

General Introduction to Major Trends

The institution of family is a basic unit in the society, and the multifaceted functions performed by it makes it a much-needed institution in a society. Some of the important functions performed by the family include, reproduction of new members and socializing them, and provision of emotional and physical care for older persons and young. Family in fact, is an institution which resolves or eases a large number of social problems.

The term family had been defined by various sociologists and anthropologists. Murdock (1949), after studying over 250 multi-cultural societies defines family as 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 the sexually cohabiting adults. The “household” is said to be the “living arrangement” of such a family unit.

Haralombos and Herald (1997), define family as a procedure for socialization, economic activity and sexual activities that consists of two persons of opposite genders who will indulge in sexual activity at least for the sake of pleasure and would also consist of children and a group of decedents. Most definitions refer to family as a universal social institution, which is constituted of persons directly linked by “kin” connection where the adult members, assume the responsibility of caring for the children (Marsh et al., 1996).

Interconnectedness of individuals in family relationships through bonds of affection and/or obligation leads to joint decision making, budget – pooling, cooperative work roles and altruistic parenting within a framework of culturally accepted notions about the division of rights and responsibilities by sex and generational position (UN, 1996).

There are two main family types introduced by the sociologists. One is the nuclear family, which consists of two elders and their children. It is often referred to as the “immediate family”. Extended family is the other type. It consists of an old system of family performances with the close connections of two or three generations of relations, such as grand parents, husbands of sisters and wives of brothers, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews (Bilton et. al., 1996; Giddens, 1993).

Irrespective of the size of family, the institution of family can again be seen in two mutually exclusive categories, namely the family of orientation and the family of procreation. The family into which a person is born can be referred to as the family of orientation and the family of procreation is constructed by the adult individual who creates a family as he or she becomes an adult. In sociology, family systems are categorized by residence of the couple who formulate the family unit. For example, if a married couple moves to live with the parents of the bride or of her house with close proximity to her kin, such family is recognized as a matrilocal family, while the inverse of this model is identified as the patrilocal family (Giddens, 1993).

An accelerated creation of nuclear families occurred with the process of industrialization when large scale migration from rural to urban areas occurred largely among young adults who left the remote villages and the extended family system, seeking employment in urban centres, thus blurring their memory of extended family. Due to large scale occupational mobility of younger generations and the associated erosion of the extended family system, a host of new social problems and disorders emerged, paving the way for long term demographic implications, such as declining fertility as demonstrated by low birth rates in urban areas and increased age at marriage for both sexes. Thus the structure and functions of a nuclear family had a different form when compared to the extended family. According to Adoms (1986), as families move from being extended to being more isolated, nuclear and privatized the relationship between wives and husbands tend to become more egalitarian, with both partners working and sharing household tasks. Such a family is defined as “the symmetrical family” (Marsh, et al., 1996).

NEW TRENDS AFFECTING FAMILIES

Social changes together with reorientation of social values and increased participation of women in production of economic goods and services promoted functional and structural changes in the institution of the family. New patterns of marriages emerged superseding arranged marriages. A tendency on the part of younger generations, to overlook the consent of the “procreated” family for conduct of sexual behaviour; divorce and remarriage gained ground in most countries, especially in the Western World. Children born out of wedlock became a common phenomenon. Cohabitation became popular among the young generations (De Silva, 1998). Some of them tended to think of such sexual behaviour as some kind of pre-marriage experiment. As much as in Western European countries, this phenomenon is visible in Asian countries too (De Silva, 1998). This situation poses a strong potential to change the attitudes, particularly of the younger generation, who experience and experiment with the changes, causing a pattern of delayed marriage. A resultant outcome is the decline in birth rate. Another issue arising out of such situations is the absence of a legal heir for property if one of the partners met with an accident.

Overall increases in divorces almost in every region of the world from the 1960's is another important development in the demographic sphere. Two major reasons can be identified for this trend. New legislation had been enacted making the procedures associated with the act of divorce easier, to meet the newly emerging economic and development needs. The attitudes towards women and the social status of women underwent a change. Comprehension and conceptualization of gender equity and gender based discussions occurred during the period. Economic empowerment of women through employment tended to loosen their bonds to the patriarchal family and gave them the taste of economic independence. Women experienced a greater confidence to discontinue a bad relationship with a married partner.

Increases in divorce rates imply that the number of single parent families also increases. This situation severely affects the socio-economic conditions of families with

children which means that security, education and welfare of these children would hardly be met. Most frequently single parent families are headed by women.

Another new trend is the increasing number of childless families, improvement in social status of women from about 1970's, partly as a result of increased access to higher education and the labour force have changed fundamentally family roles. Newly married couples have greater choice, thanks to the availability of various contraceptive methods, to have fewer children, or to delay child birth until they have their careers well established.

As the number of children in families decrease the proportion of older family members increases. With this increase, the structure and functions attributed to various members of the family under go changes. Such a process places a burden on the wider society in the form of need for provision of welfare services for older persons, and the need for provision of more capital. Generally the family as a social institution provides lifetime emotional, social, economic and health support for each of its members. Therefore, the family has two different aspects in relation to the process of population ageing. First the family itself undergoes a transformation as a result of demographic changes, which are part of the ageing process. Second, the family serves as a buffer lessening the social and economic impact of population ageing on its members (UN, 1994).

Another thing is that the 'new' family life became much more home centered in various senses. The house had become a more pleasant place and people now had increased means with which to make themselves comfortable. Intra family relationship within the wider kin group were becoming less significant and the nuclear family household increased its importance. More and more home centric men and women could be identified in a significant way.

There is a need to identify various problems that emerged due to the changes in functions and the structure of the family unit. Reduction of emotional and physical support by the family would directly affect the personality development of children and their health. There are unmet needs of social security provisions and care for older persons, which result in additional social costs at macro-levels. These are key issues in the policy making process particularly in developing nations. There is a need for policy-making, taking in to consideration the needs of the family at the grass root level, which would be different from a "top down" approach, but tending towards a "bottom up" technique of planning and the recognition of sociological aspects of family life in policy making.