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Family Life in Europe in the Twentieth Century

Życie rodzinne w Europie w XX wieku

Abstract: Family life in Europe has undergone many changes in the twentieth century. These include the lifestyle of women, their legal freedom, family relations, relations with partners, relations with the older generation, and relations with children. The position of women in society has also undergone many transformations. Problems remain, however, in the social and family policy of the state, as women engaged in the working process give preference to their own plans and their need for self-fulfilment. The main goal of state family policy in the twenty-first century is, then, to ensure a harmonious balance between professional activity and family life.

Keywords: the family, family life, the twentieth century, divorce, abortion, the role of women

Family life in Europe underwent significant transformation during the twentieth century. It was a century of two world wars and a great economic crisis, also a century of social modernisation, economic development and progressive globalisation.

In comparison with demographic developments in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century was marked by a gradual slowing of demographic growth, reaching zero in the nineteen nineties. This trend was caused by changes in generative behaviour. A decline in the child mortality rate resulting from advances in medicine and hygiene was accompanied by family planning and control of the birth rate and by growing of family expenditure on providing for children.

The decline in the birth rate even outstripped the falling mortality rate in the second half of the nineteen nineties. The number of deaths exceeded the number of births in 11 of 35 European countries, including the populous states Germany, Italy and Russia. The process of urbanisation continued, though to a lesser extent than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A gradual increase in immigration, particularly to Western and Nord-Western Europe from areas outside Europe. These immigrants had a different system of family life and generally did not adapt to the majority population¹.

The ageing of the population was a particularly unfavourable demographic trend in Europe, as the proportion of the population aged more than 65 began to exceed the sustainable 5%. The country with the largest number of people more than 65 years of age in the year 2000 was Italy (17.6%), followed by Sweden, Denmark, Germany and Greece.

A significant transformation in family life in Europe was caused by an increase in marital instability. Legal separation and divorce became a phenomenon, particularly in the last four decades of the twentieth century, as a consequence of changes in family law and in the equality of men and women. The liberalisation of divorce has had the most significant influence².

The legalisation of abortion also made an undoubted contribution to the transformation of family life. As a result of this change, 7.7 million abortions were performed in Europe in 1995, as compared to 8.3 million births.³

Three new types of family began to take shape in Europe towards the end of the twentieth century – families comprised of unmarried partners or cohabitants, new or reconstructed families between divorced people, and families made up of partners of the same sex.

Families comprised of unmarried couples or cohabitants have been part of European family life since the nineteen seventies. This form of cohabitation is currently popular among young people as a way of preparing for marriage. The majority of these couples do not, however, reject the family as such, but rather the institution of marriage⁴.

¹ F. Schultheis, *The Missing Link: Family, Memory and Identity in Germany*, [in:] *Family and Kinship in Europe*, M. Gullenstad – M. Segalen (ed.), Pinter, London 1997, p. 40–60.

² L. Stone, *The Road to Divorce. England 1530–1987*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990, p. 435–436.

³ W.J. Goode, *World Changes in Divorce Patterns*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1993, p. 116–117.

⁴ R. Phillips, *Putting Asunder. A History of Divorce in Western Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 536.

New or reconstructed families formed by divorced people are a characteristic feature of European family life. Divorced men and women entered into a second marriage most frequently. Blood relationships with children from previous marriages thereby become less important⁵.

A third type of European family taking shape at the end of the twentieth century involved the cohabitation of people of the same sex, without legal recognition. Their number increased more significantly among women than among men, particularly in large towns and in intellectual circles, in many European countries. This form of cohabitation was legalised in Denmark in 1989. Homosexual couples were allowed civil marriages, i.e. their registration as a couple. The Danish model spread to other countries, including the Czech Republic. These couples obtained the right to adopt children born in previous heterosexual marriages in 1997 in, for example, Denmark⁶.

The nuclear family predominates in European family life to this day. The family has ceded a number of its original functions to communal or state institutions. This has led to an increase in the importance of private life and a strengthening of the emotional function of the family with its emotional ties and intimacy. This is one area in which the role of women has not been reduced, remaining irreplaceable in spite of formal equality and changes in their position in public and family life. This conflict between the role of women in the family and the role of women in the working process continues to be a topical issue, and women from all social classes are striving for the recognition of their rights in practice⁷.

European family life has undoubtedly remained unified on the threshold of the twenty-first century, in spite of numerous differences. Problems remain, however, in state social and family policy, as women engaged in the working process give preference to their own plans and their need for self-fulfilment. They play an active part in public life, while also fulfilling their duties responsibly in private life. The principal task facing state family policy for the twenty-first century is, then, to ensure a harmonious balance between professional activities and family life. Although the nuclear family

⁵ M. Barbagli, *Provando e riprovando: Matrimonio, famiglia e divorzio in Italia in altri paesi occidentali*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1990, p. 161.

⁶ J. Finch, *Family Obligations and Social Change*, Polity Press, Oxford: 1989, p. 32.

⁷ L.A. Tilly – J.W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1978, p. 154.

still predominates statistically, there are clear signs of a new model of more extended families that do share mutual emotional ties⁸.

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⁸ D.I. Kertzen – M. Barbagli (ed.), *Family Life in the Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2003, p. 375.