



**Communitarian policies** included the following:

- Children's Act (1999): Finch (2003) notes this 'redefined parental responsibility to include responsibility towards the child'.
- Child Support Agency: This continued the Conservative policy of legally pursuing 'absent fathers' for the maintenance of their children.
- Child poverty: New Labour committed itself to introducing a range of financial policies designed to 'end child poverty within twenty years'.
- Minister of State for Children (2003): This post was created to 'provide integrated leadership and responsibility for children's services and family'. This led to programmes such as Sure Start, designed to combat early-years disadvantages experienced by the children of low-income families.
- Child trust fund (2005): Every new child was given between £250 and £500, depending on family income, in an account they could access at 18 years of age. This could be added to (by families) and would be topped up by governments (but was abolished by the coalition government in 2010).



Suggest two differences between libertarian and communitarian social policies.

#### OCR examination-style questions

- 1 Identify and explain two types of family diversity. (17 marks)
- 2 Identify and explain two reasons for the growth in single-person households in the contemporary UK. (17 marks)
- 3 Outline and evaluate the view that the family is characterised by diversity in the contemporary UK. (33 marks)
- 4 Outline and evaluate postmodern views on the diversity of family life. (33 marks)
- 5 Outline and evaluate the view that the nuclear family is the ideal family form. (33 marks)

# Roles, responsibilities and relationships within the family

## Men and women

Rather than seeing gender roles one-dimensionally (as a set of things people must do when playing a particular role), an alternative is to see them in terms of **identities** (both social and personal). How individuals interpret and play the 'husband role' is conditioned by their perception of what this role means in general *social* terms (what husbands are

expected to do) and in the more specific, *personal* context of the individual's family relationships. If we think about gender roles in this way, we can note two things:

- **Change:** In the past, **social identities** were dominant; they provided clear behavioural guidelines for family roles (the mother, for example, worked in the home, raising children). There were few opportunities to develop **personal identities** that differed from the social norm, and the penalties for trying were severe (in terms of male violence against women who tried to reject or renegotiate their role within the family).
- **Diversity:** Gender roles within contemporary families, although clearly having some consistency (the role of 'mother' is usually marked out differently from that of 'father'), are not as constrained as they were in even the recent past; people have more **personal freedom** to work out their own particular interpretations of gender roles and identities.

While gender roles and relationships have seen many recent changes, we can examine both continuities and changes in two areas: domestic labour and power relationships.

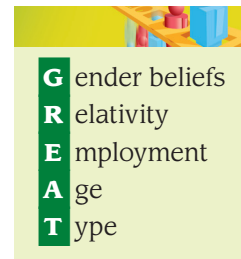
### Domestic labour

Domestic labour refers to the running of a home and family. It includes cooking, cleaning and shopping, household repairs and chores, as well as care of children, the sick and the elderly. We can note the following points concerning the division of domestic labour:

- **Gender beliefs:** Ramos (2003) found that women do more housework in families with 'traditional gender beliefs' than in families where beliefs reflect sexual equality. In households where partners hold conflicting beliefs, men do less domestic work.
- **Relativity:** Gershuny et al. (2006) note that men do less domestic labour each day than women (100 versus 178 minutes), although the trend for both is less domestic labour.

The Future Foundation (2001) estimate that:

- 60% of men do more housework than their father.
- 75% of women do less housework than their mother.
- **Employment status:** Kan (2001) found that, while levels of female housework were marginally reduced by paid employment, retirement or unemployment increased female housework and reduced that of her partner. Ramos (2003), however, noted that where the man is unemployed and his partner works full-time, domestic labour is more likely to be equally distributed.
- **Age:** Gershuny et al. (2006) note that female housework increases with age — younger women do less housework than older women.
- **Type:** Men and women perform different tasks for different lengths of time; women spend more time on routine domestic tasks, while men spend more time on tasks like





repairs and gardening. Where there is no clear **gender association** with particular tasks (such as pet care), these tend to be performed equally.

Gershuny et al. (2006) summarise the general pattern of domestic labour in the contemporary UK as follows:

- Women of all ages, ethnicities and classes do more domestic labour than men.
- Men, on average, spend more time in the paid workforce than women.
- More domestic labour is carried out at weekends than during the week, reflecting the number of women now in paid employment.
- 90% of women do some housework each day (compared with 75% of men).
- Families with dependent children do more housework than those without (with the main burden of the extra work falling on women).

Trends in domestic labour show both **continuities** and **changes**. Women still do the majority of domestic labour in our society. However, Willmott (2000) argues there is less reliance on 'traditional roles when dividing up tasks in the home'. Changing family (and wider social) relationships mean domestic labour is 'negotiated by every couple depending on their individual circumstances'. The significant factors in determining 'who does what' in the family are time and inclination, 'not whether they are a man or a woman'.



Identify and explain two recent trends in domestic labour.

### Explanations

#### *Social identities*

Cultural beliefs about male and female abilities and roles are significant in explaining domestic labour differences, an idea initially tied up with notions of **patriarchy**. Gender roles can reflect patriarchal attitudes:

- Pleck (1985), for example, noted that the 'more traditional' the views held by couples about gender roles, the greater the level of domestic labour inequality.
- Pilcher (1998) found that older people, unlike their younger counterparts, didn't talk about 'equality' but thought instead in traditional ways about gender roles, responsibilities and relationships. This reflected their socialisation and life experiences, where 'Men undertook limited household work, married women had limited involvement in paid work and a marked gendered division of labour was the norm.'

Within this general patriarchal context there are distinct forms of social identity that exert powerful influences on perceptions of male and female identities:

- **Femininity**: Although gradually changing, notions of what it means to be a woman are still tied up with ideas about caring and nurture. To 'be a woman' means adopting a certain way of thinking (about the welfare of others) and behaving; as Gershuny

*et al.* (2006) demonstrate, responsibility for childcare within the family still falls mainly on the female partner as an extension of feminine identity.

- **Masculinity:** McDowell (2001) noted the 'continued dominance of a "traditional" masculinity' in her study of young working-class men. Notions about how to 'be a man' were bound up in being able to look after the economic well-being of both partner and children.

### **Personal identities**

Gender roles are interpreted and negotiated according to specific family circumstances.

Callaghan (1998) highlights class, age and educational differences in the creation and performance of gender roles within the family (older working-class men, for example, are more likely to hold 'traditional views' on gender). Dench (1996) argues younger men believed 'couples should share or negotiate family roles' and resist conventional ideas that men should be the main breadwinners.

Speakman and Marchington (1999) are more sceptical about 'changing *attitudes*' filtering down to changing *roles*. Some men, they noted, used **learned helplessness** when trying to avoid domestic tasks — their 'inability' to work domestic machinery served to throw domestic tasks back into the hands of their partners. Two further points we could note here involve data **reliability** and **validity**:

- **Over-estimations** of male domestic labour: These may occur when (male) subjects are required to self-assess the amount of housework they do.
- **Cherry-picking** domestic tasks: Most female domestic labour involves routine and mundane tasks required to keep the family functioning. Men are more likely to do domestic tasks they see as more interesting and personally rewarding; while women are more likely to be involved in washing and dressing their young children, men are more likely to count things like 'playing with their children' as part of their domestic labour.



Fathers may view playing with their children as part of their domestic responsibilities

### **Further points**

Finally, we can note the unequal distribution of domestic labour is related to the following:

- Social identities involving deep-seated cultural (patriarchal) beliefs about male and female 'natures' that exert a powerful pull, through the gender socialisation process, and lead to the reproduction of traditional gender relationships.



- Socio-personal identities involving the way *personal* identities are *pragmatically* ('reasonably') shaped by *social* identities. In a family, for example, where the man is the main income provider, decisions about who will give up work to care for children are pragmatically guided by the reality of differences in earning power.
- Personal identities involving specific relationships between family members which may be played out against a background of complex personal and cultural histories. For example, some men may be able to get away with doing little or nothing in terms of domestic labour (even where their partner works full-time); alternatively, a man's personal relationship with his partner may not allow him to shirk his share of family responsibilities.



Suggest and explain two ways the domestic division of labour may be becoming more equal.

### Power relationships

Like any social institution, families involve power struggles — relations of domination and subordination between family members. An example we have already discussed is patriarchy (male domination and female subordination). In this section we will look at two very different dimensions of power within the family: physical power (involving domestic violence) and psychological power (involving decision-making).

#### Physical power: domestic violence

This covers a range of behaviours (physical and emotional), aimed at aggressively controlling the behaviour of another family member in ways that include:

- physical violence (assault)
- sexual violence (such as rape)
- economic sanctions (denying a family member something they need)

Domestic violence is an **under-reported** crime, which makes it difficult to **reliably** estimate its extent; victims may be reluctant to admit or acknowledge their victimisation to 'outsiders'. Kirkwood (1993) notes that reasons for this include:

- low self-esteem of the victim (a belief they 'deserve it')
- dependence on the perpetrator
- fear of further consequences (repeat victimisation)

We can, however, identify some significant facts about domestic violence:

- 16% of all violent incidents involve domestic violence (Dodd et al. 2004) .
- 77% of victims are female (Nicholas et al. 2007). This is the only category of violence for which the risks are higher for women than men.

Jansson (2007) notes:

- 3% of all women and 2% of all men in Britain had experienced either minor or severe violence at the hands of their partner.

- Incidents peaked in 1994 (1.2 million cases) and have slowly returned to 1981 levels (around 275,000 cases each year).
- Women are most likely to be sexually assaulted by men they know and 45% of reported rapes were carried out by a current partner.

Coleman et al. (2007) suggest this is a crime highly prone to **repeat victimisation**:

- 40% of victims suffer further victimisation.
- 25% suffer prolonged victimisation (three or more attacks).

### **Psychological power: decision-making**

While we shouldn't downplay the extent of domestic violence, nor should we overplay it — the vast majority of families are not violent spaces. They are, however, places where 'everyday power struggles' are played out; these are non-violent and may involve one or more family members being unaware of their involvement in a power struggle. To understand this, we can outline three 'abilities' identified by Lukes (1990).

#### ***Ability to make decisions***

Although women exercise power within families, it's mainly in areas where they traditionally have greater expertise (the daily management of family resources). Major decisions tend to be made by men, mainly because they control an important 'public domain resource' (family income) that, if removed, would cause acute problems for the remaining family members. Where both partners work, women have more control over decision-making (although female power depends on factors like the status of female work, relative level of income, domestic responsibilities and so forth).

#### ***Ability to prevent others making decisions***

This is the 'ability to manipulate any debate over decisions that actually reach the stage of being made'. In terms of gender roles, the personal identities of family members (how each partner sees their role within the family) are important. Gender socialisation is also significant since, if males and females have certain role expectations, the ability to make decisions affecting the family group takes on a 'natural' quality. It appears 'normal' for women to raise children and men to have paid employment, for example. While major decision-making *seems* to be made 'with the support and agreement of others', it is men who generally make such decisions because the debate has been manipulated in their favour.

#### ***Ability to remove decision-making from the agenda***

This is probably the most powerful form of decision-making because those subject to a decision have no idea they were involved in such a process. For example, decisions about who does paid employment, domestic labour and the like are 'removed from the decision-making agenda' (the respective partners don't actually have to make conscious decisions about them) for a variety of reasons: they may share the belief women are better at child-rearing than men. Alternatively, when one partner earns more than the





other and has higher career expectations, this partner may remain in work while the other cares for the children.



Suggest two things domestic violence tells us about the nature of family relationships.

## Children and parents

We've already noted some aspects of this relationship in areas like:

- > primary socialisation
- > grandparents as a childcare resource
- > parasite kids
- > boomerang kids

However, we can focus more specifically on the relationship by, initially, noting what Archard (2004) terms 'a dissimilarity in ideas about childhood between past and present'. How parents relate to children has changed, not just over the centuries but more recently too. How we view children determines how we treat them — whether we see them as 'little devils' in need of care and control at one extreme, or 'little angels' to be protected from adult influences at the other.

Fionda (2002) suggests children in contemporary Britain are variously seen as:

- > **Objects of concern** (New Labour, for example, focused the majority of its 'family policies' on the parent-child relationship). This mainly involves **protection**, for example from child abuse or from exposure to depictions of violence or sexuality.
- > **Autonomous possessors of rights** — individuals who should enjoy similar levels of freedom to adults and who should not be denied the rights adults take for granted (such as protection from 'assault').
- > **Lacking moral consciousness**: Children are exempt from some forms of responsibility (such as the criminal law) to which adults are accountable.
- > **Accountable for their actions**: If children are to be given adult rights they must take responsibility for their actions.

These ideas reflect a basic uncertainty about how to understand the status of children in contemporary society — as individuals in their own right or as dependent on adults. In the past, writers such as Aries (1962) have argued, the relationship was more clear-cut: children were basically 'little adults' who, from a very early age, were considered an economic asset to the family; they dressed, lived and worked like adults. In the present, however, Robertson (2001) argues we've reached a stage where children have become 'economically worthless and emotionally priceless' — a significant change in status that has changed the way parents and children interact.

Mann (2009) suggests contemporary Britain has seen the 'rise of more democratic forms of parent-child relationships...children are taking a greater interest in, and having an input in, decision making'. This relationship is, however, uneasy and at times ambivalent. While parents have legal responsibility for their children and have to

assume a certain level of control over their behaviour, children (through the internet) are acquiring ever greater levels of knowledge, if not always understanding, about the adult world and relationships therein.

The 'darker side' of child–parent relationships is, at its most extreme, expressed through **child abuse**. This, Humphreys and Thiara (2002) note, has a strong link to domestic violence (men who are violent towards their partner are also violent and abusive towards children in their care). We can note the following points:

- Each year 80 children are killed, mainly by parents and carers. This number has remained constant for almost 30 years.
- The most likely abuser is someone known to the child (National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse 1996).
- Department of Education figures for 2010 show around 46,000 children on child protection registers or plans.



Briefly explain one way children have become 'economically worthless and emotionally priceless'.

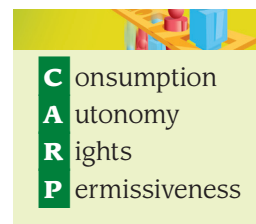
### Postmodern children

Postman (1985) argues that the development of modern communication systems such as television (which we can extend to include mobile phone and internet technology) casts doubt on the assumption that 'adults' and 'children' are distinct and separate categories. Television and the internet are 'open admission technology' — they cannot differentiate between adults and children. As a result, children are exposed to images of adulthood (sex, violence, the news and so forth).

This, for Postman, diminishes both adult and child abilities to decide where childhood ends and adulthood begins. Children become more like adults in terms of their criminality, sexuality and dress, while adults become more like 'children' in their equation of 'youthfulness' with health, vitality and excitement.

Robertson (2001) argues child–parent relationships are now less 'adult directed' and more focused on allowing children to find their own general way in life, freed from overt adult direction. This leads to a breakdown of conventional child/adult distinctions (and relationships) in a range of ways:

- **Consumption culture:** Children see the world through the eyes of consumers as they're encouraged to buy goods and services formerly the preserve of adults (mobile phones being a recent example). Advertisers target 'children's markets' in ever more sophisticated ways, leading to the development of a 'consumption culture' that encourages children to see their identity in terms of what they consume (which is increasingly 'adult' in nature and tone).







- **Autonomy:** Children, as they exercise newly available choices, become more rebellious, sexually precocious and, indeed, active. They become immersed in an adult world that requires they become ever more sophisticated in their outlook.
- **Rights:** Where children are seen as 'autonomous individuals' (rather than, as in former times, dependent beings), they acquire 'rights' formerly only extended to adults. The flip-side here is their treatment as 'adults in miniature' which, in turn, leads to the development of more sophisticated ways of living and behaving.
- **Permissiveness:** With autonomy and rights comes a change in the way children are raised; they gain greater control over their own social development but must take responsibility for their mistakes and misconceptions.

## Fathers

In some ways parent-child relationships in postmodernity resemble those of the past (the idea of children as 'little adults'), whereas in others they do not — children are banned from numerous 'adult' experiences (drinking, smoking, sexual activity and so forth).

This '**postmodern ambivalence**' is reflected in changes to parental perceptions of their role. The role of 'father', in particular, is played out against a backdrop of ambivalent understanding (uncertainty about what their role should be). On the one hand, fathers see their primary responsibility to their children as economic provision (which increasingly relates to consumption cultures), while on the other they see their role as providing emotional and psychological comfort and stability. A flavour of the way fathers interpret their role is given by an Equal Opportunities Commission (2002) study of 60 fathers, which identified four main types (with most fathers falling into the middle two categories):

- **Enforcer:** Little involvement in childcare; interprets father role in terms of providing clear rules for children's behaviour.
- **Entertainer:** Interacts with children regularly, but usually when partner is occupied with more mundane aspects of domestic labour (such as cleaning).
- **Useful:** Has greater involvement with children (and domestic labour) but is usually directed by his partner.
- **Fully involved:** Plays a role that is interchangeable with his partner's and aims to play as full a role as possible in childcare.

## Sociological explanations

### Functionalism

For traditional functionalist approaches, the historical development of family roles, responsibilities and relationships is seen in evolutionary terms — a gradual move away from **asymmetrical relationships** based around **segregated conjugal roles** with a clear separation between the home (women's work) and the workplace (men's work),

towards **joint conjugal roles** involving greater levels of equality in terms of both paid and domestic work.

Family roles start to **converge** through **stratified diffusion**. For Willmott and Young (1973) an initial change in upper-class family roles and relationships gradually 'trickles down' the class structure; joint conjugal relationships are adopted next by middle-class families and finally by the working class. Sullivan et al. (2008) suggest evidence for convergence can be found in areas like:

- an increase in male — and a decrease in female — housework
- an increase in the time men devote to childcare
- a general acceptance of gender equality
- a 'quiet revolution' in family relationships where change occurs 'behind the scenes'

Two frequently cited developments here are the 'new man' and 'new father' identities we noted earlier.

The Equal Opportunities Commission (2002) also highlighted a range of evidence from fathers suggesting some movement towards role convergence, albeit one juggling work and family responsibilities:

- **Support role:** Although most fathers had little involvement with their children during the working week, weekends were 'put aside' for family life.
- **Childcare:** Fathers claim to carry out around a third of 'active parental childcare'.
- **Income:** Male involvement in childcare increases where their partner has a high income from full-time work.
- **Work-life balance:** Fathers balance work and family responsibilities to ensure greater involvement in the latter.

Whatever the reality of this situation (and we always need to be aware of reliability and validity problems with such data — what people say they do may differ from what they actually do), a slightly different recent approach is Swenson's (2004) **neo-functionalist** focus on adults as providers of a stable family environment for primary socialisation. This involves:

- roles as both **expressive** and **instrumental**
- providing children with a safe, secure environment that gives free range to both expressive and instrumental roles and values

In this respect neo-functionalism suggests parents contribute to the socialisation process by giving their children a knowledge of both expressive and instrumental role relationships. It doesn't particularly matter which partner provides which; all that matters is they do. This means that gender roles in contemporary families can be fluid:

- Women can provide instrumental values and men expressive values (or vice versa depending on specific family conditions and relationships).
- Same-sex families can perform these roles.



- Lone-parent families are not automatically excluded; the parent may successfully combine both roles or they may have help from others (such as extended family) to provide the role content they cannot provide (grandparents could play an expressive role while the parent plays an instrumental role).

Dysfunctional families are not a product of particular family structures (single-parent families are not automatically dysfunctional, just as dual-parent families are not automatically functional). What matters is the *quality* of parental roles; as Swenson (2004) argues, 'families become dysfunctional when poor parenting produces poor socialization outcomes'. 'Good parenting', therefore, successfully integrates both expressive and instrumental roles and values into the socialisation process.

## Evaluation

### *Family structures*

While traditional functionalism is criticised for seeing some forms of family structure as dysfunctional, neo-functionalism argues that the primary role of families — the successful socialisation of children — is related to parental role performance rather than family structures. However, neo-functionalism suggests some family structures are 'more or less optimal' for the performance of primary socialisation. A dual-parent family, for example, may have greater human resources and opportunities than a single-parent family.

### *Child problems*

Swenson (2004) argues that the avoidance of 'antisocial behaviour' in children is based around the stability of family roles and relationships. This suggests that, while children can be raised in a variety of family types, 'optimal socialisation' takes place in stable (married) families where husband and wife play complementary roles.

### *Happy families?*

All varieties of functionalism generally underplay power imbalances in gender roles and relationships — the idea, for example, that men play instrumental roles inside and outside the family because they have the power to impose their will on others. Ferree (1990) argues 'male dominance within families as part of a wider system of male power, is neither natural nor inevitable, and occurs at women's cost'.



Identify and explain one difference between joint and segregated conjugal roles.

## Marxism

We've previously outlined a range of Marxist ideas on family roles and relationships (to which you should refer in this context). We will look here at how Marxist analyses of family life in recent times have focused on conflict and power struggles (not all of which are necessarily and automatically resolved in favour of men) based around

**family economies.** Power relationships within families are not always played out in terms of violence or abuse; the vast majority of families experience neither of these things. Morgan (2001) suggests we should consider power relationships in terms of 'three economies': political, moral and emotional.

### *The political economy*

The political economy relates to the **economic** aspect of family life which, Pahl (2007) suggests, involves how money is 'received, controlled and managed within the household, before being allocated to spending on collective or personal items'. More specifically, she argues for a **resource theory** where power struggles are an inevitable part of our relationships and 'the greatest power tends to accrue to those who contribute the most resources' (which include money and status, love and affection, or things like 'domestic work, child care or sexual services').

Financial decision-making is a significant indicator of where power lies within a family, since major decisions involve concepts of authority. Pahl and Vogler (1994) found that men made the most important financial decisions.

Other areas of major decision-making in dual-earner families involve paid work and relate to whose work has the greatest priority when, for example, the family is forced to move because of a change in employment. Hardill (2003) found women were more likely to be the 'trailing spouse' — male occupations had greatest priority.

Status enhancement, Coverman (1989) argues, involves 'work done by one partner (typically the woman) to aggrandize the other partner's career' (hosting dinner parties, attending work functions and so forth). In extreme cases, status enhancement takes the form of a 'trophy wife' — a marriage pattern used by some powerful (mainly, but not necessarily, older) men to demonstrate their wealth and power.

### *The moral economy*

The moral economy relates to the values and norms within a family group concerning the roles and responsibilities of different family members. The female partner can exercise high levels of power through her ability to organise family resources and behaviours even when she earns substantially less than her partner.

### *The emotional economy*

The emotional economy involves the interpersonal relationships that are almost unique to family life — what Dallos et al. (1997) call '**affective power**'. If someone loves you this gives you power. Pahl (2007) suggests this 'family power' has a number of aspects:

- Who 'loves' the other the most: the partner who 'loves less' can use this to gain power over the one who 'loves more'.
- Who 'needs' the other most: the partner who needs the other least is more able to control the relationship (ultimately by threatening to leave).
- Who best meets their partner's emotional needs.



- Who is most able to resolve conflicts, reduce emotional stress and create emotional well-being within the family.

Finally, the possession and exercise of power within families is not confined to a particular household — just as either partner may draw power from their ability to bring economic resources into a family, the same is true of moral and emotional resources. In extended families, for example, either partner can draw power from their ability to link into a network of power involving wider kin like parents and siblings.

### Evaluation

- **Power:** By seeing families as an extension of the class struggle in wider society, Marxism underplays the genuine feelings of love, affection, intimacy and sacrifice that exist within families.
- **Struggle:** Marxists underestimate the extent to which families are based on shared feelings of mutual cooperation and support rather than power struggles.
- **Choices:** This general view suggests family members have little or no choice over how their roles, relationships and responsibilities are played out (family members are simply one small part of wider class struggles). The evidence from contemporary families suggests relationships involve greater complexity in terms of how and why they allocate different roles.



Identify and explain two sources of power used within family relationships.

### Feminism

Feminist sociology has traditionally focused on the role of the family group in the exploitation of women, with attention mainly given to explaining how traditional gender roles are enforced for the benefit of men. The family group is generally seen as patriarchal and oppressive, imprisoning women in a narrow range of service roles and responsibilities, such as domestic labour and childcare.

#### Liberal feminism

As we've previously noted, this type of feminism is focused around **equality of opportunity** — gender relationships, roles and responsibilities should be equitable, with men and women being free to choose both their roles and how these are played out in a work or family context. Liberal feminists have traditionally looked to the **legal system** to enforce 'equal gender rights', and to **governments** to carry out **social policies** aimed at dismantling barriers to female emancipation — from equality in political representation, through equal pay and anti-discrimination policies, to protection against domestic violence.

Liberal feminists have, therefore, fought for policies designed to recognise female **dual roles** — as both carers within the family and paid employees. These include the following:

- The development of nursery schooling and childcare facilities that allow women to work and have family responsibilities.
- Maternity and paternity leave: In 2007, New Labour introduced the right of up to two weeks of paternity leave for fathers; maternity leave was extended to a maximum of 52 weeks and consolidated the right for employed women to resume their former job.
- The right to abortion 'on demand'.
- Affirmative action designed to allow more women to break through the 'glass ceiling' in the workplace.

This 'softer' form of feminism promotes 'practical and realistic' ways of creating a gender balance within the family — one that recognises some women want to focus on family and child-rearing responsibilities, some prefer to focus on a career and others want (or need) to combine family and work responsibilities. Liberal feminists, in this respect, reject:

- Marxist feminist claims that family life is simply a reflection of wider economic inequalities
- radical feminist notions of patriarchy as an inevitable by-product of male–female relationships



Harriet Harman has a high-profile career in the Labour Party

### Evaluation

- **Status inequality:** Although women have achieved major political and legal changes over the past hundred years, stubborn forms of patriarchal domination are proving resistant to change (despite equal pay legislation, for example, women are still paid on average 20% less than men).
- **Family roles:** Men still perform less domestic labour than women, even in situations where both partners work. Despite changes, the private sphere of the family remains wrapped in cultural notions of femininity and the female role.
- **Cultural capital:** 'Equality of opportunity' is based on the idea that men and women can, given a legally assured even playing field, compete equally in both the private and public domains. Other forms of feminism argue that male cultural capital (from ingrained patriarchal ideas about 'male and female capabilities' to the fact that men still generally have greater access to important economic and cultural resources) gives them an advantage in both the home and the workplace.

### Marxist feminism

Marxist feminism involves the application of Marxist ideas about wider economic inequalities to an explanation of gender inequalities in family roles, relationships and





responsibilities. In specific terms, relationships are based around a range of gendered inequalities:

- **Service roles:** Within the family women have the role of 'unpaid servants'. This is sometimes done willingly (women see it as part of the female role) and sometimes unwillingly because their partner is unable or unwilling to take it on.
- **Double shift:** Where women are increasingly entering paid work, they often have to perform a double shift. Women are doubly exploited — in the public sphere as paid employees whose labour contributes to ruling-class profits, and in the private sphere as unpaid workers whose labour primarily benefits men.
- **Triple shift:** More recently, Duncombe and Marsden (1993) have argued women perform a triple shift, the third element being emotional labour (investing time and effort in the psychological well-being of family members). Women, rather than men, are expected to make this investment in both their children's and their partner's 'emotional well-being'.

In this respect, Marxist feminists argue women increasingly suffer from dual forms of exploitation: **patriarchal** exploitation, as domestic labourers, and **capitalist** exploitation, as paid employees.

For Marxist feminists, issues like 'equality of opportunity', in terms of removing legal barriers to female emancipation, are, at best, distractions from the 'real cause of female (and indeed male) oppression' — the capitalist economic system. This follows because capitalism inherently involves relations of domination, subordination and oppression. Female exploitation, therefore, will continue for as long as capitalism exists.

### Evaluation

- **Class:** Both liberal and radical feminists argue gender is not simply a 'secondary' form of exploitation, but one experienced by all women, regardless of class. Marxist feminism, therefore, pays too little attention to the particular forms of sexist exploitation suffered by women 'simply because they are women'.
- **Realism:** Liberal feminists argue 'real female lives' can be improved on a daily basis through legal and social changes. Marxist feminism simply promises 'freedom tomorrow' once capitalism has somehow been replaced.
- **Social change:** Over the past hundred years women's lives have seen radical changes and substantial improvements. It's difficult to see how or why, according to Marxist feminists, these could have occurred; if 'male interests' are served by the exploitation of women it's difficult to see how or why this exploitation should have eased or, in many cases, ceased.



Suggest one difference between liberal and Marxist feminism.

### Radical feminism

For radical feminism, patriarchy is the key source of male domination within the family. We can note several examples of radical feminist solutions to the 'patriarchy problem'.

### *Technology*

Firestone (1970) argues that 'a culture of sex discrimination' devolves from **biology** — the fact that women experience pregnancy and childbirth. This is the **essential** difference between men and women from which all other cultural differences flow. If technology can liberate women from childbirth (by enabling children to be born outside the womb), this eliminates an essential sexual (biological) difference and removes male power to discriminate on the basis of biology.

### *Femininity*

This strand argues women, as a **sex class**, should exploit the 'values of femininity' that derive from their particular **psychology**; these include a sense of community, family, empathy, sharing and so forth that make them different from men (whose patriarchal values are built around aggressiveness, selfishness and greed).

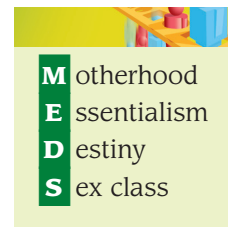
Women should 'embrace the power' that comes from the ability to reproduce since, for Stanworth (1987), 'reproduction is the foundation of women's identity'. She argues women should reject the 'technologies' embraced by writers like Firestone as being a further source of male power and domination — this time over the one ability (to reproduce) that marks women apart.

### *Anti-family stance*

For Frieden (1963) and Millett (1969) the patriarchal structures and practices of the family are the source of female oppression. As Friedan argues, 'A housewife is a parasite' because she is forced to depend on men for her social existence. The solution, therefore, is either the abandonment of the patriarchal family or the development of **matriarchal** family structures that exclude men (through lesbian relationships).

### *Evaluation*

- **Motherhood:** This condition is increasingly rejected by a range of women so it becomes difficult to see how and why they would see their identity in these terms. The question, therefore, is whether women who cannot or do not want to reproduce would be considered 'real women'.
- **Essentialism:** Butler (1990) argues men and women do not have fundamentally different natures. Given the high levels of historical and cultural diversity in gender roles and relationships, it seems difficult to sustain the idea that 'men are men, women are women' and there is no way to change their essential natures.
- **Biology is Destiny:** If our 'natures' (men as 'aggressive and competitive', women as 'compassionate and nurturing') cannot be changed, it's difficult to see how the gender relationships on which they are built can change.
- **Sex class:** Butler (1990) argues women are not a sex class. Female histories and experiences are too diverse and fragmented to be seen in these terms.





### Post-feminism

For post-feminists the thing missing from other feminist perspectives is the notion women make **choices** about their lives — to be ‘mothers’ or childless career women, for example.

The key to understanding family roles, for Butler (1990), is how gender is **performed**, rather than an ‘essentialist notion’ about what gender *is*. Gender performance inside the family is seen as changing, through a merging of traditional gender roles whereby the rigid separation between ‘home’ and ‘work’ is no longer sustainable: just as women move freely into and out of the public domain, so men take the reverse route.

This results in a form of **gender understanding**: family groups form around a range of ‘rational choices’ about ‘who does what’ and ‘when they do it’, with males and females performing a range of different and complementary family roles. These roles can be interchangeable — sometimes the female will look after the children, sometimes the male — such that family roles are no longer the preserve of one particular gender.

According to post-feminists, Marxist and radical feminists ignore significant **changes** in male and female family lives, roles and relationships over the past 50 years.

Women have **choices** to construct their personal identities in a range of ways. One of these involves ‘reclaiming femininity’; they can be both ‘feminine’ (in terms of seeking and gaining pleasure from the care of others) and ‘careerist’ (in the sense of wanting economic independence and security).

Overall, post-feminists argue we should see family roles, relationships and responsibilities in light of how different men and women construct and negotiate their lifestyles and identities. Unlike other feminisms this approach suggests we should neither underestimate female choices (to want a close involvement in the nurture and care of their children, for example) nor disrespect women for making such choices.

### Evaluation

- **Choice**: Real choice for women may be limited by male power. While women have greater choices now, only a minority enjoy the luxury of ‘unlimited choice’. Choice is still tied to economic power controlled mainly by men.
- **Change**: Changes in family roles and relationships have been the result of relatively simple political and legal adjustments rather than a radical reappraisal of ‘gender as a concept’. These changes have arrived through women collectively (rather than individually) organising and fighting for change. If women cease to see their lives in collective terms they risk losing the rights gained over the past few decades.



Suggest three differences between feminist explanations of family roles and relationships.

## Demographic changes

In previous sections we’ve looked at some of the demographic trends which affect families. We can now pull these ideas together in relation to both an ageing population and declining family size (in the context of declining birth rates).

An **ageing population** occurs when the number defined as elderly in a society exceeds the number defined as young. In 2007, for example, the number of people in Britain aged 65 and over exceeded the number aged 16 and under for the first time in our history. Demographically, we can identify two **mega-factors** that cause an ageing population: increased life expectancy and falling birth rates.

### Increased life expectancy

People are, on average, living longer. While there are gender, class and regional differences, during the twentieth century average life expectancy in Britain increased by 30 years (males can now expect to live, on average, 78 years and females 82 years).

Chamberlain and Gill (2005) identify two factors that explain why Britain's population is ageing:

- The **death rate** has fallen dramatically, from 16 per 1,000 of the population in 1900 to 10 per 1,000 in 2000.
- An '**ageing of the ageing population**': the elderly are 'getting older'; the fastest growing elderly group are now the over-85s.

Increased life expectancy relates to a number of areas: healthcare, public health measures and lifestyle changes.

### Healthcare

Self and Zealey (2007) note a range of factors:

- **vaccination** against diseases like polio and diphtheria that steadily reduced their death toll among infants and children
- **medicines** (e.g. the development of antibiotics)
- **practices**: developments in surgery (such as heart bypass operations)
- **prevention**: a fall in **infant mortality rates** — 'one of the major factors contributing to an overall increase in life expectancy' — attributed by Self and Zealey (2007) to three 'areas of improvement':
  - diet and sanitation
  - antenatal, postnatal and medical care
  - vaccines and immunisation programmes

### Public health measures

Arguably of more value in terms of increasing general levels of life expectancy are a raft of improvements in the **physical environment**:

- **Housing**: Important steps include slum clearance and the development of cheap, good-quality public ('council') housing after the Second World War.
- **Public sanitation**: Steps have been taken to ensure that public exposure to sewage/waste is minimised and that people understand basic sanitation principles (e.g. how disease can be spread).
- **Clean water**: The Department of Health (2004) notes that, over the past century, one of the 'most significant contributions to better health has been clean water supplies'.



To this general list we could also add the development of the **welfare state** (post-1944).

### Lifestyle choices and changes

There is now a greater awareness of behaviours contributing to individual health and longevity:

- **Smoking:** Penneck and Lewis (2005) point to the 'dramatic reduction in death from circulatory diseases (in part caused by the decline in smoking)'.
- **Cleaner air:** The Clean Air Acts (1956 and 1993) placed restrictions on smoke emissions (from both private and industrial premises).
- **Health education:** There is a greater awareness of the importance of balanced diets, daily fruit and vegetable intakes, limits on alcohol intake and the like.



Define the term 'ageing population'.

### Declining birth rates

Declining birth rates involve a range of factors.

#### Birth control

Tiffen and Gittins (2004) suggest a couple of specific reasons for a decline in birth rates over the past 40 or so years:

- the increased availability and reliability of **contraception**
- the legalisation of **abortion** in 1967

Although birth control techniques are significant factors, they don't explain why people want to limit **family size** in the first place. To understand this, we need to note a further set of explanations.

### Lifestyle choices and changes

We've seen that increased female participation in the workforce over the past 30 years has led to a delay in the average age of first marriage and a consequent delay in conception and childbirth, but an equally important factor is **childlessness**. Self and Zealey (2007) note a significant rise in childlessness:

- 1985: 11% of women (aged 45+)
- 2005: 18%

McAllister and Clarke (1998) suggest two main reasons for both childlessness and fewer children:

- **Risk:** For single and career women 'parenthood was not considered a viable option'. It was identified with disruption, change and poverty; the childless chose independence over the constraints of childcare, and material security over financial risk.
- **Financial pressures:** The cost of raising children over a lifetime was a factor in either not having children or limiting their number.

Additional factors (Grenham 1995) include:

- less need for children as a protection against old age and illness
- a trade-off between having children and maintaining a higher living standard

Tiffen and Gittins (2004) also suggest many women have different *aspirations* from both their mothers and grandmothers; they are less likely to accept identities built around the home and motherhood.

### Explanations

The overall relationship between an ageing population, falling fertility rates and the decline in average family size has been explained in several different ways, focusing on demographic transition, wealth flow or optimal investment.

#### Demographic transition

Historical development is characterised by Newson et al. (2005) as a progression from high mortality and high fertility to low mortality and low fertility. In other words, demographic transition theory suggests the trends we've identified are part of a general demographic change that occurs in the transition between different types of society — such as, over the past 30 years or so, from a mainly **industrial manufacturing society** (dominated by heavy engineering) to a **post-industrial service society** (characterised by computer technology and financial services).

#### Wealth flow theory

The decision to have children (and how many) is sensitive to the specific economic circumstances of a family and a wider sense of economic advantage or disadvantage. Caldwell (1976) suggests children are seen as less of an economic *asset* (through their ability to work) and more as an economic *liability*; where wider economic and social changes turn children from a source of wealth (flowing from the child to the parent) into a drain on family resources (wealth flowing from parents to children), people take the **rational decision** to limit the number of children they produce.

#### Optimal investment

Decisions about family size are made on a 'cost/benefit' basis that takes account of both economic and social/psychological factors; these are influenced by the following:

- **Psychic income:** For Becker (1991) the psychological pleasures gained from children potentially increase the 'demand' for them (the more children, the greater the psychic income for parents). However, the increased economic costs of children mean parents 'limit their investment' by producing a smaller number in whom they invest a great deal of time, money and effort.
- **Consumption choices:** Newson et al. (2005) note that (potential) parents now have a greater range of consumption choices, such that 'They can compare the costs and benefits of a child with those of a new car.'





- **Support networks:** Sear et al. (2003) argue modern families increasingly lack the kin support networks that provide resources — a grandparent looking after children while both parents work, for example — to allow for larger families.
- **Status objects:** Parents increasingly view their children as measures of their own status; the success of children in their adult lives reflects back on parents who use this as a means of measuring their own self-worth. Family size is consciously limited to make the greatest possible economic and emotional investment in a small number of children.

#### OCR examination-style questions

- |   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>1</b> Identify and explain two ways in which relationships between parents and children have changed over the past 30 years. | (17 marks) |
| <b>2</b> Identify and explain two ways in which an ageing population affects family life.                                       | (17 marks) |
| <b>3</b> Outline and evaluate the view that relationships between parents and children have changed in the last 30 years.       | (33 marks) |
| <b>4</b> Outline and evaluate feminist views of relationships between men and women in family life.                             | (33 marks) |