

Families

A Summary of the Situation in Europe Today





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The consortium consists of the following 12 organisations:

- Technical University Dortmund (Co-ordinators)
- State Institute for Family Research, University of Bamberg
- Family Research Centre, University of Jyväskylä
- Austrian Institute for Family Studies, University of Vienna
- Demographic Research Institute, Budapest
- Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon
- Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milan-Bicocca
- Institute of International and Social Studies, Tallinn University
- Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics
- Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (COFACE), Brussels
- Forum Delle Associazioni Familiari (FADF), Italy
- MMMEurope (Mouvement Mondial des Mères-Europe), Brussels

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FAMILYPLATFORM - Social Platform on Research on Families

The project

FAMILYPLATFORM is a project involving twelve organisations working together to chart and review the major trends of comparative family research in the European Union (EU), critically review existing research on the family, attempt to foresee future challenges facing families, and to bring all of the results of this work together and propose a research agenda on families for the European Union.

The Lisbon conference

A key event of the project was the conference *Critical Review of Research on Families and Family Policies in Europe*, which took place in Lisbon on 25-27 May 2010. It involved over one hundred representatives of different organisations from scientific, policy, and civil society backgrounds, discussing and debating various aspects of family life in Europe. Afterwards, a comprehensive report was published detailing the discussions.



Families - A Summary of the Situation in Europe Today

Based on work charting current scientific knowledge of families in Europe and the Lisbon conference and report, this booklet presents the mass of information gathered so far into manageable chunks of information spread across eight thematic areas.

Numerous reports have been produced by FAMILYPLATFORM, though two documents are particularly relevant for readers wishing to quickly increase their knowledge about issues covered in this publication:

- *Research on Families and Family Policies in Europe: State of the Art*, prepared and edited by Marjo Kuronen at the Family Research Centre (University of Jyväskylä) in Finland.
- *Critical Review of Research on Families and Family Policies in Europe*, by Karin Wall, Mafalda Leitão and Vasco Ramos at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon.

We hope that this publication puts our current knowledge about the situation of families in Europe today on a stable footing, helping us to collectively move forward into the next phases of the project. All of FAMILYPLATFORM's reports are available to download from the website: <http://www.familyplatform.eu>.





Next steps

Future work of FAMILYPLATFORM involves outlining key challenges facing families in the future, and proposing a European research agenda on families and family policy. The success of the project relies on the input of others, and for this reason there will be further opportunity to have a say on our work.



1. Contemporary motherhood and fatherhood

Much has been made of new representations of partnership and parenthood, and it is certainly possible to identify common traits among the representations of maternity and paternity of young Europeans today.

However, there is a discrepancy between the ideals expressed by young women and men and actual practices in family life. Women continue to do a greater share of domestic and care work, and gender divisions often return to a more traditional model after birth of the first child. Fathers have become more involved in caring for their children, but this has

changed slowly and unevenly across social groups.

The division of work continues to be gendered, and although the male breadwinner model is increasingly being replaced by other models, the “dual carer - dual earner” society remains something of a theoretical concept in most of Europe. Female employment has increased rapidly over recent years, resulting in the care of children going from being a private matter to one in which governments are increasingly involved in developing out-of-family childcare centres and policies to reconcile work and family life.



Key policy and research issues highlighted by FAMILYPLATFORM include:



- The need for research from male and female perspectives, concerning gender roles before and after birth of the first child
- The need for policies and regulations that enable parents to choose between different leave and childcare arrangements
- Consideration of new kinds of leave that allow other family members to take leave for care purposes
- The need to take up reconciliation of work and family life as a political issue that requires services, and financial and time resources



2. Children's experiences and life-outcomes

As families undergo change across Europe, there is a need for greater understanding of the experiences of children and how their lives and outcomes are affected by different elements of their family life. These elements include family structure, education, parental working patterns, family break-up, experiences of living in poverty, the immediate living environment, and the effects of different kinds of childcare.

There is an ongoing debate about children's rights and parental responsibilities, but very little consensus or clarity on where these rights and responsibilities start and end. What is widely recognised is that the early years of a child's life are extremely important for the development of the future individual, and these are therefore issues that have to be understood by researchers and taken into account by policy makers.

Key policy and research issues highlighted by FAMILYPLATFORM include:



- The need for consideration of the different dimensions of family life in research, such as schooling, parenthood, social inequality, etc.
- Greater understanding of the impact of all types of media on the social, psychological, and intellectual development of children
- Understanding of how work-life balance and childcare arrangements affect the outcomes of children and adolescents

3. Changing family composition, structures and networks

Across Europe, family structures have changed at different rates and family forms have multiplied across Europe. Despite this, the family remains the main sphere of personal investment for both men and women.

An individual may experience multiple types of family life during the course of a lifetime, though it seems that the 'standard nuclear family model' with a married man and woman continues to be dominant and a normative ideal.

Especially in northern and western European countries however, the recent decline of the 'golden age of marriage' with high fertility and marriage rates, low divorce rates and an early start to family formation has been accompanied by an increase in less institutionalised relationships.

These alternative family forms have increasingly begun to replace the 'nuclear family', making it difficult to describe the European family using the touchstones that characterised definitions used in the 1950s. As a result, it is more useful to talk about "families" and "family life" rather than the European family *per se*.

Key policy and research issues highlighted by FAMILYPLATFORM include:



- The need to understand the effects of major demographic trends and new family living arrangements on family forms
- The need for research considering the consequences of policies on individual family members and on the family unit as a whole
- The need to move beyond an over-emphasis on the nuclear family and grasp new notions of family relationships, which may include a variety of different networks providing support and resources such as grandparents, relatives, friends and colleagues



4. Family relationships and family break-ups

While marriage rates have decreased, family break-ups and divorces have more than doubled across Europe since the 1960s. Contributing factors include increased participation of women in the labour market and associated increases in economic independence, increases in gender equality and the impacts of the feminist movement, and a process of secularisation which has led to a spread of cohabitation.

Research shows that the relationship between women's employment and divorce rates varies. In countries with greater gender equality, the economic independence of women has a positive effect on marital stability.

In countries with less gender equality, the increased presence of women in the workforce has a negative effect on marital instability; in these countries, it seems that it is the nature of marital relations rather than female employment itself that contributes to marital instability.

After the family break-up, women are at a much greater disadvantage than men in every country of Europe. Lone parent families, usually headed by women are amongst the most vulnerable to poverty. Many couples go on to form new families, and reconstituted families now make up a substantial proportion of families in Europe. They are also some of the most likely to have additional children.

Key policy and research issues highlighted by FAMILYPLATFORM include:



- The importance of the issue of non-payment or irregular payment of child maintenance
- The need to investigate policies and services that prevent family break-up, and protect and preserve both parent's connections with their children after break-up and custody proceedings
- Understanding of how different policies across Europe deal with family break-up situations, such as who receives family benefits, and the relationship this has on how parents decide on post-divorce living arrangements



5. Social inequalities and living environments

Key policy and research issues highlighted by FAMILYPLATFORM include:



- The need for a deeper understanding of the role of families in reproducing social inequalities
- The need for greater understanding of how policies can challenge or even retrench inequalities
- The need to highlight the important role of social transfers in reducing poverty
- The need for policies which give disadvantaged groups such as migrants the instruments and opportunities of breaking the cycle of poverty

Social inequalities and living environments shape family life. Families simultaneously transmit, reproduce, and resist inequalities, and living environments have a substantial impact on the wellbeing of families.

Close to twenty percent of Europeans are now considered at risk of poverty, and polarisations of wealth continue to increase. Certain groups, such as lone parent families, large families, and single elderly people are at particular risk of poverty. Over the last few decades, significant migratory flows have led to large groups of immigrants and their families being particularly vulnerable to both poverty and violence.

Much work has been done on developing ways of measuring poverty, material deprivation, and quality of life and there is now a widely recognised need to go beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP) when measuring the quality of people's lives. Despite this, there is still no agreed consensus on how to move beyond GDP, and much more work is needed to develop policies that improve local living environments and foster community development, so as to improve the wellbeing of families.

6. Family interactions and transitions

Families can be understood from the perspective of the myriad of daily interactions of family members, such as solidarity and conflict, and in terms of transitions from one life-phase to another, such as from childhood to adulthood or employment to retirement.

These perspectives enable researchers and policy makers to better understand how children and the elderly are actors in a family system, why decisions are made to have children or to postpone, and how these interactions and processes are all parts of transitions over the life-course of individuals. They might also shine a light on how family members develop their autonomy whilst retaining responsibility for their family's wellbeing.

Despite this, policies rarely treat families as dynamic units, and they often actively hinder transition from one phase of life to another.



Key policy and research issues highlighted by FAMILYPLATFORM include:



- The need for more research about the daily and biographical practices of being a family
- Recognition of the utility of the life-course perspective
- The need to understand family decision-making processes, and for policies to support transitions over the life-course and during critical life transitions, such as during family break-up

7. Care arrangements and social policies

Key policy and research issues highlighted by FAMILYPLATFORM include:



- The need for research focusing on how to best combine the interests of children, working parents and the labour market, to find quality care solutions for young children
- The need to know more about reform of long-term care policies and the sustainability of future care and pensions
- Understanding intergenerational support and solidarity from the perspective of the elderly, both as care givers and receivers
- The need for social protection of family respite carers
- The need for further research on the relationships between formal and informal care solutions

Since the mid-1990s, social care policies have transformed from a marginal to a core issue in social policy.

Across Europe, childcare can be described as “care going public”, and the main emphasis has been on the coverage levels of childcare services that allow for reconciliation of work and family life. Care for the elderly is also high on the policy agenda, though this is often discussed with reference to increasing demand for services and the need for different kinds of housing and changes in urban planning. Research does show, however, that elderly people are often the most consistent providers of support within families.

Many questions remain to be answered. To what extent are existing services reaching out to the most vulnerable groups? Is there a need for care and family policies to be more greatly integrated? How well would a ‘care leave entitlement’ or ‘time care insurance’ support family members over the life-course?



8. Family policies

Family policies developed later and more hesitantly than other social policies and have typically been treated as a cross-cutting issue amongst other policy areas. As a result, the impacts on families of government policies are regularly unintentional.

Many countries have never institutionalised a formal body dealing solely with families, and family policies are often accused of being at odds with the needs of families today. Furthermore, family policies should not be confused with pro-natalist policies: the former creates a favourable environment for families to have the number of children they wish for, while

the latter encourages couples to have children and afterwards often discontinues family support.

While most researchers today agree that the main differences in family policies can be found between southern and northern Europe, there is no agreement on whether they can be regarded as separate regimes. Indeed, research has demonstrated that there are often significant differences between countries of the same region, and even within countries where social policies are developed at the local level. There is a need for more family mainstreaming, and for the family dimension of existing EU competences to be taken into account.

Key policy and research issues highlighted by



FAMILYPLATFORM include:

- The need for a more up-to-date and reliable family policy typology taking into account moves towards the individualisation of social security rights
- The need to communicate research findings more effectively and for policy-makers at all levels to analyse the results of research
- The need to integrate the family perspective into overall policy making
- The need to consider creating regional EU action plans on the family and intergenerational solidarity
- The need for more explicit analysis of the real aims of family policies and their underlying ideologies

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