

# The development of care of single mothers in Poland: Single Mothers' Houses as an example of institutional care

## *Opieka nad samotną matką i jej dzieckiem z uwzględnieniem funkcjonowania domów samotnej matki*

Renata Bajcarczyk<sup>1</sup>, Renata Florek<sup>1</sup>, Dorota Kozieł<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Social and Humanistic Studies, State Higher Vocational School, Tarnobrzeg, Poland  
Head of the Department: Dr. Anna Zych

<sup>2</sup>Collegium Medicum, Jan Kochanowski University, Kielce, Poland  
Head of the Department: Prof. Marianna Janion MD, PhD

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**Słowa kluczowe:** macierzyństwo, samotne matki, polityka rodzinna, domy samotnej matki.

### Abstract

In every culture, ethnic group, or society, there have been women who raise their offspring alone. Throughout the centuries, lonely motherhood has been considered as a disgrace for the woman and for her family. Even rich women were exposed to social ostracism and condemnation, and their children were named 'bastard'. The women found care and help only from the churches and from rich philanthropists. Institutional help from the state began only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, through to the social and moral changes of the last dozen years, single motherhood has started to be transformed into self-reliant motherhood. Thanks to the help of the state, single women can cope with the situation much better than their precursors. There is still a group of single mothers who, on account of their bad economic situation, family violence, or life incapability, need special care and support.

### Streszczenie

W każdej kulturze, grupie etnicznej, społeczeństwie były kobiety, które samotnie wychowywały potomstwo. Przez wieki samotne macierzyństwo uważane było za hańbę dla kobiety i jej rodziny, nawet kobiety bogate narażone były na ostracyzm społeczny i potępienie, a ich dzieci określano mianem bękartów. Kobiety znajdowały opiekę i pomoc jedynie w kościołach i u bogatych filantropów. Pomoc instytucjonalna ze strony państwa zaczęła się kształtować dopiero na początku XX wieku. Dzisiaj dzięki zmianom społeczno-obyczajowym, które zaszły w ostatnich kilkudziesięciu latach, samotne macierzyństwo zaczęło się przeobrażać w samodzielne macierzyństwo. Dzięki pomocy państwa samotne kobiety radzą sobie dzisiaj o wiele lepiej niż ich poprzedniczki sprzed lat. Nadal jednak jest grupa samotnych mam, które na skutek złej sytuacji ekonomicznej, przemocy w rodzinie lub życiowej nieporadności, potrzebują szczególnej opieki i wsparcia.

### The aim of the paper

The aim of the paper is to present the situation of single mothers in Poland, including the state care, legal regulations, the forms of help with the particular compliance of functioning of the Single Mothers' House.

### Reference and methods

The method that was applied is associated with the analysis of literature, legal acts, magazine articles, Internet publications, and statistics.

### Single motherhood over the years

A woman who brings up her child alone has always been in a more difficult situation than a woman who

has the support of her husband or her partner. The modern situation of single mothers has been more or less difficult; however, it is certainly better than the situation of lonely mothers from previous centuries. The Roman Law and the Magdeburgian and canonical law modelled on it discriminated the children of single women. They were deprived of the majority of civil rights, and they also did not have the right of succession [1]. The women could not demand the fathering of a child born out of wedlock. They could also not rely on his help in the child's upbringing. Women who lived in cohabitation were in the best position, in contrast to those who gave the birth to the child as a result of incest or adultery and prostitutes. Especially the latter group and their children could

not rely on anyone's help but only on social condemnation [1]. The canonic law regularly deprived foster children of their rights (surname, succession, they were also denied the possibility of becoming a priest), and also single women who became mothers were condemned. The Civil Code of Napoleon, proclaimed in 1804, which was effective in Poland until the interwar period, discriminated against unmarried mothers, suppressing the proceedings to establish paternity and depriving the rights of foster children [2].

The Industrial Revolution and urbanization did not bring any improvement to the situation of single mothers. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century single mothers and their children were exposed to condemnation from the family and from society. Such families were identified as anti-pattern of family life, illegitimate child lowered not only the position of the woman but also of the whole family.

These women were called 'furlers' and their children 'bastards' or 'foundlings'[3]. Needy women who did not have any help and support often abandoned their children. There were also cases of infanticide. Upper-class women who were afraid of family exclusion often passed their children on to other rural families [3]. The first foundling hospitals for abandoned children were established in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Krakow and Sandomierz; however, no institution helped the mothers in this difficult situation.

In 1736, on the initiative of the priest Baudouin, the House for Foundling Children in Warsaw was established (currently Children's Home Number 15 of the priest Baudouin). Mothers who left their children in this institution did not bear criminal responsibility on the basis of the Act Parliament of 1742 [4]. The children were left in churches, or they were put into a "foundling wheel", i.e. they were placed in a "baby hatch" installed in the church's street-facing wall. A mechanism rang a bell and the child was taken by a nun on the other side of the wall; the common name of this device was a 'foundling wheel' [4]. The House of Baudouin priest hired women as wet nurses. A wet nurse could also feed her own children, and she received maintenance. Healthy and well-nourished women were chosen, while others remained alone with their problems [3]. In 1885 the Association of Care for Needy Mothers and Children was established in Warsaw on the initiative of doctors, lawyers, and philanthropists [3]. This association established the foundling hospital for midwives and babies, to which Christian and Jewish women were brought. This association helped pregnant women during birth and while taking care of the child. Moreover, pedagogical activities were conducted and the women were prepared for work [3]. In 1892 Zygmunt Gorazdowski established in Lvov the institution named 'Baby Jesus', which gave care and shelter to lonely, needy women and their children [5]. This was the only such institution giving help to women on the premises of Galicia, Poland.

During the time of the second Republic of Poland, the situation of single mothers did not improve at all. About 60,000 illegitimate children were born every year, which was 10% of all births [6]. A significant part of single pregnant women were factory workers and servants. If they managed to get through the pregnancy and give the birth to the child, they were left alone without any help or care, worn out, depressed, they often abandoned their children or even murdered them. The state attempted to solve this problem. The institution concerning the care of orphaned children was appointed in Katowice municipal office [6]. This institution functioned as a free-of-charge family counselling service where the woman received information about social benefits and other forms of help [6]. In Silesia it was easier to receive alimony; however, it had negative consequences – the number of murdered pregnant woman increased [6]. The resolution implied in the Silesian voivodeship did not spread throughout the country. During the interwar period no benefits for unmarried women were preserved by act of law.

### **The development of care of single mothers and their children**

After regaining independence in 1945 some actions were taken over the unification of the civil law and over the family law. The decree 'Family Law' stated that the extramarital child has every right, including inheritance law, resulting from blood relationship only in relation to mother and her family. Mothers obtained the law for affiliating a child. They gained the right to demand the reimbursement of costs connected with the delivery and demand compensation for unfair treatment when the man made a promise for contracting marriage [7].

The possibility of alimony claims was also introduced but only in the case when the paternity of the child was affiliated by court [7]. The decree was the first act of law that emancipated the rights of extramarital children with those who were born within a marriage. This decree gave also the women the possibility to affiliate the child by court for alimony and compensation from the father of the child. After regaining independence in 1945, the period of the so-called 'baby boom' began. It was a time of dynamic growth of births which followed the family policy. The socialist welfare state provided help for families at different stages of their development. There was also growth of the powers connected with maternity, raising children, and with social insurance. Free-of-charge health service care was established. Moreover, the number of doctors and nurses for children of mothers who were occupationally active was also increasing. For those children there were places in nurseries and kindergartens. The protection of pregnant woman was also introduced. There was prohibition of employment within harmful occupations and during the nighttime. The maternity

grant was gradually prolonged to 12 weeks. Medical benefit was also implemented due to the child's illness, nursery, and kindergarten financing for mothers in difficult situations. The children gained the free medical and dental care. Marriage law was also reformed. In 1978 the Council for Family Matters was proclaimed. Its role was to inspire activities for the family through the modification of financial, legal, and educational help, establishing programmes of national plans in the field of taking care of the family, and conducting scientific and statistical research [8, 9]. The actions taken were focused on family help, especially on the single-parent family. Single mothers ceased to be discriminated against. They could rely on special help from the state. Women gained a number of privileges during pregnancy and maternity time; the prohibition of employment in harmful occupations, excessive work hours, at nighttime, delegating away from the fixed workplace, protection against work dismissal in the time of the pregnancy and maternity, time off for mandatory medical examinations, a baby bonus, and 3 years of parental leave [10]. In 1975 the Alimony Fund was established to help single parents, especially mothers who could not obtain alimony from the father of the child. The economic crisis of the 1980s and increasing unemployment led to the impoverishment of society. People who were bringing up children alone were in particularly difficult situations. The family allowance for people with low incomes was raised, but in comparison to the increasing costs of maintenance it was inadequate.

After the system transformation of the 1990s countries focused on families of low economic status. The Act of Law from 1994 of family, care, and child-care allowance conditioned obtaining the help from the income criterion. As well as performance in kind, the families in difficult situations could obtain use of the activities for nourishing the children, free legal and psychological help was also ensured.

In 1997, the Constitution of the Republic of Poland was proclaimed. Article 71 is connected with the rule of the good of the family. It states that the state allows for the goodness of the family. Families in difficult financial and social situations, especially numerous or single-parent families, have the right to special help from the state, and mothers before and after delivery have the right to special help from the authorities [11, 12].

The legal care for single mothers can be divided into the following categories:

- protection of the pregnant women – article numbers 176,178,185 of the Labour Code,
- protection of the working mother – article numbers 180,181,182,186,184 of the Labour Code,
- medical protection of maternity – the guarantee of free benefits connected with maternity, the type of bonus, and also the procedure of its action (Regulation of Council of Ministers of the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 2008 in the matter of way and the mode of financing from the national budget the benefits of health care and

the Regulation of the Minister of Health from the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 2018 in the matter of the organizational standard of perinatal care),

- social protection of maternity – maternity benefit, pedagogical benefit, and other kinds of financial help [13].

The social and custom changes of recent years formed the changes of the family policy of the state, which is focused on the growth of the number of births, the improvement of the quality of life of Polish families, care of the new model of the family, and social benefits [14].

In 2003 there 3,511,000 children were born. It is the lowest number in the post-war period. In order to stop this unprofitable trend, the state introduced help for families in maintaining and bringing up children. This help has the following form:

- 'baby bonus' – a single allowance due to child birth, withdrawn for all the families; however, in 2012 the income criterion was imposed at 1922 zloty (the income of the family per person),
- the extension of maternity leave to 20 weeks; however, the woman can make use of an additional 32 weeks – altogether 52 weeks,
- paternity leave – 2 weeks, only the father of the child can make use of it, no later than when the child is 2 years old,
- maternity benefit – during the first 26 weeks of maternity leave, accounts for 100% of salary, the remaining time of the maternity leave accounts for 60% of the salary. On the application of the woman, the salary can be averaged and paid to the amount of 80% of the salary during the whole duration of maternity leave,
- parental leave, appertains to the mother or the father of the child. It lasts maximally 36 months. The regulations impose that 1 month of it will be used by the second parent of the child,
- activation benefit appertains to unemployed people taking a part time job with a salary lower than the maximum salary for the job; this benefit accounts for no more than half of the 100% unemployment benefit,
- grant for teleworking (that is a non-traditional form of employment) conceded for the employer taking on an unemployed parent of a child until the age of 6 years, the employer is obliged to hold down the employment for the full time for 12 months or for the time of 18 months but employed half time,
- Personal Income Tax allowance for children – so-called pro-family relief – is a tax advantage of an appropriate amount, it appertains to every child,
- 'Maluch' programme, support for nurseries and kindergartens – it is a grant from the government budget for the creation and functioning of institutions providing care for children,
- benefit of 500+, introduced in 2016, appertains to every child until the age of 18 years, paid every month,

- ‘Good Start’ programme – a support of the amount of 300 zloty, so-called 300+ for pupils, appertains to every schoolboy or schoolgirl until the age of 20 years or until the age of 24 years for disabled pupils; benefit paid once a year,
- the “Big Family” card – this is a system of discounts and additional privileges for families in which 3 or more children live. It exists in state institutions (e.g. museums, recreational centres) and in private institutions (shops, resorts),
- Alimony Fund – the regulation of help for beneficiaries for alimony from 2007. The beneficiaries who do not receive it due to ineffective execution gain financial support from the state,
- foster care over the child – the regulation of foster care from 2011, if parents or a parent has temporary difficulties and cannot take care of the child. Then the child can be placed in the foster family, family orphanage. The child can be also placed in an educational or therapeutic care centre or in an interventionist adaptable centre,
- the benefit in virtue of single parenting of the child, for the parent who is not prerogative for alimony payment, if the alimony was not awarded for the child (the father is dead or is unknown),
- the programme “For Life” is comprehensive support for pregnant women and their families. In the case of severe impairment or irreparable damage or incurable disease, which occurred during prenatal development or during the delivery. The programme involves prenatal diagnosis, diagnostics, treatment, consultancy service, rehabilitation, hospice and palliative care, and single financial support [15].

Influencing the new forms of family policy is assessed variously. On the one hand, the financial situation of the families has improved, especially the incomplete ones, and there has been a decline of extreme poverty from 9% to 5.8%. On the other hand, the programme discourages the women to undertake vocational activities. The demographic effect is low. In 2017 and in 2018 a few thousand more were born, but in 2019 14,000 fewer children were born in comparison to 2018 [16, 17].

Helping programmes are rarely aimed at single parents. Lonely mothers is the group which is differential. The age, the education, the family of origin, the job experience or the health condition has the influence over their social and economical position. Their socio-economic situation is influenced by the following: age, education, family of origin, job experience, or health condition.

The differentiation of the group of single mothers proposed by Raław and Trawkowska is as follows:

- lonely by choice- usually these women are professionally active. They are educated and they bring up 1 or 2 children. They are economically self-reliant. They benefit from the general care for families,

- lonely by chance- usually these are young mothers, or even under 18 years old, without a job or qualifications. They are often from pathological families. They gain from different forms of help and support,
- unwanted single maternity- between economic independence and dependence. These are women with low vocational qualifications. They have to benefit from the financial support as a result of their husband or partner abandoning them, giving birth to a disabled child, or job loss,
- not quite lonely maternity – includes the situation in which there is a household with a mother and in which there is a third person or more, multifamily household, the closeness of other members of the family reduces the feeling of loneliness [18].

Incomplete families, which represents a quarter of Polish families. The majority of them, about 90% are single mothers who usually live in the town or the city and bring up one child [19]. Single mothers struggle not only with the problems of taking care of the child, which is to provide appropriate financial means, but also with the other problems, i.e. the feeling of isolation, social limitation, and the feeling of inferiority. They are often overworked, and have health and emotional problems [19].

### Single Mother’s House

The first national Single Mother’s Houses were established in autumn of 1945. Those kinds of houses were sought by women who were looking for some help. These were the women who lost their husbands or fiancés during the war, those who, as a result of repatriation, could not find a family. There were also pregnant women coming back from hard labour, raped and abused women during the wartime period. The women encountered these centres directed by the Social Care Department. They did not pay to stay. They had to submit to established regulations in the centre, which organized meals, care, free time, and cottage industry work for them, for example sewing slippers [20]. In these Houses they could rely on comprehensive care. The women had their everyday life arranged and they only had to fulfil duties. There was no place for individual help and care [20].

The Single Mother’s House, based on new rules, was organized in 1958 in Chyliczki near Warsaw. Teresa Strzębosz constituted it according to her own original conception. The external staff were reduced to minimum. The women took up duties, as well as responsibility for themselves and for their children [21]. This centre is still operational today. It is led by the Foundation of Family Help.

Currently, the Single Mother’s House gives shelter to women in tough situations, being at the perinatal period, i.e. since the sixth month of pregnancy and after delivery. Single Mother’s Houses are led by local governments, non-governmental organizations, nuns’

associations, and charity institutions. The number of centres is difficult to determine. Some of them were shut down in the last few years and they were transformed into institutions of emergency response or into shelters for the homeless, or help centres for women with children. On the catholic portal [www.deon.pl](http://www.deon.pl) there is information about 40 Single Mother's Houses, of which 14 are led by diocesan centres of Caritas [22]. The other portal, dealing with the pro-family matters, gives a very different number of them: about 60 in the whole country [23, 24]. The Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy gives the information that there are 26 houses for mothers with minors and pregnant women in the whole of Poland. These centres provide support and shelter for women not only during the perinatal period but in every crisis [25].

Single Mothers' Houses provide people who are under their care around-the-clock stay, financial help, legal and psychological advice, protection from violence, support in a crisis, prevention from marginalization and social orphaning, and duplication of bad family and surrounding patterns.

The legal basics for running these institutions are the following:

- The Regulation of The Minister of Social Care from the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2008 in the matter of Single Mothers' Houses with young children and pregnant women (Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland from 2005 No. 43, item 418),
- The act of law dated the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2004 regarding the issue of social help with further amendments (Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland from 2019, item 1507),
- The act of law dated the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2011 regarding family support and foster care with further amendments (Journal of Law of the Republic of Poland from 2019, item 1111) [26].

The Regulation determines the procedure of directing and taking into the institution, the duration of stay, and the financing of the stay. It guarantees separation from the perpetrator of violence, support in the difficult situation, and prevention of social marginalization and repeating bad family and background patterns. In the scope of care and support, the institution enables making use of health services. The standard of the service provide subjective treatment, and the partnership in the mutual relation between the dwellers and the staff, in this institution, create the living conditions and 'family atmosphere', the conditions for personal development, respecting the privacy of the women and individual attitudes to the accomplishment of the plan of becoming independent of the charge [26]. The Legal Act of Social Help determines the objectives in the field of social help, the variety of services, and the means of their provision, organization of social help, and the procedure of control. The social help supports the persons and their families in fulfilling their indispensable needs, giving the chance for living in dignity,

cooperating with the other members of the institution. Social help provides not only benefits and material help but also social work, professional advice, and help in achieving better living conditions or finding a job [26]. This Act of Law also states about the work with the family (consultations, mediations, therapy, legal advice), as well as help in bringing up children [26].

Every institution has its own established rules, which include:

- legal basics for its functioning, the leading and supervising subject,
- determining the number of places and for whom they are purposed,
- the rules of acceptance into the Single Mothers' House and the duration of stay,
- the range of needs that the institution provides: living standards, caring, educational, and prevention,
- the rights and the obligations of the dwellers,
- the organization of the functioning of the Single Mothers' Houses.

The Single Mothers' Houses take the women in on the application of Social Help Centres or Family Help Centres, courts, police, and other institutions having a written contract concerning the financing stay, the cost of staying covers the institution which is managing. In the case of a threat to the safety of the woman, she can be taken in without request. The duration of stay is determined on the individual situation of the woman: finding a flat or job for her, and also her family situation and the chance of its improvement. Mothers stay in the institution most often for 3 to 6 months; the maximum duration time is a year; however, this time can be prolonged. The women are obliged to follow the rules of the institution, if not, after a few admonitions, they can be expelled from it. Smoking in some places inside the institution is acceptable, but not in the presence of children. Other substances are forbidden. However, sometimes women drink alcohol or take drugs; with such women the work is the most difficult.

'The houses for mothers with minor children and pregnant women' are institutions of the intervention type. They provide care and shelter in the case of a threat to health or safety until the time of overcoming the crisis situation. Pregnant women or mothers with minor children are also taken in. These institutions must meet certain accommodation standards. The maximum number is 30 adults. The institution provides fulfilment of living standards, caring and supportive services, care of the baby in the case of her/his mother's illness, and help in dealing with personal matters. The psychologist, the pedagogist, the social worker, the nurse, and the mid-wife cooperate with the institution. The women come to these institutions as a result of police intervention or on the application of a Social Help Centre. The decision to stay in such institution is made by the county commissioner who leads the institution.

At the moment of reception, the current situation, the condition of staying, the rights and the obligations of the dweller, and the programme of becoming independent are established.

The work with the dwellers is based on partner rules with respect for their privacy and individual needs. The aim of working with them is their return into normalization, overcoming the situation of the family crisis, preparation for aware and responsible parenthood, and prevention from repeating bad family and background patterns, especially the feeling of helpless [27].

In 2017 there were 1723 functioning stationary centres of social help, institutions helping single mothers and pregnant women – who were 3.6% [28]. These institutions are led by local governments, associations, foundations, the Catholic Church, and confession union [28].

The source of information of this kind of help is mainly offices, parishes, and the media [29]. According to the survey, the majority of women, before being directed to the institution, lived with their partner, and the reason for being taken into the institution was mainly bad financial situation and domestic violence caused by alcohol abuse of their partner [28]. The dwellers are usually satisfied with the support that they gain. According to a survey and chats on the Internet, they mainly complained about the temporary stay, the uncertainty of the situation, the lack of intimacy, and the rules in the institution [29, 30].

## Conclusions

The development of the pro-family policy of the state. The law and social service changes created the situation that single mothers are currently in a better situation than a few or more years ago. The increase of financial expenditures of the state on the family policy caused the development of economic problems for single women raising children. The main cause for the women staying in Single Mothers' Houses, apart from financial reasons, is domestic violence or the lack of ability to deal with the crisis. The help for women staying in Single Mothers' Houses should be focused on, not only solving the current hardship situation, but also mainly on creating independent thought, positive patterns of behaviour, and social competence.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**Address for correspondence:**

**Renata Bajcarczyk**  
Department of Social and Humanistic Studies  
State Higher Vocational School  
Tarnobrzeg, Poland  
Phone: +48 513735115  
E-mail: [renata130@poczta.onet.pl](mailto:renata130@poczta.onet.pl)