

*Magdalena Rek-Woźniak*  
*University of Łódź, Institute of Sociology*  
*Department of Applied Sociology and Social Work*  
[magdaer@tlen.pl](mailto:magdaer@tlen.pl)

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**Stream 5. Social Work and Social Policy: Control or Empowerment?**

**Social workers in Poland – missionaries, professionals and working poor.**  
**On the specificities of social work's image in hybrid welfare state**

**1. Introduction. Social work and in the context of welfare state changes**

Ernest Greenwood (1957) listed five indicators defining profession: systematic theory, ethic code, internal culture, authority and social mandate. Obviously, one can stay sceptical towards this list, claiming, after symbolic interactionists, that professional character of a job is being constructed through activities undertaken by those who are to identified as “professionals” as well as by their social environment (see: Granosik 2006).

The question of professional status of social work has been discussed for over a hundred years. There are various models of welfare institutions, attached to particular welfare regimes and welfare cultures (see: Esping-Andersen 2002; Pfau-Effinger et al. 2008). Thus, It would be a cliché to say that the concept of “professionalism” in social work differs in various socio-cultural contexts.

The process of identifying social workers as actors in the field of welfare is a part of much broader debate upon the social policy, power relations, social justice and modes of capitalism. “In sociological literature it is underlined that no persisting structure of economic and social inequalities exists in the absence of some kind of system of meanings that seeks both to justify and to explain the unequal distribution of societal resources (...) These systems are the secular and religious ideologies, doctrines and political programmes that serve specific groups of interests, and broad philosophical systems and scientific theories whose main goal is to explain inequalities” (Rokicka, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2006: 286). The perceptions about what social services should be and what should be the actual role played by their employees are closely connected with the socially-constructed frames of social problems such as poverty

(see: Kendall 2005) or reflections about deservingness etc. (see: van Oorshot 2006). Bearing in mind that regardless of the differences in defining detailed tasks attached to social services, the main objective of these institutions is a frontline work with those groups and individuals which are either at direct risk of social exclusion or actually do experience it. Thus, both the public and self-image of social workers can be considered as a factor influencing daily practice in the field of social policy, but also contributing to the further policy formulation.

For that reason, it seems vital to identify strategies, arguments and language codes lying behind this process. Getting into the sphere of welfare discourse also helps to understand the mechanisms building public sanction for social work (see: Summers 1976) as a profession and cause that some measures are approved and implemented and turn out to be effective or not.

Getting deeper into the welfare debate seems crucial in the context of observed neo-liberal turn in modern welfare states. As “the profession of social work occupies an intermediary space, charged with ‘translating’ state power to individuals, families, groups and communities” (Pollack 2010: 1263), the discussion on this social role in this context can be framed by the Foucault’s concept of “governmentality” (*ibidem*). Butler and Drakeford (2002: 7) described a social work profession as “the unwitting but not unwilling partner of political and ideological processes that have robbed social work of its essential radicalism and transformatory potential”. Growing influence of market forces on the sphere of social welfare “transformed all aspects of social work” (Ferguson, Lavalette 2005: 207). This remark seems especially significant for Central-European countries, where the influences of global trends connected with the welfare state retrenchment, have overlapped changes deriving from the principles of systemic transformation.

Contrary to UK (see eg. Butler, Drakeford 2003), the welfare debate in Poland has not been subjected to systematic scientific inquiry, even if there are some examples of studies devoted to the ideological attitudes behind concepts social justice in Polish press (Rokicka, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2006) or ideological implications of the public representations of the poverty (see: Ferenc 2005, Rek 2007, Woźniak 2010) or unemployment (Miś 2007).

In this paper, I am going to point at the other side of the picture, focusing on the question of the public image of workers and social services as frontline institutions in a hybrid welfare state. I will try to reveal discursive strategies which lead to constructing the legitimate role of certain kind of institutional activities towards disadvantaged.

Bearing in mind that the sphere of public discourse is broad part of social reality, I am going to refer to two types of data, namely legal acts and strategic documents, as well a selected examples of media releases related to welfare legislation, in order to show the interrelations

between the models postulated by those formally at power and the images of “reality” both reflected and shaped by press and TV.

## **2. From social care to social services-redefining welfare institutions in Poland**

The term social services<sup>1</sup> was first introduced in Polish welfare discourse by the Welfare Act of 1990. It can be seen as a part of much broader ideological shift from the concept of “(over)caring state” (attached to communist model of relations between citizens and the state) and state paternalism to empowerment of citizens. While in the field of economy, there was much stress put on promoting self-reliance and entrepreneurship, social policies were to promote a self-help approach. This argumentation was aimed at justification of raising selectivity of access to public support, as well as tendencies towards privatization (especially in such fields as care for the elderly). However, tensions between market-oriented, liberal views, dominant in economic policy (Balcerowicz, 1997, 1995; Ost 2005, Kowalik 2009) and trials to keep or raise popularity among important groups of electorate clearly brought up to creation a chaotic status quo in the field of social policy (see: Księżopolski 1999). Contrary to the economic policy, where at the beginning of the transformation neo-liberal, free-market orientation gained domination, social policies were formed in rather incoherent, hybrid system.

After the first decade of rebuilding welfare system, social services were still underdeveloped (Szmagalski 2001; see also Krzyszkowski 2003, 2004) due to limited public resources and weakness of the third sector, as well as tendency towards deinstitutionalization. Moreover, its employees had to combine distributing cash benefits with other forms of support which frequently resulted in being overloaded with formalities.

Due to decentralization of public administration, implemented in 1999, much of responsibilities in the field of social welfare was attached to the lowest level of local self-government (*gmina*). This decision was not followed by relevant funding from the state budget, which diversified the quality and accessibility of services within the country. What is more, daily functioning of social services at the local level was not smooth due to low level of trust (observable in many studies on social capital in Poland). Studies on social services in Poland have shown negative consequences of the reform. Insufficient funding and welfare state retrenchment led to tensions between carers and clients whose needs could not be

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<sup>1</sup> This term is not commonly used in Poland, contrary to “social welfare” or “social care” (see: Krzyszkowski 2004). This language practice, dating back to the pre-war period and observable in also in the Welfare Act of 1990, could be considered as an example of defining social policy institutions and the relation between social worker and a client not through the concept of citizenship and civil rights, but rather through the concept of care or charity. The relation between job descriptions in the field of welfare and its consequences for the welfare practice has been analysed in the literature (see: Krumer-Nevo, Weiss-Gal, Levin 2010).

satisfied sufficiently. Also the lack of cooperation (and sometimes even unhealthy rivalry) between public and NGO sector on the local level has been observed (see: Krzyszkowski 2003, 2004)<sup>2</sup>. What is more, the fact that distribution of cash benefits was for years dominant social workers' activity. Strengthened the voices criticizing welfare dependency syndrome and its social costs. In 2004 Jerzy Krzyszkowski stated "The criticism of the whole system of social services of being expensive and inefficient while poverty and unemployment are widespread is strongly connected with state budget crises, and neoliberal argumentation has supporters among political elites". Negative attitudes towards clients observed among social workers (see: Warzywoda-Kruszyńska at al. 2006, Woźniak 2007) has been, to a large extent, a result of frustration

### **3. Documentary reality-the Welfare Act and strategic documents**

Accordingly to Hochfeld: "Policy as a formal mode of social discourse has immense power to shape the way we think and function in society" (2007:80). Not only legal acts, but also strategies and other formal documents "can strongly influence the manner in which social workers are expected to respond to the actual lives of families, and can be a tool both for emancipation as well as restraint and regulation, as seen in welfare systems across the globe" (Beresford Croft 2004, after: Hochfeld 2007: 80).

The rapidly changing transformational reality required an adequate legislative and institutional regulations. After 1989 both the questions of unemployment and poverty were first brought into public sphere and officially admitted by statistics and covered by the relevant legislation. According to official definition formulated in the Welfare Act of 1990, social services was defined as "institution of state social policy designed to provide assistance to those individuals and families who cannot manage their life problems<sup>3</sup> within their own means, capabilities and rights" (Krzyszkowski 2004).

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<sup>2</sup> "Among weaknesses of new district family centers are insufficient resources and lack of political power to fulfill their role as creators of the local social policy (local strategies of solving social problems documents with no practical implications). Human resources at managerial level have not always been recruited and selected on the basis of professional competence but much more on the basis of political loyalty (tribal democracy). Some (25%) have neither proper educational background nor managerial competency (34%). The situation is worsened by the fact that the inclusion of services for families and children into the social care system so that all social services could work together has not been prepared properly. As a result, staff working in services for families and children have deemed this inclusion as unwanted. Institutional care of children still dominates, and parental and children's rights have not yet been recognized. It is just the beginning of support for families in the community instead of sending children to institutional care (foster carers instead of group house-orphanage, etc.). As an unwanted result of administration reform there has been huge growth in bureaucracy and also in the numbers of welfare staff. Unfortunately, growing number of welfare institutions and managers have not been accompanied by an increase in the numbers of social workers or democratization of social services. On the contrary, there has been more hierarchy and increased workloads (paperwork), and subsequently burnt-out syndrome is widespread among frontliners which was proved by the research.(...). Empowerment practice has not been introduced, so users and carers have not been able to participate in planning and implementing services at local level" (Krzyszkowski 2004).

Negative attitudes towards clients observed among social workers (see: Warzywoda-Kruszyńska at al. 2006, Woźniak 2007) have been, to a large extent, a result of frustration.

<sup>3</sup> Such as long-term unemployment, disability or chronic illness, large number of children in a family, helplessness in child-rearing, orphanage, homelessness, difficulties with adaptation after imprisonment, alcohol or drug addict, being a victim of natural disasters etc.

In order to achieve these goals, social services were equipped with two types of instruments-cash benefits and care services delivered through residential institutions or at the community level.

The first Welfare Act after 1945<sup>4</sup> situated the main responsibility for alleviating negative consequences of transformation on local authorities, who were identified as main actors in welfare provision while sharing financial responsibility with the state. Social services are organized by public authorities, but they can cooperate with NGOs<sup>5</sup>.

Both the act of 1990 and currently being in force Act of 2004, have précised the tasks attached to social workers. According to the latter these are following:

1. "Social work
2. Analysing and evaluating of the phenomena which evoke a necessity to bring social care and qualifying to obtain these provisions
3. Providing information, advice and support in resolving problems to the people who, thanks to the support, will be able to resolve the problems on their own; effective usage of the law regulations while realizing these tasks
4. Support for the people being in a difficult life situation to get advice about possibility to resolve problems and getting support from relevant state, government's and non-governmental organizations
5. Providing support in accordance with the rules of professional ethics
6. Stimulating social activity and inspiring self-help activities aimed at satisfying indispensable living needs of persons, families, group and social environments
7. Cooperation with other specialists, aimed at counteracting and reducing pathologies and negative consequences of social phenomena, alleviating consequences of poverty
8. Initiating new forms of support for individuals and families being in a difficult life situation and inspiring creation of institutions and inspiring creation of institutions providing services aimed at improving situation of such individuals and families.
9. Participation in inspiring, elaborating, implementing and developing of regional and local welfare programmes aimed at improving the quality of life.

Even if Polish welfare system has not been embedded in a coherent and clear ideological framework, the language used to describe the role of social workers within the welfare system, seems to be influenced by the ideas of "active" social policy. Stress put on such keywords as "stimulating", "inspiring", "advising" and encouraging to self-help, as well as on ability to initiate and shape local policies, brings the picture of a **local leader** or **animator**.

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<sup>4</sup> The general idea has was not changed after 2004. However, due to the reform of public administration, some responsibilities are now attached to districts (*powiat*) and regions (*województwo*). The role of the national administration (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy) is to create and implement a cohesive system of welfare policy.

<sup>5</sup> NGO's, private institutions and institutions subject to churches can offer realization of social services. They can also propose social services to municipalities, which then assure funding and control.

Both Welfare Act of 1990 and from 2004 were aimed at defining professional role of social workers. According to Minister's decree of 2005, the prerogative to use the title "social worker" can be used only by the trained and licensed people, who are graduates of social work or sociology, political sciences, psychology, education or family studies with a "social work" specialization. The article 116 of the Welfare Act of 2004 describes precisely the track of professional career (specializations). The Commission by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy is a body entitled to coordinate the process of professional promotion for social workers in the country (Art. 117).

However, the construction of social worker's image as a **professional** is rooted not only in requirements concerning formal competences, but also in the description of tasks attached to this social role. The act underlines independence and ability to analyze social problems and decide about undertaking intervention, but also creativeness in proposing new forms of support. It also claims that obeying ethical standards is a part of professional development (p.6; the standards are not described by the act, but by the Ethical Code agreed by the Polish Association of Social Workers in 1996). Social workers are obliged to counteract discrimination of supported people (p.3) and treat personal information about them as confidential (p.5). What is more, they shall: "be guided by the rule of acting for the good of people and families which he serves, of the respect for their dignity and their right to self-determination" (p.2); "Inform entering individuals about services they are entitled to and about available forms of support" (p.4).

However, the article referring to the relation between social worker and welfare recipient, does not mention explicitly such questions as equal treatment of all beneficiaries, respect for their views, opinions and life attitudes. In the whole Act the term "client", commonly used both in the public and by social workers, does not appear. There are "individuals and families" in need or receiving support. This probably derives from semantic ambiguity of the notion of "client", associated not only with the exchange between "equal" partners, but also with state clientelism, identified as a part of "homo sovieticus" mentality (see: Ferge 2008, Woźniak 2010).

Before 2004 scheduled interviewing and granting benefits were major instruments of diagnosis and intervention available to social workers in Poland. "Social work" as a type of professional activity remained an abstract, vague concept. The introduction of the social contract by the Welfare Act of 2004 was the most significant novelty in this respect. It was designed as a tool of active social policy towards the long-term disadvantaged individuals and families. Contrary to eg. UK, where the contract paradigm had been functioning for many

years (see: Corden 1980), this kind of approach to social worker-client relation was new in Polish welfare system. It can be also considered as a symbol for the change in thinking about the role of social workers and welfare institutions in Poland and stress on the idea of self-support and focus on the principle of subsidiarity (see also: Art. 119 p. 4 and 6).

The introduction of this measure was followed by twofold argumentation, expressed explicitly: on the one hand, it was an instrument of clients' empowerment, but on the other-a mechanism of control over those clients who were identified as having tendency towards being welfare-dependant (see: Włoch, Domaradzki 2005). Thus, the role of social workers as "gatekeepers" was strengthened. It seems to correspond with managerial and market-oriented type of discourse, which "has given priority to notions of rationalization, financial liability and cost efficiency in government in general and in welfare in particular" (Hochfelf 2007: 83). The neo-liberal welfare state is also focused on the question of employability and perceives integration into the labour market as core objective. In December 2008 an amendment to the Welfare Act was passed that has stiffened the regulations concerning social contract, focusing this measure on activation of the long-term unemployed, meeting additional criteria (such as being under 25 or over 50, being professionally inactive after giving birth, being lone parent, unqualified, former prisoner or disabled). In consequence of drawing up the agreement the person loses the status of unemployed. In the light of this decision, social workers' tasks more closely connected to the labour market policy. This type of approach was implemented not only for Central-European countries and liberal governments, but also grounded political decisions of social-democratic cabinets (see: Esping-Andersen ed., 2002). It was grounded in a conviction that: "poverty will be reduced by creating an institutional environment that returns to people living in poverty a sense of personal responsibility over their lives, encourages their integration in the labour market, releases their skills and abilities for individual initiative, and reduces their dependence on welfare services and transfer payments. This approach supports the stiffening of criteria for entitlement to welfare services and encourages the privatization of welfare, health and educational services. It establishes the concept of individual responsibility as a supreme social value and the foundation upon which the social contract should be based (...). Reductions in transfer payments are likely to cause economic pressure and result in merging welfare services within professional training and employment frameworks, an integration that would rattle the fixed life patterns that characterize the culture of poverty" (Strier, Binyamin 2009).

It has to be noted that Welfare Law of 2004 was passed not without controversies, but the

critical debate over the act was weak and carried on practically only among social workers and between social services and the Ministry. Social workers criticized further bureaucratization of the social work and lack of serious debate about their professional ethos. What is more, the vision of professional career drawn by the act (which narrowed the possibility of promotion to public social welfare institutions), reinforced the image of the social worker as a representative of public administration, instead of breaking the popular image of a bureaucrat. The critics were also pointing at potentially dangerous competition for public money that would make the situation of social workers employed by the NGOs precarious<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless, right after passing the law, the secretary of state in the Ministry submitted a letter (16.03.2004, published at the website [www.ops.pl](http://www.ops.pl), a recognized platform for social workers), in which he explained that the Act was a step towards “building social safety net enabling counteracting social exclusion, which is, for the first time in history of social policy in Poland, embedded in real costs of maintaining households”. The letter also announced new proposal for the Act on Social Work Profession. It contained plenty of enthusiastic statements about the “new deal” envisioning the new opportunities for employees of social services: “Step by step, without trumpets and sensations new model of Polish social policy is being developed”. Reminding criticism towards the Welfare Act, he stated: “It does not mean that public authorities should not carry a complex analysis of the system, to enable changes that will help us all in solving social problems by shifting the direction of actions from wrongly understood clientelism to active, participatory approach”. It seems that the term “clientelism” has twofold meaning in this context. First it refers to the claiming attitude and passiveness of the welfare recipients which could be overcome by means of new legislation. But it could be also interpreted that at the same time it is an appeal to the attitude of social workers who should adopt to new rules modernizing their profession and present more active approach to duties.

There is no doubt that the shift from „old” to „new” perspective in constructing the role of welfare institutions and their employees was stimulated by the forthcoming EU membership. The vision of welfare system as a net of professional institutions required an adequate vision of a social worker. National Report for Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2006-2008, published by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy or National Strategy for Social Policy 2007-2013 can serve as examples of strategic documents, dealing with the professional status

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<sup>6</sup> The Act defines types of institutions, where social workers can be employed-such as Centres for Family Support, Centres for Social Care and other institutions competent in the issues of employment, hospitals, custodial and educational institutions, prisons, or religious/non religious NGOs (art.25, ust.1).

of social workers in the context of EU objectives. In both papers they are framed as actors of “active” social policy. NRSPSI (p. 39) informed about the plan of introducing of the „Programme of local integration” aimed at local communities. The NSSP Priority 2 (“Implementation of active social policy”) underlines a need for developing a life-long learning system for social workers “in correspondence with implementation of social contracts and other activating measures” (p. 29). NRSPSI says about “Integration and development of social services” not only in relation to professional training, but also in the context of cooperation with labour market institutions. The stress is also put on the success of the contract-based approach to social welfare (“Introduction of motivation system for the social workers, whose social contract succeeded”, NSSP, p. 29). Of course, one may ask about the criteria of “success”. If taking into account more general tendencies towards managerialization of services (see: Dewe, Otto, Schnurr 2006, McDonald 2006), one may assume that these would be not only the fact of client’s reintegration, but cost-efficiency of the process.

The language of the strategies, if it comes to further professionalization of the social work, as well as strengthening cooperation of social services, corresponds with the ideas included in the Welfare Act. Professionalization of the social services is seen as a „factor for social integration” (NSSP, p.37), but also as a way to improve social recognition and prestige of the profession:

“strengthening the role of a social worker as a professional acting for deeper social integration of the poor and socially excluded. Implementation of the norms and standards of performing social work agreed in 2005 and regulated by the law on the profession of a social worker. Passing a rule of higher education for new social workers from 2010” (NSSP s. 37).

#### **4. Negotiating documentary reality-the Act on Social Work Profession**

Professional identity is one of five indicators of „profession”. It manifests itself by the tendencies towards creating corporate self-governance and professional associations. Polish Association of Social Workers was created in 1986,” on the initiative of social workers who had participated in the drafting of "The Welfare Act”, which was the first such a statute enacted after 1945” (<http://www.ptps.ops.pl/>)<sup>8</sup>. It was the initiative of PASW to establish the

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<sup>8</sup> On the PASW website we can also read the list of its objectives:

1. “To support the social security system that satisfies basic human needs and contributes to the development of human potential,
2. To promote actions according to the ethics of the profession of social worker,
3. To increase and to maintain the high prestige of the profession of social worker,
4. To explain and popularize the role and significance of social worker’s profession,

first Code of Ethics in 1996 and to propose the Social Work Profession Act in 2002, which has not been passed till now, even if the claim for it was expressed in the previous Strategy for Social Policy for 2002-2005, prepared in relation to EU accession.

One of the core objectives of the Act was to get formal confirmation of the status of civil servant for social workers. The reception of the proposal was critical<sup>9</sup>, mainly because of insufficient stress put on decent salaries, standards of the workload and entitlement to additional holidays, but also incoherence and inadequacy to Polish socio-economic and political context.

In 2005 another project, prepared by the government, did not gain widespread acceptance, so legislative works stopped. Instead, in July 2005 the question of professional education (a decree of the Ministry) was regulated and the employers were obliged to co-finance specialist training. And 250 PLN (60 EUR) of allowance for social workers full-time employed in public sector was guaranteed. The project was submitted to parliamentary discussion in 2005, but due to electoral calendar, it was shifted for October 2006 and then-March 2007. Then the it got back to the ministerial agenda and social workers' organizations started lobbying for it (see: Rafał Kowalski, "Gazeta Prawna"/*Law newspaper*, 16.01.2007). Nevertheless, it caused objections of the representatives of the local self-government, who were concerned about creating another corporation, giving special prerogatives and privileges to a group being under local authorities' supervision.

In may 2007 social workers officially appealed to the Prime Minister (text available at: <http://ops.pl/archiwum2/news.php?id=4080>), presenting themselves as group of frontliners who had played considerable role in alleviating negative consequences of systemic transformation and who needed special legal regulations in order to fulfil their professional tasks efficiently:

"the lack of the Act, as well as the lack of Government's interest with the problems of 15-thousand professional group does not favour performing the job professionally, since apart from continuous laying new duties upon nothing is being done for supporting social welfare in terms of cadres, office space, finance and law".

On the 4-6 of June 2007 days of solidarity with social workers were announced. The symbol of support for their claims was an orange ribbon. Nevertheless, the mutual Committee of The Government and Local Self-Government, The Committee of the Council of Ministries rejected the project. The statement about corporate self-government was removed the

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5. To maintain and improve the standard of the services offered to clients,

6. To promote professional skills, knowledge of individual, group, family and community problems, and the skills of how to solve them,

7. To stimulate cooperation with various public institutions and non-government organizations which realize the goals of welfare"

<sup>9</sup> The course of debate on the project was registered at social service websites (see: [www.ops.org.pl](http://www.ops.org.pl); [www.ngo.org.pl](http://www.ngo.org.pl)).

subsequent version of the Act. Despite this, in 2008 the civil project of the act started to be prepared.

Social Workers tried lobbying for a civil project. In June 2008, after media releases about the extreme case of long-term abuse within a family, a MP, Marzena Okła-Drewnowicz (currently ruling „Civil Platform”, centre-right wing, liberal-oriented party) formulated a formal question (nr 2026; available at <http://ops.pl/archiwum2/news.php?id=16225>) to the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, concerning development of the legislative works. It stated as follows:

“(…) public opinion has raised many questions that are obvious for social workers, concerning their role and possibilities to act in similar cases. The problem cannot be reduced by accusing the workers in question of acting too modestly. It is about creating adequate tools for efficient work for them and ensuring the proper prestige for the profession which is such important in our country. The Act on Social Work Profession should be an important step towards accomplishment of this goal”. The Secretary of the State, Jarosław Duda, answered in the name of the Minister, that the works on the project were advanced and would be submitted to consultation in 2009, but also confirmed further professionalization of the social work as a priority” (<http://ops.pl/archiwum2/news.php?id=16225>).

In August 2009 local branch of “Solidarność” trade union attached to Municipal Centre for Family support in town Grudziądz initiated a protest called “the day of the black T-shirt” (<http://www.ops.pl/news.php?id=18421>). Despite this, until August 2010 the works on the Act were not more advanced. This case shows, that regardless of the declarations concerning significance of improving the public respect for social worker’s profession, the regulation that could bring into it, was systematically shifted from political agenda. By this occasion, also the conflict of interest between the group of social workers and local administration was revealed, as the latter have been clearly uninterested in strengthening the autonomy of their own employees. The rhetoric employed by the self-governors appealed to the fear of granting the professional group too much of public trust, as corporate professionals like teachers or lawyers are considered to be unfairly privileged.

„-This a second Teacher’s Chart<sup>10</sup> - could be heard at the last session of Mutual Committee of Government and Self-Government. According to the representatives of communes and districts, another group of workers with special entitlements will be created” (Daniel Pawluczuk,” Karta Socjalna”/social chart, 10.05.2007, text available at: [www.samorzad.pap.pl](http://www.samorzad.pap.pl)). However, negative attitude towards the project could also result from its consequences for the local budget, as it claimed that local community would ensure at least

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<sup>10</sup> Teacher’s Chart is the legal act that provides teachers working in schools administered by local government with certain privileges which are not included in the general labour regulations for limiting the control of local authorities.

one position for a social worker; and that at least 3 social workers should be employed in a social assistance centre and not more than 50 households should be supervised by one social worker (Andrzej Gocłowski, *Co gryzie pracodawcę/what bites the employer?*, 13.05.2007, text available at: <http://ops.pl/archiwum2/news.php?id=4119>)

### **5. Social workers in media debates-the case of *Prevention of Domestic Violence Act***

In parallel to the changes observable in the legal and documentary discourse referring to social workers and to the expert debates which were completely skipped by the mainstream media and public opinion, their image has been constructed by the some media debates. It seems crucial, that the role of social services and question social mandate for social workers were not subjected to a separate debate in Polish mainstream media. Public knowledge about this group of institutional agents has been shaped as piece of frames (see: Goffman 1984) of poverty, domestic violence, problem of unemployment, natural disasters, social housing or promotion of foster parenthood. These questions were, in general, positioned definitely low in the public agenda. The fact that publication of the *Innocenti Report* containing alarming data on child poverty in Poland caused no reaction in Polish public sphere, can serve as a good example.

For 20 years an unspoken consensus developed around the conviction that there is no alternative to market-oriented reforms, thus public debate has been also dominated with neo-liberal vision of social ladder (Ferge 2008; Woźniak 2010), promoting such principles as restrictive fiscal policy, individualism and reduction of state intervention in social-but mostly economic-life and praising labour market activity as panaceum for social problems. Welfare services have been labelled as money-consuming, inefficient and preserving passive and claiming attitudes of the low-income groups (see: Strier, Surkis, Biran 2008). What is more, when significant differences could be observed if it comes to such questions as sexuality, role of the Roman-Catholic church, political ideologies or attitudes towards the past, the socio-economic consensus seemed to be shared by regardless of the type of medium (public/private; press/TV/electronic media).

Taking into consideration the ongoing trend towards tabloidization, one should not be surprised that main focus was put on scandals-the spectacular cases of crime or serious abuse committed in poor neighbourhoods, examples of extreme helplessness and “welfare dependency syndrome”. These were often interpreted in terms of negligence presented by the employees of welfare services. One of the most tragic examples was the story known as

“Children in barrels affair”, which took place in April 2003. In an old tenant house in Łódź (third biggest city in Poland) a policeman, while searching the flat, found two plastic barrels containing partly decayed bodies of four children—two infants and 5-year old twins. They were killed four years before by the mother. The family was for years supervised by the municipal welfare services, similarly to the woman from Lubelskie (region in Eastern Poland) who was found to have drowned her five infants and took them in the barrel to a flat provided by welfare services. These were pointed as scapegoats, jointly guilty of the crimes, even if it was mentioned in press, that single social worker in Poland sometimes has to supervise more than 100 families. Ryan and Gamson (2006) distinguished three dimensions behind each release concerning social problems: diagnosis, prognosis and moral judgment. If it comes to the latter, social workers have been definitely identified as morally co-responsible for the examples of pathology “inevitably” linked to social exclusion.

The exceptional role of scandal in media debate over social issues is not surprizing (see: Butler, Drakeford 2005), but in contrary to eg. UK, in Poland no further debate or political reaction has been undertaken when the scandals expired. It could be argued that Polish discourse on welfare has a little potential to be a trigger for moral panics, but the level of public acceptance for the state of affair seems astonishing. In turn it can be argued, that focus on individual “cases” labelled as referring only to certain social categories, helps to neutralize social problems.

Another factor that has directed public attention to the problem of welfare provision is connected with natural disasters (floods in 1997 and 2010). Public welfare institutions, which are obliged to provide support, are presented as bureaucratic structures—reacting slowly, reluctantly and forcing people to deliver unnecessary documentation. Also the problem of the amounts of money granted to victims has been criticized.

However, recently the discussion over the novelization of the Law on Domestic Violence of 2005 has spotted the discussion on the role of social services and social workers within the welfare scheme in Poland. The explanation for the significance of this case can be at least twofold. The first one, domestic violence has been already subjected to media debate, as it is very attractive for “scandalous” releases. On the other hand, it touches ideological questions that have heated public discourse since the beginning of transformation—the problems of traditional/modern family model and the Roman Catholic Church’s power to impose the norms and values concerning family life. The new law widened social workers’ authorizations included in previous Act, as well as Family Code and Welfare Act.

Controversial statements from Art 12 a. are as follows:

1. In case of direct threat to life or health of a child, especially when the legal guardian is in the state of intoxication or under influence of intoxicant, social worker carrying on the job duties has a right to take the child from the family and place it in the foster family or 24/7 care institution
3. Social workers executes the activities in question in section 1, accompanied by physician, medical rescuer, nurse or by the police
4. Social worker has obligation to inform the guardianship court immediately, but not later than within 24 hours, about taking the child from the family and place it in the foster family or 24/7 care institution.

There is a statement in the reason for the law that the Family Code would be supplemented with the prohibition on corporal punishment in order to minimize the scale of domestic violence, especially against children. The project has been supplemented by the Minister's of Labour and Social Policy decree, stating that effective usage of above-created instruments would be able after ensuring properly qualified social workers (at least secondary education entitling to work as a social worker; those with secondary education should be trained in domestic violence prevention).

Since the release of information in February about agreeing the project of the Law by the Ministry, the discussion covered the most recognized media, engaging politicians (the members of conservative opposition party "Law and Justice" were against), journalist and experts.

The discussion related to practically all key issues and exposed the ideologies typical for Polish welfare discourse concerning the problem itself (pathologies and crime within families) and the state's right to intervene (separate the perpetrators from the victims, even at the price of splitting the family). The media coverage has been exceptional. Only in two distinct daily newspapers Gazeta Wyborcza (the best-selling daily newspaper, considered as representing political "centre"; boasting about its social concern) and Rzeczpospolita (conservative daily newspaper, partly state-owned), there were dozens of releases referring to the law exposing the dilemma between traditional, primary safety nets such as family and professional, state institution, is exposed. The headlines, as well as the content of articles, were very emotional, especially in the conservative press: "There will be a family police" (RP, 29.01.2009); "Smack is not abuse" (RP, 31.03.1009); "Against violence, parenting, family" (RP, 12.04.2009); "The state haunts family" (RP 27.12.2009).

If the Governments' Project of change in the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention is to be agreed, anyone from the 15-thousand army of state social workers will be able to decide about taking a child from the family. "This idea makes one's hair rise" (Bronisław Wildstein, O

czym zapomnieli państwowi uszczęśliwiacze?/ What have the state gladdeners have forgot about? RP, 28-01-2009).

The good example of argumentation strategies employed in course of debate, can be “Tomasz Lis na żywo” (Tomasz Lis live), a prime time journalistic show hosted by one of the most recognized political journalists in Poland, broadcasted weekly in the 1st Programme of public television (TVP1) (average audience ratings in September 2009 - 2,5 millions; AGB Nielsen Media Research, quoted after: <http://www.press.pl/newsy/pokaz.php?id=20187>).

The discussion in studio was moderated by the journalist (Tomasz Lis), whose role was constructed as “neutral”. The opponents were to be Katarzyna Piekarska (MP, representing left-wing Democratic Left Alliance), Dorota Zawadzka (psychologist and TV celebrity, known as Polish “Supernanny”) and on the other side: Tomasz Terlikowski (conservative catholic journalist) and Karolina Elbanowska (the representative of association” “the Spokesman for Parents’ Rights”).

The moderator set the problem in a following way:

“According to this project, a social worker will...as a matter of fact...immediately take a child from parents if he is convinced that either they mistreat this child, or they are unable to bear the child upbringing (...). There is an argument from the Council of Episcopate, from...various associations, and above all, from parents, that this is the state’s outrage against family”.

The discussion was carried around several types of arguments. The opponents of the law pointed at the threat that law would be used by the omnipotent state on order to execute almost totalitarian control over family, gather personal, even sensitive data about the family and give children a possibility to blackmail their parents.

Social workers were presented as a part of huge bureaucratic machinery, ineffective and helpless in the face of “really pathological” acts of abuse, but potentially misusing the law: “These are the tips from the textbook for social workers. If they would like to interpret them radically, and we cannot assume that there will not be such a worker, who wants to interpret it this way, it will be banned to punish at all” following with: „We will create a huge structure which will operate in the whole Poland which needs permanent justification for its existence. They will be trying to find some deviancies in every family”.

On the contrary, the proponents of the newly passed law underlined the necessity to give prerogatives to social services, as the previous regulations were not enough, and domestic violence was a growing social problem: “Because of your stand point, they [social workers] will not intervene, cause they are frightened. And I really prefer the situation where someone maybe once makes mistake and the court says –give the child back-than to find a child’s body (...)”.

Such statements were grounded not only in general diagnosis of the problem of domestic violence, but also in entirely different concept of the family and rooted in more individualistic ideology, which is frequently seen as a cultural factor favouring more trustful relation between citizen and public institutions (Reykowski 1999). The negative or suspicious reactions to the law agreed on May 6, 2010, apparently breaking the silent consensus concerning the way of presenting social services and their representatives, can be thus considered as an explicit expression of the lack of trust towards formal safety nets.

If it comes to illustrations of the debate, even if mentioning stories of extreme family abuse, media generally tended to appeal to more conservative, family-oriented values. Within the last year two cases of “unfair” child taking from poor yet “healthy” (caring) families were exposed nationally and explored, serving as examples of the “institutional abuse” and heartlessness of welfare services towards disadvantaged people. One of these stories predeceased above-described TV discussion, serving as an “introduction”. Short (1 min. 40 sec.) documentary about a couple who lost a newly born child for two months by decision of probation officer who suspected that the woman and her elderly partner would not be capable to take care of it. After the history was spotted by the private TV station (TVN), and as result of intervention of neighbours, priest and the Ombudsman, the court decided to give the child back.

To sum up, the negative image of social workers in Poland is being constructed through two types of discursive strategies:

- by presenting them as oppressive towards those poor who are considered helpless and not labelled as “guilty” of their life situation (and for that reason-deserving support)
- by presenting them as oppressive towards traditional family.

Social workers both as professionals and as the state representatives do not seem to be given too much credit by the public, but also by those who are considered as “experts”. In an interview with a distinct family therapist, with great experience in work with the disadvantaged we can read:

“If the house is clean, fridge full with products which should be there, the family will get benefit of service. In “Wysokie obcasy” (supplement to Gazeta Wyborcza targeted at women from middle class), which are usually great, recently an article titled ‘Supernanny for adults’ was published, containing detailed description of a female social worker who looks down after people under her charge, planning in detail their every day, humiliating them. This social contract, typical, as a matter of fact, is simply a blackmail. And it is given as model” (Nie pogardzać marginesem/Do not despise the margin, GW, 28.02.2008).

If one takes into account the image of social workers in the context of the debate on the Domestic Violence Act, the state of art presented in media seems worrying, regardless of the

standing point. For those who argue for strengthening the social services' prerogatives, the implementation of the Act will bring a considerable improvement of ability to protect the victims. The opponents of the Act claim that giving social workers such strong instruments will be another step towards building panoptic society.

The most commonly presented version of the social worker's image - a **bureaucrat**, is frequently founded on the assumption about insufficient sensitivity to social problems, stereotypical thinking and abandoning the mission, whereas NGOs as well as informal support networks would be praised not only as the manifestation of personal engagement, solidarity or even charity, but are also considered as much better informed, as there is a commonly shared conviction that their expertise is based on direct, face-to-face personal contacts.

In the above-mentioned interview we can read:

"Empathizing with another human is not any professional art, but basic life skill. For years I have been working in a non-governmental organization as a family assistant, which means a kind of a social worker. My method is simple, I try to understand the situation of the other from his point of view".

Although the place of NGO in Polish public debate deserves separate analysis, it can be mentioned here that constructing a kind of NGO mythology (even if the third sector is still underdeveloped in Poland) can be connected with the fact that these organizations are being recognized as "bottom-up" initiatives and manifestations of civil society, awaited by the politicians and experts eager to dismantle the welfare state.

What seems remarkable, the voice of the social workers is barely present within main arena of the debate. It is very meaningful that there was no representative of this professional group present in television studio during the debate on the law which referred a lot to the social work. It seem obvious that the idea of mass media as a whistleblower is replaced in this case by the reality of media as a key element of popculture, where "genre" rules are much more important than presenting equally all actors and their arguments.

Also the place of welfare in hierarchy of public agenda is a consequence of the place given to social problems. The above-mentioned "Black t-shirt" protest, in which social workers from 92 institutions all over the country took part (see: [www.ops.org.pl](http://www.ops.org.pl)), stayed far from the top of the agenda of the mainstream media. Apart from very few and short few releases, the biggest broadcasters stayed silent. Again, the action did not become a trigger for political debate on the welfare system reform.

## **6. Conclusions:**

According to the data gathered by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, app. 20 000 of social workers is employed in public welfare intuitions such as social assistance centres, centres for family support etc. At the same time, the average gross salary (including managers) amounts app. 2000 PLN(500 EUR). The numerous research conducted among social workers within last 20 years, show not only the ongoing professionalization of the welfare personnel, understood in terms of formal training, financed mainly by the social workers themselves or by the EU, but also growing frustration and risk of professional burnout.

However, the image of “frustrated, working poor bureaucrats” is not the whole truth. The studies conducted all over transformation enabled researchers to build various social workers’ typologies. Arkadiusz Żukiewicz (2002) in his study on social services distinguished following variants of the social worker’s role: reformers –represented by the young and devoted people; conformists-those reformers who have already experienced burn out; bureaucrats, who are professionals but at the same time treat clients instrumentally; statist, whose attitude towards clients is passive or even negative.

The latter type is obviously the most easily identified by the public, as it represents the states’ oppression. If raise a question about who do social workers represent, the review of presented data does not leave too much place for doubts. The image of local leaders presented in official documents does not seem to be embedded n an assumption that social workers speak for the communities or are advocates of “individuals and families” they are to support. In the light of the Welfare Act, and especially-the passage on social contract, the employees of social services can be seen as flexible, effective intermediates between the state and the society, stimulating people to obeying the rules of the free-market society which brings back in mind the Foucault’s notion of “governmentality”.

However, public debate seems to resist these attempts, as public image of social workers as cynical bureaucrats remains the same and no alternative images are developed: the professional and even a missionary. The first is, paradoxically, unattractive for market-oriented politicians, experts and other public actors, unless the professionalism is understood in terms of effective gate keeping. The second one was attached to NGOs.

Zsuzsa Ferge (2008: 158) argued that “Popular welfare culture does not seem to be very different in the East and West of Europe. Attacks on it are also ubiquitous. In East-Central Europe it is based on allegations of a pampered Homo Sovieticus, “learned helplessness” and ‘primitive egalitarianism’. These seem to be clichés used at various times and in various

places to discredit social security and to make a case for cutting back public expenditure”. In case of the public discourse referring to social work in Poland, Ferge’s claim is well justified.

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