as well as create a positive image of large families and increase the chances of the development and life of children from these families. The card is intended to improve the situation of large families both in terms of reducing the cost of access to certain services and in the social sphere by stimulating the activity of these families (Szczepaniak-Sienniak, 2015: 110).

In 2019, one-time childbirth benefits, the so-called “newborn benefits”, were distributed to the parents of 252.4 thousand children, which amounted to 67.3% of the total number of children born. The expenditures for the payment of the “newborn allowance”, which was financed from the state budget, amounted to PLN 252.4 million and were 9.6% lower compared to 2018. Among families receiving lump-sum benefits in connection with the birth of a child, the largest group, i.e., 42.8%, were families with one child; with families with two children making up 38.4%; and large families (with three or more children) accounting for 18.8% of this group. In 2019, over 11,000 additional zlotys were paid out. Childbirth allowance from municipalities’ own funds was paid to the total amount of PLN 9.2 million (*Świadczenia na rzecz rodziny...*).

Conclusion

Between 2012 and 2019, the number of marriages decreased and the average age at marriage increased. The increase in the age of newlyweds is a consequence of the choices made by young people who, when planning their future, first invest in themselves, i.e., education and work, and then in their families. Women who marry have a higher level of education as well as higher economic activity. Young parents are increasingly reluctant to have offspring, because in many cases, family growth means giving up a high standard of living and the need to reduce their own expenditures. With the increasing number of divorces and layoffs, single parenting is becoming more common. In previous years, the most common cause of marriage breakdown was the death of one of the spouses, which has changed due to medical progress. Low fertility rates will also have a negative impact on future fertility rates as there will be significantly fewer women of childbearing age in the future. For this reason, the state began to take measures to support large families. An example of such financial assistance was the introduction of the Family 500+ program, the Big Family Card, and the so-called Newborn Benefit. The purpose of the programs is not only to provide financial support to families, but also to create a positive image of large families, which in turn should become a kind of incentive for other young parents to try to have children. However, despite government support, most newlyweds still choose to have one child, mainly due to job prospects and better living conditions.

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