

# Feminist perspective on the family



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**A Woman/s Place Was in the Home: Has Feminism Finished the Family?**

Government debates and some religious discourse harks back to what Finch (1989) has described as the myth of a golden age of the family. Various studies on the family tend to suggest that in Western societies family forms have differed depending on wider social events such as the Industrial Revolution and also demographically. In England for example, family patterns in rural areas and in poor areas differ from those in more affluent areas. In poorer areas families are more likely to involve wider relationships such as grandparents and aunts and uncles. During the nineteenth century the idea of the nuclear family became the most prevalent. This is what is often referred to as the traditional family and the source of what have been called traditional values. It is this family form that has attracted the most criticism, especially from feminists. Even without a feminist critique there have been widespread experiences of changes in the UK and other Western countries during the last forty years concerning marriage, household, and family forms. These are changes that would have been unimaginable before the Second World War (Giddens, 2001). People wait longer before getting married and more people are less likely to marry than used to be the case. What has been called second wave feminism began in the 1960s. Many of its opponents argue that it is feminism which has led to a drop in the number of marriages, greater divorce rates among those who do marry, and a consequent rise in the number of single parent families. Before the late 1960s having a child out of wedlock was still a source of great social shame but during the closing years of the twentieth century the number women who had children but were not married continued to rise. Figures available for 1997 indicate that at that time this group made up 42% of all lone parent

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households (Social Trends, 2000). Although feminism has been cited as the cause of such changes, this criticism is based on the view that the 'traditional' family was an eternal form until women challenged this view.

This paper will begin with a definition of key concepts. It will then look at the concept and history of the family. It will examine the notion that a woman's place was in the home until the advent of feminism. It will look at different family forms and then assess whether feminism has brought about the end of traditional ideas of the family.

## **Family**

Murdock 1949 describes a family in the following way:

*The family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of sexually cohabiting adults* (Murdock, 1949). [1]

Family forms vary across societies but theorists maintain that the most prevalent form is the nuclear family described below. Larger family units are referred to as extended families.

## **Feminism**

Women have argued for equal rights with men since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) wrote her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Other women followed in her stead, the most famous being the Pankhurst sisters and the suffragettes who fought for women's right to vote (Abbott and Wallace, 1997). Modern feminism began in the 1960s with the work of

American writer Betty Frieden (1965) and this has come to be known as second wave feminism. Alister McGrath (1993) has written that,

*Feminism has come to be a significant component of modern western culture. At its heart, feminism is a global movement working towards the emancipation of women. The older term for the movement- 'women's liberation'- expressed the fact that it is at heart a liberation movement directing its efforts toward achieving equality for women in modern society, especially through the removal of obstacles-including beliefs, values, and attitudes- which hinder that process (McGrath, 1993: 111).*

## **The Concept and History of the Family**

The family is the primary place of socialization and the place where children are introduced to the norms and values of a given society (Talcott Parsons, 1951). Parsons work referred to what has come to be known as the nuclear family. Nuclear families consist of parents and children living together, family members ostensibly provide mutual love and support. It is this support that enables individual family members to contribute to society and lead productive lives (Giddens, 2001). In the nuclear family one of the adults is employed outside the home and there should be an unrestricted sharing of income (Cheal, 1991). Theorists such as Murdock (1949 cited in Giddens, 2001) have argued that traditional concepts of the family are to be found in all societies and that the family is a necessary and central institution in society.

Whether one regards traditional notions of the family as being pertinent to all societies depends largely on how the family is defined, certainly it might

be argued that the nuclear model is no longer the norm in contemporary society. Willmott and Young (1957) undertook what has come to be regarded as one of the most important studies on the sociology of the family in Britain. The work investigated families and family life in East London during the 1950s. The study was undertaken at a time when housing policies and greater financial rewards meant that when a couple married they were able to set up home on their own. Increased geographical mobility also meant that many young couples lived a good distance from their families. As a consequence of this and the fact that more women were working outside the home it was argued that the division of labour in the home was changing, as more women went out to work so men would take on more domestic chores. Willmott and Young (1957) believed that the family would become a more democratic institution where work, finance, and family responsibilities were shared. Willmott and Young maintained that with the passing of time the family would become more symmetrical i. e. that the changing nature of men and women's roles would mean that their family roles would become interchangeable (Abbott and Wallace, 1997). Feminists challenge this view Walby (1990) maintains that the family is still a site of oppression for women and that this is the place where their roles are perpetuated. Furthermore, feminist writers such as Abbott and Wallace (1997) have argued that the nuclear model of the family is too narrow. They also claim that such a concept neglects the fact that not all family members experience life in the same way, or receive equal measures of support. Goode (1963) argues that social systems such as the family, are powerful agents of control because to some extent their existence is founded on force. Within social systems such

as the family this is often unrecognized, because it is hidden it is effective.

Gittens (1992) is of the opinion that in modern Britain:

*Ideals of family relationships have become enshrined in our legal, social, religious and economic systems which, in turn, reinforce the ideology and penalise or ostracise those who transgress it (Gittens, 1992, p. 74) .*

## **The Family and Ideology**

In pre-industrial society most of the household chores were undertaken by children. There was little distinction between home and work, the private and public spheres, families generally worked the land and they did this together.

The rise of industrialization and the growth of the towns brought massive changes to what had constituted the family and family life up until that time.

Oakley (1981) maintains that the coming of the factories replaced the family as the unit of production. In 1819 the Factory Act was introduced and this resulted in the growing dependence of children, and also to women's increased dependence on men and their restriction to the private sphere.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries there was a growing resistance to the employment of married women as wage earners. This was because working women were perceived as threatening to male employment and so there was pressure to keep them at home (Hacker, 1972). The nineteenth century witnessed the embedding of gender roles which were epitomized in men's idealisation of the feminine. Women were seen to be both physically and emotionally weaker than men and therefore not suited to the same roles. The following is a rationalization for men's idealistic views of women and why they were confined to the home.

*No woman can or ought to know very much of the mass of meanness and wickedness and misery that is loose in the wide world. She could not learn it without losing the bloom and freshness which it is her mission in life to preserve* (Quoted in Hudson, 1970: 53-4).

Victorian ideology said that women were created to help men and this became the rationalization for their confinement to the home. To start with this primarily affected the middle classes, as the century progressed, however, the working classes were also subjected to this ideology. Oakley (1981) maintains that this had the effect of locking women into the housewife role, further cementing the growing ideology of gender roles. Murdock (1949 in Giddens, 2001) argued that gender roles are the natural result of the biological differences between men and women. Such differences, he maintained, made the sexual division of labour the most sensible way of organising society. This view became endemic in society and has affected much Government policy. When Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 the Conservatives were calling themselves the party of the family. They maintained that people should be discouraged from cohabitation or from homosexuality and supported the patriarchal nuclear family where the father was the person to enforce behavioural standards. Even though single parent families, extended families and reconstituted families were becoming more prevalent at the time these were not regarded as the norm or as desirable (Abbott and Wallace, 1997). Barrett and McIntosh (1980) have argued that ideas centred on a man being able to earn enough to support a family benefited the capitalist economy and the working man at the expense of women. They maintain that this idea of a family wage

is still embedded in society and has been a major aspect of women's inequality with men. The idea that a man was entitled to earn a family wage but women were not has meant that women have, (and still do in a number of areas) earn less than men. Furthermore, the low pay which accompanies what is often termed 'women's work' means that women's choices are restricted and their economic power within marriage has been reduced.

## **Changing Work Patterns**

Even though there had been widespread resistance towards women working outside the home Oakley (1981) maintains that this began to change after the first World War, and between 1914 and 1950 the number of women working outside the home showed a steady increase. In spite of this their primary role was still seen in terms of being a housewife. Since the 1960s women have been struggling to achieve participation in paid employment which is equal to that of men. This has been the case for women from all walks of life (Abbott and Wallace, 1997). These struggles resulted in the introduction of the Equal Pay Act in 1970 which meant that women were entitled to the same pay as men if they were doing the same job. In 1975 it became illegal under the Sex Discrimination Act to discriminate against women in education, in employment, and in the provision of goods. The European Court demanded a strengthening of the Equal Pay Act in Britain in 1982. This was followed by a further amendment in 1984 which allowed that women were entitled to the same pay as men in their organisations providing they could prove that their work involved the same kinds of decision making and skills as their male counterparts. Women should have equal access and an equal chance for promotion. Some jobs were regarded



as outside the confines of the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act e. g. only women could work in a women's refuge (Haralambos et al 2000).

## **Feminist Criticisms of the Family**

Since the 1970s and 80s the main sociological focus on families has been concerned with the experiences of women and children, furthermore, the highlighting of these experiences has generated a growth in awareness that the family is an ideological form that does not always work in everyone's best interests. Feminists have highlighted the fact that for centuries women have been the subordinate sex in society and that this subordination is largely a result of their biology i. e. the fact that they have been born women rather than men. Feminists maintain that there is a disjuncture between women's experiences of being in a family as wives and mothers and ideologies of domesticity. For a long time many women have felt extremely dissatisfied with the role ascribed to them once they are married and it was this dissatisfaction that Betty Friedan (1965) was seeking to express when she referred to the experience of American housewives in the 1960s as suffering from 'the problem that has no name'. For some women the ideal of family life is seen as desirable, but their experiences within their own families, falls far short of that ideal (Stanley and Wise, 1983).

The gender roles that women have been assigned are constructed on the basis of this biological difference rather than such roles being innate (Abbott and Wallace, 1997). Gender roles are socially constructed and reinforced through the family and the education system. This is done through the different ways that authority figures have of relating to boys and girls, and the fact that there is a tendency to give girls dolls and tea sets, and to give

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boys toy cars and construction sets (Firestone, 1971). However, Connell (1987) has argued that this view tends to ignore the capacity of individuals to accept or reject the social expectations that are embedded in gender roles. Thus Connell maintains that boys and girls may choose elements from each others roles e. g. the tendency of some girls to become involved in competitive sports, and boys dressing in drag when alone. Connell (1987) has said that this may result in males and females building themselves a fantasy life that is in contradiction to their public actions, thus gender roles can be interchangeable. Feminists have also pointed out that gender socialization is evident in a hidden curriculum in the education system where books that represent males and females in ' traditional' roles reinforce the view that men and women have different paths in life. Until the late 1980s girls were less likely than boys to achieve the requisite number of A levels to enter university. In recent years the focus has tended to be on the growing underachievement of boys because girls are matching or exceeding boys across the curriculum and thus there are more women entering higher education. This does not, however, give them much advantage in the job market where they are disadvantaged in comparison with males who have the same qualification levels

(Epstein, et al, 1998). Despite these things Moore (2002), maintains that things are changing, men are taking on more domestic responsibility than they were 20 years ago and often have a much greater involvement with their children than in the past. This has gained official recognition through the introduction of parental leave. In the past, although mothers were entitled to maternity leave, fathers did not have paternity leave. Parental

leaves allows both parents to legitimate time off, however, unless men have sympathetic employers, this leave is unpaid and so often not taken. Changes within families has also meant (as mentioned earlier) that the structure of the family itself is changing.

As it has already been noted, women's subordination increased with the rise of industrialisation and the separation between public and private spheres (Oakley 1981). The continuing erosion of this distinction over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has been a significant factor in the changing nature of the family. There are a number of forces at work in the decline of what has been called the traditional family. Feminists have highlighted these changes while at the same time exposing the unequal power relationships that exist within society and within the family (Harding, 1987, Walby, 1986). They relate this inequality to the patriarchal nature of society. Rich (1976) has argued that patriarchy is a social and ideological system where men determine the roles that women should or should not play in society. Oakley (1981 and Pahl (1983) <sup>[2]</sup> have cited the division of roles, both within the family, and in the wider society, as a major site of oppression for women. Traditionally the man has been seen as the breadwinner once children arrive and this puts the woman at a disadvantage as research has shown that there is a relationship between money, power and inequality (Vogler, C and Pahl, J. 1999) <sup>[3]</sup>. Because the family has been seen as the primary site of socialization (Parsons, 1951), it is also a useful place for social conditioning where obedience to authority lays the foundation for the submissive workforce that capitalism requires. Delphy (1977) has argued that gender differences are socially constructed and they tend to serve the interests of

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the dominant groups in society. Delphy further contends that women should be treated as a separate class because the categories of man and woman are not biological, but political and economic categories. Therefore women form a class who are exploited by men, and this is particularly evident in the nuclear family. Thus, Delphy writes:

While the wage-labourer sells his labour power, the married woman gives hers away; exclusivity and non-payment are intimately connected. To supply unpaid labour within the framework of a universal and personal relationship (marriage) constructs primarily a relationship of slavery (Delphy, 1977: 15).

Marxist feminists argue that while Marxism may give an explanation of exploitation by the capitalist system it does not explain the inequalities between women and men, as Delphy (1977) maintains gender and sexual inequality should be the fundamental categories of feminist analysis.

Marxism alone does not explain for example why women should be seen as responsible for household tasks and capitalism could just as easily still profit if men stayed at home. The Community Care Act of 1990 has imposed further responsibilities on women in the role of informal carers, this places considerable stress on women's health, particularly as nowadays many women who have a family also work outside the home. Dalley (1988) argues that much Government's policy making, particularly the idea of community care is based on outmoded notions of the ideal family, where most married women do not go out to work, and b) it is the woman's duty to assume the caring role. Under such circumstances it is widely assumed that the caring that women do in the home is a natural part of women's role within the family even though many more women work than used to be the case.

## **Changing Family Structures**

Since the Second World War there has been a dramatic rise in women's participation in the workforce, although a lot of this has been part-time employment. The 1991 Census shows that the workforce was 47% women although there were regional and ethnic variations and single women are more likely to be employed than are married women. This is largely because women's participation in the labour market is affected by their domestic responsibilities (Abbott and Tyler, 1995). Many women spend time out of the labour market when they have young children and then may work part time while children are at school only returning to full employment when their children are older. Few women have continuous careers as a result of their domestic responsibilities. Although child care arrangements do have an effect on women's working patterns, lack of proper child care is not the only reason women do not participate more fully in the workplace. For example, while the number of women in work has continued to rise only a third of single mothers with young children are economically active (HMSO, 1999). This is due to the fact that, despite Government initiatives such as Sure Start Centres, most lone mothers do not have either sufficient extra support to return to the workplace, or can only take low paid work which may leave them worse off than they were on benefits. In addition to this the welfare system was formed on the basis that the traditional nuclear family, with a man at its head, should be the norm. It is not, therefore, set up to deal with the increasing number of single parent households (Moore, 2002). Government continued concentration on the notion of the traditional family, tends to make single parent families appear as deviant, when in fact this type of family has become more prevalent as have other family forms.

Gittins (1993) maintains that there are a wide variety of domestic relationships and that although relationships may be universal, they can take an infinite variety of forms. Besides the nuclear family there is the extended family, often a feature of minority ethnic groups. There are also many single parent families, whether through death, divorce or choice. Second marriages that often result in what is known as reconstituted families, e. g. where one or both partners have children from other relationships, are also becoming more prevalent. The last twenty years have also seen a rise in the number of people living together, or cohabiting, without the bonds of marriage. Different family relationships are also more evident due to the different ethnic groupings that now make up the UK (Giddens, 2001). Different attitudes towards those people who are not heterosexual has meant that an increasing number of gay and lesbian men and women now choose to live together as couples, and may or may not have children. <sup>[4]</sup> According to Hartley-Brewer (1999) contends that the family (as we have known it) is evolving, rather than the emphasis being on mother and father it should be on nurturing parents of whatever sex. It might therefore be argued that the home may soon cease to be the specific place for women and could become the place for dependent children and caregiver, who may not necessarily be a biological parent.

## **Conclusion**

This assignment has looked at the concept and history of the family and at feminist criticisms. As noted earlier an increasing number of families are matriarchal or matrifocal, this is often the case in Caribbean families. This has generated debates about whether fatherless families are the source of

an increasing number of social problems. Dennis and Erdos (1992) maintain that without adult examples of the proper conduct in relationships the children from families with absent fathers will not have the ability to become effective members of a social group. It is further argued that if a boy grows up without a father present then he will struggle to be a successful parent himself. Blankenhorn (1995) has argued that the high divorce rates of Western nations does not mean simply the absence of fathers from the home but the erosion of the idea of fatherhood, and that this will have lethal consequences. Fukuyama (1997) maintains that the roots of the disruption of society and of the traditional family can be attributed to the rising numbers of female employment. This, he argues, changes men's perceptions of women, they now perceive women as being more capable and independent and thus able to care for a child without a man's help. It is Fukuyama's (1997) contention that the emancipation of women can lead to the further abdication of responsibility by men. Clearly a number of social and historical forces have contributed to the changing nature of the family. Many of these forces have been highlighted in feminist work, whether or not feminism has brought about the death of the family is a matter of opinion. On the evidence presented above it might be argued that feminism itself was the result of social, historical, and economic processes and it is these processes, rather than feminism, that is changing our view of what constitutes a family.

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### Footnotes

[1] Quoted in Haralambos and Holborn, 2000: 504 no page given for Murdock quote.

[2] Cited in Abbott and Wallace 1997 *ibid.*

[3] Ditto

[4] Either through the adoption process, artificial insemination, or an earlier heterosexual relationship