



**HAL**  
open science

## Household and Family in Contemporary History (ca. 1900-2000)

Sarah Carmichael, Julia Moses, Ángela Pérez del Puerto, Florence Tamagne

► **To cite this version:**

Sarah Carmichael, Julia Moses, Ángela Pérez del Puerto, Florence Tamagne. Household and Family in Contemporary History (ca. 1900-2000). Hansen, Jan; Hung, Jochen; Ira, Jaroslav; Klement, Judit; Lesage, Sylvain; Simal, Juan-Luis; Tompkins, Andrew. The European Experience: A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500–2000, Open Book Publishers, p.219-227, 2023, 978-1-80064-870-8. 10.11647/OBP.0323.21 . hal-04154895

**HAL Id: hal-04154895**

**<https://hal.univ-lille.fr/hal-04154895>**

Submitted on 29 Aug 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial 4.0 International License



## 2.3.3 Household and Family in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

*Sarah Carmichael, Julia Moses, Ángela Pérez del Puerto,  
and Florence Tamagne*

---

### Introduction

The last century and a quarter have seen sweeping changes in how people organise their household and family life. From the emergence of private day care facilities to the establishment of general pension schemes, from rising divorce rates to far higher life expectancies (meaning that couples who stay together can expect to spend many more years in each other's company), households and families are very different now compared to those of our great-grandparents. Many of the services previously provided within a household (most significantly childcare) have been outsourced to organisations outside of the household, changing the roles of parents and relatives in the raising of future generations. Significant differences exist in how these changes have taken place across Europe.

Another major change in households is that couples now live together for long periods without marrying, or never marry but have children and live together without the formal status of marriage. Many more households than ever before consist of single individuals who live alone for much or all of their life-course or who create blended households unrelated to formal family ties. Divorce and remarriage have also meant that many children grow up with siblings originally born in other families and to whom they may not be biologically related. Although such blended families existed in the past, generally due to the death of one parent, they are now far more frequent and may mean that children are part of two households. The ramifications of these changes are far-ranging for adults too, and often gendered in their outcome.

Multiple studies show that divorce is often detrimental to a woman's economic position, but that men are in many cases actually financially better off after a divorce. Parts of this chapter therefore focus on the female position in this story, as it is often women who are most affected by changes to household and family, having long been officially and unofficially the centre of these two societal units (especially during the nineteenth century). However, it is also important to note that with the growing visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals, gender roles tied to a male/female binary are in flux and contemporary households may well be centred on different roles and definitions. The changes to household and family thus took place in many dimensions. In this chapter we discuss shifts in the division between public and private realms, in marriage and family law, and in relation to sexuality.



Fig. 1: P. B. Abery, Portrait of a Welsh family (1930s), CC 1.0, Wikimedia, National Library of Wales, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Family\\_portrait\\_\(4601533194\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Family_portrait_(4601533194).jpg).

## Public versus Private

The twentieth century saw a clear redefinition of the boundaries between what was public and what was private, and women opened many doors which had previously been closed. On their non-linear journeys between public and

private, some women left their homes for public professions from which they had previously been barred, others remained or returned to the private sphere but questioned the impositions within it, and others experienced the difficulty of reconciling both options. Women had long been involved with the labour market (especially during the Industrial Revolution) but this period saw further, massive increases in the degree to which women worked for wages.

The new century saw the continuation of the struggle for suffrage, a mobilisation that brought together women from different backgrounds to fight for their citizenship. The 'woman question' became a topic that dominated public debates and exposed for many housewives the social and legal bases of discrimination against their gender. Very different kinds of feminism represented women in the home and in the factory, but the movement suffered significant setbacks with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. During the war, female participation was key to the defence of the nation, whether it meant safeguarding the family structure at home or working in factories to replace men who now fought at the front. Women and their labour were required in the arms sector, in agriculture, in banks, and so on. In addition, many participated in the war as nurses, even at the frontlines of battle. As a result, the work of women, inside and outside the home, was essential for the war effort. At the same time this called into question arguments that had been used in the past to justify their social and legal discrimination.

Female participation in the war effort, following years of struggle for suffrage, precipitated women's securing of the right to vote in many countries in the 1920s, though this proceeded in parallel with the reinstatement of earlier discourses of female domesticity. Once their patriotic work was accomplished, women were effectively told to return home to make way for men returning from the front. However, many women used their experiences to question this and to challenge the biological determinism that had until then justified their limited access to certain jobs or social functions. The rise of fascism, though, led to the strong imposition of a patriarchal model in which women were above all mothers and wives. With no time to heal the wounds of the First World War, another conflict broke out in 1939, and women were again incorporated into the tasks that men at the front left vacant. They also re-experienced, like a *déjà vu*, the contradiction of public policies when, as war came to a close in 1945, governments once again asked them to return to the home as their supposedly 'natural' place. The post-war home was a mechanised one, presenting the modern housewife as a fulfilled woman surrounded by washing machines and stoves. However, many women had embarked on a one-way journey out of the domestic sphere, pursuing higher education and positions of ever greater specialisation. This situation strengthened the second feminist wave in the 1960s, which emphasised cultural challenges and the weight of gender

constructions. This gave all women the opportunity to question their own assumptions about their supposedly 'natural' limitations.

This path led to an unrelenting rise in the access of women to the world of non-domestic work, but at the same time it revealed certain challenges that remained unresolved even at the end of the century. In particular, the 'double burden' of balancing professional and personal life has made it hard to reconcile a maternal desire with work aspirations. Thus there continues to be a very clear dividing line between those who opt for the domestic sphere and those who choose the public sphere.

## Marriage and Family Law

The twentieth century witnessed competing movements of liberalisation and reaction in terms of marriage and family law that roughly mirrored the waves of revolution, war and the growth of new ideologies across the continent. Prior to the First World War, a number of countries experienced a push to democratise divorce and improve the rights of women within and beyond marriage, and the results of these movements continued into the interwar era. For example, in Britain, women were unable to hold property in their own names upon marriage until 1870, and it took several reforms, up until 1926, for married women to have the same rights to own and dispose of property as men. Similarly, divorce was uncommon and expensive prior to the First World War. It took a number of legal reforms to make it more accessible, including laws in 1923 and 1937 that first allowed women to end their marriages if their husbands committed adultery and also enabled partners to split on grounds including cruelty, desertion, and insanity.

Both World Wars, alongside the prolonged period of economic decline between them, generated reactions against the growing role of women outside the home, and more generally against the supposed breakdown of what many perceived as the traditional family. This movement cut across the political spectrum and across the continent, from liberal Britain to fascist Italy and Germany as well as the Soviet Union. One impetus for the movement to uphold this ideal of the family was the fact that so many marriages had broken down during the war through abandonment, separation, or death on the battlefield. For example, in Germany, the marriage rate almost halved between 1913 and 1916. In the interwar period, a number of different measures around Europe encouraged families to have more children, and women to stay at home. These included 'marriage bars' that prevented married women from taking up certain jobs (such as working for the post office), and family allowances or even prizes to encourage women to have more children. Fascist Italy famously introduced a 'bachelor tax' to encourage men to settle down and start families.

Even in the Soviet Union, which had initially sought equality for women and innovation in the sphere of the family, later constitutional changes meant that women were encouraged to prioritise their roles as wives and mothers.

Some of the movements to preserve the family during this period did not, however, aim to preserve the old order but rather to forge a new, supposedly 'purer' order. For example, National Socialist Germany banned intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews in 1935. Germany was not unique in adopting racial and eugenic family policies. Sweden, too, for example, introduced laws that banned 'undesirable' individuals, such as the disabled, from marrying and having children, while Switzerland separated parents and children within the partly nomadic Yenish population between 1926 and 1973, in an attempt to force this minority group to assimilate.

Progressive campaigns related to marriage and family law nonetheless continued in parallel with movements that sought to preserve what was seen as the traditional family. This could be seen, for example, in the international arena, where a woman's right to retain her own citizenship upon marriage was fought out in the interwar period. Eventually, countries like Britain, France and Germany changed the law so that women could maintain this essential aspect of autonomy in cases of intermarriage. International bodies and conventions in the interwar and post-1945 period, such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (1979), continued to call for greater rights for women to choose whether and whom to marry, and also for rights within marriage, such as the right to retain a professional life and to be educated. They also outlined universal rights for children, regardless of their family of origin, as in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In fact, the period after 1945 continued to be characterised by the tension between conservatism around the family and calls for loosening restrictions—on women as well as on different sexual practices. This could be seen, for example, in the movement for no-fault divorce that took off across Europe (from the late 1960s), as well as ongoing changes to women's rights to property and inheritance (as was the case in France into the 1980s), and women's equal rights within marriage (introduced in West Germany, for example, as late as 1977). It could also be seen in the outlawing of marital rape across much of Europe in the last quarter of the twentieth century (as was the case in Italy in 1976 and in England and Wales only in 1991).

Some of the most significant shifts in family law came in the 1990s and 2000s, with legislation creating civil partnerships and same-sex marriage. Europe has since continued to witness significant legal changes, including the expansion of adoption and pension rights for civil partners and same-sex couples, new rights for cohabitantes, and recognition of transgender individuals. Indeed, the many shifts in marriage and family law described above were part of a broader

story, in which questions of sexuality (including sexual rights, women's rights and the treatment of children) were intimately intertwined, as we shall see in the following section.

## Sexuality in Europe in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

For much of the twentieth century (and especially its first half), sexuality was still understood as the privilege of married couples that were procreative, heterosexual, and monogamous. Nevertheless, by the 1960s, a kind of sexual liberation (sometimes described in terms of a 'sexual revolution', although it was the result of a long-term shift) had taken hold within a context of growing secularisation and the affirmation of feminist and LGBTQ+ rights.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, anarchist and socialist thinkers (from Charles Fourier in France to Alexandra Kollontai in Russia) had already begun to question the traditional family and advocating gender equality, free union and sometimes sexual freedom. In the 1920s, psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich denounced sexual repression as a source of neuroses, while the World League for Sexual Reform (1928–1932) and others promoted birth control, the prevention of prostitution, and the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Although some countries, such as France, had already decriminalised sodomy as early as 1791, others created new penalties for sexual relations between men (though rarely for those between women), as in Britain's Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885) and Germany's Paragraph 175 (1871). From 1897 onwards, homosexual movements, such as the Scientific Humanitarian Committee from Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany, fought for their rights.

Hitler's rise to power put an end to this first wave of emancipation. Although the Nazi regime encouraged sexual relationships outside marriage (as long as they contributed to the pro-birth policy), it forbade interracial relationships and sent men accused of homosexuality ('Pink Triangles') to concentration camps. In 1934, Stalin's Soviet Union re-criminalised both homosexuality and abortion, which had been legalised in 1917 and 1920 respectively.

After the Second World War, many European countries—whether they were governed by Christian democrats or by communists—sought to restore supposedly 'traditional' gender and sexual norms. It was not until the 1960s that this model began to be challenged openly, by both the scientific field of sexology (the publication of the Kinsey Reports on human sexual behaviour, 1948–1953) and the movements associated with 1968 (including so-called 'counterculture'). Over time, sex education became mandatory in schools (as in Sweden in 1955), censorship generally lost ground (leading to a rise



in pornography), and sexuality came to be seen as a fundamentally political question.

Birth control and abortion were among the main demands of second-wave feminist movements, which had been notably influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's essay *The Second Sex* (1949). Even though birth control in the form of 'the pill' (first trialled in 1956) gradually liberated women from the fear of unwanted pregnancies, abortion rights were often only granted after years of struggle in different countries across Europe (as early as 1967 in Britain and as late as 2018 in Ireland). Poland, which had authorised abortion in 1956 (following the example of the USSR), has since drastically limited its use, introducing stringent legislation since 2016 to essentially outlaw it in nearly all cases. Since the 1990s, Assisted Reproductive Technology that was developed to tackle infertility has become a subject of public debate, especially when same-sex couples are concerned.

In fact, achieving visibility and the recognition of rights for LGBTQ+ persons has been one of the biggest challenges for European societies of the last fifty years. Following the United States, European countries saw the rise of revolutionary movements for gay and lesbian liberation in the 1970s, which began coming out of the closet, advocating gay pride, and demanding LGBT rights. In Western Europe, states began decriminalising same-sex relations between consenting adults at the end of the 1960s (Britain in 1967 and West Germany in 1969 for instance), although laws on age of consent continued to penalise homosexual relations more than heterosexual relations for much longer (until 1982 in France and until 1994 in united Germany). In Central and Eastern Europe it was generally only in the 1990s that homosexuality was decriminalised, often under the pressure from the European Union. Strong opposition remains in countries such as Poland where, although homosexuality has not been a crime since 1932, local governments have since 2019 started declaring themselves as "LGBT-free zones". When the LGBT community was struck by AIDS, new demands emerged in favour of recognising same-sex relationships through civil unions (the first of which were established in Denmark in 1989) and, later, same-sex marriage (starting with the Netherlands in 2001). The World Health Organization ceased to regard homosexuality as a mental disease in 1990, and did the same for trans identity in 2019. Even though some European countries today acknowledge non-binary gender identities, facilitate the changing of one's legal gender, and support transgender rights, transgender people still suffer numerous legal and social discriminations, and often see their identity negated or questioned, even in LGB and feminist circles.

The outcomes of the sexual revolution remain controversial. In the 1970s, some feminists worried that sexual freedom would only prove profitable for men. The quest for sexual gratification generated new fears related to sexual

performance (or at least new markets, as demonstrated by the authorisation of Viagra in 1998). Although many countries strengthened their laws regarding sexual assault, sexual and gender-based violence is still a massive issue (as shown by the #MeToo movement). Prostitution remains a divisive topic, with countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, or Germany regulating red-light districts (while at the same time condemning sex trafficking), and others like Sweden making it illegal to buy sex (1999). Child sexual abuse, for a long time a taboo subject, has been a topic of concern following several high-profile media cases, some of them directly involving the Catholic Church.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that understandings of household and family remained in flux in the contemporary period. Large changes were—and still are—underway, with wide-ranging implications for society as a whole, as households and families have become ever more fluid. While we know that many families in earlier periods also did not conform to the two-parent norm, personal choice is now a much greater factor than in previous centuries (when death and abandonment were the main drivers of diversions from the nuclear family). Households and family influence how the rest of society is organised, but they have also been reshaped by changes in the wider world. The emancipation of women, the growing recognition of sexual rights/freedoms, and the burgeoning recognition of the LGBTQ+ community in the twentieth century had profound impacts on how households and families were defined and how they continue to operate.

## Discussion questions

1. In which ways were changes to perceptions of sexuality and to the role of the family linked in twentieth-century Europe?
2. In which ways did the developments described in this text change the lives of women?
3. The twentieth century saw major changes in the way people organise their household and family life. How do you think the family of the future will look? Which aspects of the twentieth-century family will remain and which will change? Why?



## Suggested reading

- Aldrich, Robert, ed., *Gay Life and Culture: A World History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).
- Davidoff, Leonor, et al., *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830–1960* (London: Longman, 1999).
- Herzog, Dagmar, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- Kertzer, David I. and Marzio Barbagli, *Family Life in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).
- Maynes, Mary Jo and Ann Beth Waltner, *The Family: A World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- Steinberg, Sylvie, ed., *Une histoire des sexualités* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018).
- Therborn, Göran, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World, 1900–2000* (London: Routledge, 2004).