

## Socioeconomic aspects of the family

At its best, the family performs various valuable functions for its members. Perhaps most important of all, it provides for emotional and psychological security, particularly through the warmth, love, and companionship that living together generates between spouses and in turn between them and their children. The family also provides a valuable social and political function by institutionalizing procreation and by providing guidelines for the regulation of sexual conduct. The family additionally provides such other socially beneficial functions as the rearing and socialization of children, along with such humanitarian activities as caring for its members when they are sick or disabled. On the economic side, the family provides food, shelter, clothing, and physical security for its members, some of whom may be too young or too old to provide for the basic necessities of life themselves. Finally, on the social side, the family may serve to promote order and stability within society as a whole.

Historically, in most cultures, the family was patriarchal, or male-dominated. Perhaps the most striking example of the male-dominated family is the description of the family given in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament), where the male heads of the clans were allowed to have several wives as well as concubines. As a general rule, women had a rather low status. In Roman times the family was still patriarchal, but polygamy was not practiced, and in general the status of women was somewhat improved over that suggested in the Hebrew Bible, although they still were not allowed to manage their own affairs. The Roman family was an extended one. The family as it existed in medieval Europe was male-dominated and extended.

In the West, industrialization and the accompanying urbanization spawned—and continue to spawn—many changes in family structure by causing a sharp change in life and occupational styles. Many people, particularly unmarried youths, left farms and went to urban centres to become industrial workers. This process led to the dissolution of many extended families.

The modern family that emerged after the Industrial Revolution is different from the earlier model. For instance, patriarchal rule began to give way to greater equality between the sexes. Similarly, family roles once considered exclusively male or female broke down. Caring for the home and children, once the exclusive duty of the female, is often a shared activity, as, increasingly, is the earning of wages and the pursuit of public life, once the exclusive domain of the male. The structure of the family is also changing in that some couples choose not to marry legally and instead elect to have their children out of wedlock; many of these informal relationships tend to be of short duration, and this—as well as the rise in levels of divorce—has led to a rapid increase in the number of one-parent households.

Especially in Western cultures, the modern family is today more of a consuming as opposed to a producing unit, and the members of the family work away from home rather than at home. Public authorities, primarily governmental ones, have assumed

many of the functions that the family used to provide, such as caring for the aged and the sick, educating the young, and providing for recreation. Technological advancements have made it possible for couples to decide if and when they want to have children.

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