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Difficulties of contemporary motherhood. Methodological aspects of maternal research

Trudności współczesnego macierzyństwa. Metodologiczne aspekty badania matek

Abstract

Introduction. The article aims to present the difficulties experienced by mothers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was assumed that during the pandemic, difficulties related to reconciling work and family life would intensify, there would be changes in the relationship between mother and child, and the division of family responsibilities between the child's parents would change.

Aim. The main problem was: What difficulties related to family life during the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus are experienced by the examined mothers?

Material and methods. The research used a qualitative approach. The source of the research data are interviews with mothers.

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Results. During the pandemic, mothers' difficulties varied in nature. Research results indicate both negative and positive (from deterioration to improvement of relationships) consequences of change in the relationship between mother and child, attempts to combine work and family life, and the division of responsibilities between partners. The surveyed mothers report an increase in tension and stress as a result of the emerging conflict between work and family life, limited support from the partner and a difficult, full of difficult emotional relationship with the child. On the second continuum are mothers who, despite a difficult situation, tried to reconcile work and family life, received support from their partner, shared the responsibilities of caring for the child and running the household equally.

Conclusion. We should consider the pandemic in terms of a difficult situation. In a way, it forced mothers to construct a new everyday life related to the role of mother and employee simultaneously. So far, existing attempts to balance both spheres of life leading to maintaining balance ("work-life balance") have not always proved effective during the pandemic. In many cases, the pandemic has led to a reset of the existing family model and re-creation.

Keywords: pedagogy, mother, motherhood, child, family, everyday life, COVID-19 pandemic, SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Abstrakt

Wprowadzenie. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie trudności doświadczanych przez matki podczas pierwszej fali pandemii COVID-19. Zakładano, że w czasie pandemii nasiliły się trudności związane z godzeniem życia zawodowego i rodzinnego, nastąpią zmiany w relacjach między matką a dzieckiem, zmieni się podział obowiązków rodzinnych między rodzicami dziecka.

Cel. Zapytano o główny problem: Jakich trudności związanych z życiem rodzinnym w czasie pandemii wywołanej wirusem SARS-CoV-2 doświadczają badane matki?

Material i metody. W badaniu zastosowano podejście jakościowe. Źródłem danych badawczych są wywiady z matkami.

Wyniki. W czasie pandemii trudności matek miały zróżnicowany charakter. Wyniki badań wskazują zarówno na negatywne, jak i pozytywne (od pogorszenia do poprawy relacji) konsekwencje zmiany relacji między matką a dzieckiem, próby łączenia życia zawodowego z rodzinnym oraz podziału obowiązków między partnerami. Badane matki zgłaszają wzrost napięcia i stresu w wyniku pojawiającego się konfliktu między pracą zawodową a życiem rodzinnym, ograniczonego wsparcia ze strony partnera oraz trudnej, pełnej trudnych emocji relacji z dzieckiem. Na drugim kontinuum znajdują się matki, które pomimo trudnej sytuacji starały się godzić życie zawodowe z rodzinnym, otrzymywały wsparcie ze strony partnera, dzieliły się po równo obowiązkami związanymi z opieką nad dzieckiem i prowadzeniem gospodarstwa domowego.

Wnioski. Pandemię należy rozpatrywać w kategoriach sytuacji trudnej. Niejako wymusiła ona na matkach skonstruowanie nowej codzienności związanej z rolą matki i pracownika jednocześnie. Dotychczasowe próby równoważenia obu sfer życia prowadzące do zachowania równowagi (*work-life balance*) nie zawsze okazywały się skuteczne w czasie pandemii. W wielu przypadkach pandemia doprowadziła do zresetowania dotychczasowego modelu rodziny i stworzenia go na nowo.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogika, matka, macierzyństwo, dziecko, rodzina, codzienność, pandemia COVID-19, wirus SARS-CoV-2.

Introduction

In recent years, motherhood has become the subject of many inquiries and scientific research. This interest is largely due to the experienced difficulties related to maintaining the unwavering dynamics of prenatal processes expected by given European societies. Negative population growth is the result of many factors. Issues related to the lack of generational replacement are, of course, not the only reason. The interest in motherhood is also caused by the changes, that occurred in the XX century, in the perception of women and the roles played in the family by both women and men (Włodarczyk, 2009).

It happens in human existence that reality confronts a person with sudden and unpredictable situations that may have a global dimension (Kwak, 2005). Such a situation took place at the time of the outbreak of the pandemic which somehow forced the society to reorganise its current functioning in the pandemic reality.

The pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus was announced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on March 11, 2020. Countries reacted differently to the risk of infection – ranging from implementing restrictions quickly to significantly delaying the introduction of restrictions. Poland was among the countries where restrictions were introduced relatively quickly (Górniak, Krupnik, Koniewski, 2020). All institutions were closed overnight and distance learning (as well as professional work in the vast majority) became, regardless of the will of the teachers, children, and parents, everyday life (Całek, 2021). For two years after the outbreak of the pandemic, many studies, showing its impact on various aspects of the functioning of the individual and society, have been conducted around the world. Care for the family gained special importance in this difficult situation. The pandemic disrupted family habits, plans, and social contacts and introduced uncertainty, fear of falling ill and fear for the health of loved ones (Kwak, 2022).

The article aims to present the difficulties experienced by mothers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus during the complete lockdown of kindergar-

tens, schools, and other educational institutions. This seems important because the process of modifying old family practices, including those regarding the division of household duties and taking care of children, had to take place as a result of the outbreak of the pandemic. This was due to, among others, the fact that for a part of society it became necessary to perform professional work at home, where children were also staying due to the temporary lockdown of facilities, or to provide care for children during the absence of parents as a result of the performance of professional work in the workplace.

Research problem

The difficulties experienced by mothers during the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus constituted the subject of the author's research. Undertaking the above issue is justified due to the occurrence of a difficult situation which to a large extent also applies to family, including motherhood. The pandemic somehow forced the emergence of new ways of constructing everyday life related to the performance of social roles, including the role of an employee and mother. The main objective of the conducted research was to learn about the difficulties experienced by mothers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was assumed that during the pandemic, the difficulties related to reconciling (combining) professional work with family life would intensify, there would be changes in the relationship between the mother and the child and the division of family responsibilities between the child's parents would change (including taking care of the child and his/her education). Therefore, the conducted interviews served the stated purpose of the research – to learn and interpret the articulated experiences of the studied mothers, often involved in many roles at the same time.

The theoretical inspiration for the author's research was the theory of family practices developed by David Morgan (2011a) who defined them as everyday processes and activities, undertaken by family members, most often repeated routinely. However, he noted that there may be some tensions and violations of family practices that will cause them to change. According to D. Morgan (2011b), the family is constructed and reconstructed through family practices, it is something that "people 'do' and in doing so they create and recycle the idea of the family" (Sikorska, 2019, p. 238). They focus their attention on reciprocity, interaction, and everyday life. They also make it possible to capture both durability and variability in the process of giving meanings to one's biography about the created relationships of closeness (McCarthy, Edwards, 2011). It was assumed that in the case of the pandemic, some tensions and violations could lead to a change in current family practices.

The pandemic should also be considered in the context of a difficult situation faced by parents and children. According to Jerzy Tomaszewski (1982), a difficult situation occurs when, despite the mutual adjustment of the tasks and capabilities of the individual, the prevailing conditions make it impossible to perform a given task or when there is a lack of appropriate competencies enabling the achievement of the result despite the compliance of conditions and requirements of the task. In the first case, the source of difficulties is caused by external conditions (the pandemic), while in the second case, it results from within, it concerns the capabilities of a given person (the parents in this case). The difficulty is the result of the relationship between a human and the environment in both conditions (Łukaszewski, 2015). The pandemic should be considered in the context of a difficult situation for at least three reasons. Firstly, the pandemic created completely new circumstances for the functioning of the individual, the family, and the society. Secondly, the consequences of the pandemic turned out to be multidimensional, affecting, among others, the economic, social, educational, professional, and health spheres. And thirdly, its scope turned out to be worldwide, regulations and decisions were universal and not limited to one country – it affected the family and its individual members in an individual and specific way (Opozda, 2022). A difficult situation generally concerns the discrepancies between human capabilities and limitations related to him/her undertaking activities, efficient functioning and carrying out life tasks. It puts a human in front of a challenge and forces him/her to deal with this situation. What is important, previous experience is not enough to do this many times. There is no ready-made scheme (pattern), based on which a given situation can be solved and overcome.

The interpretative paradigm, which considers the discovery of the central semantic structure in the biography of a given person to be the foundation, was the starting point of the research. Supporters of this paradigm share the belief that reality is shared by various constructs used by the subject and the researcher, while knowledge is social and constitutes a social interpretation of the realities taking place in specific social conditions. The adopted paradigm explains how a human copes in the world, what meanings he/she assigns to reality, how he/she defines himself/herself and what visions of life he/she constructs (Creswell, 2013; Rubacha, 2008).

The qualitative approach was applied in the research. It assumes the so-called lack of assumptions about the nature of a given phenomenon, resulting not from the lack of any research assumptions but from the “cognitively naive” attitude adopted by the researcher (Konarzewski, 2000). The application of the qualitative method enables researchers to research little problems explored that the researcher senses rather than knows about (Bauman, 1998).

An in-depth partially guided interview, during which the researcher interrupts the interviewee’s narrative by asking detailed questions, was conducted. An individual inter-

view, which Krzysztof Rubacha (2008) treats as a conversation between the researcher and one studied person, was also used. This choice seems to be justified – it is related to the tradition of interpretative social research, in which social reality is reorganised as a result of interpretative processes (Jakob, 2001). Biographical research aim is to reach knowledge about social reality, the foundation of which is everyday life (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011). The following question was determined the main problem: What difficulties, related to family life during the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, are experienced by the studied mothers? The following specific problems were posed:

- What possible conflicts of experiencing motherhood in the face of the pandemic do the studied mothers talk about?
- What is the division of responsibilities in the family during the pandemic (child-care, remote education, housekeeping activities)?
- What are the relations of the studied mothers with the child like in the face of the pandemic?

Characteristics of the research area and profiles of the studied mothers

The research was carried out at the turn of May and June 2020, so a few months after the outbreak of the pandemic in Poland, after a complete lockdown. The interviews were conducted among 9 mothers of children aged 3–10 years old in the district of the city of Bydgoszcz (Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship). After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed in the original language of the interlocutors. The studied persons were informed about the research purpose and the possibility of resignation at any time. The mothers were assured of anonymity and the solely scientific purpose of the research. The mothers were asked questions about the occurrence of the professional work-family life conflict, the division of responsibilities in the family and the relationship with the child. Interviews were given by mothers who consented to the study and met the most important requirements from the point of view of the conducted research. The study covered 9 mothers aged 30–41 years old, with at least vocational education (3 mothers had secondary and 3 had higher education). Taking into account the criterion of family structure, 3 mothers indicated functioning in a reconstructed family, while the other 3 in a complete family. Single parenting was declared by 3 studied mothers. Among the studied mothers, 4 had one child (aged 3 to 9 years old), and the rest were mothers of two children.

Experiencing motherhood in the face of conflicts

The society's expectations of mothers are increasing. At the same time, they are increasingly accompanied by a feeling of powerlessness, helplessness, fatigue, and a sense of guilt related to the quality of the relationship with the child (Sikorska, 2019) as well as the belief that the amount of time spent with the child is insufficient. Despite the changes connected with the division of responsibilities in the family, mothers are still the ones who bear responsibility for their offspring (Szlendak, 2010), they are treated as "managers of care and everyday life" (Sikorska, 2019, p. 238) of their children, by adjusting working hours to the needs and capabilities of the family (Alon, Coskun, Doepke, Koll, Tertilt, 2021; Bożewicz, 2019; Morgan, 2011b). The role of a mother can be a source of satisfaction and fulfilment but also of stress, frustration, and burn-out. The difficulties associated with contemporary motherhood are more and more often spoken of. The situation connected with the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus revealed a new face of the difficulties experienced by mothers.

The lack of possibility for children to attend educational institutions and the beginning of remote work (although it was not always possible) and education was associated with certain consequences. They were not concerned only and exclusively the assistance in remote learning and performing work duties at home but also (and perhaps above all) reorganising taking care of the child staying at home. Since March 2020, working parents have found themselves in completely new conditions which contributed to significant changes in professional and family life. Performing remote (or hybrid) work was a new experience for most parents. Just like the need to provide childcare at home while the parent is at work. The pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus resulted in particular difficulties in combining professional work and family life. The connection of these spheres in the following article was considered justified because considerations related to professional work are not possible in this aspect without taking into account the context of home and childcare. Similarly, it is impossible to reflect on family practices without referring to the professional situation of individual family members. The professional work-family life conflict became more intense during the pandemic. Even though the existing attempts to balance both spheres of life leading to maintaining the balance ("work-life balance") are known to most, they were not always effective in the situation of the pandemic. This is evidenced by the statement of one of the mothers:

Although I have been a working mother for many years and combining work with family life has not caused me much difficulty so far, this is where I failed. You cannot work remotely and help your child with technical issues at school at the same time. My child had no contact with the computer, now he is required

to connect remotely, send e-mails and work with a virtual board (M_32, higher education, complete family, two children aged 6 and 10).

I am either 100% a mother or 100% an employee. It was hard for me to combine these two roles at the same time. I could not split like this. This led to remorse that I was not with the child or that I was not developing professionally (M_30, vocational education, complete family, child aged 7 years old).

To perform their professional work, mothers often decided to do it late in the evening when other family members were already asleep. This is indicated, for instance, by the statement of one of the mothers:

I also often sat down to work in the evening after my children and husband had gone to bed. I tried to catch up with what I could not do during the day while I was with the kids. Unfortunately, I ended up falling asleep by the computer or being unconscious and barely functioning in the morning (M_32, secondary education, complete family, two children aged 2 and 7 years old).

The intensification of the problem of childcare turned out to be one of the most unexpected effects of lockdown, especially since the tasks related to children's education were added to the care tasks of working parents. As it turned out, this burden affected mainly women who often had to combine work and family life before the pandemic (Godlewska-Bujok, 2020). To emphasise the difficult situation in which women-mothers found themselves in the situation of the pandemic, the term "pandemic Polish mother" appeared (Lewicka, 2021) referring to a woman who is overburdened and exhausted but convinced of her irreplaceable competence in performing and coordinating various tasks (Imbierowicz, 2012). School classes take place alongside online meetings, conducting professional conversations with the child on one's lap or team meetings conducted from bathrooms, basements, gardens, and other available rooms where the child was not present at a given moment and there was relative peace, which became everyday life at home. For many mothers, the pandemic turned out to be a time of overwork and constant work under pressure which reduced job satisfaction and affected its effectiveness. This is confirmed by the statements of the mothers:

Coordinating remote education and performing my professional work was simply impossible because how was I supposed to talk to clients and connect online when the child would come in and complain about not knowing something, the internet not working, being hungry or bored or that there are no lessons. It was impossible to work like that. Every morning I woke up tired and frustrated just

thinking about the next day (M_36, higher education, single motherhood, child aged 8 years old).

I remember that in the first two weeks, I imposed such an obligation on myself that I had to occupy 100% of the children's time. I felt terribly tired and frustrated then. It turned against me. In the following weeks, I gave up, I allowed them to choose games and the form of spending time and my children were happy. Of course, I am not talking about the media here but about drawing, building, playing ball, and playing with blocks (M_39, secondary education, reconstructed family, children aged 3 and 8 years old).

Based on the mothers' statements, it may be concluded that the situation of the pandemic caused serious difficulties in combining professional work with family life, many times lowering the quality of the former. Household chores and childcare somehow distracted women from their professional work, many times leading to stress, exhaustion and fear of losing their jobs. The fears were intensified by the difficult economic situation in the labour market. This is indicated by the statement of one of the mothers:

For the first few weeks I was trying to reconcile it but it turned out to be impossible. I had to "let go" and give up work, I was doing it at the absolute minimum, I was replying to half of the e-mails, and I was falling behind at work. I felt bad about it. Additionally, I was worried that I could have been fired either due to downsizing or due to my lack of availability. I did not meet the deadlines (M_35, secondary education, single motherhood, child aged 9 years old).

Several months after the outbreak of the pandemic, the studied mothers lacked freedom, activity, direct contact with other people, the former routine and the ability to plan the day, the division of duties and the ability to perform professional work in peace. This is indicated by the statements of the studied mothers:

I missed work and people, I wanted to be in touch with them, I wanted to do something other than just being a mom, a tired and exhausted mom trying to work from home. I miss the time before the pandemic when I could have planned everything (M_32, secondary education, complete family, two children aged 3 and 7).

I was so tired of being at home with the child that going back to work turned out to be a rescue. On the other hand, it makes me feel remorse – I catch myself thinking how can I think like that when I have a child with me who is at risk of

infection, illness and even death and I want to rest from them. Then I think that I am a bad mother and I do not know how to change my attitude (M_36, higher education, single motherhood, a child aged 8 years old).

Similar conclusions are drawn by Patrycja Chudzicka-Dudzik (2022) referring to combining the professional work of women working at universities with family life, indicating the difficulties associated with the overlapping and mixing of roles performed by women-mothers during the pandemic. It would seem that remote work can facilitate the management of home-work relationships but due to multitasking, it can intensify the feeling of being lost, frustrated, exhausted and long-term emotional tension.

The requirements related to childcare led to the fact that all activities performed by mothers (both professional work and family-related issues) were reduced by half by all of the studied mothers. It may be confirmed by the statement of one of the mothers:

I felt like I was always in a hurry. I had always done everything 100% and it was impossible after the outbreak of the pandemic. I did everything minimally, home a little, kids a little, and work a little. I did not meet the deadlines, nothing in fact. I was just exhausted and every day I asked myself: When will it finally end, when will it be normal. I am terrified of the thought that it may come back soon (M_41, higher education, reconstructed family, children aged 3 and 8 years old).

The need for mothers to combine work duties with childcare obligations at the same time had negative consequences related to the decrease in the efficiency and timeliness of mothers' work. So it happened that the duties related to professional work were limited to a minimum. Women suffered from insomnia more often during quarantine (Grudniewska, Hołdakowski, 2021). Mothers, who switched to remote work, had to find themselves in a new situation of fulfilling many roles at the same time (Partyła, 2020). As a consequence of moving professional work home, a new process emerged, namely work-life integration which occurs as a result of technological changes (Mościcka, 2021).

Parenthood in the pandemic – (un)equal division of duties

Due to the need for people to stay at home, it became a new centre of social life, constituting a place of professional work, a kindergarten or school, a space for fun, rest and eating meals. Parents were obliged to perform activities that were carried out by educational and upbringing institutions in traditional conditions. The home took on a new meaning. It began to be treated as an oasis of peace and security but also as

a category of a prison (Kopciewicz, 2020). Both European (*Eurostat*, 2019) and Polish (Bożewicz, 2019) studies indicate that women are given the leading role in caring and upbringing responsibilities. Thus, the unequal division of childcare responsibilities had remained strongly present in the public mind even before the pandemic. In the situation of the pandemic, it was necessary to reconfigure the division of household and childcare duties.

Three models of division of duties in a family can be identified based on the results of the interviews. Two of them did not change due to the outbreak of the pandemic. The first was the traditional model in which most of the duties were performed by the mother and the second one – was the partnership model in which there was no division into paternal or maternal duties. The child was taken care of by the person who was available at the time. The third model concerned the change of the existing functioning of the traditional model into a partnership model. Thus, it may be said that in many cases the pandemic led to a reset of the existing family model and its recreation.

Mothers belonging to the first group additionally indicate the tension accompanying them in a situation of information chaos and uncertainty about the undertaken decisions:

I felt physically and mentally exhausted because of this uncertainty and fear. Plus, I was all by myself. We were both working remotely, our children were studying at home. I remember feeling like I was at the market, the noise was unbearable, and everyone was talking to the computer. One big chaos. The difference between my and my husband's work was that my husband was working in the room and was not very interested in matters related to children and household chores. While I was often working with the children together in one room (M_32, complete family, children aged 6 and 10 years old).

My husband was kind of running away from home to work. He kept saying: I have to go to the company, I cannot deal with this remotely. Somehow nobody asked me then if I could work remotely or if my boss agreed to it. I was afraid of losing my job but then my husband said that I earned less than him and that my work was worth nothing (M_30, vocational education, complete family, child aged 7 years old).

Despite the generally accepted partnership model, the majority of childcare responsibilities still rests with the mother. The above statements, apart from the clear message that mothers do not receive support, indicate yet another issue – the loneliness of the studied mothers.

The pandemic resulted in the vast majority of mothers having to reorganise their work. Transferring work responsibilities and school to the house made it necessary to perform several duties simultaneously with little or no help from others. The statements of the studied mothers evidence this:

The pandemic made me realise even more that the majority of duties related to taking care of the child and home is on me. I would also like to add that I work. Only then did I feel like these two worlds were in one place? I am constantly at work and constantly with the children. I try to “patch holes”, a little with the children, a little at work. I do not know how long I can do that. My husband comes home from work, eats dinner, rests and says that he is tired. He talks with the children for a while and goes to sleep because he has to go to work in the morning (M_37, reconstructed family, children aged 3 and 7 years old).

Even though we were both working remotely, I do not know how it happened that my husband was able to work and I was just trying to. The child came to me with every problem, even though dad was next to me many times or he had to pass him to come to me. It is hard to understand but often my computer was next to the child’s objects, we were trying to function together so as not to disturb each other while my husband was alone in the other room. I will only add that my child has his own room (M_30, vocational education, complete family, child aged 7 years old).

The pandemic made me be with my child all the time. Due to isolation, the child had no contact with the father who lives in another city. I had to take custody of the child. He is only 3 years old, he is not able to take care of himself and stay home alone (M_34, vocational education, single motherhood, child aged 3 years old).

Not all of the interviewees noticed changes in the division of responsibilities between them and their husbands/partners during the pandemic. Some of them declared that the pandemic did not cause any changes. The functioning of the second family model concerning the division of duties is confirmed by the statement of one of the studied mothers:

My partner got involved in childcare immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic. This was also the case before the pandemic. For as long as I can remember, we have always set the daily schedule together taking into account the children and our work and we have shared the responsibilities. Now we just had to redefine everything and adapt to the situation but it was done without any major issues (M_37, vocational education, reconstructed family, children aged 3 and 7 years old).

According to the research of Quality Watch, mothers most often performed remote work, while combining roles was the share of every third father (Partyła, 2020). The difficult situation related to the outbreak of the pandemic and its numerous consequences also led to the re-regulation of matters related to childcare and the performance of household duties by partners. This is indicated by the following statements of the studied mothers:

The pandemic made my partner realise how many responsibilities I have. It completely changed our functioning and so far it continues to this day. He helped me with my daily chores and doing my son's homework. There was no division between the tasks of the mother and the father but whoever had the opportunity to help the children in a given situation, spend time with them or prepare a meal, did so. This flexibility helped us survive (M_39, secondary education, reconstructed family, children aged 3 and 8 years old).

It is hard for me to say because I know how dangerous it is to get sick but the pandemic brought a lot of good in our case and certainly in mine. First of all, it opened my partner's eyes. In fact, we were together with the children at home during the week for the first time since I can remember. One day he told our children that what mum does every day was impossible and that he was proud of me but at the same time he said that it could not go on like this. We have been helping each other and sharing childcare and household duties together ever since (M_41, higher education, reconstructed family, children aged 3 and 8 years old).

The pandemic, as well as the uncertainty and isolation associated with it, made us realise that family is a value and the pre-existing values lost their significance. It is confirmed by the statement of one of the mothers:

My partner and I used to often argue before the pandemic and I also had taken care of the child for the most part. Every day had been a rush, we had passed each other and we had not had time to talk or be together. I have the impression that everything changed when the pandemic broke out and we were locked in our homes. We started to take better care of ourselves, we shared responsibilities and childcare together. We understood what is important in life (M_32, secondary education, complete family, children aged 3 and 7 years old).

The increase in responsibilities in families is obvious in the face of interruptions in the functioning of educational institutions and the transfer of education and childcare to the house. It is hard to draw far-reaching conclusions on the issue of (un)equal di-

vision of duties. It would be necessary to take into account the specificity of the work performed and thus, the possibility of performing it at home and the possibility of taking care of the child during the lockdown of educational institutions.

Relationships between mothers and children – from deterioration to improvement

The pandemic forced the isolation of the family both in the spatial and interpersonal dimensions. The term “isolation” took on a new meaning for the whole family as well as for its individual members. Depending on the structure of the family, the quality of family relationships was severe to varying degrees (Firlit-Fesnak, 2022). All of the family members staying in one place more frequently closed to the outside world somehow, can undoubtedly contribute to the improvement of relations between them and lead to the deepening of relationships and tightening bonds. However, it may often lead to more frequent misunderstandings, frustration, fatigue, stress, and anxiety often caused by a complete reorganisation of everyday functioning, increased daily duties and concern for the health and life of loved ones. In the context of the pandemic, it also seemed important to obtain information on family relationships and practices. The temporary lockdown of nurseries, kindergartens and schools meant that children spent more time at home. The simultaneous possibility (sometimes necessity) of remote work by the parent/parents, led to a situation of greater involvement in childcare. The mothers’ statements indicated that the relationship with the child during the pandemic was more tense and saturated with difficult emotions and behaviour:

I felt that I was drifting apart from the child. Looking at it today retrospectively, I am looking for the reason for the difficulties of reconciling these two spheres: home and work. We closed ourselves off because we were not able to leave the house as well as because of fear and uncertainty. Me in my room and the child in theirs. No one asked anything, no one said that they were afraid of how they were coping with the lockdown. We passed each other in the kitchen not knowing anything about the other. Until one evening. I decided to talk, we both cried then. Today I make sure that we always talk to each other every day (M_36, higher education, single motherhood, child aged 8 years old).

The remote education system moved teaching to the home space, implying many new tasks for parents, both in the area of organising material facilities for the child’s learning as well as diversified substantive support in assimilating remote education techniques, the teaching content and the principles of children’s own effective work in

the process of knowledge acquisition (Firlit-Fesnak, 2022). School-age children participating in online lessons required attention and a lot of commitment from women. The situation, in which mothers became, in a way, guardians of education, made them frustrated depriving them of energy and activity in other spheres connected with spending time with the child and providing support in a problematic situation. It is confirmed by the statements of the studied mothers:

My relationship with my child was directly related to school. In the morning I helped with connecting with teachers and sending emails, in the afternoon with caught up when the child misunderstood something or did not have time to write something down. Unfortunately, my child could neither ask for a few extra minutes to finish work nor ask questions. Therefore, all responsibility was on our side. It was tiring. I was not able to help with everything, it was frustrating. I followed the news every day hoping for information about the opening of schools (M_32, higher education, complete family, children aged 6 and 10 years old).

The lockdown of educational institutions and the introduction of remote learning as well as the need to provide 24-hour childcare in combination with professional work, constituted a huge burden for women. Family relationships took on a different dimension. As a result of many restrictions, it was necessary to change everyday functioning which was not suitable for everyone. The studied mothers were looking forward to the reopening of kindergartens and schools. The statements of two mothers evidence it:

My daughter was constantly “hanging” on me because she was bored and I had a lot of things to do on the computer for work. It happened that I connected remotely with the child in my arms who, after a short time, began to cry because she wanted to play with me. I was often angry then, it was an unsolvable situation. I was not satisfied with the time spent with the child in the afternoons because I was already tired of her behaviour during my work. At that time, I was only thinking about when kindergartens would open. My relationship with my daughter deteriorated significantly (M_34, vocational education, single motherhood, child aged 3 years old).

A change in the hierarchy of values during the pandemic can be seen in the statements of the studied mothers.

Previously I attached great importance to the child’s grades, to my work, to material issues. Now I feel like my thinking is centred around health. I do not want any of us to get sick or die. Family is the most important thing to me. Retrospectively,

I see that the pandemic shows us what really matters (M_32, higher education, complete family, children aged 6 and 10 years old).

The studied mothers pointed to the favourable conditions for strengthening closeness that the pandemic provided them with. Being with the child 24 hours a day made it possible for mothers to watch their children, their everyday life, the way they organise their free time and fulfil their school duties. This situation led to the creation of a space where family members had the opportunity to spend more time together and talk. They had more time for one another. It is worth quoting a statement from one of the mothers here:

Before the pandemic, I had often been torn between work and family. Despite the difficulties associated with my job, I had better contact with my children during the so-called “lockdown”. It felt like rediscovering them. I could see how they function outside the house, at school, how they study, how they manage to organise their time in between lessons. We hugged and talked more often. I am glad that this happened to us in that respect, although I know that I should not say that (M_41, higher education, reconstructed family, children aged 3 and 8 years old).

Time may have also contributed to the improvement of the relationship. Parents were able to save time, previously spent on transporting children and commuting to work, and use it to talk to the child and strengthen the relationship. This is indicated by the statements of the studied mothers:

They were so happy that they did not have to leave the house every day. They were enjoying each other. I did not notice them missing their peers at all. They were calmer than before the pandemic. I think that it was a good time in retrospect. Thanks to the fact that I did not have to commute to work, we had more time for each other, to talk and play together during the breaks in between work and studying. We ate meals together. We benefited from the lockdown if you can say that (M_37, vocational education, reconstructed family, children aged 3 and 7 years old).

During the pandemic, my husband and I noticed that the children were getting along better. There were fewer quarrels between them, they played together and needed our help only in exceptional situations. It was perhaps because they had no contact with other children apart from themselves (M_39, secondary education, reconstructed family, children aged 2 and 8 years old).

Our relationship has strengthened because we talk often and it seems to me that we get to know each other better and we are more and more open to various things.

There is more trust between us (M_35, secondary education, single motherhood, child aged 9 years old).

There were also mothers' statements showing that the pandemic did not cause any changes in the relationship with the child. The lack of changes in relations can be seen in the family itself which is built on solid foundations, mutual trust and support. This is confirmed by the statement of one of the mothers:

It is as it used to be, I do not notice any difference. Everyone does their own thing, we meet for lunches and dinners. I think that we have a good relationship. The amount of time we spent together is similar to that before the pandemic. When my child has a problem, he knows that he can always come to me. I also know that I can count on him (M_35, secondary education, single motherhood, child aged 9 years old).

Conclusion

Considering the pandemic as a difficult and borderline situation (Tomaszewski, 1982), it should be analysed in detail as a situation of deprivation, overload, hindrance, conflict, and threat. The situation of deprivation, due to the introduction of social isolation, was the source of a sense of loneliness associated with the emergence of information chaos. The studied mothers indicated that they felt lonely in many activities, they did not know which undertaken decisions were right. The situation of overload, caused by the deprivation of needs and the disorganisation of life, in many cases, could lead to exhaustion, as a result of which many activities, so far considered natural, turned out to be tasks on the border of physical and mental capabilities. The situation of hindrance, in the case of the studied mothers, concerned the lockdown of educational institutions and the need to provide the child with care at home and help in education (remote learning), while the situation of conflict mainly concerned the work-family life relationship where mothers performed remote work ("home office") while taking care of the child at the same time. The situation of threat referred to the concern for the health and life of their loved ones which was even more pronounced during the pandemic.

The accounts of mothers, presented in the above text, show the complexity of the process of the family's adaptation to new challenges. The year 2020 caused an unexpected turn in everyday functioning. With the start of mandatory social isolation, the majority of employers ordered their employees to perform remote work as soon as it was possible due to the specificity of the work (Gliwicka, Sikorska, 2022). The pandemic

led to a situation in which the family began to live somehow in its own circle, away from distant relatives, friends and peers. It forced the need to reorganise family life.

The impact of the pandemic on the family is not uniform. The research results indicate both negative as well as positive (from deterioration to improvement of the relationship) consequences of the change in the relationship between the mother and the child, attempts to combine professional work and family life and the division of duties between partners. The studied mothers report an increase in tension and stress as a result of the emerging conflict between professional work and family life, limited support from the partner as well as difficult and emotionally charged relations with the child. Mothers, who tried (with varying results) to reconcile professional work and family life despite their difficult situation, received support from their partners and equally shared the responsibilities related to taking care of the child and running the house, are on the second continuum. They also reported an improvement in contacts with family members as a result of the greater amount of time they gained due to not being able to commute to work and the child's remote education at home.

The pandemic modified the way and scope of performing many activities related to the family and the performance of professional duties. The studied mothers were heavily burdened with care work and pandemic emotional baggage. Some of them were forced to give up some professional duties because of the need to take care of the child. Disturbances in the daily routine, the inability to perform professional work, and meet friends and the change in the functioning of the house, which became not only a place of family life but also of education and work, turned out to be a particular difficulty.

The following question was determined the main problem: What difficulties, related to family life during the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, are experienced by the studied mothers? The following specific problems were posed:

- What possible conflicts of experiencing motherhood in the face of the pandemic do the studied mothers talk about?
- What is the division of responsibilities in the family during the pandemic (child-care, remote education, housekeeping activities)?
- What are the relations of the surveyed mothers with the child like in the face of the pandemic?

Concerning the first specific problem, mothers pointed to experiencing a conflict in the family life – professional work relations. Based on the provided answers, it may be concluded that the pandemic somehow forced mothers to construct a new everyday life related to performing the role of a mother and an employee at the same time and intensified the difficulties associated with combining professional work and family life. The attempts to balance both spheres of life leading to maintaining a balance (work-life balance), practised so far, did not always prove to be efficient during the

pandemic. Particular difficulties occurred when educational institutions were closed and remote education was launched, children had to be provided with care at home when the parent was at work or professional work had to be combined with childcare at home. For many mothers, the pandemic turned out to be a time of overwork and work under constant pressure which reduced job satisfaction and affected its effectiveness, while causing stress and fear of losing it at the same time.

Three models of the division of duties in the family can be identified based on the results of the conducted research in response to the second specific problem which was formulated in the following way: “What is the division of responsibilities in the family during the pandemic (childcare, remote education, housekeeping activities)?”. Two of them did not change due to the outbreak of the pandemic. The first one was the traditional model, in which most of the household duties were performed by the mother, and the second one – the partnership model, in which there was no division into paternal or maternal duties. The child was taken care of by the person who was available at the time. The third model concerned the change of the currently functioning traditional model into the partnership model. Thus, it may be said that the pandemic led to the rest of the existing family model and its recreation in many cases.

Family relationships took on a different dimension as a result of the pandemic. The mothers’ statements indicated that the relationship with the child during the pandemic was more tense and saturated with difficult emotions and behaviour. The situation, in which mothers became somehow guardians of education, made them frustrated and deprived them of energy and activity in other spheres related to spending time with the child and providing support in a problematic situation. However, the mothers’ statements, which emphasised the favourable conditions for strengthening closeness that the pandemic provided them with, can be indicated. Being with the child 24 hours a day made it possible for mothers to watch their children, their everyday life, the way they organise their free time and fulfil their school duties. There were also mothers’ statements showing that the pandemic did not cause any changes in the relationship with the child. The lack of changes in relations can be seen in the family itself which is built on solid foundations, mutual trust and support.

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