

Sigurd Skirbekk:

Family structure and functionality

V - Have women gained by these changes?

When men in our day take a critical attitude toward changes on the cohabitation front, they are often met in predominant intellectual circles with the reaction that men's criticisms are an expression of their loss of previous privileges. It is claimed that the development must be regarded as part and parcel of women's liberation. To the degree that developments have led to more family break-ups, in which it is often the women who take the initiative, this is purportedly the case because men remain stuck in old, ingrained role patterns and have not absorbed the laws of equality. Reference is often made to specific types of feminist literature from recent years in an attempt to justify the patriarchal and subjugating nature of marriage 32]. The mystical arch-image that binds these reactions together can be found in the story of the doll house – one of Henrik Ibsen's psychologically weakest, but still most enacted plays.

It is not difficult to find examples that fit into this idealized interpretation; and it is this kind of example that is constantly used in the public media. Still, there is much to suggest that the choice of examples is not unrelated to the way of life and lifestyle interests of those who make those choice. All of which suggests we should take a closer look at the question of whether the de-emphasize of marriage as an institution, all in all, has been in women's best interests.

Many kinds of data can help shed light on such questions. Current conditions, marked by unstable marriages and even frailer cohabitations, could be compared with historical examples. Our basis for comparison could be last century's manner of getting married, characterized by the parents' active role and the couple's veto – or vice versa – or by ideals from our own century, in which the couple passes through different stages of infatuation, engagement, and marriage, where the more rights one got, the harder it became to break off the relationship. Our comparison could also be a theoretical one. In this case, future forms of the family could be compared with functions that were adapted to a long-term social adjustment.

A number of commonplace interpretations can be refuted fairly directly. A couple of Norwegian studies can be mentioned in this connection. Svein Blom and Ola Listhaug, on the basis of data concerning health and a sense of well-being, have concluded that married partners of both sexes fare the best in different types of comparison, even with we correct for selection variables and age variables. In their conclusion they state the following: "So it should not be a manifestation of collective irrationality when the majority of adult people get married. Reports of violence and family abuse reveal the shadowy aspects of the institution; and even though the phenomenon appears to have been on the rise, there is nothing in our data to suggest that this is anything but a deviation from the normal situation 33].

Objections can always be leveled against studies of general trends. In this area, violence can be said to take place behind closed doors in different families, a fact that all active policemen can confirm. The question remains, however, whether this violence is due to marriage as an institution, or whether it is because people spend much of their time in families, with this being the arena for a great deal of emotional exposure. To determine whether it promotes or hinders violence, marriage may be compared with violence in areas where the unmarried live out their emotions. We should also make an appraisal of the validity of many estimates of the outbreak of violence; indeed, these may be ideologically tinged. We must also take into consideration the fact that violence can be mutual 34].

Based on American data of registered incidences of violence, it is estimated that approximately 57,000 women were abused every year by their husbands every year between 1979 and 1987. But during this same period, 200,000 women were reported to have been abused by their *boyfriends*, and 216,000 by their ex-husbands. Of all registered violent crimes committed against women in this period, 65% were committed by these "friends" or by ex-husbands, compared with 9% by husbands 35]. The differences here are too great to be attributed to women being more prone to report violence from their ex-husbands than their actual husbands. Measured in rates for criminal abuse of women, 12 years and older, for the period 1973-1992, the percentage was 43 for unmarried women, 45 for separated women, and just 11 for married women 36]. Another study concluded that for every pregnant woman reported to be abused by her husband, there are nearly four pregnant women who are abused by their unmarried partners 37]. Even though it can always be argued with different selections for different forms of cohabitation unions, the data suggests that marriage, in general, lessens the spread of violence toward women.

To arrive at an explanation for this phenomenon, we may return to Emile Durkheim. He claimed in his time that it was the husband who had the greatest mental benefit from marriage, because marriage set limits for limitless needs, a fact that is a condition for inner rest. This assertion, that men have more limitless predispositions than women, can be justified from an evolutionary-psychological view. As an extension of this reason, we could argue that a civilizing of the man's urges requires institutional frameworks, and that by and large this benefits women. This, in turn, suggests that a de-emphasis on institutional borders respecting the realization of needs could lower the threshold for the use of violence in several areas.

In this connection we should also consider the matter of rape. Let us take a look at a relevant commission report for the United Nations Human Rights Commission, submitted by Radhika Coomaraswamy on April 2, 1997, concerning the spread of rape, forced prostitution and sexual harassment in recent years. The commission concluded that the women all over the world are subject to increasing levels of violence. Studies at American, Canadian and British universities suggest that one out of six women has been the victim of violence with sexual overtones.

Spokesmen for individualized ideologies have tended to view the institution of marriage as a framework around husbands' rights, which has been blamed for men thinking they did not need to show a lot of consideration for their wives. Relationships based solely on emotions were supposed to lead to greater mutuality. This is the background for the attempts to legitimize all voluntariness and to define as rape all sexual relationships that were not based on mutual agreement. In practice, however, it has been impossible to determine the existence or degree of voluntariness

in the many rape cases that came to court. Where it was a case of one party's word against another, the courts usually gave the accused the benefit of the doubt. As a result, most raped women feel that they have a lot to lose and little to gain by going to court. Nevertheless, in neo-liberal societies, this has not led to a renewed interest in the institutional criteria for distinguishing between legitimacy and illegitimacy. This could have reversed the burden of proof where a man was accused of raping a woman with whom he was not married.

Naturally, gauging the use of violence against women is not the only way to decide whether women have lost or won in the de-institutionalization of family formation. Usually, women are also concerned with their children's circumstances. So it would be inappropriate to mention some studies of how changes in the family have affected children's circumstances of life.

Here too, not all research backs up neo-liberal interpretations. It is true that some men do tyrannize their wife and children, but statistically, this is not typical. The information we have about men's mistreatment and abuse of children show that, on the contrary, that bad behavior is overrepresented among men who are not husbands 38]. The independent British research institute *Family Education Trust* has studied family court cases in England for a 6-year period during the 1990s and found a clear connection between child abuse and family structure. British children who lived with unmarried parents were generally victims of more violence and abuse than children who were members of married families. Among children who lived together with a man who was not the child's father, the chances of being killed were 30 times greater than among children who lived with their fathers 39]. Several studies show that girls who live with stepfathers are at greater risk of sexual abuse than girls who live with their fathers 40].

Other studies conclude that the changes in family structure represent the greatest long-term threat to American children 41]. This threat must be taken very seriously indeed in a country which, in the course of just one generation, has experienced changes in the family that have seen a decline in the number of children living with their biological fathers from about eight out of ten to six out of ten. What has been termed "the feminization of childhood" is a historical experiment 42]. True, there are cases in which parental separation is experienced as a liberation for the children, but long-term studies in California suggest that this reaction is not typical for more than 10% of the cases 43]. The argument which states that children in previous times experienced the death of their fathers just as often as contemporary children experienced their fathers abandonment of the family does not add up. Family researcher David Popenoe writes that when a father dies, the child grieves. When a father leaves the family, the child experiences worry and guilt. Death robs fathers of their lives, but keeps their fatherhood intact. Abandonment of the family preserves the fathers, but kills fatherhood 44]. Popenoe has also subsequently published a book in which he argues that fatherhood and marriage are indispensable for the good of children and society 45].

We can once again ask whether the de-institutionalization of family relationships means that women generally have gained more freedom to make their own choices, and whether this has consequently set the stage for new forms of personal development. There are studies of rapes among acquaintances with a weak family-institutional setting 46]. One of the sociologists who first dealt with the consequences of de-institutionalized relationships was Willard Waller 47]. According to him, in

relationships that were not bound by institutionalized forms, those who were least interested in seeing the relationship continue were the ones who had the most say in determining the rules of the game. Where there were children involved, and mothers had a vested interest in keeping the family intact, the husband often had a disproportionate advantage. Waller's observations fit well with other sociological explanations of the way institutions function in regulating opposing interests, and do so in a way that serves to preserve society. Some interpersonal norms were primarily intended to limit infringements; still other norms were intended to cause people to grow together.

Men and women are not only different in complimentary ways, or in ways that set the stage for mutual attraction. Evolutionary-psychological arguments and explanations related to women's close relationship to their offspring suggest that it is not only masculine role models and emotional seclusion that causes men and women to have different attitudes toward commitment to marriage 48]. Young men are noticeably more favorably disposed toward a cohabitation union than their female counterparts 49]. There is nothing that suggests that an increasing acceptance of cohabitation is an expression of women's increased influence on the norms of society.

If women have greater social sensitivity, this can be advantageous if the framework around the social interaction is fairly fixed. On the other hand, it is not sure that relationship-oriented ethics, which has typically characterized women more than men 50], is capable of coping in situations where even the rules of the game are determined by the parties. Women who have been trained to believe that the man's emotional life is basically the same as women's – only more hampered in terms of emotional expression after the age of four – tend to believe that the man will be blinded by falling in love, as long as she shows she trusts him. This can lead to big disappointments when she discovers that sexual satisfaction often has a liberating effect on a needs-oriented man, while it binds a relationship-oriented woman. Women, so it would seem, have stood to lose a great deal from de-institutionalization 51].

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