

# **Family comes first - trans parenting in Poland**

## **Survey report**

### **About the survey**

Trans parenting as well as everyday situation and functioning of families that are set up by trans persons is a subject consequently omitted by social surveys on gender nonconformity in Poland.

The most popular analysis on nonheteronormative families in our country is a publication by Joanna Mizielińska, Marta Abramowicz and Agata Stasińska (2014) which was an outcome of a project „Families of choice” concerning persons in same sex partnerships. The analysis entailed trans persons (1,2 % of the respondents), but only those who fulfilled the criterion of being in a same sex relationship (according to their gender identity), as this was the main topic of the survey. However, the situation of trans individuals has not been analyzed separately. Additionally - the survey concerned family life described as living in a relationship and parenthood was only one of many aspects of a relationship taken into account and did not concern all the respondents.

In English literature the issue of trans families and parenting is a more frequent topic of discourse (np. Gupta 2005; Flynn 2006; Currah, Minter, Green 2009; Lev, Sennott 2013; Hicks 2013; Downing 2013) however mainly as a part of a broader theoretical discussion on gender minority rights and social politics.

What was most important for us when conducting the survey was taking a closer look at relationships of trans persons, regardless of their sexual preferences and gender of their partners, not what we would call „nonheteronormative relationships” per se<sup>1</sup>. And even though there are many definitions of family, its structures, types and ways to make it

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<sup>1</sup> – we try to avoid using terms such as homosexual or heterosexual orientation when referring to trans persons, some of whom have a gender identity which is out of the binary system (see Klonekowska 2015).

- in this report we have focused on those type of trans families that have or plan to have children, and that is what makes the issue of trans parenting the central topic of our research.

Report contained in this chapter of the publication is mostly empirical. It presents conclusions and observations obtained from interviews with trans individuals and their intimate partners on parenthood, family life and functioning in broader family circle and society in general.

## **Methodology**

Conducted research was qualitative. It was based on structured interviews, collected from June to November 2016. Interviews - conducted based on pre-prepared scenarios where collected by psychologists working for Trans-Fuzja Foundation. The goal of the research was to analyze the situation of families living in Poland, in which at least one person was trans. The criterion of selection of interviewees was also presence of a child in a family or parenthood plans for the nearest future. The research included both families, in which a trans person lived with their partner, and those where the partnership fell apart, but former partners share parenting responsibilities.

The researched group is a minority and many trans persons fear to disclose their identity (Kryszk, Klonkowska 2012). This can escalate when privacy of the family and children comes into play. That is why interviewees had been recruited personally, based on connections of the researches taking part in the project with the trans community.

In the scope of the project we looked closer at a situation of ten families. We interviewed a total of 14 persons. 10 of the interviewed individuals were trans, four - their female intimate partners. Interviews with the children raised in those families were planned (taking into consideration a possibility of arising of difficult topics - the interviews would only by conducted with children older than 15 years of age). During the research however, no interviews with the children could be carried out, due to lack of consent of either a child or their parents. To respect privacy of the interviewees their names or other data that could disclose their identity had been changed.

To make family ties of interviewees easier to recognize within the report - table 1 shows persons taking part in the research and their relations to each other.

Table 1

|            |                                  |
|------------|----------------------------------|
| Ewa        | trans person, Marta's partner    |
| Marta      | cis person, Ewa's partner        |
| Olga       | trans person                     |
| Maciej     | trans person                     |
| Adam/Wiola | trans person, Dorota's partner   |
| Dorota     | cis person, Adam/Wiola's partner |
| Paulina    | trans person, Kamila's partner   |
| Kamila     | trans person, Paulina's partner  |
| Monika     | trans person                     |
| Aga        | trans person, Natalia's partner  |
| Natalia    | cis person, Aga's partner        |
| Przemek    | trans person                     |
| Filip      | trans person                     |
| Kinga      | trans person                     |

Among others questions about defining a family where raised in the interviews, as well as the issue of trans identity of a person in the family, both who it influenced functioning of the family and how the family influenced trans identity of the interviewee. A question was raised whether distant family and social environment know about the trans identity of a person and how did their attitudes influence functioning of the family. An important element of the interviews where issues concerning parenthood and relations of a child with their social environment. The interviewees were also asked about legal issues concerning functioning of their family and interactions with public institutions. Interviewees where also asked about how they asses situation of trans families in Poland and to give suggestions on how to improve the situation of members if such families.

## Families of trans persons

### What is a family?

At the beginning the interviewees were asked to define a family and to describe their own.

The answers varied, but the emphasis was put on an emotional aspect of such relationships. For example Natalia, Aga's partner, mentioned blood ties at first, but quickly stated that it is not a necessary condition:

*Basically blood relatives, but not only and not always [...] they have to be close to each other and that's what is most important - strong emotional bond, mutual support, being together, keeping in contact, even if it cannot be often or regular, you always know, that the person is there for you.*

Paulina, started with naming people constitution the „basis“ of the family, stressed relationship between the partners and other members of the family. She talked about emotions, love, emotional ties as the most important values of the family:

*First of all a relationship of two people, having children together. In fact it is the most important to create a bond with your partner. It is something... that I don't know how to describe... it is something that you feel, I don't know, that there is a family, everybody loves each other, there an emotional tie among all the members of the family.*

Adam also talked about love, but also that family means people you want to spend time with. He stressed that closeness and feelings are most important in the family and distinguishes between a friendly and family relationship. He put family ties in the first place:

*Family... people who I love, with whom I want to live, to spend time with. I always see it like, I don't need anybody else, but those people who are my family. There are friends, acquaintances, but family is closeness, bonds, effortless conversations, and of course - feelings. Feelings are the most important.*

Dorota, Adam's partner, also emphasized emotional bonds and mutual support of the family members:

*Family, as I see it, are people who respect each other, love each other, are there for each other, are emphatic, understanding, help each other, you can count on them in hard times.*

*This is family.*

According to Monika however people become family when a child is born. She clearly distinguished between a relationship and a family, contrary to Marta who also recognizes as a family a relationship of two people that lasts a couple of months.

*I mean, family is for sure at least two people, this is minimum, so there must be a child and a parent. For me family simply starts to exist when a child appears, without a child it is rather a relationship.*

#### **Monika**

*A family for me is two people. Two people who feel tied to each other emotionally and are together for a little more than let's say, 3-4 months.*

#### **Marta**

Monika additionally stressed the fact that – according to her views – a „traditional“ family should constitute two people whose genders are considered „opposite“, but at the same time she said she had nothing against two women or two men raising a child together.

*I don't deny and I don't say, that a relationship of two women or two men raising children is something bad, however if I were to make a statement on what in my opinion a model of a family is, I would say – traditional.*

Maciej, on the other hand gave a broader definition of a family and, like other interviewees – stressed mostly the element of closeness:

*Family is related persons, or intimate partners, or children – born or adopted, or different types of life partners regardless of gender, who we perceive as close, who we simply consider family.*

Most of the descriptions given by interviewees during the survey marginalize aspect of blood ties or formal aspects of the relationship. Interviewees put a lot of emphasis on emotional bonds, empathy among persons in the family. Filip even stated: „I think we decide who we call family“ denying a common view that: „We do not choose family“. During the interviews family was mainly mentioned in its nuclear form, including mostly

persons in a relationship and children, although in most cases there were no attempts to name the exact persons who constitute family. As it was previously stressed – feelings came to the foreground.

It was clearly visible that interviewees value family and see it as an important part of their lives, which is depicted by Filip's words: „For me family is a priority”, or Aga's: „Family is a thing which has an absolute priority over everything”. On the other hand, Ewa notices that, in her opinion, the role of the family is overestimated:

*I think family is overestimated and there is that propaganda aimed at glorification of the family and it's „sanctity” and everything. It even irritates me. [...] Having a family is of course useful in many ways, that means – it can be useful, but also in many aspects it can be a burden, a problem.*

She stressed that family – besides the support it gives – can be also oppressive, especially in a situation when a person is not cis- or nonheteronormative. Having a family can have an essential influence on person's decision whether to transition or not. This was emphasized by Kinga:

*You know what, I will shortly sum this up: if it weren't for my family, if I haven't met my wife, I would probably be on the other side of gender by now.*

### **Who belongs to a family?**

Besides giving a definition of a family, the interviewees also talked about certain persons that constitute their families. It depicted a broad possibility of inclusive thinking about family and their diverse compositions. Including house pets and persons who are not related (close friends) can be noticed.

*The closest family is the three of us, that means me, my wife, and our son. Plus our two cats – them too.*

#### **Natalia**

*So my family, it's me, it's Adam and it's Viola<sup>2</sup>, so it is the three of us, plus we have two cats. They are also our family, they mean a lot to us.*

#### **Dorota**

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<sup>2</sup> – Viola is Adam's female alter-ego.

Maciej presented a very detailed description of his family, diversifying between his blood family (family of origin) and family which he himself set up. As we can see, in his family he also included persons who are not related, but who truly influenced him in the past or persons that he felt responsible for:

*There is a family we are born into, and a family we create. The one I was born into is my parents who still live. [...] It is my brother [...] his wife and two children. The son already has a wife, and the daughter supposedly has a partner, but I am not sure of that. [...] Aaaa, and I have to mention my non-biological family, which I come from, that means persons who formed me, besides my parents. One was my baby sitter at home – Anna, and the other was a friend I found – two generations older than me. [...] Then there is a family that I set up. It's my husband Piotr, with whom we have been together for 33 years, 31 years married. Kids grown up already – Oliwia [...] and Basia [...] Łukasz paired up with a girlfriend [...] and I can also count in Tomek – who I have adopted mentally and spiritually.*

For persons taking part in the research – defining family as persons related by blood or marriage only seems not sufficient. The need of emotional ties and having influence on who to call family member has been stressed many times.

## **How family influences decision whether or not to transition?**

### **Family comes first versus forced divorces**

As underlined above, interviewees expressed that family had or had had in the past influence on person's decision whether or not to transition. Those kind of words came among others from persons, who concluded marriage before transition and had biological children. Monika described influence of family on her life:

*I just, obviously I don't deny, that for a long time my wife was important to me. I just tried to fulfill myself in a form that the society has put on me, that is – a husband and a father, so I tried to deal with it the best I could [...] and of course it had a strong influence on how it all turned out.*

Putting a role of a husband and father first for a long time had, as she herself stressed – influence on Monika's life decisions, including postponing transition and living according to her gender identity.

Maciej – assigned female at birth – emphasized that his decision whether to transition was mostly dependent on his husband's approval. He put his relationship and psychological comfort of his partner above his desire to transition.

*In such a close relationship and love we have for each other with Piotr I don't want to do this to him, and I have a feeling that it could influence his life directly, having in mind his health conditions. [...] It means that if Piotr said OK to my desire, I would go through different elements of transition.*

This decision seemed to be a consequence of his view of family, and an important role it played in his life. It is so important that Maciej, to some extent, was willing to give up a part of his identity and happiness which would come from living according to his gender identity, to preserve the most important relationship – family. He did not totally give up transition, he is active socially as a trans person, but at the same time he did not attempt formal gender recognition.

Aga, who is married to her partner, also mentioned a similar aspect:

*There is a psychological taboo, I am afraid that breaking up formal ties<sup>3</sup> could harm our relationship, and I don't know on who's part – mine or Natalia's, but one of us could start feeling that if she is not in a formal relationship anymore, can allow herself more, and I do not want that. Besides, I love my wife too much to do such things.*

Aga, expressed love for her wife and fears that divorce could loosen their relationship and finally – lead to a break-up. She treated a formal marriage as an important element which keeps family together and did not want to risk a break-up by undertaking medical and legal gender confirmation, which would mean a need to divorce. At the same time she partially functioned socially as a woman. She started using female name: „Last year I did this little transition – now the second name I use is Aga”, so even without taking up transition to an extent that she would want, she functioned according to her gender identity to as extensively as she was allowed. Although marriage, or more precisely – the fact that it has to be dissolved by divorce in case of legal change of a gender marker, is a limitation of sort, Aga managed to maneuver legal intricacies and choose solutions which suit her and her situation best. It is obvious that it requires more sacrifice and effort than a relationship of two cis persons.

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<sup>3</sup> – according to Polish law, trans persons going through transition are forced to divorce their spouse, even if both of them decided to stay in a relationship.



Paulina talked in similar tone, appreciated the formal aspect of a relationship very much:

*This is the thing that is the most emotional for me in my relationship, because wanting to, let's say go through gender recognition procedure, I am not allowed to be married. Going through recognition I can't be in a relationship with a person who is now the same gender as me, because we have such a dull law in this country and now I simply don't know, I am almost sure, that I will sacrifice all of this, to be with that person, because I want to be with that person, because I know that marriage is... a relationship should be formalized [...] this is something that bugs me the most, that I have to somehow choose, but I think, that I am sure, that in this situation I would even choose to rather do some things illegal, and simply...*

In their decisions about transition and gender recognition the interviewees were dependent to a large extent on their partner's opinions and how it could affect their family members. Above that, despite seeing family in the light of emotional bonds, keeping a formalized relationship was a very important aspect of their family lives.

Legal regulations enforcing divorce on persons who go through gender confirmation often keep trans individuals from taking a decision about transition, if they do not wish to change the status of their relationship. Polish law stipulates that a person going through gender confirmation procedure has to obtain a divorce, otherwise - after the confirmation they would find themselves in a same sex relationships, which is not recognized by law in Poland. However keeping their marriage is for many trans individuals more important than changing their gender marker. This creates a certain dilemma for persons in relationships with partners of the gender marker which is the same as trans persons gender identity - changing their gender marker will make it impossible for them to marry and enjoy legal and social benefits that go with it. Transitioning formally takes away that right, so persons face a huge dilemma. They would have to either give away part of themselves, or give up important values.

Not all interviewees however considered influence of family on their decision whether or not to transition equally important. Ewa mentioned that influence of her family was only „indirect”, pointing out, that opinion of her blood family was not determinative. Although asked about her wife and child, she answered:

*It has, to some extent, but the decision has been made earlier, so changing my status to being married with a child was not crucial. My wife would of course support me in this process, she always declared, she would, but formally we would have to divorce, if we still wanted to live in Poland.*

When it comes to Ewa and Marta, it is important to stress, that Marta knew about Ewa's trans status all along, even before they were married. Moreover, Ewa – although she was not changing her gender marker – lived according to her gender identity.

This was another story where we saw that forced divorce and lack of alternative forms of registration of same sex partnerships is an obstacle to transition. Considering additionally that if a trans person makes a decision to transition legally, they lose parental rights<sup>4</sup>, a situation is created that separates a person from their family. Of course, two people can still live together, but a biological parent with new personal data, formally does not exist as a child's parent.

It is also not hard to imagine a situation, when an ex-partner uses trans status of the second parent to separate them completely from the child. This is how Paulina gave account of her case:

*She [ex-wife] thinks, that I don't have a right to see the child, and to be honest, I suspect that if there is a question in the subject asked, the subject of so to say, my transsexuality – it influenced my divorce case, and now – it is mainly fuel for the case. Lately my wife's attorney, filed with the court, that I don't have a right to see my child, that a trans woman cannot be a father, that was one thing, another was that I can carry infectious diseases, this kind of bull...*

Those kinds of situations are not rare. That is why, fear of losing children or limiting contacts with them keeps a lot of persons back from transitioning but also from openly talking about their trans identity, especially if they do not trust their partner. Sometimes, as in Filip's case, individuals fear other family members reaction too:

*I am scared to death of my parent's reaction. I am scared that they would want to take away my parental rights.*

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<sup>4</sup> – in child's birth certificates only birth personal data of a parent would be disclosed.

## **Influence of transition of family**

Luckily, not all trans persons experience abandonment and lack of understanding of their families when they come out. Of course, all the interviewees came out as trans at different points of their lives and relationships, but in all cases – the closest family – partners as well as children are aware of their trans identity. Even if children were young, parents did not want to conceal this fact. Marta says:

*All the time, as everyday life goes by. We are not hiding anything. He saw Ewa from the beginning, every time we found some time for makeup and wig. He knows Ewa as, let's say, two persons, so the male Ewa, who is not very masculine, and the super-feminine one, so to say. Maybe the first time when he saw Ewa in a wig, as an infant, he was a little surprised, but then he heard her voice, and knew exactly who it was.*

Marta and Ewa did not hide anything from their son. The same way Ewa's identity was a casual situation for them, the same way it was a casual situation for their son. Adam and Dorota who planned to have children, had the same approach:

*We have our minds made up, that the child will know from the beginning that there is also Wiola, because we do not want a situation when he sees her and shouts „who is that?“, no. Kids can understand a lot and accept it. They take it and I think there's no reason [to fake anything].*

It is though important to stress that in both above mentioned cases partners knew about their significant other's trans identity before they getting married and deciding to have a child.

While the closest family members of the interviewees knew their identity, when it came to their more distant relatives – it all depended on the situation. Some of them decided not to reveal it due to relatives poor health or complicated relations with them:

*My partner's parents still don't know me. They are old, and have disabilities, and we are simply scared to talk to them about it.*

### **Filip**

*My mom is in a fairly advanced age, she is 84 now and psychologically, she is such a person, that if I told her, she would kill me. She has her world, and things should be the way they are and that's it.*

### **Kinga**

There were also statements, that hiding information about trans identity was a result of views of more distant family members:

*My wife's family are... I will tell you. You know, my wife's family are catholic, very religious people. They are kind, warmhearted and loving people. They are also mistreated by the world, as I see it. They reassure themselves in all those lies.*

**Kinga**

Some of the respondents, mostly trans activists did not conceal their identity from family:

*I take part in different public actions, I give interviews, there are photos taken of me in mainstream newspapers, and it is all on purpose and I do not make a secret out of it, so everyone who can know - knows, and the ones far away, with no contact we don't know if they know.*

**Ewa**

Individuals, who decided to reveal their identity before their families mostly met with acceptance and understanding, even if it took some time. Family members noticed a positive change in trans persons after coming out:

*Kids think, that Mamut became a fantastic person, because I unblocked and changed, and I am not a religious fundamentalist anymore, which I use to present in different ways. I hope it wasn't so extreme, but I was very subdued by this church upbringing.*

**Maciej**

*You know what, I think that my family accepted me the way I am and that they are happy, that I am who I am, because I smile more, I am more self-confident and most of all - I don't drink.*

**Przemek**

Unfortunately there were situations when the closest persons could not fully accept identity of a trans family members.

*At first with humor, until he realized it was true, and that there are consequences, and later very painful and tough, which lasts until today, but I think he got used to some aspects of it, some are less scary to him, because I promised him not to transition, if he will not accept it. And he knows I will keep my promise.*

**Maciej**

Persons who enter a relationship with trans individuals not knowing about their identity, might not want to continue the relationship, after their partners coming out. It is not only because of lack of understanding or acceptance or intolerance towards trans persons. Sometimes it is due to the fact, that being a heterosexual person they want to be in a relationship with a person of a opposite gender. Being in a relationship with a person of a same gender simply does not match their sexual orientation.

In Monika's case however, her identity sealed breakup of her relationship, but was not the only reason:

*She [ex-partner], during the time that we didn't talk, when we were going through the divorce, I don't remember exactly, was it after of before, she said it herself, that she could accept it, who I am, but she could not live with somebody like me. [...] That made her more confident and reassured that I am not the right person for her, not who she expected and who she all the time...*

### **Children of trans parents**

Most of the respondents had children, others were planning to have in the near future. Although children who had contact with trans parents, knew about their identity, their social environment was often unaware of it.

Dorota and Adam planned to have children, but do not any yet. When asked if they want their children to know about Adam's trans identity, Dorota answered:

*Of course, there are no „buts“. We have been talking that we cannot imagine living in lie, it would be living in lie for me, if we don't tell the child the truth, how it really is.*

As future parents, Dorota and Adam did not even consider concealing this fact from their children. They also assume that a child might decide to share this information with their environment they do not see this as a problem.

Filip was raising two children: a son from his former relationship and his partners son from her former relationship. Both boys knew that Filip is trans:

*My biological child is taught not to look at people based on their gender [...]. Anyways, I am still the same person to him and I think he doesn't see a difference, he doesn't notice it, but there*

*is another thing that he has autism and he sees world differently and things that are important socially, for him are not important, he doesn't pay attention.*

### **Filip**

*We have known each other with my partner way before, we were friends, and her son knew me before as his mother's friend, by the name of Justyna, but he knew that I do not identify with it so much, and saw me as this kind of person who doesn't strictly identify, but he is a very smart young person and when Weronika decided to be with me [...] Mikolaj asked if I am the same person, and she said yes, so he asked why was I Justyna earlier, and now I am Filip. Weronika answered, that sometimes it is just the way it is, that there are people who are born with a certain body, but feel different and he asked if there are many persons like that. She said no, but it doesn't change the fact, that they exist. He said ok, and the case was closed, since that time he has been treating me as a man and asks me for advise as a boy would ask a grown up man, and he doesn't see a problem in that.*

### **Filip**

Filip also noticed, that his relationship with his son did not change after his coming out, but it helped their relationship. Also his relationship with his partners son improved:

*With my biological son nothing changed. Maybe for me it changed for the better. [...] I feel better now, I don't have to pretend I am a mother I never was and who I do not feel like [...] but also it improved with Mikolaj, I think, because I became an authority to him, someone to look up to.*

Filip's son's closest environment did not know about his parent's trans identity. It was a specific situation, because, as he says:

*He doesn't really have a social environment, because he is autistic and doesn't have friends at this moment.*

Respondent himself deliberately hid his identity from his sons environment, due to unpleasant experience with his son's therapist, described later in the report.

Monika's son was already an adult and she did not plan to have any more children. Her son found out about her identity is a direct conversation with her.

*My son took it very calmly, which I was happy about, also because I was already starting to write a blog. I gave him a link, so he could read some of it, he did and said that he could understand more thanks to it and it is now easier for him to look at the issue now, but he also stated firmly that he does not want to be a part of my life in any way. There was no way we could go out*

together, me as a woman, and that created a lot of conflict, since we were living together.

## **Monika**

None the less, Monika understood her son:

*It is enough to imagine an situation like this: there is a father rising his child alone all his life, I raised him myself [...]. I spent all the time with him, it created a bond, and all of the sudden... Of course, it probably wasn't perfect, but still I was the father figure to him.*

Relationship of Monika and her son changed. He acknowledged Monika's identity and understood her situation, but clearly stated that he „doesn't want to be a part of it“, as if he wanted to separate Monika's role as a parent and who she was. He was not revealing his parent's status to anyone, rather - concealing it. There was a situation, when her son was living with her with his partner, so the girl knew about the situation. According to the interviewee - he did not want to reveal it to more persons. Due to lack of contact with her son, she did not know what exactly was his standpoint on the subject during the time of the interview.

*There where conversations between us, he started them, to know about the subject, he told me that he was with a girl when I was living with him, before I moved to Szczecin, he was with a girl back then and she knew, who I was. He told her, but also it was practically impossible for her not to know, because there was my stuff in the apartment, so she took it really ok [...] when we came back to the conversation, he said it himself that we have never done anything wrong to each other so there is no point to fight now, to live in disagreement, but on the other hand, he just, you know, friends in school, in collage or at work, it is a different subject, but if he is dating someone, he doesn't want to lie. He doesn't want to make up stories, cheat, so if he wanted to present the subject in an acceptable way, he head to know a little bit about it, so at this point at least I know that if he has any close relationship, that person will know who I am, but how it is today, I can't tell.*

Maciej had three grown up children. They all knew about his trans identity. They took it well, but, according to Maciej, a picture of him as a „mother“ was still present. He stated that he does not know if children talk about his identity, but as he stressed, the situation did not make them uncomfortable and they did not feel ashamed because of it. They openly admitted that their parent is engaged in LGBT activism and Faith and Rainbow initiative. They also changed the word „Mama“ they used to call him to „Mamut“.

*They were never hostile, or did anything unpleasant to me because of that. They use words to describe me, which of course are linked to my former identity, which was their mother, so here for me the best way around it is when they call me „Mamut”, but sometimes they also need to talk about it. [...] I don't know it, because I didn't ask them, but I know that they are proud talking about how „Mamut” is a LGBT activist and all and Faith and Rainbow. They talk about it to their friends, here and abroad, and the effect is that some of their LGBT friends wanted to meet me [...], but to what extent they talk about me and my trans identity, that I don't know, but I don't think they are ashamed, because they know, that if anybody touches upon the subject, they will instantly know.*

Ewa and Marta had a four year old son. They did not hide Ewa's identity from him, but they tried to make the information he gets adequate to his age. His son's surrounding, that is his kindergarten teachers knew about Ewa's identity, because she did not hide it from them either. They even sometimes helped to take care for the child at home. All reaction were positive, nobody from Ewa and Marta's family faced discrimination due to that. Adrian, their son, referred to Ewa by the name „Tatusia” (this would be a female version of „Tatus” - „Daddy”)

*He is still too young to talk about it more, or deeper, but nobody hides anything from him and we want him to know about everything and of course that is was explained to him so that he could understand. [...] I just don't hide it, so everyone who I interact with has to notice it, so in kindergarten, because it is a place where he goes now, teachers and parents know. There is, let's say, no problem, the teachers come by our place sometimes to help us with Adrian at home if we need help, we just hire them privately, so here we have, let's say a good situation for now. There will come a phase when we will want to introduce a proper name for me, now at home he calls me Tatusia, which is female for father, but a kindergarten kids and teachers just use „Dad” and „Mom”.*

Przemek has two sons, he lives with the older one after the divorce. He was the first one to know about his trans identity. It was during Przemek's attempt of suicide. No matter how traumatic a situation of a suicide attempt of a parent and information about his trans identity must have been for a 15 year old, the son did not turn away from Przemek. On the contrary - he helped him quite drinking, found a doctor who could perform SRS. The younger son found out from the older one, but the interviewee did not know how he reacted.

*My older son found out during my second suicide attempted, when he came and rescued me. [...] That was one of the toughest conversations I had to have in my life, but I have to tell you, the moment I said it, what is going on with me, why I did the things I did, why I drink [...] my son, when I told him everything, didn't say w word. He didn't say a word to me for two weeks. I knew he had*



*to shake it off. He said it once in an interview: today you know that you have a mother, then you wake up and find out this is really a father. It wasn't easy for him, even more that he was 15. It is a specific age, and I don't want to full myself, life treated him hard, pouring a bucket of ice water on his head and what he was supposed to do? So, you know, I suspect that he didn't have it easy. It wasn't easy for him, 100 %, but one day he came to me. Of course he saw that I had been drinking, I wasn't drinking that much during those two weeks, cause, you know, I knew that after the conversation we had it would be not ok, to you know, get wasted again, but I couldn't do it. I got wasted, he came, grabbed the bottle, smashed in on the ground and said: „From no on you will be sober. You will get treatment. I found you a doctor“. „What doctor?“ – I asked. „A psychiatrist, who will help you with your issues, I found him for you“. He was browsing on the internet, he wanted to know, what all that meant, why I am the person I am. He found a doctor. We went to his office, he slammed the doors and left.*

However Przemek stressed that his son's environment mostly supported him and treated the interviewee as a „buddy“, there where persons who turned their backs on him, because of his father's trans identity.

*Some of them turned their backs on him, some simply supported him, they supported him really well and they treat me as equal, as a friend. As a matter of fact I am a friend among his friends. They call me by my name, not „mister“, I am just Przemek and they treat me normally, as their pall. There is no such thing like lack of acceptance.*

Out of Kinga's four daughters, two older ones knew about her trans identity, which they accepted, but did not reveal it in their environment. Some respondents where not sure if their children talk about trans issues in their environment and did not ask them about it.

## **Family and the society**

### **Social functioning**

Respondents who had already undergone medical procedures and legal gender confirmation or where in the course of it, functioned in everyday life according to their gender identity. Some of the respondents were trans activists and were recognizable for it in the social surrounding. Some persons however decided not to come out to their environment, especially if they had planned gender confirmation and went through part of the procedures, but didn't confirm it legally. Often, a scope in which the respondents functioned in gender as assigned at birth was professional life.

*My work is a place where I function as a man. Not a typical man, of course, so it doesn't go unnoticed, but I am still formally a man. [...] It is the level I would want to be at, so this is a compromise between keeping a well-paid job and being satisfied with ones' life. This is a compromise which one must be willing to accept, unfortunately.*

### **Ewa**

*Sometimes, you know, there are situations, that I have to go to a public institution and I have to show my ID, where I have a male picture, and there is no problem. [...] Really, it won't kill me. I understand, some girls have a real problem with that, but I think, that sitting and thinking about it: „Oh my god, I have to go to the office as a man“. Fuck, I am going and I don't fuck around with it! Oh my god, so what?!*

### **Olga**

Maciej, despite not going through gender confirmation process, decided to be fully open about his identity in his workplace.

*I came out to all significant persons, actually to the whole team at our ward – doctors and nurses, and to other people from other wards a little bit too, when there was a chance.*

When asked about results, he answers he was happy with the decision:

*It is great, although I have to listen sometime when others talk to me and it is a little uncomfortable, but as uncomfortable as living before this bigger coming out.*

Except one case, persons who started a family and had children before taking up a decision to transition, did not face rejection by their doctors or councilors accompanying them throughout transition. Maciej however encountered a situation, in which he was denied care due to his parental status:

*Ah, earlier I went to this lady, I don't remember her name. She was curious, because at some point in life she was helping trans persons. [...] I made a private appointment. I had been visiting her a long time, half a year, or longer and she told me that she will not certify I am trans, because she thinks I shouldn't transition. [...] She said she won't give me a diagnosis, because that is her opinion, and even before that I went to a gynecologist-sexologist doctor [...] she jumped at me, saying, what was I thinking, how do I even imagine my family situation, am I aware of the consequences. I don't know, it all seemed... Now I see how stupid it was, because it is my decision whether to transition or not and what is interesting, since then I didn't even make that decision yet, but I think that having a diagnosis is a different story and everybody is entitled to it.*

Filip on the other hand, faced a different discriminating treatment, on the account of being a trans parent:

*It was psychologist who was my child's therapist, I decided to be completely honest with her, because it was about my child's therapy, so I decided to tell her everything, if she asked or even if she didn't ask, because everything might be relevant in a situation like this and she reacted real bad. She started to moralize me about values that can influence child's mental health, that if there are no role models, that the child is already from a broken home, let alone this. She reacted as if it had anything to do with autism, when I am among others a certified autism therapist and I was taking this course back then and I was really surprised, that she can have this idea, because I know where autism comes from and that was the moment I stopped talking about it at school or with other therapists.*

Based on this research, no conclusions can be made if this kind of situations are frequent, but as shown, it happens that due to parental status, a trans persons access to diagnosis or transition can be hindered and their parental competences undermined due to their trans identity. And it is not about the moment of gender marker change, where a problem lies in legal provisions concerning same sex relationships and parenting, but about idle stereotypes about a person and their family.

### **Feeling of safety of a person and their family**

Among the interviewees cases of transphobic violence where rare. Monika faced some unpleasant situations though:

*One of them told the other one who I was, and then the second one reacted very aggressively. It seemed as his reaction was based on an instinct of some sort, than the first one pulled him away and off they went. Of course, he still shouted all called me names and for the first time I felt threatened. [...] I heard on of them say to the other: „hey, what is this?“. Somebody, some guy, answered: shemale and that was too much for me. I turned around, I walked towards them, stood two meters away, looked and them and waited are there gonna be any more reactions. There was silence. I saw a girl who was first laughing sitting with her head down. She was struggling not to laugh. She did not laugh at me anymore and I waited for them to make any more comments [...], and they didn't quite, cause as I was leaving through and underground passage on the platform, I heard them say from above „fag“.*

Described situations were verbal violence, although in at least one situation there was a risk of physical attack. Monika made it clear she felt threatened, she carried tear gas for self-defense.

*I am sometimes really frightened, that persons who use hate speech and take pictures of me during different marches or pride parades...I don't want to nourish them, because I believe in optimism, but yes, I do have anxiety attacks being at home or elsewhere.*

Those kind of situations had a real influence on Maciej's life. Although he tried to be optimistic, he admitted that he feared for his own safety and the safety of his family.

Aga, on the other hand stressed that, even though she did not face any direct aggression, she witnessed aggression towards a group she is a part of:

*We experienced aggression of let's say, nationalist community, hooligans, during campaigns that we undertook, there is no safety, non the less I personally was never attacked, only that I am a part of a movement or that I work somewhere. It was organized violence, from those kinds of groups, but it was also aimed at our group, so during a demonstration, or our holidays or on other occasions.*

Respondents noticed that after last parliamentary and presidential elections the situation changed for worse. According to interviewees, political climate in Poland made them fear for their safety and safety of their close relatives.

*Generally, I am of course afraid, because our beloved government, headed by the president, is what it is, unpredictable. [...] I am afraid what might happen, if our beloved government will really arm those paramilitary fascist troops, they will have authority to act, and I am scared of that, which of course influences the way our work. We have an office in Tęczówka [an LGBT organization], but it has no sign on the door or outside, because otherwise there would be attacks, blocking key holes and what not.*

In the interviews respondents stressed, that declaration of changes made by the government, made them stressed, that attacks on LGBT persons will take a more acute form. The respondents saw the government's attitude towards LGBT persons as hostile. Monika stated it clearly:

*For sure after the government change it started to get worse, unfortunately we are a part of minority, and all minorities, which deviate from the norm which is set by the catholic thinking is for the paramilitary troops [...] something that has to be eradicated and I haven't come across any ONR [National Radical Alliance] troops in Poznań, but when you look at some people you can see that they associate closely with them. I am not stupid, I just see what is going on and I am starting to fear that someday chanting and exclamations will turn into attacks, will change into action and this will get really dangerous. I practically don't walk around without tear gas. I have it all time on me. I didn't ever have to use it, but I practically don't leave the house without it in Poznań.*

Public permission of hate speech and demonstrating intolerance made respondents fear what current situation might evolve into. Most respondents did not feel safe in their own country and even though until now they did not consider moving abroad and where not forced to change place of residence within Poland, they feared about the future of themselves and their families.

*When I try to assess political situation and what is going on... it is very bad, there is great intolerance, xenophobia, hate speech, which pour like rivers, it scares me.*

**Dorota**

According to our respondents, a change in attitudes towards trans persons was visible and it was a change for worse. However, respondents did not notice any changes influencing them directly, but they do noticed a change in social attitudes towards trans persons in Poland, which influenced fears about their family's safety.

### **What direction are we supposed to be heading?**

Respondents were also asked how, according to them, a situation of trans person's families can be improved, what social changes could help their situation. They were also asked, how trans activists could contribute to that change.

Need to introduce same sex partnerships was anonymously mentioned as a condition which has to be met so trans persons could start transitioning without being forced to divorce their partners.

*Absolutely there should be no requirement to divorce. There should be same sex partnerships or marriage, and it should automatically change. If somebody wants to divorce, they want to, but if they don't want to, then even a very good relationship forced to undergo divorce will fall apart.*

**Natalia**

*I would be content if there was a possibility to change gender marker and to be forced to divorce [...] maybe if there wasn't need to undergo those ceremonies with divorce, which they want to impose on us, maybe I would even decide to change my documents, but in a situation like this, there is no chance, because I don't want to divorce at all.*

**Aga**

A second important element, mentioned by the respondents, was that a trans parent deciding to transition did not lose parental rights of under aged children.

*There should be no requirement to deprive us of parental rights, cause what changes here is a gender marker, but a relationship to a child does not.*

**Monika**

*First of all, when it comes to children, emotional relationship between parents and children should be taken into account. And if nothing is missing here, they should never take children from their parents.*

**Filip**

Respondents also stressed a need to improve the process of gender confirmation procedure, introducing certain legal mechanisms and awareness rising in this scope.

*I would wish for adequate sex education, because that would be the first step, which we have to start with. If we don't start with that, nothing will change, because people just lack the knowledge. People are scared of something, what they don't know, because I seems perverted to them, because somebody on TV said so.*

**Dorota**

*First of all, efforts to introduce a new gender confirmation law should be repeated. There was such attempt and I know that it was rejected, but I think it should be repeated until we succeed. Maybe it is a good idea that more lawyers spoke about it, to make law conferences and debate this issue, even theoretically.*

**Filip**

*Just to be visible, nothing more. To show that we exist, that we are active. Raise awareness, grass root work, make people aware that it is not w deviation, it cannot be cured with magic happy pills or something.*

**Aga**

In this aspect, the statements about education where directed at LGBT activists. Moderate educational actions where advised and examples of specific solutions for trans support organization where given.

*First of all - education, they are doing it already, let's say we are doing it, because I am an activist myself, but this education should be very balanced and moderate, it should allow straight and cis people not to feel threatened, because I sometimes think that it is something we fail to notice in this education.*

**Maciej**

*First of all, there should be a bill. Even if it is not perfect, but it should exist, if I want to file for gender confirmation, I walk into court, pick up a form, I get information and I know, step by step, what I should do in a certain situation. [...] Maybe it would be ok, if Trans-Fuzja Foundation based on the knowledge they have, made a manual and put it on their page, for people to know, that if a parent is dead, you should do this<sup>5</sup>, if both of them are dead - this, if you were married, you should do this.*

### **Monika**

When it comes to accessibility of information on legal and medical confirmation procedures, and rights of trans persons, respondents did not report any difficulties with access to help. They were however aware that it depends on determination and independence of people looking for that information. As Ewa noticed:

*It means, that you have to find all this information on your own, because it is not something that is publish widely, and it not just common knowledge, but you can find this information if you look.*

Conclusion is that necessary information are accessible for persons who look for it. However, effort should be made to make information more accessible, to minimize the risk that persons without limited information access is unaware of their rights. This is how Adam summed up the direction in which we should be heading to improve situation of trans persons and their families:

*We have this comfortable situation that we are man and woman, without transition [...] we can do anything, so from my point of view it is ok, we don't have to change anything, but I know, having contact with other trans persons and hearing about their problems and their transition, those changes, this situation, which is present it is unacceptable, cause it makes it very difficult. People don't have a slightest idea what they are talking about, when they say: „They will change their gender 10 times” and stuff like this. I try to explain to them: this is not a change, a fad, gender confirmation. You have no idea what people go through, how their mental health is affected, what it leads to, and how unfortunate it is - to have to sue your own parents, who might not have anything against it and accept it, but this is the only way. There is also this divorce requirement, cause in Poland same sex marriages are not allowed, so they have to divorce, cause then they change their gender marker, than what? There will be Aneta and Agnieszka on a wedding certificate and this is not allowed. I think change is necessary when it comes to relationships and parental rights, accepting new personal data and so on, so you know... really.*

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<sup>5</sup> - this concerns legal regulations in Poland, according to which, to confirm ones gender before court, a trans person has to sue their parents on basis of incorrect gender recognition at birth.

## Conclusions

According to our respondent's accounts trans persons successfully create families, have or plan to have children – also biological. Although level of acceptance of their trans identity differs among distant family members and social surrounding, family life for most interviewees is satisfying. Family is an important part of their lives, they care about being truthful to their children when talking about their identity. According to most interviewees, children accept trans identity of their parents. However they often not talk about it in their social surrounding to avoid third party's negative reactions. It does not seem like trans identity of a parent influences their parenting skills, but families of trans persons can face more difficulties than cis-normative families, however this is due to lack of knowledge about trans issues in the social surrounding or legal provisions, which do not acknowledge certain facts about their family structure. Situations of straight forward rejection or misusing partners trans identity by the second partner came out as rare in our research. However the fact that it exists must not come unnoticed, especially that interviewees responses do not show the scale of the problem in the whole trans community.

Respondents often mentioned resigning from gender confirmation due to family situation. Making such a decision would result in forced divorce (even if both persons wanted to stay married after the confirmation of one of them), and would also make it difficult to formally play a role of a parent. Formally there are no legal obstacles that would keep married persons with children from being diagnosed as trans (an obligatory condition for medical and legal gender confirmation). Everybody is entitled to medical and psychological aid. From our respondents accounts it stems however that trans persons fear prejudice and judging their parental skills based on their identity.

Interviewees reckoned that political discourse changes and there is more and more permission for extreme intolerance. It is a unfavorable situation for all minorities, especially if they do not enjoy full rights. This atmosphere have definitely bad influence on trans persons and their families wellbeing.

Introducing legal provisions which would allow persons in transition to stay married and keep their parental rights seems unlikely in current political situation. However, we



should not give up trying to improve trans person's and their familie's functioning. The most important element seems to be education of the society on trans issues, what is trans identity and how it affects trans persons and others. Higher awareness could very likely correct levels of discrimination or violence and in the long run create space and atmosphere to introduce legal improvements to make transitioning easier (medically and legally), increase access to professionals and knowledge.

## **Summary**

According to persons participating in this research there is much to do to make trans persons feel lawful citizens of Polish society. Situation of direct aggression and discrimination, still happens despite organization's and activist's efforts. Even if they are not frequent, they are still alarming, especially if they are committed by doctors or therapists, who deny trans diagnosis on the basis of being a parent.

Our respondents stress necessity of law amendment, what could improve transitioning and functioning of families of trans persons. However current socio-political situation rises concerns of respondents who participated in the research and according to them - can potentially make improvement of legal gender confirmation and other improvements for trans families harder.

The research shows also how important awareness rising on trans issues and social situation of trans persons is. Improving access to information on transitioning procedures and trans rights would be not less important.

Scope of research and its qualitative character does not allow to make overall conclusions on the subject, that would be true for the whole trans population. Issues suggested by respondents however are possible topics for further analysis.

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