In Poland there is a striking disproportion between the tremendous changes that have occurred in the roles of men and women in public life and those they play in the home and family. The revolution has transformed relations between social classes but not between members of the family, an area, where change is much slower. While the gainful employment of married women has long become accepted as matter-of-course, rational distribution of household chores has not yet been so socially legitimized. Many husbands and wives are still attached to the traditional models of relationships between spouses, parents and children, to a patriarchal pattern of authority within the family - with its equally traditional division of duties. Yet the socio-economic base, which once provided a sufficient justification for such models, has undergone a radical change. In the new situation, in which the woman is a second breadwinner, a re-casting of the roles of husband-cum-father and wife-cum-mother has become of the essence. There is some evidence for believing that such a development is already taking place in this country.

The fact that women have become the co-providers has radically modified the old definition of 'head of the family'. In the National Census of 1970, the instructions issued to the census-takers specified that 'the head of the family is the earner of the whole or the greater part of the livelihood of a given household. Where there are two persons providing it in equal degree, the one chiefly responsible for its management should be regarded as the head of the family.'

The following question was put to 700 girls of sixteen and seventeen canvassed by the youth journal Filipinka: 'Would you like the attitude of your future husband to be like that of your father to your mother?' More than a half said No.

The girls do not accept a family model in which the mother is a 'skivvy', expected to look after the household and the children all by herself. An ideal husband is a father who 'does the cleaning and the washing up, goes for a walk with the children, helps them solve their crossword puzzles, and so on.' An ideal home is one in which all worries are shared and all decisions taken jointly. It seems clear from these answers that the up-coming generation of young women is beginning to absorb a new model of family life based on friendship, comradeship and equal partnership in everything. The views of young men are on the whole similar. The statement made by a 26-year-old arts graduate in a poll conducted by the daily Zycie Warszawy entitled 'Man and Wife' seems revealing. 'They begin their married lives from the same mark, equal in education, age, jobs, everything. In time he moves ahead, is promoted, gets extra training, goes abroad. She is stuck at home, bears children, does all sorts of chores, although she is still bringing money home. He is on the rise, she on the downgrade. Why? Natural inequality of the sexes? Go on. I don’t want to do the dirt on my girl, I don’t want her seeking peace of mind, as my mother did, in church or in novels or the cinema. I won’t let my wife ever feel victimized on account of being a woman.'

HOUSEHOLD CHORES

Studies of time budgets conducted in various socialist (and not only socialist) countries invariably reveal that the total number of hours worked by women (both outside and in the home) is higher than that worked by men. As a consequence women have less time to spare for study, cultural activities, sports, social life and various forms of entertainment. From a national survey carried out in Poland in...
1964-68 it is evident that as many as 54.5 per cent of all gainfully employed women in towns have no one to help them in the household. The rest are given a hand by their husbands (22.3 per cent); mothers or mothers-in-law (10.7 per cent); older children (4.5 per cent); other members of the family (1.6 per cent); strangers (1.1 per cent); and others (5.3 per cent). Only 0.9 per cent have no household duties. These data show how slow is the process of reorganizing the household by a more rational division of labour within the family, a greater modernization of everyday life and transfer of certain traditional duties to service centres outside the home. The same investigation has shown that although the woman’s financial contribution to the family budget is relatively high (the husband’s earnings are seldom more than 600 zlotys higher than the wife’s, and 22 per cent of the women earn as much as, or more than their husbands), the greatest part of household duties is still the responsibility of women. In most families the wife does the shopping, cooks the meals, does the washing up and ironing, and above all - in 75 per cent of families - takes exclusive care of the children. When asked what could make it easier for them to fulfil these duties, most women said, better housing.

Sociologist J. Piotrowski believes that apart from all the external impediments to the rationalization of life in the household, the family itself is markedly unenterprising on this score. No attempts are made, for example, to shift the time of the main meal to the evening (and thus adjust it to the structure of the working day in Poland) or, even when practicable, to give up laundrying at home, etc. The network of services is inadequate, it is true, but so too is the family’s readiness to change its habits. What is particularly perplexing is the fact that older children do practically nothing in the way of housework. What is more, despite the unanimous view that boys and girls should be brought up identically in this respect, the chores, if any, fall on the latter. The most that is expected of a boy is garbage removal, but even this is more often done by mothers or even fathers. Though minor repairs remain the man’s chief province, they are beginning to help with the washing up, housecleaning, etc. - although even this is not a matter of relieving their wives but only of ‘giving them a hand.’

The younger the married couple the greater the husband’s assistance in the home. In many such households it is passe to say ‘my husband helps’, which has been replaced by phrases like ‘my husband participates’ or ‘shares the responsibility.’ This applies above all to the care and raising of the children, particularly older ones, an area where the father’s contribution is growing quickly, and he is playing a far more prominent part in such things as contacts with the child’s school, play, exercise, visits to the theatre or cinema.

The findings of this national survey seem to show that women with a more advanced education and an outside job tend on the whole to cope with their household obligations better than ones who are solely ‘housewives’. They are likely to display more initiative over rationalizing these duties - largely because they have that much less time in which to squeeze them in.

CHANGES IN THE FATHER’S ROLE

In a set of anonymous essays on ‘How I Feel at Home’ written by 150 boys and girls aged 12-14 from a Warsaw school a revealing emphasis was placed on ‘both parents’. There was also a great deal about their jobs, all of it, as it happens, approving. Only one boy said he’d sooner his mother didn’t go out to work. The others took both parents working for granted, their only reservation being a wish that they could get home earlier, less tired and out of sorts and have more time for the family. These children saw no reason why fathers couldn’t do many of the household chores equally well. Nor do they associate upbringing exclusively with their mothers; on the contrary, they often place a higher value on their father’s
help and advice, his contacts with their school etc. This ties in with the 1964-68 survey which revealed that marginally more husbands of working mothers played a positive part in the raising of the children.

The traditional stereotype of the father had him doing little more than providing the family’s livelihood and punishing the children. For certain segments of society, ‘a good husband and father’ still means a man who does not drink or make scenes, and brings home his pay packet. If for good measure he also helps his wife with odd jobs around the house, he is also a veritable paragon. It is a formula which says little or nothing about his role in the upbringing of the children. In the past, all major decisions affecting them were his as of legal right; today, they are expected to be taken jointly, but instead, they are liable to become the sole domain of the mother. The Soviet sociologist A. G. Kharchev(2) writes that in many Soviet families there is a total absence of paternal care: the father ‘lives in’ but takes little or no part in the upbringing of the children (a phenomenon known in Poland as ‘dad behind the newspaper’).

Kharchev thinks that both parents are essential to the child’s proper development; the role of the father and the mother is not identical, he adds, since there can be no doubt about the ‘otherness’ of the male and the female psyche, but both an exclusively paternal and an exclusively maternal upbringing must be considered incomplete.

The new status of women is freeing man of the stresses, realized or unrealized, inseparable from being the family’s sole breadwinner. Consequently, there is emerging a new model of the husband and father in which he takes upon himself some of the responsibilities for the upbringing of the young generation - which is socially all to the good. At a time when most of the occupations that impinge on child-rearing are staffed by women the evolution and proper performance of the father’s role become a problem of basic social significance. Summing up the results of a poll of fathers, the Catholic weekly Wiez wrote:

‘Fatherhood as a social role in our age is only now being rewritten by history ... An answer is slowly taking shape to the question: is the modern male a family creature? Yes, to the extent that he is up to performing an individualized, creative role as father and sees it as a chance of self-affirmation and a source of new values ... The father should not be a “mother’s help” in the family, but above all a partner by reason of his different sex, something, in other words, that is incommensurable and irreplaceable in its distinctness and indispensability.’

NEW FAMILY PATTERNS

Changes in approach to the roles of husband and wife are quickest in urban families, among men and women with a relatively high standard of education. These transformations will no doubt spread with the levelling of the life-styles of the various sections of the population.

One instance of these processes has been supplied by a study of a group of married couples, living and working in Warsaw, in which both husband and wife are qualified engineers.(3) They reveal the existence of genuine partnership reflected in a more equitable division of household duties, joint child-rearing shared holidays and entertainments, etc. An important place in their relationships is occupied by ‘shop talk’ and mutual assistance in their work. None of the wives contemplates the possibility of giving up her job, since they regard a career to be just as much part and parcel of being a woman today as having a family.

A similar picture emerges from a poll conducted by the daily Zycie Warszawy (1967) in which a large number of the respondents were pairs of academics (a group which has a high status rating in Poland). Here too there was a striking lack of sexual discrimination in the division of the innumerable, time-consuming tasks involved in running a household. The way these couples handle chores like washing, cleaning, cooking, shopping, looking after the children etc., affords grounds for guarded optimism that the rigid demarcation between husband and wife
will gradually disappear in the future and women’s monopoly of nappies and the pots and pans will eventually become a thing of the past.

LESS CHILDREN

The principal spur to the process of change within the family is the gainful employment of women. For its part the factor chiefly responsible for reducing the family obligations of married women at home and thereby enabling them to pursue a career is a drop in child-bearing. A smaller maternal work-load is a crucial element in dovetailing the demands of the home and employment.

In country as well as town the child-bearing rate is declining, though more pronouncedly in the cities. Large families are disappearing. In 1968, of all women with children under sixteen, 36 per cent had one, 32.8 per cent two, 18 per cent three, and only 13.1 four. During the past fifteen years there has been a considerable decrease in the number of women bearing three or more children - 32.5 per cent in 1968 as compared to 42.4 per cent in 1955. In big cities families of one or two are becoming the rule; and the evidence of all surveys seems to be that two is regarded as the ideal number of children for a family, rural or urban.

There are very few new mothers in the over-35 bracket. By the age of 30, in fact, most women have borne all the children they are likely to have and can look forward to some 40 more years of life, since their average expectation in Poland is now 72.8 years.

Over the last fifteen years natural increase in Poland has been greatly reduced - from 19.5 per thousand in 1955 to 8.5 in 1971. The same is true of the average fertility of women. In 1955, there were 111 births per 1,000 women between the ages of 15 and 49, while in 1969 the ratio was only 63. This drop is found in all age groups, but it is most pronounced in the older ones, which means an earlier termination of child-bearing. It is chiefly due to the smaller size of families: there has been an insignificant decline in the number of first births but a considerable one in that of second or third children. Similar trends can be observed in other central and east European countries, and in Europe generally. In Poland it was a relatively sudden development, and demographers, doctors, statisticians, planners and social policy-makers are trying to puzzle out what caused so rapid and radical a change and what kind of population policy should be followed in the near and more remote future. The discussion centres on drawing up a family model which would encourage less rigorous control of fertility, in other words on devising an effective pronatalist programme. Most demographers and many journalists are in favour of such a programme, although they differ on points of detail; others are sceptical.

One of the features of debates about the size of families is that they soon extend to the subject of the role of women, with particular reference to their gainful employment. This has been a fiercely vexed issue since certain commentators maintain that the goals of population policy are hard or even impossible to reconcile with professional aspirations - and accordingly call for a restriction of women’s employment.

In Poland the gainful employment of women is not the decisive curb on the size of the family. Differences in the fecundity of working and non-working women are insignificant: in a representative sample of 100 working women in towns (between the ages of 21-47 years) there were 246 children, in a similar sample of non-working women, 257 children.

In western Europe there are basic differences in the influence of education on the number of children. Less education, more children is a pattern that seems to be on the decline; indeed, more and more often a woman with a university degree has two or three children. In central and east European countries such a change has not yet been noted. In a Polish family in which either husband or wife is a graduate the average number of births is 1.5, and there still remains a wide
discrepancy in the number of children in each education bracket. There are some grounds for supposing that this situation is beginning to change. For example, a recent study of a representative sample of town dwellers, made by the Chief Statistical Office, has revealed that the lower the standard of education (both among men and women and in all social groups) the greater the reluctance to have a larger number of children. Conversely a wish for more children (in addition to the ones already born) tends to grow with the educational level.

There is a view that a rational population policy should be based on two fundamentals: first, the spontaneous and growing participation of women in the country’s economic life must not be opposed; and second, the living standards of families must be gradually improved.

The first of these premises implies making the provision of jobs for women one of the aims of employment policy. Cutting down the number of female employees may have advantages for one enterprise but on a national scale is totally undesirable. The greater number of special benefits to which women are entitled makes them seem less worthy of their hire. But expansion of creches and nurseries, development of services and promotion of the production of labour-saving appliances can all help to increase the productivity of women.

The second principle is, above all, a matter of more and better housing. A long-range plan for the development of housing construction, designed to provide a comfortable home for every family, has been recently launched and will, in the first place, improve the situation of young married couples. In addition, to counteract the decrease in the birth-rate, various incentives are provided in the form of family allowances and benefits. In the various socialist countries this system is being steadily expanded.

A sensible population policy aims not so much at raising the birth-rate as such but at increasing the number of wanted children. In 1956, a law was passed permitting the termination of pregnancy on medical or social grounds. Recently, during the debate on the dwindling natural increase, it came in for criticism in some quarters. However an overwhelming majority of experts - demographers, doctors and journalists - have strongly emphasized its benefits. They regard its introduction as a very important achievement and one of the greatest of social gains. Abortion is not, of course, a good thing in itself and should as far as possible be avoided by means of contraception. ‘But.’ said Professor B. Gornicki, a well-known pediatrician and chairman of the Family Planning Association, ‘I feel that our present regulations concerning the termination of pregnancy are sound ones, and any curtailment of them would mean a step back. I would even say that to do so would be to let down those countries which regard our measures as rational and progressive in the sense of the protection of man.’

To conclude, two more statements which in a way sum up the debate:

J. Piotrowski (sociologist): ‘I feel that the measures being taken to increase the population are to be commended insofar as they serve the happiness of the family. On the other hand, they should not be assessed from the point of view of their impact on fertility - because they are mostly ineffective.’

S. Klonowicz (doctor): ‘I do not want anybody to conclude that I see no hope of remedying the present downturn in fertility rates. I believe there is a chance, and it resides in comprehensive economic transformations, a radical improvement in the living standards which would make for even fuller satisfaction of non-essential wants, in the consistent implementation of the present social policy, in the development of the network of services, and in better housing. It is only then that - in my opinion - the effectiveness of various “incentives” can be increased, it is only in such conditions that one can launch an active pronatalist policy, and it is only then that it will not prove prejudicial to the welfare of women’.