

~~Gender and Family~~

"The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state" - (Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 16).

There is a widely accepted and supported belief that the nuclear family, constituted of legally married parents raising their own biological offspring in an exclusive arrangement is the singular morally and socially desirable choice of adults and children alike. Although the concept of family is now widely contested there are a multiplicity of theoretical arguments as to why this belief is sustained.

Theoretical perspectives

Functionalist – believe that the traditional nuclear family is a natural unit and exists to maintain social order and is mutually beneficial to all. Marriage controls sexual behavior and ensures it is morally acceptable (i.e. heterosexual) and parents can control children. This arrangement meets the needs of industrial society.

Marxist – believe that the nuclear family is valued over the typical working class extended family to encourage material aspirations. This family unit is organized to reinforce passive acceptance of authority, hierarchy and inequality thereby keeping the working classes (Proletariat) under the control of the Middle/upper classes (Bourgeoisie).

Marxist feminist - the nuclear family benefits the powerful at the expense of the working class AND women's domestic labor enables the future workforce to be reared at little cost to the patriarchal capitalist state. The containment of women's sexual services and domestic labor within marriage ensures the male workforce is emotionally and physically fit. Keeping men satisfied at home detracts from frustrations caused by lack of power but results in compensatory behavior i.e. violence against women and children.

Western European welfare policies, underpinned by media conditioning, have historically favored those living in the traditional nuclear family, specifically reinforcing gendered roles within the family i.e. man as breadwinner and woman as Mother and housewife. Girls and boys are socialized into gendered roles from birth through television and books, clothes and hobbies, language and school.

Research suggests that across all family types Fathers treat children in a much more gendered way (Gross 2005).

Whilst many people throughout the Western world live in traditional nuclear families there is a discrepancy as to the benefactors of such an arrangement i.e. men fare better in marriage than women do. Recent evidence however suggests that men are more vulnerable to mental and physical illness in response to isolation and separation after marital/relationship breakdown. (Pantazis and Ruspini 2006):

- Women do the majority of domestic labor and childcare regardless of work outside the home, although men's contribution is increasing,
- Research indicates that whilst women's health deteriorates through marriage men's improves,
- Married women are even poorer than single women and lone parents (mainly women) are poorer still.

- Men's role as parent is viewed as inferior,
- Women are still subjected to an increased rate of domestic violence through marriage despite recent legislation,

One of the important indicators of gender equality in the family is the number of persons taking **maternity & paternity leave or parental leave**. The data from most European countries reveals similar trends: women take parental leave much more often than men do. In the United Kingdom, Czech Republic and Lithuania, 99 % of all parental leave is taken by women and only 1 % is taken by men. However, according to the law, parental leaves apply equally to the father and to the mother. In Austria, these figures are somewhat better (97 % for women and 3 % for men). Finland has a different approach to this issue: there is a differentiation between maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave. Statistics show, that all eligible women take maternity leave, while over 2/3 of the eligible men (or 68 %) take paternity leave in some form. However, statistics show that in 2004, out of all parental leave allowances only 3% was used by men, with 97 % being used by women.

Statistics, presented above demonstrate clearly, that majority of men are aware that they have a right to parental leave but prefer do not use yet.

The main factors discouraging fathers from staying at home to look after a newborn are **financial matter and stereotypes**:

1. Financial reasons

The gap between women's and men salaries is still quite big in most of the EU countries, and a benefit for parental leave is usually less than 100% of the salary (for example, in Lithuania it is only 70 %). Therefore, for family it is financially better, that mother is taking parental leave, and father is staying at work.

2. Stereotypes

The stereotypes of gender roles in family, work and social life need to be changed. Different projects, actions and measures need to be created and used.

The main challenge is to change the employer's attitude to the paternity leave and educational projects could help.

Measures need to be developed both nationally and at EU level to facilitate cultural change in men so that they become producers and not merely consumers of domestic labour. These should include compulsory teaching on gender issues at primary and secondary school level, the development of positive role models for men doing domestic labour in the media, and incentives via employers and tax breaks to encourage men to take on proper care responsibilities for dependents.

Currently, experts of gender studies and family sociologists pay a considerable attention to masculinity studies and the phenomenon of fatherhood. The improvement of women's situation in society is inevitably related not only to the exposure and celebration of women's experience, the social visibility of their problems and strategies of their empowerment in the public sphere but also to the transformation of the meanings of hegemonic masculinity and the redistribution of power among genders in society. The findings of masculinity studies demonstrate that in contemporary societies the role of men in family life and particularly in childcare becomes a more significant part of masculine self-realization than ever before. In Western Europe, an increasing number of men actively participate in child care, use their right to paternity leave and easily accept career ambitions of their partners. It

can be argued that because of these facts women and children have not encountered more problems. On the contrary, men's participation in family life strengthens their relationships with partners, creates a closer emotional bond with a child and opens up new possibilities for women to contribute to the general social and economic welfare. In "new" European countries this process is rather slow, for example, in Lithuania only one percent of men use their right to paternity leave. Therefore, it is likely that the advantages of male participation in childcare are not yet fully realized and that male ability to be a good caretaker is still much doubted in the country. Without rejecting the basic idea of gender difference, we should not evaluate male care by the standards of female care. Male care is particular since it acquires a specific form and expression, and is no less valuable for the lives of children and other family members. If we accept male and female care without prejudices and complexes, male care may gradually transform the norms of hegemonic masculinity and open new spaces for masculine self-expression.

Research suggests this is a period of rapid social change and that the underlying trends are moves from homogeneity to diversity, from stability to change and from gendered parenting and male dominance to a more egalitarian arrangement.

WHAT ROLE DOES THE STATE PLAY IN SHAPING FAMILY LIFE?

It may be thought that the politician's chief concern is with the economy and provision of services. However the state does have the power to intrude into what we call our personal lives and it can be seen to regulate our personal behaviour.

"The state sets the framework within which couples live in a legal relationship called marriage, it determines the age of consent to sexual relation, it makes certain kinds of sexual relations criminal acts, it forbids or regulates the grounds on which abortions can be undertaken legally. The courts set precedents and rules which determine what happens when a marriage breaks up. All of these functions profoundly affect the quality of people's lives and are part of social policy" (Glennister 2000:137).

In other words, the personal is political.

Welfare, tax policies and legislation have historically favored married couples but moves towards embracing equality through legislation and policy e.g. Discrimination Act, Equal Pay Act, divorce legislation, increased availability of contraception, decriminalizing of homosexuality, New Deal for Lone Parents, Civil Partnerships Act, Adoption legislation and Tax Credits have enabled Families (largely women) to make more choices. The new Commission for Equality and Human Rights emerging from the Equality Act 2006 promises to provide a more comprehensive protective and supportive mechanism for issues of inequality and discrimination. However discrimination and oppression (including benevolent oppression) persist ensuring that appearance, traits, roles and responsibilities ascribed to women are consistently undermined and marginalized in comparison to typically masculine attributes and roles.

WHY THE CHANGES?

- Increased divorce rates (the vast majority of petitions are instigated by women),
- Less stigma attached to different family choices e.g. cohabitation, same sex relationships, children without Fathers, elected childlessness,

- Women have more economic freedom so are less dependent on men,
- Legislation and policy reforms give women more power e.g. Domestic Violence Act, Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit (as outlined above),
- Advances in reproductive technologies,
- The effects of globalisation resulting in exposure to different cultural norms in relation to family.

WHY THE CONCERN OVER ONE-PARENT FAMILIES?

- Lone parenthood had had an increasingly high profile as the focus of research and policy over the last forty years, partly because lone parenthood has been increasing steadily,
- According to the 2001 UK census there are currently 1.8 million lone parent families and over 90% are headed by women, a statistic mirrored by other European countries.
- Between 1991 and 1998 the proportion of all families headed by a lone parent rose from 18% to 20%.
- Between 30 and 40% of all children will spend part of their life in a lone parent family,
- Lone parenthood is not a static state and every year 12% of single mothers remarry or partner it.
- Although often portrayed as young the average age of a single mother is 35,
- Lone parents are not an homogenous group but represent a diversity as rich as any other family.

Lone parents (women) have been maligned of late by press and politicians alike for being the root of many societal problems particularly anti-social behavior of young (working class) people. The popular conceptions of lone parent's families being welfare dependent and non participant therefore punitive policies are geared at getting people back to work rather than valuing the unpaid (women) work in childrearing. The reality of the situation is that lone parents and their families disproportionately experience poverty and this is gender related. Rather than perceive lone parents as the problem it is more helpful to society to view lone parents as being more vulnerable to problems, particularly the financial burden of raising children. The discrimination and judgments that lone female parents are subjected to are of course exacerbated if the woman is black, disabled or lesbian and the complexities of multiple oppressions are known only to those individuals who are exposed to this prejudice and ignorance, which is clearly evidenced in contemporary academic texts.

CONCLUSIONS

The shape of the family is changing across the world and it is no longer appropriate or constructive to view family as one-dimensional. Families are diverse and shared experience, acceptance of difference and respect and are key values in any progressive society. Gender is a social construct, it is used to maintain and justify men's dominance over women across all dimensions of society. Women are not pre-disposed or able to cook, clean and care than men are to protect, provide and punish. .

There have been many positive moves towards equalizing the position of men and women in Europe through legislation and policy in all spheres of public life, however change appears much slower with regard to family life. Sex role stereotyping is particularly entrenched in the private domain. It is time for higher levels and institutions to embrace and support diversity in family life for the benefit of all.

THE FUTURE AND THE ROLE OF PARTICIPANTS

Silverstein and Auerbach (2003) offer a definition of the post-modern family as "two or more people who share a relationship created by birth, marriage or choice". They suggest that we are in a period of transition whereby we are struggling to detach ourselves from gendered ideology around family, despite the fact of us living lives that clearly do not conform i.e. struggling to manage gendered roles in our own families, same sex couples, single parent families, extended families, reconstituted families etc. Gender inequality in the family appears a particularly stubborn problem and must be tackled on all levels. The representation of and support for a diverse range of home situations and family life will offer both men and women the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

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