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Social orphanhood in Latvia

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Abstract. The reform processes and the developments of social policy to solve the major social problems of the socially vulnerable population, among them, children in particular, take place in Latvia during the last 20 years. Protection of children rights is declared one of the strategic priorities of the state social policy. At the same time the problem of child neglect and child abandonment in Latvia has not yet been sufficiently conceptualized. Already since 1990-ies Latvian society has clearly faced with an objective necessity of solving problems of child abandonment in connection with an increasing number of social orphans. The situation was complicated by the fact that the formation of a fundamentally new system of social policy, social support and assistance to risk children had to be developed and implemented in conditions of economic transition to market economy relations, increasing social tensions, and sharp increase in social inequality and social discrimination. Among the enormous number of economical and social problems in the developing democratic state, the issue of child abandonment as an important social problem has been addressed rather fragmentary. The term “social orphanhood” does not appear in the social policy vocabulary of the Latvian social policy discourse.

Introduction

The objective of this article is to discuss the phenomenon of social orphanhood. The problem of social orphanhood of children needs a complex approach related to the phenomenon of child abandonment. The problem lays at the intersection of the fields of sociology, social psychology and pedagogy, child protection and social policy, justice and welfare policy on social orphans in children’s homes, custody and foster care, the inclusion and integration policy after reaching of age. Already since 1990-ies Latvia faces unfavourable demographic situation, low birth rates and relatively large proportion of children born in poor families. According to statistics, decline in the total number of children does not decrease the number of social orphans and children deprived from parental care. The main reason for the rise of social orphanhood is the prevalence of family problems and the poor policy mechanisms to identify risk families at an early stage, lack of effective policy to prevent this problem.

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Biological orphanhood and social orphanhood

First, it is necessary to differentiate two types of orphanhood – biological orphanhood and social orphanhood.

According to the legislation¹ an orphan is a child (under the age of 18 years), whose parent or both parents have deceased. This is the biological orphan, he/she has no parent alive who can take care of the child. Biological child orphan can be adopted, put in custody or in the children's home. The number of biological orphans in Latvia has been rather small since 1990-ies; in 1997, there were 127 biological orphans who lived in out-of-family care institutions. The highest number of biological orphans was registered in 2003 (236 children) and statistical data show a stable decrease of biological orphans since 2004. In 2012, the number of biological orphans in institutional care had decreased to 70². Among all the biological orphans, the number of babies and small children (0–2 years) has stayed rather stable and has not changed much – from 12 in 1997 to 16 in 2012. The small number of babies among biological orphans shows that the mortality of mothers during the delivery is small. Biological orphanhood is mainly related to death of parent/-s due to accidents, illnesses and traumatism. The Children' Protection Law³ mentions a situation when a child is left without parental care – “a child whose parents are not known, are lost, or due to long term illness are not able to ensure custody, or whose parents are deprived from custody rights or they are suspended”. This definition includes majority of cases of social orphanhood, except “Euro-orphans”.

A social orphan can be defined as a child whose biological parent(-s) are alive, but due to various reasons they are not able or are not willing to take appropriate care of a child, do not participate in child's upbringing, education, do not provide safety and security and do not take care of child's health (physical and mental). According to Sara Dillon (Dillon, 2008), “social orphan” is a term that refers to a child who may have living parents, but who is not currently living under the care of those parents. The reasons for widespread social orphanhood are social, cultural and economic, and often a combination of these factors”. The term “social orphan” is more widely used in ex-Soviet Union countries – Russia (Brutman, 1994, Rockhill, 2010), Ukraine (Dillon, 2008), Bashkirstan (Vasilyev, 2011) and Poland (1997). At the same time it is important to mention that the term “social orphan” is not used in the legislation. For example, in Latvian and Russian legislation the term “child without parental care” is used. The term social orphan emphasizes the perspective of the background of a child – not having parents due to parental incapability to raise their children. Researchers of western school of sociology, social work and social policy (Stein, Munro, Milligan, Kendrick, etc.) do not use the term “social orphan”. They discuss “children and youth in residential care”, thus emphasizing not the background of children, but the type of care provided to children – residential care.

The term “social orphan” is not used in the Latvian legislation. The Child Rights' Protection Law (1998, Art.2) refers to “child without parental care”, whose parents for various reasons are not able to take care of a child or are deprived from parental rights. It means that the main reason of social orphanhood is within the family, which is not able to fulfill the basic family functions, and the parental roles in particular. Thus, social orphanhood is a social phenomenon due to lack of parental care and due to the lack of parental ability to meet the basic needs of a child. The number of children who have become social orphans and entered institutional care in Latvia has increased from 225 in 1997 to 637 in 2012⁴.

¹ Bērnu tiesību aizsardzības likums, 1.pants, 1999 (Children's Rights Protection Law).

² <http://csb.gov.lv>

³ Bērnu tiesību aizsardzības likums, 2.pants. 1999.

⁴ <http://csb.gov.lv>

Some pedagogical and sociological literature defines those families as dysfunctional families⁵. The defects of upbringing and education of dysfunctional families result in child's health problems, poor education and behaviour.

There are several types of dysfunctional families:

1. Family with a clear (open) form of disadvantage. The family is characterized by conflicting, antisocial, immoral, and criminal features. Rather often those families have poor educational background and poor human capital in terms of Bourdieu (1977). The life style of those families is closely related with alcohol/drug addiction and criminality. Due to antisocial lifestyle parent/parents do not take care of children, leave them alone at home for longer periods without food and appropriate accommodation or even abandon them. Those parents might be deprived from parental rights due to alcohol and drug abuse, alcohol related violence, not taking care. After longer periods of being not cared appropriately, those children are taken of family, and parents are deprived from parental rights.
2. Internally dysfunctional families. Behavior of parents in such families outwardly does not show any dysfunctionality, and in many cases it is not easy to identify those families. The main problem in such families is physical violence against child/children, including sexual violence. Violence is the main reason of deprivation of parental rights.
3. Family that leaves child/children without parental care for a longer period of time due to economical emigration. Those are so called "Euro-orphans" or "children left behind", where parents have immigrated to other countries due to economical reasons for period longer than six months. Children can be left with relatives, older siblings, and friends of parents, neighbours or by children themselves. The number of children "left behind" is at least about 7000⁶. In difference from the first type of dysfunctional families, in majority of cases, parent/-s provide financial means to children. According to research (Trapenciere, 2011), economical well-being of the family is the main reason of emigration. This type of family does not fulfill the other parental functions, for example, upbringing, behaviour control, emotional and psychological well-being of a child.

Child neglect and abandonment

Globally, the number of orphans is high in war countries and countries with high incidence of HIV/AIDS. Those are biological orphans. In many cases they are cared by relatives and/or siblings. The crucial problem of East European countries in the first decades of the 21st century is not biological but social orphanhood. According to the UNICEF data, the total number of orphans in Europe is around 5 million children, which indicates the volume of the orphanhood problem. In Eastern and Central Europe there have not been wars during the last century, and the HIV/AIDS epidemics do not bring large number of orphans. It means that the main reason of social orphanhood lays in families and ineffective social policies and child protection policies.

Social orphanhood is related to child abandonment and deprivation of parental rights. The reasons of child abandonment are based on various social and cultural factors and mental disorders of parent/-s. UNICEF defines an abandoned child as one who "does not know where his or her next meal is coming from; does not know where he or she is spending the night or/and does not live with either the mother or the father.

⁵ Millere, J., Pranka, M., Analīze par situāciju Latvijā bērnu tiesību aizsardzības jomā bērniem, kas atrodas ārpus ģimenes aprūpē un bērniem, kuriem pastāv risks zaudēt savas ģimenes aprūpi; R. 2009., p.11.

⁶ Data from the Ministry of Welfare, 2012.

According to statistics, in 2012, in Latvia there were more than 1400 social orphans and children left without parental care who stay in children homes, orphanages and crises centers. They are withdrawn from the biological families, custody families and foster families, and receive upbringing in institutions. The main reasons of that is child neglect, abandonment and abuse.

To understand the phenomenon, it is first necessary to identify the main reasons and causes of the phenomenon of child neglect in Eastern and Central Europe and in Latvia in particular. Russian researchers (Brutman, 1996) states economical, insecurity, sexual freedom and fact that “today’s young people are not psychologically ready to create a family and, especially, to the education of their children”, and “psychological reasons, because this or that model the behavior of the two young people creating their own family, comes from childhood, depends on what family they were brought up”. Brutman emphasizes abandonment in cases of birth in early or unwanted pregnancies, when mother is not ready/prepared for parenthood or to raise a child alone. The other aspect of social orphanhood can be abandonment due to inability or unwillingness to raise a child or irresponsibility of parent/-s. Some authors (DePanfilis, 2006, Burnside, 2012) discuss that the unwillingness to take parental responsibility is not immediate, but when faced with crises – child disability, loss of a job, housing, loss of a partner or illness. Often the crisis has led to violence against a child and partner, alcoholism. Children first are put to a boarding school, later deprived from parental rights or parents abandon a child themselves.

In Latvia, there is one publicly available Report on reasons of child abandonment (Praulīņa, 2011). According to the data from Valmiera (Praulīņa, 2011), almost every third case of violence against a child is abandonment of a child and can be combined with emotional, physical and sexual violence. Praulīņa concludes that abandonment is related to leaving child behind when going to work abroad, lack of interest towards child, abomination towards a child, and lack of childcare knowledge and skills. According to the data (Praulīņa, 2011, p. 12) in Valmiera, in majority of analysed cases, child is abandoned by both parents and mother, followed by custodians, siblings and grandparents. Abandonment by father is less expressed.

In this paper, a certain place of social and community services is presented as a part of necessary analysis of the functioning of social policy, which should be responsible for the creation of sound normative regulations, for the development of social technologies to support and care for children – social orphans.

In the situation, when large number of children lives in institutions, the phenomenon of social orphanhood should receive greater importance also in research. Besides that, so far, in Latvia there has been a few research on the problem of social orphanhood or children in out-of-family care, and insitutional care in particular.

The first international, comparative study on the risks of social exclusion of children leaving children’s homes was carried out in 2007–2009⁷. The study has analyzed the child protection system in five European countries (Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania, Italy and France), systems of orphan homes/residential care and the risks of social exclusion that young people face after leaving the institutions. In 2008, the Ministry of Child and Family Affairs had decided to investigate the system of out-of-family care in general. The research report “Out-of-family care (institutions, foster families, custody) and system of adoption, and recommendations for implementation” (2008) has provided a general overview on out-of-family care system in Latvia⁸. The study has described the institutional aspects of the problems of social adaptation, social protection, and social support for children

⁷ Trapenciere, In: Barbaroti, M., Cremona, E., (Eds.) “2008 Report. Child Abandonment: an emergency”, FrancoAngeli, Milano, pp. 171-220.

⁸ Bērnu un ģimenes lietu ministrija, “Ārpusģimenes aprūpes (ārpusģimenes aprūpes iestādes, audžu ģimenes, aizbildnība) un adopcijas sistēmas izpēte un ieteikumi tās pilnveidošanai). Ministry of Child and Family Affairs, A study on out-of-family care (institutions, foster families, custody) and system of adoption, and recommendations for implementation, 2008.

out-of-family care. The study discussed the social content of abandonment, the social status and prospects the abandoned children as a social group, the issue of social protection of orphans.

However, it should be noted that the problem of child neglect, abandonment and social orphanhood phenomenon has not been studied systematically. From social policy perspective, too little attention has been paid to interagency cooperation to the solution of the social orphanhood problem. From a comprehensive sociological perspective no analysis is available on cooperation between government, public institutions and NGOs addressing the problems of social orphanhood. The relations of social, economic and legal methods to influence the quality of social protection of orphans should be further developed. A system of social integration of children without parental care is of particular relevance in the field of social policy in the making socially-oriented economy. It still needs to have political will to start to develop the strategy on integration of social orphans into the society.

There are studies in Russia (Brutman, 1994) Romania (Baban, 2009) showing that problem of socialization and psychological instability remain unresolved throughout the lifetime of social orphans.

To develop conditions for full physical, intellectual, spiritual, moral and social development of children orphaned provides an integrated implementation of social reforms. The social reforms include the following: the development of the foster family institution, social planning, adoption, guardianship, family-type orphanage.

At the national and regional level, a series of programs to reduce the number of orphaned children should be developed. Children deprived from regular contacts with their parents develop dysfunctional in the physical, intellectual and psychological development, are subject to social deprivation, psychological anomie. Many graduates of orphanages inherent socio-psychological unadjusted, characterized as infantile, self-sustained, ignorance and lack of recognition of oneself as an individual. To improve the situation of social orphans in Latvia, a number of preventive measures are necessary:

- development and implementation of educational programs in preparation for the education of children and family life,
- revision of the social policies and incentives, including long-term social and economic guarantees to mother and fathers,
- sufficient funding for prenatal care and training of pregnant women and potential fathers,
- to change the governmental attitude towards the problem of child abandonment and to influence public opinion in relation to adoptive families, orphans and their own children,
- development of positive public opinion towards foster family institution, development of foster family institution.

Conclusions

In the paper the author tried to justify position on the division of the concepts of “orphanhood” and “social orphanhood”. Separation of terms makes it possible to more clearly identify orphanhood as a social phenomenon with a negative direction. That is significant for research, social policy agenda and for the specific case studies of orphanhood. Social orphanhood is a problem, so the solution will help in reducing the number of orphans, as well as better integration into society of this category of children.

At present, Latvian out-of-family residential care institutions are inhabited by almost two thousand children. The number of children during the last decade is slowly decreasing, however, the proportion of social orphans within the total number of children is increasing from 1 percent to 1.8 percent.

In modern society, within the complex and ambiguous processes the problem of orphanhood receives an acute relevance. Children deprived from regular contacts with their parents develop dysfunctional in the physical, intellectual and psychological development, are subject to social deprivation, psychological anomie. The problems of socialization and psychological instability remain unresolved throughout the lifetime of a social orphans.

To develop conditions for full physical, intellectual and social development of orphaned children provides an integrated implementation of social reforms. The social reforms include the following: the development of the foster family institution, social planning, adoption, guardianship, family-type orphanages. At the national and regional level, a series of programs to reduce the number of orphaned children should be developed.

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