

Changes in the family model and gender roles

New Family Order



Professor Kotowska studies recent demographic trends in Poland

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Over the past 15 years Poland has seen changes in how people form and raise a family, meaning the process of marriage and procreation. Increasingly fewer children are being born, and women are deciding to marry and to have their first child at an increasingly later age

Together with other countries in Central Europe, Poland is now experiencing the changes that have been underway in countries with developed market economies since the 1960s. These transformations began in Scandinavia, then came to encompass the countries of Western Europe, then Southern Europe, and reached Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. In all these countries, we can observe similar demographic trends in terms of fertility, as well as similar changes in the family model resulting from both the greater economic activity and the independence of women and from the situation on the labor market.

Some statistics

These changes have also come to effect Poland. In our country, indicators on processes that have a fundamental impact on both the nature and development of the family and on the current and future demographic situation have been systematically shifting since 1989. The total fertility rate, defined as the average number of children per woman aged 15-49, is dropping and remains on a level considerably below the reproduction level. And so, while the total fertility rate in Poland stood at 2.08 in 1989, it fell to 1.22 in 2003.

The eagerness with which families are being raised is also dropping. As recently as in 1990 there were 255,000 marriages in

Poland, yet only 195,000 couples decided to tie the knot in 2003. Decisions to get married and to give birth to a child are being made at a later age. The average age of women getting married for the first time stood at 23 in the mid-90s, but rose to 24.3 in 2003; the same figure also rose by more than 1 year for bachelors, to 26.6 years. The average age of women giving birth to their first child was at 23.7 years in 1988, but rose to 24.9 years in 2003.

Marriage rates have fallen steadily in Poland, signalling a fundamental change in the process of forming a family



Lukasz Giza / Agencja Gazeta

Women's growing professional activity does not necessarily mean a more equal sharing of household and childbearing duties between father and mother



Krzysztof Kallinski

The number of one-person households has risen by 1 mln, now accounting for 25% of all households. Informal relationships, which until recently came up against social ostracism, are now an increasingly more common lifestyle, and marriages are now relatively frequently ending in divorce. The divorce rate in Poland stood at 1.5 in 1990, against 1.7 in 2003 – although this is still one of the lowest rates in Europe. The number of out-of-wedlock births has increased too, but is similarly among the lowest in Europe.

All of these trends, taken together, represent a process of the deinstitutionalization and destabilization of the family. This gives rise to weak and unstable family ties, diversity in terms of family forms, and also a growing number of incomplete families which lack a father or – considerably more rarely – a mother.

Individuals, not a family

The rising individualization of behaviors and perception of social roles, the expanded spectrum of life choices available to individuals, and individuals' increased responsibility for their own life choices all bear upon family-related decisions as well. Individuals have attained a greater ability to choose the time in their lives when demographic events occur, and also to choose their sequence. The traditional model of the family – which involves asymmetric gender roles (where the father of the family is responsible for the financial situation, while the mother is responsible for childrearing and the atmosphere at home) and prioritizes the child (the "king-child with parents") – has ceased to be accepted by individuals who seek self-realization and support gender equality. The

gradual increase in women's economic activity has brought about an increase in their economic independence, and their opportunities to choose different social roles.

As a result, not only has marriage's significance as a kind of economic insurance decreased, assessments of how attractive marriage and motherhood are as lifestyle choices have also changed. The family has not been rejected as a basic form of social relations, yet there have been shifts in the family's significance and the way in which it is formed (not necessarily via a formal marriage), as well as shifts in family relations, both between the two parents themselves and between the parents and their children (the "king-pair with a child"). Partnership-based and symmetrical relations between parents in terms of their responsibility for the financial and emotional situation in the family and the greater significance of parents' satisfaction with the relationship they are in have changed attitudes towards parenting and changed the position of children. They continue to be important, but they are not what is most important for the quality of this relationship. Improvements in the birth control (effectiveness, availability, and ease-of-use) have also been another important factor of change in procreative motivations, which can most concisely be characterized as a transition from contraception (from preventing unwanted conceptions) towards conscious procreation.

Family models

One of the basic causes for these shifts in family-related demographic behaviors lies with the greater economic activity of women. This is an irreversible process leading

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to fundamental changes in the family model, considered in terms of the relation between paid work and performing family duties, reflects how the social roles of women and men are perceived. In the traditional family model, the man is responsible for financially supporting the family, while the woman is responsible for taking care of the home and the children (the "single breadwinner model"). This model has been gradually displaced, first by the model in which the father is still the main supporter of the family and the mother's professional work stems from a need to supplement the household's income, yet is subordinate to her family duties (the "male breadwinner model - female part-time home career"), and subsequently by a model in which both parents bear responsibility for supporting the family, but the woman continues to be responsible for handling household duties (the "dual earner model - double burden of females").

The transformations that are taking place on the modern labour market, such as changes in the organization, nature, and patterns of employment, demand that employees be highly flexible and mobile. On the other hand instability and discontinuity of employment with the associated increased sense of uncertainty require both parents to be present in the market so as to reduce the risk of a drastic deterioration in the family's financial situation should one of them lose their job. As a result of such transformations in the job market and the changes constantly taking place in how

men and women's social roles are perceived, the family model that involves two working parents who are jointly responsible for family duties (the "dual breadwinner / dual career model") is becoming increasingly relevant.

Two conflicts

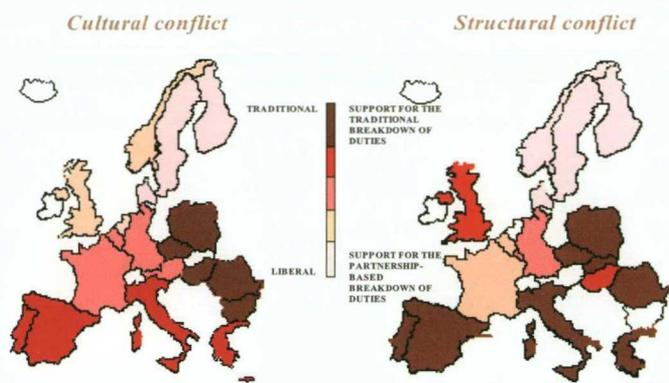
On the one hand, as a result of such increased competition and greater demands on the labour market, and on the other, due to the above-mentioned changes in norms and the system of values - giving rise to greater expectations from life, greater individual needs for self-realization in many realms (the personal, family, and professional domains) - it has become increasingly difficult for women to combine the two basic types of life activities, given the persisting traditional division of household obligations and given the shortage of institutional solutions aimed at reconciling the two activities. Here, we are dealing with two types of conflict. The first type, called the "structural conflict," involves the failure to adapt institutional solutions to take account of economic women's activity. The second type, the "cultural conflict," involves the attitude towards the social roles of men and women, meaning to define what should be the responsibility of the former and the latter, including a definition of the relationship between professional work and the family.

These two conflicts usually co-occur, but they may be of differing intensity. Studies have shown that the countries of Northern Europe are characterized by the lowest cultural and structural conflicts, while Southern and Central Europe see both intense structural and cultural conflicts. At the same time the highest fertility is now being recorded in the Scandinavian countries, which are also simultaneously characterized by the highest level of employment among women, as well as by the least discrepancy between employment rates for men and women. This shows that it is possible to have such solutions that enable both fertility and the professional activity of women to be retained on a high level. In the countries of Southern Europe, on the other hand, where fertility is among the lowest in Europe, employment figures among women are also the lowest, and the greatest discrepancies are seen between the employment

Families with three or more children accounted for only 17 per cent of the total number of families in Poland in 2002, while families with one child accounted for 47 per cent



Agencja Gazeta / Marcei Zielenkiewicz



Source: Muszyńska M., 2003, Gender, structural conflict and family formation in Poland, European Population Conference, Warsaw, August 2003.

of men and women. In Central Europe, too, the fertility rate is the lowest, while employment rates are also relatively low, especially in Poland and Slovakia.

At present, the most frequently occurring model in European countries is the one whereby women bear a "double burden" – meaning when women are responsible for homeduties and for childcare, and also work at the same time. The Labor Force Survey of the fourth quarter of 2001 showed that the double-burden model characterized 57% of those surveyed. Almost one out of three respondents lived according to the traditional model, while only one out of ten lived according to the partnership model. Here, reality differs from expressed preferences: in the Population Policy Acceptance Survey taken in 2001, the traditional model was supported by only 6% of those who had precise views on the subject, while the partnership model was more frequently preferred than models that involved working women also responsible for family obligations (48% vs. 46%, respectively).

The issue of reconciling work and family duties is becoming a central point of discussion concerning the possible changes in the family and fertility. An awareness is gradually increasing that the consistently low fertility rate in Europe should be recognized as a key issue that must be given priority treatment in European Union development strategies. Combining professional life and raising a family under the conditions of a competitive labor market, which prefers mobile and flexible employees, thus necessitates that solutions be adopted to assist both parents in reconciling their professional and

family obligations. The type of family with two working parents is currently the dominant form, and so the point here is that both parents need to be treated equally, as equal participants both in the labor market and in performing household duties. This entails implementing the proper regulations to recognize both mothers and fathers as being entitled to benefit from solutions that enable them to reconcile work and family (child-related leave time, and benefits, flexible working hours, part-time work etc.) Such changes are gradually being implemented in more and more countries.

Nevertheless, introducing the proper regulations will not suffice. Unless attitudes towards sharing household and professional duties between men and women change, i.e. without a change in mentality about partnership in the family, such solutions may be of little practical significance. As a case in point, even though fathers in Poland have been authorized to take childbirth leave since 1995, and also to take childrearing leave and collect childrearing benefits since 1996, in practice such opportunities are utilized very rarely.

The cultural underpinnings of sharing such duties is thus of fundamental significance for adapting institutional conditions to make them more conducive for both parents combining family and economic activities. In other words, effectively relieving the structural conflict hinges upon cultural changes in the gender roles. In light of the changes taking place on the labor market, which are not friendly to the family, it will be hard to expect to see an improvement in fertility in Europe and Poland unless solutions are implemented to help make work and family less at odds with each other. ■

Further reading

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- Matysiak A. (2004). *Family Models – Preferences and Limitations* [in Polish]. Warszawa: Warsaw School of Economics.
- Muszyńska H., (2004). Family models in Europe in the context of women's status. *Working Papers on Population, Family and Welfare*. Budapest: Hungarian Central Statistical Office.