

## Review Paper:

# Motherhood in Females with Intellectual Disability: Review of Selected Polish Educational Research

Agnieszka Karpińska

Faculty of Education Sciences, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Torun, POLAND  
akarpins@doktorant.umk.pl

## Abstract

*The purpose of this text is to analyse the issue of maternity of women with intellectual disabilities. Many disabled women wish to perform role of mother. Feelings and desires are no stranger to females with disabilities.*

**Keywords:** Motherhood, woman with intellectual disability, research.

## Introduction

People occupy certain roles in a society from an early age as noticed by Chodkowska<sup>1</sup>. The author emphasises that these roles may result from people's own choices or they may be associated with social tasks which people are supposed to accomplish at a certain stage of their lives. Parchomiuk<sup>2</sup> states that adulthood involves taking up the roles of spouses and parents. Motherhood occupies a special place among these roles. Kornas-Biela<sup>3</sup> believes that a willingness to be a mother is determined by many factors. She enumerates the following: fulfilling the role of a woman, satisfying life aspirations, willingness to take up a socially approved role, intention to create a complete family.

Regardless of the reasons that drive women to become mothers, Bartosz<sup>4</sup> stresses that being a mother somehow contributes to shaping the character of an adult woman. Sadowska<sup>5</sup> stresses that motherhood is a kind of fulfilment of femininity.

According to Bojarska<sup>6</sup>, the uniqueness of motherhood results most importantly from the fact that it is based on a strong and inextricable relation between a woman and a child. Sadowska<sup>5</sup> adds that such closeness is formed from the first moments of the child's life and it gets stronger day by day.

Therefore, the author suggests that the role of a mother is so essential in the process of a child's upbringing. Kościelska<sup>7</sup> believes that serving the role of a mother of a disabled child is a unique form of motherhood.

This review particularly focuses on another characteristic form of motherhood, namely the motherhood in women with intellectual disability. Górnicka<sup>8</sup>, thinks that "issue of motherhood of disabled women is not noticeable in the media or educational programs. We do not know much about disabled mothers and we cannot answer the question: What is it like to be a disabled mom in Poland?"

## Review of Literature

Kirenko<sup>9</sup> believes that every human's life involves "an important role of interpersonal relations which constitute a basis for the formation of emotional relationships such as partnership, friendship and love and persistent emotional and sexual relationships such as marriage, family and a desire to manifest them by having offspring." These feelings and desires are no stranger to people with disabilities according to Janiszewska-Nieścioruk<sup>10</sup>, Borowska-Beszta<sup>11</sup>, Borowska-Beszta, Ćwirynkało and Bartnikowska<sup>12</sup>, Górnicka<sup>13</sup>, Parchomiuk<sup>2</sup>.

Many disabled women wish to perform the role of a mother, which was confirmed by the research conducted by Ciaputa, Król, Migalska, Warat<sup>14</sup> and Wołowicz-Ruszkowska<sup>15</sup> whereas the research conducted by, Zawisłak<sup>16</sup>, Nowak-Lipińska<sup>17</sup>, Grutz<sup>18</sup>, Kijak<sup>19</sup> and Górnicka<sup>13</sup> proved the fact that women with intellectual disabilities dream about and take up the role of a parent.

Żyta<sup>19</sup> thinks that despite desires and willingness to have offspring, many people with intellectual disabilities still do not take up these roles due to legal barriers, lack of sufficient knowledge and support. Kijak<sup>20</sup> adds that restricting the independence and self-reliance of adults with intellectual disability is conditioned by negative stereotypical social attitudes. Parchomiuk<sup>21</sup> believes that women with intellectual disabilities in relation to motherhood experience many conflicting emotions. These are positive feelings such as joy, happiness. However, they often experience negative emotions that result primarily from abnormal relationships with others, the lack of acceptance of their motherhood, even the social ban on the role of mother.

The research conducted by Ciaputa, Król, Migalska and Warat<sup>14</sup> indicates that the large number of restrictions and obstacles that disabled women encounter in their pursuit of maternity result from social context. The authors asserted that the major symptom of the above is: "the perception of a woman with disability as passive, dependent, incompetent, weak, lonely and unattractive."

Podgórska-Jachnik<sup>22</sup> believes that "people with disability always despite the difficulties, they were friends, love, they set up families, they gave birth to children, they undertook the task of educating them and endowed them with love. No special permits, no special instructions, support. They accepted the difficulties of life". Undoubtedly, the issue of motherhood in disabled women is still controversial and therefore requires a more profound understanding.

## Analysis

Herein I present the empirics concerning the issue of motherhood in women with disabilities on the basis of the work of selected Polish researchers. The present studies do not fully cover the issue of motherhood in women with intellectual disability as they concentrate mostly on the aspect of experienced difficulties and problems.

In 2005, Zawiaślak<sup>16</sup> examined the quality of life in the families of juvenile and major mothers with intellectual disability. The author conducted qualitative research. Zawiaślak<sup>16</sup> used the research method of individual cases and observation and interview as the techniques of data collection. The main research question which she posed and then tried to answer was: "What is the quality of life in the families of juvenile and major mothers with intellectual disability?" Whereas the detailed research questions that she formulated concerned the following: "What is the livelihood of the participants' families? What is the mothers' family situation? How do these women evaluate their family life?"

21 female residents of Bydgoszcz with diagnosed mild intellectual disability participated in the study. Their age ranged between 18 and 34 years. It is worth mentioning that the author divided the participants into two groups. The first group consisted of mothers with intellectual disability who gave birth to their first child before reaching the age of 18. The second group included women who became mothers after reaching the age of 18. When looking at the education of the participants in Zawiaślak's<sup>16</sup> research, it becomes clear that the majority of mothers graduated from the basic essential school. Only 9 participants received primary education. It is particularly worth noticing that 14 participants were married at the time of the study. Only 5 women were single whereas 2 women were divorced. Moreover, as many as 20 women participating in the study were unemployed.

Having analysed the research material, Zawiaślak<sup>16</sup> remarks that the housing situation of the participants is not easy. It is most visibly seen in the group of juvenile mothers as 8 out of 10 women in this group still lived with their generational families. The standard of their flats was low and so was the quality of life. According to the author, the situation is quite better in the group of women who had their first child after reaching 18 years of age as more than a half of them lived on their own.

However, the housing conditions in which the women lived together with their families were poor and it was visible that they lived in want. The author<sup>16</sup> thinks that housing difficulties experienced by mothers with intellectual disability somehow result from their professional situation as only one mother was employed. Economic inactivity of the participants leads to the situation where they are dependent on their parents or partners. It is essential that the women with intellectual disability who participated in Zawiaślak's study did not want to take up a job or obtain new

qualifications which could possibly help them find a job in the future.

Zawiaślak<sup>16</sup> also wanted to observe whether the quality of life of mothers with intellectual disability is influenced by such elements like marital status or the number of children. The group of juvenile mothers demonstrated that a decision to establish a relationship had been dictated by the very information of pregnancy.

However, as the author states, these relationships have been short-term. These women very often get involved with new partners and have children from non-marital relationships. When analysing the situation of major mothers, it becomes visible that the relationships that they establish are mostly marital. Despite numerous problems being encountered in everyday life, the women from this group live in happy families.

According to Zawiaślak<sup>16</sup>, on the basis of the number of children born to the participants, it can be stated that "the fertility rate of these women is high." All participants were satisfied with their motherhood and expressed their wish to have more children. The author notices that only 2 women who became mothers before reaching 18 years of age performed the role of a parent improperly. As a result of consequent neglect, these women's children were placed in custodial care centres.

Another essential element of Zawiaślak's<sup>16</sup> analysis concerns the participants' self-perception with regard to the role of a mother. The research shows that 19 participants positively perceived themselves as mothers. The participants believe that motherhood is an amazing experience that abounds in pleasure and satisfaction. Offspring play an essential role in the lives of these women who cannot imagine current life without them; although almost all participants stressed that their maternity was unexpected.

Zawiaślak<sup>16</sup> states that the disabled women, when asked about problems and difficulties in satisfying the role of a mother, enumerated only the problems that they had encountered during the first months of their children's lives. They did not see any obstacles in bringing up their children at the time of the study. However, Zawiaślak<sup>16</sup> thinks that such opinion of the participants may prove "low awareness of the women's children's needs, as evidenced by their neglect of the evident signs of developmental disorders in these children".

Zawiaślak<sup>16</sup> notices a significant discrepancy between the participants' opinions with regard to the concepts concerning their own future as well as the future of their children. The women from the group of major mothers, when talking about the future, focused mostly on the plans concerning their children in financial and intellectual aspects whereas the second group of mothers showed greater care devoted to the housing standard and household equipment as well as a wish to increase the family budget.

In her conclusion of the research, Zawisłak<sup>16</sup> states that women with intellectual disability that participated in the study are characterised by difficult financial situation which translates into their poor living conditions. What is more, these women do not feel the need to take up a job. The pregnancy in the case of intellectually disabled women is usually unplanned, which may prove the lack of knowledge concerning contraception and fertility. The participants highly evaluate themselves and their competence as parents which according to the author is not so much reflected in their current situation.

Another interesting study on motherhood in women with disabilities was conducted by Bartnikowska, Chyła and Ćwirynkało<sup>23</sup>. The authors conducted qualitative research on the possible difficulties experienced by mothers with intellectual disability. 13 women with intellectual disability encountered barriers in proper fulfilment of the role of a mother participated in the study. The intellectual disability of 11 of them was moderate whereas the rest of the women were diagnosed with mild intellectual disability. Their age ranged between 18 and 40 years.

According to the authors<sup>23</sup>, it is also worth noting that the majority of the participants (10 women) did not have parental authorities at the time of the study. What is more, the considerable number of participants remained in non-legalised partnerships. The disabled women that participated in the study had graduated from special vocational or primary school and their current financial situation was poor.

The key research problem raised by the authors<sup>23</sup> concerned a desire to understand “the threats to disabled women's opportunity to fulfil the role of a mother in Polish society”. In order to gather data, the authors used the method of the analysis of the documents.

The research conducted by Bartnikowska, Chyła and Ćwirynkało<sup>23</sup> shows that the fact of being an intellectually disabled person was not a dominant reason for depriving the women of parental authorities. According to the authors, the reasons may lie in: financial difficulties resulting from the lack of permanent paid job, housing problems of the participants, lack of support of the beloved ones, problems with alcohol, conflicts and physical violence towards children. Moreover, the authors stress that most intellectually disabled women that participated in the study rejected help and support offered by professionals.

The following conclusions were drawn having analysed the documents. There are many threats that the participants encounter in their everyday lives. These difficulties do not primarily result from their intellectual dysfunction. According to Bartnikowska, Chyła and Ćwirynkało<sup>23</sup> many of these difficulties may be avoided by providing the disabled mothers with support from various institutions. Hence, the authors wonder why so many intellectually

disabled women are still being deprived of their parental authorities despite so many forms of professional support.

Another qualitative research study worth analysing was conducted by Lizoń-Szłapowska<sup>24</sup>. 25 women with intellectual disability who were leaving a day-care centre participated in the study. The author stresses that most women were single parents. Only a few participants had husbands or partners. Most participants' partners were intellectually disabled. The author also emphasises that the financial situation of the participants is difficult due to the lack of qualifications and willingness to take up a job.

The objective of the research conducted by Lizoń-Szłapowska<sup>24</sup> was to “learn the context in which disabled people function with regard to their social roles, making it a measurement of the levels of their adaptation and socialisation”. In order to gather data, the author used the research techniques of observation and the analysis of individual cases.

The conducted study shows that the fulfilment of maternal tasks by intellectually disabled women is most importantly influenced by the experience drawn from a generational family. What also plays an essential role is an environment in which the participants were brought up. According to the author, in many cases it was the closest environment where the participants experienced physical and sexual violence as well as negligence. Lizoń-Szłapowska<sup>24</sup> sees adapting such kinds of behaviour in contacts with their own children as a consequence of the above. However, the author suggests that the very fact of staying in a day-care centre cannot be associated with current maternal difficulties. Moreover, the analysis of the data gathered by the author indicates that the quality of motherhood in women with intellectual disability also results from the kind and length of the mother's relationship as well as the financial situation of her partner.

When looking at the issue of the care provided to a child, the author stresses that “it is taken instinctively and the role of a mother in the case of intellectually disabled women is situational”. It leads to child's hygienic, medical and educational negligence<sup>24</sup>.

Lizoń-Szłapowska<sup>24</sup> distinguished a range of conclusions on the basis of the conducted analyses. The participants did not receive specialist professional assistance from specialists. Although they lived in a day-care centre, they were not informed where and what support they could receive. According to the author, their knowledge on contraception and its application is almost non-existent. Moreover, the intellectually disabled women demonstrate serious lack of knowledge and skills associated with being a mother. The author particularly emphasises that the disregard for the issue of motherhood in intellectually disabled women is an example of intolerance and social ignorance towards essential issues. Although there are many discrepancies concerning motherhood and its fulfilment is very often

dramatic, there occurs a necessity to make this problem a subject to regional policy.

## Conclusion

When analysing the above-presented selected Polish research studies, we can identify that women with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities take up the role of a mother. This issue, as mentioned by Kaniok<sup>25</sup>, Parchomiuk<sup>2</sup>, Żyta<sup>19</sup> and Janiszewska-Nieścioruk<sup>10</sup>, is extremely important, though difficult and multifaceted. The above-discussed studies elaborate only on selected elements of the activity of intellectually disabled women in Poland. However, it is clearly visible that motherhood in women with intellectual disability involves numerous difficulties and problems.

The main barriers which hinder proper functioning of disabled mothers, based on the above-discussed empirics, include: poor financial situation, housing difficulties, unemployment, being in non-marital partnerships, poor knowledge on sexuality and procreation, bad patterns drawn from generational families, disturbed contacts with the nearest family. According to Żyta<sup>19</sup>, Kornas-Biela<sup>26</sup>, Dmoch-Gajzlerska Mazurkiewicz<sup>27</sup> and Ćwirynkało, Żyta<sup>28</sup> the problems that arise in the context of parenthood in intellectually disabled people should not be directly associated with low intelligence quotient. M. Parchomiuk<sup>2</sup> adds that “parenthood may be stressful for every person, regardless of the level of their cognitive functioning”.

Undoubtedly, according to Parchomiuk<sup>2</sup>, Ćwirynkało Żyta<sup>28</sup> and Janiszewska-Nieścioruk<sup>10</sup>, the following elements also influence the fulfilment of these roles: social attitudes towards procreation of intellectually disabled people, lack of prior sexual education and relations with a child's father. However, Kornas-Biela<sup>26</sup>, Ćwirynkało Żyta<sup>28</sup> and Parchomiuk<sup>2</sup> believe that the most important factor is the lack of sufficient assistance and support provided by both the closest family and specialists.

Intellectually disabled women, as stressed by Ćwirynkało Żyta<sup>28</sup> and Parchomiuk<sup>2</sup>, should be provided with support starting from their early education, in the form of classes on sexual needs and procreation. According to Długołęcka<sup>30</sup>, sexual education of disabled people provided from their early age will contribute to “a positive discovery of one's own sexuality, broadening self-awareness with regard to these issues, learning the responsibility for one's own sexual life”. Kornas-Biela<sup>26</sup> and Kijak<sup>29</sup> notice that it is extremely important to take care of intellectually disabled women during pregnancy. The authors mean both mental support provided by the beloved ones including the child's father, as well as healthcare personnel.

According to Parchomiuk<sup>2</sup> and Ćwirynkało Żyta<sup>28</sup> after giving birth to a child, an intellectually disabled mother should have the opportunity to cooperate with social assistants and take part in classes during which she will gain new essential knowledge and skills broadening her current

maternal experience. M. Parchomiuk<sup>21</sup> writes that providing help to women with intellectual disabilities in the role of motherhood should cover the following aspects: “increasing parental self-efficacy, self-evaluation of parents; a sense of control over one's own life and confidence in one's own ability; developing social competencies; raise awareness of potential sources of support”

Summing up, it is necessary to stress that motherhood in women with intellectual disability undoubtedly involves many difficulties. Many barriers which intellectually disabled mothers encounter in their lives do not result from their intellectual dysfunction. Therefore, providing the women as well as their children and partners with adequate support poses a challenge for specialists. Hence, it is undeniable that extending the area of assistance provided to women with intellectual disabilities will contribute to improving their fulfilment of the role of a mother.

## References

1. Chodkowska M., Family and professional roles of disabled women, *Disability and Rehabilitation*, **3**, 6-25 (2005)
2. Parchomiuk M., Adulthood of people with intellectual disabilities- selected aspects, *Disability and Rehabilitation*, **4**, 12-23 (2005)
3. Kornas- Biela D., Family in the process of procreation, In Stala J. and Osewska E., Family- priceless gift and task, Radom, Polish Encyclopedia Press (2006)
4. Bartosz B., Motherhood experience, Autobiographical analysis of narration, Wrocław, University of Wrocław Press (2002)
5. Sadowska M., Experience of motherhood in context of an intellectually disabled child-analysis of narration, *Humanistic Sketches*, **1**, 119-132 (2017)
6. Bojarska A., Conditioning of motherhood of the blind and visually handicapped women, In Janocha W. and Zielińska- Król K., Femininity and disability, Lublin, Catholic University of Lublin Press (2015)
7. Kościelska M., Difficult motherhood, Warsaw, WSiP Press (1998)
8. Górnicka B., Parenting disabled- it is possible?! Case analysis, In Brągiel J. and Górnicka B., Parenting in a situation of disability and neglect, Opole, Opole University Press (2014)
9. Kirenko J., Sexuality of women with disabilities, In Janocha W. and Zielińska- Król K., Femininity and disability, Lublin, Catholic University of Lublin Press (2015)
10. Janiszewska-Nieścioruk Z., Respecting and enforcing the sexual rights of people with disabilities - a burning, unresolved problem, In Gajdzica Z., Person with disability in public space, Cracow Impuls Press (2013)
11. Borowska-Beszta B., Ethnography of lifestyle of the culture of adults with disability living in Toruń, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun Press, Toruń (2013)

12. Ćwirynkało K., Borowska-Beszta B. and Bartnikowska U., Masculinity and Intellectual Disability- a Review of Theoretical, *International Journal of Psyche- educational Sciences*, **5**, 2 (2016)
13. Górnicka B., Some aspects of the functioning of people with disabilities in parental roles, *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska Sectio J Peadogia- Psychologia*, **28**, 1 (2015)
14. Ciaputa E., Król A., Migalska A. and Warat M., Motherhood of Women with Vision or Hearing Impairments and Physical Disabilities, *Sociological Studies*, **2**, 213 (2014)
15. Wołowicz-Ruszkowska A., How polish women with disabilities challenge the meaning of motherhood, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, **40**(1), 80-95 (2016)
16. Zawiślak A., The quality of life of adolescent and adult mothers with intellectual disabilities, In Janiszewska-Nieścioruk Z., Spheres of life of people with intellectual disability, Cracow, Impuls Press (2005)
17. Nowak-Lipińska K., Psychosocial aspects of marriage of the intellectually disabled with the able-bodied, In Rzedzicka K. and Kobylińska A., Adulthood Disability Contemporaneity On the border of special education, Cracow, Impuls Press (2003)
18. Grutz M., People with intellectual disabilities as partners, spouse and parents- research reports, In Cytowska B., Adults with intellectual disabilities in labyrinths daily, Torun, Adam Marszałek Press (2011)
19. Żyta A., Marriages and parenthood of intellectually disabled people- modern challenges, *Adult Education*, **2**, 59-71 (2013)
20. Kijak R., The need for love in the context of the sexuality of adults with intellectual disabilities, *Disability and Rehabilitation*, **4**, 39-51 (2011)
21. Parchomiuk M., Sexuality of people with intellectual disabilities, Cracow, Impuls Press (2016)
22. Podgórska- Jachnik D., Problem of fatherhood in the context of disability from a scientific perspective, In Rydzewski M., I'm father, Warsaw, Foundation open your eyes Press (2013)
23. Bartnikowska U., Ćwirynkało K. and Chyła A., The difficulties of woman with intellectual disabilities on the way to keep custody of their children and fulfil the roles of mothers, *Disability Discourses of Special Education*, **13**, 40-53 (2014)
24. Lizoń- Szłapowska D., Motherhood of women with intellectual disability in own research, In Gajdzica Z., People with disabilities in social space, Cracow, Impuls Press (2009)
25. Kaniok P., Disabled parents- an overview of foreign research results, *Disability and Rehabilitation*, **3**, 66-73 (2013)
26. Kornas-Biela D., Social attitudes towards marriage and maternity of women with a disability, In Janocha W. and Zielińska-Król K., Femininity and disability, Lublin, Catholic University of Lublin Press (2015)
27. Dmoch-Gajzlerska E. and Mazurkiewicz B., Preparation of women with disabilities for procreation and motherhood, *Disability and Rehabilitation*, **4**, 93-98 (2011)
28. Ćwirynkało K. and Żyta A., A woman with an intellectual disability as a mother- the issue of support, *Disability Discourses of Special Education*, **18**, 113-127 (2015)
29. Kijak R., Perinatal care for a woman with intellectual disability, In Janocha W. and Zielińska- Król K., Femininity and disability, Lublin, Catholic University of Lublin Press (2015)
30. Długołęcka A., Meaning of gender category in rehabilitation of disabled people, *Disability and Rehabilitation*, **4**, 52-67 (2011).

(Received 12<sup>th</sup> November 2017, accepted 15<sup>th</sup> December 2017)