Family changes and women’s rights in Europe. Towards gender equality?

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Abstract
In this article I will try to articulate that gender equality means also changing the patriarchal system. In my opinion, family changes in the last decades contributed to defense and development of women’s rights. Family changes and family varies from one society to the other. Anywhere and at any time in the history of human societies, kinship systems and family systems have evolved and continue to do so. But European societies today are torn between two contradictory trends, on the one hand we can observe the extension of social relationship in the case of blended families, and on the other hand the continuing reference to a genealogical, therefore biological relationship, because adoption in Europe and the United States still refers to the model of a fictitious family lineage. It displaces real family lineage of birth parents which legally disappear.

Keywords: women’s rights, family, gender, equality, Europe

Introduction: A changing social scene. Family changes and changes of the roles of men and women

Thirty years ago French sociologist Louis Roussel outlined in his book, La Famille incertaine, the main transformations undergone by families. Even if he used sometimes very normative categories he could discern very early the most important ongoing changes: divorce by mutual consent, blended families, consensual unions and children born out of wedlock,
birth control, entrance of large numbers of women in professional world, redistribution of male and female roles… Families no longer conform to a single model, but are taking many other forms (Roussel, 1989; Héran, 2010).

Louis Roussel’s attitude to these family transformations was in fact contradictory. On one side he complained about the general process of deinstitutionalization and the obliteraton of meaning which threatened to undermine a society with no common project. In fact, in his mind, family was basically the main foundation of society. As a demographer, but above all as a moralist - because he was pursuing normative goals, Roussel was actually one of a long series of writers or academics who cast a pessimistic eye on the changing social scene. On the other side it is precisely from their nostalgia for a past form of social and family order that these authors draw their keen insights into the scale of social transformation, and develop their pioneering ability to grasp the overall coherence of slight movements detected here and there, and to perceive the strong underlying currents of change (Roussel, 1989; Héran, 2010).

Family changes must of course be examined from a sociological point of view and not from a normative one, neither ideological nor religious. When we try to study families in changing contexts, we don’t have to deal with any harmony of the stars, because relations in families are always complicated and difficult, but this is quite normal. In Europe and more generally in Western Societies, until the beginning of the twentieth century and even later, family was a strong hierarchical institution (of course with a man, a husband and a father, at the top of the family), the use of violence against spouse or children was not unusual, and despite the diversity of family systems or family forms, the micro-institution was more or less an unequal one. Family was based on an almost indissoluble marriage except when interrupted by the death of one of the members of the couple. Consensual divorce was not possible in those days. At the beginning of 20th century even sociologist Emile Durkheim fought strongly against consensual divorce (Pfefferkorn, 2010: 40-51). Unmarried mothers were stigmatized, illegitimate children excluded, unwanted children often given up or assigned to others. The roles of men and women in the family were complementary and rigid – and of course unequal. Fathers had to exercise professional activities in paid work or as independent workers on small farming or in craft activities, fathers brought pecuniary resources to the family as breadwinners and mothers had to be in charge of unpaid housework and childcare.

This male breadwinner family model was the big reference for family policy - and public policies in general - in most of the countries. It was also the reference for the French family
policy, characterized by a strong “familialism”, during the so-called “golden age” (1945–65) of that policy (Heinen, Hirata, Pfefferkorn, 2009; Martin, 2010).

Marital or conjugal relation and status of children began to change gradually, first slowly, then faster from the 1960s and 1970s until now. Marriage based on love gradually became the new marital ideal. Marriage became a choice and marriage bonds could be dissolved more easily. In some European countries we can observe an important increase in consensual unions. Therefore the contemporary European family has changed a lot and very quickly, particularly from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Women’s rights, including reproductive rights, were finally obtained in most of the European and western countries. Women's reproductive rights include of course the right to legal and safe abortion; the right to birth control; freedom from coerced sterilization and contraception; the right to access good-quality reproductive healthcare; and the right to education and access in order to make free and informed reproductive choices.

**Family changes observed through demographic data**

Some demographic statistics give a clear indication of significant changes in the family, particularly on fertility and number of children, family size, marriage, cohabitation or consensual unions, but also civil partnerships, divorce or different kinds of separations, birth out of wedlock (see the references in bibliography).

**Fertility – Number of children**

The most recent annual fertility rates rarely exceed the symbolic threshold of two children per woman. Europe is now relatively homogeneous in terms of fertility. In countries with the highest fertility, the rate exceeded 3.9 births per woman in 1960, 2.4 in 1980, 1.9 in 2016. In France, the highest rate in Europe: exactly 1.92 in 2016. Countries with the lowest fertility declined from 2.1 to 1.6 and even 1.3, i.e. a decrease of 0.8 points and almost 40 %. In Poland, not the lowest: 1.25 in 2005, 1.39 in 2016. Spain, Italy, Portugal, Greece, Malta, Cyprus have even a lower fertility rate. The divide is no longer between west and east but between north-west on one side, south and east on the other (Eurostat - 2018).
European fertility over the past 40 years has followed two paths: in the north and west of the European continent, the period was dominated by an increase of at least three years, in some countries much more, in the mother's age at childbirth between the 1970s and the 2000s, with little change in the annual number of children per woman over the period. On the other hand, in southern, central and eastern Europe, the key trend has been the decline in fertility, although this has slowed or even stopped recently. By contrast with the north and west, the age at childbearing remained stable for a long time, before rising suddenly in recent years.

The ranking of fertility levels has reversed, with lower levels in the north and west than elsewhere in the 1970s, and the opposite pattern today. Delayed childbirth has become a common feature of all sub-regions of Europe in the past ten years. The general pattern is also a decline in fertility at young ages, partly or fully "offset" by an increase in fertility at older ages. In France, the average age at childbearing was 30.6 in 2017 (29 twenty years ago in 1997). The distribution of fertility by age has changed considerably over the last thirty years. Presently, it is women aged 25-29 and 30-34 years who account for two-thirds of the total fertility rate, whereas until the late 1970s it was women aged 20-29 years who did so. Most of the remaining one-third of total fertility occurs after 35 years, with women under age 25 contributing only a very small share of births. Childbearing under age 20 is extremely rare, accounting for less than 2% of overall fertility in 2008 compared to nearly 5% in 1960. With similar fertility levels, France and Sweden are the two most fertile countries in the European Union, followed by Ireland, Great-Britain and Norway. Fertility remains very low in the southern European countries (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece…), as it does in central and eastern Europe (Rumania, Poland, Hungary, Bosnia, Moldavia…) where the total fertility rate stands at 1.3 to 1.5 children per woman in most countries. Fertility is currently lowest in Spain and Italy ( Prioux, 2010; Avdeev, 2011).

**How can we explain the two different paths in European fertility?**

First of all, we have to emphasize the importance of birth control. Use of contraception and possibility of abortion means women are taking control of their own body and are freeing themselves from unwanted pregnancies. But France and Germany offer contrasted fertility
patterns despite the fact that almost all women in both countries can decide, whether they want to have a child or not. Although with two children on average per woman, fertility in France is the highest in Europe, with less than 1.4 children per woman in 2010, 1.6 in 2016, Germany displays a low fertility level.

The comparison between both countries reveals the influence of the institutional and cultural framework on fertility decisions (Fagnani, 2006). The differences observed between the two countries in a recent research center around several factors, all of which are linked to the political and socio-cultural context (Letablier, 2013). Still now in Germany men are the main breadwinners. A scarce income of the male partner is a major obstacle to having children. This is less the case in France, where it is the couple's joint income that counts. This breadwinner status certainly explains why in Germany mostly men want to limit family size rather than women. Here again, the situation is different in France. This gender dimension can be explained by two main factors. First, it reflects the idea, still strongly anchored in German culture - even if it is changing a little in the last ten years - that mothers have to assume responsibility for the child. Second, the limited provision of external preschool childcare and short school opening hours oblige one of the parents – generally the mother – to limit her working hours to look after the child. In France, the public authorities take the place of the parents in the daytime by offering extensive childcare provision and keeping children in school during working hours (Martin, Le Bihan, 2009).

Women are expected to give up any career ambitions when they have children. It is more difficult to juggle work and family life in Germany, because the cost of children is very high. Many women in higher social groups therefore remain childless so that they can pursue a career. Thanks to public support, there is less conflict between work and family in France, enabling many women, even highly qualified ones, to combine a career and a family. Those who want to remain childless do not use financial or professional arguments to justify their position, but their desire to remain free, not to burden themselves with a child who represents a major investment in time and money (Testa, Grilli, 2006). By contrast in Germany, for people who plan to have just one child – or who have given up the idea of a second child – financial and professional reasons provide the main justification for their choice. In both cases, however, they plan to limit their family size or remain childless because the child is perceived as an obstacle to their freedom. This attitude can be largely explained by the strong constraints imposed upon parents. They are almost the only responsible for caring for the
child throughout his/her childhood, including years in school, and financial support (notably tax breaks) is less generous than in France. The financial impact of birth is more limited for French families, their main concern being to obtain a satisfactory childcare solution.

These three major differences reveal the decisive impact of the institutional and cultural framework, not only on the occupational and financial situation of families, but also on the production of social norms and in turn, on fertility and family formation decisions.

**Family size**

Over the past 50 years, significant changes have taken place, which have helped to reduce the size of families. There are now fewer children in families, but also more single-parent families and more people living alone. In France for example, as the population censuses show, the average household size has decreased steadily. There are fewer complex households (comprising members other than parents and their children) and more one- and two-person households (Toulemon, Grieve, 2012).

This trend is driven by changes in different aspects of family behavior, we can mention a few of them concerning also young adults: departure from the parental home (it was much earlier in the 1970s than now); union formation (it is later than in the early 1970s and 1960s, but the union formation is also more complex and less institutional because of the upswing of consensual unions and civil partnership); births (fewer than in the sixties, but still on a high level in countries like Sweden, Great-Britain or France, because of the rise in birth out of wedlock); separations (much more often and common, because of the very strong increase in divorce, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s but also in more recent times, but also because of the upswing of other separations after consensual unions and civil partnerships); departure of adult children (later than in the seventies or sixties because of much longer studies, considerable difficulties for the young generation to get an employment or a flat); widowhood (less often than before because of the increasing life span and life expectancy); changes in population structure, notably the increasing share of older adults, often living alone (it has also contributed in recent years to the decrease in household size). Last but not least, the growing number of older couples resulting from the mortality decline counterbalances the effects of delayed first union formation and the increase in separations, so the percentage of people with a partner has remained constant.
The increase in the share of people living alone corresponds to new stages of life, which differ by gender: more men live alone at adult ages after a marital separation (because in most cases women stay with their child or children as single parents); more women live alone at old ages after widowhood (because of a longer life span for women). There are also contrasting trends by social groups. For example, in France, in 2009 the most educated women lived with a partner as frequently as other women; those not living with a partner more often lived alone and less often lived as single parents than low-educated women.

Decline of Marriage and Rise of out of wedlock births

Between 1970 and 2010 we can observe a strong decline in marriage and a strong rise in out of wedlock births. The two trends are linked, as the decline in nuptiality makes way for less formal unions, which may provide a context for childbearing, although to different extents depending on the period and country. In Europe, this relationship is expressed generally in a negative correlation between total marriage rates over a period and the percentage of out of wedlock births a few years later: the lower the marriage rate, the higher the percentage of births outside marriage (Avdeev, 2011).

In the 1970s, marriage was still dominant in almost all European countries and fertility outside marriage was rare. In France, the average age at first marriage, which had been declining since 1945, reached its lowest level of the twentieth century in 1972; 24.5 years for men and 22.5 years for women in 1974 instead of 26.2 and 23.3 years in 1950. In 1972, the number of marriages was also highest: 417,000, an increase of 34% in 15 years. Only Denmark and Sweden saw very early, from the 1960s, a significant decline in marriage and a percentage of out of wedlock births that exceeded 20-30%.

In the 1980s, behaviour observed in Denmark and Sweden had spread to the other Nordic, and some western countries like France. Southern Europe also saw a decline in nuptiality but the percentage of out of wedlock births remained very low.

From the 1990s onwards, the whole continent exhibited a negative relationship between nuptiality and fertility outside marriage. In this decade, however, there was a contrast between low nuptiality rates and a high percentage of out of wedlock births in the north, and still
relatively high - although strongly declining - nuptiality rates and low rates of out of wedlock births in the south. Western countries were in an intermediate position. Most countries in Eastern Europe were still very different; although the correlation was negative, nuptiality levels remained much higher, until recent years….

In the 2000s, all the countries of Europe shared a regime of low nuptiality, as the last countries of Eastern Europe aligned themselves with the rest of the continent. The main difference concerned fertility outside marriage, which has a more discrete inverse relationship with nuptiality. The percentage of out of wedlock births was very high everywhere in the north (above 40%), as well as in France and the United Kingdom in the West (Eckert-Jaffé, 2002), in Slovenia and Bulgaria in the Centre, and in Estonia and Latvia in the East. Southern countries all exhibited percentages below 30%.

The changes over time in the different sub-regions have all been towards lower nuptiality and a higher percentage of births outside marriage. The trend was steady and gradual in Western Europe, followed by Southern Europe with a lag of ten or fifteen years. It was much more rapid in Northern Europe, and likewise in Eastern Europe where it began 20 years later in the 1990s. The growing proportion of persons who never marry and the rising average age at first marriage reflects a broader phenomenon of decline of the institution of marriage. But at the same time in some countries, like France for example, a different type of unions developed.

As marriage declines, common-law unions are becoming more widespread. Since the PACS (Pacte civil de solidarité - civil partnership between same- or different-sex partners) was instituted about fifteen years ago (Act of 15 November 1999), French couples can sign a contract defining the organization of their common life and giving access to certain advantages formerly only available to married couples. However, these advantages are not as extensive as those of marriage, notably with respect to inheritance and filiation. The popularity of the PACS has increased year after year. More than 6,000 PACS contracts were concluded between 15 November and 31 December 1999, 30,000 in 2003, more than 100,000 in 2007 and nearly 150,000 in 2008. This type of civil union was very successful over the first ten years of its existence, totaling close to 600,000 PACS and at least one million contracting parties. The PACS dissolution rate is reasonably stable, and for heterosexual unions is

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1The same person may have formed and dissolved several PACS unions in this period.
gradually catching up with the divorce rate (Prioux, Mazui, 2009). But the development of intermediate situations, between married and unmarried, single and non-married people who are living together, complicate the investigation and the analysis in demography, sociology, psychology or law.

**Consensual unions and divorce**

We can observe an increase in divorce over the past 40 years almost everywhere in Europe, a lower frequency of remarriage after divorce or widowhood, and an increase in consensual unions (Lambert, 2009; Avdeev, 2011). However, the rise of divorce has been steeper in the north and west, where legislative changes have supported this trend by facilitating divorce by consent. Some 40% to 50% of marriages now end in divorce, compared with 10% to 20% around 1970. In Mediterranean countries like Italy and Spain, the increase has been much smaller and the frequency of divorce is still only about 10%, creating a big gap with the rest of Western Europe. The former socialist countries constitute a heterogeneous group: divorce rates are relatively high and steadily increasing in Hungary, Czech Republic and Baltic countries, but are lower in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia, although they have recently seen a sharp increase. Between 20% and 50% of marriages in central and Eastern Europe now end in divorce.

Concomitant with the decline of marriage and the rise of divorce, consensual unions have also increased. In the western half of the continent, the current situation is nevertheless extremely diverse. In the 2000-2001 censuses, the percentage of women aged 20-34 living with a partner without being married ranged from around 5% in the southern countries to 25% to 30% in the northern and western Atlantic countries, with countries in the interior of the continent occupying an intermediate position (10% to 15%). Eastern Europe is more homogeneous, since informal unions are quite rare throughout the sub-region (between 2% and 12%), with the exception of Estonia, which is similar in this respect to the Nordic countries.

Consensual unions are more common in countries where marriage has been in severe decline for a long time, and where consensual unions have become a substitute for strong institutionalized ones. However, there is no systematic negative correlation between the percentages of married women and of women in consensual unions at ages 20-34: Ireland, Slovenia and Spain, for example, simultaneously exhibit low percentages of married women
and fairly low percentages of women in consensual unions. Young people are living in their parents' homes for longer and delaying union formation, as they spend longer years in education and find it increasingly difficult to find employment and housing after completing their education. France’s and England’s fertility outside marriage accounts for around half of overall fertility. Extremely heterogeneous patterns of fertility outside marriage reflect wide variations in the acceptability of non-marital fertility in European societies.

The combined trend in overall fertility and in the frequency of births outside marriage over 40 years in European countries has led to a paradoxical situation: fertility in recent years has been highest in the sub-regions where the percentage of out of wedlock births is also the highest, such as in northern Europe, Great-Britain or France; the picture is reversed in the southern countries, which combine low overall fertility with low fertility outside marriage, such as Italy, Spain or Greece, but fertility outside marriage is growing in the last years in some of these countries (Spain, Italy, Portugal); the pattern is slightly different in the eastern half of the continent, where overall fertility is low in all countries, sometimes even very low, and where the percentage of out of wedlock births is in general very moderate, except in Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Slovenia, where non-marital fertility remains high.

If we take the percentage of births outside marriage as an indicator of the European decline in the institution of marriage in recent decades, the most prudent conclusion is that there is no clear, systematic link between the degree of "deinstitutionalization" of the various countries and their level of fertility. Declining marriage and low fertility can probably be attributed to different sets of causes (Avdeev, 2011).

**Family changes and equal gender relations**

But if family changes go towards more equality it doesn’t really mean equality. The traditional roles of men and women within the family began to change in the 1960s, particularly in some countries, less in others. Like men, women are now more involved in professional work, outside the family sphere. However, this evolution varies from one country to another. It can be shown that there are roughly two types of situations: countries where female employment is less accepted, especially for young mothers (a good example of this type of countries is West Germany); countries in which female employment is growing, faster, more easily and where it is better accepted, even if the inequalities between men and
women still remain wide (as countries in Northern Europe or France, but also some Eastern European countries).

Authority and solidarity among families seem to change in comparison with traditional families from the past. Violent attitudes of men are no longer acceptable. However, the changes are slow in other aspects of the domestic sphere: men are still doing very little housework – even if a bit more, and spend less time with their children – even if sometimes they play with them. But even if things are changing slowly, in the last decades, men are more and more under new social expectations: taking care of children, negotiating domestic division of labor.

The feminist movement (1969-1976) has contributed to the structural family changes. Issues of women’s rights entered the family policy agenda, earlier in some countries like France (later in other countries) leading to fundamental changes. The timing and intensity of these changes vary widely from one country to the other. In France Civil Law reforms concerning marriage settlement (in 1965), parental rights and obligations (in 1970), filiation (in 1972), divorce by mutual consent (in 1975) and sexuality (contraception in 1967 and abortion in 1975 and 1979). Henceforth, maternity is no longer imposed on women.

And more recently, after the introduction of the PACS (civil partnership between same- or different-sex partners), homosexual couples can marry and adopt children (2013). The opening of registered partnership and later civil marriage to same-sex couples was a topic of heated debate when such measures were first introduced. Very soon, between 1989 and 2003, nine European countries adopted legislation of this kind, especially regarding registered partnership (Festy, 2006). In September 2018, 25 countries in the world adopted same-sex marriage.

Family law is now more egalitarian. Timing and number of children don’t fall from heaven anymore: having a child is a decision. Families are gradually organized around a child or children rather than around marriage, as evidenced by the rise of divorce and consensual union from the 1970s. In France, equality between legitimate and illegitimate children (1972, 2001 and 2005) is decided. In the past, children born out of wedlock were referred to as "illegitimate" or as "natural children", to distinguish them from "legitimate" children born within marriage. The notion of legitimacy ceased to have a legal basis (2005 and 2009).
Following the international Convention on Rights of Children, the interests of the child is now the first purpose of parental authority. Since 1993, parents are to exercise parental authority together, whether single, married, or divorced. Alternating residence was promoted in 2002 to allow children to keep relations with both parents and to avoid mothers bearing the responsibility of caring and educating children alone.

But despite these changes and despite the fact that girls today are more educated than boys, still mothers have to assume the so-called work-life balance. Professionally, fathers work more to earn more, but take less care of children than mothers. Wages of fathers (and pension rights) progress more, however mothers continue to provide material and mental work, and school- and medical care of children. But the spread of child psychology, the emphasis on children’s self-fulfilment and the new issue of school success increased their difficulties in education (Bihr, Pfefferkorn, 2002).

The expression work-life-balance is generally used in the Anglo-Saxon world and Japan to describe the difficulty resulting from the fact that women have to combine family and work. Never, or very rarely, do we speak of work-life-balance for men as if this were not an issue for the latter. Furthermore, this expression suggests that the accumulation of domestic work and professional activity could in principle be done in a harmonious way for women. Feminist scholars have suggested other less icle expressions that focus on tension, or more explicitly conflict, rather than the word "balance". In countries like Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan, the lack of facilities for young children and the policies of private enterprises make the pursuit of professional activity very difficult for mothers and explain largely the decline in birth rates in these countries (Heinen, Hirata, Pfefferkorn, 2009).

Around the 1970s, domestic work within the patriarchal family was theorized: an activity considered as subordinate, less valuable and yet essential and also "productive" (Delphy, 1998; Pfefferkorn, 2012/2016). Today, the questioning of the private sphere is often done in terms of care giving. This leads to two results. First, recognition of the carework (mothering, care for the elderly, etc.), thanks to their professional activities, which could encourage greater representation of women in these activities, but also act on inequalities between women (social and ethnic inequalities because women delegate care activities to other women, from other social condition and/or foreign countries). Second, it leads to upgrade the private sphere. Care and its values are used to rethink citizenship and the public sphere.
Researchers are talking about the ethics of care in front of the dominant individualistic values (Molinier, 2013).

Gendered roles within the family continue to give primacy to mother-child bonds and to maintain a male economic domination. In case of separation, these inequalities are increasing: in most cases, children remain with the mother, their link with the father is weakened, and the mother is impoverished when the father does not pay alimony (this is common). Alternating residence is far from appearing as a solution for failure of pension or when the father is not ready to assume alone responsibility for their children. Certainly some authors emphasize the fragility of paternal bonds. But in the current historical and sociological context of Western societies, we know that when there is a divorce, judges generally entrust the child to the mother, saying that men are less able than women to raise children. This automatically increases the position of women. This implies that to increase the role of fathers we should maybe start at school to explain to the boys that they can - and should - have the same responsibilities as girls to raise children in the future. Otherwise, the tradition will win and almost exclusively women will bear the weight of raising and educating children.

The public / private division is at the heart of gender relations, feeding inequality in both areas. Questioning this dichotomy is central to feminist claims. Women's work has become a massive social phenomenon. It is now a great part of social reality and everything seems to indicate that it has become irreversible. Women’s professional work is now involved in the construction of female identity: girls at school think about their future as workers, just like boys, those who do not seek a professional position after the school period are very rare (Cardon, Kergoat, Pfefferkorn, 2009; Dunezat, Heinen, Hirata, Pfefferkorn, 2010, Dunezat, Pfefferkorn, 2011; Kergoat, 2012).

The involvement of women in professional activities is also linked to two other phenomena: the spread of contraception and greater autonomy with regard to marital relationships. Half a century after the French law allowing contraception (1967), between 20 and 44, more than two-thirds of women are using a contraceptive method. Of these, nearly two-thirds use the pill and a quarter the IUD\(^2\). Today, only a small minority of women (3%) takes the risk of an

\(^2\)The current intrauterine device (IUD) is a small 'T'-shaped device, containing either copper or levonorgestrel, which is inserted into the uterus. It is a long-acting reversible contraception.
unwanted pregnancy. Contraception gave the possibility to women to control timing and number of births. These conditions are essential to get a job and remain in employment.

Similarly, the links between family policies and employment policies can help to influence the professional inequalities. In addition to the opening up of public and private spheres (Marques-Pereira, Pfefferkorn, 2011), the recognition of activities in the domestic field is also at stake. All these changes give a greater autonomy to women with regard to marital relations. Women have played a leading role in the changes affecting conjugal relations during the last decades: development of cohabitation outside marriage, consensual unions, development of divorce, development of celibacy, especially among women with high academic and professional skills, but these women confront specific barriers on the marriage market.

On the other hand, a number of traditional inequalities between men and women did not change, therefore the status of women has not significantly changed. We can identify two strong points of resistance of male domination. First, in the public sphere: men continue to monopolize most of decision and power positions. Second, traditional inequalities remain largely in the private sphere, the domestic work continues to be provided mainly by women (Bihr, Pfefferkorn, 2002; Pfefferkorn, 2007).

**Conclusion: Gender equality means also changing the patriarchal system**

The family is a socio-historical entity. Family changes and family varies from one society to the other. Anywhere and at any time in the history of human societies, kinship systems and family systems have evolved and continue to do so. French anthropologist Maurice Godelier establishes two main changes in Western societies: a rise of social kinship in contemporary families, and a separation of parenthood and procreation. As we have seen, in France people are marrying later then decades before. In the Paris region, the average length of a marriage or union is only seven years, hence the increase in the so called blended families. In France there are now 1.5 million children living in blended families (Lapinte, 2013). In these families stepfathers and stepmothers are required to raise stepchildren. But European societies today are torn between two contradictory trends, on the one hand we can observe the extension of social relationship in the case of blended families, and on the other hand the continuing reference to a genealogical, therefore biological relationship, because adoption in Europe and the United States still refers to the model of a fictitious family lineage. It displaces real family
lineage of birth parents which legally disappear. But, however, family continues to change, and tomorrow, in Western societies, the reference will be even less biological than today. Anyway, transformation of a kinship system or a family system still produces kinship and family in another form. This assumption allows us to consider, without any catastrophic perspective, the current changes in family in a number of societies, in the West and the East, in the North and the South.

Godelier also pointed out that, not the family, but the political and religious relations are the foundation of a society: "Nowhere kinship and even less family are the foundation of society" (Godelier 2004). Political (and religious) relations underpin society and establish the sovereignty of a number of human groups on a territory, on its resources and people. These relations are both political and religious when there is no separation of religion and state. But in most modern societies there is a separation between both. Family policies and more generally public policies and welfare system regulations belong to these political relations.

The comparison between Germany and France shows the decisive impact of the institutional and cultural framework. It also shows the implications of relevant social norms and values on fertility issues, gender relations and articulation of work and family. Changes in family structure over recent decades, combined with new constraints in the labour market, are radically changing inter-individual and inter-generational relationships and social solidarity in most of Western Societies. The role of the state and local or regional authorities is important in the configuration of gender relations, both in the sphere of work and within the family – linked, especially with demographic factors and fluctuations in the labour market.

Therefore it is so important that public policies – not only family policies – act in the right direction, it means aiming at real gender equality. In recent years, international organizations insist particularly on the notion of empowerment of women. This notion is certainly important, because it means women taking control of their own lives and freeing themselves from the structures which dominate and constrain them. This notion is of course attractive for individuals who can be empowered even within an existing system. But gender equality means also changing the patriarchal system, and then perhaps it would be better to use the concept of global emancipation that goes beyond personal transformation (Cardon, Kergoat, Pfefferkorn, 2009; Bihr, Pfefferkorn, 2014).
Bibliography:


