

## **GENDER EQUALITY AND FAMILY CHANGE**

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*Abstract: Which are husband's attributions? Which are wife's attributions? Which are husband's expectations? Which are wife's expectations? These are four questions whose answers explain the biggest changes of family institution and even the most conflicts within this group. If the consensus can not be reached, after negotiations, the family will not be created or will not resist. This consensus has been very well explained, for a long time, by the conflict theory representatives that sat at the base of family institution the inequality between spouses and even the husband dominance over wife. In this theoretical context there is a set of rules that were not questioned, it was taken as self-evident. The emergence of trends that promote gender equality and the development of individualistic values increasingly put into question these cultural models on which family works as an institution. Woman began to gain "power". The question that arises is whether it will withstand a family relationship in which both partners has the same level of power. The answer is absolutely no, especially under the traditional family context. The growing number of women with higher education, with leading positions in the labor market, with higher incomes than men, with similar opportunities as men make difficult the emergence of consensus.*

*This paper aims to analyze by using statistical data, how changes in the status of women, in particular, causes changes in family. Family relationships become a partnership in specific conditions that are very different from case to case. Very important here are negotiation skills, emotional balance, flexibility, counseling and family therapy.*

**Keywords:** gender equality, woman's status, family change, conflict theory, individualistic values.

Family is one of the institutions undergoing major changes, which influence the behaviour of individuals but also the operating principles of other systems and society as a whole.

The portrayal of the husband as the “breadwinner” and of the wife as a “homemaker” is no longer satisfactory for those that assume these statuses within developed societies (Cunningham 2008). Moreover, since the wife and husband are the main actors working inside the family, it is interesting to see how these shifts in roles determine changes at the family level, as an institution, but also as a social system fulfilling a series of significant functions in society (Parsons & Bales 1956).

In order to identify the most important changes that have occurred in the family, but also its future trends, we must analyse the answers to the following questions: What are the duties of the husband? What are the duties of the wife? What expectations does the husband have? What expectations does the wife have? The answers are significant at the individual level, as well as viewed from a social perspective. Social change occurs when the individual perspective is no longer in line with the social one. When consensus between partners cannot be reached in terms of the answers to the questions above, the family will not be formed or will be dissolved. Family roles are built on gender roles. If we try to eliminate gender inequalities, it will be difficult to maintain inequality at the level of family roles, a situation of disparity with which the traditional family as well as the modern one have been used to.

### **Changes in the woman's status and strengthening gender equality**

To emphasize gender equality, and thus the impossibility of preserving the family under its traditional and even modern form, we will analyse several statistics referring to certain realities that actually represent the starting point for unstoppable changes. Toffler (1983: 283-284) stated almost four decades ago that the nuclear family in its well-known form cannot be preserved since this would mean blocking many aspects related to the evolution of society.

Toffler Associates (2010: 3), in a report concerning the evolution of society over the next 40 years, reserves an important position for women in national governing structures meaning that we will drift further apart from the idea of family with which we have grown accustomed to until now.

In Romanian society, we often come across the statement that young people are getting married later. “Later” is a relative term and its significance depends on the period to which we are referring to. The fact that the marriage age is increasing is certainly true<sup>1</sup> and we will see what the context that determines this situation is. This reality leads to another one: the increase of the age at which women decide to have their first child. If in 2000 a woman gave birth to her first child at the age of 23,7, in 2012 this event occurred at the age of 26,2. The two realities are connected in a highly logical way. The increase of the age for first marriage also has a logical explanation, if we take into account the increase of the years spent in school and the importance attached to higher education. The number of female individuals that are seeking higher education is slightly elevated compared to male individuals, a relevant aspect for delaying marriage, as well as for gender equality (see table 1).

Table no. 1. Evolution of student population in the Romanian higher education system, by gender, between 2007-2013

School year	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013
Male	397770	398286	346732	303901	252961	219414
Female	509583	492812	428587	369100	286891	245178

Source: National Institute of Statistics (2013)

Higher education often involves leaving the family of origin and the beginning of an independent, separate life that establishes individualistic tendencies and weakens cooperation.

<sup>1</sup> According to the National Institute of Statistics, in 2012 the average age for first marriage was 29,6 years for male individuals and 26,4 years for female individuals. Roughly 10 years ago, in 2000, the average age was 3 years younger: 26,9 for the husband and 23,6 for the wife.

This change is even more relevant for female individuals whose independence, one of the pillars of gender equality, is becoming increasingly extensive and effective.

The idea of female independence and emancipation is also supported by external, not only internal, migration. In this sense, the data from the National Institute of Statistics (2013) reveals that there were 1108727 female emigrants and 1232536 male emigrants from Romania in 2012. The close figures also indicate a rise in gender equality. The international migration of women suggests the increase of liberty and the development of powers of decision. In 2007, these figures were almost at half their current standing, which accentuates the level of change within the Romanian society.

The large number of opportunities that are equally available to men and women (study programs at home or abroad, jobs at home or abroad, significant financial gains, etc.) also affect the attitude towards marriage, leading to a decrease of the marriage rate. In 1960, there were 10,7 marriages per 1000 inhabitants, in 1989 the rate was 7,7, while in 2012 the marriage rate dropped to 5,4 per thousand inhabitants. The birth rate also witnesses a major decline. In 1960, there were 19,1 births per thousand inhabitants, in 1989 – 16, while in 2012 the figure drops to 9 births per thousand inhabitants (National Institute of Statistics 2013).

The development at the level of educational status opens more doors for women on the job market. One cannot say that the most important aspect is currently the entry of women on the job market. This was a relevant factor during the modernisation of society. Relevant now are the kind of jobs designed for women. Data shows that the number of working women with higher education is greater than that of their male counterparts on the job market. The difference is minor, in favour of women, but significant. Thus, we have 5126000 men and 4137000 women that are working, out of which 814000 men and 846000 women have graduated from university. There are 3441000 men and 2788000 women employees. There are 81000 male managers and only 31000 female managers (National Institute of Statistics 2013). At the level of the last two indicators, there is a major difference in the employment status of women and the way in which their work is evaluated.

In Romania, the participation of women in the decision making process within local and central public administration is under the European average. Only 9,7% of the Romanian Parliament seats are occupied by women, while the average at EU level is 24%. Ten years ago, the average was 8% at EU level, indicating a strong evolution in this respect over the last few years. Over 80% of decision making positions in the Romanian local public administration were occupied by men in 2004. Participation has decreased even more after the 2008 elections. Thus, it may be observed that “the percentage of positions occupied by women increases with the decrease of the degree of decision making” (Ministerul Muncii, Familiei și Protecției Sociale 2011: 3). This situation is also found outside the administrative sector.

The situation presented above implies that, on a practical level, we can speak of equality on the job market in terms of employment rates, but there is also a series of barriers that prevent the professional involvement of women with similar rights as men. We are referring here to the importance of positions occupied by women, the level of power that is associated to these positions, but also the incomes.

The existing barriers may be inferred if we analyse the structure of the working population, based on work groups and gender, in Romania (see table 2).

Table no. 2 The structure of the working population, based on work groups and gender

Occupation groups	Male	Female
Members of the legislative body of the executive, high officials of public administration, senior leaders and officials	139000	64000
Specialists in various activity fields	531000	722000
Technicians and other specialists in the technical field	282000	319000
Civil servants	128000	251000
Service workers	459000	751000

Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers	1113000	1052000
Craft and related trades workers	1140000	310000
Other categories of occupations	1334000	668000
of which: Unskilled workers	552000	435000

Source: National Institute of Statistics (2013)

From the table above, one may notice that the highest positions have remained the privilege of men, at least in Romania. At the level of specialists in various fields, technicians, administrative clerks and workers in the service industry, positions that require a certain level of competence, the number of women employees exceeds that of male counterparts. When talking about occupations with a lower level of training, the number of men employees is higher. Again, these are data that highlight gender equality and an efficient activity of women in the economic area. However, at the top management level, in the public and private sector, women are not yet well represented (Ministerul Muncii, Familiei și Protecției Sociale 2011). Thus, elements of inequality are identified here that are not necessarily determined by the lack of certain competences but by cultural models and gender stereotypes. The situation of working women in Romania enhances this aspect. From the total number of working women, 31,1% of them are working in social services, 39,7% in commercial services, 27,2% in industry and 2% in constructions (National Institute of Statistics 2013). A segregation of women may be observed in the first two sectors, fact which contributes to the creation and maintenance of stereotypes regarding the work positions that are fit for women.

Moreover, elements of inequality can also be identified in terms of the involvement of women, and men respectively, in household activities. Data collected by OECD between 1998-2008 shows that in all EU member states the number of hours weekly allocated by women to care for the family members (children, elderly, disabled family members) is highly superior to the number of hours that the men allocate for the same activity. For example, in Germany the women allocate 50 hours a week, while the men spend only 20 hours doing the same thing. In countries such as the Netherlands and the UK, the differences are the same. The explanation for

such a high number is probably the low number of dual-earner families. In Romania, the women allocate approximately 32 hours, while the men allocate 23 (OECD 2014).

A research study conducted at EU level shows that, on average, 80% of women perform household activities on a daily basis, while only 45% of the men do the same thing. In Romania 69% of women declare that they do daily housework, while only 41% of the men declare the same (European Foundation for the Improving of living and Working Conditions 2010: 18). The same study shows that, at the EU level, the women that have a job allocate 28 hours a week on average for caring and educating the children, 16 hours for household activities and 11 hours for caring for the elderly or disabled individuals. The number of hours allocated by the men is significantly lower: 18 hours for caring and educating the children, 8 hours for housework, 8 hours for caring for the elderly or disabled individuals (European Foundation for the Improving of living and Working Conditions 2010: 21). It is very important to stress here how vast the category of household activities is, which remains an undeniable fact. Gender equality implies a fair distribution of these tasks among men and women, while the current distribution benefits the men, even though the women also have an effective role on the job market.

### **From the traditional family to the postmodern family**

Strictly referring to the traditional Romanian society, the image of the family and its functions is very well captured by S. Fl. Marian (1995: 15-16). Thus, the author believes that people used to get married to share the joy, as well as the pain, with someone, to produce descendants that would inherit the assets and care for the elderly and to avoid the social sanctions applied to those that would not get married. This model has lasted for a long period of time, especially in the rural areas.

Industrialization introduced the nuclear family model that still maintained a series of traditional elements such as: the importance of marriage, the negative attitude towards divorce, close relations within the family, extended domestic economy.

With the transition to a new type of society, these elements become more under-represented and are replaced with others that were once unacceptable such as celibacy, consensual union and gay couples.

At present, the husband may handle household activities just as well as the wife can significantly contribute to the family budget. This is the picture of gender equality in the context of a family but we have seen previously in the paper that this is hard to enforce on a practical level. Nevertheless, gender equality is facilitated by the development of technical and technological elements that have made household activities much easier to handle: the washing machine, the dishwasher, the vacuum cleaner, the microwave, the abundance of food products available in stores, etc. On the other hand, women's access to education, to better paid jobs, the opportunities for professional development secures an increased financial income for them as they emerge from the sector of unpaid work.

On a practical level, gender equality does not function as easily, not only because of cultural models but also because of the “genetic programming” of man and woman. This biological inequality was partially solved at the individual level (not at the level of society) through the control and decrease of births. The fertility rate, i.e. the number of children born per one thousand women of fertile age (15-49 years), is dramatically dropping in Romania: in 1989, the rate was 66,3 and by 2012 it had dropped to 37,5. The number of children born by one woman during her fertile life was 1,3 in 2012 (National Institute of Statistics 2013). This figure indicates a lower involvement of the woman in the institution of family. This situation is common in all countries where the entrance of women on the job market and accessing certain positions that require a high level of involvement has determined a change of perspective regarding the “woman's mission”.

It was previously mentioned that the changes arising in the family sphere must not be separated from technical and technological ones, the cultural specificity of a society and the economic level. The decline of the traditional family is connected to the shift from traditional values, strongly influenced by religion, to secular, rational values, while the emergence of gender equality is connected to the transition from survival values to those promoting self-expression and self-importance (Inglehart & Norris 2003: 11). Except for the development of these new values, the entrance of women on the job market does not have such a strong impact on the family institution.



However, cultural changes are not enough to guarantee the equality of men and women in all walks of life. The Romanian society has not developed enough services yet to liberate women from a series of family life attributions: educating and caring for the children, housework and caring for the elderly. There are not enough kindergartens and most of them do not offer appropriate conditions. Moreover, there are few after-school services and they usually close at 4 PM, while the working hours of parents often exceed this time. There is the option of private services, but this requires financial investments that are too great compared to the family income in Romania. Under these conditions, one of the most favoured options is the traditional one: the grandmother or the grandfather will take care of the child. The same problems arise in the case of elderly people. The number of nursing homes is very low and the conditions are disappointing. In conjunction with these conditions, the Romanian society remains very reserved regarding the institutionalization of elderly people.

At the moment, we are facing the so-called postmodern family that has several structures: the typical family, mono-parental family, families without children, consensual couples, restored families that are all accepted and supported by social policy and cultural models. Moreover, this is associated with an increase in the rate of divorce, the rising instability within the couple, the apathy of teenagers in relation to family identity (Zeitlin et al., 1995: 29).

There are several theories that have well explained the status quo of the family over time. Conflict theory has attributed the inequality between men and women to the existence of the traditional family. The supporters of this view (Engels 1884, Bourdieu 2003) consider this gender inequality to be natural and impossible to eliminate since it is constantly reproduced and supported by women themselves. This inequality has led to the emergence of a relation of male domination over women within the family context and beyond. Well-defined and agreed upon family roles have been created around these inequalities. It can be argued that the consensus is maybe forced, but it is an agreement that goes without saying, not called into question in the traditional family and even in the modern one. From this point of view, “the access of women to professional work is also a determining factor for having access to divorce” (Bourdieu 2003: 39).

Feminist theories strongly criticize this inequality and try to implement gender equality at the social level, but also at the level of family roles. The imposed model typical in conflict theory is no longer followed; the focus is on negotiating roles, on the rise of a negotiated agreement in which both parties may express their point of view. Dominance is no longer accepted. The marriage contract, viewed as a work contract (Delphy 1980), must change. However, this movement is not enough. Apart from economic development and creating opportunities, this equality remains a privilege reserved for a small number of women (Fukuyama 2002: 145). The quality of women's lives is improving overall but the family must adapt to these transformations.

Individualism is added to these changes, as a powerful trend that holds the focus on personal success even when dealing with a family group. The group comes after the individual in Western culture. The individual is viewed as more important than the community (Inglehart & Norris 2003: 11). In this context, the family in its regular existing form is rather difficult to create and maintain. Relationships must take the form of partnerships focused on a win-win situation. It is a partnership that enables those involved to attain their objectives and to fully capitalize on their potential. Romantic love, fundamental principle of marriage that led to many struggles, now gives way to rational choice (White & Klein 2005).

### **Conclusions**

Although there are several common lines of evolution that may be registered at the level of family in Europe, it must be emphasized that each society has its specific elements that determine the variety of this reality.

Nonetheless, family within the Romanian society also becomes a partnership under specific terms, different from case to case, a partnership in which risks and benefits must be equally distributed. We are no longer speaking about a work contract but a partnership contract that usually spans over a defined period of time and works as long as those involved have resources that may assist them in achieving their goals. The partners will try to solve any conflict situation that arises so that personal well-being may be secured. In this context, negotiation skills in case of conflict and other situations, emotional stability, flexibility and (although from a different register) counselling services and family therapy become extremely important. All these

are necessary since the influence of rules and the force of models that would direct family life decisions no longer exist.

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