

# Technical Commission on Family Allowances

Children in new family structures  
Changes in family structures in the world and  
adaptation of family policies

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## Changes in family structures in the world and adaptation of family policies

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### ***Abstract***

*Changes in family structures in the world show that families are extremely diverse. Above all a cultural phenomenon, the family is the profound reflection, in its structure and functions, of a people's history and culture. The diversity of the family is the subject of this present report. What can we possibly find in common between the traditional Asian family, the extended family in Africa, the increasing importance of single parenthood in South America, the demographic decline of part of Europe and demographic stability in the United States?*

*This approach, continent by continent, is simplistic in itself because within one continent, or even within one country, the differences remain considerable.*

*Should this be a reason not to try and identify elements that are common to all families of the world? Certainly not. The facts are:*

- *world-wide demographic change is accelerating even faster than the United Nations predicted as little as ten years ago;*
- *urbanization, the most obvious product of economic development, is upsetting the traditional family both in its structure and functions, leading for the greater part to individuation of its members;*
- *still subject to constraints, women are nevertheless acquiring new rights, in particular through a longer period of education, which delays the age of marriage and reduces the importance of fertility;*
- *ageing of the world population, already crucial in the developed countries, will become a world-wide phenomenon.*

*Family policies are also very diverse.*

*What is there in common between simple health measures with regard to pregnancy, policies of more equal redistribution of income through family allowances, and certain large-scale demographic policies? Not to mention civil family law, that encompasses certain sociological changes.*

*What this means is that at the very least there is no country today that can state that it does not have a family policy. At the very least, the family code and civil law express a cultural or certainly a political view of the family.*

*The family may be said to some extent to be emerging from its far-reaching collective sub-consciousness and to be heading towards new limits of freedom for each of its members. This goes some way to explaining its manifold forms.*

*But the State, if only for reasons of social cohesion, has no option but to provide family support. This can relieve the government of many purely curative policies. In this sense, social security cannot escape the responsibility of carrying this new social liberty and being concerned with it in all phases of family life.*

*In the International Year of the Family, in 1994, the family was seen by the United Nations as the smallest entity of social democracy. This present report, based on major research projects, sets out to describe the evolution of the family in the world over the last 10 years. The changes have been profound, with doubtless more similarities than differences, from country to country and continent to continent.*

*Everywhere we find diversity of form and of the structures underlying and controlling the family. The family is a multiple concept not only at the level of cross-continental comparison, but also within each country and within each region. The first thing we have to do is simply accept that diversity.*

*Even so, we have to take into account the fact that over the last ten years other undercurrents have been exerting their global influence. They completely upset the structure of the family, or at least cause it to change. It is not up to us to say whether these changes are positive or negative. What we must do in the first instance is record them and try and evaluate the policies intended to match these changes in family structure.*

*Apart from the diversity of the situation and the changes that have taken place, it clearly emerges that there are a number of elements that to a large extent explain the evolution in question:*

- *Generalization, even if in varying degrees, of demographic transition. This is not to say that we are here seeking to "explain" the family by demography, merely to indicate that we cannot avoid demographic considerations in any analysis of family policies.*
- *Economic development (or the lack of it). Under this heading, and doubtless in a rather too simplistic way, the point to note here is the phenomenon of urbanization as the economic indicator with perhaps the most influence on the evolution of family structures.*
- *Increasing significance of the status of women and children. As far as the latter are concerned we do not have enough data to set out our arguments in an objective scientific manner, with relevant statistical indicators. On the other hand, with regard to women we can emphasize significant progress world wide in their education, which is a fundamental factor in postponing the age of marriage and improving birth control.*
- *Ageing population. Longer life expectancy (except in some countries ravaged by war or AIDS) is already leading the so-called developed countries to pose the problem of dependency and of the fourth age.*

## Changes in family structure

### Changes in fertility

The most significant demographic change world-wide since the end of the 1970's has been the falling birth rate, dropping from 4.5 children per woman to 2.8 in 2003.

Thirteen per cent of the world population currently live in countries where the birth rate is very high (more than 5 children per woman), 47 per cent of men and women live in countries with a high birth rate (between 5 and 2.1), and 40 per cent live in countries where the birth rate is below the threshold of generation renewal.

The decline in fertility is evident almost everywhere in the world. Between 1960 and 1990 it fell by 52 per cent in Asia, 55 per cent in Latin America, 15 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. The extent of this drop is even greater than the estimations made by the United Nations in the 1950's.

Three phases of demographic transition may be distinguished, each corresponding to advances in local policies:

- Pre-transition: The birth rate is falling from over five children per woman. Few countries in the world are still at that level today.
- Transition itself: This usually takes place in the decade following pre-transition. Most of the world population is in this phase.
- Final transition phase: Stabilization or a falling population, mainly affecting the developed countries.

Forecasts with regard to the world population quote 7.2 billion inhabitants by 2015, 7.9 billion in 2025, (of which 4.7 billion in Asia) and 8.9 billion in 2050. Europe will have 632 million inhabitants in 2050 compared to 726 million in 2002. Asia will have a population of 5.2 billion (3.8 billion in 2002), Africa 1.8 billion (851 million in 2002) and North America 448 million (326 million in 2002).

This forecast is lower than that of 1990 because of more rapid ageing of the population, a more significant fall in the birth rate and an increase in mortality (mainly due to AIDS).

### Advancement of women despite continuing constraints

The World Conference on Population held in Cairo in 1994 pointed up the essential role played by women in questions of population control, depending on their degree of freedom in deciding on the number of children.

The importance of male-female agreement in conception practices becomes an essential factor. In all the African countries, according to demographic and health information, there is a significant fall in polygamy: in the 1990's it varied from 28 per cent in Ghana to 52 per cent in Togo. In 1998 it varied from 4.5 per cent in Ghana to 7.5 per cent in Niger.

### Urbanization and changes in family structure

There are many reports underlining the link between a family model and urbanization. The most urbanized countries have a lower birth rate than other countries.

In the towns we note that developments take place very differently from the country, where access to public amenities, schools, offices, hospitals and modern facilities is more difficult. New aspirations for their children and new more equal behaviour between couples are transforming family organization, balance and rhythm and also behaviour with regard to birth control, particularly for the young generation of middle class city dwellers.

## **Ageing population**

The average global life expectancy is 65 years, compared to 50 in 1950. It may rise to 75 in 2050, 82 in the developed countries and 73 in the developing countries. The fact that the world population is getting older is observed everywhere: the world median age of 26.4 years in 2000 will rise to 36.8 by 2050.

## **Family policies: Importance and diversity**

Since the 1960's policies for birth control, support for couples to make free choices in their family planning, contraceptive methods and programmes for protecting children have become general throughout the world, with different rhythms and approaches.

Even though policies that may be called family policies differ in their content, form and range, in all countries they form a focal point of government social and environmental thinking.

## **Africa**

There are ethnological surveys describing the complex family relationships between men and women. Demographic health surveys and the World Fertility Survey (WFS) carried out on the initiative of the United Nations confirm the progressive fall in the high rates of fertility and mortality. However, the spread of AIDS is upsetting all the trends: life expectancy in South Africa was at 62.7 years in 1990 and 46.6 in 2003, with similar differences in Central and East Africa, and greater differences in North Africa and West Africa.

Family structures, the situation of women and cultural habits all contribute to the effects of contamination. In Senegal, the rate of infection is only 0.5 per cent as in Ile de France, because women marry later and because of preventative efforts on the part of the government. In southern African countries and in South Africa, 20 per cent of adults are affected, increasing mortality and, as a result, the number of orphans, stray children and delinquents. Schooling for women and inner-city education are helping to control these phenomena; young girls are given health education and lessons in AIDS prevention, contraception and child care and home economics. These, together with professional training and employment, delay the age of marriage.

In the Muslim Arab world marriage retains its quasi-universal nature. In the family there are two contradictory trends: some countries (Saudi Arabia) allow polygamy and the practice of Islamic law; others (Morocco) place the family under the joint responsibility of the married couple. Some countries encourage women to stay at home and to have large families. Others, generally the poorer countries, try to persuade women to have fewer children.

There are contrary trends showing the presence of women in jobs like teaching, health, administration and industry, thereby reducing the numbers of their children. In 2000 women had an average of 3.4 children, compared to 7 in 1970: 3 in Egypt, 2.7 in Algeria and

Morocco, 2.2 in Tunisia, 1.9 in the Lebanon in 2003. Girls have the same level of education as boys: 80 girls for every 100 boys reaches secondary education, influencing behaviour with regard to marriage (they negotiate with their parents) and the number of children they have. But men migrate more frequently to find work.

## **Latin America**

With a high percentage of single-parent families, low instance of marriage, and fewer children per family, the families of Latin America have also become strongly urbanized, in spite of weak indicators of development.

In Mexico for example, pro-birth policies between 1930 and 1970 tripled the population, of whom half are under the age of 15. A national population programme slowed down natural growth to 100 million inhabitants in 2000 instead of 153 million. Measures to postpone the age of marriage and promote contraception and sterilization have resulted in an average number of 2.4 children per woman instead of 4.5, changing family structures. Many men have emigrated to the United States, leaving their wives and children in Mexico.

In Brazil, the average number of children per woman was 2.2 in 2003, compared to 6 in 1960. 30 per cent of the population is aged under 15; men marry at 28, women at 26. Fertility drops dramatically after age 33 whereas up until 1970 women were still having children up to the age of 45. Forty per cent of women, often poorly informed, have suffered rather than requested sterilization and 20 per cent a form of contraception. From 1980 to 2000 there was a decrease in the number of large families set against an increase in nuclear families and single mothers with children or living with their parents. The growth in the number of single-parent families has been accentuated by divorce and separation. Together with this change we find great poverty amongst children: 75 per cent of children and adolescents in some regions.

In Paraguay and Bolivia, families are very large, especially in rural areas, where there are no contraception programmes; women had an average of 4.2 children in 2003. Infant and adolescent mortality remains high. In Colombia and Venezuela 33 per cent of women aged 35 are married, 35 per cent live together with their partner. One person in five over the age of 40 is divorced. There are numerous extra-marital births, abandoned children or children dependent on public assistance.

In Argentina, women have an average of 2.5 children. The country is characterized by a high number of single women with children and single men wishing to emigrate. Life expectancy in 2003 was 79.2 years for women and 71.5 years for men. The trend is towards reduction in the size of families, later marriage and wider use of contraception.

## **North America**

### **The United States**

In the United States, the threshold of generation replacement allows a bigger average family than in Europe. There is a natural surplus in the order of 1.6 million births per year and immigration of 1 million persons per year. Life expectancy in 2003 was 80 years for women and 74 years for men; over age 65 represent 13 per cent of the population, compared to 15 per cent in Europe, and under age 15, 21 per cent of the population compared to 17 per cent in Europe. The birth rate is 14 per thousand compared to 10 per thousand in Europe. Women have an average of 2.1 children, against 1.4 in Europe.

Eighteen per cent of households are single-parent. Marriage is becoming less popular and more children are born outside of marriage. Having said this, children whose father has shared their education with their mother since birth still see their father. These changes do not apply to black and Hispanic mothers, who are more often isolated. Each community keeps to its traditions with regard to the family.

## **Canada**

In Canada, a life expectancy of 83 years for women and 77 for men, together with very low child mortality (4.9 per thousand) demonstrate the high standard of living in a country which is undergoing a revolution with regard to family behaviour. Large families, families of several generations, and extended families have disappeared in favour of singles, couples without children and single-parent families. In 2001, the average household had 3.1 persons and women had 1.6 children (1.4 in Quebec). Forty-four per cent of families have two children, 28 per cent have 3 or more, 27 per cent are single-parent, of which 32 per cent divorced, 24.6 per cent separated, 23.4 per cent widows, 19.5 per cent single. Thirty per cent of couples co-habit and between 57 and 65 per cent of children are born outside of marriage. One couple out of 2.4 divorces. 30 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men of a fertile age choose sterilization to enjoy their sexuality without having children. There is a growing number of abortions. Canada is threatened by an ageing population and counters this with immigration.

Government policies on the family are criticized by the people, who consider that they are too "money-minded", too much aimed at low income families, and do not invest enough in the development of children. One proposal is to put in place a universal family allowance which is the same for households without children as with children.

## **Asia**

In China, the revolution proclaimed equality between men and women and union by mutual consent. Families in rural areas are extended, young couples living with their parents and sharing their resources. Women have an average of 2.5 children, the most important thing being to have a son. The urban family is nuclear and has one single child or none at all. The elderly live with their children, or turn and turn about (so-called "roving" families) helping with the housework and bringing up the children.

Japan had a tradition of the different generations living together, but since 1960 the nuclear family has developed in the cities, living in a tiny apartment with the man going out to work and the woman staying at home and taking care of the children. Since 2000 there is a tendency for the generations to live separately. Marriage takes place at a later age. Seventy per cent of mothers with a child under the age of 3 do not work. The average number of children per woman is 1.33. Japan is planning to re-launch a fertility programme and to give social assistance to the elderly.

The so-called New Angel Plan contains provision for removing the sexist division of roles, arranging conditions at work to enable women to bring up their children, improving health and social conditions, creating reception centres for young children, promoting public education around the dream of having a family, and improving housing and the environment to make a better place for people to live. South Korea is following the same trend; similarly Taiwan and Singapore, where the number of children per woman was 1.3 and 1.4 in 2003.

In India things vary depending on cast, religious practice, income, whether they live in a city or the countryside and which State they live in. A high proportion of babies are male; infant mortality varies from 15 to 112 per thousand. The number of children per woman went from 6.1 in 1961 to 3.1 in 2003, varying from 4.8 to 1.9 depending on the region. Families of two children and both parents working are more and more common. The family remains patriarchal, the family network deeply religious, and marriage a matter of strategy. Fifty per cent of women are married at age 20, use a form of contraception and are under the strict social control of their husband, in-laws and the village. In poor social or rural areas girls do not go to school.

Vietnam and Thailand suffer the same contradictory effects of the traditional influence of the patriarchal family, male superiority, a high birth rate and sexist division of roles. The number of children per woman was 2.3 in 2003. Thailand, influenced by tourism, is characterized by western-type nuclear families, as well as widowed and divorced. The villages remain composed of large patriarchal families. In 2003 women had an average of 1.7 children.

Indonesia (population 220 million), Bangladesh (147 million) and Pakistan (149 million) have a very low gross national product. Seventy per cent of couples have an arranged marriage where the woman is illiterate and very young, ten years or so younger than her husband. Nevertheless the average number of children per woman is falling from 4.4 in 1980 to 2.5 in 2003 in Indonesia, 6.5 to 4.8 in Pakistan and 4.99 to 3.10 in Bangladesh. Illiteracy amongst women is dropping to 42 per cent; 64 per cent of females aged over 12 work, and boys are better educated than girls.

## Five European zones

Three groups of countries may be characterized by the proportion of social spending that goes on children and family allowances: 10.5 to 13 per cent in North Europe; 8.8 to 10.5 per cent in West Europe and 2.1 to 7.6 per cent in South Europe.

- The Scandinavian countries may be seen as a laboratory of social change and changes in family structures and family policies since 1930. Between 1970 and 2002 the average age of marriage went from 23 to 30.1 years. Divorce affects one marriage out of two; 56 per cent of children are born outside of marriage. The number of children per woman dropped from 2.42 to 1.65 in Sweden, 2.95 to 1.72 in Norway, 3.72 to 1.93 in Iceland.

Seventeen per cent of the population in Sweden is aged 65 or over, 18 per cent are under 15. The institution of co-parenthood encourages fathers to take paternity leave from the time of their child's birth to encourage joint responsibility, prevent separation or in the case of separation guarantee that both parents take care of the children. One family in five is single-parent. One child in four aged under 17 experiences the separation of its parents.

- West Europe – Germany, France, Austria, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom – went through "the transition of all the demographic family components" five years after North Europe. The fertility rate fell from 2.03 to 1.48 in Germany and from 2.47 to 1.93 in France; the number of marriages fell and the number of births outside wedlock and of divorce increased (one marriage out of three or even out of two in the cities). There was also an increase in the number of single-parent families, especially in the United Kingdom, with very young mothers.

The average household consists of 2.1 persons; the proportion of families with four children went from 20 to 4 per cent in a single generation. The number of working mothers with at least one child under six is very high: 82.4 per cent for example in France.

- In South Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece) women migrate in large numbers to the North, where they often go into domestic service; and on returning to their countries they take with them a new concept of their condition. In Spain fertility fell from 2.8 in 1975 to 1.2 in 2003 and in the same proportion in Italy, Portugal and Greece. Young people often remain living with their parents, by contrast with the North where they move into their own accommodation. Marriage is on the decrease and divorce on the increase. There are very few nurseries or kindergartens. In order to be able to go out to work, women have fewer children.
- East Europe is characterized by early marriage and by families with several children in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia, and by smaller families in Hungary, the Baltic States and Czechoslovakia. Pro-birth policies cover maternity and paternity leave, family allowances in proportion to the size of the family, crèches and kindergartens and family planning. Between 1960 and 1990 the average number of children per woman fell nevertheless from 2.34 to 1.84 in Romania, 1.14 in the Czech Republic and 1.3 in Estonia. Average fertility in the 11 countries concerned is 1.2: one of the lowest fertility rates in the world. The high level of education, high unemployment and emigration provoke separations in couples and families. In Estonia 56 per cent of births in 2003 were outside of marriage. The rate of divorce is 0.46.
- In Russia the birth rate fell from 1.9 children per woman in 1990 to 1.3 in 2003. 29.5 per cent of births were outside of marriage. 700,000 children each year live in a single-parent family. Life expectancy is on the decrease: 59 years for men, 72 for women in 2002. Amongst young people there are 41.9 suicides for every 100,000. The rate of marriage fell from 8.9 in 1990 to 6.2 in 2000. One marriage in two ends in divorce. There are three million abortions per year.

## Conclusion

Finally we might ask what is happening, at the international level, about adapting family policies to the changes in family structures. Although very diverse they certainly constitute a regulator and a powerful adaptation factor in family life.

That family policies are diverse is hardly surprising since family structures in themselves largely remain so. Yet family structures are everywhere present, in more or less explicit form, though with objectives that may differ.

It would be to have a very "western" and very limiting view of things to say that family policies are limited solely to the domains of financial benefits. In reality many countries have large-scale political projects concerning population and health. The same is true for educational policies, which are at the same time family policies having a strong influence on family structure and changes in the family.

We can therefore say that family policies do have certain universal features, even if these are more or less evident depending on the context: examples are demographic regulation

(supporting demographic transition or the wish to check the demographic downturn), child protection policies or measures aimed at a greater equality between men and women.

Looking at similarities around the world, the increase in single-parent families, which themselves take diverse forms, more or less everywhere calls for policies of financial or social support and assistance with job insertion.

The general question, which we ask in all humility, is whether with the emergence of more freedom for the individual (but conscious also of increased responsibilities) it is possible to move on to family structures that are more flexible and more voluntarily chosen.