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FAMILY POLICY IN EASTERN EUROPE: DEVELOPMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Family policy can be defined as government activities that are designed to support families and enhance family members' well-being. An explicit family policy addresses the problems that families experience in society, and has as its goal the advancement of family well-being (Bogenschneider, 2006). It is constituted of a series of separate but interrelated policy choices that address issues such as family care, poverty, domestic violence, and family planning. As such, family policy assumes a diversity and multiplicity of policies rather than a single monolithic, comprehensive legislative act.

A system of explicit and institutionalized family policy implies legal recognition of the family as a social institution playing a major part in the maintenance of social cohesion. Family policy focuses on the family as a social entity, not as individual members, deliberately targeting the concerns of the family group in terms of educational, affective, economic and social environments. Family policy is a field of activity that includes programs such as family life education, family planning, child care, adoption, social security, financial assistance, child development programs, and fatherhood programs.

Eastern Europe has been an area with major socio-economic upheavals in the last decades. The transition from communism to democracy has been associated with economic and social changes having complex implications at the family level. Developing and revising family policies need to be at the forefront of the policy making agenda.

Family Policy Framework

The main provisions of family policy legislation are family cash/financial benefits and family social services (see Figure 1). Family policy is organized around the four main functions of the family: marriage, childrearing, financial support and family care (Bogenschneider, 2006).

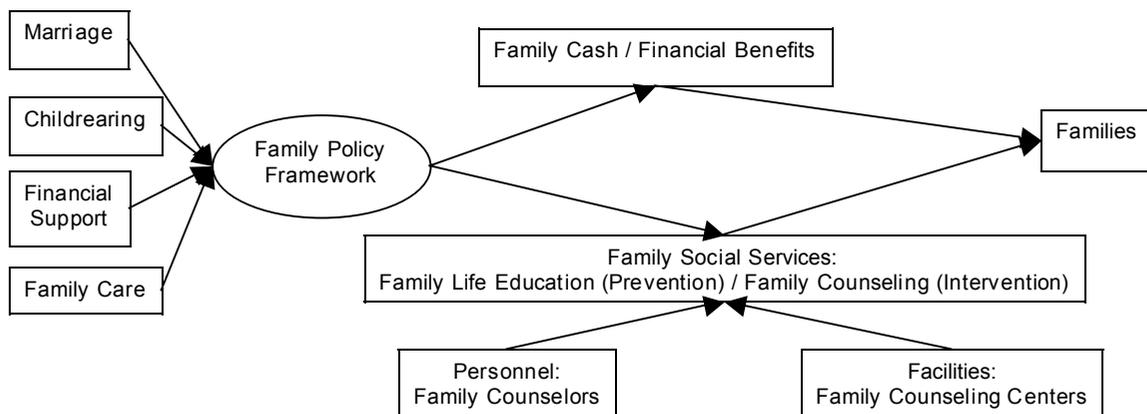
1. Marriage

The importance of marriage and family in society should be recognized by providing family life education, promoting gender equality and eliminating domestic violence.

Family Life Education

The number of educational programs and services focused specifically on families is very limited in Eastern Europe (e.g., Robila, 2004). While social work departments have been introduced at several universities in the region, programs focused on families, such as Family Studies, Family Psychology, or Family Counseling, are not present, resulting in a shortage of local family scholars and practitioners. It is recommended that family life education be introduced at different instructional levels (e.g., university, schools, community centers, hospitals) with a prevention focus on family relations, marriage, and parenting. Premarital and marital counseling and support groups for specific issues (e.g., immigration, disability) should be provided as prevention and intervention mechanisms to promote marital and parenting quality, effective conflict resolution skills and financial management knowledge.

Figure 1. Family Policy Framework



Gender Equality

Family policy should promote gender equality in family and society by changing the gender contract and gender division of work through policies that better reconcile work and family life. Although governments in Eastern Europe are trying to ensure “gender equality”, significant differences still exist between men and women especially in the labor market, with wage gaps based on gender, access to better and higher positions available only to men, and a lack of recognition of unpaid work. There is less emphasis in this area on policies enabling women to combine maternal and professional roles, the focus being on providing cash benefits and expanded parental leave, encouraging women to stay at home. In order to promote gender equality, specific policies are recommended on paternity leave, parental leave (with special provisions for fathers), family medical leave to take care of an ill/disabled family member (with specific provisions for men), and flexible work hours to facilitate childrearing and equal pay for women and men.

Domestic Violence

Legislation on domestic violence is a major component of family policy. Many Eastern European countries are still struggling to have domestic violence recognized by their societies and to develop and enact policies to address it. For example, Johnson (2007) examined domestic violence policies in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia, and revealed that while there were several legislative proposals in Russia, Ukraine is the only one which approved national domestic violence legislation. Considering the cultural resistance to confront domestic violence, legislation is significant in defining the problem, and setting prevention and intervention strategies. Policies for early detection, reporting, and intervention in domestic violence should set severe consequences for the perpetrators (e.g., judicial sentencing). The legislation should also sanction law enforcement agencies if they do not follow through with policy implementation. The policy should provide social services for the victims, such as hotlines, shelters, individual / group counseling, job training, financial/legal advice, as well as for the perpetrators (mandatory conflict management training, individual / group counseling, and job training).

2. Childrearing

The second function of families is childrearing, providing a safe and thriving environment for raising children. Family policies are conducive to maintaining family values by creating an environment favorable for children.

Parent Education

Parent education serves as both a prevention and intervention strategy, including classes on child development, child care, nutrition, and effective discipline techniques. Highly recommended are child birth education classes, especially for first-time parents and teenage parents, for both mothers and fathers.

Family Planning and Birth Control

Lack of family planning education, misconceptions and insufficient provisions of contraceptives explain why the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe still have a high number of unwanted pregnancies. For example, teenage pregnancy rates are four times higher in Romania and three times higher in Estonia, Lithuania, and Hungary than in Western Europe (Kontula, 2008).

Family planning / birth control education needs to be approached at different levels (e.g., university, high schools, hospitals, libraries, community centers) in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies and children being abandoned in orphanages. Increasing levels of subsidized

contraceptives may further reduce the incidence of unintended pregnancies.

Child Abandonment

Mandatory workshops on the consequences of abandonment and living in orphanages on children should be provided in order to educate the parent that the child might not “fare better in the orphanage”, a misconception often present in Eastern Europe since the communist times. Programs should provide job training, priority for job placement, and subsidies to encourage the family to keep the child. Legislation needs to be provided to ensure a child’s safety and well-being (“safe haven laws”). Regarding orphanages, small family-type structures should be developed to replace the old large institutionalized centers. Developing and improving the foster care system in the region should be another priority.

Since many abandoned children are of teenage parents, developing policy on dealing with teenage pregnancy is strongly recommended. Besides workshops on child care for teenage parents (mandatory), the grandparents should be encouraged through financial means to be involved in taking care of the grandchild (e.g., “grandparent leave”). Financial benefits should be linked to requirements for teenage parents to continue their education and be in school and to live with their parents (thus increasing the likelihood that they will continue with schooling). This will also increase the opportunity to promote social protection and intergenerational solidarity.

Father Involvement in Family Life and Parenting

Policies to promote father involvement in family life and parenting are strongly recommended. Fathers play an important role in the emotional and cognitive development of their children and encouraging father involvement with the child from birth increases the likelihood for further paternal involvement in childrearing duties and bonding with the child (e.g., Martin, et al., 2007). The right and responsibility of fathers to make a commitment to family life should be recognized and supported in society in several ways, such as increasing father involvement in the child-birth process, providing paternity leave, and developing father support groups (e.g., for teen, first-time or single-parent fathers).

Child Abuse Prevention and Intervention

Every child has the right to protection against all forms of physical and psychological violence and abuse. Services for the prevention and intervention of child abuse need to be provided, and as part of this, education on the different types of abuse and their consequences on children should be delivered. For example, a policy on mandatory reporting of child abuse by teachers and other professionals could be an effective preventive, early detection and intervention tool. The law

should set consequences for the perpetrators, set restraint orders, provide witness protection, and, if necessary, remove the child from the situation/family and place him/her in foster care. The law should also severely sanction the law enforcement agencies if they do not follow through with its implementation.

International Migration

International migration is a major contemporary issue in Eastern Europe (Robila, 2009). For example, due to economic migration, in the Republic of Moldova about 30% of children live without one or both parents, and, similarly, around 20% of the 10-15 year old Romanian children have parents working abroad (Toth, et al, 2007; Sarbu, 2007). Most of the migration policies focus on developing advantageous labor contracts with the receiving countries without much attention paid to the psychosocial impact that migration has on families and the support they need to adapt to this process. As such, policies need to be developed to support migrant families and children, through programs providing information on migration to assist families to cope with the challenges of migration, (prevention) as well as individual/group counseling for children, parents, grandparents /caregivers (prevention/intervention).

3. Financial Support

The third function of the family is providing financial support to its members. A goal of family policy is facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life and promoting gender equity through improving both parents' opportunities to take part in working life and in caring for their children. Parental leave provisions and public childcare arrangements have been recognized as the two most important components of childcare policies, and are usually evaluated in terms of their extensiveness, quality, generosity and universality. A family-friendly environment, including an increase in flexible working schedules for parents of small children, should be provided by employers.

Parental Leave

Parents have the primary responsibility for their child's development and the society should support them in their endeavors. Maternity, paternity and parental leave to care for a biological or adopted child are important parts of family policy. Paternity leave promotes fathers' involvement with the child from the beginning. It is also a recognition of the important role that fathers play in the family and a symbol of the equilibrium that needs to be achieved between work and family life. It also contributes to the development of a gender equality perspective in family life as well as in the workplace. Similarly, parental leave and medical leave should have specific provisions for father's involvement (besides the mother's) in childrearing and caring for a sick/disabled child or a family member. Unfortunately, in many Eastern European countries (e.g., Czech Republic,

Poland), family benefits continue to embody a model that does not include incentives being offered to change the stereotypical division of labor between men and women (Steinhilber, 2005).

In Eastern Europe, the maternity leave is generally longer than in the western countries and in some countries young families are offered special credits for buying a house (e.g., in Hungary) or tax exemptions. Among the former communist countries, Slovenia is one with a relatively well-developed family policy aimed at reconciling the professional and family life. For example, the Parenthood Protection and Family Benefits Act of 2006 provides 105 days of maternity leave, 260 days of childcare leave and 90 days of paternity leave, with each parent being entitled to half of the childcare leave (Stropnik, & Širčelj, 2008). Similarly, Hungary provides more comprehensive support to parents with a more generous paid parental leave (70 weeks), than Poland (39 weeks) or Czech Republic (35 weeks) (Thévenon, 2008).

It is recommended that family policy promote universal family assistance practices. Universal actions are directed at every family with no exclusions or restrictions. States should recognize and promote the family as a common good and, therefore, supports all families and not be exclusively welfare-based, aimed only at disadvantaged families. However, income-tested benefits have been replacing the universal benefits in several countries, such as Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, where the higher income families are excluded from receiving the leave benefits. Low-income women are encouraged by these benefits to withdraw from the labor market while the higher income women are encouraged to re-join the labor market sooner (Rostgaard, 2004). Unfortunately, a consequence of this could be an income-selective approach to daycare that results in the exclusion of children from low-income families from early childhood education programs.

Child Care Allowances / Benefits

Family policy should help alleviate the direct and indirect costs of children for families through family allowance and family cash benefits for caring for a child. It needs to compensate for the economic costs of rearing children and to give people the economic resources to have children. Eastern European countries inherited a relatively extensive system of family policy in terms of the coverage and benefits granted to families (Cerami, 2008). For example, in most of the countries child raising allowances are offered until the child is two or three years old and child benefits until the child has completed secondary school or university (up to 18 – 26 years old). However, the benefits are relatively small in value and should be increased. Moreover, most benefits are linked to employment, while at the same time finding and keeping a job is more challenging in the market economy.

Examples of child benefits in Eastern European countries vary for the first child, between 47 Euros (€) per month in Hungary, 26€ in Slovenia to 11€ in Bulgaria and 10€ in Slovakia (IPF, 2008).

The average of family financial benefits provided by family policies also vary from those provided in Slovenia - 278€ per month; Hungary 222€; Czech Rep. 172€, Slovakia -131€; Estonia -125€; Latvia – 74€, Lithuania -72€; to Poland – 54€; Romania -50€; Bulgaria -30 €. Research indicates that some countries which offer higher family benefit levels have higher birth rates (e.g., France, Luxembourg) than those where the benefits are lower (Spain, Poland, and Italy) (IPF, 2008).

Early Childhood Education and Care Services (ECEC)

Early childhood education and care services represent another important dimension of family policy. Family policy needs to allocate funds for the development of a variety of high quality public and private child-care centers. As part of the family policy's support to working parents, it is recommended that states provide subsidized childcare to at least 33% of children under the age of three, and to 90% for 3 to 6 years old children (IFP, 2008). There is a wide variation among the Eastern European countries in terms of subsidies; for example, in Hungary there is more public spending for child care services and coverage for preschool children (87% of children) than in Poland (36%) (Thévenon, 2008). Subsidized public childcare (no fee/low fee) has two main objectives: to assist parents who are economically active, and to give all children equal opportunities, irrespective of their social background, since the services for children below compulsory school age involve elements of both care and education.

In Eastern Europe, during communism, women were encouraged to join the labor force through incentives such as public affordable childcare services. After the fall of communism, many of the governments opted for a male-breadwinner model, closing many childcare centers and withdrawing the financial support, developing a new “refamilization” trend, emphasizing that maternity and rearing children are a woman's role, encouraging women to leave the labor market to raise children. (“Defamilizing” policies on the other hand, shift the responsibility for care away from the family, by providing accessible and affordable child care services, enabling women to join the labor force.) (Saxonberg, & Szelewa, 2007). As such, an imposed home care model seems typical for all former communist countries (except Slovenia), with economic hardship and high unemployment rates imposing home care without public support (Kontula, 2008).

A majority of the countries promote explicit and implicit familism-pursuing policies to support the traditional family model (women as carriers of children), with longer paid parental leaves (two to four years), but not providing subsidized child care centers (the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia). Others support a more comprehensive model, the family receiving support in combining paid employment with high quality child care, and a generous parental leave (Hungary, Lithuania) (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008)

Early childhood education and care services are recommended to include a wide range of part-

day, full-school-day, full-work-day programs offering flexible and extended hours to accommodate working parents. It is recommended that an allowance for individualized child-care arrangements or an allowance to employ an “approved child minder” (Family Policy in France, 2005) or a private individual (e.g., family member - grandparent) be provided to allocate funds to childcare carried out by individuals. This would increase parental employment, provide jobs to childcare providers (fight unemployment), compensate for shortage in childcare centers, and give parents choices and financial support for the diversification of childcare arrangements.

In Eastern Europe, extended family members, especially grandmothers and grandfathers, are very involved in the childrearing of their grandchildren. When available, families prefer to involve the grandparents in childrearing due to trust, convenience, and financial reasons, but also to strengthen family ties and to increase the child’s attachment to his/her grandparents. It is strongly recommended that financial allowances be provided to support the care provided by grandparents, increasing thus the opportunity for social protection and intergenerational solidarity.

Family Financial Assistance

Family policy is designed to support parents’ financial control over their lives. Family policy also provides insurance (e.g., parental insurance, child’s survivor pension) and allowances (e.g., housing benefits for families with children, child support to custodial parents, allowance for disabled children). Another component is the welfare assistance for low income families and children (single parent families, large families, unemployed parents). A focus on improving and continuing education and job training is recommended rather than just welfare support. In addition, providing parents with courses on financial planning and money management might increase their knowledge and skills in coping with current economical upheavals.

4. Family Care

The fourth function of the family is family care, referring to the care for members with varying degrees of disability and chronic illnesses, and for elderly family members.

Caring for a Disabled Family Member

The number and quality of services supporting people with disabilities or chronic illnesses (e.g., AIDS) and their families are very limited in Eastern Europe and consequently most of the care is provided by family members. Family policy should make provisions to set budgetary allocations targeted towards these families in terms of both financial means to support the care they provide (subsidizes, allowances to the family, use the years for retirement/pension) and for developing and providing support services (e.g., respite care, counseling, support groups). Developing inclusion

schools and job training programs targeted for children and adults with disabilities, providing tax reductions to companies who hire them, and providing job placement support should also be part of policy provisions.

In Eastern Europe there is still stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities. Family life education should teach people about different types of disabilities and national campaigns are recommended to educate people about this topic, to reduce discrimination and to inform families of available services.

Caring for the Elderly

There is still a lack of high quality services for providing care to elderly citizens in Eastern European countries, which leads to a lack of trust in the public institutions targeting this age group. This situation together with the cultural scripts suggesting that the best care is provided by family members (and stigmatizing the use of institutional care), determine that most care to elderly in this region is provided by family members. As such, caring for the elderly family members in Eastern Europe is perceived as a sign of love, respect and family duty. However, caring for elderly parents could put pressure on the middle generation ("sandwich generation") required also to care for their children. Family policy should provide social protection by compensating financially this care-giving process, thereby contributing also to increased intergenerational solidarity. This will also be cost effective for the society since caring for elderly in an institution will be more expensive.

Family Policy: Institutional and Budgetary Considerations

It is recommended that the promotion of the family as an institution be done through setting up a Ministry for the Family with sufficient organizational and budgetary capacity to promote the family as a policy priority, to develop family protection measures, and to ensure that all legislation considers the roles and rights of the family (IFP, 2008). Several Eastern European countries have incorporated the "Family" as part of their Ministries: Ministry for Children and Family Affairs (Latvia), Ministry of Labor, Family and Equality of Opportunity (Romania), Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family (Slovakia), Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Affairs (Slovenia) (IFP, 2008).

Family policy promotes the establishment of family protection measures. Most countries set aside a certain percentage of their GDP for social expenditures (e.g., Sweden 33%, Latvia and Estonia 12.5%) (IFP, 2008). As a recognition of the importance of the family, it is recommended that 2.5% percentage of the GDP should be set aside specifically for the family (e.g., Sweden 3%, Italy 2.1%; Bulgaria and Lithuania 2.1%, Hungary 2%, Poland 1%) (IFP, 2008; Thévenon, 2008).

Family Policy Implementation: Family Social Services and Family Life Education

The main provisions of family policy are the financial benefits and the family social services. Family social services consist in family life education as a prevention mechanism and in family counseling as a prevention and intervention strategy. These services are mainly dependent on having qualified personnel and high quality facilities. However, having the qualified personnel and state-of-the-art counseling facilities is a serious challenge in Eastern Europe. Instituting family life education and family counseling as fields of study at different instructional levels (e.g., university, high school, community) is highly recommended, along with the development of family counseling centers. Family life education provides opportunities for individuals and families to enhance and improve their lives by providing the “knowledge and skills needed for effective family living” (www.ncfr.org).

Family life education is a multi-disciplinary area of study, focusing on prevention and taking an educational rather than therapeutic approach. The areas of focus of family life education include human development over the life span, interpersonal relationships, human sexuality, family resource management, parent education, families relationships to other institutions, family policy, and methodology (program planning, implementation, and evaluation) (ncfr.org). Family life educators and family counselors work in different settings such as human services, premarital and marriage education, parenting education, schools, caregiver and long term care programs, family policy, or medical agencies.

Conclusions

There is a great need to develop family policy in Eastern Europe. Decisive are the political will to develop and enact it, available budgetary allocations (for financial benefits) and family social services to implement it. While the budgetary concerns are difficult to resolve due to the high economic struggles present in the region, there is a great potential to develop the family services through which family legislation could support families, without necessarily requiring extreme financial efforts. Developing these family services would be avenues through which family policies would reach their intended beneficiaries: the families.

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