Chapter 6

Conclusions: Parenting in Times of Prevailing Inequalities

Abstract The final chapter of the book briefly summarises the key points of the previous chapters and addresses the central conclusions of the book. I underline how analysing parenting from the perspective of three types of work (paid work, care work and domestic work) help to recognise prevailing gender and economic inequalities in Polish society. I also argue that the opportunity structures of mothers and fathers greatly differ, and that it has its sources in the family policy system.

Keywords Paid work · Care work · Domestic work · Gender inequalities · Poland · Power relations

6.1 Parenting Work

Parenting is one of the most common experiences people have. Many of us are parents, some of us are planning on becoming parents, all of us have parents (even if we do not know them personally). In this context, it is not surprising that parenthood is a phenomenon often researched in social sciences, in particular in the sociology of families. At the same time, the common experience of people living in neoliberal societies is the experience of paid work. To satisfy basic human needs individuals need to have money that can be earned in the labour market. As I argued in Chap. 4, paid work is a crucial aspect of life. Today almost every adult person is expected to engage in paid work. These two elements of social life in contemporary times—parenthood and paid work—are crucial for studies of family life. Social scientists, as well as policy-makers, often refer to the concept of the work/life balance, the aim of which is to recognise that an individual has various roles in life and that they need to combine obligations arising from these roles (Drobnič 2011). Such an approach can be particularly useful in organisational studies to analyse how employees combine their various family obligations with those arising from paid work (Bozionelos and Hughes 2007; Nordenmark 2002). It can also be helpful for social policy, especially in times of decreasing fertility rates and policy-makers' aims to support parents in providing care for their children (Blofield and Martinez Franzoni 2015; Caracciolo di Torella and Masselot 2010). Yet as I argue, the concept of a work/life balance is

not very useful from a sociological perspective since it does not allow for a critical description of contemporary social reality but it rather promotes one acceptable way of living that is based on a combination of parenthood on the one hand and engagement in paid work in the labour market on the other. What is more, this concept also assumes that there is a clear boundary between parenthood and paid work, between paid work activities and other activities in which an individual engages in everyday life. The experiences of Polish parents indicate that there is not such a clear boundary.

Thus in this book I proposed to look at the experience of parenthood from the perspective of three types of work: care work, paid work and domestic work. I claim here, following the reasoning of Oriel Sullivan (2013), who proposed analysing housework separately from child care, that distinguishing these three types of work helps to understand prevailing gender inequalities and can have implications for gender, family and labour market policies. The analysis presented in the previous chapters shows that in Polish society at the beginning of the twenty-first century there are still considerable gender inequalities. In the case of care work, women are still perceived as the main caregivers. This role is reinforced with the process of naturalisation, in which women are perceived as *natural caregivers* because of their biological abilities to become pregnant and to breastfeed (Suwada 2015, 2017). These initial biological differences have great consequences on how care work is organised in the household—who takes parental leave and who withdraws from paid work when there is a lack of institutional care for the children. This also puts stronger pressure on women who are active in the labour market. Economic resources can help in reducing this pressure by creating greater opportunity structures for the organisation of care work. Yet still, regardless of the economic situation of the family, women are perceived as the main caregivers. The inequalities in the organisation of care work are connected with inequalities in the area of paid work. Men's participation in the labour market is unquestioned. The role of the father is still recognised mostly in terms of economic provision. Fathers have to work for pay, regardless of their job satisfaction or working conditions. Paid work in their case is a crucial parenting obligation. The paid work of women, even though acceptable and for many families even necessary, is rather seen in terms of a secondary activity resulting from economic pressures and a woman's personal need to develop. It is more acceptable for mothers to resign from paid work when that work is unsatisfactory or too time-consuming and hinders care and domestic obligations. In the third type of work—household chores—gender inequalities are also palpable. In contrast to care work and paid work such inequalities are at least acceptable to Polish parents, especially mothers. Women are overwhelmed with domestic duties. Each week they spend more time on them than men, they also have to be everyday managers who force men to be more active in the domestic sphere. A man's role is perceived in terms of help or support, and consequently they have a greater ability to choose their level of engagement in domestic duties. Similarly, as is the case for care work, economic resources significantly expand opportunity structures of parents, who can more easily outsource domestic obligations to others. In all these types of work the situation of single parents is distinctly different. They do not have another person

with whom they could share different parental obligations. They more acutely experience lack of time and insufficient support from the welfare state.

As I have claimed in the previous chapters, it might sometimes be difficult to find clear boundaries between these three types of work. Especially in the case of men, but this also applies to women, it is clear that paid work can be defined as one way of performing care work. The interviewed parents noticed that their approach to paid work changes in connection to parenthood. They feel a greater pressure that they need to work for pay, they also need to look more carefully at their level of earnings. Having children costs money, and as a responsible parent, they have to earn enough money to fulfil the needs of their children. In this context, paid work should not be understood as an obstacle to parental obligations, but rather as one of the most important parental duties. Paid work can be seen as one type of care work. Similarly, there is no clear boundary between care work and domestic work. As many studies show, becoming a parent results in an increase of domestic duties. Many of these chores are an element of taking care of children—preparing meals, shopping, cleaning the house, doing laundry, ironing and so on. In my opinion, this lack of clear boundaries between these different types of work may indicate that care work is the most important aspect of parenthood. Care work lies at the heart of parenting. As a result of having children mothers and fathers change their attitude to paid work and domestic work, as well as their everyday practices resulting from paid work and domestic work. Taking care of children, especially when they are small, becomes a central task in their everyday life that determines the organisation of all work.

6.2 Opportunity Structures of Polish Parents and Prevailing Inequalities

The way people realise their parental obligations is not only a result of their personal preferences. In this book I have referred to the theoretical perspective of agency that tries to understand the links between individual practices with societal structures on a macro level. People take actions in a particular social context, these actions are limited by constraints. Social action is an outcome of a choice made within constraints. Therefore, I have used the concept of opportunity structures to describe the situation of Polish parents within which they have to realise their parental obligations. Thanks to analysis through the triple lens of three different types of work, it becomes evident that different parents are characterised by different opportunity structures. I have argued that in-depth interviews, on which this work is based, allowed Polish parents to reflexively assess their situations, their opportunity structures, and to depict the actions they undertake in everyday life. Parents often indicated the limits that constrained the choices they could make in connection to fulfilling parental obligations. Such an approach enables a critical assessment of parenting in Polish society from the perspective of gender and economic inequalities.

Let us look first at the opportunity structures of men and women. The analysis presented in this book has shown that they differ significantly. In contemporary parenting practices individuals refer to traditional gender roles which affect the way men and women engage in different types of work. As Jennifer Hook notes: ‘Women’s responsibility for the home limits employment and advancement, and men’s responsibility for breadwinning limits relationships with children’ (Hook 2010, p. 1481). Even so, women’s participation in the labour market is acceptable in Polish society, it is clear that as a society we did not get to the second phase of gender revolution, in which the importance of men’s participation in the domestic sphere is recognised. In the literature there is plenty of research indicating the emergence of the new model of involved fatherhood (Doucet 2004; Dowd 2000; Wall and Arnold 2007). This is often perceived as a result of the changing gender order and changing models of masculinity. According to the theory of caring masculinities (Elliott 2016; Hanlon 2012; Scambor et al. 2014), men’s engagement in care work is a crucial step towards a society based on gender equality. One way to achieve this is for fathers to be more involved in care work. Yet my analysis indicates that even though there is a big group of men who are actively engaged in care work, they still have greater power than women to choose the exact nature of this involvement. For example, I showed in Chap. 5 how men use a strategy of avoiding domestic work by taking care of children. In such a way gender inequalities prevail in a more nuanced way, they are subtly woven into everyday life.

The category of choice is crucial to understand the power relations prevailing in the household. Based on the narratives of the interviewed parents, I distinguished four types of a right of choice that parents can have. These are: (1) a right of choice to engage in satisfactory paid work, (2) a right of choice to go on parental leave, (3) a right to choose how to organise care work, and (4) a right to choose the level of engagement in domestic work. In a way these four rights create the opportunity structures of different parents. If we take into consideration the dimension of gender, as with economic resources and the family situation, it is clear that the opportunity structures of different parents vary. To understand how these rights of choice are exercised, it is important to distinguish two types of power an individual has in a couple—*situational power* and *debilitative power*. Using these two types of power I refer to the research of Caroline Gatrell (2007), who utilised the concepts from Carol Smart and Bren Neale (1998). Gatrell researched ‘how fathers challenged [a] mother’s sphere of influence by asserting their parental “rights” within marriage/co-habitation’ (Gatrell 2007, p. 353). Situational power is based on resources, and so is easy to identify. It can be seen as a list of attributes that might be used to emphasise one’s position in a couple. Debilitative power is harder to recognise, since it is often applied secretly, as Gatrell emphasises: ‘in situations when the personal needs of one partner are suppressed by the other’ (2007, p. 358). Gatrell claims that situational power is usually held by mothers, whereas debilitative power by fathers, yet I would argue that it depends to which right of choice one refers to.

Considering the right of choice to engage in satisfactory paid work, I argue that fathers have situational power, which is grounded in gender beliefs that a good father needs to provide for his family. Thus the question about men taking a break from

paid work hardly ever appears in the context of becoming a parent. Yet at the same time, as I showed in Chap. 4, women's participation in the labour market is more often perceived in terms of bringing satisfaction and fulfilment. This might suggest that in a way a woman could more easily wield debilitating power and resign (at least temporarily) from paid work. If she resigns from paid work, the economic pressure is even greater on the father, and his choice is even more constrained. Of course, lack of paid work in a couple can lead to a relationship of dependency, which is characteristic of unemployed housewives. Thus this type of debilitating power is advantageous in the long term only when a woman has a good situation in the labour market and can easily find a job after some period of unemployment.

Concerning the three other rights of choice, women hold situational power, whereas men have debilitating power. A women's right to use parental leave is never questioned—it is grounded in gender beliefs and cultural norms about care. Consequently, women take more parental leave and have better arguments in front of their partners or husbands, as well as their employers and significant others. At the same time, fathers easily fall into the role of secondary caregiver. For many of them it is easier, especially when a child is small, not to be solely responsible for taking care of the child. Parental leave can be a very difficult period for many parents, so the right to choose if a parent wants to take it and for how long should be seen as an important right. As was argued in Chap. 3, care work is more satisfying when an individual is not forced to carry it out.

On the matter of the right to choose how care work is organised, especially after the period of paid parental leave, women also hold situational power, which is based on the fact that they spend more time with a child at the very beginning and so gain the necessary knowledge of how to take care of them. But at the same time, when there is a lack of support from the welfare state and parents need to fill the care gap resulting from the lack of places in care institutions, men are in a privileged position resulting from debilitating power, which allows them to concentrate on paid work whilst not taking into consideration, for example, a woman's need to return to paid work. Consequently, women are more often forced to take a break from paid work in connection to parenthood than men. Finally, concerning the right to choose the level of engagement in domestic work, it is clear that men's debilitating power not to engage in household duties lies in gender beliefs that they are an area of expertise for women, and as I demonstrated in Chap. 5, men use different types of excuses not to get engaged. At the same time, women wield situational power by maintaining the position of manager in everyday life.

It is hard to clearly state which type of power is more advantageous. Yet it is clear that men and women hold debilitating power in areas which are not traditionally associated with their gender. So women have debilitating power in the context of paid work, whereas men in the context of care and domestic work. This explains to some extent how gender inequalities prevail in contemporary times, regardless of the increasing participation of women in the labour market and the greater involvement of men in care and domestic duties. What is more, it also shows why couples are relapsing into gender inequality after becoming parents, even those couples who had an equalitarian approach beforehand (Reimann 2019). The normative models of

motherhood and fatherhood are so deeply rooted in society that men and women can unconsciously seize the power rooted in them. Such power is grounded in the broader structures of gender inequalities, norms about care, the way the labour market functions, and how the family policy system is designed. All of these differently shape the opportunity structures available to men and women.

Apart from gender inequalities, my analysis also shows that economic inequalities are particularly important. In the case of each of these rights to choose, economic resources give more power and significantly broaden an individual's opportunity structures. Economic resources allow them to take a break from paid work or use unpaid leave, which provides greater opportunities in choosing how to organise care work—hire a baby-sitter or send a child to a nursery. Economic resources are also very important in the area of domestic work, since they make it possible to outsource household chores to other people or invest in more effective household appliances. The current family policy system does not recognise these differences and does not provide different rights in connection to economic inequalities. Similarly, the situation of single parents is much more difficult than the situation of coupled parents, since single parents are often deprived of the support of a second person in fulfilling different parental obligations.

6.3 The Welfare State and Parenting Experiences

The welfare state plays an important role in designing the opportunity structures of parents. Its impact is especially evident in how care work and paid work are organised. My aim in this book has been to show how Polish parents experience parenthood and deal with its various obligations in the context of Polish family policy. I argue that such an approach is important not only from a sociological perspective, but also from the perspective of policy-makers. In designing family policy there is a need to look at the experiences of parents, who should be perceived as reflexive agents assessing their opportunity structures. Consequently, their experiences can indicate if the family system works and what should be improved or changed. In the context of my research, it is important to underline that the Polish family system in 2017 is characterised by an explicit familism (Szelewa 2017), which means that it strengthens the family in caring for children (and other dependent family members) and does not provide many alternatives (Leitner 2003). My analysis clearly shows that parents with children under three face many difficulties in organising care after the end of parental leave. The Polish system has a care gap, which results from the incongruency of the parental leave system with institutional care for children. The support of the state is not sufficient, and many parents need to organise care using their own resources. Furthermore, as Mary Daly (2011) notes, familistic systems treat family not in terms of individuals but as family members. The family as a whole is seen as the recipient of family policy instruments. Therefore, parental leave in the Polish system is not an individual entitlement of a mother or a father, but is a right of both parents that can be shared. Parents also have

individual forms of leave—maternity leave for women, and paternity leave for men, yet they are not symmetrical. Women have a right to 20 weeks of maternity leave (from which 14 weeks are obligatory and 6 weeks can be transferred to the father), whereas men have a right to two weeks of untransferable paternity leave. Parental leave, even though it is the shared entitlement of a couple, is usually perceived as an extension of maternity leave, so consequently it is used by women (see Chap. 3). Such a system is explicitly genderising, since it perceives mothers as the main caregiver, whereas the role of a father is seen as a secondary caregiver or the mother's helper (Saxonberg 2013; Suwada 2017).

The issue of gender inequalities is hardly ever mentioned by Polish policy-makers nor do they provide any incentives to encourage fathers to be more engaged in taking care of their children. In familialistic states, men have greater choice of how much they want to be involved in family life, consequently their situation in the labour market is privileged compared to that of women. The aim of family policy in the European context is to support parents in the reconciliation of parenthood with paid work (Lewis 2006). At the same time, in recent decades we can observe the promotion of the adult worker model, in which high labour participation of all adults is expected (Daly 2011; Lewis and Giullari 2006). The Polish labour market is characterised by a high percentage of adults working full-time. According to Eurostat data¹ part-time employment is not as popular in Poland as in other European countries. All of the above points—the expectation that all adults work full-time, insufficient provision of institutional care for children under three, and strong gender roles in family life—make it especially difficult for women to reconcile paid work with parenthood. In a way the current system does not recognise gender inequalities yet at the same time it reinforces them. Similarly, it does not recognise the economic inequalities between different families. Although it is true that there are special cash benefits aimed at the poorest families, their value is usually very low, as is the income threshold criterion. Consequently, many families experiencing poverty do not receive any additional support. At the same time the most expensive programme of family policy in the twenty-first century, 'Family 500 +', was extended in 2019 to all children regardless of the financial situation of the family. In such a way, the opportunity structures of parents with different economic resources differ significantly. Those who can afford to pay for care in the free market are in a much more privileged position in comparison to those who cannot afford it. From an intersectional perspective, the only choice for low-skilled/low-income mothers to fill the care gap is to temporarily withdraw from the labour market, which is particularly difficult for them. In the long term such a withdrawal might lead to their greater marginalisation in the labour market and greater risk of poverty. The situation of single parents or parents of children with severe disabilities is even more problematic, and the reconciliation of paid work with parenthood is for many of them out of reach.

¹Data available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tesem100/default/table?lang=en> (accessed 21-09-2020).

The results of my research suggest that policy-makers in Poland should put more focus on economic and gender inequalities, and take these into account especially when designing the systems of parental leave and institutional care of children. There is also a need to look carefully at policies concerning the labour market and full-time employment. The narratives of Polish parents indicate that the possibility to work part-time would significantly help them in the organisation of care and domestic work. Yet part-time employment need not be connected with a significant reduction in salary. Reasonable and stable pay for work is a crucial issue for Polish parents, since having children requires economic resources. Salaries in Poland are at a very low level compared to some other European countries. Thus in designing family policy instruments it is crucial to include considerations on the labour market and the quality of work.

6.4 What Is Lacking in the Analysis?

In my analysis I have concentrated on the experience of parenthood in Polish society through the lens of three types work. This is obviously a limited perspective, therefore there is a need for further research that would provide more distance from the concept of a work/life balance. The issues that in my opinion would require greater focus are connected to the dimension of time. As I pointed out in Chap. 5 most parents complain about a lack of time—this results from multiple reasons, in particular from: full-time employment, demanding care work, and an increasing amount of domestic duties. Thus research on the leisure time of parents would add an interesting angle to research on parenting from the perspective of work. Anna Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz (2016) claims that the difference between work and leisure is sometimes difficult to recognise, and that many people work for pleasure. This also applies to care work—whether time spent going for a walk with a child is leisure time or care time? Is it possible to distinguish these two aspects of parenthood? Certain domestic duties might also be perceived as giving pleasure. For example, there are people who like cooking. Yet does this mean that all cooking is similarly pleasant? Why are some activities associated with care/paid/domestic work seen as pleasurable while others are not? What is the difference between men and women in this regard? In my interviews some parents raised this issue, yet because it was not the main theme of the research, they did not elaborate on it. It would be necessary to design new research that would help to answer the above-mentioned questions.

In my research, I concentrated on economic and gender inequalities, yet it is clear that gender and economic dimensions are not the only dimensions that differentiate the situation of parents. In the research sample there were also single parents, as well as parents of children with disabilities. Even though my initial aim was to more systematically compare their situations with coupled parents, as well as parents of healthy children, during the analysis it became clear that it is not always possible to do so. Such a comparison is especially difficult in the case of parents with disabled

children, whose situation is so different it is often incomparable. Their narratives about different types of work were differently constructed. The three types of work distinguished in this publication often overlap in their experiences. Consequently, their voice is often missing in the above analysis. Therefore, I have decided to analyse the situation of parents with children with disabilities separately in other publications.

In the preceding chapters I have tried to include the perspective of single parents. Yet it was not always possible. Today people raise children in different family configurations. The interviewed single parents also varied in their family situations. Some of them were totally alone from the very beginning because their partner did not participate in their children's life at all (for various reasons). Other single parents had raised children with their then partner prior to separation, when they henceforth raised them in alternating custody. Some single parents were in a new relationship, yet since the new partner did not participate in raising the child, they defined themselves as single parents. Consequently, it was impossible to include all of these perspectives in this book. Research on single parenthood would also require more careful sampling to include these multifarious perspectives.

In my analysis, I have usually referred to research conducted in Western European countries. I still lack enough studies published in English about other post-communist European countries. I argue here that the analysis of the experiences of Polish parents supplements the studies on parenting in Western Europe. I hope that my book will encourage other scholars from the peripheries of Europe to share their research and results with others.

Of course, as the sociology of families shows, there is a multitude of other topics associated with parenting that should be raised. Here, I indicated the most important ones that arise from my research. Parenting is a phenomenon that is constantly changing and is heavily dependent on social, cultural and institutional contexts. My book has attempted to describe the experiences of parenting in Polish society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I hope that it fills some gaps in our current knowledge.

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