

THE FAMILY IN HISTORY – 20th Century

Contents

The Contemporary Period, 1920s-present
The Soviet Union and Russia
The Western Family in the Contemporary Period
East Asia
South Asia
The Middle East
Sub-Saharan Africa
21st-Century Trends

The Contemporary Period, 1920s-present

Basic Trends World historians approach the past century (roughly, World War I-present) in various ways, but some attempt to see some very general themes running through the whole period. This works for family patterns at least to some extent. The most important underlying developments resulted from the spread of some degree of industrialization, plus reforms intended to promote industrialization, throughout much of the world. Most regions have thus participated in birth rate reduction (though to varying degrees) and have seen a striking decline in infant and maternal mortality levels, both obviously fundamental to family life. Schooling has spread more widely, again a major reorientation for children and parents alike. On the whole, thanks to urbanization, extended families have weakened as well, though again there are important regional variations.

Gender Patriarchal family structures have been widely modified, though particularly in the cities and in regions where the hold of religion has loosened somewhat. The percentage of women working outside the home has risen, and this always generates a modification of the family power structure (the same occurs when older daughters work even while remaining in the family). Rates of child marriage have dropped – though the phenomenon remains important. Reduced educational gaps and the decline of the birth rate both contribute to shifts in family gender dynamics, and result from them. These trends have also provoked resistance, even new forms of domestic violence in some cases, but they have largely persisted.

Latin America Changes in Latin American family structure illustrate some of the common dynamics. By the 1970s the birth rate began to drop rapidly, soon leading to rates of 2.1 or so per family. Anthropologists documented the process in which women, now literate, began to use new birth control methods, often against opposition of both husbands and priests (both of whom sometimes accused them of seeking extramarital sex). The goal, as the women put it, was to be able to provide better lives and more education for children, only possible if there were fewer of them.

Disruptions The contemporary period has also brought huge disruptions to family life in many regions. New methods of warfare, including the bombing of civilian areas (a trend that began in the 1920s and 1930s) caused many family casualties and in some cases prompted efforts to send children away from their urban parents. The sheer magnitude of contemporary conflicts, plus new ethnic tensions and “cleansings”, led to massive refugee populations, often with a disproportionate number of women and children and leading to huge challenges in maintaining or reestablishing family life. By the 21st century disruptions also included droughts and climate disasters due to global warming. At an extreme, disasters could reverse gains such as declining child mortality.

Globalization Increasing global contacts affected family life in many regions, though again particularly in urban areas. Human rights campaigns, often associated with the United Nations after World War II, pressed for more education for children and better treatment of women, in the family as well as in society at large; many programs targeted practices like child marriage or, in northeastern Africa, the genital

mutilation of women. Expert advice to parents spread widely as well. Pediatrician Benjamin Spock's late 1940s book on *Baby and Child Care*, a massive best seller in the United States for half a century, was translated into at least 39 languages; a Japanese edition thus appeared with great fanfare in 1964, and versions in Hindi, Arabic as well as many European languages were issued as well. Finally the spread of Hollywood movies (from the 1920s onward) and television shows after 1970 extended awareness of Western family images, such as dating or an extensive youth culture. This too could increase interest in a quest for love-based marriages.

Global Consumerism Global consumer forms also deeply affected family life. More and more parents felt an obligation to buy standard toys for their children, often made in the United States (like the ubiquitous Barbie doll) but increasingly coming from Japan as well (as with Hello Kitty). Amusement parks and other global attractions encouraged family vacations – a visit to Disneyland in Florida became a goal for many successful parents in Latin America, for example. Celebrations of children's birthdays extended as well, complete with translations of the song "happy birthday"; by 2000, services were available in the Middle East, China and elsewhere promising to organize appropriate festivities. Valentine's Day also gained global purchase, celebrating romantic love (though, interestingly, in some places such as India, traditionalists sometimes violently disrupted Valentine's day dinners, claiming that romantic emphasis risked reducing the appropriate power of parents in family formation). Consumerism could also place strain on family traditions, with urban, nuclear families for example resenting kinship obligations such as the expectation of hospitality when rural relatives came visiting; or with young people preferring to hang out in a fast-food restaurant than to go home for a family meal.

Regional variables: economic development General trends played against a number of regional differentials. Areas such as much of Africa, where industrialization lagged at least until the 21st century, retained higher than average birth rates and other signs of family traditionalism. Urban-rural divisions within countries like India generated similar differentials, obviously complicating generalizations even around basic features such as parental willingness to send children to school.

Regional variables: religion Religious regions, again including cultural differentials within countries, were slower to generate changes such as birth rate reductions (and use of artificial devices), rates of women working outside the home and so on. Patterns in many Islamic regions; among Orthodox Jews in Israel; In Christian fundamentalist areas thus differed from their counterparts in more secular areas such as Western Europe, most of East Asia, the coastal United States and so on. By the 21st century religious-political combinations were generating some interestingly divergent trends. In Iran, for example, birth rates were dropping rapidly, while women outnumbered men in the universities; but rates of women working outside the home (at 22% of the labor force) lagged well behind patterns in more secular societies.

Regional variables: political systems Worldwide, governments played a greater role in family life in the contemporary period than ever before. Promotion of schooling; efforts to encourage birth control (for example, in 1970s Mexico, against the urgings of the Church); welfare measures; new laws on marriage and divorce – the range of state action was varied. Obviously, some governments pushed harder than others: the Chinese government's campaign against large families from the late 1970s was thus unprecedented, in contrast to the substantial failure of a much more modest campaign in India. At the same time, many state efforts failed to counter family dynamics. A number of governments in the 1930s thus sought to promote a birth rate increase with various incentives, and the same began to occur after 2000 – but most families, bent on their own goals, largely ignored the pressure.

Experiments or throwbacks Any contemporary survey must also note some special political efforts claiming to restore older family values. Thus European fascism, and especially German Nazism, between the world wars touted the importance of the traditional family (including of course higher birth rates). Women were officially encouraged to stay home to have and raise children; efforts to punish sexual deviance expanded and contraceptive devices were discouraged, while marriage was actively promoted (though actual rates did not rise much). Financial incentives were involved in many of these campaigns, and a 1938 law made it easier for men to divorce so they might remarry to have more children. After 1990 several extremist Islamic regimes – the Taliban government in Afghanistan, later the so-called "Islamic State" (ISIS) in parts of Syria and Iraq fiercely limited opportunities for women outside the home,

including schooling, while often forcing young girls to marry and bear children. Most of these extremes were short-lived, though the return of the Taliban in 2021 raised questions anew; but they certainly demonstrated some of the basic tensions that changes in family life could generate.

Conclusion World historians dealing with the contemporary period emphasize the complex balance between the local and the global, and this certainly applies to family history. Regional variants remain vital, but they should not be pressed to the point of ignoring some underlying common dynamics.

Study questions

1. Why have modern governments on the whole had better results when they tried to encourage smaller families than when they sought to promote birth rate increase?
2. Did global consumerism come to play a significant role in family life?
3. Did differences among family forms and goals increase or decrease overall in the century after World War I?

Further reading

Heinrich Hartmann and Corinna Unger, eds., *A World of Populations: transnational perspectives on demography in the 20th century* (Berghahn Books, 2016)

Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese toys and the global imagination* (University of California Press, 2006)

Marilyn Coleman and Lawrence Ganong, eds., *Handbook of Contemporary Families: considering the past, contemplating the future* (Sage, 2003)

The Soviet Union and Russia

General trends With surprising speed after their revolutionary victory in 1917, communist leaders worked to expand the educational system – at all levels, while also improving maternal and infant health conditions. Schooling soon became the normal childhood experience, and child labor below the age of 14 was abolished at least in principle, while infant death rates fell rapidly. Over time, the acceleration of industrialization and the growth of cities enhanced the emphasis on nuclear families. (Because of housing limitations, many newly-married couples at first lived with parents, but then moved out when children arrived.) Many parents began to reduce the birth rate, another standard feature of industrial family structure. However, a shortage of rubber constrained the availability of contraceptive devices, forcing considerable reliance on *coitus interruptus* or abortion for birth control.

Marxism and the family Many Marxists harbored some suspicion of the family as a “bourgeois” institution that might hold back the achievement of a revolutionary society – particularly because of its roots in private property and inheritance. Many revolutionaries assumed that in a revolutionary society the family would “wither away”. These concerns help explain a fascinating experimental period in the 1920s, before Stalinist policy actually emphasized a rather conservative family structure. Even over the longer term, the Soviet state, in expanding youth organizations – notably, the Young Pioneers and *Komsomol* -- as well as formal schooling, sought to modify parents’ hold over their children, and occasionally sought to use children to report on potentially subversive parental views and activities. “The child is the product of state upbringing”, one official declared. Extensive efforts to reduce the hold of religion could also create tensions in family life.

The 1920s A dramatic 1918 Family Code greatly expanded opportunities for divorce – “no-grounds” divorces required no rationale. Each spouse would retain property in case of divorce. The category of illegitimate children was abolished: all children were entitled to parental support. Women were recognized as equals under the law and no longer had to obtain a husband’s permission to earn a wage or seek education. A variety of discussions and experiments followed in the effort to loosen the hold of family traditions. Ideas of free loves circulated widely in some circles. In a dramatic move for the time, abortion was legalized. However, a new law in 1926 largely ended this open period, establishing clearer rules for divorce (mainly to provide greater protection for women) while also setting up stricter criteria for paternity and child support.

The 1936 Code Under Stalinism, the experimental mood was replaced by a clearer effort to stabilize the family. Abortions were limited by law, with fines and jail time for those who performed the service. Efforts to promote procreation stepped up – though with limited effect – with payments and child care services for large families. Motherhood was praised. Divorce became more difficult.

Gender The Soviet system generated fascinating tensions for women and the family. On the one hand, the Soviets avoided the Western impulse to remove married women from the labor force: both ideology and the need for labor, often cheap labor, worked against this. The Soviets pointed with great pride to the roles women took on as doctors, factory workers and so on, contrasting this with the narrower opportunities in the West. On the other hand, women unquestionably retained primary responsibility for the family; this could include extensive amounts of time devoted to shopping for necessities, in what was still a limited consumer economy. For many women the dual role proved extremely difficult – one reason, of course, for cutting back the birth rate. Despite propaganda, patriarchal traditions held firm in many ways. As family policy became more conservative, emphasis on the authority of the husband increased; feminist strivings were rigorously suppressed as counterrevolutionary.

Rural-urban Rapid change opened up new regional distinctions in family. Rural families were on the whole larger than those in the city. Extensive kinship networks survived easily, particularly in areas like Central Asia. Ideas of romantic love were downplayed in favor of emphasis on parental responsibility and tradition. Over time, however, some newer motives did begin to affect family life even in the countryside.

After Stalin Conservative family policies eased by the 1960s to some degree. In keeping with what was happening by that point in Western Europe, restrictions on abortions were loosened, though policy continued to oscillate. Another important government focus, from the Stalinist era onward, involved the organization of annual family vacations for workers, at mass resorts created on the Black Sea coast and elsewhere.

Under Putin After the fall of communism and under President Vladimir Putin, by the early 21st century Russian policy in many ways reaffirmed family conservatism, though without some of the radical restrictions of the Stalinist era. Officials held Russia up as an alternative to the looser family values of the West, for example by opposing homosexual rights and gay marriage. Most dramatically, a new law severely limited opportunities to prosecute domestic abuse. More generally, the trend toward low birth rates and emphasis on nuclear family structures continued, while at the same time the country generated unusually high divorce rates – confirming some of the most fundamental trends in family life in Russia during the contemporary era.

Study questions

1. Why did Marxists harbor suspicions about the family, and did these lead to significant changes?
2. Why and how did family policy change under Stalin?
3. How did women's family roles in the Soviet Union compare to those in other regional societies?

Further reading

Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet family policy and social life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge University Press, 1993)

Gail Lapidus Warshovsky, *Women in Soviet Society: equality, development and social change* (University of California Press, 1978)

Elizabeth White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood from the Late Imperial Period to the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Bloomsbury, 2020)

The Western Family in the Contemporary Period

General The past century has seen a number of important changes in the Western family and, overall, probably a weakening of family structure. At the same time a number of basic modern trends continued to intensify. This was the period after all when the very low child death rate was confirmed and extended; when birth rates continued to drop overall, with increasing reliance on various artificial birth control

devices. The continued expansion of schooling, and growing importance of school success in advanced industrial economies, affected parents and children alike. The idea of love-based marriages continued to flourish, even amid the rise of online matchmaking services in the early 21st century: references to finding a “soul mate”, a term first coined in 1832 in the Victorian era, actually expanded.

Class structure Family trends continued to be conditioned by social and economic differences, though middle-class patterns gained greatest attention given the position and size of the class. Birth rates still varied a bit, with middle-class families smaller except during the baby boom. Parental expectations and behaviors varied. A study in 1970s Britain showed that both middle-class and working-class parents hoped for professional jobs for their children (doctors, lawyers etc), but middle class parents put far more emphasis into supervision of their children’s schooling efforts. Even dating and marriage patterns varied, with higher marriages ages and more “shopping around” for middle-class families during most of the period.

The Baby Boom For two decades after World War II the Western birth rate unexpectedly increased, particularly in the middle classes and particularly in the affluent United States. Some observers thought a new commitment to larger families would prove a durable choice. What happened was a catch-up effort, after the birth rate reduction forced by Depression and World War II, that then maintained momentum for two decades (often with children very closely spaced together). It was an interesting development, producing a pronounced demographic bulge, but it was temporary. Birth rate reduction resumed in the 1960s and then accelerated.

Role of the state Government impact on families increased, particularly with the development of the welfare state (more pronounced in Western Europe, Canada, New Zealand and Australia than in the US). Government-provided housing was an important resource for many families. Pensions measurably reduced the reliance of older people on younger kin. State regulations also increased: governments might intervene against parents found deficient, even, by the 21st century, to protect children against excessive obesity. Battles in 2020-21 over government-mandated masks and vaccines, in dealing with the Covid pandemic, showed the recurrent possibility of tensions between the state and parental autonomy.

Extended family Structurally the extended family continued to decline. From the 1920s onward co-residence of an older person with an adult child, a common pattern in the 19th century, began to drop away, and no one seemed particularly concerned. Greater resources allowed older people to live on their own or in group facilities. At the same time, informal contacts remained important. Mother-adult daughter bonds continued strong, particularly in the working class. Telephones and, later, social media contacts allowed intergenerational interactions. The role of the loving grandparents gained new attention.

Sexuality Probably the biggest shifts in the Western family involved sexuality and gender. Interest in sexual pleasure grew steadily, at least into the early 21st century. In Britain experts like Marie Stopes urged women to seek enjoyment, and in general the Victorian notion of the passionless female declined notably (aided by a variety of sex manuals). Dating began to replace courtship, and while dating did not necessarily involve sex it did decrease parental supervision. In families, growing use of artificial contraception helped promote recreational sex – and expectations for pleasure and performance. Even Catholic families participated despite the official opposition of the Church. Among young people on both sides of the Atlantic, a “sexual revolution” in the 1950s and 1960s made premarital sex increasingly common, accepted, and even expected; assumptions of virginity at marriage declined markedly, and sexual jealousy was also discouraged. By the same token, sexual dissatisfaction undoubtedly became an increasing cause of marital infidelity and also divorce.

Abortion After World War II all Western societies faced increasing controversy over abortion. On the one hand, advocates of sexual pleasure and women’s rights urged latitude, along with citing the importance of avoiding unwanted children as a basis for good parenting. But religious conservatives, some of them deeply concerned about overall sexual license, firmly resisted. In most European countries some consensus was reached, often with latitude for abortions in the first three months of pregnancy, stiffer approval requirements thereafter. But the debate remained unresolved in the United States despite a 1970s court ruling that allowed the procedure.

Gender Married women increasingly sought work outside the home, during both World Wars and then from the 1960s onward. A desire for higher family living standards and greater personal fulfillment combined, amid a second wave of feminism. This was not an easy change. For several decades German wives continued to argue that mothers should stay home – even though they themselves were working. Care facilities for children became crucial, and in the United States considerable reluctance to turn young children over to others, plus inadequate state support, created ongoing tension. Other patterns, like carefully prepared evening meals, had to shift. The change obviously contributed to birth rate decline and a growing increase in deliberately childless marriages or acceptance of a single child.

Parenting Smaller family size obviously affected parenting, and sibling relations. Increased emphasis on schooling prompted many parents to devote greater supervision to this aspect of their children's lives. The rise of childrearing expertise, deriving now from pediatricians and psychologists, might assist parents but could also create new pressure and concerns, reducing parental confidence. Anxiety also increased when mothers were working, generating some often frantic efforts to maintain contact and supervision over children. In some countries like Britain and the United States what was called the helicopter parent emerged by the early 21st century, with hovering attention to children's activities and emotional as well as cognitive development. While child death rates dropped, concern over health issues might actually increase. Some people – parents and experts alike – believed that parenting was becoming more difficult and stressful, particularly in the middle classes. At the same time, parents in Western culture were united over one point: they wanted their offspring to be happy. An early 21st century poll showed surprising uniformity here, in contrast to several nonWestern societies where children's health or achievement were rated more important; 86% of French parents, 75% or so of parents in most other Western countries agreed that happiness was the main point.

Household tasks The issue of responsibility for household tasks had existed since the industrial revolution but it now took on new dimensions. New appliances cut into the labor needed, but in some cases heightened standards of cleanliness balanced the gains. When women began more commonly to take jobs outside the home, husbands on average increased their responsibilities but not to equal levels; women still bore disproportionate responsibility, including child care. At the same time, children's chores around the house dropped steadily, thanks to school work and recreational interests. The result was some obvious potential tension. Men sometimes felt that their extra contributions were not recognized, while women even more reasonably might resent their fuller load – a latterday reminder of older inequalities.

Divorce and marriage Through most of the 20th century divorce rates tended to rise in Western society, though there were important national variations based on religious tradition and specific law. Cultural acceptability of divorce expanded steadily. By the later 20th century almost half of all American marriages were ending in divorce, and about a third of those in the United Kingdom. Remarriage often occurred, and the complications of stepparenting contributed a new or renewed element to modern family life. The trend also caused an understandable flurry of concern about the basic stability of the family itself. By the 21st century, marriage age was increasing, and marriage rates were dropping – leading to a significant decline in the divorce rate in places like the United States, though perhaps not, overall, to a real improvement in family stability given the rise of single parenting and unmarried couples.

Consumerism Though not a new trend, family life in the West was increasingly enveloped with consumer expectations. The family vacation became a common ideal (though beyond the reach of poorer families). Extended family trips marked the rise of vacation time in Western Europe. Institutions like the Disney worlds cropped up to lure families in the United States, and ultimately Europe as well (EuroDisney, after some growing pains, became the top vacation destination in France). At home, the rise of television placed a new premium on home-based entertainments, though some affluent families, buying separate televisions for children, reduced the solidarity impact. Increased expenditure on family-based holidays like birthdays and Christmases was another sign of change. Some authorities argued that, with the decline of the birth rate, shared consumerism was becoming the chief purpose of Western families above the poverty line – with shared spousal decision making from partners both working outside the home. Another term frequently applied to many Western marriages from the 1920s onward was “companionate”, with spouses developing primary emotional as well as recreational relationships with each other.

Gay marriage A vital change in the contemporary history of the Western family involved the rise of demands for legalization of gay marriage, and the increasing acceptance by the Western public. The dramatic shift in attitudes occurred throughout the West from the 1960s onward, leading to legalization in most societies, beginning with steps in Denmark in the 1970s. The rate of gay marriages and gay parenting soared, and the result was a clear if unexpected confirmation of the importance of the family in Western life.

Study questions

1. Why did the baby boom prove to be an anomaly in the contemporary history of the Western family?
2. Should the history of the contemporary Western family be considered mainly as a story of decline?
3. What were the main changes and issues in parenting during the contemporary period?
4. Why and how did Western marriage become more sexualized, and with what main results?

Further reading

Donna Bee-Gates, *I Want It Now: navigating childhood in a material world* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: a history of modern American childrearing* (New York University Press, 2003)

Pamela Druckerman, *Brining Up Bebe: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting* (Penguin, 2014)

Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a history* (Viking, 2005)

Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: a social history of American family life* (Free Press, 1989)

Peter Willmott and Michael Young, *The Symmetrical Family* (Pantheon, 1970)

East Asia

General National patterns of family life within East Asia have differed considerably over the past century. Most obviously, the communist revolution in China brought huge and distinctive changes between 1949 and the late 1970s, including some experiments, on rural collective farms, to replace aspects of family life with community facilities. Since then, however, some common trends can be noted across borders, including a rapidly declining birth rate, increasing emphasis on love-based marriage, and growing interest in family consumerism. At the same time, traditional values continue to play a role, often derived from Confucianism, leading to greater stability among families than is true in the West – at least in terms of legal status. East Asian divorce rates average at about 5% of all marriages, a distinctive figure worldwide; divorce still draws considerable social stigma. Overall, family patterns in East Asia may demonstrate the most dramatic combination of tradition and change of any world region during the past century, though the comparison should be debated.

Family size Overall, birth rates have declined fairly steadily in the region, though Chinese policy stands out. In Japan, the postwar government began to encourage birth control in the interests of population balance, accelerating the earlier trend and ultimately leading to one of the lowest birth rates in the world. Revolutionary China touted large families as a national resource for several decades, but then changed course in the 1970s. The famous decree limiting most families to a single child occurred in 1979, though it was later modified to allow a second child if the first born was female, an interesting testimony to the continued preference for male children. The government forcibly intervened in some cases, imposing abortions or sterilization. (The gender preference also showed in a pronounced overall gender imbalance, as some families consigned girls to orphanages or, as some speculate, practiced infanticide.) At the same time, infant deaths declined dramatically, thanks to better public health measures and greater prosperity. The Chinese communist regime quickly moved to improve conditions in this area, as the Soviet Union had done earlier

Extended families Here too, change occurred in favor of the nuclear family, particularly amid rapid urbanization and housing constraints. In revolutionary China, the regime worked to reduce parental authority in marriage in favor of decisions by individual children. However, informally, extended families continued to count for a lot. Arranged marriage remained fairly common in Japan. In China, many families, seeking work in the cities, left children with older parents back in the village, visiting on annual holidays such as Chinese New Year. Kinship ties, and the special politeness due to relatives depending on their family rank, retained great importance, in contrast to the looser family manners and the greater acceptance of strangers in the West.

Education The growing importance of schooling played a vital role in family life – more, arguably, than in the West. China's revolutionary regime quickly expanded education at all levels, and the trend continued into the 20th century. Japan and South Korea, in the modernized Confucian tradition, emphasized school performance strongly. In all cases, challenging examinations, that determined among other things eligibility for university entrance but also the prestige level of the university available, drew great attention. Parents, particularly mothers, in East Asia carefully arranged extra tutoring (particularly prominent in South Korea), and at the same time tried to give children an opportunity to blow off steam in compensation. Expectations of household duties for children, in the cities, were very limited.

Discipline and emotion Until the 1970s the Chinese communist regime actively disapproved of Western emphasis on love and romance, which might distract from revolutionary devotion. And in general, public demonstrations of affection were not common in the region; severe, unisex costumes also prevailed. However, and in China particularly from the 1970s when foreign cultural influence increased, romantic expectations and dating clearly increased (frequently along with sexual activity). Parenting styles remained fairly strict, though again with periods of indulgence and organized entertainment. Some observers compared Asian tiger moms” or *jiwa* parents to Western helicopter parents in their careful organization of children's lives, but the former were probably more focused on achievement and less on easing stress. Shaming continued to be quite acceptable to bring children in line, both within the family and in school – another clear traditional remnant – and physical punishments were accepted also. (Many Chinese parents expected physical discipline in the schools.) Family and community loyalty, rather than individualism, predominated as a childrearing goal, though individualism gained some ground nevertheless. One study of a Chinese village in the later 20th century revealed a striking interest in pursuing individual goals rather than hewing to family traditions and solidarity. Growing consumerism among youth also pulled them away from families to some extent, as in their interest in separate entertainment, fast food dining and so on. Obviously, some complex balancing was involved in the individual-family relationship overall.

Gender Women unquestionably gained new freedoms in communist China, as in Japan from the American occupation onward. In China a steady reform pressure from the late 19th century finally did away with foot binding, a process completed by the communists. However, though this was particularly obvious in Japan and South Korea, gender relations in the family remained markedly unequal. Extraordinary working hours kept many men away from home for long stretches of the day, and at the same time separate male entertainment, including sexual affairs plus widespread consumption of pornography, persisted as well (at least in Japan and South Korea), without at least officially disrupting the marriage. (Overall, sexuality was a less fraught issue in East Asia than in the West.) Family-based entertainments were more limited, though in Japan the tradition of public baths with family members, including children, retained popularity. Work outside the home was common in China, but far more limited in Japan, where gender discrimination and long hours of work made it hard for women to combine occupations with family. (Lest all this seem dire, polls suggested that Japanese women were happier than their male counterparts; and Japanese girls seemed to enjoy greater freedom and self-confidence than their male counterparts.) By the 21st century women's labor force participation began rising, but in some cases only because the women involved were no longer marrying at all.

The elderly East Asian tradition urged respect and care for older members of the family. As one result, social security support for old age was lower than in the West, on the assumption that the family would provide. However by the 21st century, the low birth rate, the rapid improvement in adult life expectancy (among the highest in the world in Japan), plus crowded and expensive housing cut into traditional solidarity. Many old people lived and also died alone, raising new issues for family and society alike.

Study questions

1. What were the most striking signs of the persistence of tradition in East Asian family life?
2. In what ways did the Japanese family retain a patriarchal base?
3. How did the revolution alter family life in communist China?

Further reading

Yungxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism* (Stanford University Press, 2003)

Ono Kazuko, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950* (Stanford University Press, 1989)

Merry White, *The Material Child: coming of age in Japan and America* (University of California Press, 1994)

Muriel Jollivet, *Japan, a Childless Society?* (Routledge, 1997)

South Asia

General South Asia participated in many of the basic family trends of the contemporary period. Family size declined. To be sure, an Indian government campaign in the 1970s to promote vasectomies failed to catch on, and Muslim birth rates remained higher than Hindu (a source of real concern in the Hindu-Nationalist mood of the 21st century). The region also saw a slower decline in child labor than was common globally. But family size did drop; infant mortality figures improved; education began to replace work for more children. While child marriage was still common, rates here also declined. The age of parents at the birth of a first child rose steadily as part of the process of change. Overall, traditions retained a greater role in South Asia than in East Asia, partly because the percentage of population in the countryside remained higher, but there was a clear patterns of adjustment to new conditions.

Variety Regional and religious variety create important differences in family patterns within South Asia. Indian law leaves a good bit of family regulation up to individual groups. Matrilineal traditions remain in a few regions. In many cases, intermarriage is frowned up; this is an important part of Hindu-Muslim tensions in India. In the 21st century Hindu nationalists began warning of a so-called marriage jihad, claiming that Muslim men were wooing Hindu women in order to convert them. Education is another variable. While schooling has gained ground, a large rural minority remains largely untouched; on the other hand, in many urban families attention to the school performance of children, including the use of shaming to promote greater achievement, has become an important parental function.

Gender Considerable tension has surrounded gender family issues in South Asia. Violence against girls appearing in public or seeking to attend school was high; many motives were involved, but a desire to seclude women was among them. The custom of purdah declined, but it clearly still left a mark. Honor killings of daughters or sisters accused of misbehavior remained an issue. Violent disputes over the adequacy of bridal dowries was another sign of friction. Protest against male violence became an important feminist rallying cry by the early 21st century, with some success in courts of law. Finally, as in China, South Asian families retained a preference for boys. By the 1980s, when ultrasound procedures allowed determination of the sex of an embryo, ensuing abortions disproportionately targeted girls. The result, again as in China, was an excess of males surviving to maturity, leading to concerns about finding partners plus efforts to recruit spouses from Southeast Asia. Indian law provides some protection for the property of women in the family, but confirms patriarchal power overall.

Extended family and marriage The most striking feature of modern South Asian family structure was the preservation of extended family ties and the deep respect for older parents. Urbanization did create more nuclear families; no single pattern prevailed. But an overwhelming majority of South Asians expressed a preference for arranged marriage (2/3, in early 21st-century polls). Interviews among upper-caste Indians showed a huge desire to please the adult father, as the most important factor in marriage selection -- plus the preservation of a marriage even when little affection developed between husband and wife. India featured one of the lowest divorce rates in the world, at under 1% of all marriages. Some Indian feminists argued that arranged marriage spared women from the competition for sexual attractiveness and artificial good looks that plagued their sisters in the West. India also retained the tradition of elaborate, multi-day

wedding ceremonies, a high point in family ritual. Many of these family patterns continued to involve South Asians even when they emigrated to other areas.

Study questions

1. Why did arranged marriage remain particularly popular in South Asia?
2. How might traditions of purdah continue to affect gender relations in the family and community?
3. What standard modern family trends developed in South Asia during the contemporary period?

Further reading

P. Kolenda, *Regional Differences in Family Structure in India* (Rawal Publications, 1987)

David Mandelbaum, "The Family in India," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 4 (1948)

Bai Ram Singh, *Indian Family System: the concept, practices and current relevance* (DK Prinworld, 2011)

The Middle East

Childrearing Many Middle Eastern families, particularly in the cities, sought to combine some new messages about the importance of individual children with older values. A study of postwar Lebanon for example showed the impact of messages from United Nations agencies and other sources about dealing with children as individuals; the growing importance of schooling might promote similar emphasis. But family also taught children the value of the family as a collective entity, the necessity of honoring elders and other kin, the need to subsume personal inclinations in favor of family service. While Middle Eastern families continued to indulge small children, discipline for older children often stiffened; corporal punishments remained common in schools, without parental objection.

Gender Considerable division developed over gender issues in Middle Eastern families, in part because of the variety of official policies. Ataturk's Turkey, in the 1920s, while firming up male authority in family law ("Man is the head of the union of marriage", with the right also to determine where the family lived), also gave women equal rights to divorce and abolished polygamy. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, long upheld requirements for concealing clothing and the necessity of obtaining permission of a male relative to travel and make other public decisions; this pattern began to ease only in the 21st century when, among other things, women were famously finally allowed to drive. The Iranian revolutionary regime also imposed many restrictions on women after 1979, arguing that a woman "should be the preserver of tradition, the family". But family decisions were equally important. Rural families, in places like Egypt, continued to insist on veiling in public, and some urban women decided on veiling as a demonstration of cultural solidarity; but others opted for more Western style clothing. The steady spread of female education – even in Saudi Arabia, allowing many women to study abroad – was a persistent source of change. Many women also became adept at using traditional Islamic law to argue for protection of certain rights. On the other hand, relatively low regional rates of female participation in work outside the home showed the continuing hand of tradition.

Marriage Changes in marriage were gradual, but they picked up speed, overall, from the late 20th century onward. Marriage age rose on average, as more women acquired education and joined the labor force at least for a time. Polygamy also declined – in part because of high urban housing costs. Arranged marriage also waned, even in conservative societies like Saudi Arabia, though parental authority and kinship ties remained important. Inevitably, gaps in family types increased between city and countryside, but urban populations grew rapidly. Divorce rates were low, particularly because women faced legal barriers (often, despite Islamic law). In Egypt women could petition with divorce only with a husband's permission until 2000, except in cases of abuse or alcoholism. But there was a perceptible increase in divorce rates after 1980, while they remained well below Western levels.

Conclusion Overall, family patterns evolved noticeably, despite the important role of traditions including Islamic law. The balance was somewhat similar to that of South Asia, though with different specifics; but in some respects, as in the continued reliance on child labor, Middle Eastern families changed more substantially.

Further reading

Judith Tucker, *Women, Family and Gender in Islamic Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: gender and sexual anxieties of Iranian modernity* (University of California, Press, 2005)

Fatma Gocek and Shiva Balaghi, eds, *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: tradition, identity and power* (Columbia University Press, 1994)

Bahara Doumani, ed., *Family History in the Middle East* (State University of New York Press, 2003)

Kathryn Yount and Hoda Rashid, eds., *Family Life in the Middle East: ideational change in Egypt, Iran and Tunisia* (Routledge, 2011)

Sub-Saharan Africa

General Sub-Saharan Africans participated in many of the standard family trends in the contemporary period, though often at a slight lag in time thanks to a slower pace of industrialization and urbanization. Thus birth rates fell, and the average age of marriage rose: but the subcontinent still had the highest birth rates of any world region by the early 21st century, with the most rapid pace of population growth (levels expected to double by 2022). Family patterns in the region were also partly defined by some distinctive crises, including various war-induced migrations and the particularly severe impact of the AIDs epidemic. Finally, continued adaptation of earlier traditions, such as polygyny, also continued to affect family styles. By the 21st century many African cities housed nuclear families very similar to those in other parts of the world, but many rural areas differed considerably and the rise of an unusually important sector of single-parent households also marked parts of the subcontinent.

Birth rate High fertility was promoted by continued reliance on child labor in the countryside and by a desire to assure the perpetuation of the family line as child mortality, though declining, remained high. But the diminishing economic utility of children in the cities, plus costs of living factors, began to cut into traditional assumptions. Rapidly rising interest in education promoted the notion that family size should be limited (even in the countryside), while use of contraceptive devices was also encouraged in response to the AIDs epidemic. Fertility changes began to emerge particularly from the mid-1970s onward (again, later than in most other regions).

Marriage and kinship Marriage at a fairly young age remained common, but the number of women marrying before age 20 declined noticeably. On the other hand, polygyny persisted strongly in the countryside, despite expectations of more rapid change, primarily because of the continued importance of wives' labor in the maintenance of landholdings. Polygyny was even adapted to the cities, with "matricentric" households of women and children visited periodically by the husband/father. Because of polygyny also, men were more likely to retain at least one spouse during the AIDs epidemic than was true of women. Similarly, while increasing numbers of couples make their own decisions about marriage, kinship ties remain strong and constrained women's autonomy in many cases. On the other hand, women often gained more education than men by the later 20th century, another factor that might affect relationships within the family. In some cases women have also been able to take advantage of new national human rights legislation that provides greater protection for their property in cases of family dissolution or inheritance disputes. Some law codes, as in the Ivory Coast in the 1980s, specifically limited the authority of the husband, even requiring (in principle) greater collaboration in household chores. And while the practice persists, international and local agitation began to reduce the incidence of genital mutilation of women in the northeast.

Feminism Important feminist movements developed in Africa after decolonization, sometimes following United Nations initiatives. They worked for a variety of changes in women's family position and well as wider social issues. Some feminist intellectuals urged an approach different from Western feminism, arguing that imperialism had reduced vital family supports for women. Their goal was a less individualist feminism, with more attention to mutual protections within the family.

Single parent households The rise of single-parent households was a clear sign that kinship traditions were weakening. As women gained more education and a greater role in the urban economy, single parenting became more common – though it was over-represented among the urban poor. In South Africa the results of the Apartheid system added to the disruptions of urban life, creating an unusually high incidence of single parenting. Single parenting has also, however, increased the importance of grandparents in providing child care in many cases (including guidance in educational decisions), promoting some stability in the rates of multi-generational households. Here was another case where changes generated imaginative adaptations of older family traditions. On the other hand, there was a marked decline in the practice of fosterage, in which urban families had often provided care for the offspring of rural relatives. Economic problems in the cities but also growing consumer aspirations disrupted older rural-urban ties, to the disadvantage of the countryside. Finally, the AIDs epidemic, far more severe in Africa than elsewhere given more limited public health systems, generated a growing number of households headed by a single parent or even an adolescent.

Migration and gender The late 19th century had already seen a pattern of male migration to jobs in urban and mining areas, leaving women and families in the countryside. This persisted into the later 20th century. Rural families received money transmissions from absent husbands, but they were also confined to subsistence labor in the villages themselves – and there were frequent cases of family abandonment. Poverty and migration have also encouraged trafficking in children, seized for use in labor or sexual service; one estimate calculated about 200,000 cases in year in which African children were effectively enslaved.

Ageing Rising life expectancy has increased the percentage of the elderly in the population. Surviving extended family and kinship traditions make this a less severe problem in Africa than in some other societies, with more reciprocal assistance among generations. In some cases, of course, older people provide child care even when they can no longer work. But the trend does put strain on some families, and poverty among the elderly was increasing by the early 21st century.

Study questions

1. What were the most distinctive features of African family life by the end of the 20th century?
2. What traditions have proved particularly resilient amid social and economic changes?
3. In what ways do contemporary African families reflect more standard global trends?

Further reading

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Women, a modern history* (Westview Press, 1997)

Nana Apt, *Coping with Old Age in a Changing Africa* (Aldershot, 1996)

Betty Bigombe and Gilbert Khadiagala, "Major Trends Affecting Families in Sub-Saharan Africa," (Universidad de Alicante, Escuela Universaria da Trabajo Social, 2004)

21st-Century Trends

General Given the regional diversity of family forms, and the recency of the 21st century, it would be foolish to project many new basic trends. In many ways the main point is the persistence of 20th-century patterns, toward lower birth rates, more (though varied) emphasis on nuclear families, the growing importance of the family as a consumer and emotional unit. However, a few developments are worth noting, even if their results push into an unknown future.

New disputes The wide acceptance of gay marriage in the West after 2000 prompted vivid disagreements internationally. A growing number of societies joined in, at least to an extent. The Indian Supreme Court abolished an old British law outlawing homosexuality. A few Latin American societies made concessions, against the disapproval of the Catholic Church and Evangelical Protestants. South Africa stood out in the Nelson Mandela tradition of tolerance. Taiwan and Hong Kong became more tolerant (but the Chinese government worked to pull back in Hong Kong). But most Islamic societies became resolutely opposed. So did most of Africa: Nigeria and Uganda in fact threatened new penalties against homosexuals/. In Brunei the Sultan decreed the death penalty (but under Western pressure

agreed not to implement). Russia and key countries in East-Central Europe also tightened prohibitions, portraying themselves as defenders of the Christian family, in the latter case creating a significant rift in the European Union. The divergence was intriguing.

Marriage and sexuality In most Western countries and in Japan, marriage rates began to fall, as many people expressed a preference for living alone (or with pets) while lamenting the burdens and compromises of married life. Rates of sexual activity also declined, a notable development. Again, some people argued against entanglements. The increasing availability of pornography played a role. In Japan (where pornography was more widespread and, in the case of men, more open than anywhere else in the world) a surprisingly large minority of people had no active sexual experience into their mid-30s. This was not, to be sure, a global trend, but it was possible it would gain ground. It modified a number of 20th-century trends.

Demography More widespread still was the decline of the birth rate below rates of national population maintenance. Globally, the birth rate average per family in 2017 stood at 2.5 per family, half the level of 50 years before: but the figure masked huge regional disparities. Europe, including Russia, East Asia and the United States led the way in lowering birth rates, though to varying degrees. Housing costs, new adult interests and women's commitments, possibly a concern about the emotional burdens as well as expenses of parenting, in some cases worries about the world's troubled state – all contributed. Many governments made moves to reverse the trend, including a new family size policy in China, but it was not at all clear if these would have much impact. In one sense all this simply continued a modern trend, but the difference of degree, and potential impact, were striking. Historically, societies incapable of demographic reproduction have almost always been in serious trouble, often both reflecting and causing new problems for families. It was not clear if the new conditions of industrial society would create different outcomes.

Ageing Rising life expectancy brought the growth of an old age sector everywhere, even in places like Morocco where birth rates remained fairly high. Where birth rates were low, the burdens of the elderly posed new responsibilities for families and societies alike. Many women (the so-called sandwich generation) found themselves caring both for their children and for one or more older parents (including parents of the husband; there was a gender division of responsibility here).

Pets Affluent societies in the West and East Asia, increasingly including China, showed a growing attachment to pets, often expressly viewing them as family members and giving them family names. Grief at the death of a pet became an important part of family life. This was a trend that had begun in the 19th century but by the 21st century it was reaching measurably new proportions. In the United States a strong minority noted that they preferred pets over human family members; in disasters like hurricanes, authorities found that if they did not move pets as well as people, many people would simply refuse to leave a threatened area.

Covid-19 and other challenges The pandemic of 2020-21 (and counting) brought several important changes to family life, though it was not clear if they would prove durable. Forced isolation made many people more appreciative of the emotional contacts of extended families. Many workers, required to work online, planned to maintain the pattern even when conditions eased, so that they had more time with family. On the other hand, reports of domestic abuse rose as well. Further, the family lives of many women were deeply disrupted (more than men, another sign of ongoing family-gender disparity). Over 350 million women, worldwide, lost their jobs, partly because they were in vulnerable employment sectors, like tourism, but partly because they had primary responsibilities for child care, home schooling, household maintenance. A further concern: given economic collapse, more families may feel pressed to push some daughters into child marriage, to relieve resource constraints. Some authorities have speculated that it might take a generation to restore earlier trends toward greater gender parity. Birth rates, of course, were further disrupted. One cautionary note: the last great pandemic, Spanish flu in 1918-9, did not produce many permanent changes, as people rushed to forget about the episode. And of course, separate from Covid, the growing rate of climate-change-induced natural disaster has been raising new complications for families as well, in many different parts of the world.

Study questions

1. Does the rise in emotional attachment to pets signal a major change in family history?
2. Will the pandemic generate durable changes in family life, or will people be eager to return to prior patterns?
3. Is the family declining, on the whole, as an institution around the world?
4. Besides the developments noted in this section, are there other recent changes that should be taken into account?

Further reading

Frank Whittington, Suzanne Kunkel, and Kate de Medeiros, eds., *Global Aging: comparative perspectives on aging and the life course* (2nd ed., Springer, 2019)

Max Roser, "Fertility Rate," *Our World in Data*, December 2, 2017