

Franciszka Wanda Wawro

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Franciszka Wanda Wawro
Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski

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Abstract: In the Polish cultural ethos, the family as a value seems to have an established high position. It is also confirmed by current numerous studies focused mainly on the young generation, which show that for young people the family constitutes a value of the highest priority. It could be presumed, therefore, that the present socio-cultural climate is favourable for the family and enables it to perform its various functions, including the care and cultural function. It also concerns the large family, which in the Polish tradition used to be considered as a beneficial educational environment, or even a kind of a social force. However, in the modern society, which in its definition seems to be a declaration of high quality standards, mainly in terms of developmental chances of all its subjects, the large family has found itself in a specifically difficult situation. The reason behind it is, above all, the fact that having a large number of children is socially ostracized in various ways. If the value of the large family is not only not appreciated socially, but even discredited, then the consequences of such a state of affairs will become apparent in numerous spheres of social life. Most often, it is reflected in the basic decisions in the area of social policy, unfavourable towards large families. For such families it might imply the necessity of engaging in even an extreme struggle for survival in the sphere of everyday existence; even more so when it comes to decent conditions of performing its tasks and its socio-cultural role. Therefore, it is essential to define and refer to the arguments coding in the social consciousness the fact that the large family in the Polish cultural ethos occupied a high position not only in the past, but it still constitutes a significant value which deserves recognition and support.

Key words: having numerous children, the large family, socio-cultural transformations, social policy towards the family.

Introduction

The researchers who deal with the issue of the family, especially in the area of social sciences, point out the characteristic (at least in the last two decades) sharp decline in the number of children per family. At the same time, it is apparent that the model of family with one or two children is being consolidated. Various conditions which are responsible for such a state of affairs reach back to the socio-political context before the structural transformation in Poland, but can also be found in the expansion of the cultural pattern transferred from Western European societies and connected with the expansion of the ideology of consumerism and hedonistic values. As F. Adamski rightly points out, after the Second World War, in the period of the People's Republic of Poland, the model, which was promoted quite persistently and effectively, was that of a small family; such a model was supported by propaganda stereotypes claiming that "for the welfare of the nation and in order to provide everyone with work, accommodation and alimentionation, it was necessary to significantly limit the birth rate" [Adamski 1970].

Population policy, as well as social policy in Poland in the abovementioned period, confirmed the practical realisation of the adopted assumptions with consistent strategies implemented in many areas: from promoting birth control methods to artificial stimulation of women's professional activity, building small flats or through specific solutions introduced in the system of social benefits. The negative consequences of the permanent decline in fertility can be noticed in the long term and in different dimensions of the functioning of the Polish society. Above all, the tendency of lowering the number of children per family is consolidated, to the point of the currently observed drastic situation when the balance between birth and mortality rates in the Polish society is unfavourable. Numerous factors give rise to this tendency. The most drastic ones include the aggravating conditions of the young generation's start in life. Due to the unstable economic situation and other unfavourable systemic solution, young people delay the decisions connected with starting a family and with procreation.

It seems, however, that a factor which deserves to be especially carefully examined is the abovementioned diminished approval shown to large families in the ethos of modern Polish culture. Both academic and public discourses lack the accent on favourable attitude towards the large family which would point to its objective value; all the more, there is a noticeable deficiency of studies concerning such families' actual living and developmental conditions [Wawro 1995]. The undertaken analyses, presenting the difficult situation of large families, often tend to contain a subtext which negatively assesses the very fact of having a large number of children as "the main cause" of these families' problems.

In contrast, Polish large families used to be considered as social capital in the past decades. Renowned Polish sociologist L. Dyczewski [1993] mentions their

reliability in ensuring generational replacement as a major argument for their significance. However, it needs to be highlighted that having a large number of children is a clear testimony in itself of the spouses being open to the human life. J. Śledzianowski notes that respect for the value of the human life, which is expressed by the parents in such a family, and which they convey to the children as an attitude of acceptance and openness to every new member of the family, has a chance to properly shape the hierarchy of values, as human life constitutes a value superior to the world of material objects. The quoted author stresses the fact that large families are usually internally coherent and characterised by a strong connection between their members [Śledzianowski 1988]. Moreover, there are studies available which confirm that divorces are much less frequent in large families than in those in which there are one or two children [Graniewska, Balcerzak-Paradowska, Warszawa 1997].

Furthermore, a large family provides an optimal environment for socialisation. A morally and socially healthy family with numerous children creates beneficial conditions of a special kind, as it has specific emotional and cultural capital at its disposal. The plurality of interrelationships between the family members enriches the psychological climate, strengthens a sense of being rooted in a community, socialises, shapes the openness to the needs of other people, increases the sense of solidarity and responsibility for others. In large families, interpersonal relationships are richer in contents and emotional links are stronger, which ensues from living in close intimacy on a daily basis. Everyday close relationships result in a natural sensitivity to the needs of another person. Older siblings in a large family learn quite early to be protective of the younger children, therefore preparing themselves for being independent in various everyday situations. At the same time, older siblings often become models for the younger children of making life and value choices. Moreover, the environment of a large family provides its members with numerous opportunities for developing organisational skills in everyday functioning, the ability to share responsibilities equally, as well as resourcefulness and supportiveness in difficult situations.

The analyses undertaken in the present article are primarily focused on selected aspects of socio-cultural conditions of the transformations in the model of the family and its functioning.

The situation of the large family and the transformations in the modern society

The sociological approach stresses the claim that there exists a specific feedback effect between the family and the society, and therefore its condition is dependent on the condition of broader macrostructures, and it affects them at the same time. Consequently, the sources of the current model of the structure and

functioning of the family need to be sought in the transformations of the society which have occurred or are occurring presently. The sense of this dependency is emphatically expressed by P. Kryczka, who writes that it is in the family that “nearly all problems of social, economic and cultural nature are concentrated, leaving on it a distinct mark. On the other hand, it constitutes a natural rearguard, a sort of a last line of resistance to the disorganisation and the general disarray of other social structures” [Kryczka 1997].

Social pedagogy perceives the family in all its developmental dynamics as an unparalleled internal system of mutual benefits, and at the same time a great potential providing its members with a sense of security as well as the possibility of personal development and satisfaction of their intimacy needs. However, this system, although having an internal force ensuring a sort of autonomy, especially in the sphere of value choices, is to a large extent dependent in its appropriate functioning on the social environment. Therefore, the family is extremely responsive to the changes occurring in the society, which is justified by the fact that the abovementioned social changes have after all brought about specific transformations in the external and internal structure of the family [Dyczewski 1981]. Therefore, in the description of the conditions which affect the state of modern large families, it is important to take into account certain socio-cultural processes. I am here referring to these which occurred much earlier in history and were fundamental to the transformation of entire macrostructures (mainly, the so-called industrial revolution and the related processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, the ongoing division of labour and social mobility, the discovery and exploitation of new sources of energy, the mechanisation of labour), the transformations within the area of culture (e.g. promoting the new patterns of self-realisation related to the emancipation of women and their resulting newly awakened professional, educational and socio-cultural aspirations), as well as the modern globalisation processes.

The abovementioned social processes and phenomena, whose dynamic rapidly grew at the end of the 19th and in the 20th century, significantly contributed to the transformation of the environment of families' life and development, which was also reflected in their functioning and structural changes.

In many cases, the father was forced to temporarily leave the family to seek employment away from their place of residence, which undoubtedly affected the quality of the performance of numerous intra-family functions, resulting, among others, in a reduced frequency and intimacy of contacts between the members of the family, growing class differences among them, the appearance and diffusion of new definitions of values which have so far been appreciated in the family, and the promotion of such aspirations as personal and professional achievements as the main determinants of success and renown in life. In the sphere of structural

transformations, there has been a consistently occurring process of the decrease in the size of families. The number of large and multigenerational families has been considerably reduced, while the model of two-generational family with the “optimal” number of two, at most three children, has become widespread. It is as a result of these numerous transformations which the family community – its structure and functioning - has undergone that the representatives of social sciences signal today the dramatic threats to the family, including its ongoing destabilisation in numerous dimensions: structural, functional and axiological [Wróblewska 2001].

If in the modern society the highest priority among the appreciated values has been given to social position and recognition (so-called prestige values), then such a value orientation is also visible in the lifestyle and aspirations of numerous modern families. It is especially connected with the intensification of women’s social and professional aspirations. Women who strive to attain a high social and professional position, which has become a widespread phenomenon, get involved in educational pursuits and the related professional activation outside the home, which at the same time forces the couple to share responsibilities equally, and sometimes to delegate care tasks to other persons in the family. The women who are focused exclusively on the self-realisation in the sphere of marital and family life do not constitute a category which is positively perceived in the social sphere due to the pattern of professional success propagated in the media. The patriarchal culture in the marital and family relationships is currently being replaced by partnership. This process is called by M. Raclaw-Markowska “the successive modernisation of the Polish family” [Raclaw-Markowska 2000].

Cultural transformations have been reflected mainly in the internal order of the valuation of the family. As S. Kawula states, one of the central issues raised in the discourses on the family is the question to what extent “this age-old form of human social life has temporarily become a necessary phenomenon” [Kawula 2007, p. 6]. It indicates a significant change also in perceiving the marriage and family as a value which should be institutionally validated. Liberal ideologies, propagated in the media, significantly affect the promotion in the modern society of the pattern of marriage as a peculiar form of a private contract, which is undoubtedly aimed at eliminating the definition of marriage as an institution in favour of treating it instrumentally, that is, as a function of individual needs. K. Slany predicts that more and more widespread forms of marital and family life, based on the so-called “principles of rational choice,” reflected also in the procreation decisions, will become consolidated in the future as well [Slany 2002]. It also concerns the growing tendency of families to fall apart. While in 1990 there were 166 instances of divorce for 1000 new marriages, this number grew to 254 as soon as in 2008. Divorce or separation are treated more and more

often as the only solution to conflict situations, or a change in emotional attitudes fitting in with the principle of the freedom of choice. It could be described as a peculiar syndrome of the popularisation of the lay manner of valuation in the sphere of personal and family life; namely, the abovementioned tendencies are usually accompanied by the acceptance of the model of the family with a small number of children as the norm, as well as the single-parent family (in Europe, the number of children brought up by one of the parents is successively growing). An important aspect of this syndrome is the fact that in the consciousness of a considerable part of contemporary Europeans marriage, sexual intercourse and having children are treated as separate issues. It signifies a clear tendency to redefine the essence of marriage and family.

The social and intra-family processes and phenomena signalled here, whose dynamic has been successively growing since the 20th and in the 21st centuries, have significantly contributed to weakening the social position of the large family and to perceiving it less and less frequently as a value.

The large family and the selected aspects of Polish social policy

The social policy of a country in its correct understanding is aimed at organising and shaping social life purposefully and systematically, so that existential and developmental needs of all citizens could be satisfied according to the accepted quality standards. The activities of a country, as a precisely organised system of various institutions provided with legal tools, an economic base, qualified staff and educational structures, should strive to optimise the living environment and self-realisation of the whole society according to the canon of the most essential values.

In the Polish socio-cultural and political context, however, a wide gap can be observed between the socially accepted order of values, the declared goals of social policy, and the undertaken activities for the benefit of families, including large families. It is worth pointing out here that in the canon of Polish national culture the family, including the large multigenerational family, used to be considered as one of the central values. Systematically conducted studies concerning value orientations of young and adult Poles indicate that affiliative values, such as family, marriage and friendship are invariably given main priority and are situated on the highest level of the choices one makes [Wawro 2015]. In contrast, the Polish policy towards the family, both in the period of the People's Republic of Poland and after the structural transformation, is characterised by an unfavourable attitude to it. The model of a small family, propagated after the Second World War and into the period of the People's Republic of Poland, supported with the covert tactics of social policy (e.g. small flats allocated to families, encouraging women's professional activity, undervaluing large families

in the system of social benefits), certainly resulted in lowering the number of children in an average Polish family. Some sociologists claim, however, that the number of children in the Polish family is one of the features distinguishing it from the families in other European countries; nevertheless, it is undeniable that the propagated models of the family lead, also in Poland, to a larger number of children being treated as a threat to the welfare, as impoverishment of life in its material and spiritual aspect, and sometimes even as the proof of parents being “losers” or their “backwardness” and “ignorance.”

In order to provide a general description of the situation of Polish large families, it is essential to present the most significant problems which affect them. According to social workers' judgement, the most frequent reasons for the difficulties of large families are problems with the financial and living situation, as well as pedagogical and health issues. In some families, a few unfavourable factors accumulate, e.g. insufficient means of subsistence and housing problems. The housing benefits system in the People's Republic of Poland did not take into account the needs of large families, and the problem still exists. After the systemic transformation the situation seems even more dramatic as the chance of acquiring a bigger flat depends above all on a given family's financial means, and with the excessive housing prices most of families in need are unable to raise their accommodation standards. The families which signal a need for assistance in most cases apply for an increase in the family allowance, for family counselling and the possibility to work part-time. Many Polish families, and especially large families who are particularly affected by the inadequate social policy and the economic crisis, make efforts to improve their living conditions on their own behalf.

Recent diagnoses established in the field of social pedagogy inform about an increasing population of families affected by the abovementioned negative consequences of the systemic transformation, such as the deteriorating living and material situation, or even living below the subsistence level. For children who come from such families, the shortage of financial means to be invested in their education, as well as the lack of perspectives for the consolidation of stable mechanisms in social structures which would open the way for social advancement, may not only block them in dynamically activating their subjectivity in social life, but even generate an attitude of passivity and preserve it in the subsequent generations. An assumption could be risked that the syndrome of procreation anxiety in case of some young married couples, in the face of the inevitability of objective conditions, is strengthened by their fears for the future, insecurity, distrust of public institutions, weakening hopes, or even a sense of futility connected with the perspectives for their existence in their own country in the future.

The activities of the country undertaken within family policy which raise most doubts include: low family allowance, the commercialisation of care and educational services, imposing the costs of the services related to health care and recreation on families, as well as increased costs of education and participation in culture or the introduction of market-based instruments into housing [Hryniewicz 2006]. Other elements of Poland's policy, which are unfavourable to starting a large family, include unemployment among the young, encouraging them to emigrate, the persistent promotion of the so-called alternative forms of marital and family life, as well as preserving in social consciousness the image of the large family as irresponsible, dysfunctional and disorganised, and what is more, feeding like a parasite on the fruits of the work of the society.

The situation of large families should be of particular concern to the public authorities, who should provide them with real support. In practice, social allowances in large families constitute a larger proportion of their income than in the case of families with a smaller number of children. The ratio between those allowances and the minimum subsistence level or the living wage indicate, however, that these benefits constitute only a minor contribution to the family budget. Currently, the allowances for large families have been reduced, as the previously existing preferences in favour of these families were abolished when the new act on family benefits entered into force. According to the new legislative solution, "the privileged position" – that is, the possibility of obtaining higher financial benefits - was given to single-parent families, which are not as affected by the risk of poverty as large families are [Balcerzak-Paradowska 2004].

It needs to be pointed out that the duty of the public authorities to support large families ensues directly from the constitution, according to which "the State, in its social and economic policy, shall take into account the good of the family. Families, finding themselves in difficult material and social circumstances – particularly those with many children or a single parent – shall have the right to special assistance from public authorities" [Article 71, the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1997].

Final conclusions

The aspects of the socio-demographical, material and cultural situation of the family signalled here should provide an argument not against having a large number of children (as it happens in literature and social practice), but for the necessity of revising social policy, as well as changing social attitudes towards large families. It assumes the need for a more solid insight – also into the value which these families constitute for the society. It is indispensable to introduce solutions supporting large families in their functioning.

Important recommendations concern the necessity for implementing specific solutions supporting the family in the realisation of all its inherent functions.

In terms of creating conditions for realising the procreation function of the family, the responsibilities of the public authorities include: labour protection, the distribution of the costs related to bringing up the new generation between all members of the society, improving the availability of decent living conditions, including proper housing adapted for families with children, the protection of the reproductive health of women and men, shaping attitudes and behaviour favouring marriage and family. The economic function of the family should be supported by social policy through systematic supplementation of the families' income, a family-friendly tax system which would respect a tax payer's commitments to the family members who are dependent or unable to work. Supporting the family in its care and educational function can be realised through creating the conditions enabling the parents to combine care tasks and professional activity [Hryniewicz 2006]. Moreover, the state should also create the conditions for full participation in culture, especially for large families. In fact, the work of the appropriate state institutions, but also social initiatives, should not only construct the necessary support system for large families, but also promote their social value.

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