

Child in the migrational family – the issue of care and social support

Dziecko w rodzinie migracyjnej – problem opieki i wsparcia społecznego

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Abstract

Researches conducted in families separated as a result of gainful migration aimed to determine situation of the child remaining in long-lasting separation with one or both parents. 77 children aged 3 to 17 were qualified to researches. Interviews were made with the children at the base of questionnaire allowing to collect research material constructed for the purposes of the studies. Obtained results of the studies on the random sample allowed to determine proportions of departures among mothers and fathers and form of care which is "organized" by the parents for the children during their absence. Majority of the studied children is in the custody of one of the parents, most commonly mother of the child, who is often supported by own parents or more rarely by siblings or persons from outside the family. At the other hand, children, answering the question about the need of support and understanding by the closest persons, most frequently (3/4 of studied group) pointed that they need help in difficult situations resulting from the separation with parent, but they do not receive it, remaining alone with their feelings and problems. Only 12% of the studied children pointed that they count on help of the closest (siblings, grandparents, extended family) and 4% of children experienced professional help at school.

Streszczenie

Przeprowadzone badania w rodzinach rozłączonych na skutek migracji zarobkowej miały na celu określenie psychologicznej sytuacji dziecka pozostającego w długotrwałej rozłące z jednym lub obojgiem rodziców. Do badań zakwalifikowano 77 dzieci w wieku od 3 do 17 lat. Z dziećmi przeprowadzono wywiady na podstawie skonstruowanego na potrzeby badań kwestionariusza, pozwalającego na zebranie materiału badawczego. Uzyskane wyniki badań na próbie losowej pozwoliły na określenie proporcji skali wyjazdów matek i ojców oraz formę opieki, jaką rodzice „organizują” swoim dzieciom pod czas swojej nieobecności. Większość badanych dzieci jest pod opieką jednego z rodziców, przeważnie jest to matka dziecka, która jest często wspierana przez swoich rodziców lub rzadziej przez rodzeństwo oraz osoby spoza rodziny. Z kolei, dzieci, na pytanie o potrzebę wsparcia i zrozumienia przez najbliższych w zdecydowanej większości (3/4 badanej grupy) odpowiadały, iż potrzebują pomocy w sytuacjach trudnych wynikających z rozłąki z rodzicem, natomiast go nie otrzymują, pozostając sam na sam ze swoimi uczuciami i problemami. Tylko 12% badanych dzieci wskazało, że mogą liczyć na pomoc najbliższych (rodzeństwa, dziadków, dalszej rodziny) oraz 4% dzieci doświadczyło profesjonalnej pomocy w środowisku szkolnym.

Key words: child, migrational family, care, social support

Słowa kluczowe: dziecko, rodzina migracyjna, opieka, wsparcie społeczne

Introduction

Scale of migration of the Poles, its range and its consequences influence many families¹. „Contemporarily, there emerges a new category of incomplete families - families with temporary absence of one of the parents or both of them, as a result of gainful departures made because of the good of the family. Perspective of better tomorrow wins over difficulties resulting from potentially momentary separation of the family. However, balance of profits and losses in case of the family is often unfavorable for it. Separation caused by gainful migrations of the parents is a factor changing normal rhythm of the family life” [1]. Reactions

between spouses and between children and parents undergo modification, structure of the family changes, as well as range of duties of particular members of the family and emotionality and psychical states of “migration members”.

Migrational family, as a separated family, stands before necessity of coping with difficult emotions of particular members of the family, created as a result of separation of persons with very strong emotional tie - martial tie or tie between parent and child. Situation of a child separated with one or both parents for a long period of time is emotionally particularly difficult. These children often remain in the custody of different persons with different degree of kinship and most frequently without established legal care as well as without possibility of acquisition of full responsibility for education of a child.

¹ See „Eurosieroty”- raport o dzieciach polskich imigrantów zarobkowych, „Polityka”, 2008, nr 46.

Balcerzak-Paradowska [2] conducted studies among families temporarily separated because of migration, and basing on them, she mentions a row of educational difficulties with which parent or “temporary guardian of a child” staying in the country cope. In the studies realized by the author, such difficulties as: conflicts, indiscipline, disobedience of children, decrease of results in education, truancy and appearance of aggression, occurred most frequently.

As Nowakowska states [3], when one of the parents is absent, the other spouse has to overtake his role. It often leads to accumulation of frustration and tensions as well as overload with crowd of duties. Lonely parent usually experiences stress, what is accompanied by decrease of life satisfaction and quality of family relationships creating the whole of home atmosphere in the family.

Similar results of the studies are presented by Kukołowicz [4], who states, that in migrational families in which one of the parents temporarily takes care of children, educational situations are usually featured by: anxiety, loneliness as well as lack of subjective feeling of possession of social support by the close persons. At the other hand, “lonely” parent, unable to obtain support in the closest surrounding, is at the same time unable to provide feeling of safety and emotional support for own children.

Additionally, the author shows, that the separated family generates a row of situational features aggravating creation of proper educational environment favoring development of a child. Among them, the following are underlined:

- a. lack of stabilization of rhythm of the life and continuity of education of children;
- b. happiness of meetings is disturbed by the anxiety of subsequent separation, what causes stressed situation and relaxation of family tie, and particular meetings are associated with received presents;
- c. meetings usually take on ceremonial character, aggravating understanding of family reality, as it is expressed in interlacing everyday life with planned or unplanned arrivals of the parent;
- d. children, despite of longing for migrating parent, become attached more to the staying parent and learn that they can look for support in problematic situations only by him;
- e. migrating parent stops understanding family situations; his absence causes that there is no possibility to interfere in it;
- f. process of identification with own sex by children is interfered, as only model of women as a mother or man as a father is presented in education;
- g. good or very good material conditions make children convicted, that it constitutes sense of life and everything should be subordinated to it;
- h. loosening of martial tie, caused by becoming independent by the spouses and cooling down

the emotional climate, threatening the durability of the family.

At the base of published studies on emotional situation of a child being educated in separated family, one presented following research questions:

- who takes care of the child in the migrational family?
- are there persons from the closest family who support lonely parent in the care of the child?
- do children from migrational family experience emotional difficulties because of the separation with parent and do they confess to it?
- do children from migrational family have feeling of emotional support among the closest family and social environment?
- who is most frequently perceived by the children as an adequate source of social support?

Studied group

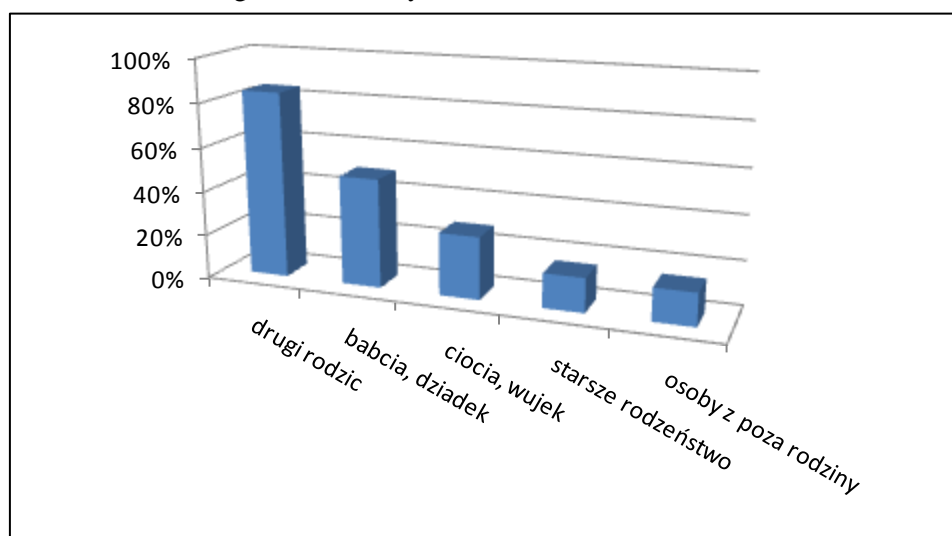
The basic study embraced group of 77 children educated in the families in which one or both parents work abroad for longer than half year. The studies were conducted at homes of studied persons. Families of migrational children were characterized by different structure, resulting from situation of migration of parents. Significantly biggest group was constituted by children from families in which mother temporarily takes care of them and father stays abroad. This situation concerned 54 studies persons, constituting 70% of the whole studied group. Education in the family where only father temporarily takes care of the children, and mother earns money abroad, concerns 13 persons – constituting 17% of the studied group. Family type, characterized with durable lack of both parents concerns 10 children; it is 13% of the whole in the studied group.

In the group of studied children from migrational families, there were 55,84% of girls and 44,16% of boys. Range of age of the studied children varied from 3 to 17 years.

Method

For the needs of the studies, a questionnaire of interview was constructed; it concerned details of the situation of migrational separation of a child with parent or parents going abroad to work. It contained detailed data concerned the fact, which parent goes abroad to work, from which time he stays out of doors, how long the separation with the family may last until the next meeting. The questionnaire determined also type of migration of the parent, way and frequency of contact of a child with the parent being abroad, form of care of the child during absence of the parent/parents, kinds of support which the child can get from the closest persons and institutions.

Chart 1. Care of the child in migrational family



second parent/grandmother, grandfather; aunt, uncle, older siblings, persons from outside the family

Additionally, block of questions concerning occurrence of symptoms of psychosomatic disturbances accompanying situation of external departures of the parent of studied children was placed in the work.

Results

In the conducted studies, form of care provided for children during the absence of one of the parents or lack of both parents, was taken into account. Most frequently, care of the child was taken by the second parent – father or mother (84,51%). A significant part of them had also help from parents (grandparents) of the child or older children, own siblings as well as help from persons outside the family (see chart 1).

Results of the studies show, that different number of persons with different forms of relationship with child, or only one member of the family, were engaged in care of children after departure of one or two parents. 12% of the studied children stayed exclusively in the custody of grandparents, and 6% of children – exclusively in the custody of adult siblings. Further family (aunt or uncle) as sole guardians of the child, constituted 4% of the studied group. One child stayed in the custody of persons from outside family of the child, it was educated by the parents of the new partner of its mother, with whom she went abroad. None of the studied children had established legal replacement care.

Feeling of social support is an important factor for good functioning of a child; it can be obtained in different life situations, defined by the child as very difficult. As the studies on the meaning of social support for children in stressful situation indicate, not only amount of obtained support is significant, but mainly the awareness of many

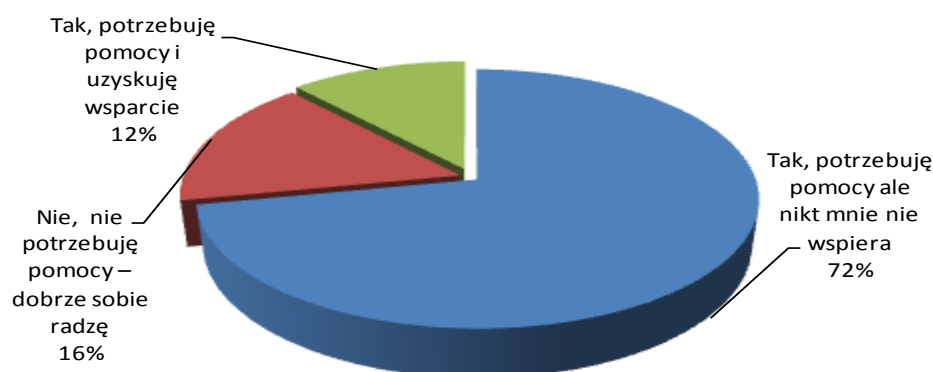
possibilities and sources of support, which can be obtained by the child in the closest surrounding [5].

Chart 2 shows demand for help in difficult situations by the studied children, and their subjective conviction on possibility of receiving it in the closest surrounding. Only 16,22% of children are convicted that they cope well in situations difficult for them and does not require support from outside: “I have my methods for stress and I get by” – children’s expressions of this type were qualified to this category. Similarly, very low percentage of children who are in favorable social situation was observed. 11,90% of children pointed that they need help and do not cope with difficulties, however always receive support or can count on help from the closest relatives. Exemplary statement of a girl aged 7 (mother has been working abroad for two years): “older sister is very good for me, she always helps me in my homework or when I ask her for something”.

However, it is worth to underline that as much as 71,88% among studied children indicated need of help and support in different problems; at the same time stating that in their closest surrounding there is nobody who could support or cheer up them in this time. One should state, that internal conviction of this type is a very aggravating feeling for a child.

As the reference books indicate, adult persons - parents temporarily taking care of children during the stay of the spouse abroad, often indicate loneliness and difficulties in coping with separation. However, at the same time they indicate that their children tolerate separation with the parents in much better way than they alone do. Excessive focusing of the parent on own difficult feelings - which weakens possibility of empathy

Chart 2. Do you believe that you need help in difficult situation when father or mother stays abroad; is there anyone who supports you then?



Yes, I need help and I get support 12%/No, I don't need help- I get by well 16%/Yes, I need help but nobody supports me 72%

in the situation and feelings of the child – can be result of such way of perceiving situation in the family². It often happens, that the closest surrounding of a child is focused on own issues and does not perceive its psychological difficulties; at the other hand further surrounding is not ready to sympathy and understanding of a child, even because of the fact that there still exists a conviction in our society, that „work abroad of one of the members of the family is rather a benefit for the family than a factor of destabilization or suffering”.

Children were asked a question concerning persons who constitute a source of psychological support for them. The question concerned persons from the closest surrounding of a child, such as: parents, siblings, grandparents, further relatives as well as persons able to serve them with help in a wider surrounding, in which the child functions – neighbors, friends, school, and the church. When it comes about further surrounding of the child, including institutional one, none of the children embraced with the program stated that it receives or is able to see possibility of receiving such kind of support. It is unexpected that none of the children pointed that the parents constitute a source of psychological support for them in their own conviction. Children do not find understanding for their feelings, sympathy, engagement, agreement or acceptance of existence of difficult moments in their lives caused by separation. It may be that among parents there acts a strong psychological mechanism, which is denying existence of psychological difficulties by the child. In case of acceptance of this situation - the parent is convicted that he has to change this situation or

prevent it, although it is currently impossible because of different causes.

Children track the most frequent source of support for oneself in situation of separation in own siblings (50%) (see chart 3). If one omitted the only children, this percentage would rise to about 70%. Siblings experience similar difficulties and are to a large extent ready to talk about situation in which they are placed. Children often fantasize commonly on the future, imagine the situation of return of the parent and lucky common life of the family, realization of goals and dreams, which are established by the parents – as the goals of gainful migration (most frequently these goals are connected with ensuring material goods for the family – that is dreamed-of welfare).

Grandparents are subsequent persons, on which the child can count in a difficult situation; they often support the parent in care of children. 31% of children indicate that they can look for help by grandparents and they in fact receive such help. Further family - aunt, uncle, cousins, are indicated as support and help for child in 19% of cases.

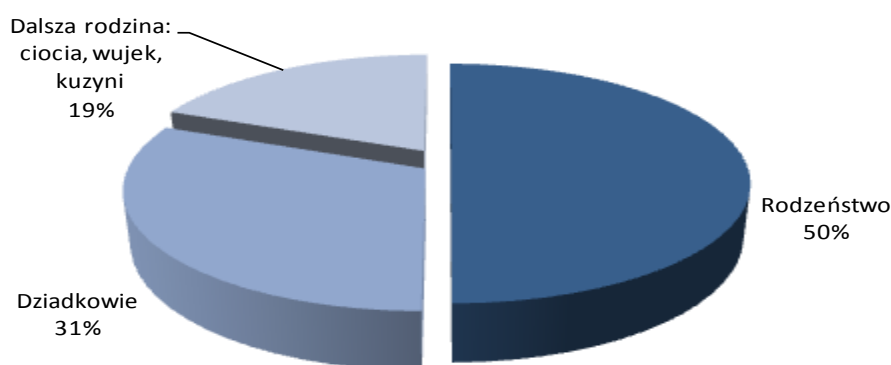
When it comes about source of psychological support which can be constituted for the child by wider society, offering specialist support within school, social or church institutions, only very small percentage of children (about 4%) stated that they can count on such help, referring to the lady in clubroom (school or environmental).

Conclusions

Conducted studies aimed to determine in which way the migrational family copes with ensuring care of children during parents' work abroad and who constitutes for the child the most significant source of emotional support in situations difficult for it. Stating the fact, that over 70%

²Mother is sad and it is difficult for her to be without father. I can not make her sad – I answer that everything is OK (boy, aged 12).

Chart 3. Who supports you the most in difficult situations?



Further family: aunt, uncle, cousins 19%/Grandparents 31%/Siblings 50%

of children declares that the situation of separation with the parent is difficult for them and is expressed in longing for the parent, loneliness, sadness, anxiety of safe return of the parent and suffering because of limited contact with father, mother or both parents at the same time, is a significant conclusion from the realized studies. Simultaneous statement of this group of children that they do not have anyone among the closest persons who could understand their difficult situation and provide them adequate emotional support is highly worrying. At the other hand, children who stated that they can count on understanding their difficulties by other people, did not point at parents as persons providing them support (either parents abroad or the parents taking care of them at home), as the ones who would support them in a way that would allow to express own fears, anxieties, sadness etc.

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