

# THE FAMILY IN HISTORY – Early Modern Period

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## Early Modern Themes, c.1450-1750

**Themes** The early modern period saw a number of crucial developments, from the new contacts with and from the Americas to the formation of a variety of new colonial and Asian empires. It was not, however, a decisive period in family history on a global scale. Significant changes occurred regionally. The West European family changed in a number of ways, though building from previous patterns. European colonial activities had huge impact on families in the Americas, and also, through the slave trade, on key parts of Africa. In Asia and Eastern Europe, however, most trends extended family features that had been established earlier, though there were some interesting specific adjustments and additions. Islamic, Hindu and Confucian approaches to the family were largely confirmed, in their respective regions. This said, some of the major systematic innovations introduced in the early modern period deserve to be considered in terms of family impact.

**Demography** A key set of changes in population structure involved the new biological exchanges with the Americas. Into the Americas came new diseases, domesticated animals, and crops – as well as European and African immigrants whether voluntary or forced. The net result was a significant population decline, though the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the beginnings of some recovery. For the rest of the world, access to crops of American origin, notably corn and the potato, added to available food supplies; it is estimated that about 30% of the plant foods consumed today are of American origin. Along with some internal improvements, for example in Chinese rice cultivation, this led to significant population growth in various parts of Asia. Europeans, more conservative about new foods – many American foods were long suspect because they were not mentioned in the Bible and were seen as sources of disease – began to convert to greater use (particularly of the potato) by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, leading to very rapid population growth for the next two centuries. For much of the world, then, family life was undoubtedly conditioned by increases in the numbers of children available, plus of course by the fact that numerically there were more families than ever before.

**Commerce** New trade with the Americas, plus improvements in ship design and navigation, led to a major surge in global commerce. Europeans used American silver to pay for a growing array of Asian spices and manufactured goods. China, India (until the 18<sup>th</sup> century) as well as Western Europe saw major economic growth. Latin America and parts of Africa and Eastern Europe were pressed to produce more foods and raw materials for export. An increasing divide opened up in terms of regional economic prosperity, some symptoms of which have lasted to the present, and this would affect the context for family life. More generally, many historians believe that the commercial surge pressed people in many regions to work harder than they had before, and this too could have family impact. Reliance on child labor may have increased in many areas, though it is also true that commerce provided new incentives to provide some education for children who could benefit from some literacy and numeracy skills.

**Politics** The watchword of the early modern period was empire. Major European countries created colonial empires, particularly in the Americas but including a few coastal areas in western and southern Africa and in Southeast Asia; India would be added to the list beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. New Islamic empires arose in the Middle East – Ottoman and Safavid – and with the Mughals in India, while the Russian empire surged forward from 1450 onward. China reestablished empire after the expulsion of the

Mongols. These were important developments, but the new or reaffirmed governments did not necessarily have major impact on family structures. Asian empires tended to reaffirm older family patterns, seeking to embellish them as a basis for overall social stability.

**Culture** No systematic cultural changes occurred on a global basis during the early modern period. Many regions sought to confirm and protect cultural traditions amid the other changes. Japan, most notably, cut off most global contacts after 1600 in the interests of cultural and social preservation – though within the country the role of Confucianism expanded. Considerable cultural continuity in much of Asia helped confirm family continuity, and vice versa. In contrast, the importation of Christianity to the Americas directly applied to family life, while complex cultural changes in Europe also prompted major family innovations.

**Continuities and adjustments: the Islamic empires** The early modern period did not introduce major new themes in family life or structure in most Muslim-majority societies. The formation of the Mughal Empire in India, particularly during its prosperous initial century, increased Hindu-Muslim interactions, accelerating the adoption of *purdah* as a common practice in the upper classes. Mughal emperors imported the practice of large harems with literally hundreds of concubines, and some Hindu rulers began to copy the pattern; there was also evidence that divorce and even some polygamy spread in Hindu ranks. But these changes did not affect the masses of the population, where older forms persisted – with the one exception, that urban growth saw an expansion of prostitution. The formation of the Ottoman empire also did not constitute a major new stage in family patterns, though there was some interesting internal regional variation for example around the issue of whether to include or exclude women from family property arrangements.

**Continuities and adjustments: East Asia** Chinese families did not change in fundamental ways, but there were some interesting enhancements, often encouraged by the state under the Ming and early Qing dynasties. Government encouragement of commendations to women who displayed full family loyalty was one example, even as foot binding continued to spread and many women became identified only in terms of their family position. Another interesting effort involved attempts to promote but also regulate identification of ancestors within a family clan, to facilitate ancestor worship but also clarify the family lineage of the clan – again a new move on behalf of older family goals. In Japan, extended families remained the norm though the sprawling family networks of traditional clans – based on elaborate marriage alliances -- tended to recede in favor of more straightforward extended households based on paternal descent; patriarchal power increased in the process. As always, peasant families required extensive labor collaboration between husband and wife, modifying the patriarchal pattern in practice. Alongside these patterns, a noteworthy expansion of education – mainly in Buddhist-derived schools that now emphasized practical skills (the *terakoya* schools) – also affected family life, though particularly in the cities and particularly with regard to boys.

**Conclusion** Regional patterns invite further comparison of family styles during the early modern period, particularly in contrasting the relative stability of Asia with more disruptive changes in Europe and its colonies.

### Study questions

1. Why is it difficult to venture global generalizations about family history during the early modern period?
2. What were the major changes in global demography? What were the key regional differences?
3. What were some of the ways major Asian societies sought to confirm basic family traditions during the period?

### Further reading

Beshara Doumani, *Family Life in the Ottoman Mediterranean: a social history* (Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Maurice Freedman, "The Family in China, Past and Present," *Pacific Affairs* 34 (1961-2)

Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (University of California Press, 1993)

Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

## Early Modern Western Europe/British North America

**Main trends** Several factors introduced some fundamental changes into Western family life, some of which were then carried over into the coastal colonies of North America. The rise of what is called the “European-style” family took shape early in the period, with huge implications for family structure and gender roles. Then the rise of Protestantism stimulated further changes, some of which also affected Catholic regions. Growing commerce and the increasing role of cities, even before industrialization, provided a final element from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century onward, supplemented by other new cultural influences in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Not all of these developments neatly meshed, and there were significant divisions in family behavior between middle and lower classes, and between cities and the countryside.

**European-style family** Catholic kinship rules may have created some of the basis for a further change in family structure, but it was apparently a new concern for protecting access to property that prompted a more decisive shift. Beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, a growing number of West European peasants and artisans began raising their marriage age, to a standard of roughly 25-6 for women, 27-8 for men (an unusually small age gap, as well as a delayed arrangement). This was truly a change from below; the aristocracy did not participate. The goal seems to have been assurance that the new family would have access to property as a nuclear unit (either land or an artisanal shop); concurrently, a growing number of propertyless people simply could not marry. This pattern also helped control the birth rate, which rose slightly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century but then stabilized during most of the 17<sup>th</sup>.

**Implications** Beyond the demographic result, this distinctive family pattern highlighted the independent nuclear unit. Late marriage meant that the children of the union would have little contact with grandparents, who would be reaching an age near death. (This has raised interesting questions about the role of grandparents in children’s socialization, as a historical variable.) The importance of broader kinship ties declined further. And while nuclear families might locate near other relatives (based still on patrilineal definitions), literally extended households became far less common. The independent nuclear unit, perhaps supplemented by a laborer or two living in the household, also increased the importance of cooperation between husband and wife as workers, probably modifying though not eliminating patriarchal inequality. Late marriage also increased the importance of community controls over the sexuality of young adults. While there was some expansion of the rate of illegitimate births, they remained in check until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, a growing number of couples, once engaged, did begin to have sex, resulting in a rise in “prebridal pregnancies” that led to births about 7 months after actual marriage. Here was an interesting new tension in family and community life.

**Protestantism** From a family standpoint the obvious result of Protestantism was increased emphasis on the importance of marriage and the family; the idea of a spiritual advantage in celibacy was simply removed. Martin Luther thus pointedly married a former nun. In consequence, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century family manuals in Protestant countries like England began emphasizing the importance of the husband-wife relationship and the importance of mutual happiness, including sexual pleasure. Husbands and fathers, though, were still assigned special responsibility for the moral education of children. Protestant countries, headed by places like Sweden and Scotland, also rapidly expanding schooling, though still particularly for boys, as the literacy rate began to rise rapidly. Here was an interesting change in the experience of childhood and in the obligations of many parents. Some of these changes also began to show up in Catholic countries, though often slightly later. Growing commerce provided new motivations to promote literacy and numeracy regardless of religion.

**New consumerism: the family as haven** By the late 17<sup>th</sup> century family life was further altered, at least for those with some means, by new consumer opportunities. Overseas trade was bringing products like coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate, and while some of these were consumed in shops, like the burgeoning coffee houses – largely a male preserve – others contributed to new family occasions. This shift was further enhanced by growing interest in chinaware and table settings. Increasingly, many families took an evening meal together, organized and scheduled by the wife and mother – this replaced more slapdash eating patterns. Revealingly, cookbooks, which previously had focused on preparing food for occasional village festivals, now focused on cooking for the family. Interest in better bedding, decorated armoires and

other furnishings, similarly demonstrated a desire to make the home a more attractive and comfortable place – indeed, the family was one of the principal foci of rising consumerism in general. All of this further suggested a partial separation between family and the local community. Some historians had argued that, in a more competitive economic environment, men were shifting from strong emotional reliance on male-male friendships, to greater attachment to family members. These changes were clearest for families above the poverty level, but they applied to rural as well as urban settings. And even among the poor, emotional investment in marriage (where it was economically possible) may have risen as well.

**Rise of romantic love** Love was not a new topic for the Western family. In the late postclassical period, troubadours had entertained the aristocracy with tales of chivalric love – intense devotion, often outside marriage. It was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century however that romantic love and family began more clearly to intertwine. A new reading genre, the novel, helped promote the notion. The spread of domestic manufacturing gave some young people opportunities to earn some money without waiting for inherited property. Rapid population growth now kicked in as well (British population grew a full 100% between 1750 and 1800), and this meant that parents could no longer provide customary inheritances for all their children anyway, which reduced their authority. The upshot was that a growing number of young people moved away from arranged marriage, forming attachments on their own. By midcentury some law courts in places like Switzerland agreed that if a young person, male or female, objected to a parental choice on grounds that love was impossible, the arrangement was void. Consumerism played a role in this category as well: growing numbers of young people developed new interests in more fashionable and colorful clothing, with courtship appeal in mind. Arranged marriage still occurred; courtship often involved selection of a mate in the same socio-economic category in any event. But the basis for marriage, and perhaps even more the expectations surrounding marriage, were changing for many people.

**A sexual revolution** Among some groups, particularly the lower, less propertied classes in both countryside and city, sexual habits began to change in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as well. Quite simply, more and more people engaged in sex before marriage – with a considerable resulting increase in the rate of illegitimate births. Here was another demonstration of the declining control of parents and community. In some cases, young men and women both eagerly participated in the new license. In other cases, men undoubtedly took advantage of propertyless women, as some propertyless girls, eager for marriage, sought to substitute sexual willingness for dowry only to be disappointed as the men moved on. Respectable groups deplored this trend (and exaggerated it), and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century worked to devise an alternative courtship model that would delay sex. But the disruption was considerable, and lasted certainly for several decades among some groups.

**British North America** Most of the features of the early modern European family were brought by the British colonists to the Americas – including some of the internal tensions and contradictions. American experience was altered somewhat by the greater availability of land and the desperate need for labor. This prompted somewhat younger marriage ages particularly for women – 23 instead of 26 – and slightly higher birth rates – but within the basic framework of the European-style family including its emphasis on nuclearity. New interests in romantic love and selective changes in sexual behavior involved 18<sup>th</sup>-century North America as well, and for essentially the same reasons as applied to Western Europe. American parents may have been somewhat more careful in dealing with their children than was true in Europe, if only because of the need for labor in a situation where older children might simply take off for the frontier. American child-centeredness was more obvious by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as noted by European visitors, but it may have had origins earlier on. In some cases, fathers ceded some property to sons even before the full inheritance, in hopes of maintaining good relations – though there were cases (as in Europe) of bitter, even violent disputes between impatient adult sons and their fathers. (The European-style family was not necessarily good for intergenerational relations.) Overall, however, an overlap in basic family patterns would continue to describe transatlantic history from this point onward – bolstered, of course, by frequent travel and contact and shared reading matter.

**Conclusion** The early modern period saw some intriguing and fundamental changes in Western family life. They were not all fully consistent, and important social class differences opened up as well. But the distinctiveness of the Western family, already suggested in features such as kinship patterns, notably increased. Some of the changes may help explain other innovative behaviors, in areas such as economic innovation or political unrest, though the connections are complicated and debatable. One result however

was very clear: by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Europeans boasted family values – including Christian traditions but now more besides – through which they confidently judged and often condemned the family systems of other societies – including their growing colonial holdings. Judgments about marriage, sex and parenting in Asia and Africa became standard fare, into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

### Study questions

1. What was the European-style family and why did it take shape?
2. What were some of the new social class differences in family life in the West?
3. How did consumerism intertwine with changes in family life and family formation?
4. What were the main similarities and differences between West European and British North American family patterns?

### Further reading

Mary Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History: a subversive view of the Western past* (Cambridge University Press, 2004)

Marilyn Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood: eighteenth-century cultures and the ideology of domesticity* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013)

Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western History since 1500* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Longman, 2005)

Katherine Lynch, *Individuals, Families and Communities in Western Europe, 1200-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) (excellent in itself, but also with references to a vast previous historical literature on the subject)

Marilyn Coleman and Lawrence Ganong, eds., *The Social History of the American Family* (4v., Sage, 2014)

## Latin America

**Disease** The arrival of Europeans in the Caribbean and the Americas, in growing force after 1500, disrupted established family life in many ways. High death rates took their toll; we lack elaborate evidence about family reactions to the new contagious diseases, and of course many whole families were wiped away. But ultimately mortality rates above 80% must have imposed tremendous strain on family survivors, and the process did not end until about 1700 (only to be repeated then in the northwest and Pacific Oceania). Ultimately, disease resistance and the growth of a mixed, or mestizo, population ended the vulnerability, allowing demographic growth that would continue until recently.

**Other disruptions** European arrival also brought intense Christian missionary activity, particularly in Latin America but also in the French holdings in the north (Protestants were long less interested in this effort). Missionaries found many faults with existing family patterns and worked to correct them. In addition, however, European sexual depredations created a high rate of illegitimate births, another ongoing challenge. Family structures rebounded in many ways; it would be misleading to overemphasize the fluidity. But social class differentials, in one of the world's most stratified societies, introduced further complications.

**Christian concerns** Missionaries in Latin America quickly concluded that a number of Native American family practices were immoral, though the specifics varied with the region. Clothing was a concern, and both genders were pushed toward greater concealment – men ultimately adopting loose-fitting pants. Older patterns, like a Mayan willingness to allow boys and girls to swim together naked, were quickly attacked. Other functional practices, such as abortion, were attacked, and locals were urged to replace extended families with more strictly nuclear households. A great deal of attention was paid to regulating contacts between unmarried young people and eliminating the custom of trial marriages. In other words, as one historian has put it, the Spanish worked hard to subvert the normal conduct of Indian family life in the name of Christian values. Many locals withdrew from areas with active missions, to preserve older customs, or found ways to compromise. Some women, for example, lied to authorities about their kinship with a proposed husband, in regions where traditions allowed matches with close relatives. Efforts to

convert children, and in a few cases school them, could also be disruptive, but educational systems were not in fact very extensive beyond a portion of the native upper class. On the other hand colonial authorities worked hard, and successfully, to eliminate earlier practices such as child sacrifice.

**Family authority and discipline** Europeans generally strove to promote greater authority for men in the family (this was true among native populations in North America as well). They criticized some customary disciplinary practices with children as cruel – for example, exposure to hot pepper smoke – but they confirmed the importance of parental control and the importance of child labor, pressing whole families to work on colonial estates.

**Illegitimacy** Spanish and Portuguese conquerors, from Christopher Columbus onward, routinely requested access to native women. As one put it, after a military victory, “You are to deliver women with light skins, corn, chickens, eggs and tortillas”. The practice was compounded by the fact that, initially, relatively few women came over from Spain. Sexual depredations were profoundly shocking, but resistance was difficult; and some women participated more willingly out of affection or in hopes of preferential treatment. And some matches developed with mutual commitment but simply without the benefit of a formal marriage ceremony. The result was a persistently high rate of illegitimate births, plus a large number of maternally-based families. In one Brazilian parish in 1740, for example, 23% of all births were registered as illegitimate, and percentages would actually rise even higher in many parts of Latin America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Results** Consequences were varied. Some fathers recognized illegitimate offspring and tried to provide economic support, even stipulating a share in inheritance; but others bowed out entirely. Mothers raising children on their own received considerable help from other village or neighborhood families; the results for many children were not as unstable as might be imagined. A number of children “circulated” – that is, they were sent to families that were childless or needed some supplementary help – though this sometimes led to harsh treatment. In one Chilean city as late as 1880 17% of all children were living in households with adults who were not their parents. Reliance on Catholic-run orphanages developed as well, with children allocated for labor when they became old enough. (Some orphanages, however, as in Cuba, would not take Indian, Black or mixed-race children.) These patterns contributed as well to a pronounced gap between upper- and middle-class families, disproportionately of European origin and officially hewing to Christian family values, and the real and imagined behaviors of the *mestizo* and native populations. Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century condemnations of popular family behavior as “infamous”, “leaving an indecent and shameful mark” circulated widely in official circles. Preserving or re-establishing family life in Latin America posed clear challenges, prompting a variety of responses.

### Study questions

1. What were the main Christian concerns about American family practices?
2. What were the common responses to high illegitimacy rates? How disruptive were they for the children involved?

### Further reading

Ondina Gonzalez and Bianca Premo, eds., *Raising an Empire: children in early Iberia and colonial Latin America* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007)

Tobias Hecht, ed., *Minor Omissions: children in Latin American history and society* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002)

Richard Trexler, *Gendered Violence, Political Order and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Cornell University Press, 1995)

Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood and Robert Haskett, eds., *Indian Women of Early Mexico* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1997)

## Atlantic Slavery

**Disruptions** The rise of the Atlantic slave trade and American slavery were hugely disruptive of family life. At the same time capacity to form families recovered to an impressive degree, a tribute to the importance of the institution and the persistence of enslaved peoples. Disruption began with the seizure of slaves in Africa by European traders or, more often, African merchants. Young people were snatched, their parents almost always left behind; in some cases, a brother and sister might be captured together but then immediately separated. For Africans accustomed to extensive family ties, the result must have been massive disorientation and grief – as a few who later left written accounts attest.

**Impact on Africa** In many parts of West and southern Africa, so many millions were seized in the three centuries after 1800 that regional demography was seriously affected – both because of outright loss and the deprivation of many people who were just reaching their childbearing years. Further, a marked gender disparity resulted, because young men were disproportionately valued. The twin results were, first, overall demographic stagnation in the early modern period – compared to growth in Asia and Europe – and, second, greater reliance on polygynous families as a means of accommodating excess women.

**Family law in the Americas** Throughout most of the Americas, slave families, once formed in the new territory, had no status in law. Slaveowners systematically resisted any legal recognition that would limit their ability to sell or move slaves regardless of family status. Owners themselves were somewhat divided concerning the informal families that surfaced: some remained hesitant, but others thought that families might promote greater stability and reduce the risk of flight. But this did not change the legal liability. Colonial law was also quickly applied to the offspring of enslaved women sired by Whites: they were slaves too. Rapes and sexual coercion of women were a common feature of slavery throughout the Americas.

**Further complications** Some enslaved people formed families where husband and wife worked on different, though usually neighboring, estates, with mutual visits once or twice a week (the practice was called “marrying abroad”). The high labor demands on slaves, both male and female, represented another hindrance to full family life, and children were expected to start work at a young age. But the great threat was sales of one or more children or a spouse. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, slaveowners in states like Virginia, in the United States, increasingly took advantage of the end of most transatlantic slave trading by selling slaves to the cotton-growing regions of the deep south, often without regard to family status. It has been estimated that a substantial minority of families were disrupted in this fashion, and of course abolitionist literature, quite understandably, played up this feature of slavery in trying to encourage opposition. Slave owners sometimes required the wife whose husband was sold away to take another partner, for purposes of procreation to increase the labor supply. Finally, slave owners frequently divided their slaves in passing inheritance along to their own children, again without much consistent regard for family status.

**Adjustments** Despite all the barriers, meaningful family life developed for many enslaved people, with deep emotional attachments. Some slave communities were able to identify one woman, usually somewhat older, to assist with care for younger children while parents and siblings were at work. While family ties were often precarious because of the sale of fathers or sons, women were less often at risk and as a result mother-daughter ties often developed particular intensity. In tobacco-growing areas, where few slaves were needed on each plantation and “marrying abroad” was common as a result, slaves families managed to develop larger kinship ties, sometimes over a wide area; this was less possible amid the more concentrated labor demands of cotton or sugar plantations. Kinship ties in some cases revived West African traditions, including matrilineal descent. Families in general, whether nuclear or extended, offered not only economic assistance to family members, but emotional consolation as well amid the many misfortunes that could affect enslaved people.

**Aftermath** Freed or escaped slaves often went to great lengths to try to retrieve enslaved family members. After Emancipation in the United States, former slaves took out newspaper ads and attempted other methods in order to reestablish family ties. Considerable and often bitter debate has addressed the question of the longterm impact of slavery on African American or African Brazilian family structure, into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Study questions

1. How did the slave trade affect African family structure?
2. Why did planters quickly move to deprive slave families of legal status?
3. Why were enslaved people often successful in establishing families despite the many impediments?

## Further reading

Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: slave youth in nineteenth-century America* (Indiana University Press, 2011)

Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Vintage, 1977)

H.P. McAdoo, ed., *Black Families* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Sage, 1997)

## Russia: early modern through 19<sup>th</sup> century

**Gender roles** By the early modern period Russian families may have been more rigidly patriarchal than their counterparts in the West, even though Russian Christianity, like its Catholic counterpart, sanctified marriage as a sacrament and surrounded it with considerable ritual. Some evidence suggests that religious men were particularly likely to emphasize their authority over wives, even with violence, as part of their sense of appropriate structure. In some cases, bouts of domestic abuse did not preclude a normally friendly spousal relationship, and certainly work cooperation between partners was an essential part of the peasant economy. And it is simply impossible to venture comparisons of domestic violence rates with any certainty. It was revealing, however, that a mid-16<sup>th</sup> century treatise urged husbands to whip disobedient wives, though this should be done without anger. The symbolic transfer of the whip in marriage, from father to new husband, was accompanied by the phrase, "Should you not behave as you ought toward your husband, he in my stead will admonish you with this whip." In the upper classes, women were kept fairly secluded, and sometimes veiled in public. Russian Christianity allowed a man, twice, to divorce his wife by sending her to a convent, where she would become dead to the outside world while the husband could freely remarry.

**Lamentation** A number of ethnographers have noted a custom, perhaps since preChristian times, of female lamentation before a marriage, that persisted until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women would gather prior to a marriage to cry and tear their hair, mourning the loss of the bride's childhood and the suffering she might endure in marriage.

**Petrine reforms** Peter the Great's reforms at the end of the century intended to cut into the pattern at least for the upper class. Aristocratic women gained much more public freedom, and greater latitude in dress. They could attend a variety of public events, such as concerts. Peter also hoped to improve their educational level, if only to improve the domestic context for the education of sons. Peter also in principle abolished arranged marriage; a decree of 1702 held the all marriage decisions should be voluntary and that prospective partners should meet at least six weeks before any engagement, with full freedom to renounce the match. Catherine the Great furthered the process of change, particularly by extending opportunities for education for upper-class women (as with the Smolenyi Institute for Girls of Noble Birth, in 1764). At one point the empress even argued for educational equality but then pulled back with the claim that "the intent and goal of the rearing of girls should consist most of all in making good homemakers, faithful wives, and caring mothers." These developments were important but they touched only the top level of the social hierarchy; by the later 18<sup>th</sup> century only 7% of all school students were female.

**Feminist voices** Despite periods of political repression and limitations on contact with the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a growing number of women writers, particularly later in the century, began denouncing the subordination of women in the family. Some men joined in, as with a doctor who urged more education for women not only for the sake of the home but also to prepare for other professions such as nursing. For a few, opportunities opened up in higher education, even medical schools. On the other hand, for better or worse, there was no large movement in Russia to remove women from the labor force in order to focus on the family; through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, most women were expected to combine productive work



with primary family responsibilities. While an urban middle class began to emerge in Russia, it did not gain the cultural influence of its Western counterpart.

**Early industrialization** After the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861, labor mobility improved somewhat, while population growth also reduced access to property for some peasants. Literacy began to increase as well. This led to some developments similar to those in the West a century earlier, and particularly an increase in rates of premarital sex and illegitimacy. Earlier, in a more strictly patriarchal context, women found guilty of premarital sex were severely shamed, and often could not marry. But now things began to loosen up; one observer claimed, with due exaggeration, that it was becoming impossible to find a virgin any more. More young people also defied traditions of arranged marriage, insisting on picking their own partners. Russian family patterns were in flux by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Study questions**

1. What were some key differences between Russian and Western family patterns during the early modern and 19<sup>th</sup> century periods?
2. What was the impact, but also what were the limitations, of Petrine reforms for family life?
3. Why did a Victorian family model not develop in Russia?

### **Further reading**

Barbara Clemens, Barbara Engel and Christine Worobec, eds., *Russia's Women: accommodation, resistance, transformation* (University of California Press, 1991)

Barbara Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound: the politics of marital strife in fin-de-siecle Russia* (Cornell University Press, 2011)

Barbara Norton and Jehanne Gheith, *An Improper Profession; women, gender and journalism in late imperial Russia* (Duke University Press, 2001)