

Parental Movements in Poland as the Bottom-up Forms of Action: Success or Failure? The Cases of First Quarter Mothers and Save the Little Ones

Dominika Polkowska*

Abstract

This article is focused on two parental movements that have appeared in Poland: First Quarter Mothers and Save the Little Ones. Both of these movements demanded changes in the law (or to prevent such changes) because, in parents' opinion, the assumptions behind the intended reforms were contrary to their children's interest. The conducted analysis showed that both exhibit the characteristics of social movements. Parents are aware of their strength and know that acting together can have an impact on the social reality, legal change and government decisions. Analyzed movements showed that the institutional forms of dialogue slowly come to the end, and instead of them the bottom-up forms of action become increasingly important.

Keywords: parental movement, new social movement, dialogue, bottom-up forms of action, *First Quarter Mothers*, *Save the Little Ones*

* Maria Curie-Skłodowska University; dominika.polkowska@poczta.umcs.lublin

Introduction

New social movements are one of the ways to mobilize the society for action. They are increasingly becoming an alternative to organization- or institution-driven social activities. Increasingly, they are also becoming the basic mechanism of participation in public life as one of the elementary forms of spontaneous reaction to the dysfunctions of institutions and public organizations.

As Bronisław Misztal writes, 'social movements are always a reaction to the unsatisfactory social world order because happy and satisfied people do not take action to change that order. They are thus both a product and an indicator of social discontent and testify to the fact that the status quo does not satisfy the human aspirations' (Misztal 2000: 342).

Gumkowska et al. in their study show (2006) that in Poland most citizens do not participate in voluntary organizations and grassroots initiatives. People are not interested in organizational membership in associations and are less likely to take part in elections than most of their Western counterparts.

There are only few studies regarding the parenthood/motherhood issues in Poland. Taking this reason into account, the special attention should be paid to the study of Renata Hryciuk and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2013) who focused on three social movements carried out in Poland. They analyzed it in the context of social mobilization around mothers' rights in Poland.

The main purpose of this article is to present two parental movements that have appeared in Poland. The first one assumed a spontaneous name of First Quarter Mothers and the other of Save the Little Ones. The main goal and the reason of emergence of both of these movements was to improve the fate of children. The comparison of these two movements is not accidental: the former has succeed while the latter has failed to achieve its goals. Both of these movements demanded changes in the law (or to prevent such changes) because, in parents' opinion, the assumptions behind the intended reforms were contrary to their children's interest. It is also an example of grassroots initiatives, that were not particularly popular in Poland in the past, but nowadays it becomes increasingly important. Meanwhile the institutional forms of dialogue seems to be less essential.

The article consists of two parts: the first describes the activity of these movements, and the other goes for a deeper analysis of the subject of whether the parents' actions can be thought of as new social movements.

The following analysis is based on documents related to the activities of the movements, conversations and interviews with the representatives of the parents (including conversations via Skype and chat) and the mass-media reports.

First Quarter Mothers: Fast Battle Successfully Completed

The underlying factor that led to the emergence of First Quarter Mothers was a set of proposed law changes related to the length of the parental leave. The Polish legislator assumes that all working women are entitled to maternity leave after giving birth to a child. In the outgoing variant of maternity leave, women were entitled to 100% of the current salary, but the leave lasted only 24 weeks. The bill envisaged the extension of parental leave from 24 to 52 weeks but (and this was the main cause of the dispute) covered only those children who were born after 17 March 2013. A spontaneously created parents' movement pointed out that it would be discriminatory to all children born between 1 January and 17 March 2013, as they would not have fall under the new law. Parents' calculations demonstrated that this new right to have extended parental leave would disadvantage about 80,000 families. We have to bear in mind that that when parents decide to use up the whole 52 weeks of parental leave, the salary would be reduced to 80%.

On 23 November 2012, First Quarter Mothers filed a petition with the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, entitled, The Open Letter on Parental Leave to Cover the Parents of All Children Born in 2013, which proposed a reconsideration of the bill and the coverage of parents of the children born between 1 January and 17 March 2013 with extended parental leave. It would have been possible if the introduction of the new law had taken place on 10 June instead of on 1 September 2013.

In particular, in the letter to the minister, parents drew attention to the fact that children born before 17 March 2013, although born in the same year, would be (right from their birth) divided into two groups – those who were lucky to be born in the second half of the March of 2013 and would be able to spend with their mom or dad twice as much time as those who were less lucky to be born during the first two and a half months of 2013. They would have to attend nursery or stay with a babysitter. Such a division is unfair, especially that other laws related to children (e.g. the law on compulsory education) do not differentiate between the months of birth.

The parents pointed out that their children would be discriminated against from birth. They could not agree to this and were ready to fight for the reversal of the change. They suggested that the new provisions of the act should apply to all children born in 2013, so as to equalize their chances for development because in the future, after all, they will be starting their school education at the same time.

A solution would be to shift the date of entry of this law into force from 1 September 2013 to 10 June 2013; as a result, all children born in 2013 would be covered by the new parental leave regulations. There will also be no need to make changes in the records of the act.

At the same time, as the parents emphasized, such a solution would not hurt the children born in 2012 because they have the same rights as their peers born in the whole 2012.

The main communication channel for the parents of children born in the first quarter of 2013 was Facebook. At the end of December 2013, close to 13,000 users has already liked the First Quarter Mothers page.

It must be remembered that the early entry into force of the act would mean certain costs for the state budget, which was the main controversy in the dispute between the parents and the government. The government argued that the state could not afford the early entry into force of the act because it would entail certain additional costs that were not budgeted for.

What steps have First Quarter Mothers taken in order to defend their interests? The main activities were focused on spreading information about this issue through the mass-media so as to enlist public support and favour. It was hoped that under the influence of public opinion the government once again revisits its assumptions and finds money in the budget to extend parental leave for the 2013-born 80,000 children.

Most activity of the movement began in early March 2013. Initially, the information about First Quarter Mothers was limited to conversations among the women whose date of delivery fell around 17 March and who, for obvious reasons, wanted to delivery after the magic date.

On 18 March 2013, a conference was held in the Sejm co-organized by First Quarter Mothers and Deputy Speaker of the Sejm Wanda Nowicka. The attending mothers with their newborn kids called for social equality. During the conference, the representatives of the movement demanded a change in the bill involving extended parental leave to cover all children born in 2013. However, the government invariably refused to speak on the issue and avoided confrontation with the protesting parents. The mass-media amplified the least rational argument that each date would dissatisfy

the parents. Interestingly, as protesters pointed out, all regulations concerning children and maternity leaves since 1975 had always become effective on January 1.

The government considered, however, that there was always a party that was losing when introducing new legislation. Parents responded that there was no such an argument to justify why children born before 17 March have to pay for it. During the conference, it was explained in detail why the parents from the movement felt that they children were discriminated against. It was also reminded that since early 2013 the government of the Republic of Poland had dramatically tightened the criteria for granting baby benefits (the so-called baby bonus), increased the income threshold for a tax relief for the first child, abolished the Family on Its Own programme without announcing a substitute, increased the prices of children's products through the introduction of a higher VAT rate. In addition, 2013 was announced the Year of the Family as if overlooking the children born in the first 76 days of that same year. The conference coverage was broadcast in major national television channels.

It turned out that the conference in the parliament was a milestone in the struggle for the embracing of the principles of First Quarter Mothers: on the one hand, the public learned about the problem, on the other, the MPs of the ruling party began to speak more favourably about the whole situation. Moreover, the parents' initiative was supported by the adviser to Polish president, Prof. Tomasz Nałęcz.

Despite this, on 20 March, the government spokesman, Paweł Graś, told journalists that the decision on parental leave had already been taken and due to budget constraints it may be inauspicious to mothers. The spokesman added that to satisfy the 'claims' regarding 'the first quarter', around PLN 500 mln is needed which the state did not have. The parental movement's answer relied on the calculations by the economist, Wojciech Szewko, PhD, who confirmed that the additional cost would only be PLN 228 mln (and not PLN 500 mln).

However, as can be inferred from press reports, the movement began to garner more and more support. Opposition parties began to argue for First Quarter Mothers. The ruling party refuted the arguments of the movement explaining that, in fact, the provisions of the amended law were addressed mainly to those women who had not yet taken the decision to have a child.

Nevertheless, the battle for the extra money that the government were able to spend on parental leave for parents of children born between 1 January and 17 March 2013 had begun. The parents and children visited their MPs in their parliamentary offices throughout the country trying to win them to their case.

Finally came 26 April 2013 when (to the surprise of many observers) the government suddenly found the extra money. During a press conference held after

a meeting with the representatives of the parental movement with Prime Minister Donald Tusk, he declared that the government was able to find the money to bear the cost of additional parental leave.

That is how a grassroots parents' initiative demanding changes in law aimed to enable about 80,000 children to spend 52 weeks with their parents at home during extended parental leave has attained a complete success. Based on the movement, an association was established pursuing the goal of improving the situation of Polish families, especially children.

As regards the assessment of the activities of the movement, it can be seen that parents' determination has brought the desired results in a short time. No less important for the ultimate success was also adequate publicity and drawing public attention to the problem faced by the parents of children born in the first quarter of 2013. On the other hand, that the demands were met relatively easy came as a surprise. It took only less than two months of intense parents' action to make the government completely change their mind. It may even seem that from the very beginning the authorities considered the likelihood of protests of at least some part of disgruntled parents, and to fulfil their expectations was only a matter of time. It is doubtful, however, whether this 'leniency' was not intended mainly to improve the image of the government in the eyes of the public opinion: it suddenly turned out, after all, that the Polish authorities were able to yield to parents' demands despite the fact that not so long before they had made it clear that nothing like that would happen. In addition, we have to consider the fact that young dissatisfied parents are part of the electorate of the ruling party, and any party making concessions gains probably more faithful voters who are likely to 'return the favour' in the next elections by voting for the ruling party (Civic Platform).

Save the Little Ones: Success or Failure?

The other grassroots parents' movement whose activities I would like to present is one called Save the Little Ones. Like the former one, it is assumed apolitical, and its main aim is to improve the condition of children. In particular, the movement opposed the lowering of the age at which children start elementary education. According to the government, already 6-year-olds have the school obligation to meet. A citizen action run under the slogan, Save the Little Ones, has been conducted from May 2008 in order to suppress unfavourable (for families and children) solutions in education

pushed through by the Minister of Education. It was mainly about the earlier start of elementary education in a situation where neither schools nor teachers were prepared for admission of children aged 6.

Parents and experts involved in the movement campaigned in the parliament, met the MPs, attended the 'round table talks' on education convened by the president as a social organization. The website www.ratujmaluchy.pl, started in mid-2008, was the most frequently cited source related to parents' issues in the Polish mass-media in 2008. The parents' protest contributed to the vetoing of the education reform by President Lech Kaczynski, but the amendment was adopted by the parliament, introducing, among others, the lowering of the school age to 6 years.

The parents involved in the Save the Little Ones campaign decided to continue working towards the elimination of unfavourable solutions introduced by the reform. This was even facilitated by many other parents boycotting the school age reform across the country. Those involved in the campaign also noted that despite the fact that parents are the most numerous social group, and that the education of children is the greatest contribution to the building of the state and society, are one of the groups most neglected by the state authorities and the local government.

As part of the initial action of the social movement Save the Little Ones (in 2008), a citizens' draft bill was presented in parliament referred to tentatively as a Six-Year-Olds Back to Kindergarten law, with the backing of 347,000 signatures. The project involved the abolition of the education reform and return to a stable educational system from the age of 7 in the first grade, thus limiting the possibility of liquidation and privatization of schools without the knowledge of the local community and increasing access to pre-school education by extending the state subsidy. The citizens' bill was designed to achieve the objectives of the movement that had been active since 2008 and had been supported by more than 50,000 parents signing up at ratujmaluchy.pl. In response, the Polish government decided to postpone the compulsory school attendance by 6-year-olds until 2014.

At this point, it is worth considering whether the government's decision actually meant success or failure of the parents' movement. On the one hand, we can talk about winning a battle – another groups of children did not go to school earlier, and the decision whether they were ready for school or not was left to parents. However, in a broader perspective, 'the war with the government' was not over. The time of entry into force of the new regulations was only postponed for another year. For the parents of children born before 2007, it was, without doubt, a success; still, for the parents of younger children (born in 2008 and later), nothing had actually changed.

That is why it is questionable whether the Save the Little Ones movement has achieved its objective as the lowering of the school age will inevitably come in 2014.

The 2008 initiative led to a veto of the new education law by President Lech Kaczyński and caused the reform to be rewritten. Also, children born in three consecutive years were offered a free choice: kindergarten or school – this option was extended in 2011 for another two years. The no-go choice was made by the vast majority of children (approximately 90% of the eligible), that is approximately 1.5 million of children born in four consecutive years.

Initially, the parents' movement boasted a significant successes. Thanks to the parents' action for six-year-olds, they managed to postpone the reform of education for a total of five years. However, as the borderline date of 1 September 2014 approaches, there is a growing number of parents who are convinced of the ungrounded and unfair nature of sending their 6-year-old children to school. Taking into account the fact that (as it seems) the existing possibilities of deferring the reform (by exerting influence on the government) seem to have been exhausted, the organizers decided to elevate the problem to a nationwide referendum in which all citizens would be able to voice their opinion on the education reform assuming e.g. compulsory elementary education for 6-year-olds.

As the organizers argued, apart from the main purpose of collecting signatures for the referendum initiative, it was also important to bring five important educational issues into the public debate. In addition to school obligation for 6-year-olds, there were: obligatory kindergarten for 5-year-olds, the question of the dissolution of junior high schools, the problem of reduced curriculum in high schools and the threat of liquidation of thousands of schools and kindergartens. However, a question remains why a national referendum. The sponsors of the action provided several arguments with particular emphasis on 6-year-olds at school:

- 1) Schools in Poland are underfunded: many schools are in a very poor condition. Children learn in overcrowded classrooms in shifts. There are no separate zones for younger children. Children are exposed to aggression, noise and stress.
- 2) The new core curriculum is beyond the abilities of a 6-year-old child. The programme that children used to cover in two years will not be covered in one year. 6-year-olds have to master the rules of calligraphy and read. Educators stress that it is too tough for children. The time for fun is largely reduced. Children are forced to sit at desks and strictly follow the programme.
- 3) The revised educational reform law does not set any standards that must be met in order to help 6-year-olds get adapted in the same class. The overarching rule seems to be: 'We'll manage somehow'.

4) There is no programme for the transition period: 6-year-olds attending nursery school are going to remain at the level of 5-year-olds. The programme does not provide for the learning of reading, as it was the case in the past.

The movement Save the Little Ones, met with a very strong response of the public. The organizers managed to gather one million signatures in favour of a national referendum. The campaign of collecting signatures was held under the slogan: Save the Little Ones and Bigger Ones Too. The proposed referendum questions were as follows:

Question 1. Are you for abolishing school obligation for 6-year-olds?

Question 2. Are you for abolishing the preschool obligation for 5-year-olds?

Question 3. Are you for the restoration of the full course in history and other subjects in high schools?

Question 4. Are you for a gradual return to the system: 8 years of elementary school + 4 years of secondary school?

Question 5. Are you for stopping statutory liquidation process of public schools and kindergartens?

The lists with signatures of nearly one million citizens were submitted to the Sejm, which, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1997, had to address the question of referendum. MPs had to decide whether to accept the idea of a referendum on the issue or not. In early November, the main initiator of this action – Tomasz Elbanowski (who is also the proxy for the referendum initiative) sent a letter to the MEPs and MPs on the issue. He stressed that parliamentarians be aware that the political cabinet of the Ministry of Education rejected the civic initiative of referendum on the system of education, which was signed by nearly one million Poles. He claimed that for the last five years, the ministry has been pushing towards the new reform despite the general public opposition. He also pointed out that the citizens' right to vote in a referendum on the most vital social issues stems directly from the Constitution. He stressed that parents who oppose the forced compulsory education of 6-year-olds are not guided by some irrational fear but have the knowledge of the school reality and its inadequacy to the natural process of development of the child and its needs.

Despite the appeals of the movement Save the Little Ones and a huge parental involvement in collecting signatures for a referendum, the decision of the governing

coalition was to reject the initiative in a parliamentary voting. The referendum will not take place.

However, as the parents' representatives say, they are going to keep fighting and failures do not discourage them. Nevertheless, the movement has apparently lost this battle. At the moment, the regulations on the school obligation for 6-year-olds are to enter into force on 1 September 2014. The question is whether the entire 'war' is not lost and we are facing the ultimate failure of the initiative as the new law is about to become effective (despite the several years of postponement).

Some doubts have been raised as to the manner in which the referendum was to be carried out. It seems that it was not necessarily to accompany the key questions about the compulsory education of 6-year-olds with other questions that were less relevant to the cause. Moreover, if the referendum come to fruition, it would mean the capsizing of the whole system of education in Poland. I guess that is why the government protested against this referendum – which (as it turns out) made 6-year-olds suffer the most. The linking of the problem of earlier compulsory education to the liquidation of junior high schools, and the prohibition of closing schools distracted the public attention from the main issue that triggered the whole campaign.

The relentless position of the authorities may also be related with the image. The education reform is one of the flagship projects pushed through by the current government. A lot of effort has been put into convincing the public to the project. Too much money has been spent on both the information campaign and adaptation of schools to meet the needs of 6-year-olds (although as the movement representatives said – too little and often to no purpose). The reform has also been postponed for a few years, and it seems that the readiness of the authorities to make concessions to parents has just ended.

In addition, it is worth noting that the current version of the reform implies that compulsory elementary education would apply in the first year to only half of the children born in 2008. Those born between 1 January 2008 and 30 June 2008 will go to school in September 2014, while their colleagues born in the second half of the year do not have such an obligation (their parents will still be able to decide whether to send their children to school at the age of 6 or 7). Taking all the possible solutions into account, the idea of dividing learners born in the same year into seems to be the worst possible. In addition, a huge inconsistency of the government has been revealed. On the one hand, they found extra money on parental leave for parents of children born in the first quarter of 2013 by adopting one of the parents arguments that the division of children born in the same year into those that are no longer with their parents at home, and those who will not have this possibility will be a form of

discrimination and a manifestation of the existence of social inequalities. At the same time, the government took, weird as it seems, a decision on the division of another group of children born in the same year into those unlucky to be born in the first half of 2008, who, in line with the new reform, will go to school as 6-year-olds, and those who were lucky to be born after 1 July 2008, when the decision of going to school earlier or staying at nursery will be taken by the parents and not by the state.

New Social Movements?

The question that arises at this point is whether both of these initiatives taken by Polish parents can be referred to as new social movements. In the encyclopaedic definition, for a social movement to exist, it must meet the following conditions: there must be a group of people organized in a manner specific and appropriate for this form of social action and the phenomenon of social change. These three elements: people, their methods of operation and the aim to strive for change are the inseparable components of a social movement (Słownik socjologii i nauk społecznych 2005: 292).

One of the basic characteristics of each social movement is the informal organizational structure, which is based on interpersonal contacts and direct communication, which allows each movement to survive even in unfavourable conditions (Paleczny 2010: 16). Do the movements covered in this paper satisfy this condition? The answer is not clear. At first glance, it seems that they do not. In fact, the people belonging to the discussed movements did not meet or were not meeting one other, and their relations were not personal. On the other hand, modern technology has obviously changed the concept of communication. In my view, contacts maintained via social networking sites (such as Facebook) is a modern form of interpersonal contacts. The lack of direct physical contact is compensated by the possibility of multiple contacts via e.g. on-line chat; additional facilitation is that thanks to the ubiquity of the Internet geographic location is irrelevant. At the same time, people who are in completely different places in Poland can fight to attain the same aims. Facebook allowed both these movements (but especially First Quarter Mothers) to conduct a nationwide campaign without involving large resources and costs. There were, of course, regular personal contacts (e.g. joint press conferences), but this was an exception rather than a standard.

Another inherent feature of any social movement is that its goals, once formulated and conscious, are the driving force to often an anonymous group of people, difficult to identify by the system. It seems that the two analysed parental movements fulfil this condition (Paleczny 2010: 16). The objectives of both groups were clearly articulated and became an impulse to act, negotiate and discuss issues with the representatives of the government.

Another condition is that a social movement is mostly a series of ad hoc and coordinated actions rather than a single reaction to an event. Both analysed groups fell within this category. It can be seen, especially in the case of Save the Little Ones. This campaign followed a long string of specific activities that were undertaken by parents in order to convince the government to their arguments.

As we know, as the movement develops, some of its participants seek to get formalized, consolidate leadership structures, or transform into an organization or interest group. The activities of First Quarter Mothers leads to the establishment of an association whose aim is to continue to work towards improving the condition of children and families. In contrast, Save the Little Ones, in addition to the appointment of the Ombudsman Association of Parents' Rights, established a foundation of the same name. What follows, the two movements continue their activities which were originally sparked by a spontaneous action of parents who disagreed with certain laws and regulations, and that led to the institutionalization of parents' activities.

As for other features that any social movement must contain, it needs to be of a mass character. Given the number of people involved, it seems that in both cases this condition is met. Another issue is the spontaneous character of the movement, voluntary participation and commitment based on the acceptance of the objectives of the movement and its forms of action, which stems from the personal motivations and beliefs of the members. Definitely, both First Quarter Mothers and Save the Little Ones fit perfectly with this condition.

Another noteworthy feature is a shared, socially conscious and personal dissatisfaction with a specific matter or for a specific reason. In the case of First Quarter Mothers, it was disagreement related with the moment of entry into force of the revised parental leave regulations, and in the case of Save the Little Ones, it was disagreement on compulsory education of 6-year-olds. In both cases, the goal was clear and self-explanatory.

Finally, participation in a movement has the instrumental value because in both covered cases it is connected with the pursuit of a common goal. Parents did not join the movement to build a career or to gain a personal success; by contrast, they were motivated by the need to make a social change.

The analysis shows that both First Quarter Mothers and Save the Little Ones exhibit the characteristics of social movements. In both cases, we are dealing with spontaneously formed movements, whose main objectives are related to the disagreement with the law (or with the announcement of unfavourable legal changes affecting these groups).

Discussion

Taking into account the broader context, the discussed movements might be easily qualified as contestation movements. Especially, if we have a closer look at their objectives and the method of operation. In this perspective, a social movement is a response to a functional and structural mismatch between the participants of the social system of organizations and institutions and the requirements of the normative social order. In both cases, we see a functional mismatch that involves the divergence of expectations and needs of parents and difficulties in meeting these needs by public institutions (including certain provisions of the law). As regards the structural mismatch, none of the analysed movements met this criterion. The grounds for classifying a movement as a contestation movement is the goal – the desire to induce a social change. In this case, the desire to induce a social change is closely linked to the legal system. What is more, parents who contest the social reality want to change the system (changes in the law) not only for their own benefit but for the advantage of all members of the society.

In an even broader context, the described parental movements can be ranked among cultural movements (Touraine 1995: 223). Cultural movements strive to eliminate or reduce social conflicts feeding on the disparities in the system of values and norms. They create innovative trends and promote modernization in order to remove normative conflicts between the past and the present. They become the primary structural component of the new image of social life.

Using Claus Offe's classification (Offe 2007: 222), parental movements in Poland can be regarded as political tools but such that are not subordinated to the interests of the state as an organizational system but to the principle of civil society. New social movements, according to Offe, have arisen from the increasing subjectivity and consciousness of citizens' participation in shaping the rules of social life in the developed Western democracy. Parents are aware of their strength and know that

acting together can have an impact on the social reality, legal change and government decisions.

Conclusions

Both of the analyzed movements are an expression of disagreement with the changes in the law relating to children. Analyzed movements showed that the institutional forms of dialogue slowly come to the end, and instead of them the bottom-up forms of action become increasingly important.

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