

What is the crisis in the British family a crisis about? How is the crisis gendered?

The term 'family' officially evokes the image of a heterosexual, nuclear institution where each member is related to the other by marriage/law or blood, and the state, religion, media and other important institutions in our society encourage this image. However, lived realities are often very different and in recent years this form of the family, which is assumed to be normal and the norm, has been displaced by various other family forms which are labeled as deviant and which are assumed to be the root of current social problems. Hence has risen a 'crisis' in the British family. This crisis has been highlighted by the various social institutions mentioned above which encourage the heterosexual nuclear family form. Quoting Wright and Jagger, according to them 'the turn of the century is marked by a growing crisis in the family, a crisis that may prove terminal unless decisive action is taken', and the crisis has been pointed out as the collapse of marriage and the 'family'. This crisis however is not new and a similar was said to have risen at the end of the 19th century. Like now, the crisis then too had been a rise in social problems and women had been identified as the cause. Single mothers, working mothers, woman opposing the dominant ideology of 'womanhood' were and are labeled as the cause of the 'crisis'! As Gittins say,

'Ideals of family relationships have become enshrined in our legal, social, religious and economic systems, which in turn reinforce the ideology and penalise or ostracise those who transgress it.' [Gittins 1992]

The crisis in the family can thus be seen as nothing more than a gap between the ideological construction of the family and the diverse realities of family life. [Gittins, 1993] The different alternate family forms that have come up and become increasingly common in the last few decades such as the single parent (specially single mother) family, extended families, communes, homosexual families are seen as social threats. This is because they resist the patriarchal ideology that is prevalent in the nuclear family form where the male is all-powerful. Resistance to this form of the family has seen the rise of the gendering of the family crisis with the blame falling on the women.

This crisis as mentioned above is not something new and was seen before in the 1890's when the results of it were deemed to be the evils of those times – namely illegitimate children, women not having children, prostitution, homosexuality etc. The family – which by the way was the white, middle class, heterosexist family – was seen to be the buffer against these social evils. In these families the sexual divisions of labor played an important part in the claiming of moral superiority. The industrial Revolution which preceded this period can thus be seen as the time when the seeds of change were sown, because even though at this time the 'domestic ideology' of the middle class was established, working class women became increasingly involved in paid employment working away from home – and hence rose the first crisis. Indeed, the cause of the crisis

at this time was seen to be the 'bad' mother – invariably a working class woman in paid labor. With World War II however, women had to take up jobs and it allowed them more freedom. Gradually the 20th century saw changes in attitudes and legislation – though it did take a very long time. The most important legislative changes were perhaps the right of divorce for women and the decriminalization of gay relationships. These factors were important in the rise in the alternate family forms.

The argument that the heterosexual family is the 'norm' can however no longer be held valid. There is a vast discrepancy between the actual family forms and the 'cereal-packet family' considered the ideal! In 1961 over half of all households consisted of a married couple with dependent children and in 1992 this proportion had dropped to 24%. In 2001 19% all households consisted of an adult couple and dependent children – the couple not necessarily married. Marriage certainly has become less popular in the last 2 decades. Cohabitation, teen pregnancies, the number of children outside marriage has seen a marked increase. Homosexuality also has become much more widely accepted in society and many homosexual couples live with their children – adopted or from previous relationships. Divorce rates have also shot up dramatically with 1 in every 3 marriages ending in a divorce.

These changes have been constructed into a national crisis by the state and the media. The statistics have been used to create moral panic among the people. In Britain, the government whether the New Right or the New Left have supported the 'traditional family'. In the debates and policies of the New Right or the New Left, there is seen to be a particular connection between deviant family forms and social ills and there can be seen a particular vision of the individual, family and state responsibility. Policy units, the think tanks like the Social Affairs and the Economic Affairs units and the newspapers rather than the academic press stress are the agencies that stress more on the importance of the 'traditional family values'. [Jagger and Wright, 1999] The lobbyists on behalf of the 'normal' family say that government policies and feminist ideologies threaten it.

Government policies however far from threatening the nuclear family form strongly support it. In fact the Conservatives called themselves the party of the 'family' and deviant family forms such as homosexual relationships and cohabitation were actively discouraged. The 1988 Local Government Act stated that it was an offence for local government employees or institutions to promote the acceptability of homosexuality as a family relationship. The Conservatives also shifted away from state provision and the emphasis lay on the family as a source of provision and rhetoric as well as legislation supported this. The moral panic shifted from the unemployed male scrounger to the female lone parent on benefit. The benefits given to single parents were cut down and the Child Support Act was introduced. Refamilisation – by which fathers were tried to be reinserted into the family by being made responsible for his child after separation made life very difficult for those people who had been divorced. This rhetoric

of traditional family values however helped the state to back out of much of its fiscal responsibilities!

The Labour Governments emphasis has also been on the family. Legislation based on the 'families role in society' has been passed. As Frazer says, there is 'an insistent emphasis on 'the family' as the relevant and significant institution' together with 'the insistence that rights must be correlated with duties, obligations and responsibilities'. It does seem from the government's emphasis on the family that the terrain of family offers the illusion of a cheap and feasible political program. Other than this emphasizing on family also obscures the failure of the politicians in other spheres such as economics or likewise.

The media also plays an important role in this invocation of 'the family' – the 'cereal-packet family' being a noteworthy propaganda and the stress on the current 'crisis'! Religion is another important social institution that encourages the nuclear family maintaining it to be moral and healthier than the other family forms.

It has been seen that in all these cases of addressing this crisis by the state, the media or any other institution the focus has been on women as the cause of the crisis and consequently social problems. The single mother is seen as the source of current social evils like poverty, children's indiscipline, crime and juvenile delinquency. Fatherless families are seen to be more of a problem with no one to impose authority and discipline! The discourse of lone/single motherhood as a social threat as it helps to resist close scrutiny of the content of hegemonic masculinity and fatherhood. [Lister, 1996] and conceals the fear that if men lose their relevance to the family life they also lose control over women and children. The traditional nuclear family, which is patriarchal, enforces this ideology through the strict gendered division of labor and other family forms without these gender divisions are not seen as desirable or normal. The traditional family is seen as one in which the male is the breadwinner and the woman is the homemaker – looking after the house and the children. This was in fact the Victorian middle class ideology. Though today women are no longer thought of as not going into paid work, it is still considered that her primary duty lies in looking after the home – thus she has a double burden of her job and housework. Men however have no such responsibilities and the symmetrical family that Young and Willmott talk about in which housework is shared equally between men and women instead of men thinking that they are doing a favour by helping, will take a long time to come if it ever does come at all! These family relationships – the inequality of women in their relationships with men (in either marriage or cohabitation) is linked to wider social and economic factors and is in fact sanctioned by the power of the state.

Thus gendered division of labor is a part of the 'normal' family ideals. The crisis in the family means that this gender division no longer works within a majority of

the families anymore. This is the feminist explanation for the rise of a 'crisis' in the family by the media and the state. The patriarchy that is based on the exploitation of women's unpaid labor at home constructs alternate family forms as a 'crisis' and blames women as the cause of social problems, advocating the return to the 'normal, heterosexual, nuclear family' for a better and healthier society!!

-----X-----

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dallos, R and R. Sapsford (1995) 'Patterns of Diversity and Lived Realities', in J. Munice et al (eds) *Understanding the Family*, London : Sage.
- Wright, C and G. Jagger (1999) 'End of century, end of family? Shifting discourses of family 'crisis'', in G. Jagger and C. Wright (eds) *Changing Family Values*, London: Routledge.
- Abbot, P and C. Wallace (1997 – 2nd edition) *An Introduction to Sociology : Feminist Perspectives*, London: Routledge, ch 6.
- Gittins, D (1993) *The Family in Question: Changing Households and Familiar Ideologies*, London, Macmillan.
- Jackson, S (1993) 'Women and the Family', in Richardson. D and Robinson. V(eds) *Introducing Women's Studies: Feminist Theory and Practice*, London: Macmillan.