

Chapter 2

Parenting, Gender and Work: A Sociological Perspective



Abstract This chapter presents the issue of parenthood as a subject of sociological inquiry in the context of broader social and cultural changes. I demonstrate why parenthood should be perceived as a process that is strictly connected with social, cultural and institutional contexts. Keeping this in mind I argue that there is no one proper way of doing parenthood. The most important aspect here are the links between parenthood and paid work. I critically approach the concept of work/life balance that is vastly popular in contemporary social sciences, but in my opinion is not always adequate to describe parenting in a post-communist society. I propose to look at parenthood through the lenses of three types of work: care work, paid work and domestic work. I claim that such approach helps to grasp different ways of parenting in contemporary times, as well as to recognise persisting gender and economic inequalities.

Keywords Parenthood · Parenting · Poland · Care work · Paid work · Domestic work

2.1 Introduction

The experience of parenting is widespread for most people who lived in the twentieth century and are living at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As demographic analysis shows, throughout industrialised societies only 10–20% of people remained childless. In Europe the lowest proportion of childless people is characteristic for the cohorts born in 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. In Poland only 10% of women born between 1950 and 1954 remained childless (Rowland 2007). Yet even though in younger cohorts (born after 1960) researchers have observed increasing childlessness in European countries, the proportion of childless women rarely exceeded 20% (Sobotka 2017). In the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region the share of childless cohorts is the lowest in Europe (5–15%) for cohorts born between 1900s and 1970s. This data indicates that being a parent is an experience shared by at least 75% of people in older generations. Other studies also indicate that younger generations are willing to become parents—for example in Poland in 2011 only 12% of

childless people aged between 18 and 39 do not want to have children at all (Kotowska 2014; Mynarska 2011). All of this suggests that most people in contemporary Western societies experience or will experience parenting during their lifetime. Thus the issue of parenting is highly important for sociologists. It can be assumed that parenting greatly affects the organisation of people's everyday life and society in general.

What is the sociological definition of parenthood then? There is no simple answer to this question. First of all, there is a need to distinguish between parenting and parenthood. To do so, I refer to the distinctions proposed by Tina Miller in her two books, one on motherhood (2005) and one on fatherhood (2011), in which she clarifies that mothering and fathering refer to personal experiences mothers and fathers have in their lives, whereas motherhood and fatherhood are defined in a wider societal context as constructed categories which indicate what individuals as mothers and fathers should do. Parenting is a personal experience of individuals that takes place in the context of parenthood models which define parents' roles and obligations. So even though parenting is a biological phenomenon, which results from a human being's biological ability to reproduce, it is not a homogeneous experience for all individuals. The ways people realise their role as a parent are diversified and differ between various societies and cultures, between historical periods, as well as between men and women, people from different social classes, living in different places, having different family situations and so on. In this book I concentrate mostly on parenting, so on parents' practices and experiences that take place in a particular social, cultural and institutional context, i.e. in Polish society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The models of motherhood and fatherhood together with gender beliefs are an important background, which highly influence the way men and women practice parenting.

2.2 Parenting and Social Changes

Parenting today is strictly linked with the broader organisation of family life and work. To describe contemporary times sociologists often use the term 'late modernity'. Late modernity is characterised by rapid and constant changes of social reality, as well as uncertainty and ambiguity (Giddens 1991). As Krystyna Slany underlines, in the new theories of contemporary times transformations are described in at least four dimensions: (1) technological changes linked with science and knowledge; (2) economic changes affecting the organisation of work and production; (3) social changes resulting from new social movements, in particular the feminist movement and the sexual revolution, which altered models of family, marriage and other social relations; (4) cultural changes with which new norms, values, ideologies and identities appeared (Slany 2002, pp. 24–25). In the context of this book social and cultural changes are the most important, since they have mostly affected the prevailing models of motherhood and fatherhood and have led to renegotiation of the contract between men and women. Yet economic changes have also had an

impact on how parents function today—where they work, for how long, how (in-)secure they feel in the labour market, what they can afford, where they live and so on. All of these have an impact on how men and women engage in their parental roles and how they experience parenting.

One of the most salient characteristics for contemporary times is changes in the organisation of family life. In the twentieth century we can observe the diversification of family living arrangements that have resulted from demographic change, including longer life expectancy, postponed marriage and childbearing, increased number of children born outside marriage, decreasing fertility rates, growing number of single parents, cohabitation, divorce, as well as remarriage (Kimmel 2011; Slany 2002, 2013; van Eeden-Moorefield and Demo 2007). Besides there are *new* arrangements of parenting, which are no longer only performed by biological mothers and fathers, but also by adoptive parents, parents living with new partners (step-parents), and parents living in nonheterosexual or polyamorous relationships (Balzarini et al. 2019; Mizielińska 2017; Mizielińska et al. 2014). All these changes are described against the backdrop of a *traditional* nuclear family model, in which men and women play specific roles and live together with their children in one household. Such a model is often treated as the ideal, and all the above-mentioned changes are treated as a sign of *family crisis*. Yet, as historians and sociologists have noted, this *ideal* model is a relatively new historical development that appeared together with industrial societies, it was also a social phenomenon limited to particular geographical locations and particular social classes (Flandrin 1979; Kimmel 2011; Mizielińska 2017; Szlendak 2011; Żurek 2020). Therefore, as sociologists we should be cautious with strong claims about family crisis, since they derive more from a normative ideal of a family than historical facts (Giza-Poleszczuk 2005). Family life, as other aspects of social reality, is under constant change and it is hard to find any stable elements in it (Elias 1978, 2000). Thus in this book parenting and models of parenthood are seen in terms of processes that are fluid and open to constant transformation. I assume that there is no one proper way of doing parenthood as individuals change during their life courses and their parenting practices change over time.

The ways men and women engage in parenting are strongly linked with the changing reality of late modernity, as well as with normative ideals of how a family and its members should function. Yet they are also connected to the economic dimension of social reality. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Engels 1884/2010; Marx and Engels 1848/1969) underlined the link between prevailing family models based on gender inequalities and the economic system. In capitalist societies the single family is an economic unit within which there is a particular division of work and production. Women are dependent on men who have to engage in paid work to support their families. Family ties among workers are ‘transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour’ (Marx and Engels 1848/1969). The world described by Marx and Engels is of course characteristic of a different historical period, yet also today the organisation of family life is strictly connected to the economy and the organisation of labour. That is why it is impossible to analyse contemporary parenting without taking into consideration the working situation of

parents. Today global competitive capitalism affects the everyday life of every individual. On the one hand, the European Union from the very beginning has promoted a high level of employment. In the Europe 2020 strategy the goal was set to increase the labour market participation of people aged 20–64 to 75% by 2020. Many social benefits are connected with employment. This basically means that the European welfare states expect almost everyone to work in the labour market. In the capitalist world paid work is seen as an instrument of earning income that is necessary to live and consume (Chang 2014). Paid work is supposed to protect individuals from poverty and homelessness. Yet at the same time the conditions of paid work are far from perfect. Individuals in the labour market face precarious working conditions, low salaries and even potential job loss, as well as working hours which are either too long or too short. Sometimes they have to migrate to other places, even to other countries, seeking work. Women and people from different minority groups have to deal with discrimination in the labour market (Standing 2014; Tomescu-Dubrow et al. 2019; Wrench et al. 2016). In the context of parenthood, this means that parents are at risk of various processes resulting from competitive capitalism.

The tensions between parenthood and work are rather well described in the social sciences (Bäck-Wiklund et al. 2011; Crespi and Ruspini 2016; Drobníč and Guillén 2011; Olah and Frątczak 2013; Spitzmueller and Matthews 2016). In particular the welfare state is present in contemporary discussions on parenting. The role of welfare states that appeared in the twentieth century is to protect their citizens, especially those who are the most vulnerable and face problems with fulfilling basic human needs, but also those who just participate in the labour market. The welfare state should guarantee the right to work in proper conditions, as well as the right to an income. Yet in this context the welfare state also addresses the issue of family and family obligations (Esping-Andersen 1990, 2002). In contemporary European countries we are all accustomed to the idea of paid or unpaid maternity or parental leave, public childcare institutions, child benefit, a public education system and public healthcare. All of these elements of the state are designed to assist individuals in their family obligations. Therefore, today the welfare state plays an important role in how family life is organised and how particular individuals engage in parental obligations. On the one hand, its role should be to protect and assist individuals in their parenting practices, but on the other hand, its instruments are far from ideal and are often based on tacit assumptions about preferable family models and/or gender roles which promote and support particular parenting practices whilst ignoring or opposing others.

2.3 Parenting as Work from a Sociological Perspective

Keeping in mind all the above mentioned issues, parenting is analysed in this book by taking into consideration the various aspects and different contexts within which it occurs. My aim is to provide a critical sociological description of parenting in

contemporary times based on the example of Polish society. I claim here that the critical approach requires distancing from the construct of a work/life balance that has become one of the most common theoretical tools to analyse the experiences of parenting in contemporary capitalist societies. I argue that the theoretical construct of a work/life balance is normative and based on several hidden assumptions that do not allow for an adequate and critical analysis of parenting experiences today. These assumptions are not value free, but promote a particular ‘permitted world’, using Alvin Gouldner’s concept (1970), that is regarded as a desirable and ‘normal’ way of being a parent. What is more, the concept is vague and ill defined, since it is not clear what *work*, *life* and *balance* really indicate. I have identified six hidden assumptions of the work/life balance construct, which are as follows:

1. There is an obvious boundary set between the area of work and non-work activities in everyday life.
2. Only paid work in the labour market is recognised as work, therefore in an ideal world everybody should be engaged in paid work. Those who do not engage in paid work never work.
3. Unpaid work in the domestic sphere is not perceived as work, and as such it is not perceived as an activity oriented on the production of goods and services. Consequently, it is perceived as being less significant than paid work in the labour market.
4. Everyone is expected to be in paid employment or at least seek it.
5. Everyone is expected to have a family and sustain family relationships.
6. Everyone should combine paid work with family life and find some satisfaction with this combination.

Since the construct is prevalent and often adopted to analyse parenting today, I propose to start thinking about parenting in terms of various types of work, rather than something that is in collision with work (in particular paid work). I am convinced that such an approach would better serve sociologists for providing an adequate and critical description of social reality. To do this there is a need to get rid of thinking in terms of work and life as two opposite elements in individuals’ lives. Work is an important element of people’ lives and as such should not be treated as something distinctive, but rather as a crucial element of individual lives in capitalist societies.

Furthermore, there is a need to recognise different types of work. According to sociological definitions, work is understood as activities involved in the production of goods and services in order to cater to one’s own needs (Bonstead-Bruns 2007; Reskin 2000). Yet even though this definition indicates that work is not necessarily done for pay, in analysis regarding the work/life balance it is implicitly assumed that work means paid work done in the labour market. Sociologists tend to overlook unpaid work done in the household, as well as volunteer work. Unpaid work done outside the labour market is often invisible (Oakley 2018; Reskin 2000; Tancred 1995; Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2016). At the same time, it is an important aspect of people’s everyday life, especially in the context of family life. As Anna Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz (2017, p. 121) notes ‘unpaid labour and care are

important sources of comfort and support in people's daily lives.' She further observes that without this type of labour people would not be able to survive either as individuals or as society. The importance of unpaid work was originally recognised by second-wave feminist scholars over four decades ago (Hochschild and Machung 2003; Oakley 2018; Tancred 1995). The invisibility of unpaid work resulted from the process of industrialisation that has led to an increasing number of people who work outside the household for pay, consequently the division on paid work in the labour market and work done at home for catering to individuals' needs was established. These changes took place simultaneously with a growing specialisation in social roles and social relations, as well as growing consumption (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2017). The division of paid and unpaid work overlaps with a division of male and female obligations. The process of industrialisation strengthened gender inequality in everyday life. In the ideal model men were responsible to economically provide for their families, whereas a woman's obligation was to take care of household duties and children. In fact this division was of a moral character rather than an instrumental one, since many women actively participated in the labour market. Under such conditions work was defined as 'a paid economic activity linked to the market' and all other kinds of work done outside the market were ignored (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2017, p. 122). Yet, as feminist scholars argue, such an approach is not accurate, since it does not recognise the importance of unpaid work for the whole of society. Peta Tancred, using the concept of the 'productive and reproductive spheres' to describe the division of paid and unpaid work, argues that these two spheres are greatly intertwined: 'the whole nature of the productive sphere is based on the premise that someone else is looking after the reproductive sphere' (Tancred 1995, p. 14). In other words, without reproductive work in the household, it would be difficult to fully engage in paid work in the labour market.

Thus it is necessary to distinguish different types of work. In the context of parenting in contemporary European societies there are three basic categories: (1) *care work* done in connection to having children (and other dependent family members), (2) *paid work* done in the labour market and (3) *domestic work* done in the household. All of them are connected to each other. As I shall show in the following chapters, sometimes there is a problem with finding a clear boundary between them. Yet there are several reasons why it is convenient to keep to these categories. First, parenthood is a highly gendered phenomenon. The division of traditional maternal and paternal duties often overlaps with the division of paid and unpaid work—men are mainly responsible for breadwinning, whereas women's obligation is to take care of children and deal with housework. When analysing different types of work separately, we can clearly see inequalities between men and women. Secondly, the transition to parenthood is connected to great changes in an individual's life, as well as family life in general. As much research shows, transition to parenthood is often associated with an increasing number of care and domestic obligations, this requires rethinking issues of paid work—such as the length of working hours, time of work, taking longer leave and so on. For many people it is only after becoming parents that they start to experience time conflict or more

critically assess their attitudes to paid work. Thirdly, it is important to recognise the difference between care work and domestic work. Of course, in many cases they overlap, yet at the same time they significantly differ, interviewees from my research recognised this difference. Even though care work is present to some extent in everyone's life, childless people usually have a lot fewer care obligations than parents. This is because care of children, especially small ones, requires constant attention and in many situations cannot be totally transferred to other people—of course parents can share care work with others, for example babysitters, grandparents, childcare institutions, yet they are still solely responsible for how this care is arranged. This responsibility is ever-present. Care work is imbued with greater emotional engagement than domestic work, which, whilst having its own importance, requires less attention and can be postponed or more easily transferred to other people. Finally, such a categorisation of work allows for comparisons between different studies on parenthood. There are studies that concentrate on the issue of the work/life balance, in such studies researchers usually focus on paid work in the labour market and analyse how people combine this with other parental obligations. They usually refer, implicitly or explicitly, to such a division (Crespi and Ruspini 2016; Drobníč and Guillén 2011; Lewis et al. 2017; Olah and Frątczak 2013). There are other studies that concentrate on everyday parental obligations connected to care work, organisation of everyday practices with children, as well as relations between parents and children (Doucet 2004; Miller 2005, 2011; Sikorska 2019). There are many studies that deal with these issues in the context of migration (Pustulka et al. 2015; Ślusarczyk 2019; Urbańska 2015, 2016). Finally, there are studies which analyse the organisation of domestic work, unpaid work done in the household, which is highly gendered, but the organisation of which differs depending on social class, economic situation, location of residence and level of engagement with the welfare system (Boje 2006; Coltrane 2000; Greenstein 2009; Schober 2013; Titkow et al. 2004; Warren 2003).

In my analysis of parenting, I concentrate on the issue of work, that which is either done at home or for pay. This focus on work results from the fact that at the beginning my aim was to identify the strategies used by Polish parents for achieving a work/life balance. Yet during the fieldwork and analysis of the data, I realised that the concept of a work/life balance is not very useful. This concept is restraining and often inadequate to describe the situation of many parents, especially those who do not fit to the *ideal* model of two employed, middle-class parents with healthy kids. To move away from this concept whilst still using the collected data, I decided to distinguish the most important elements of parenting experiences in contemporary Poland. I concentrated on the issue of work, since the interviewed parents talked about this topic most. Yet I am aware that parenting is something more than only work.

2.4 Parenting and Doing Gender

Parenting is a social and cultural phenomenon, it is not only determined by the biological features of human bodies, but rather results from various norms, social expectations and prevailing models of behaviour in a particular society. It has not always been obvious for sociologists and social scientists to analyse parenthood as a social construct. As a gendered phenomenon people often confuse biological predispositions of men and women with cultural and social expectations grounded in norms and values. A good example of such confusion is the functionalist perspective in sociology, in which it is assumed that in modern societies models of motherhood and fatherhood are based on distinctive, yet complementary, obligations (Bales and Parsons 1955; Parsons 1955; Zelditch 1955). Functionalists treat the nuclear family as a subsystem and analyse it in terms of its functions. They indicate two characteristics that determine the role of individuals within the family: sex and age. The first function of the nuclear family is the socialisation of children, in which children learn how to function in a society and what values are important. The second function is important from the perspective of adults—marriage and becoming a parent are significant events in an individual's life, which are necessary to achieve an emotional balance. The roles in marriage and the family are based on an instrumental/expressive axis and are related to the occupational system. In modern societies the family does not produce all necessary products and services by itself, but can function thanks to external economic income gained by family members' participation in the external occupational system. That is why there is a need to differentiate roles in the family—one person focuses on economic provisions for the whole family, whereas the second is responsible for emotional stability and takes care of family relations. In this division men participate in the occupational system, whereas women are responsible for the domestic sphere. The difference between men and women is described here as functional, and is explained with biological differences between genders—women because of their ability to become pregnant and breastfeed *naturally* belong to a domestic sphere and have predispositions to take care of relations between family members. This does not mean that in the functionalist perspective women's work in the labour market is not recognised—it is, yet it is never recognised as a primary role—women are expected to resign from paid work in connection with motherhood. Even though the functionalist perspective is formulated to make it appear unbiased and objective, it is in fact based on the false premise that men and women are distinctly different, and that this is a result of biological differences between male and female bodies. At the same time, the nuclear family described by functionalism is a very limited social phenomenon, which was characteristic for middle-class families living in the United States in the 1950s. As Michael Kimmel notes:

The so-called traditional system of dads who head out to work every morning, leaving moms to stay at home with the children as full-time housewives and mothers, was an invention of the 1950s – and part of a larger ideological effort to facilitate the re-entry of American men

back into the workplace and domestic life after World War II and to legitimate the return of women from the workplace and back into the home. (2011, p. 248)

The confusions of biological and cultural predispositions of men and women to parenting are grounded in a broader system of gender inequalities. The dimension of gender inequality is crucial for my analysis. To understand how contemporary societies function it is necessary to analyse gender relations and how they affect the everyday lives of men and women. Family is one of the most important and the most resilient of social institutions, at the same time it is also one of the most gendered ones. This means that the functioning of the family is strictly connected to gender roles and unequal gender relations. In this book parenting is analysed in terms of work, as activities that are undertaken to cater to one's own needs. Consequently, to describe the experiences of Polish parents, I refer here to the theoretical approach of *doing gender* proposed by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987, 2009), in which gender is perceived as an ongoing situated process, in which masculinity and femininity are not ascribed, but rather achieved and connected to a particular system of relationships. Gender then is interactional and institutional, it is also subject to constant social change (West and Zimmerman 2009). Furthermore, in the context of this book, it is important that gender is also relational—the scripts of being a man and a woman refer to each other, as well as to the broader dominant models of masculinity and femininity. In this approach, gender is not perceived as an individual characteristic, but rather ‘an emergent property of social situations: both an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and a means of justifying one of the most fundamental divisions of society’ (West and Fenstermaker 1995, p. 9).

Despite decades of the feminist movement, gender inequalities still persist today. Family life, especially parenthood, is one of those areas in which these inequalities are particularly visible. As research shows, the transition to parenthood results in re-traditionalisation of how everyday life is organised—women undertake more domestic and care duties while reducing their engagement in paid work (Paull 2008; Schober 2013; Solera and Mencarini 2018; van der Lippe et al. 2011). This means that the consequences of becoming a parent are different for men and women, and that parenthood reinforces gender inequalities. In the context of the three types of work connected to parenthood distinguished above—care, paid and domestic—the theoretical perspective of doing gender helps to explain the parenting experiences of men and women. These experiences are not only a result of individual choices made by parents, but are also strictly connected with the social, cultural and institutional contexts which characterise the particular acceptable models of mothering and fathering. These models serve as a reference point for individuals as they engage in their parental roles. They are an important element of gender beliefs, which can be defined as ‘the cultural rules or instructions for enacting the social structure of difference and inequality that we understand to be gender’ (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, p. 511). Their role is twofold—on the one hand, they specify how men and women should behave in particular situations, on the other hand, they serve

as a set of rules which allows the behaviour of others to be evaluated (Ridgeway and Correll 2004).

In family life, especially parenthood, it is especially difficult to ignore gender beliefs and to undo gender. This is because parenthood is not only a cultural and social phenomenon, but it also has a biological dimension. Consequently, the differences between a mother and a father are often perceived in terms of biological differences between female and male bodies—the first one is capable of childbearing and breastfeeding, whereas the latter is deprived of these abilities. The role of a mother is thus defined at the beginning, since she was pregnant, gave birth and then breastfed a child. During this time the role of a father is only one of being supportive. As I showed in my research on fatherhood, these initial differences between a mother and a father resulting from biological differences serve as an explanation for the diversification of maternal and paternal obligations at the later stage of being a parent (Suwada 2015, 2017a). Consequently, women remain as the primary caregiver, whereas men are rather perceived in terms of secondary caregiver or a helper whose role is to support the mother in everyday life. His primary obligation is to provide economically for his family. This differentiation of a mother's or father's obligation has consequences for the organisation of work within the family. Paid work in the labour market is perceived as being more of a male duty. Care and domestic work remain as a woman's duty to perform or at least manage.

In contemporary times even though sociologists observe the increasing participation of women in the labour market, as well as the increasing involvement of fathers in care and domestic obligations, there are still great inequalities within the household. They are, on the one hand, connected with gender beliefs affecting the way individuals think about motherhood and fatherhood, but on the other hand they are also strictly connected with the institutional context, i.e. the organisation of the labour market, the welfare state, and in particular family policy. These institutional settings can reinforce or weaken gender beliefs about the level of engagement in parenthood of mothers and fathers. In the next part of the chapter, I shall concentrate on this issue more carefully.

2.5 Parenting and the Welfare State

Gender beliefs are an important element of the gender system based on inequalities between men and women. They are not only important for individuals and how they behave in everyday life, but they are also an important point of reference in designing the family policy system. At the beginning of the twenty-first century parenthood is a political concern. This is not only because of the feminist movement and feminist scholars who recognised that 'the personal is political', questioned the division on public and private spheres, and showed how the everyday life of women is embedded in the broader structure of gender inequalities (Hanisch 2006; Rogan and Budgeon 2018), but also because family life was recognised as a sphere affected

by the public sphere, in particular the organisation of the labour market and family policy system.

The family policy system is aimed at supporting parents in reconciling parenting obligations with paid work in the labour market. Therefore, when analysing the parenting experience today we need to look not only at individual motivations and actions, but also on the structures created by social, economic and political conditions. The general point of theoretical reference in this book is the concept of agency that attempts to explain the links between individual behaviours at the microlevel of a particular society with its macrostructures. Anne Lisa Ellingsæter and Lars Gulbrandsen, referring to a concept of agency, claim that ‘social action is an outcome of a choice within constraints, and preferences underlying choice are shaped by the constraints’ (Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen 2007, p. 656). Thus individuals function in a social reality that limits their actions. Such a social reality can be understood as *opportunity structures*, which in the case of parents determine their everyday practices (Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen 2007; Javornik and Kurowska 2017). The family policy system is an important element shaping the opportunity structures of parents. In particular, it affects the way parents can or cannot fulfil various obligations resulting from being a parent, in this book I am especially interested in how the family policy system shapes the opportunities of parents to combine paid work, care work and domestic work.

Research on the welfare state indicates that various family policy systems differently affect people’s everyday life. In this book I concentrate on the Polish family system that is an example of a post-communist system and has many common features with systems of other countries from Central and Eastern Europe. To map the opportunity structures that the Polish system creates in the case of Polish parents, I refer to the historical-institutional analysis of Steven Saxonberg (2014), who claims that post-communist Europe is characterised by gendering family policies. Consequently, ‘it seems clear that the policies pursued have not enabled women to balance work and family life, and that in fact they have led to a large drop in fertility rates’ (Saxonberg 2014, p. 33). The analysis of Saxonberg is based on his welfare state typology regarding the dimension of genderisation-degenderisation (2013). In this typology the crucial question is how particular policies reinforce or reconstruct traditional gender roles. Looking at the welfare state in the context of its impact on gender relations has a long tradition in feminist studies (Connell 2009; Giullari and Lewis 2005; Orloff 1996, 2009). It is recognised that the links between gender relations and the welfare state is twofold. On the one hand, states can support the social reproduction or reconstruction of gender order based on inequalities. On the other hand, changing gender relations have an impact on the character of the welfare state (Orloff 1996). For my analysis the crucial question is how the institutional system of family policy affects gender relations within the family and shapes opportunity structures of mothers and fathers in the context of three types of work: paid work, care work and domestic work. To answer this question it is necessary to distinguish the most important instruments of the family policy system and recognise their impact on the everyday organisation of parents’ lives.

The Polish family policy system is based on three main instruments: (1) parental leave, (2) institutional care for children, and (3) cash benefits. All these elements went through significant reform in the first and second decades of the twenty-first century. Below I try to briefly describe these three elements and depict the opportunity structures of Polish parents in 2017. Since the in-depth interviews on which the following analysis is based were conducted in 2017, I shall concentrate on how the system looked up to 2017, even though since then some elements have been changed (for example in cash benefits and in the number of places in care institutions available for children under three). Since there are many analyses of how the system has changed in the last two decades, I focus only on the institutional settings in which the interviewed parents functioned. The sample only included parents whose youngest child was no older than eight. Thus I am particularly interested in how the system was designed 2009–2017.

In the 2010s the system of parental leave went through significant reforms. Parents of children born in 2010 had a right to 20 weeks of maternity leave, two weeks of additional maternity leave and one week of paternity leave (all paid at 100% salary). In 2012 the additional maternity leave was prolonged to four weeks and paternity leave to two weeks. In 2013 the system went through the most significant reform—a new type of leave was introduced called parental leave, it was 26 weeks long. Also in 2013 additional maternity leave was extended to 6 weeks. Consequently, at that time parents had a right to 20 weeks of maternity leave, 6 weeks of additional maternity leave and 26 weeks of parental leave (together 52 weeks, which is almost one year). Since the system was a bit confusing for many parents, in 2016 the additional maternity leave was integrated with parental leave, so from then on parents could use 20 weeks of maternity leave and 32 weeks of parental leave. The replacement rate in these leaves is high—if parents plan to use all 52 weeks then a person on leave gets 80% of their salary, if they plan to use only 26 weeks, the replacement rate is 100%, in such cases all additional weeks are paid at 60%. Through all these years after using maternity and parental leave parents could also take advantage of a three-year-long extended leave, which is means-tested—the benefit being 400 PLN per month (ca. 90 euros) is paid only to parents not exceeding income criterion 500 PLN per person per month in the household. In this case, for most parents this type of leave is unpaid.

As in the case with most post-communist countries in Europe, institutional care for children in Poland is a two-tier system, in which there are nurseries for children under three and preschools for children aged three–six years. Even though this division has its roots in the nineteenth century in the Austrian Empire (for more details see: Saxonberg 2014), it still persists in the Polish system and has consequences for the enrolment rates of children under or over three years. Today the Polish system for the institutional care of children is a mixture of public and private institutions. In 2017 72% of nurseries were private, but they offered only 52.8% of all available places. Yet since private institutions are also subsidised by the state, 86% of all children in public and private nurseries benefited from partial or total funding by the municipality (Statistics Poland 2018). According to Statistics Poland, in 2017 only 8.6% of children under three were enrolled at a care institution (13.3%

in cities and 2% in rural areas). Whereas the enrolment rates for children aged three–six were 86.4% in general (99.9% in cities and 67.9% in rural areas). The lack of places in care institutions for children under three is one of the greatest challenges for Polish policy-makers. Since 2011 the program ‘Toddler’ has been implemented, which aims to increase the number of available places. Poland is also obliged by the European Union to increase the enrolment rates of children under three to at least 33% (European Commission 2013). So even though since 2011 enrolment rates have risen from 3.8% to 10.5%, in 2018 there was still a huge unsatisfied care demand for the youngest children. As I show in the following chapters, the experiences of parents also indicate that there is a huge problem with organising care for children under three.

The last element of the family policy system is child benefit. This universal cash benefit is a fairly new instrument for Polish parents, it was introduced in 2016 by the programme ‘Family 500+’. The benefit is an untaxed 500 PLN per month for a child. Initially, this benefit was restricted to families with more than one child—parents received the benefit for every second and following child. In the case of one-child families, the benefit was means-tested and was available for parents whose income per person in a household was not higher than 800 PLN per month (or in the case of children with disabilities not higher than 1200 PLN per month). In July 2019 the programme was extended and now every parent has a right to this benefit regardless of the number of children or the financial situation of the family.¹ Additionally, parents have a right to tax relief in connection with having children, there is also a system of financial aid for the poorest families. Even though the aim of the ‘Family 500+’ programme was to increase fertility rates by financial support for families, the instrument is often perceived as redirecting women away from the labour market and into motherhood (Gromada 2017; Ruzik-Sierdzińska 2017).

The Polish family policy system is grounded on traditional and conservative views about gender roles and the organisation of family life. Dorota Szelewa (2017) notes that post-1989 evolution of the Polish welfare state is characterised by the state’s withdrawal from the social policy programme. In family policy this was connected primarily with spending cuts on formal care. Thus after 1989 the Polish family policy system engaged in a process of re-familialisation, and was defined as ‘implicit familialism’, in which the lack of support from the state meant putting the burden of care on families, in particular women. Yet the beginning of the twenty-first century is a time of greater focus on family policy. As Szelewa indicates, in 2005 a conservative government took office and started a transition towards explicit familialism that finalised in 2015 with the introduction of the ‘Family 500 +’ programme. As Sigrid Leitner argues ‘the explicit familialism not only strengthens the family in caring for children, the handicapped and the elderly through familial policies. It also lacks the provision of any alternative to family

¹As the interviews were conducted before the ‘Family 500+’ programme was extended to include the first born child, all parents in the research had experience of its earlier restricted version. Yet some of them were also eligible to receive the benefit for their first child.

care. This lack in public and market driven care provision together with strong familialization explicitly enforces the caring function of the family' (2003, pp. 358–359). The greater focus on cash benefits than on childcare institutions could be evidence of adopting explicit familialism by Polish policy-makers. Even though in the Polish system there are some elements of public and private care institutions, especially for children over three years, it is clear that the current government puts more pressure on familial rhetoric and traditional gender roles and does not guarantee a stable funding for childcare institutions.

The process of re-familialisation that has been taking place since 1989 has great consequences for women and prevailing gender inequalities. The concepts of familialisation and defamilialisation are at risk of adopting gender neutrality and not recognising that putting the burden of care and domestic work on the family in fact usually means putting it on women. Thus to better understand what consequences the familial orientation of the Polish family policy system has on opportunity structures of men and women, I refer to the previously mentioned concepts of genderisation and degenderisation. Saxonberg (2013) distinguishes three types of policies based on the axis of genderisation/degenderisation. On the one hand, there are policies that are degenderising, and their aim is to support the elimination of traditional gender roles. On the other hand, there are genderising policies, which promote the different roles of men and women in relation to family life and labour market participation. Referring to a difference proposed by Leitner (2003) between implicitly and explicitly familialising policies, Saxonberg recognises implicitly and explicitly genderising policies. The explicitly genderising policies openly support the traditional gender order and family roles in the family, whereas implicitly genderising policies simply ignore the gender dimension and through gender neutrality contribute to the reproduction of gender unequal societies. Keeping in mind the three main instruments of family policy, the Polish system can be defined as explicitly genderising. The parental leave system in particular is openly oriented to women and does not recognise fathers as its main recipients. Even though in 2013 the new leave which was introduced was formulated in gender neutral terms (highly paid 26 weeks of parental leave, in 2016 extended to 32 weeks) the policy-makers did not decide to encourage men to actually use it. Parental leave from the very beginning was perceived as an extension of maternity leave and was perceived mostly as a mother's right that in some special circumstances could be transferred to fathers (for more details see: Suwada 2017a, b). Consequently, in the Polish system only women are expected to take longer breaks in connection to parenthood. Men's care obligations are ignored by the system.

The way institutional care for children is designed in Poland also has genderising consequences for women. The lack of places in institutions for children under three creates particularly difficult conditions for women. After 52 weeks of highly paid maternity and parental leave, parents need to organise care for their children. The interviewees' experiences show that the period between the end of paid leave and the time when a child can go to preschool when they are three can be very problematic. I call this period a *care gap*, since there are no good mechanisms that help parents in organising care. The system gives parents three possibilities: (1) finding a place in a

nursery, which is very hard because of lack of places, this is especially so in smaller towns and rural areas; (2) taking an extended parental leave, which is unpaid or low-paid and requires a longer break from paid work, this type of leave is only available to one of the parents, which in practice usually means the mother; (3) hiring a nanny, which even though it can be subsidised by the state, is still very expensive and unaffordable for most parents. In Chap. 3 I show how parents deal with this care gap in everyday life. The institutional conditions create a situation in which there is a great pressure on women to resign from paid work or at least reduce working hours for this period of time. This pressure is reinforced by the cultural norms around care. An important context in Polish society is *the idea of threeness*, according to which mothers should take care of their children until they are three years old. This is connected with a conviction that it is better for child development to be at home with a mother until three years than to spend this time in care institutions.

Paradoxically, this norm is not a reason why there is a division of nurseries and preschools in Poland today. This has its origins in the institutional context of the Austrian Empire (then the Austro-Hungarian Empire) in the nineteenth century. Today on its territory there are four countries: Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia and part of Poland. All of these countries developed a two-tier system based on the division of institutions for children under or above three years of age (Saxonberg 2014). Saxonberg et al. (2012) argue that the idea of threeness is an example of how institutions can influence discourses.

The idea of threeness actually came from the Lutheran Church [...]. They thought that the main task of preschools was to ingrain children at an early age into Protestant religious values, including obedience and the Protestant work ethic. Thus, the division of children above and below three did not emerge from any kind of modern psychological research on child development, but rather it came about from century old beliefs about the age at which children were ripe for learning certain religious values. The roots of threeness have nothing to do with the issue as to whether it is good for mothers to stay at home with their children during the first three years. (2012, pp. 10–11)

In the Polish case, nurseries were never very popular, especially because of the strong influence of the Catholic church, which defended the family as a private institution. Consequently, even though nurseries were an element of the family policy system for the whole of the twentieth century, the system was never highly developed and enrolment rates were always rather low in comparison to other countries in the region (Saxonberg 2014). Yet the idea of threeness is still very dominant today in Polish society, it is reinforced by a system which provides insufficient nurseries places and in which hiring a nanny is impossibly expensive for most parents. Consequently, there is a pressure on a mother to provide care for her children until they are three years old, this is so even if she works full-time. There is no similar pressure on fathers. To understand this difference in attitudes towards men and women in connection with parenthood in Polish society it is important to refer to another cultural norm. In Polish society there is a strong myth of *Matka Polka* (*the Polish mother*) according to which a woman's role is to devote herself to childbearing and childrearing for the sake of her country. The figure of *Matka Polka* was particularly strong when Poland lacked independence, and also when Polish

men were fighting wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Anna Titkow notes (2012), this figure legitimised a woman's position of power in the family.

Difficult life conditions led to a special variety of matriarchy, characteristic for the communist and post-communist states of the Eastern Europe. Matriarchy, in which laden with shopping bags, often experiencing lack of sleep, a terribly tired woman also has a justified sense of being an irreplaceable manager of family life, fulfilling countless duties and tasks.² (Titkow 2012, p. 33)

This special position of a mother in the family was a reason why women accepted inequality—'in a system where the state tried to exert totalitarian control over society, the family was the one space in which people felt secure – able to be their *true* selves and to express their true opinions. Women often *wanted* to have the main responsibility for the family' (Saxonberg 2014, p. 45). Consequently, as many researchers have observed, men in communist Poland did not hold the traditional male role as head of their household. They were rather remote, they belonged to the labour market and their role was limited to breadwinning. This situation is still visible today—in Polish families a father is often absent and lacking agency in everyday family life (Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk 2000; Saxonberg 2014; Stanis 2014).

The concept of opportunity structures allows us to see how the institutional and social as well as cultural contexts shape the situation of individual human beings. The Polish institutional system together with cultural norms about care creates strikingly different opportunity structures for men and women in a situation of parenthood. Women are expected to take longer breaks from employment in connection to parenthood, they are overwhelmed with a double burden plus the lack of institutional support which primarily affects their everyday life. They experience more so called *combination pressures*, which result from the combination of often conflicting expectations resulting from family life and paid work (van der Lippe et al. 2006). At the same time, men are mostly expected to concentrate on paid work and provide for their families. They are not even encouraged to use parental leave and they deal differently with the consequences of the institutional care gap. What is more, since expectations from men in connection to childcare are limited, they do not experience combination pressures in the same way as women. Although, as my following analysis shows they also experience difficulties in being a parent.

2.6 Conclusion

From a sociological perspective, parenthood is one of the most important experiences that the majority of people share. To understand how society works it is necessary to recognise how people fulfil their parental obligations. In contemporary times the links between parenthood and paid work seem to be core areas of interest

²All citations from the Polish publications are translated by the author.

for the welfare state. In the following analysis, my aim is to describe the experience of parenting in Polish society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yet I shift away from the popular concept of a work/life balance that, as I argue, is not always adequate to analyse parenting experiences. I propose to examine parenthood in the context of three types of work that are carried out in connection to it. These are: care work, paid work and domestic work. Even though there are not always clear boundaries between these types of work, their separate analysis enables an understanding of the inequalities in economic status and gender between different parents. Cultural norms about care, gender beliefs, economic and social resources as well as instruments of family policy and labour market requirements create different opportunity structures for different individuals. In this analysis, I assume that parents are reflexive agents who can assess their situation (i.e. their opportunity structures) and during the in-depth interviews can share with others how they experience parenting in the context of the three above mentioned types of work. The narratives of Polish parents pave the way for a critical analysis of inequalities in economic status and gender that prevail in family life and in the labour market in Poland.

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