

POLISH FAMILY POLICY IN THE FACE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. RESULTS OF PILOT STUDIES

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***Abstract.** Family policy in Poland has undergone a number of changes over the last few decades. The authorities are constantly modifying the law and instruments, implementing new programs and projects which are supposed to lead to the implementation of specific goals and to improve the functioning of families and the whole society. The unprecedented situation and outbreak of the epidemic has highlighted new challenges and problems, also for family policy. The aim of the article is to show the challenges faced by Polish family policy after the outbreak of the COVID - 19 pandemic and to indicate the directions of solving new problems.*

***Keywords:** family policy, economy, pandemic, work-life balance*

1. Introduction

In Poland, family policy has undergone numerous modifications for many decades. From a policy in which the responsibility for the functioning of the family belonged exclusively to parents and the role of the state, even in the provision of institutional care for children was very limited, to a policy supporting both children and those caring for them, with particular emphasis on working parents and low-income families. In the past, family policy has faced various challenges. In the post-war period, when Poland lost one fifth of its population, family policy was focused on improving the demographic situation in the country. At the end of the 1950s, antipronatalist policies intensified and conscious motherhood was promoted. The next decade brought changes. Attempts were made to improve the living conditions of families, benefits were granted, social housing increased, and a sphere of services was developed to help families function. In the 1970s, the rights of women during pregnancy and after giving birth increased. At that time, the amount of maternity leave was

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increased, childbirth and parental benefits were introduced, and a Maintenance Fund was created. In the 1980s there was an increase in the number of births, but it was mainly related to the fact that people born in the post-war period entered the reproductive age, and not to the effects of the pro-family policy. Issues related to family policy entered the public discourse for good after the political transformation. Since then, three main stages of its development can be distinguished – from 1989 to the second half of the 1990s – the transformation period; from the end of the 1990s to 2005 – the development period; and the third – the mature one, lasting until now. During this period – since 1989, family policy faced many problems – from the demographic crisis to insufficient institutional care for children to the financial situation of families. Social and family policy in many countries of the European Union and the world was shaped by the economic crisis in 2008. Despite the fact that the negative effects of the crisis were not felt in Poland, it caused the withdrawal from liberal reforms. More conservative solutions were introduced, which were supposed to support families financially through the transfer of cash benefits, and began to strengthen the care of children by family members. To sum up, in Poland family policy tried to respond to emerging, increasingly different challenges.

Nowadays, the outbreak of the worldwide pandemic coronavirus caused that new problems and challenges emerged, in particular of an economic, social and psychological nature. In particular, there is a need to implement new instruments that would facilitate the reconciliation of work and private life, which is related to the increasingly widespread phenomenon of remote working. It is to be expected that the mode of remote work, regardless of the development of the epidemic, will be implemented more and more often, which is also economically justified. Issues concerning the reconciliation of professional life, including remote working, with private life have already been raised many times in the Polish public arena, as evidenced, for example, by the election programs of political parties whose candidates applied for the seats of deputies and senators in 2019. However, at that time they were not so priority that certain solutions quickly entered into force. A greater need for their introduction emerged after the outbreak of the pandemic.

The aim of the study is to show the challenges faced by Polish family policy after the outbreak of the pandemic. In particular, however, it focuses on instruments that facilitate reconciliation of work and private life. Polish legal solutions in this area are presented and new ideas considered. The new, unprecedented situation made it necessary and

extremely necessary to diagnose how employees combine their professional duties by working online with home care for children during the pandemic.

Due to the fact that in the literature and in international legal acts there is no single definition of the concept of a family or family policy, these terms should be defined each time. The article assumes that family policy covers issues related to both the creation of the family and its functioning in appropriate conditions. The family is the basic and most important social institution which should be supported by the state at all levels of its development. Decisions made by public authorities in the area of family policy should be directed to the needs of all families, taking into account conditions and factors of, among others, economic, social, historical or political.

Various research methods were used in the study, mainly descriptive, comparative and CAWI (computer assisted Web interview). The nationwide survey had a pilot character and was addressed to people who worked online during the pandemic and at the same time looked after children¹. The search for literature, legal acts and analysis of the questionnaires made it possible to achieve the aim of the study and to draw conclusions.

2. Polish solutions to the problem of reconciliation of work and private life

The demographic and economic changes in the family model, which have been observed for several decades now, not only in Poland, but in most European and world countries, determine the directions of changes in family Policy [see: Eydal GB, T. Rostgaard, 2018]. The roles of individual family members are changing, their needs and expectations are also changing. As a result, new challenges are emerging for public authorities and contemporary family policy, requiring a number of actions and decisions, which in turn are implemented using specific instruments.

In recent years, the authorities in Poland have tried to respond to the demographic decline and to the economic problems of families. To meet the needs and requirements of society, it was decided to support families and offer them financial benefits. The employees after the birth of a child

¹ Author of the study: A. Szczudlińska-Kanoś, M. Marzec, Institute of Public Affairs, Jagiellonian University. The research was conducted on a random group of 58 people between 15 May and 05 June 2020.

and those bringing up small children were also taken care of. A number of solutions have been created to help raise children. Over several years, the rules for using maternity leave have been extended and numerous, parental and paternity leave have been introduced. The time during which parental leaves may be used was modified. The provisions concerning the calculation of social security contributions in the case of taking parental leave were also changed. In addition, it was decided to pay financial benefits for children, modified tax breaks for families with children, and created the option of collecting a minimum pension for mothers (in special cases, fathers) who raised a minimum of four children – the so-called Mother 4+. In Poland, apart from the nationwide financial benefit for children, the so-called 500 +, which consists in the payment of 500 PLN for each child regardless of the family income, after meeting the income criterion, various social assistance benefits are available for giving birth and bringing up children. Moreover, there is a national program 300 +, in which 300 PLN is transferred to all children once a year to partially cover school expenses. It should be noted that since 2011 the availability of childcare and upbringing services for children has also significantly improved, although there are still huge deficiencies in this respect.

Nowadays, one of the most important challenges of the Polish family policy is the implementation of further legal, organizational or technological instruments and solutions that could support the reconciliation of professional and private life and facilitate raising children [see: Ashmarina, Mesquita, Vochozka, 2020]. The lack of such solutions results in a number of other problems, which appear, among others, in public finances, pension systems, health systems and the labor market. These problems became particularly evident after the outbreak of the pandemic.

Currently, Poland has one of the longest paid maternity leaves in the world. Nowadays, after many modifications, maternity leave after the birth of one child is 20 weeks. Then, parents are entitled to 32 weeks of parental leave, which was introduced in 2013. If a parent declares from the beginning to take 52 weeks, they are paid in the amount of 80 per cent of the basis of the remuneration received in the last 12 months. If the declarations are made for subsequent periods, the first 26 weeks of maternity leave is paid at 100 percent of the basis of assessment, followed by 60 percent. For the first 14 weeks, with exceptions, the mother is obliged to take the leave. The rest can be taken by the father on the same basis. Paternal leave can also be used together, but then the periods add up. While on parental leave, it is possible to work for the employer granting

this leave for no more than half of the full working hours. After the birth of a child, regardless of the rights of the mother, the father has the exclusive right to take paternity leave, which is 100 percent paid. This leave is up to 2 weeks and can be taken within 24 months after the birth of the child [Act of 25 June 1999 on Money Benefits from Social Insurance in case of Illness and Maternity].

Workers meeting certain conditions may take child-care leave at the end of their parental leave. For many years it has been 36 months and now can be taken up to the age of 6 years (earlier to the age of 4, than 5). There are additional regulations for disabled children. Unlike maternity leave and parental leave, child – care leave is unpaid. After fulfilling the income criterion, it is possible to apply for a social assistance allowance for raising a child. It is important, especially in the light of the new EU Directive of 2019 [Directive 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019] that within this period, 1 month is allocated exclusively to the other parent, without the possibility of its transfer.

Pregnant women are particularly protected. From the moment of pregnancy until the day of childbirth and throughout the whole period of maternity, parental and parental leave, a female employee is protected by the Labor Code and, except in exceptional cases, cannot be dismissed from work. In case of employment under civil law contracts, the provisions are separate. When a contract ends during pregnancy or maternity leave, the employment relationship is prolonged until the day of childbirth, which in most cases makes it possible to take paid leave for the birth of a child. A woman returning to work after the birth of a child is entitled to a breastfeeding break. Parents can also take so-called child care days – 2 days or 16 hours in each calendar year for both parents together, without giving any reason for their absence from work, until the child is 14 years old. These days are 100% paid. From the point of view of reconciling professional and private life, it is important to note that without the consent of the employee caring for a child until the age of 4 years, it is not allowed to postpone the work or employ overtime, night time or intermittent working hours. Employees caring for children are also entitled to sick leave if the child is sick. The allowance is 60 days for all children up to the age of 14 in total and 14 days for older children and other family members. The allowance is paid in the amount of 80% of an employee's average monthly salary.

In addition to financial assistance in the form of benefits and allowances, employees with children, by submitting an annual tax return,

can also benefit from the tax credit for children, by which the amount of income tax due for a given year can be reduced.

Despite the fact that Poland has been discussing the issue of supporting families with children for several years and other solutions are being implemented, it is still desirable to implement further solutions. New ideas often appear before the election. Candidates and party groups have then the opportunity to submit their ideas in electoral programs. For example, in 2019, before parliamentary elections, it was postulated that the largest employers carry out wage surveys every two years in order to detect and prevent unjustified bad practices on the gender pay gap [Law and Justice Program, 2019]. In order to increase the number of places in care – education for children [see: Civil Coalition Program, 2019] there offered the employers support in the creation of so-called plant nurseries and kindergartens by simplifying the procedures for obtaining permits to open such facilities [Law and Justice Program, 2019]. Supporting the partnership model of the family and a fair distribution of roles in childcare should be done, inter alia, by promoting paternity leave and guaranteeing two months of paid parental leave specifically for fathers [The electoral program of the Democratic Left Alliance – Left, 2019]. As regards leaves, it is also proposed to guarantee one parent the possibility to work part-time for 12 months after the parental leave and to pay PLN 1,000 to the salary taken during this time, regardless of the form of employment [Electoral Program of the Polish People's Party, Polish Coalition, 2019]. The idea was also presented that the sickness benefit for pregnant women, which is currently financed by the employer as remuneration for the time of sickness for 33 days, should be financed from the beginning by the Social Insurance Institution in order not to expose employers to additional costs [Civil Coalition Program, 2019]. It has also been proposed that care should also be provided for older children (over 10 years old) and it is therefore expected that every primary school will provide free and professional extra-curricular care for students until parents return from work. In addition, it would be helpful to provide for the possibility of reducing working time by one hour for parents bringing up children under 10 years of age and returning them to school or kindergarten [Electoral Program of the Polish People's Party, Polish Coalition, 2019].

It was also postulated that the catalog of cases in which the employer must take into account an employee's application for teleworking, working with the use of new technologies, will be added to the employee – the parent of a child aged 1-3 years, assuming that the nature of the work will allow it to be performed outside the employer's premises [Law and Justice

Program, 2019]. After the outbreak of the epidemic, the last of the above mentioned postulates gained great importance.

3. Combining on-line work with childcare as a challenge for family policy after the Covid-19 pandemic – results of pilot studies

Today, the world faces another problem – the fight against the coronavirus Covid-19, which has already claimed millions of victims and will certainly continue to spread. Most countries have decided to introduce the severe restrictions necessary to extinguish the pandemic. In Poland, for many weeks it was closed, among others: borders, schools, kindergartens, creches, universities, shopping malls, service outlets, cultural institutions, suspended flights, and citizens returning from abroad were forced to go through a two-week quarantine, just like others with specific symptoms of the disease. In addition, the necessity of covering the mouth and nose in public places was introduced. The effect of "freezing the economies" of countries for a long period of time will cause the economic crisis and the necessity to implement unconventional solutions.

The inability to provide work resulting in many employers having to lay off their employees, reduce their working hours or reduce their wages already in the first month of the epidemic. In Poland, the public authorities have developed the so-called "crisis shield", which is based on five pillars: protection of workplaces and worker safety, financing of entrepreneurs, health care, strengthening of the financial system, public investment [Anti-crisis Shield, 2020]. On a declarative level, it is to a large extent intended to help certain entrepreneurs in the form of the possibility of deferring or liquidating social security contributions within a few months, partial coverage of wage costs for employees and many other undertaking [see: Family friendly policies, 2020].

The virus crown pandemic has influenced and will continue to influence family policy as well. The epidemic revealed new problems encountered by families regardless of their stage of development. First, the closing of schools and childcare facilities forced parents to stay at home. The government recommended that employers should enable their employees to work remotely, as far as possible, so that some people started to carry out their duties on-line, while combining their professional and childcare responsibilities. Therefore, it was decided to introduce an additional care allowance for parents of children up to eight years of age; up to 16 years of age who had a disability certificate; up to 18 years of age

who had a significant or moderate degree of disability and children who have a special education certificate [Take advantage of the additional care allowance]. The extended period of receiving the additional care allowance did not affect for the limit of the traditional care allowance for childcare, but was equally paid. The care allowance is 80% of the salary. However, parents of older children who still need supervision and support still had a problem.

Despite the above, the survey showed that in 74.1 percent households of people working on-line and having children did not receive such an allowance. In these households no childcare benefits were received, despite the fact that as many as 74% respondents showed that their work at home, carried out remotely, depended on the obligations arising from childcare. For more than 50% of the respondents the hours of work at home were very dependent on the obligations imposed from childcare.

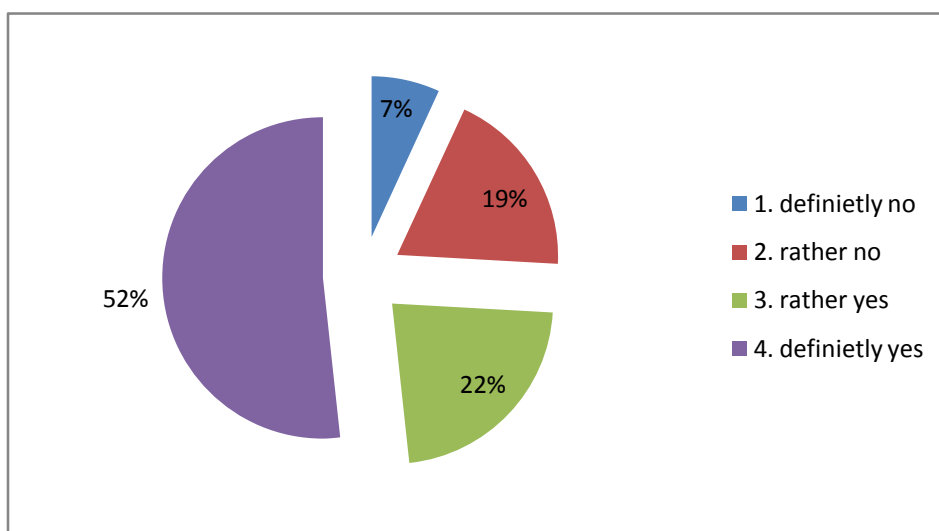


Figure 1. Dependence of working hours on domestic duties.

Own study

The implementation of solutions facilitating the combination of remote work and childcare is also confirmed by the results presented in Figure 2. It is clear that very rigid and rigid boundaries between performing professional duties and childcare are set by only 14% of respondents. Most of the respondents – 38% of them work while caring for children, and 24.1% occasionally set such boundaries.

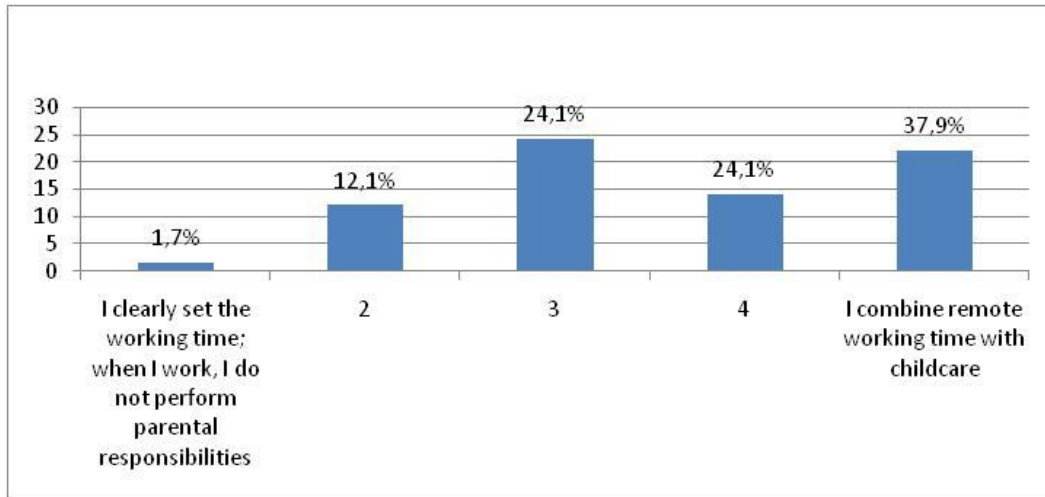


Figure 2. Combining professional work with childcare on a scale from 1 to 5.

Own study

It is positive that the half of the respondents assessed that the employer creates conditions for performing remote work in conditions adapted to childcare. Only one in four respondents stated that the employer does not provide such conditions (Figure 3). In the opinion of the respondents, it would be good to introduce other additional solutions which would help in performing remote work and childcare. For example: no imposition of strict meeting hours, greater time flexibility in performing duties or the possibility of taking breaks in work. These conclusions are important not only from the point of view of working on – line during a pandemic. The changes that have taken place and are likely to evolve further have resulting in remote work being carried out in organizations to a greater extent than before. This will have a number of positive and negative consequences, both for employees and employers. In particular, there will be changes in labor costs and problems related to achieving a work-life balance.

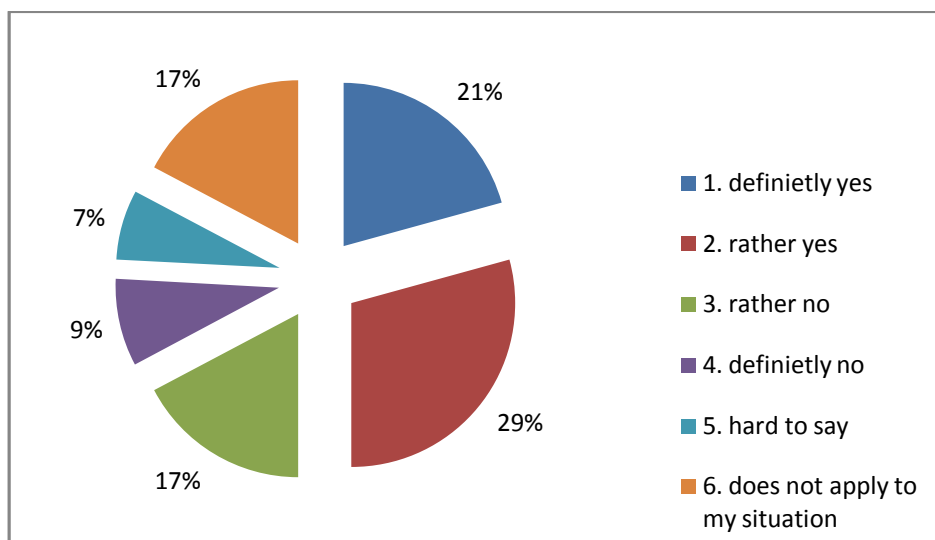


Figure 3. Creation by the employer the conditions for performing remote work in conditions adapted to taking care of children.

Own study

In addition to the problem of combining online work with childcare, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted other problems faced by family policy. Suspension of traditional classes in educational institutions showed the real possibilities of using ICT technologies and revealed a lack of skills in using modern tools, both on the part of students and teachers. Moreover, it is worrying that some students did not have access to computers, the Internet, printers or scanners, which in the near future may not only cause digital exclusion among children and young people, but also deepen inequality in education.

It turned out that the organization of the work of a school or other childcare facility made it easier to combine professional work with childcare only 38% of respondents. 41% of the respondents answered that the care and educational institutions do not facilitate remote work at home. Children, especially younger classes of primary school and kindergartens in the field of remote education, required substantive assistance and technical support of their parents, which at the same time made it impossible for caretakers to perform their professional duties. In the longer term, children and young people will return to school, so it should be expected that this problem will not be as severe.

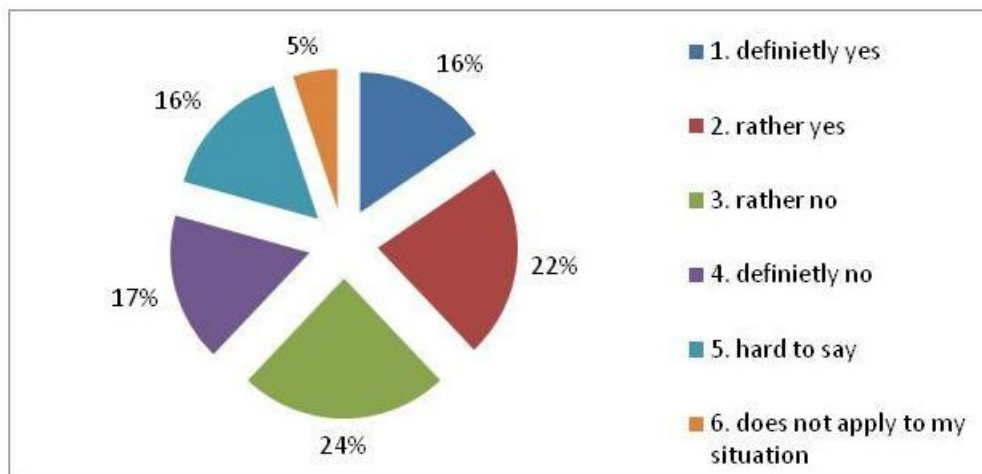


Figure 4. Organization of work in a school or other care and educational institution and combining professional work with childcare.

Own study

Moreover, the prolonged period of the epidemic also caused problems within families. Often staying at home of whole families, combined with the fear of infection, a sense of lack of control and a vision of potential worsening of the material situation, can activate additional emotions leading to aggression and violence. Families with sick, disabled people, those in need of care or rehabilitation, as well as multi-generational families living in shared households are in a very unfavorable situation. Seniors, people in poor health, as the most vulnerable group during the epidemic, should limit contacts with others as much as possible. It is therefore very important to take care of mental and physical safety, especially for children, who are unable to cope with this difficult situation, and to create additional assistance programs [see: Policy Brief: The Impact of Covid-19 on children, 2020; Lessons from a once-in-a-life experience, Families and family policies after Covid-19, 2020].

Certainly, in the coming months and years the problems of families will change, and the ones presented above are only the result of observations and pilot surveys using the CAWI method at the beginning of the epidemic. In the nearest future they will need to be thoroughly verified and diagnosed. However, the costs and organization of specific assistance will certainly be a huge barrier.

4. Conclusion

Over the decades, and especially the last two decades, Polish family policy has undergone many changes. Public authorities have tried to respond to further problems and challenges. It is worth noting that many of them still remain valid. There is invariably a need to increase childcare places. Apart from opening new places of care and subsidizing the facilities, it would also be desirable to support organizations in opening in-house care and educational facilities. Families still need financial support, including help with the purchase of their own flat or house, which can have a positive impact on the fertility rate and psychological support, as became apparent during the pandemic. In addition, families with people with disabilities, the sick, and the elderly, who need the care of their loved ones, require help. The epidemic also revealed that it is particularly important to support parents in combining work and private life. The changes that occurred after the outbreak of the pandemic are irreversible. The need to use modern technologies will not be without a response for the future. Employees will perform their professional duties more often than before at home, which will have both negative and positive effects.

Therefore, it is worth considering the implementation of legal solutions that would enable and facilitate remote work to a greater extent than before. In addition to the obvious issues such as strengthening institutional childcare, this could also be a solution that directly affects employees. These include, among others, flexible forms of working time, task settlements, the implementation of provisions enabling the completion of tasks and the on-line handling of administrative formalities.

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