CHAPTER 4

Changes in the Area of Family Life in Poland

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Since the start of political, economic, and social transitions in 1989, the area of family life, like other sectors of social life, has undergone profound and accelerated transformation. It should be noted that changes both in political and economic life have been initiated by institutional reforms, which had formally been approved and sent down for implementation from the top of the public administration. The first aspect of transition, that is, political change, covered such areas as the introduction of free elections and democratic forms of government, liberalisation of the media, and the reform of public administration (aimed at, among other things, devolving some tasks and areas of competence from the top level of administration to local government). Institutional change concerning the economy, it should be emphasised, included in the first place the shift from a centrally planned economy to a free market economy, privatisation, and the liberalisation of trade and production.

However, in the area of customs and traditions, which certainly includes family life, changes cannot be brought in by way of instruction from public institutions, at least not in democratic and liberal countries, amongst which I include Poland since 1989. Therefore, at least for this reason, the area of family life has gone through inconsistent change, with varied intensity in different social groups. It is difficult to identify one tendency that would describe the direction and the nature of the change. One might say that in the area of family life a ‘struggle’ has taken place between the traditional\(^1\) and post-modern

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1 Sociologists often use the term ‘traditional family’, but they define it, just as often, in a different way. In this chapter I use the term ‘traditional family’ after Louise B. Silverstein and Carl Auerbach (2005) to describe a model of heterogenic relationship in which the husband acts as a breadwinner and the wife looks after the home and family. In the studies based on surveys in Poland (e.g., CBOS – Public Opinion Research Centre reports, frequently quoted in this chapter), ‘traditional family’ is described in the same way, which shows that this definition of family is widely understood and used in society (I elaborate on this form of popular relationship further in this chapter). It should be emphasised that this family model is legitimised and promoted by the Catholic Church in Poland. I describe ‘modern family’ – also after Silverstein and Auerbach – as a model of relationship in which both partners work and earn money for the family and the woman thus assumes the extra responsibility of looking after children and home. (In the CBOS report quoted above, this category is named ‘mixed model’). However, the ‘post-modern family’ is considered by both Silverstein and Auerbach and me as a deconstruction of the traditional family, including for example lesbian couples or
models of the family and family values. As a result, the present model of family life in Poland may be located on a continuum, the extremities of which are determined by these two models; on one hand, the model of the family promoted through the strength of the Catholic Church in Poland, involving the traditional division of gender roles, that is, a man working to support the family as a breadwinner and a woman forsaking a professional career to care for children; and on the other hand, a model based on equal rights and partnership. The main aim of this chapter is to describe the space between these two models of family life.

The contemporary models of family life in Poland are not entirely free of the influence of family patterns commonly practised in the People's Republic of Poland (PRL). It should be remembered that the official ideology of the socialist state stressed the equal status of men and women and of women's labour. Even in typical male jobs such as tractor driver this was much promoted (as advertised by popular posters bearing the slogan, 'Woman, get on the tractor!'). The 1952 Constitution included the idea that

> in the People's Republic of Poland, a woman has equal rights in all walks of life, political, economic, social and cultural, guaranteed by the right to work and earn money equal to that of a man, based on the rule: 'equal pay for equal work', the right to study, the right to be respected and be rewarded, the right to take high-level positions in the public sector.

This ideology and – perhaps more, if not most importantly – the difficult economic situation of Polish families made many women look for employment outside the home, and this led to increased rates of women's employment in the PRL. In the mid-1970s, 75 per cent of working women were married (as compared to 16 per cent in 1932, 18 per cent in 1950, and 55 per cent in 1960). Moreover, in the 1970s, 90 per cent of married women had children.

However, studies on the division of duties between men and women and the time spent on the performance of those duties carried out in family households in the 1970s showed that 'equality' remained only a propaganda slogan. It is interesting that today's problem of combining work and family life is not new to Polish women, nor a question of adopting Western patterns of family life. It should be emphasised that in the PRL the ideology of the Catholic

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childless couples. In this chapter, I attempt to combine the 'post-modern family model' with the idea of partnership and equality between people who are in a relationship. (In the CBOS report, a similar type of relationship is called 'partnership model'.)

2 See Sections 2 and 3 of this chapter.

3 Wieruszewski (1975).