

Sorting the family business

When politicians and policymakers focus on the family and marriage breakdown, it is usually mothers who are in the spotlight. But as an international conference in Malta last week heard from several experts, it is the role of the father that really shapes a child's destiny

First there was Gordon Brown talking about family values at the Labour conference in Brighton. Then there was David Cameron telling the Tories in Manchester that family lay at the heart of his beliefs. Add in a report just published by the charity One Plus One on the consequences of relationship breakdown on children – and a very vocal rumpus last week over Cristina Odone's Centre for Policy Studies paper on working and non-working mothers – and you realise that the future of the family is right at the top of the political list of priorities.

And no wonder. Families today seem ever more fragile, with relationships breaking up, increasing numbers of single-parent families, and children struggling to cope with the vagaries of adult discord, not to mention financial woes, lack of time and the threat of unemployment. This is not just a British phenomenon. Governments and policymakers around the world are trying to make sense of both the causes and consequences of family

break-up, as are charities and the Churches.

In the UK, policymakers have at last turned their attention to an issue that had previously received little interest – the importance of stability on children's well-being. As the number of children born outside marriage to cohabiting couples has increased, so the risk of split families has increased. While marriages clearly break down – in Britain around 140,000 couples divorce each year – it is becoming increasingly apparent that cohabiting couples are more likely to break up than married ones. So should the solution be to strengthen marriage, even try to make it a more attractive option?

Last week in Malta, academics from around the globe gathered to explore how families can be helped and to understand the stresses and strains that affect them. The conference, organised jointly by the Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development, the University of Malta's Centre for Family Studies, and the Cana Movement, a lay



Catholic organisation that works with families, was unashamedly about marriage. Entitled "Strengthening Marriage and Supporting Families", it was clear that the organisers' belief was that marriage is the best institution for the raising of the next generation and the best way in which adults can find fulfilment.

It is a view supported by politicians in Malta: both the governing Nationalist Party and the opposition Labour Party believe that marriage is the cornerstone of society. But Malta has its problems too. A combination of no divorce (Malta is the only EU member country in which divorce is illegal) and the unintended consequences of the Maltese welfare system has led to growing numbers of people raising children outside marriage. The numbers both of people who cohabit with a new partner after a marital breakdown, and

As far as the Church is concerned, the trend in Europe towards fewer marriages, the falling birth rate and more divorce are all connected with the decline in Christianity and a misplaced emphasis on personal freedom and self-fulfilment, writes Elena Curti.

But an expert on demographics from Denmark presented delegates at a Catholic conference last week with an altogether different analysis. Gösta Esping-Andersen, professor of sociology at the University of Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, maintained that it was the failure of men to come to terms with what he called the "female revolution" that was key to the tensions within families. The stress, he said, was greatest in those societies where men held fast to their traditional role as family breadwinner and failed to understand the implications for family life of women becoming highly educated and having careers.

New roles, better chances: how women's education leads to more stable families

Professor Esping-Andersen was speaking on Friday last week in Gdansk, Poland, at the First Catholic Social Days for Europe organised by the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (Comece). His thesis was greeted with scepticism from some delegates but generated much debate. Professor Esping-Andersen, whose ideas are influential among policymakers in Europe and beyond, has advised the United Nations and is a member of EU President Barroso's social policy advisory group.

Citing research he had conducted in North America and Scandinavia, the professor said

the birth rate was highest where employment was highest and lowest where the most people were out of work. Typically more children were being born to highly educated women married to highly educated men. These couples, he said, demonstrated an historical U-turn in the behaviour of men and women in family life. A readiness by them to recognise the need to share equally childcare and household chores was critical to their having more children and the stability of their families.

"Highly educated women wanted careers. Men didn't adapt easily in the first wave. It took a long time. The Scandinavians have

of women who opt for single motherhood because they gain social security benefits, have been rising. In some areas of Malta, 35 per cent of babies baptised are listed as having unknown fathers – something many Maltese think is due to single mothers getting financial assistance. As the country's president, George Abela, put it in his inaugural conference address: "The Maltese family is facing one of its greatest tests. It is undergoing rapid changes, greatly influenced by current Western world lifestyles and the ever-increasing secularisation of Maltese society."

So what can Malta – a traditionally Catholic country with growing social problems – the US and European countries such as the UK with their high divorce rates, and Middle East countries like Qatar (home to the Doha Institute and also suffering growing relationship breakdown), do about these problems?

Karen Bogenschneider, professor of human ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told the conference that too often, policymakers focused only on mothers and children when considering families, with no thought to fathers or other vital family members, such as grandparents. If policy was to be effective, she said, policymakers needed to grasp what families are like and how they are changing. "People often assume", she observed, "that the family is like the one that they grew up in."

But grasping just what the family is like today is the first of many disputes about the family. While Dr Richard Wilkins, managing director of the Doha Institute, spoke of the "natural family" characterised by a strong relationship between a man and woman for the raising of children, and President Abela described the traditional family as being "based on marriage, the patrimony of humanity" – both echoing Catholic Church teaching – others suggested this was no longer the case. Instead, Professor Jan Walker of Newcastle University suggested that the family today is fluid and diverse. "There is no such thing as a typical family in Britain today," she said.

Professor Walker, partly echoing Karen

Bogenschneider's view that people are nostalgic when assessing the family, said that people have feared the loss of the traditional family for years. "There was no golden age. We have that image of stability and permanence but it was not necessarily the case." Yet Professor Walker's own figures did suggest profound change. In 2006, fewer people got married than at any time since 1895 and family life has become increasingly fragile, affected by a host of differing economic and social influences, such as greater education, more opportunities for women, consumerism and individualism.

But the most evident change to family life across the globe, as Professor Paul Amato of Pennsylvania State University showed in his analysis of demographics, is the surge in marital breakdown and divorce. From the US to Central and South America, to Europe,

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and to Asia, the divorce rate is growing and the impact on children profound. Amato's research into studies of divorce shows that the children of divorced parents have

- more conduct problems
- more emotional problems
- lower academic test scores
- more problems with social relationships

Nor do the difficulties end there, said Amato, but they continue into later life with

- less income than those growing up with stable, married parents
- a greater risk of depression
- poorer physical health
- increased risk of suicide
- more marital problems of their own

achieved an amazing degree of gender equality."

The fact that people married and had children relatively late was another factor in the survival of marriages. According to the professor's research, low-skilled women also wanted to marry but had difficulty finding men with whom they wanted to share their lives. If they did marry men who were also unskilled, they were more likely to divorce, with economic strain the main cause of the breakdown. Among these men, status, self-respect and self-esteem were plummeting.

The pattern of family life may have changed but the professor was at pains to point out that the opportunities for the children of poorly educated, low-skilled couples had remained static for between 50 and 60 years everywhere except Denmark, Norway and Sweden. These countries had

improved life prospects for children by making high-quality care available for them from birth till the age of five. Esping-Andersen believed that a similar emphasis would enable children from poorer families in other countries to improve their life chances.

He said that highly skilled parents spent twice as much time with their children as low-skilled parents. Their children were more likely to grow up in a "learning culture", with more books in the house.

The professor was optimistic about the outlook, however, believing that poorer couples were gradually adapting to the changing role of women and would catch up.

But he sounded a cautionary note about Britain, saying that there were signs there that while women were forging ahead, men were rooted in their traditional roles, which led to turmoil in families. Britain, he claimed, has yet to find its "egalitarian equilibrium".

Professor Amato was at pains to point out that "just because a child is from a divorced family doesn't mean that they are damaged goods". However, the connection between divorce and problems during childhood and adolescence was marked with one factor standing out: "In divorce", he said, "many studies show that the relationship with the father is destroyed."

Professor Walker's analysis also emphasised the role of the male in the family: what has a major effect on the family, she said, is the relationship the father has with the mother. This tallied with the findings presented to the conference by Michael Lamb, head of the department of social and developmental psychology at the University of Cambridge. "Children in one-parent families are at risk because relationships are attenuated or even severed," he said.

According to Professor Walker, policymakers need to reduce their focus on the diversity of relationships in contemporary society and concentrate instead on the quality of relationships, with support being given to families irrespective of their structure. Even though her studies show that getting married is a key aspiration for the majority of people – and she acknowledged under questioning that children seem to thrive better when living with both married parents – Professor Walker was reluctant to have marriage actively encouraged by governments. Instead, her solution was to "engage young people in conversation about relationships". To many of the Catholic Maltese attending the conference, this clearly wasn't enough; their view remained that of the conference title – that families are supported by strengthening marriage.

There were, nevertheless, several issues on which the priests, diocesan workers, policymakers, psychologists, sociologists and politicians agreed:

- More research is needed into the impact of economic and social change on the family.
- Young people need greater information and education about adult relationships and parenthood.
- Expectations of marriage can be so high that they are unattainable.
- Marriage preparation – first promoted by the Catholic Church and now spreading to other denominations and even to secular organisations – can play a vital role in helping people cope with the potential pitfalls of married life.
- The tensions within the nuclear family cause all manner of problems, and the extended family, including grandparents, aunts and uncles, can provide a child with increased stability. More research in this area is vital.

Hillary Clinton famously took an African motto as the basis for the title of a book: "It takes a village to raise a child." As Malta's President Abela put it, raising a child is not just about creating a family. "When parents are raising children," he said, "they are in reality raising a nation."