

Meeting the challenges of the 21st century: Social change and the family

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Abstract: The article recounts major changes in the European family and challenges it creates in accounting and supporting families. Fragility and diversity of family relationships, individualization and shrinking size of households are seen both as a result of change in the system of values and the processes of economics. Statistical tools used to assess the family dynamics increasingly become inadequate to monitor and interpret the change and situation in families. Statistical figures also construct the way families are imagined in policies. Fertility, marriage and divorce rates are connected to reproductive functions of the society while employment figures feature the productive needs in societies. Europeans thus not only face the actual change to families but also have to deal with problems of understanding it.

Keywords: family; social change; marriage; divorce; fertility; employment

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Family has been regarded as a taken for granted basic unit of society. Supporting families has also meant strengthening the society and its reproduction. The structure of the family has been changing during the last 50 years inviting not only new interpersonal relationships within the family but also new forms of family support. However, it is not clear how to focus the support on the proliferation of new forms, diversity and ruptures within family.

On the one hand, empirical data has shown decrease in the stability of families and partnerships, but it also points at a greater diversity and flexibility of family forms. As Eurostat (2015) report shows, all EU member states show decrease in marriage rates and increase in divorce rates. At the same time, as the report indicates, researchers experience methodological problems addressing families based on just marriage and divorce rates, as many EU member states have alternative to marriage regulations of partnerships. Eurostat (2015) also notes that the EU lacks a unified analytical definition of the family in all member countries. Families can be based on marriage or alternative forms - civil union and partnership regulation which may apply to all couples or homosexual couples only.

Additionally, Europeans are undergoing a fundamental change in family patterns delaying the creation of the family and birth of the first child and have more unstable partnerships. Also, a greater share of childrearing takes place outside formal marriage, in single parent families or in step-families (Bianchi, 2013).

However, these changes take place at a different pace and are captured at a statistical level without allowing to see diversity behind the average numbers. Understanding and interpretation of change in families, on the other hand, manifests in family policies. Europeans regard family policy as a national level concern and employ different types of policies. Olah (2015) statistically analyses changes in family in the EU countries using a cluster classification based on certain regional welfare policy criteria (referring to Thévenon, 2011 and Esping-Andersen, 1990):

- *Scandinavia* (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). the Social Democratic welfare regime promotes universal social provisions, dual-earner families and gender equality;
- *Anglo-Saxon countries* (United Kingdom and Ireland) with the Liberal welfare regime gives preference to market-based solutions regarding welfare provision;
- *Western Europe* (Belgium, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) with the Conservative welfare regime supports traditional gender roles and focusses on reconciliation of work and family life;
- *German-speaking countries* (Austria, Germany and Switzerland) are seen as Conservative but exhibiting less support for women's participation in labour market;
- *Southern Europe* (Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain) employ a family-centred welfare policy with limited provision to families;

- *Central-Eastern Europe* (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) are placed within 'Transition Post-Socialist' and combine a variety of policy approaches.

The classification based on policies demonstrates European regional differences in interpreting family support, however, it often proves to be relevant when changes are analysed, showing different pace and degree of the change.

Fewer and later children, childlessness

The Baby boom of the 1950-1960s was followed with decreased fertility rates in Scandinavian, Western European and German-speaking countries while Southern Europe and later Anglo-Saxon and Central-Eastern European countries followed the trend in the 1980s (Olah, 2015, p. 3). Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries recovered their fertility rates in the 1990s becoming a high fertility region in Europe while in Southern Europe and Central-Eastern Europe fertility rates remained low (ibid, p. 4). The changes are associated also with increasing age of mothers at birth of their first child (EU Demography Report, 2015, p. 12). The gap in fertility rate is partly explained by postponement of birth and average later age of mother at birth of their first child no longer means fewer births later. According to Eurostat (2019), in Scandinavian countries and Ireland both the total fertility rate and the mean age of women at the birth of their first child were above the EU-28 average while in Latvia, Lithuania, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Romania, Slovenia the United Kingdom and Iceland total fertility rate is above EU average, mean age of mothers at first is lower. In Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Malta, Poland and Slovakia both the total fertility rates and mean ages of women at the birth of their first child are below the EU-28 averages while Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Austria, Portugal and Finland, Switzerland exhibit higher than average mean age of women at first birth but a lower total fertility rate than the EU-28 average. Olah (ibid, p. 5) points at another factor - polarization of fertility when some groups of women remain childless but other may bear many children: as a result childlessness is high in Anglo-Saxon countries, Finland and Netherlands where total fertility rate remains comparatively high but Central European countries exhibit both lower level of childlessness and total fertility rates.

Change in intimacy: Postponement of marriage and more unstable relationships

Another change concerns the rise in births outside of wedlock (in registered partnerships, among cohabiting couples and to lone parents) and the seeming weakening of importance of marriage institution. As with birth rates, the age at first marriage has increased. Across the EU Member States the age at first marriage has been increasing over the past 20 years (EU Demography report 2015, p. 41) having also impact on marriage rate. While in the 1960s European women married in their mid-twenties, in the late 1970s, early 1980s the average age started to increase reaching early thirties (Olah, 2015, p.7). These changes started later in the Soviet bloc countries where average age at first marriage before 1990s was early twenties and started to rise after the fall of the Iron Curtain (Olah, 2015, p.7). The differences in pattern suggests that ideologies and economic formation of capitalism and socialism have had impact on family patterns.

The wave of decrease in marriage rate started in Scandinavia in late 1960s, followed by German speaking countries, Western Europe and Anglo-Saxon countries in the mid-1970s and Central- Eastern European countries in 1990s but Southern Europe in the early 21st century (Eurostat 2018a). As the EU Demography Report (2015, p.39) suggests, the crude marriage rate in the EU-28 has decreased by half since 1965 (from 7.8 per 1000 persons in 1965 to 4.2 in 2011) with lowest rates in Bulgaria, Slovenia and Portugal (3.0-3.1 per 1000 persons) but highest in Lithuania, Cyprus and Malta (6.9 -6.1 per 1000 persons).

Average age at first birth is becoming lower than that of the first marriage first in Scandinavian countries in the late 1970s, other EU country clusters following later (Eurostat 2018a, 2019). However, the change has started earlier and does not seem to be solely linked to the economic formation and ideology– as Latvian data suggest, the difference in the average age of women at first birth and at first marriage starts to decline already in the 1980s, accompanied by a weakening of the pressure to enter marriage after first pregnancy (Putniņa et al., 2015, p.53). Currently Latvian couples enter marriage when they expect their second child which also signalizes about the stability of their relationship (ibid.). Cohabitation is widespread in Scandinavian, Western Europe, Austria, the UK but less common in Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. It is on rise since the early 2000s in Southern Europe, becoming more common in Spain and Portugal and Italy (Olah, 2015, p.8).

According to Eurostat data, in 2017 France (59,9%), Bulgaria (58,9%) and Slovenia (57,5%) has the highest proportion of children born to unmarried parents while it remains low in Greece (10,3%), Croatia (19,9%), Cyprus (19,1% in 2016). As Eurostat (2018c) notes, the out of wedlock birth rate is on rise in Mediterranean countries in the 21st century - eightfold in Cyprus, trice in Malta and Italy; 2.5 times - in Spain, Greece and Portugal. The rate has stabilized in Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon and Baltic countries.

It is not clear what impact cohabitation bears to family patterns – those can be a stage of relationship before marriage (also in Latvian case (Putniņa et al, 2015) and also a conscious choice of alternative forms of partnerships.

Regardless the form, families seem to become more fragile across Europe. Divorce rates start to increase in Scandinavia, Western Europe and the German-speaking countries since the 1970s in Central-Eastern Europe in the early 1980s and Southern Europe in the early 2000s (Eurostat 2018a). In Scandinavian, Western European, German-speaking and Anglo-Saxon countries about half of marriages may end in divorce while in Southern Europe and Central-Eastern European countries it is about one third of marriages. However, the statistics only partially describe the stability of families there as many families are based on cohabitation.

Several EU member states have shown efforts to mediate the changes using policies. Research on conservative marriage popularisation policies in Austria (Cherlin, 2003, Furstenberg, 2007) shows that targeted policy support has not had any significant sociological impact of family structure and family development. Most of the EU member states accommodate the changes recognizing alternative forms of cohabitation (however with different entitlements) while some try resisting them. Six EU member countries and all of them younger member states – Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Bulgaria, Rumania and Slovakia have not passed any alternative regulation in relation to heterosexual marriage partnership regulation despite relatively high birth rate outside marriage in Bulgaria (58,9% in 2017), Slovakia (40,1%), Latvia (40,4%) and average rate in Rumania (30,3%), Poland (24,1%) and Lithuania (26,7%). (See http://europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/family/couple/registered-partners/index_en.htm.)

A historical approach to changes in partnerships and family structure dominates in academic sociological and anthropological research relating them to broader processes of modernity (Goody 1983, McFarlane 1986, 1988, Giddens 1992, Godelier 2012 and others). Giddens (1992) uses the concept of 'pure relationship' to designate situations 'when social relationships are formed for the sake of those relationships' and continue until it satisfies each of the individuals engaged. He (p. 58) argues that love and sexuality become increasingly associated with 'pure relationships' and not simply marriage. He extends the argument and field of 'pure relationships' not only to partnerships but also child-parent relationships and foster parenting (p.97).

Godelier (2012) looking at the French example reaches similar conclusions but stresses the changing relationship between the family and the state- while marriage is not the sole ground for creating family relations and kinship networks shrink in their size and significance, the role of the state increases with its participation in providing and regulating childcare and education services and prioritizing children's rights. Another aspect of change in family is that of authority - paternal authority declines and is replaced by mutual and negotiable family relationships.

Also, Second Demographic Transition theory sees changes in partnership and

liberation from traditional norms at the core of change but regards economic aspects as indirect factors (Coleman, 2013, p. 36-37). Scholars reporting on change in individual country case of Ireland (Canavan, 2011) stress the role of economic factors, poverty risks and migration patterns as well as change in the system of values inviting more diversity and equality; on Portugal, Wall and Gouveia (2014) note experience growing individualization, introduction of dual earner's model and pluralization of values, but also the importance of friendship-family bonds.

Shrinking size of households and more lonely old age

Currently the average size of private households in the EU-28 was 2.3 persons in 2016, ranging from larger households in Croatia, Poland and Slovakia (2.8 persons) to smaller in Denmark, Germany, Finland and Sweden (around 2 persons in average) and around 32.5 % of Europeans live in single-person households (Eurostat, 2017). The proportion of households with children is decreasing and in recent decades households with children tend to have fewer children (OECD, 2011). According to Eurostat (2018b) the highest proportion of households with children is found in Ireland (40%), Cyprus and Poland (both 37%), Slovakia (36%), Portugal and Romania (both 35%). The lowest proportion is registered in Germany and Finland (both 22%), Bulgaria (25%), Austria (26%) and Sweden (27%).

The increase in the proportion of divorces involving children has contributed to an increase in sole parenthood over the past few decades (Chapple, 2009). 16.0 % of the total number of families in the EU-28 in 2011 were single parent households. Most of them- 13.4 % of all families are headed by mothers and 2.6 % by fathers (Eurostat, 2017).

Eurostat (2017) shows that women (18.4 %) more often than men (14.1 %) live alone and points at two reasons – women outliving men in old age, and young women more often than men choosing to leave the parental home. According to Eurostat (2017.) 14.1% of all private households in the EU-28 in 2016 were composed of single-persons aged 65 years and over. CPA report (2014) speaks of 'care gap' - fewer children, mobile structures of family, smaller size of households combined with longer lifespan makes care of the elderly in the family problematic when it is needed.

Other type of households - extended households with more than two adults (with or without children) comprise 20-44% of Central-Eastern European and 27-36% of Southern European households. The lowest share of this type is found in Scandinavia, Western Europe and Germany. Again, this category includes a varied range of structure – adult children living with their parents for different reasons. Research conducted in Latvia shows that mother-daughter tandems living together, and rising children extend for already several generations allowing to compensate

unstable partnerships, escape poverty risks and provide childcare arrangements but mothers would still regard themselves as single (Putniņa, 2011).

Reconciliation of family and work: Women enter labour market

The delay in creating families is related to women entering labour market and having higher level of education and careers (OECD, 2015). However, this change mostly concerns Western Europe, as women's employment has been a lasting pattern in the Soviet bloc countries and declined only in late 1980s due to economy shortage to rise again in the late 1990s.

Women earn on average 16% less than men per hour (European Commission, 2018, p. 17). As EIGE report (2018, p.60) notes, gender pay gap does not disappear despite the equal pay legislation for more than three decades. Moreover, it affects also pensions, savings and quality of life. The main reason is the segregation of labour market and higher pay levels at men dominated sectors, glass ceiling effects for women (ibid.). Additionally, women are much more likely to be employed part-time compared to men. When looking at both paid and unpaid labour hours, women work in average 6 hours more per week (European Commission, 2018, p. 9).

The employment gap has most impact on mothers and women who take care of adult family members – those comprise 19% of inactive women in the EU (European Commission 2018, p.10). So, the average difference between employed women with children under age of 6 and women without children 9% but in Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary as high as 30% (ibid.). Moreover, mothers with three or more children have even lower labour force participation with exception for Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Greece and Slovenia where the gap is relatively smaller. Work at home is not equally shared- so, couples with the youngest child under 7 spend unequal time for paid and unpaid work - women spend on average 32 hours per week on paid work but 39 hours on unpaid work, while men - 41 hours in paid and 19 hours in unpaid work per week (European Commission, 2018, p.12).

Women's employment in paid labour influences well-being and security of families, child poverty risks and quality of life at retirement age of women, especially at times when partnerships are becoming more unstable. Factors like family income, family structure, and maternal depression, as Jackson et al. (2017) point, are each highly correlated with child well-being which invites new forms of support to families.

Family policies: From economic growth to quality of childhood development

Though family support policies are a national concern, families become a concern of several policy sectors – employment, social and gender equality policies with the economic growth being the leitmotif. The Lisbon Strategy (2000) set to raise women’s and older workers’ employment rates but did not reach its targets (European Parliament, 2010). However, it promoted several family support related initiatives – the Barcelona European Council in 2002 set to provide childcare to at least 90 per cent of children aged 3 and to 33 per cent of children below age 3 by 2010 (European Commission, 2013). The ‘Barcelona objectives’ also have not been achieved. For the younger children formal care is available in Scandinavia, Portugal and Slovenia but German-speaking, Southern and Central-East European countries (also countries with the low level of maternal employment and fertility) lag behind the targets (European Union, 2018). Council of Europe Strategy 2020 (2010) focuses on 1) mobilizing the demographic potential of the EU countries, increasing the quality of life; 2) increasing employment rates and productivity, calling for better balance in work/family/private life. The document also addresses migration and better integration of immigrant labour force. It continues the trend putting emphasis not only on greater involvement of women and older workers in labour market but also seeing early formal childhood care and education as the means to influence child development independently of parents’ socio-economic background.

Difficulties in reaching the EU targets are related to different national agendas and emphasis on family support. Thevenon (2011) characterises six typical and overlapping family support directions in OECD countries:

1. alleviating poverty and increasing family income level. This is the main instrument in Anglo-Saxon and Southern European countries and use universal or low-income families targeted families;
2. compensation of childcare expenses (but not targeted on low-income families);
3. support to employment, especially women’s employment, targeted at economic growth. The instruments used are paid childcare leave, providing elastic childcare services and supporting tax benefit system for working parents;
4. supporting gender equality direction is aimed at balancing work/parenting share between both parents, especially encourage father’s participation in childcare activities via paternity leave;
5. support to early child development both by means of parenting and formal early child education institutions;
6. facilitating increase in fertility rate.

The support much depends upon the way families are seen, ranging from

welfare to instruments in labour market provisions and nation building. EU policy documents see the provision of childcare support, reconciliation of work, personal and family life as means of revitalizing aging labour market. There also have been other efforts for standardizing family support setting minimum requirements for maternal and parental leave. The EU Pregnant Workers Directive (Directive 92/85/EEC) sets minimum provisions for maternity leave of 14 weeks (Poland and the UK provides up to 52 weeks) but in the Czech Republic, Croatia, Poland, Spain and the UK it can be transferred to fathers. The EU Parental Leave Directive (Directive 2010/18/EU) requires at least 4 months of leave per parent.

Also, other broader initiatives like Istanbul Convention (Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence) or EC Victim's Rights Directive (2012/29/EU) requires setting minimum standards of protection often requiring changing national legal regulations, focusing on households and family relationships as well as establishing a comparative statistic for policy monitoring and evaluation.

Along with economic growth and employment related concerns over social equality, poverty and development of a child comes to the agenda. OECD Family Future 2030 report foresees following changes and challenges to family policy which should be solved: increase of single parent families, families based on unregistered partnerships, recombinant families that can create higher poverty risk; higher share of single adult households create pressure on housing availability; increase in the share of families without children, divorce and remarriage rate can lower the capacity of childcare capacity of the families; as well as concern that increase in share of working mothers also can decrease childcare capacity of family. The report thus signals a move from economically centred to view to a more child-oriented perspective.

Conclusion

The change in families here is explored at statistical level which mostly focuses on data depicting production in and reproduction of society. As I have argued, the statistics is not a neutral model for registering situation but also provides a model for perceiving family within the context of fertility, marriage and divorce rates. However, the change in the family which is caused and mediated both by economic conditions and changes in values and lifestyle requires also a change in broader cultural comprehension, including that of statistics.

European societies react differently to the change which seems to encompass the whole Europe at a different pace. Statistical correlations, for example, between higher fertility rates and better childcare provisions outside family, do not seem to be a convincing argument outside the countries which pioneer childcare opportunities. Also, acknowledgements of economic benefits of dual earner's system in families

and women entering the labour market, individual benefits for greater economic independence and choice of the partner and partnership is recently coupled with the concern for children's welfare and development in the family. Marriage and divorce increasingly become an inadequate tool for measuring partnerships as those do not encompass all forms of partnerships, but fertility rates - to represent the position of children. All these controversies show that European societies should comprehend the structural change and learn how best to support these changes.

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