

Ewa Jurczyk-Romanowska

## THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHALLENGES OF MODERNITY – SINGLE PARENTHOOD IN MACRO, MESO, AND MICRO PERSPECTIVE

**Annotation.** The purpose of the present paper is to compare three levels of discourse on the subject of the 21<sup>st</sup> century family. The macro scale is represented by the ideas of the International Year of the Family + 20, the meso scale – by the postulates of the government of Poland aimed at the implementation of international presumptions in Poland. The reality experienced by single parents and its inherent evaluation of the realisation of the government's postulates constitutes the micro scale. Comparison of the three perspectives allows for a discernment of the shortcomings of the government's postulates as well as the somewhat superficial character of the undertaken actions.

**Keywords:** 21<sup>st</sup> century family, International Year of the Family + 20, single parenthood.

*A future democratic society cannot be perceived as a mere sum of autonomous individuals protecting their personal interests. Instead it should be viewed as a new formation of society members constantly searching for new ways to harmonise personal and the emerging community relations to make them more humane.*

Meilė Lukšienė, 1999

### Introduction: the 21<sup>st</sup> century family

In 1948 in Paris the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted at the Third Session of the United Nations General Assembly. In article 16 of the declaration it is stated that: “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State” [17]. The article is understood as the main rule of pro-family policies on the UN forum because the presented definition of the family is the only one that is accepted by all the member states. Furthermore, such approach provides the states with the opportunity to work out their own definitions of the family and to specify its functions and its areas of support, taking into account the economic, social, and cultural character of a particular country [25]. However, since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, considerable changes in the family and its

functions have been observed. Economic rationality is the defining factor in the strategy of the forming of the 21<sup>st</sup> century family [2]. During the period of Poland's transition from the Communist to the Democratic system new types of economic and social pressure arose; one of the results is that young people remain single longer, delay having the first child, take prolonged breaks between having subsequent children, and limit the number of offspring [7]. The changes of the contemporary family are also clearly related to the phenomenon of single parenthood; in Poland it is typically, in fact, single motherhood [4]. In the 1960s and the 1970s single mothers were stigmatized and condemned; this tendency was particularly noticeable in villages. Today, however, this model applies to 1 in 10 of Polish families [7]; having children born out of wedlock is not usually the reason to get married and it is no longer shameful to have such children. On the other hand, the lives of single mothers, especially the adolescent ones, are still difficult, mainly in the economic sense [10]. Over the last few years, during my research on the systemic conditions of single parenthood in Poland, I have noticed that in Polish regulations the problem is often ignored or treated only superficially. Hence the idea of the present paper constituting a comparison of three different perspectives – the macro perspective, connected with the postulates of the pro-family policy of the United Nations expressed in, among others, the International Year of the Family and its anniversaries, the meso perspective, related to Poland's pro-family policy and based on the UN postulates, and the micro perspective, which involves an analysis of the situation of single parents based on a comparison of the legal regulations that an individual has to abide and their evaluation as expressed in interviews with single parents. The title of the paper is a paraphrase of “Challenges facing the family in the XXI<sup>st</sup> century” – the subject of the conference that took place in Poland on April 3, 2013, during which the UN ideas and the areas of Poland's pro-family policy defining the structure of the present article were brought forward.

**The macro perspective: the assumptions of the 1994 International Year of the Family and its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in light of United Nations documents**

On December 8, 1989 the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 44/82 proclaiming the year 1994 the International Year of the Family (IYF), with its meaning expressed in the motto: *Family Resources and Responsibilities in a Changing World*, with the accompanying statement: *Building the Smallest Democracy at the Heart of Society* [13]. A year later, the Secretary General was obliged to prepare the programme of the preparations for and the observance of the International Year of the Family [13]. As a result, on December 16, 1991 a report of the Secretary General titled *Preparations for and observance of the International Year of the Family* [14] was accepted, and on August 19, 1993 another crucial document was accepted. It was the report of the Secretary General titled *International Year of the Family* which enacted executive organs and their competences, defined the levels of the preparations for and the observance of the IYF as the national, the regional, and the international ones, and, last but not least, described the aims of the forthcoming event [15]. Thus, it was agreed that the basic goals of the International Year of the Family should consist in actions aimed at:

- Increasing awareness of the issues connected with the family among the representatives of governments and members of societies,
- Supporting all types of national governmental and non-governmental organisations in their work for the formulating, improving, and evaluating family policies,
- Creating new quality actions for the family or emphasising that it is important to undertake such actions, depending on the situation of the family in a particular country or local community,
- Increasing the effectiveness of the already existing organisations which are active mainly on the local, regional, and national level,
- Developing more effectual forms of cooperation between national and international organisations with the aim of employing and transferring the wide experience in issues related to the family, in the broad sense of the term, of the latter to the former,
- Creating a world forum and constantly growing intellectual and organisational foundation aimed at supporting the family in its three aforementioned basic aspects.

On the basis of the 1993 report of the Secretary General the following functions of the national coordinating committees were defined [1]:

- Coordinating (in an effective way) the activities of those governmental organisations connected with the local governments and non-governmental organisations that are willing to promote the International Year of the Family in their local communities,
  - Initiating studies and research on the introduction and improvement of national programmes related to the functioning of the family as well as a fuller and richer observance of the International Year of the Family,
  - Inspiring grassroots initiatives and creating an intellectual and political lobby in order to review and evaluate the contemporary population policy and to address the issues connected with the family and the awareness of the necessity of constant introduction of quality changes,
  - Initiating new studies on the family, creating a much broader scientific and informational foundation, and incorporating important social and professional groups into such activity in order for the problems of the International Year of the Family to become a subject of ongoing discussions and journalistic polemics in which opinions of professionals as well as statements and reflections of other members of society are included,
  - In the long term, convincing national governments to include plans related to the family in the socioeconomic plans that they implement,
  - Encouraging the public to use the reports prepared by national governments for the International Conference on Population and Development, coordinated by the UN, that was to take place in Cairo from September 5 to September 13, 1994, to force the governments to publically present the aims and tasks of their currently implemented population policies along with the characteristics of future programmes for the family,
  - Development of a plan of an informational campaign on the subject of International Year of the Family; the plan has to be developed mainly in cooperation with government institutions and it has to include chronological and organisational details of the tasks and aims that are to be achieved with the involvement of many social groups, including school children and youth, universities, the press, radio and television, and adults.
- The idea of the International Year of the Family was recalled during its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and more

recently – during the preparations for the observance of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary that are to take place in 2014. Among the aims defined in the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly of March 9, 2012 [16] the following are considered to be of greatest importance for Poland [5]:

- Raising the awareness of the importance of the problems of the family, especially among the governments and the public sector,
- Improving the skills related to the formulating, implementing, and monitoring family policies of government institutions,
- Improving the cooperation between national and international non-governmental organisations supporting the family,
- Increasing the effectiveness of local, national, and regional actions, implementing new family programmes and continuing the existing ones, undertaking new initiatives,
- Evaluation of the needs and the situation of the family on all institutional levels, defining the challenges that the family faces, intensifying the efforts made to solve the problems that are directly related to the family.

**Meso perspective: what the government of Poland proposes to do to implement the postulates and the aims defined in the resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly establishing the International Year of the Family and the observance of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary**

On April 4, 2013, at the 59<sup>th</sup> sitting of the Family and Social Policy Committee there was only one point on the agenda: Challenges facing the family in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The programme and the actions for the family undertaken by the United Nations [25] were discussed, and Renata Kaczmarek, social affairs officer at the Focal Point on the Family at the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, presented the UN postulates related to the family, the International Year for the Family, and the observance of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The utmost importance of introducing family-friendly socioeconomic policies, promoting mutual respect, tolerance, and cooperation within the family and society, supporting partnership between men and women in fulfilling household duties was emphasised [25]. The following aims were mentioned: raising the awareness of the importance of the problems of the family, especially among the governments and the public sector, improving the skills related to the formulating, implementing, and monitoring family policies of government institutions, improving the

cooperation between national and international non-governmental organisations supporting the family, increasing the effectiveness of local, national, and regional actions, implementing new family programmes and continuing the existing ones, and undertaking new initiatives. The necessity to carry out a diagnosis of the situation of families in Poland was underlined [25]. The observance of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the International Year of the Family serves to emphasise the importance of three subjects: “Combating poverty in the family and social exclusion”, “Work-family balance”, and “Supporting social integration and solidarity between generations in families and society” [6]. At the end of her presentation, R. Kaczmarek stated: “I would like to formulate the following questions: Can this set of initiatives be considered a pro-family policy? Is this policy coherent? To what extent is it effective? I would also like to observe that depending on the aims of a particular state it is important that favourable conditions for new families are created; from the demographic point of view, for example. The situation of young people, job creation, better housing conditions, it is all beneficial to the development of the young generation and new families. It seems that creating favourable conditions is the basis for the continuation of this important role that the family has in society. I would also like to observe that subjectivity and independence of the family are of crucial importance, and they consist in providing families with many options, for example, those related to children’s education and child care. We believe that the state should take into account the requests of families, and it seems that it is the most important thing to have many options. The good of children is especially important, as well as partnership in the family and a good public education system at the national level” [25].

In relation to the aims discussed above the following areas of pro-family policy in Poland were defined at the *Challenges facing the family in the XXI<sup>st</sup> century* conference:

- Newborn allowance,
- Maternity allowance,
- Pre-preschool care (nurseries),
- Preschools (preschool subsidy),
- Family benefits (help for the families in difficult financial situation, paid by social services centres),
- Tax relief for families with children,
- School books subsidy,
- The government programme: “State sponsored meals” [6].

**Micro perspective: the areas of pro-family policies in Poland contrasted with the situation of one-parent families described in the narratives of single parents**

As part of my studies on the systemic conditions of single parenthood in Poland, in February and March 2013 I conducted 20 qualitative research interviews [9] in which 17 single mothers and 3 single fathers took part. There were two interviewee selection criteria: single parenthood and application for Polish government benefits. In the collected research material there was a number of references, descriptions of experiences, and evaluations related to the government pro-family policy. For the sake of the present paper I have chosen the most significant ones, which I have, in turn, compared with the areas of pro-family policy as defined by the government of Poland.

The first area of the implementation of the pro-family policy of the Polish government is the newborn allowance. The very formulation of this point is rather unclear, as in the law of Poland there are two similar benefits: the first one is a one-time allowance of 1,000 złoty per child, for which the parents or the legal guardians of the child can apply if the family income per capita does not exceed 1,922.00 złoty. It must be emphasised that this amount was defined by the amendment introduced on October 12, 2012 [23] and previously the benefit could be applied for regardless of income. The application for the allowance has to be made within 12 months of the birth of the child and the mother must be under medical care since the 10<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy [22]. The allowance is commonly known as “becikowe” (from Polish “becik” – “baby’s sleeping bag”). The other allowance is the 1,000 złoty maternity supplement to family benefits; parents or legal guardians may apply for it if the income per capita does not exceed 504 złoty per capita. In the context of single-parent families it needs to be underlined that the second of these allowances cannot be applied for if “the single parent has not been awarded child support from the child’s parent, unless (a) both parents or one of the parents is deceased, (b) the father of the child remains unknown, (c) the action for child support from the other parent has been dismissed, (d) the court has obligated one of the parents to bear the entirety of the costs of the maintenance of the child and has not obligated the other parent to pay child support” [22].

Single parents mention the burdensome nature of the criteria and the procedure of the application for this allowance: “in order to get the maternity allowance, to get ‘becikowe’, there always has to be

the child support certificate, or the lawsuit dismissal, something, there always has to be something... and when you’re single and you have a child it’s difficult to do it all in such short time. Even the court case can take very long <...> and then everything has to be done over and over again, ‘cause in the GOPS [Gminny Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej – Borough Social Services Centre]” they never tell you what documents you need <...> and who can you leave your child with?” The parents also referred to the long time that it takes to receive the allowance; as a result, it is often difficult to provide for the single-parent family after the child is born.

The maternity allowance is yet another area of the pro-family policy. To apply for it the parent needs to have an employment contract. The laws governing this issue are regulated in three acts: Kodeks pracy [Labour Code] [18], Ustawa o systemie ubezpieczeń społecznych [Social insurance act] [20], Ustawa o świadczeniach pieniężnych z ubezpieczenia społecznego w razie choroby i macierzyństwa [Social insurance sickness and maternity benefits act]. It is stated therein that “those who bear a child during their sickness insurance or on maternity leave are entitled to maternity allowance” [21]. As a result, a mother who is not on an employment contract at the time of the birth of her child or who does not pay insurance, as in the case of the self-employed and those on civil law contracts, cannot apply for maternity allowance. Only the women working on permanent employment contracts are fully protected, which is a problem for those on contracts for specified periods, because in their case the contracts are only prolonged if they are to expire after the third month of pregnancy. Two problems related to this area were mentioned in the interviews with single parents. The first one is that the women who are not employed on proper contracts, i.e. those on civil law contracts and who do not pay the required insurance, cannot apply for maternity allowance. The second problem is connected with the fact employers prefer employment contracts for specified periods which provide pregnant women with much weaker protection. One of the single mothers said: “...so because I decided to have a child, then it’s sure I had to, you know... wangle to get something ...to get maternity allowance, right? [researcher]: Wangle how? [G.B.] Well, go and ask the doctor to say I was pregnant a week earlier – the idea was that I was on a contract ending by the end of August, and the end of the third month, the beginning of the period when I’m protected was on September 4... and I worked there for three years on a contract for a specified

period...". The interviewees referred to the fact that in light of the current regulations having a contract for a specified time results in the decision not to have children.

The government declares that pre-preschool care, that is, the opportunity of receiving day care for children under the age of 3, is one of the elements of its pro-family policy. Numerous comments were made on the rules of granting places in public nurseries, the costs of which are quite low. It is officially publicised that single parents have priority access to this type of care centres, however, it is the points system that is decisive in finding a place for a child. The highest number of points is awarded to those belonging to the borough Revenue Office in which the recruitment is conducted (800 points, the examples provided on the basis of the city of Wrocław) and to those employed (60 points), whereas only 4 points are awarded for single parenthood, which is often defined in such a way as to make it impossible for many people who are, in reality, single parents to have the priority access [12]. This is a "vicious circle" for single parents, because if they are not employed their children cannot stay in nurseries, and if their children cannot be taken care of in such centres it is impossible to find a job – they cannot go to work since their children would be left unattended. The interviewees emphasise this problem because they see it as the main reason for the professional exclusion and low (sometimes extremely low) material status of those who have to take care of infants on their own. One of the single mothers provided the following description of her attempts at finding a place for her child in a nursery: "Well, I wasn't a registered resident in the city I was living in. I was there because I was a university student. I lived with my child. And, when I went to ask about the nursery... then this law, this law was introduced that you have to belong to the Revenue Office... in a particular district, and I didn't belong to it, I belonged to the district of the child's father and he got the tax reduction for the child. That's why I asked this woman at the office if it is possible for Kubuś to go to that nursery, and she said yes, and then it turned out he couldn't, because I didn't belong to this Revenue Office here. <...> I was offered a place at the other side of the city... and it was just impossible to get there <...> with just getting there and the 9 to 5 job, it was couldn't have worked, so I had to turn it down. And then what? ... I went to see the nurseries superintendent about this problem, this problem with the revenues and the districts, well... I was counting on... a dialogue, at least [laughter], and then, well... I was told that she

had a headache and that she didn't feel like talking to me that day and so I didn't go again..." Introducing a regulation providing a real opportunity of access to nurseries is of crucial importance and it is decisive for the single parents looking for employment, and, as a result, it determines the material status of the single parent families.

A further area of pro-family policy related to preschools is not free from faults that are particularly problematic for single parents. The current legal regulation [19] – introducing obligatory preschool education for all children since 2014 – does not allow for a free choice of the institution that a child is to attend. As a result, the children go to the preschools near their places of residence, which makes it necessary for the parents to find a job that is not far from the preschool. It is difficult to find such a job in small towns; it is often impossible or it makes the parents take up work for which they are overqualified. One of the single mothers said: "<...> I wanted to go to work and what I eventually wanted to do was to have the kids go to some nursery or preschool somewhere near my workplace so I could pick them up and go home. Now I live... It's really many kilometres to all possible workplaces... and the commuting is so... it's a time limit, because if I... have to travel 40 km one way... I have to work and come back for the child at half past four, because that's the time the preschool that Kubuś goes to closes, then... I can't always make it, if the traffic's bad then... you can't make it, it doesn't work, and you know that that there's always this... I'm not even talking about the complaining, but they said that after 15 minutes, or half an hour, they were going to call the police to pick up the child".

In the narratives of the single parents the necessity to regulate the issues connected with providing day care for children in nurseries as well as preschools was underlined as the most important problem that single parents have to face; a problem that often makes it impossible for them to go to work and which is responsible for the low material status of the interviewees.

In the case of the declared government benefits for families it can be noticed that the legal regulations are highly impractical. First of all, all family benefits are available only if the gross (that is, pre-tax and pre-social insurance premium) family income per capita does not exceed 504 złoty [22]. It ought to be observed that in Poland fulfilling basic needs with such low income is virtually impossible. Exceeding this limit by even 1 złoty implies the impossibility of being granted any family benefits. The provided

definition of a single parent is problematic, as well, because it was the intention of the legislators to exclude unmarried couples and at the same time a legal gap was created, allowing for a dismissal of the benefit applications of single parents on the grounds of imprecise and incorrect interviews carried out by social services workers. The single parents discussed a number of such situations. That is why the main problem in the area of family benefits is the execution of the legal regulations and malpractice of government officials. One of the mothers recounted: "I learned that: you can't just up and come to the social services office... social services won't provide for us <...> thirdly, we are obviously cheating, fourthly, if I can't provide for my own children there are other ways to solve it... Which I understood as a threat that they were going to take away my children, send them away or something... Then they said there's a terrible mess at my flat, because Kuba was just changing and he left his trousers on the floor – and I was angry about it, because I just finished tidying up. And lots of stuff like that... What I got is that they just wanted me to fuck off or they were going to take away my children... it was so weird. And when I was leaving this woman asked if I really wanted her to pass my application on <...> anyway, she asked if she was to pass it on. And I said yes and she answered that there were going to be some consequences... Well, and I said that that was exactly what I wanted – consequences <...> And she says: but the consequences are going to be negative".

The amounts of the offered allowances may raise serious objections, as the family benefit for children younger than 5 is 44 złoty a month, which is not enough even for a pack of diapers or a large carton of baby milk.

School books subsidies are granted according to the same regulations and on the basis of the same act as family benefits [22]. As in the previous case, the amounts of the subsidies as seen as very low: "Tomek has this [cerebral] palsy, so we got 210 złoty... That's a lot... but in September I had to spend over 800 so that he could go to this school... I'm not even going to talk about the things I have to buy because he doesn't go to school..." The amount that the mother refers to is only granted once a year if the child is diagnosed with a disability; the benefits for healthy children are a half of that amount [22].

What is interesting is that in April 2013 the government of Poland declared that tax reduction is to be a means of pro-family policy, while it was in October 2012 that the reduction was greatly decreased, especially for families with only one child

[11], which often includes single parent families. Currently the people whose income is too low cannot benefit from the reduction because the idea of this means of pro-family policy is that one has to first pay taxes to receive the yearly 1,112 złoty tax return. This solution also raises doubts of single parents: "... And, for example, with my income I... I cannot receive the tax reduction, no, I can't get it, because my income is too low. But since I have a child, whether I earn money or not, I should, I should get the benefits, right?"

The government programme "State sponsored meals" was introduced in 2005 [23]. Therein it is declared that meals for children up to 7 years of age and to students until secondary school graduation are to be sponsored. The benefit is to be granted if the family income per capita does not exceed 474 złoty [23], and no more than 20 % of all schoolchildren may receive this form of support [23]. While the interviewed single parents express their appreciation of the opportunity of receiving such meals for their children they also mention that it is very easy to exceed the defined amount of income and it is often that they have to choose between being granted, e.g., family benefits or state sponsored meals for children, and even the sum of both these forms of support cannot fulfil basic needs of the family. The parents have a negative opinion on the fact that schoolchildren receive different meals, because they believe it leads to the stigmatisation of the children who are granted social benefits. The stigmatisation is more or less severe, depending on the borough and the school. One of the single mothers recounted: "... and I just went to the social services, my family convinced me... to go: 'so many do it, who shouldn't you go?' ...and I went there. Well, there's this income criterion, it turned out I exceeded <...> by twenty złoty, and so our MOPS [Miejski Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej – City Social Services Centre] could only help me by, they could only give me this benefit where the children... can get free meals at school <...> It was all like this: if the parents paid the child got a different lunch, and if it was the social services then they called the benefitting children and that was different, too. The child got a different lunch and <...> some children can be cruel, you know, and then they point their fingers, they say 'you're poor' and such, so the kids were stressed to begin with: 'we're not going for lunch again...' <...> You know, since the parents paid 70 or 60 złoty month for the lunch, I can't remember, <...> and they got [lunch] the whole time, the whole school year, but I had to come and show my income every month..." The stigmatising aspect

of the state sponsored meals is emphasised here, and the wearisome, highly bureaucratic procedure of application and reception of the benefit is negatively evaluated.

### Conclusion

To sum up, I would like to quote Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – a document of the highest worldwide importance:

“1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection” [17].

When comparing the perspective of the declarations (macro and meso) with the level of the implementation of legal regulations in relation to the ever-growing number of single parent families (micro) a significant dissonance can be observed. On the one hand there are the beautiful social declarations, but on the other a close analysis of the legal acts leads one to conclude that in many cases the regulations cannot apply or they cannot secure sufficient help for single parents and their children and they have a clearly stigmatising character.

The quotation from Meilė Lukšienė that serves as a motto of the present paper underlines the necessity to look for new ways allowing each individual to develop and to enjoy basic humanitarian rights. These are guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is frequently quoted in this paper, as well as the Constitution of the Republic of Poland [8]. In light of the above reflections, a question must be posited whether the actual state of the pro-family policy of the government of Poland really creates proper living conditions for single parents and their children.

Legislation in force as of June 30, 2013.

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## Summary

Ewa Jurczyk-Romanowska

### THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHALLENGES OF MODERNITY – SINGLE PARENTHOOD IN MACRO, MESO, AND MICRO PERSPECTIVE

The present paper constitutes a discussion of three perspectives of pro-family policy: the international one, represented by the United Nations (termed the macro perspective in this paper), the national one, including the instruments of the pro-family actions of the Polish government (meso perspective) and the implementation of the legal regulations pertaining to single parents (micro perspective). In the paper the argument is made that the pro-family policy in Poland fails to provide all single parent families with support, or the benefits are insufficient and of a stigmatising character.

**Keywords:** 21<sup>st</sup> century family, International Year of the Family + 20, single parenthood.

*University of Wrocław  
Institute of Pedagogy*