

Care involvement and power relations. Parenting and gender in contemporary Poland

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Abstract

Objective: The study examines the opportunity structures of fathers and mothers in Polish society in the context of their right to use parental leave.

Background: The use of parental leave by fathers remains at a low level in Poland. The reasons for this lie in the way the family policy system is designed and also in cultural norms regarding care and gender. Consequently, Polish fathers and mothers have different possibilities for actually taking parental leave.

Method: The analysis is based on qualitative data gathered during in-depth interviews with Polish mothers and fathers. In total, 53 interviews were conducted with parents of children aged 1–8 from different socio-economic situations and with different attitudes to parenthood and gender roles.

Results: The analysis shows that the opportunity structures of fathers and mothers differ distinctly. Fathers and mothers use different types of power in their relationship. Fathers usually use debilitating power that allows them to withdraw from unwanted obligations to care, and also not to take parental leave. In contrast, mothers use situational power, which helps them sustain control over family life. Both of these strategies for using power limit the other person's right to use or not to use parental leave.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that there is a need to change the system of parental leave in Poland if gender equality is to be achieved.

Key words: parental leave, gender roles, power relations, Poland, care work



1. Introduction

Gendered power relations are an important factor influencing the organisation of care in the family. The aim of this article is to analyse the organisation of care work in everyday family life in Polish society in the context of gendered power relations. I concentrate here on how Polish parents share or fail to share parental leave. In the Polish system, parents have a right to 32 weeks of parental leave, which can be divided freely between the mother and father. A Polish father can also have six weeks of maternity leave if his partner transfers them to him. Yet, regardless of these opportunities, there are very few men who actually take advantage of them. Since 2013, when parental leave was first introduced, only 1% of parental leave recipients have been men. To answer the question why Polish parents do not share parental leave and why it is almost entirely used by the women, I refer to the perspective of agency and structures and argue that there are structural factors that limit the fathers' right to use parental leave. At the same time, the mothers' right not to use parental leave and to return to paid work faster is also restricted. These factors have consequences on how care, as well as paid and domestic work, are organised in Polish families.

To understand the dynamics of care organisation, I refer to the theoretical concept of situational and debilitating power as held by women and men in the domestic sphere. My intention is to answer the question how it is that the joint legal right of parents to freely choose how to share their parental leave can lead to a reinforcement of gender inequalities. The article should be seen as a contribution to a discussion on heavily gendered parenthood in post-communist societies. Sociology of families in Europe mostly focuses on the experiences of parents in Western European societies. There is still not enough analyses of fatherhood and motherhood in Eastern Europe. Whereas these experiences can help to formulate recommendations for policy makers on how to design family policy in post-communist societies.

In this article, I first present my theoretical approach and explain how the theory of agency and structures helps to explain the different rights of fathers and mothers to use parental leave. Second, I proceed to a short description of the Polish parental leave system. Then, I describe the methodology used in my analysis, which is based on in-depth interviews with parents of children aged 1–8 years. In the following analysis, in-depth interviews give a voice to the parents and help the mothers and fathers to describe their experiences and attitudes in relation to care work, parental leave and parenting in general. I focus on how the opportunity structures of fathers and mothers are constructed and what kind of power they each yield in connection to care work. The article ends with a discussion on how the current Polish family policy system actually reinforces gender inequalities in the family sphere.

2. The right to choose and gendered involvement in care

In seeking to understand the dynamics of care organisation in family life, my starting point is the concept of agency, which explains the link between individual behaviours and the

macrostructures of a particular society. Additionally, I refer to the concept of *doing gender* as formulated by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987, 2009), according to which, gender is interactional and institutional. As such, gender is an ongoing process that is subject to social change and is connected to a system of social relationships. From this perspective, masculinity and femininity are not biologically assigned to individuals, but are *done* through everyday interactions. These two approaches enable an analysis of the situations of men and women within the family sphere, in particular their experience of becoming a parent. As many studies indicate, the transition to parenthood is connected with the re-traditionalisation of the organisation of family life (Reimann 2019; Schober 2013; Solera & Mencarini 2018). Women end up with a disproportionately greater burden of domestic and care duties in comparison to men, often limiting the hours they can devote to paid work (Paull 2008). In contrast, men concentrate more on their engagement with paid work (Suwada 2017).

The level of individuals' involvement in the various obligations that result from paid work and the family sphere is strictly connected to gender roles. According to agency theory, individual actions are not only the result of individual choices but are also determined by different external conditions, called social structures (Archer 2000; Caetano 2015; Kozek et al. 2017). Consequently, the everyday actions of men and women should be seen as 'an outcome of a choice within constraints, and preferences underlying choice are shaped by the constraints' (Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen 2007: 656). As I argue elsewhere (Suwada 2021), parents function within a social reality, which should be seen as opportunity structures within which they realise their everyday obligations. Opportunity structures result from different external factors, such as the family policy system, the labour market system, cultural norms (in particular about care and gender) and the structures of social and gender inequalities. Bearing this in mind, gender is an important dimension that differentiates the characteristics of opportunity structures for mothers and fathers. Consequently, the woman's right to choose is constructed and constrained differently from the man's right to choose.

I concentrate here on the individual right of choice to take parental leave and how this is constructed. I am particularly interested in the factors that restrict this right. In legal terms, both the mother and father have an equal right to take parental leave. Under the Polish Labour Code, a right to 32 weeks of parental leave is given to employees, and it is regarded as the joint right of both parents. Parents have the opportunity to divide those 32 weeks freely between themselves. Yet in fact, parental leave is almost entirely taken by women. According to data from the Social Insurance Institution in Poland, since 2013, when parental leave was introduced, the percentage of men among the recipients of parental leave has been around 1%, and by 2020, this had not changed. With this in mind, it should be assumed that there are constraints, other than legal ones, that restrict a father's right to actually take parental leave. This right is connected to the balance of power in a couple. To understand how the right to choose to take parental leave is constructed differently for men and women, I refer to two types of power that can be distinguished in a couple. These are situational power and debilitating power (Gatrell 2007). These concepts were first proposed in an analysis by Carol Smart and Bren Neale (1998) that concentrated on divorced parenting. Yet Caroline Gatrell (2007) argues that these concepts can also be used to describe the power relations between parents in a couple. Situational power is

recognisable and is based on having different resources, such as time available to spend with the children, knowledge and information, formal authority and control of boundaries (Gatrell 2007: 357). In contrast, debilitating power is often used secretly, and it gives the individual a chance to resign from unwanted obligations. It is grounded in traditional gender roles. According to Gatrell (2007), situational power is usually held by mothers, who are characterised by greater resources that give them a privileged position in the family sphere in the context of care work; whereas fathers hold debilitating power, which gives them the chance not to engage too much in care work and to be regarded as secondary caregivers.

I argue that the source of these two types of power is located in cultural norms regarding care and gender that prevail in Polish society. Care is an area of social life that is heavily loaded with cultural norms that specify what the organisation of care in everyday life should look like. In every society, there are socially acceptable patterns of care practice (Pfau-Effinger & Rostgaard 2011). These care practices are usually connected to gender roles. In Polish society, there is a strong norm that the mother should be primarily responsible for the care of children under school age. Polish mothers are treated as the main caregivers who are responsible for the organisation of everyday care for their children; whereas the role of the father is perceived in terms of a secondary caregiver (Reimann 2016; Sikorska 2016, 2019). His main obligation is to provide economically for the family and to support the mother in her everyday obligations (Jarska 2019). Such cultural norms relating to care are grounded in traditional gender norms and should be seen as serious obstacles for men in actually taking longer periods of parental leave, as well as for the mothers who would need to release some portion of the parental leave. The cultural norms give the mothers the necessary resources to wield situational power in the area of care work, which includes a *greater* right to take long periods of parental leave. At the same time, the cultural norms provide conditions in which fathers have debilitating power, allowing them to avoid unwanted care obligations in the context of parental leave and to avoid taking longer breaks from their paid work in connection with parenthood (see: Suwada 2017). For both women and men, such power relations have positive and negative consequences at the individual level that may have long-term impact on the division of parental and paid work obligations within the family. Consequently, they have an impact on gender inequalities at the macrostructural level.

3. Background – the parental leave system in Poland

The current Polish family policy system consists of three main instruments - parental leaves, institutional care for children and cash benefits.¹ In the context of this article the parental leave system is the most important. Polish parents have a right to four different types of leave that can be used to take care of their children. These are:

1. 20 weeks of *maternity leave* is used directly after the delivery. This leave is compulsory for a mother, meaning that the mother cannot resign from it and must use it directly after

¹ Because of the limited space, I focus here only on the parental leave system in Poland. More on the Polish family policy system can be found in Suwada 2017, 2021, Szelewa 2017.

the delivery or start it two weeks before the due date. After using fourteen weeks of maternity leave, the mother can resign from the remaining six weeks provided that the father takes them over. The leave is highly paid on the level of 100% or 80% of the salary.

2. 2 weeks of *paternity leave* are a sole right of the father. They can be used during the first two years of a child's life. This leave is paid 100% of the salary.

3. 32 weeks of *parental leave* can be used after using maternity leave. This leave is a shared right of the mother and the father. It is paid on the level of 80% or 60% of the salary. The level of benefit paid for parental leave is dependent on the level of benefit paid during maternity leave. The mother can choose whether the replacement rate is at the level of 100% or 80% of her salary. If she chooses to have the replacement rate at the 100% level, then during parental leave, the parents get the benefit at the level of 60%. Alternatively, the benefit during the whole period of leave can be at a level of 80% of the salary of the parent taking the leave.

4. 36 months of *extended parental leave* is a means-tested leave that can be used after using parental leave by both parents. Because the benefit during this leave is only for low-income families, for most parents this leave is unpaid.

Fathers were included in the system in 2010s when paternity leave was introduced. In 2013 they gained a right to parental leave. Yet in the system there is no incentives for fathers to use it. When introducing parental leave, Polish policymakers decided not to follow the path of Scandinavian countries and include so called "father's quota" in the system. They justified it with the parents' right to choose how to share the leave (see: Suwada 2017). However, the experiences of other European countries show that gender-neutral parental leave alone does not make fathers to use it. Men must be actively encouraged to take longer periods of leave (Brandth & Kvande, 2019; Duvander & Johansson, 2012; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011; Hobson, 2002). The family policy instruments can help to reduce fathers' reluctance to take leave by reducing the economic costs for a family (men still usually earn more than women), as well as by reconstructing parental gender beliefs according to which women are better at caregiving than men (Karu & Tremblay, 2018; Kaufman, 2018; Kaufman & Almqvist, 2017).²

Keeping this in mind, the Polish system can be described as explicitly genderising, i.e. it promotes traditional gender roles in family life (Saxonberg, 2013, 2014). Mothers take longer breaks in paid work in connection to parenthood than fathers. This has consequences on how opportunity structures of fathers and mothers look like in connection to a right to take (or not to take) parental leave. In the following analysis based on interviews with parents, I show how parental leave is perceived in Polish society and what consequences this has for fathers' and mothers' engagement in care work

2 There is a plenty of publications and analyses about parental leave systems in different European countries in the context of fathers' (lack of) involvement. Therefore, I am not expanding this issue here. Just to mention a few: Brandth & Kvande, 2019; Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Grau Grau et al., 2022; Haas, 1992; O'Brien & Wall, 2017; Sponton, 2021; Van Gasse et al., 2021.

4. Methodology

The analysis is based on the qualitative data from a research project on parenting experiences in Polish society. The data were collected between June and October 2017 through in-depth individual interviews conducted face-to-face with 53 Polish parents of children aged 1–8. The first parents responded to my announcement about the project posted in care institutions for children and on the Internet in parenting social networks. Then a snowball sampling method was continued. The aim of the interviews was to analyse how parents deal with the various obligations that come from parenthood and paid work. The interviews focused on the organisation of paid work, care work and domestic work in the context of institutional settings, and in particular, existing family policy instruments. The collection of data was based on purposive sampling. The sample included parents with different socio-economic and family situations who lived in different types of place (big cities, small towns or the countryside). Interviewed parents differed in terms of education level, employment status, number of children. In total, 29 mothers and 24 fathers, aged 24–48, were interviewed. Most of them worked full-time, six were jobless, and six were on some kind of parental leave. Forty interviews were conducted with parent couples, whereas thirteen were with single parents. Only six of the fathers had taken at least two months of parental leave. All interviews were transcribed in confidentiality and analysed using a mixed strategy of thematic and open coding (Ayres 2008; Benaquisto 2008). The initial coding tree that was based on the interview script was rebuilt and expanded in the process of analysing the interviews. As new themes emerged, the new codes were added to the coding tree. In the process of analysing the interviews, the theoretical perspective of agency was adopted. From the analysed data the issues of constraints, opportunities, power and choice emerged, which led to choosing theoretical frames used in this article. The coding was conducted using the qualitative research software MaxQDA12. All names and data in the following excerpts that might inadvertently identify the interviewees have been changed.

In the following analysis, I concentrate on how Polish parents share parental leave, and also on their opinions about the idea of introducing the so-called *father's quota*. When the interviews were being conducted, there was a discussion in the public debate on the European Commission's idea of reserving four months of parental leave for fathers. The parents interviewed were asked what they thought about such a mechanism and how they perceived the idea of encouraging men to use their parental leave and if they would like to share the leave.

5. Fathers' right to parental leave

As mentioned above, employed Polish fathers and mothers have a right to thirty-two weeks of paid parental leave that they can freely share between them. The interviews with parents clearly indicated that, in general, the thirty-two weeks of parental leave are perceived in Polish society as an extension of maternity leave. In many interviews, parents did not use the term parental leave at all but called the whole period of fifty-two weeks of paid leave maternity leave.

R: How was it in the beginning when [your son] was born? Did you take any leave? For how long?

I: I took my maternity leave. It was one year and I was paid 80%. (CW Irena)³

R: Did your partner use some part of the parental leave?

I: No, he only took these two weeks [of paternity leave] and that's all. We did not share this... my maternity leave, we actually didn't think about it. And with the second child we aren't taking this into consideration. No... I'm going to use all year of maternity leave. He's going to take only these two weeks of leave that a father can take after delivery. (CW Elżbieta)

Those who were more aware of how the system is constructed were often annoyed when other people called the whole period maternity leave.

This [parental] leave is treated as a one year long maternity leave. People officially call it like that (...). I always react on online maternal groups when mothers write that they do not have to resign from breastfeeding after six months, because there is one-year-long maternity leave. This is how people see it. (CW Sylwia)

The lack of awareness that parental leave is a right of both parents and that both parents can share the leave was also evident in the interviews. The men interviewed were especially unaware that they had had a right to use some part of the parental leave. A few of them learned about it during the interview.

R: Let's proceed to the issue of parental leave. Your wife had used maternity and parental leave...

I: Parental leave? What's that?

R: There were five months of maternity leave and then seven months of parental leave.

I: Oh ... she was at home for one year, I thought it was all maternity leave. (CM Aleksander)

This has consequences for how the fathers' real opportunity structures appear. Even though, in legal terms, they have the same right as the mothers to take parental leave, they have fewer resources for actually asserting it. This is grounded in the cultural patterns of motherhood and fatherhood, which expect mothers to be the primary caregivers and the fathers secondary caregivers. In addition, it is grounded in the institutional system. Gender-neutral parental leave was introduced in 2013, yet at that time, it was presented as an extension of maternity leave. There was no educational campaign that would inform parents and prospective parents that parental leave is also the right of fathers. Many of the politicians who talked about the new leave at that time called it maternity leave instead of parental leave (Suwada 2017). At the same time, an analysis of parental leave uptake by fathers indicates that it is not enough to change the family policy system and that, without

³ Abbreviations mean: C – coupled parent, S – single parent, W – women, M – men. All names and information that might help to identify the interviewees were modified.

a broad educational campaign, it is difficult to change individuals' attitudes to parental leave and fathers' involvement in everyday care work (Duffy et al. 2020; Haas & Hwang 2019; Klinth 2008). Consequently, there is little awareness in society that parental leave is an instrument addressed to both men and women. Instead, it is treated as an extension of maternity leave and of women's rights.

Additionally, in Polish society, there is a lack of understanding of the importance of men's involvement in care work, and there is a prevailing belief that fathers are less competent in their parenting than mothers. The fathers interviewed often expressed that they were not treated as capable caregivers who could take adequate care of the children.

R: What was the reaction of other people [who heard] that you were on parental leave?

I: Well, in the beginning, nobody believed that I would take this leave... [long pause]. I'd say that parent... fatherhood in general is... how to call it? On the one hand, I all the time meet women in the elevator or other public places, who tell me what I am doing wrong... because I'm a father, so I probably have no idea [how to take care of a child]. On the other hand, others say 'Oh! The child is alive! It's great!' I mean, I'm not treated seriously as a parent. (CM Arek)

I'd say that in the role of a man there is no... no obligation for care of a small child. And this is a main problem, you know? There is this implicit assumption that a woman is better at this, that she has some kind of predisposition... For example, it's clearly visible in jokes, or maybe not jokes, but this kind of babbling, right? That a guy would sure put the diaper on wrongly, that it is so obvious. And I think such thinking is self-perpetuating, because if the man puts a diaper on once a week, he's not efficient at it, am I right? (CM Piotr)

The sources of men's alleged incompetence as caregivers are grounded in the biological differences between men and women. In the interviews, when parents were asked what they thought about the idea of a father's quota in the parental leave system, many parents referred to *gendered* differences between men and women, how they have an impact on how parents build their relationship with a child and what kind of needs of the child they can satisfy.

I wouldn't be interested in such a solution [two months of parental leave reserved for a father]. Without a doubt, a baby needs, when it comes to time and attention, a mother. As a father of a few children, I have no doubt. I really handle it great when the child is older and I can satisfy those needs, which a mother cannot. (SM Zbigniew)

You know, a little baby really needs such a super-dad when they are one and a half years old, maybe two years old, then a dad can show them the world, but a mum is... no matter how hard a dad is trying, a mum is always more important, isn't she? A dad might want to bath, change clothes, change diapers, but when something bad happens, then a mother is more important. As a mother you feed, and you hear earlier when something is going wrong. (SW Urszula)

I think that this [parental leave for fathers] is a good idea. But there is a question whether this father can actually take care of a child, if he won't need help. I'm not sure. A man is an active human being, he must do something, and I'm not convinced that he could stay at home for such a long period of time as a woman can. (CM Tomasz)

As I argue elsewhere (Suwada 2015), these gendered differences between men and women are often grounded in the biological differences between the female and male bodies. Therefore, they seem to be *natural* and *unchangeable*. Referring to the *natural* differences between men and women in connection with taking care of children often serves as justification for prevailing gender inequalities. The initial difference between men and women (i.e. the fact that women become pregnant and can then breastfeed children) is often expanded to the later stages of the child's development. It can also serve as a convenient excuse for men explaining why they do not engage more in areas traditionally assigned to women. Consequently, the whole legal system that does not *force* or even *encourage* men to take parental leave, together with cultural norms about care and gender, gives men the debilitating power to choose to what extent they want to engage in parenthood and what kind of parental obligations they want to fulfil. As Gatrell comments, 'fathers may claim unencumbered "quality time" with children but may abrogate to mothers the responsibility for all child-related domestic chores. This effectively obstructs maternal opportunities for quality mother-child time' (Gatrell 2007: 358). A perfect illustration comes in a quote from Jan:

I'd like to work less to spend more time at home, but, on the other hand as I am thinking about it, I don't really know ... I mean it also shows some difference between men and women. I used to say that if I had to stay at home and take care of all domestic duties, I would do that. But then, when there is such a situation, in which I can actually do this, then it turns out that I don't really want it. (CM Jan)

6. Mothers' opportunity structures and care work

The opportunity structures for Polish mothers are distinctly different from those of fathers. This is the result both of the legal system and of cultural norms related to care. As mentioned above, a mother has the right to twenty weeks of maternity leave. This leave is obligatory, meaning that the mother has to take it. After using fourteen weeks, she can resign from the remaining six weeks provided that the father takes them over. In this way, the legal system guarantees a child twenty weeks of care by its mother (or its father), but it does not take into account the mother's needs and preferences. In most European countries, some part of maternity leave is obligatory to allow the woman to recover after the delivery and to rest during the postpartum period (Korsvik & Warat 2016). However, according to medical knowledge, the postpartum period lasts for the first six weeks following childbirth. The period of fourteen weeks is much longer. Some of the mothers interviewed were surprised to discover that such a long period was obligatory and felt that such legal conditions strongly limited their freedom to choose how to organise their everyday lives.

I think it [maternity and parental leave] should not be an obligatory issue, but rather a choice made by a husband and a wife; they should decide who goes on leave. One of the employees in my workplace did not want to take maternity leave, her partner wanted to take all the leave. Unfortunately, the Polish law does not allow for this. I think the family should decide who goes on the leave, not the law or our government. (SW Alicja)

I was very surprised, when I started to learn about the leaves... that maternity leave is... that you cannot simply choose not to take it. You have to take all those weeks. Well, on the one hand, it is nice, but on the other hand, it is strongly deterministic, isn't it? And men? They don't have to take such leave at all. (CW Stefa)

Thus, it can be argued that, from the start, women are not only biologically (because of pregnancy, the postpartum period and breastfeeding), but also legally pushed out from the public sphere into the private one and pressured into care work.

These legal circumstances are reinforced by cultural norms about gender and care. Women are expected to be primary caregivers. During the first months of a child's life, they breastfeed them and, as they are taking maternity leave, they usually focus on caring activities. It can be argued that these early months give a woman a chance to learn how to be a mother and how to meet the child's needs. This *know-how* of care and of the child gives a woman situational power in the couple relationship. Women usually know, or at least think that they *better* know, when and what the child needs to eat, what clothes they should wear, how to calm them, and so on. Consequently, when women are asked about the idea of sharing parental leave with the father, they often feel reluctant to do this. They often refer to breastfeeding and the subsequent emotional attachment as serious obstacles to ending parental leave earlier.

I don't know if I was ready for this [sharing the leave] either. My son was so incredibly small. I was breastfeeding him until he was, I'd say, over a year and a half. There were also various different psychological conditions in play too. (CW Joanna)

R: Did you consider an option in which your husband would take part of the parental leave?

I: I mean, I must admit that I can't imagine breastfeeding while my husband would be on leave. I also wanted to breastfeed at least one year, so it was impossible, wasn't it? Well, it couldn't be done. I used the breast pump a lot, because I had these classes I had to go to. So once a week, when I went there, there were three bottles prepared for my son and I was away for six hours, so [my husband] fed him every two hours. (CW Ela)

In such reasoning, women refer to their biological ability to breastfeed and to their emotional attachment to a small child. Sharing the leave would mean serious reorganisation of everyday life. Yet, what is interesting is the fact that the interviewed mothers looked at this issue from their own perspective and did not take into consideration the fact that the father might want to take leave as well. Besides such reasoning being grounded in gendered

differences between men and women, women also comment that men taking parental leave might have consequences for domestic work.

I: [In 2013] I used only six months of the maternity leave because I was very focused on work. I did not know what it means to be a mother and I thought that my work was the most important thing in the world. But now, my family is the most important for me. I still like my paid work, I like to do it, but it is a secondary thing (...). Now if I manage to get pregnant again, if everything goes well, I would definitely like to make the most of this time and I certainly will not come back to paid work earlier.

R: Ok, do you think you would like to share this leave with your husband?

I: I think I would regret giving it to him. Because I mostly deal with housework, so I can make better use of those twelve months, although if he said that he wanted to go on leave, I would definitely let him do it. (CW Iga)

In Iga's thinking, it is clearly evident that she perceives parental leave as her own right that she might transfer to her partner. Her approval is needed for it. She does not take into consideration the fact that her husband must release his right so she can take twelve months of leave in connection with parenthood. Such reasoning is hidden in many interviews conducted with Polish mothers. They implicitly assume that they have an individual right to the whole period of leave. This has consequences for who uses parental leave in Poland and for how long.

As I argued earlier, gendered differences can serve fathers as a convenient excuse for not engaging more in care work. They wield debilitating power in the relationship, which allows them to withdraw from the undesirable obligations connected to care work. At the same time, the same gendered differences create distinct opportunity structures for women and give them situational power to take longer periods of leave in connection with their motherhood. Their wielding of this situational power strongly limits the father's opportunity to be an involved parent. As Nancy Dowd comments, 'Much of what we know about fatherhood indicates that it is strongly mediated by motherhood. Men's relationships with children are strongly affected by the nature of their relationship with their children's mother' (Dowd 2000: 202). Many studies on parenthood indicate that mothers take the role of *gatekeepers*. Maternal gatekeeping can be defined as a situation in which a woman manages the everyday life of the family and controls how the father takes care of their children (Allen & Hawkins 1999; Altenburger et al. 2018; Gaunt 2007). As Małgorzata Sikorska argues, 'maternal gatekeeping is an attitude characteristic of many Polish mothers (...). Parenting in Poland is still "the world of women": mothers, grandmothers, nannies, teachers, doctors, and others. Fathers, although they are expected to become increasingly involved in parenting, are in the women's world as merely mothers' "helpers" – if they take care of children at all, then they primarily fulfil women's commands and are controlled by them' (Sikorska 2016: 169–170). Maternal gatekeeping can be perceived as a way of wielding situational power that is grounded in institutional settings reinforced by cultural norms about care and gender.

However, from the long-term perspective, it must be noted that situational power is not always advantageous for women. On the contrary, the control that women try to have over their domestic lives limits their opportunity structures in other areas of life, especially those

connected to paid work and leisure time. As Gatrell notes, surrendering some maternal situational power can ‘facilitate maternal time away from children’ (Gatrell 2007: 365) that can be used to pursue a career or simply to have time for themselves. In the long term, this is healthy for both parents, the children, and the whole family. Yet many women do not recognise the advantages of declining to control how family life is organised, and consequently, they find themselves overloaded with various parental obligations.

7. Discussion

To depict the opportunity structures of men and women in relation to parental leave and more generally, to care work, it is necessary to take into consideration the legal structures, in particular, the way in which the parental leave system is designed, and the cultural norms relating to care and gender. In the Polish system, parental leave is designed as a shared right for both parents, not as an individual right for a mother or a father. At the same time, parental leave can be used only after maternity leave has been taken, which is the individual entitlement of the mother. Furthermore, the level of benefit paid for parental leave is dependent on the level of benefit paid during maternity leave. In this context, it is not surprising that maternity and parental leave are treated as one instrument and parental leave is perceived as an extension of maternity leave.

In the narratives of some of the parents interviewed, the factor of choice often appeared. Both fathers and mothers underlined that parents should have the right to choose how they wanted to divide the parental leave, and they were therefore unconvinced about the idea of reserving some part of parental leave for the father (*father’s quota*). This was illustrated in the interview with Alicja, who said, ‘I think the family should decide who goes on the leave, not the law or our government’. Yet, by defending their right to choose, individuals do not take into consideration the whole socio-cultural system, which has an impact on how men and women behave in a particular situation. Interestingly, those parents who defended the right to choose how parents want to divide parental leave did not share the parental leave—the whole period of maternity and parental leave was taken by the mother. What is more, they were not usually worried about the long obligatory period of maternity leave in Poland. In a way, they were only defending the right to choose in relation to the fathers’ right not to go on parental leave. It can be argued that, in Polish society, because of institutional settings and cultural norms that generate different opportunity structures for men and women, the father’s right to take parental leave is heavily restricted, whereas, in the case of the mothers, the right not to take parental (plus maternity) leave is restricted. Women do not have a choice: they have to go on maternity leave because of the legal situation, and then they are often forced by cultural norms to take parental leave. Their situation is a source of the restrictions on the fathers’ limited right to parental leave.

To change this situation and to broaden the opportunity structures for both men and women, there is a need to redesign the parental leave system in Poland. According to the EU Work-Life Balance Directive from 2019,⁴ all European Union member states have to

4 The directive is available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32019L1158#PP1Contents> (15-04-2021).

introduce at least two months of non-transferable paid parental leave. This means that Poland also needs to redesign its current system. In the interviews, the parents had an opportunity to reflect on this idea⁵. Apart from the comments defending a couple's right to choose how they want to share parental leave, there was a quite big group of interviewees, mostly mothers, who supported such an idea:

I support this. I couldn't support it more. This doesn't mean that I'm a militant feminist, but in this patriarchal world in which we live, such a kick in the ass for all men, who think that staying at home is easy, simple and nice and that children need mostly women, is needed. Then it might turn out that fathers can take this leave, because now either employers are not happy or daddies are saying 'it'd be easier for you [to take this leave]'. But if those four months [of leave] were either taken by the father or lost, then it would be a different story. I'm sure of it. (CW Magdalena)

I think this is not a bad idea, because it forces men to, for example, take over some of the duties from women . . . and if he takes care of the child, then he gains some kind of know-how. You need to know how to change a nappy or, I don't know, how to dress your child. And if you do it every day, then you know it [...]. Because later you want to help, but you have no idea how to do it. (CM Jakub)

In the opinion of the interviewees, such an instrument would have an educational dimension. It would help fathers to recognise the burden of care work, and also teach them how to take care of a small child. Additionally, it would reduce gender inequalities in the labour market, because employers would have to get used to the fact that men can also take longer breaks from paid work in connection with parenthood. These reflections are congruent with sociological knowledge about the role of non-transferable parental leave (Brandth & Kvande 2019; Duvander & Johansson 2012; Haas & Rostgaard 2011).

8. Conclusion

Individuals function within particular structures, and the actions they take are not only the result of their personal preferences but are also constrained by external factors. In social sciences the phenomenon of parenthood is often researched in the context of national parental leave systems, as well as existing gender ideologies. Especially fatherhood and (low) engagement of men in fathering is explored from these perspectives (Grau Grau et al., 2022; Lewington et al., 2021; Moss et al., 2019; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Sponton, 2021; Van Gasse et al., 2021). My analysis complements this research with a case of Polish parents. It does not focus only on fathers, but also includes the mothers' perspective. Such a procedure allows the dynamics of power relations between genders to be taken into account. The

5 When the interviews were being conducted, a public debate was happening about the introduction of non-transferable parental leave for fathers, initiated by the European Commission. Some of the interviewed parents had heard about it. Others had not, so in the interview the idea was briefly explained to them. Thus the interviewed parents had a chance to reflect on this issue.

experiences of Polish parents enrich knowledge on how parenting looks like in contemporary European societies.

I argue here that to understand heavily gendered parental roles in the Polish society it is important to distinguish the most important factors that construct the opportunity structures of mothers and fathers. Based on the experiences of the interviewed parents there are two main factors: (1) the legal system, in particular the way parental leave is designed, and (2) cultural norms about care and gender. They are the sources of debilitating and situational power fathers and mothers have in everyday life. Parental leave in the Polish system is in theory a gender-neutral instrument. It is a family entitlement that can be freely divided between the parents. Yet the number of fathers taking this leave remains low. As Linda Hass and Philip Hwang (2019) argue, the simple legal possibility for fathers to take parental leave is not enough. There is a need for additional encouragement for fathers that deconstruct traditional gender roles and consequently can lead to a change of individuals' attitudes and make men more engaged in care work. In the Polish situation, the recommendation will be changing part of parental leave from a family entitlement to an individual entitlement. Such a change will not be dramatic. Fathers would gain a right similar to that which mothers have in the form of maternity leave. To legally equalise the situation of men and women, it would also be recommended that the obligatory period of maternity leave for women be reduced. Yet this change would require also endeavours to deconstruct cultural norms about paternal and maternal roles and obligations. Therefore there would also be a need to launch an educational campaign, which would inform parents and employers about new solutions, as well as about the advantages of fathers' involvement in care work.

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Data availability statement

The dataset with transcripts of all interviews (in Polish) can be requested by email (k.suwada@umk.pl).

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Kinderbetreuung und Machtbeziehungen. Elternschaft und Geschlechterrollen im heutigen Polen

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Der vorliegende Artikel beschäftigt sich mit den unterschiedlichen Möglichkeiten von Müttern und Vätern, in der polnischen Gesellschaft Elternzeit (*przyp. Tł. urlop rodzicielski*) in Anspruch zu nehmen.

Hintergrund: Der Anteil der Väter, die Elternzeit nehmen, ist nach wie vor gering. Das liegt nicht nur an der Struktur und Gestaltung der Familienpolitik in Polen, sondern auch an den kulturellen Normen in Bezug auf Geschlechterrollen und Kindererziehung. Dies hat zur Folge, dass die Väter und die Mütter ungleiche Chancen haben, Elternzeit in Anspruch zu nehmen.

Methode: Die Analyse bezieht sich auf qualitative Daten, die mittels Tiefinterviews mit polnischen Müttern und Vätern gesammelt wurden. Insgesamt wurden 53 Interviews mit Eltern von Kindern im Alter von 1–8 Jahren durchgeführt, die unterschiedlichen sozioökonomischen Hintergrund und unterschiedliche Einstellungen zur Elternschaft und zu Geschlechterrollen haben.

Ergebnisse: Die Analyse zeigt deutlich, wie unterschiedlich die Möglichkeiten von Vätern und Müttern sind, die Elternzeit zu nutzen. Väter und Mütter üben in ihrer Beziehung unterschiedliche Arten von Macht aus. Väter üben sog. schwächende Macht aus, die ihnen ermöglicht, sich von den ungewollten Elternpflichten zurückzuziehen und auch keine Elternzeit zu nehmen. Im Gegensatz dazu üben die Mütter situative Macht aus, die ihnen hilft, das Familienleben zu kontrollieren. Beide Strategien schränken das Recht des anderen ein, die Elternzeit zu nutzen oder auf sie zu verzichten.

Schlussfolgerung: Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass das Elternzeitsystem in Polen geändert werden muss, damit die Geschlechtergleichstellung erreicht werden kann.

Schlagwörter: Elternurlaub, Geschlechterrollen, Machtbeziehungen, Polen, Kinderbetreuung

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