

Table 5.1 Forms of the family, marriage and household

Forms of:	Description
<b>Marriage</b>	
Monogamy	Two individuals Found in Europe, the USA and most Christian cultures
Serial monogamy	A series of monogamous marriages Found in Europe and the USA, where there are high rates of divorce and remarriage
Arranged marriage	Marriages arranged by parents to match their children with partners of a similar background and status Found in the Indian sub-continent and Muslim, Sikh and Hindu minority ethnic groups in Britain
Civil partnership	Civil partnership gives legal recognition to the relationships of same-sex couples, giving civil partners equal treatment to married couples in a wide range of legal matters. In 2014, gay and lesbian couples were legally enabled to marry on the same basis as different sex couples.
Polygamy	Marriage to more than one partner at the same time Includes polygyny and polyandry
Polygyny	One husband and two or more wives Found in Islamic countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia
Polyandry	One wife and two or more husbands Found in Tibet, among the Todas of southern India, and among the Marquesan Islanders
<b>Family and household structure</b>	
Nuclear family	Two generations: parents and children living in the same household
Extended family	All kin including and beyond the nuclear family
Classic extended family	An extended family sharing the same household or living near each other
Modified extended family	An extended family living far apart, but keeping in touch by phone, letters, email, networking websites like Facebook and frequent visits
Beanpole family	A multi-generation extended family, which is long and thin, with few aunts, uncles and cousins, reflecting fewer children being born in each generation, but people living longer
Patriarchal family	Authority held by males
Matriarchal family	Authority held by females
Symmetrical family	Authority and household tasks shared between male and female partners
Reconstituted family or stepfamily or blended family	One or both partners previously married, with children of previous relationships
Lone parent family	Lone parent with dependent children, most commonly after divorce or separation (though may also arise from death of a partner or unwillingness to marry or cohabit)
Gay or lesbian family	Same-sex couple living together with children
Single person household	An individual living alone

**Activity**

Refer to table 5.1 and:

- Interview a few people and try to find out what types of family they live in today. Is there any 'typical' family or is there a variety of family types? Write a report or do a presentation on your findings.
- Fill in the blanks in the following passage. Each dash represents one word.

The \_\_\_\_\_ means just the parents and children, living together in one household. This is sometimes called the two-generation family, because it contains only the two generations of parents and children. The \_\_\_\_\_ is a grouping consisting of all kin. The \_\_\_\_\_ consists of several related nuclear families or family members who live in the same household, street or area and who see one another regularly. The \_\_\_\_\_ is one where related nuclear families, although they may be living far apart, maintain close relations made possible by modern communications, such as car travel, phone, letters or email. This is probably the most common type of family arrangement in Britain today. The \_\_\_\_\_ is a form of the extended family in a pattern which is long and thin, reflecting the fact that people are living longer but are having fewer children. The \_\_\_\_\_ is today largely a result of the rise in the divorce rate, although it may also arise from the death of a partner; the breakdown of cohabiting relationships, or a simple lack of desire to get married. Nine out of ten of these families are headed by women. The \_\_\_\_\_ is one where one or both partners have been married previously, and they bring with them children of a previous marriage. It remains a popular impression that the most usual kind of family in contemporary Britain is the \_\_\_\_\_ where both husbands and wives or cohabiting partners are likely to be wage earners, and to share the housework and childcare. However, some argue that men still dominate in the family and make most of the decisions, and it therefore remains \_\_\_\_\_ is the only legal form of marriage allowed in Britain. In modern Britain, most of Western Europe and the United States there are high rates of divorce and remarriage, and some people keep marrying and divorcing a series of different partners. The term \_\_\_\_\_ is sometimes used to describe these marriage patterns. This type of marriage pattern has been described as 'one at a time, one after the other and they don't last long!'. \_\_\_\_\_ are those where parents organize the marriages of their children to try and ensure a good match with partners of a similar background and status. They are typically found among Muslim, Sikh and Hindu minority ethnic groups. However, this custom is coming under pressure in Britain as younger people demand greater freedom to choose their own marriage partner in the same way as in wider society. While marrying a second partner without divorcing the first is a crime in Britain, in many societies it is perfectly acceptable to have more than one marriage partner at the same time. \_\_\_\_\_ is a general term used to describe this form of marriage.

The solution to this activity can be found on the teachers' pages of [www.pollybooks.com/browne](http://www.pollybooks.com/browne).

The nuclear family is a family with two generations, of parents and children, living together in one household.

**Is the nuclear family a universal institution?**

Functionalist writers like Murdock (1949) suggest that the **nuclear family** is such an important social institution, playing such vital functions in maintaining society, that it is found in some form in every society. In other words, it is a universal institution. However, although most societies in the world have some established arrangements for the production, rearing and socialization of children, this does not mean that these arrangements always or necessarily involve prime responsibility resting on the family or biological parents. The examples below help to illustrate some alternative arrangements which suggest the nuclear family is not always or necessarily the only way of bringing up children.

## THE NAYAR

Among the Nayar of south-west India, before the nineteenth century, there was no nuclear family. A woman could have sexual relations with any man she wished (up to a maximum of twelve) and the biological father of children was therefore uncertain. The mother's brother, rather than the biological father, was responsible for looking after the mother and her children. Unlike our society, where in most cases the biological parents marry and/or live together and are responsible for rearing their children, among the Nayar there was no direct link between having sexual relations, child-bearing, childrearing and cohabitation.

## COMMUNES

Communes developed in Western Europe, Britain and the United States in the 1960s, among groups of people wanting to develop alternative lifestyles to those of conventional society because of the political or religious beliefs they held. Communes often try to develop an alternative style of living and a kind of alternative household, with an emphasis on collective living rather than individual family units.

A number of adults and children all aim to live and work together, with children being seen as the responsibility of the group as a whole rather than of natural parents. Many communes tended to be very short-lived, and only a few remain in Britain today.

## THE KIBBUTZ

In the early **kibbutzim**, childrearing was separated as much as possible from the marriage relationship, with children kept apart from their natural parents for much of the time and brought up in the children's house by metapelets. These were a kind of professional parent, combining the roles of nurse, housemother and educator. The role of the natural parents was extremely limited, and they were only allowed to see their children for short periods each day. The children were seen as the children of the kibbutz – they were the responsibility of the community as a whole, which met all of their needs. Children would move through a series of children's houses with others of the same age group until they reached adulthood.

In recent years, the more traditional family unit has re-emerged in the kibbutzim, with natural parents and children sharing the same accommodation, but the kibbutz remains one of the most important attempts to find an alternative to conventional family structures.

## LONE PARENT FAMILIES

The lone parent family is becoming increasingly common in Western societies, and is usually headed by a woman. Lone parents represent a clear alternative to the conventional nuclear family. This is discussed later in this chapter.

## GAY AND LESBIAN FAMILIES

Same-sex couples with children are becoming more common, though they are still relatively rare. Most same-sex couples with children tend to be lesbian couples – that is, two women. However, there are more cases emerging of gay (male) couples adopting children or having children through surrogate mothers. A high-profile celebrity example of this was Sir Elton John and his partner David Furnish, who in 2010 became parents to a son born to a surrogate mother in California.

The Civil Partnership Act of 2004 gave legal recognition to the relationships of same-sex couples who enter a civil partnership, involving similar arrangements to a legal marriage. Entering a civil partnership gives gay and lesbian couples equal treatment to married couples in a wide range of legal matters. Couples who form a civil partnership have a legal status of 'civil partner'. Since

Lesbian wedding party



2014, in England and Wales, same-sex couples have been able to marry on the same basis as opposite-sex couples. You might argue that gay and lesbian couples are families like any other, but they do offer an alternative to more conventional views of the nuclear family.

## FOSTER CARE AND CHILDREN'S HOMES

It is worth remembering that a considerable number of children are 'looked after' by local authorities, and brought up by foster parents or in children's homes. This does demonstrate that the link between natural parents and the rearing of children can be, and sometimes is, separated.

Even though the nuclear family is probably one of the main means of bringing up children in the world today, the examples above mean it would be incorrect to assume that the conventional nuclear family is a universal institution. This is particularly the case today, when new forms of relationship are developing, and when the idea of a lifetime relationship is increasingly diminishing as more people have a series of partners during their lifetimes, and abandon traditional styles of family living.

### Practice questions

- 1 Define the term 'serial monogamy'. **(2 marks)**
- 2 Using **one** example, briefly explain what is meant by a 'reconstituted family'. **(2 marks)**
- 3 Using **one** example, briefly explain the difference between a family and a household. **(2 marks)**
- 4 Outline **three** ways that children may be brought up, other than in families. **(6 marks)**

## Topic 1

## SPECIFICATION AREA

*The relationship of the family to the social structure and social change, with particular reference to the economy and to state policies*

## Sociological perspectives on the family

What is the role of the family in society? The consensus approach of functionalist writers sees the family as a beneficial institution, contributing to social stability and the creation of a harmonious society, and providing a source of practical and emotional support for individuals. On the other hand, conflict theorists, like Marxist and many feminist writers, tend to see the family as an agency of social control, and emphasize the way the family reproduces social inequality from one generation to the next, such as the inequalities between social classes and between men and women. Marxists see the family as a means of teaching its members to submit to the ideology – values and beliefs – of the wealthy upper class, and not to be critical of the society around them. The family is seen as working to dampen down the inevitable social conflict that is bound to appear in unequal societies.

Feminist writers see the family as a unit based on **patriarchy**, reproducing and supporting a society in which men have most of the power, status and authority.

These competing approaches to the role of the family in society are considered below.

### THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

As we saw in the first chapter, functionalism is a consensus theory that emphasizes integration and harmony between the different parts of society, and the way these parts work together to maintain society. With regard to the family, functionalists see the family as a vital ‘organ’ in maintaining the ‘body’ of society, just as the heart is an important organ in maintaining the human body. Functionalists suggest that the family has a number of responsibilities placed upon it – these are the *functions* it performs in society. These functions are primarily concerned with the family’s role in the preparation of children to fit into adult society, and with contributing to satisfying the functional prerequisites, or basic needs, which enable society to survive. Functionalists are also interested in how the family fits with other social institutions (like education or work) so that society functions efficiently and harmoniously.

Murdock (1949) argued there are four main functions of the family:

- **sexual** – expressing sexuality in a socially approved context (note the social disapproval attached to, for example, incest, adultery and homosexuality in many societies).
- **reproduction** – the family providing some stability for the reproduction and rearing of children.
- **socialization** – the family is an important unit of **primary socialization**, of children, whereby children learn socially acceptable behaviour and the culture of their society. This helps to build the shared ideas and beliefs (value consensus) which functionalists regard as important to maintaining a stable society.
- **economic** – the family provides food and shelter for family members.

Murdock regards these functions as necessary in any society, and he suggests that the nuclear family is found in every society to carry them out. However, as seen in the previous Foundation section, the nuclear family is not the only form of arrangement possible for carrying out these functions, and other institutions and arrangements can and do take them over.

Parsons was an American functionalist writer who examined family life in the 1950s. He argued that there are two basic functions of the family that are found in every society. These are the primary socialization of children and the stabilization of human personalities.

#### *The primary socialization of children*

Parsons (1951) sees primary socialization as involving the learning and internalization of society’s culture, such as the language, history and values of a society. He argues that society would cease to exist if the new generation were not socialized into accepting society’s basic norms and values. In his view, this socialization in the family is so powerful that society’s culture actually becomes part of the individual’s personality – people are moulded in terms of the central values of the culture and act in certain ways almost without thinking about it. Parsons therefore argues that families are factories producing human personalities, and only the family can provide the emotional warmth and security to achieve this.

#### *The stabilization of human personalities*

In industrial societies, the need for work and money, the lack of power and independence combined with boredom at work, the pressure to achieve success and support the family all threaten to destabilize personalities. Parsons suggests the family helps to stabilize personalities by the **sexual division of labour**, in the family.

In Parsons’s view, women have an **expressive role**, in the family, providing warmth, security and emotional support to their children and male partner. The male partner carries out an **instrumental role** as family breadwinner, which leads to stress and anxiety and threatens to destabilize his personality. However, the wife’s expressive role relieves this tension by providing love and understanding; the sexual division of labour into expressive and instrumental roles therefore contributes to the stabilization of human personalities.

#### *The fit between the nuclear family and contemporary society*

Writers like Parsons, Young and Willmott (1973) and Fletcher (1966) have suggested that the **classic extended family**, has largely disappeared in modern society, and the structurally isolated, **privatized nuclear family**, or some form of **modified extended family**, has emerged as the main family form in contemporary British society.

The privatized nuclear family is a self-contained, self-reliant and home-centred unit, with free time spent doing jobs around the house, and leisure time mainly spent with the family. In this isolated privatized family, family members will often know more, and care more, about the lives of media soap stars, celebrities and computer game heroes than they do about the real people who live in their street. This privatized nuclear family has been called by Parsons the ‘structurally isolated’

Is the nuclear family the typical shape of the contemporary family?



The sexual division of labour refers to the way jobs are divided into men’s jobs and women’s jobs.

The expressive role is the nurturing, caring and emotional role.

The instrumental role is the provider/breadwinner role in the family.

In the classic extended family, several related nuclear families or family members live in the same house, street or area.

The privatized nuclear family is a self-contained, self-reliant and home-centred family unit that is separated and isolated from its extended kin, neighbours and local community life.

The modified extended family is a family type in which related nuclear families, although living apart geographically, nevertheless maintain regular contact and mutual support through visiting, the phone, email, social networking websites and letters.

Patriarchy refers to male dominance with men having power and authority.

Primary socialization refers to socialization during the early years of childhood (contrasted with secondary socialization, when other social institutions exert an ever-increasing influence on individuals, such as the school, the peer group and the media).

family, since it has also lost many of its functions and links to other social institutions. According to Parsons, this family form has emerged because it is well adapted to meet both the needs of modern society and the needs of individuals.

There are six main reasons why there is thought to have been a decline in extended family life, with the isolated nuclear family fitting contemporary society. These are explained below and summarized in figure 5.1.

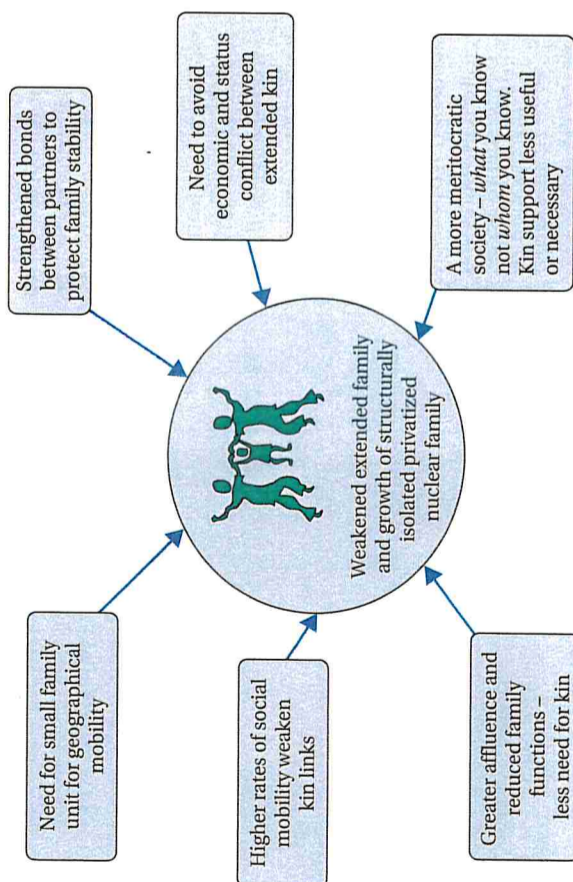
**The need for geographical mobility** Contemporary society has a specialized **division of labour**, with a wide range of different occupations with different incomes and lifestyles. This means that the labour force needs to be geographically mobile – to be able to move around the country to areas where their skills are required, to improve their education or gain promotion. This often involves leaving relatives behind, thus weakening and breaking up traditional extended family life. The isolated nuclear family is ideally suited to this requirement because it is small in size and it is not tied down by responsibilities for extended kin who, in earlier times, might have been living with them.

**The higher rate of social mobility in contemporary societies** Social mobility means that people can move up or down the social scale compared to the family they were born into. Higher levels of social mobility mean that different members of the extended family may find themselves in different jobs, with differences in education, income, lifestyle, opportunities, and attitudes and values between kin. These differences weaken relations between kin, as they have less in common.

**The growth in people's wealth and income as society has got richer and the welfare state has developed** People are much better off today, and the welfare state has taken over a number of functions previously performed by the family, such as in education, healthcare and welfare. This has reduced dependence on kin for support in times of distress. This further weakens the extended family.

**The growth in meritocracy in contemporary societies** Contemporary societies require more skills and education for jobs, and are more **meritocratic**, than in the past – it is *what you know*, rather than *who you know*, that is the most important factor in getting jobs. Extended kin therefore have less to offer family members, such as job opportunities, therefore reducing reliance on kin. However, while this is true for most people, kin links remain very important in the upper class, for the inheritance of wealth and for access to the top elite jobs.

**The need to avoid the possibility of economic and status differences in an extended family unit causing conflict and family instability** The different occupations, incomes, lifestyles and statuses of extended family members who live together might be a source of family conflict and instability,



**Figure 5.1** Reasons for the decline of the classic extended family and the emergence of the privatized nuclear family

The division of labour is the division of work or occupations into a large number of specialized jobs or tasks, each of which is carried out by one worker or group of workers.

A meritocracy (or a meritocratic society) is a society where occupational status is mainly achieved on the basis of talent, skill and educational qualifications, rather than who you know or the family you were born into.

**Structural differentiation** refers to the way new, more specialized social institutions emerge to take over a range of functions that were once performed by a single institution.

**Scapagoats** are individuals or groups who get blamed for things that aren't their fault.

**Privatization** is the process whereby households and families become isolated and separated from the community and from wider kin, with people spending more time together in home-centred activities.

with disputes over where to live when different job opportunities arise, and over different incomes and lifestyles in the same family unit. The fact that adult children generally move away from the family home to establish their own independent lives avoids such potential problems.

**The need to protect family stability by strengthening the bonds between married or cohabiting partners** There is a lack of support from kin in the isolated nuclear family, and Parsons argues that this helps to cement family relationships by increasing the mutual dependency of partners in a married or cohabiting relationship. This increases the stabilization of adult personalities, which are under particular stress in the face of the impersonal competitive relations of contemporary society as people fight for higher status, more money and promotion at work to support the consumer-led lifestyles of contemporary society. Young and Willmott suggest that rising living standards have made the home a more attractive place to spend time, and family life has become more home-centred. Free time is spent by both partners doing jobs around the home, watching TV and so on, and the family becomes a self-contained and more intimate unit.

### The changing functions of the family

Functionalists suggest that, in contemporary society, many of the functions once performed by the family in pre-industrial society have been removed from the family. These have been transferred to other more specialized institutions, such as the National Health Service and the education and welfare systems (see table 5.2 on pages 274–5 for more detail on this). Parsons calls this process **structural differentiation**. He claims this process of structural differentiation has meant the modern, more specialized family has only two basic functions left: the primary socialization of children and the stabilization of adult personalities outlined on page 271.

## CRITICISMS AND EVALUATION OF THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

Critics of the functionalist perspective see it as:

- **Downplaying conflict** Both Murdock and Parsons paint very rosy pictures of family life, presenting it as a harmonious and integrated institution. However, they downplay conflict in the family, particularly the 'darker side' of family life, such as violence against women and child abuse. Children may become emotionally disturbed by conflict between parents, and children may often be used as **scapagoats** by parents.
- **Being out of date** Parsons's view of the 'instrumental' and 'expressive' roles of men and women is very old-fashioned. It may have held some truth in the 1950s when many married women were full-time housewives, and men the breadwinners in most households. However, this is clearly not the case today, when most married and cohabiting women are wage-earning breadwinners. Nowadays, both partners are likely to be playing expressive and instrumental roles at various times, especially if men are taking on greater responsibilities for childcare, as we are sometimes led to believe.
- **Ignoring the exploitation of women** Functionalists tend to ignore the way women suffer from the sexual division of labour in the family, with their responsibility for housework and childcare undermining their position in paid employment, for example through restricted working hours because of the need to prepare children's meals, take them to and from school, and look after them when they are ill. Housework also causes stress, leading to mental illness. These concerns are typically raised by feminist writers, discussed below.
- **Ignoring the harmful effects of the family** Leach (1967) asserts that, in modern society, the nuclear family has become so isolated from kin and the wider community (this is called **privatization**), that it has become an inward-looking institution that leads to emotional stress. Family members expect and demand too much from one another, and this stress generates conflict within the family. He argues that, 'Far from being the basis of the good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents.' Marxists like Laing and Esterson (1970) and Cooper (1972) also argue the family can be a destructive and

exploitative institution. They see life in families smothering the development of individuality, leading to unquestioning obedience to authority in later life, and contributing to the mental illness of schizophrenia. Feminist writers are particularly critical of the functionalist view for playing down the 'darker side' of family life, including the domestic violence and child abuse that goes on there. This is discussed in more detail in Topics 3 and 4 (see pages 330–2 and 339–41).

Other criticisms of the functionalist view are considered below.

### The case against the functionalist view that the family has lost its functions

Fletcher (1966) 50 years ago denied that the family had lost many of its functions in contemporary society, and what he said then is still applicable today. He suggested that in pre-industrial and early industrial society poverty meant functions such as welfare, education or recreation were often not carried out. Children were frequently neglected, and male peasants often cared more about their animals than about their wives. Fletcher argues that the family now has more, not fewer, responsibilities (functions) placed on it. For example, the health and welfare functions of the family have been strengthened by the welfare state, and parents today are more preoccupied with their children's health, and retain responsibility for diagnosis of minor illness and referral to doctors and other welfare state agencies. Social services departments, with their powers to intervene in families if children are neglected or abused, have increased the responsibilities on parents, not reduced them.

Fletcher says that the family plays an important economic role as a unit of consumption. The modern family is particularly concerned with raising its living standards and keeping up with the neighbours through buying a whole host of goods targeted at family consumers, such as large-screen TVs, home media and broadband packages, music systems, computers and computer games and holidays abroad. Marxists see this pressure to purchase consumer goods as a means of motivating workers in boring, unfulfilling jobs.

Feminist writers see the modern family as a unit of production, since women's unpaid **domestic labour** (housework and childcare) produces a wide range of goods and services in the family which would prove very expensive if they were provided and paid for outside the family.

The discussion of what the traditional functions of the family were, how these have changed and the extent to which the family has lost its functions is outlined in table 5.2.

**Domestic labour** is unpaid housework, including cooking, cleaning, childcare and looking after the sick and elderly.

Table 5.2 Traditional functions of the family and how they have changed

Traditional functions of the family	How they have changed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Reproduction of the population</i> – the reproduction and nurturing of children. Having children was often seen as the main reason for marriage, as a means of passing on family property and providing a future workforce.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Britain since the 1970s, there has been a steady increase in the reproduction of children and sexual relations before, alongside and outside marriage.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before industrialization and the growth of factory production in Britain, the family was a unit of production. This means that the family home was also the workplace, and the family produced most of the goods necessary for its own survival. Children would learn the skills needed for working life from their parents, and the family ascribed the occupational roles and status of adults. In other words, children generally followed in their parents' footsteps.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Since the early nineteenth century in Britain, work has moved outside the home to factories and offices (with the exception of housework / domestic labour). Families no longer generally produce the goods they need – they go out to work for wages so they can buy them. The skills required for adult working life are no longer learnt in the family but at the place of work, at colleges and universities or on government-supported job training schemes. Occupational roles and status in society are less likely to be ascribed by the kinship network, and more likely to be achieved by individual merit.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The family and kinship network traditionally played a major role in <i>maintaining and caring for dependent children</i> – that is, those who were still unable to look after themselves.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modern nuclear family is less dependent on relatives for help and assistance with maintaining and caring for children. State welfare services, like the National Health Service, social services departments, including social workers working with</li> </ul>

Table 5.2 (continued)

Traditional functions of the family	How they have changed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The family provided most of the <i>help and care for the young, the old, the sick and the poor</i> during periods of illness, unemployment and other crises. Poverty often meant poor health and poor healthcare.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This has become shared with the welfare state through the NHS and the social services. Homes for the elderly, hospitals, welfare clinics, GPs, state pensions, Jobseeker's Allowance and other unemployment benefits and income support reduce the dependence on kin for money and support.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <i>primary socialization and social control of children</i>. The family is where society's new recruits first learn the basic values and norms of the culture of the society they will grow up in. For example, it is in the family that children first learn the difference between what is seen as right and wrong, good and bad behaviour, and the acceptance of parental and other adult authority.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The family still retains the major responsibility for the socialization and social control of young children, but the increase in the number of children's centres, childminders, pre-schools and playgroups, and free nursery or pre-school education or childcare for 15 hours a week for 3- and 4-year-olds has meant this is no longer restricted to the family. The state educational system now helps the family with the socialization of school-age children, and the media also play an important socializing role.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The family used to be one of the only sources of <i>education</i> for young people in Britain. Before compulsory schooling was provided by the state in Britain from 1880, many children from working-class families were very poorly educated by today's standards, and illiteracy rates were extremely high.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The education of children has been mainly taken over by the state, and is now primarily the responsibility of professional teachers rather than parents. All young people between the ages of 5 and 16 (age 17 from 2013, age 18 from 2015) now have by law to attend school or college or be in some form of training. However, the family continues to play an important socializing and supporting role in preparing a child for school, and encouraging and supporting her or him while at school. The family still has a major effect on a child's level of educational achievement.</li> </ul>

#### Activity

- 1 To what extent do you consider the family has lost its functions? Examine the arguments in table 5.2 and on pages 273–4, weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of each argument and reach a conclusion. (This is evaluation.)
- 2 Do you think the welfare state has placed more or fewer demands on the family? Give reasons for your answer.
- 3 Look at TV, newspaper or magazine advertising. Can you find any evidence that the image of family life presented in advertising is used as a way of persuading people to buy consumer goods – for example, by making it appear that buying goods will lead to happier lives, or will make children feel more cared for? If you're in a group, collect or record some adverts and discuss them in your group.
- 4 Do you have any evidence, from your own experience, of families buying goods to keep up with the neighbours? If so, why do you think they do this?

#### Has the extended family disappeared?

While the functionalists are broadly correct in their view that the nuclear family fits contemporary society, and it is true that many families with dependent children in Britain today are nuclear families, we must not assume that just because family members may live apart geographically, all links with kin are severed and destroyed. Kin beyond the nuclear family still play an important part in the lives of many families, and it is more realistic to talk of a modified extended family rather than the structurally isolated nuclear family as the most common family form. This modified extended

family is one in which related nuclear families, although they may be living far apart geographically, nevertheless maintain regular contact and mutual support made possible by modern communications and easy transportation.

It would also be wrong to suggest that classic extended family life has completely disappeared. It is still to be found in Asian and traditional working-class communities.

Families are changing rapidly, and there is no longer a 'typical' family type. There is a wide diversity (or range) of family structures alongside the isolated nuclear family. The issue of family diversity is discussed later in Topic 2 following this.

Don't forget you can also criticize the functionalist approach by referring to arguments drawn from other perspectives – like the Marxist and feminist approaches discussed below.

## THE NEW RIGHT

The New Right supports traditional values and institutions, and its views of the role, importance and functions in society of the traditional family unit are very similar to the functionalist approach discussed above.

New Right theorists see the nuclear family and the kinship network as performing important and beneficial functions in securing social stability, through providing emotional security for children, socializing them into the culture of society, and establishing respect for and conformity to social and moral values and norms. Like the functionalists, they see the traditional heterosexual nuclear family, with two natural parents and a traditional division of gender roles in the family, with men playing the instrumental roles as authority figures and providers, and women playing the expressive roles of providing affection and nurture, as the best means of bringing up children to become conformist, responsible adults. They therefore see it as crucial that the nuclear family should remain the dominant form of the family.

The New Right sees traditional family life as under threat from social changes like the rising divorce rate, more stepfamilies, more lone parents, cohabitation as an alternative to the commitment of marriage, births outside marriage, and gay marriage or civil partnership, and welfare state policies that support relationships outside the conventional nuclear family. They argue these changes undermine social stability, and point to rising lack of respect and anti-social behaviour among the young, lack of discipline in school and educational underachievement, alcohol and drug abuse, crime and dependency on welfare benefits as symptoms of the decline of traditional family life. For example, they argue that working mothers put their own careers above the needs of their children, and they point to the lack of successful male role models for young people in fatherless families, with uncontrollable children the fault of lone mothers who are unable to discipline youngsters (particularly young males) as effectively as if families had fathers.

Murray (1989, 1990) and Marsland (1989) argue that the welfare state has undermined personal responsibility and self-help, and the importance of support from families. They are particularly scathing about welfare support for lone parents, as they argue this encourages single women to have children they could not otherwise afford, knowing they can get help from state benefits. They see the decline of the traditional family, and particularly growing numbers of lone parent families, as contributing to the emergence of a **dependency culture** and a work-shy **underclass** which wants to avoid work by living off welfare benefits. This underclass is marked out by high levels of illegitimacy, lone parenthood and family instability, which the New Right sees as contributing to wider social problems, such as alcohol abuse and 'yob culture', crime, fiddling of the benefit system and drug abuse, exclusion from school and educational failure.

The New Right argues for a return to traditional family values, with government policies to reverse the decline of the traditional family unit. These might include measures to reduce divorce and births outside marriage, and the reduction of welfare state benefits to non-conventional family units. Such policies seek to make alternative means of living or bringing up children less attractive options, while at the same time policies are adopted to support conventional nuclear family units, with traditional gender roles in parenting and support to strengthen legal marriage over cohabitation, through measures like tax relief for married couples.

**Monogamy** is a form of marriage in which a person can only be legally married to one partner at a time.

**Ideological state apparatuses** are agencies which serve to spread the ideology, and justify the power, of the dominant social class.

A **dependency culture** is a set of values and beliefs, and a way of life, centred on dependence on others, particularly benefits from the welfare state.

The **underclass** is a social group right at the bottom of the social class hierarchy, whose members are in some ways different from, and cut off or excluded from, the rest of society.

Criticisms of the New Right approach to the family are similar to those of the functionalist perspective discussed above, and the criticisms derived from Marxist and feminist writers discussed below. Perhaps the most significant criticisms are that it has a particularly rosy view of what family life is like, ignoring much of its darker side (see pages 330–2), and harks back to the reestablishment of a romanticized era of happy families that probably never existed.

## THE MARXIST PERSPECTIVE: THE FAMILY AS AN AGENCY OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Like functionalists, Marxists adopt a structural perspective on the family, looking at how the family contributes to the maintenance of society's structure. However, unlike functionalists, Marxists do not regard the nuclear family as a functionally necessary (and therefore universal) institution. Marxists see the family within the framework of a capitalist society, which is based on private property, driven by profit, and riddled with conflict between social classes with opposing interests. Marxists argue that the nuclear family is concerned with social control by teaching its members to submit to the capitalist class, and they emphasize the ways the family reproduces unequal relationships and works to damp down inevitable social conflict.

Early traditional Marxists like Engels (1820–95) believed that the monogamous nuclear family developed as a means of passing on private property to heirs. The family, coupled with **monogamy**, was an ideal mechanism as it provided proof of paternity (who the father was) and so property could be passed on to the right people. Women's position in this family was not much different from that of prostitutes in that a financial deal was struck – she provided sex and heirs in return for the economic security her husband offered.

Althusser (1971), argued that, in order for capitalism to survive, the working class must submit to the ruling class or bourgeoisie. He suggested that the family is one of the **ideological state apparatuses**, along with others such as the education system and the media, which are concerned with social control and passing on the ideology (the ideas and beliefs) of the ruling class. Through socialization into this ideology in the family, the ruling class tries to maintain false class consciousness by winning the hearts and minds of the working class.

Zaretsky (1976) also emphasizes this ideological role of the family in propping up capitalism. He sees the family as an escape route from oppression and exploitation at work – a private place where people, particularly male workers, can enjoy a personal life and be valued as individuals, and have some measure of control over their lives. This release in the family helps them to live with their daily oppression in the world of work, and thereby helps to undermine opposition to capitalism. However, this seems a very romanticized view of the family, without family conflicts and rows, and, as Marxist feminists have pointed out (see below) this is very much a male Marxist perspective on the family, as much of the work that might make the family a haven and refuge is done by, and at the expense of, women.

### Criticisms of the Marxist perspective

The traditional Marxist perspective tends to be a bit old-fashioned. The idea that men marry and have children to pass on property ignores other reasons for getting married or forming families. Many women now work and have independent incomes, and in many cases they are more successful than men in some areas of the labour market. Women are therefore far less likely to marry for economic security. Marriage is now less of a social necessity. The idea that families exist basically to pass on ruling-class ideology ignores the many other things that go on in families. A 2003 report by the Institute of Education, *Changing Britain, Changing Lives*, found that people are now more likely to marry for love and affection rather than as a social obligation, with a growing emphasis on the emotional aspects of relationships and personal fulfilment both for men and, especially, for women. Marxist analysis of the family is now mainly explored by Marxist feminists, as considered below.

## THE FAMILY, SOCIAL CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE

Another way the family exercises ideological control is derived from Foucault's idea of surveillance. Foucault (1991) developed the concept of surveillance – the state keeping an eye on you – to describe how the state can exercise social control over people. Surveillance is traditionally associated with external pressure, through social institutions like the criminal justice system, the media and the education system which watch over people to encourage them, through force and persuasion, to conform to social norms, such as what proper family life and good parenting should be like. However, in postmodern societies, Foucault sees this surveillance as internalized – people come to accept the norms of behaviour as their own, and follow them because they think it is in their interests to do so. They then exercise self-surveillance, and police their own behaviour. Social institutions no longer need to enforce social control over how people behave because they do it themselves as they constantly monitor and keep an eye on their own behaviour.

Henderson et al. (2010) applied Foucault's concept of surveillance to the family and motherhood. They suggest that conformity to social norms relating to family life, such as those presented in the media, or by social workers, is established as mothers exercise surveillance over themselves and one another informally, as they observe, talk to, criticize, judge and reproach themselves and one another about parenting styles, about what products to buy for their children, child discipline, access to computer games, the internet and television, diet and so on. Henderson et al. found that this self-surveillance was often accomplished and accompanied by guilt if mothers were not living up to their own self-imposed parenting expectations.

This process of self-surveillance was confirmed in a Netnuns survey of 5,000 mothers in 2011. This found mothers were under so much pressure – from both themselves and other mothers – to appear like perfect parents and to give a good impression of themselves that they covered up or lied about things like how much television their children watched, what they cooked for their families and how much 'quality time' they spent playing with and talking to their children.

This process of self-surveillance establishes a self-imposed pattern of conformity to the accepted norms of family life, and is another means by which the family can operate as an agency of social control. For functionalists, this is seen as part of a desirable process of ensuring social stability and conformity, but for Marxists and feminists it is seen as repressive, promoting submission and conformity in an unequal society, and exploitative, especially for women whose guilt underpins it.

### FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE FAMILY

In recent years, feminist approaches have probably had more influence on the study of the family than any other perspective, and they have been extremely valuable in introducing new areas into the study of the family, such as housework and its contribution to the economy; domestic violence; the negative effects of family life on women's careers in paid employment; and the continuing inequality between men and women in the family. These themes are explored further elsewhere in this chapter.

Feminist perspectives emphasize the harmful effects of family life upon women, and the role of the family in the continuing oppression of women. They provide a healthy antidote to functionalist and New Right accounts, which tend to emphasize the 'functional' aspects of the family and downplay the negative side of family life. For feminists, the family and marriage are major sources of female oppression and gender inequalities in society – whether we examine housework, childcare, power and authority or women's employment outside the home.

#### Themes in feminist analysis of the family

- *The family as a place of work.* Feminist writers were among the first to state that housework is work – as real as waged work outside the home. Housework and childcare in the family, which are mainly performed by women, are unpaid, and not really recognized as work at all. Men are often the ones who gain from this, as it is they who have their meals cooked, their children looked after and their homes kept clean by women's work. Oakley (1974) has emphasized that housework is hard, routine and unrewarding (both personally and in a financial sense), and

Feminists emphasize that housework is unpaid labour. If women ironed clothes, cooked and cleaned for others outside the family they would be paid for it, but in the family they are not

A symmetrical family is one in which the roles of husband and wife or cohabiting partners have become more alike (symmetrical and equal).



housework remains the primary responsibility of women, though men might sometimes help. This will be examined later in this chapter.

- *The myth of the 'symmetrical family'.* Feminists attack the notion (put forward originally by Young and Willmott in *The Symmetrical Family* (1973)) that there is growing equality between partners in the family. These issues are discussed later in this chapter, but feminists emphasize it is still mainly women who:

- perform most housework and childcare tasks.
- make sacrifices to buy the children clothes, and to make sure other family members are properly fed.
- are less likely to make the most important decisions in the family.
- are more likely to give up paid work, or suffer from lost or restricted job opportunities, as they are expected to look after children, the old, the sick, and male partners. Many women now work both outside the home in paid employment and inside the home doing domestic labour. In effect, they have two jobs to their male partner's one.
- *The greater dependency of women on men's earnings,* as the average pay of women is only about 85 per cent of that of men, largely linked to women's traditional roles as housewife and mother in the family.
- *Domestic violence* – women are far more likely than men to be the victims of serious domestic violence.

**Liberal feminism** Liberal feminism recognizes that women's position in the family, with women taking on the major responsibility for housework and childcare, can have adverse effects on their power, careers and health. They believe the best way to improve the position of women in the family and society is through reform measures within the present system that remove all forms of discrimination to establish equality of opportunity for women with men, and allow them to make free choices between motherhood, a career or a combination of both. These measures include:

- *changing socialization and parenting practices,* to avoid the gender stereotyping which steers women into the housewife-mother role.
- *establishing and asserting the legal rights of women as individuals* with laws to establish equal pay and stop sex discrimination, such as the Equal Pay Act (1970), the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Equality Act (2010).

- *the establishment of equality in maternity and paternity leave*, so both fathers and mothers have the same legal rights to time off work when children are born, and parenting is seen as the responsibility of both parents, rather than mainly the mother's.
- *better and cheaper childcare* to enable women and men to combine childcare with successful careers in paid employment.
- *more sharing of housework and childcare tasks with men.*
- *stronger action against domestic violence* – the most serious of which is by men against women.

The major criticism of liberal feminist approaches is that, while they make proposals that might improve the position of women within existing society, they do not tackle the fundamental inequalities that women face as a result of patriarchy and capitalism – points that are made by radical and Marxist feminists.

**Radical feminism** Radical feminists focus on the problem of patriarchy in society and in the family as the main obstacle to women's equality. Greer (2007) argues that many relationships between men and women in all spheres of life in contemporary society remain highly patriarchal and exploitative. Radical feminists see the family as a patriarchal institution, which benefits men at the expense of women, and through which men exercise their patriarchal power and control over women, sometimes backed up with physical and sexual violence (domestic violence). They believe women are better-off if they steer clear of patriarchal families. Their solution is basically to reject the family and family life, and in many cases to reject relationships with men altogether.

**Marxist feminism** Marxist feminism emphasizes the way in which women are doubly exploited – both as workers in an unequal, exploitative capitalist society, and as women. They see the family, and particularly women's work in the family, as contributing to the maintenance of capitalism in the following ways.

#### The social reproduction of labour power

The social reproduction of labour power simply means the family providing a place where children can be born and raised with a sense of security, and the ruling class is supplied with a readily available and passive labour force for its factories and offices. The family achieves this in three ways:

- by providing a place for eating, drinking and relaxing, helping to ensure that members of the workforce are able to go to work each day with their ability to work (their labour power) renewed.
- by producing and maintaining labour which is free of cost to the capitalists through the unpaid housework of women (what is called *domestic labour*), as women are not paid for their labour in rearing children and looking after male partners.
- by socializing children into the dominant ideas in society (the dominant ideology), and preparing them for the necessity and routines of work, such as the need to work for a living, and to be punctual and obedient at work. Through day-to-day relationships in the family, with parents having power and control over their children, and men over women, family members come to accept, often without questioning them, the power inequalities they will face as adults in capitalist society. The family therefore lays the groundwork for submission to 'the boss' in later life, and is one of the mechanisms by which capitalism produces and recruits a moulded and obedient workforce.

#### Social control of the working class

Social control refers to the means of keeping people conforming to the dominant norms and values of society. The expectation that what are defined as 'good parents' must work to provide material comforts and good life chances for their children helps to keep people in unsatisfying, boring and unrewarding jobs. It is harder for workers to go on strike for higher pay if there is a family to support, because it might mean cuts in the living standards of themselves and their children. This weakens workers' bargaining power at work, and discourages them from taking action that might disrupt the system.

The family can also act as a 'safety valve', providing a release from the tedium, frustration and lack of power and control at work that many workers experience. As Zaretsky said above, the family can be a place to escape from the world and relax – a 'sanctuary' into which adults withdraw to recover, and enjoy the feel-good emotional factors of friendship, love and support. Delphy and Leonard (1992) argue this safety valve is provided by women, whose emotional work is an important aspect of women's domestic labour. This safety valve helps to prevent frustration at work from spilling over into action against the system, and contributes to the stabilization of the capitalist system, to the benefit of the dominant class.

#### Criticisms of the Marxist feminist and radical feminist perspectives

Criticisms of the Marxist feminist and radical feminist perspectives include the following points:

- Women's roles are not the same in all families. Many families now consist of dual-worker couples, with both partners in paid employment.
- These perspectives assume that women are passive victims in the family, and do not have any choices. Hakim (2011) suggests that women's inequality in the family, and what is treated as self-evident proof of widespread sex discrimination and sex-role stereotyping, may be the result of women's personal choices and preferences, and that most men and women have different career aspirations, life goals and priorities. Some women may choose to become full-time housewives and mothers because they enjoy it and find it fulfilling and rewarding, and they are not forced to do this. Many choose to take paid employment, even though they still have to combine this with the major responsibilities for housework and childcare (see later in this chapter).
- More women are working and have independent incomes, and this means they may have more power in the family than some feminist writers imply.
- That around two-thirds of divorces are initiated by women shows that women can, and do, escape from relationships which are unsatisfactory or oppressive.
- Day-to-day relationships in the family are less likely today to create an unquestioning and obedient workforce. Children have much more status and power in the family than they used to, with families becoming more child-centred (see pages 336–8, and children are empowered by knowledge and experience gained through exposure to a much wider range of socializing experiences outside the family, such as education and the media, including the internet. Women too are much more likely to assert themselves in family life.

Table 5.3 summarizes functionalist, Marxist feminist and radical feminist perspectives on the family.

#### POSTMODERNISM AND THE FAMILY

Postmodernists such as Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (2001) believe that contemporary society is rapidly changing and full of uncertainties, with people questioning a whole range of traditionally accepted values, morals and norms. No longer are individuals constrained by social structures, like the family, social class or religion, and they are rejecting ideas about the traditional family as a mainstay of social order. Society has become fragmented into a mass of individuals who are making their own choices about what they choose to believe in, and how they live their daily lives.

Diversity and consumer choice are two key features of postmodern society, and this consumer choice is reflected, postmodernists argue, in the disintegration of the traditional family. Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Stacey (1996) argue this is being replaced by a wide diversity of relationships in which people are choosing to live. They no longer feel bound by traditional ideas and expectations about marriage, lifelong monogamy, parenthood and family life, or traditional sexual identities. Rising divorce rates, cohabitation, multiple partners, serial monogamy and births outside marriage all reflect the way people are adopting new lifestyles and ways of relating to one another suited to their needs, rather than being constrained by traditional norms.

Many of the changes in family life discussed in this chapter – such as the decline in family size and marriage rates, the rising divorce rate, growing lone parenthood and individuals living alone, more shared households and 'families of choice', and changing roles in the family – are widely regarded



Table 5.3 Sociological perspectives on the family

Functionalism	Marxist feminism	Radical feminism
The family meets the needs of society by socializing children into shared norms and values, leading to social harmony and stability	The family meets the needs of capitalism by socializing children into ruling class norms and values (the ruling class ideology), leading to a submissive and obedient workforce, with false consciousness, and stability for capitalism	The family meets the needs of patriarchy by socializing children into traditional gender roles, with men as 'breadwinners' and women having responsibility for housework and childcare
The family is a social institution providing security for the conception, birth and nurture of new members of society	The family is a social institution responsible for the reproduction of labour power for capitalism	The family is a social institution responsible for the reproduction of unequal roles for women and men
The sexual division of labour in the family, with men performing instrumental roles and women performing expressive roles, stabilizes adult personalities and thereby helps to maintain a stable society	The male's instrumental role as wage earner maintains the family, pays for the reproduction of labour power and acts as a strong control on workers' behaviour in the workplace thereby helping to maintain the stability of an unequal, exploitative capitalist society	The sexual division of labour in the family exploits women, since their responsibilities for domestic labour and childcare are unpaid, undermine their position in paid employment and increase dependency on men. It thereby maintains an unequal patriarchal society
The family is a supportive and generally harmonious and happy social institution	The family is an oppressive institution that stunts the development of human personalities and individuality. There is a 'dark side' to family life that functionalist accounts play down	The family is an oppressive institution that benefits men and oppresses and exploits women. There is a 'dark side' to family life that includes violence and abuse against women and children

by politicians and social policymakers as a threat to the family and something to worry about, as support networks are weakened, and individuals face growing insecurity, uncertainty and anxiety in their lives.

Postmodernists see these changes as simply reflecting individuals making their consumer choices. Individuals pick and choose and 'mix and match' relationships as it suits them, and change these over a period of time – just like buying goods in a supermarket and going to another one if the quality and price aren't right. The rise of alternative family units, cohabitation, multiple partners and more diversity in sexual relationships, with greater tolerance of homosexuality, make the notion of the traditional family as a social institution redundant, as it has been replaced by a huge range of ever-changing personal relationships and household arrangements in which people are choosing to live.

### Politics, social policy and the family

Debates over family life have become a major feature of politics in Britain. Politicians of all the major parties have expressed similar views on the importance of the family, seeing it as one of society's central and most important institutions, as the bedrock of a strong society, social stability and security for children, and encouraging support for and strengthening of family units. The political parties often blame family breakdown for wider social problems, such as teenage pregnancies, sexual promiscuity, educational failure, welfare dependency, poverty, drug abuse, and crime and delinquency. Despite a changing world where a majority of the population no longer lives in families, or families with dependent children, family life still seems to be central to the thinking of the major political parties.

#### Activity

Refer to pages 270–82 and table 5.3 and to the following statements, and classify

each one as nearly as possible as functionalist, New Right, traditional Marxist, Marxist feminist, liberal feminist or radical feminist. Give a brief justification of your reasons in each case.

- 1 The family is a socially useful and happy institution providing the best context for bringing up children.
- 2 The family is an important institution because of its contribution to maintaining social stability.
- 3 The family is a patriarchal and unequal institution controlled by and for men.
- 4 Children are socialized by the family and other institutions to conform to the dominant ideology.
- 5 Only the family provides the warmth, security and emotional support necessary to keep society stable.
- 6 Patterns of obedience laid down in the family form the basis for acceptance of the hierarchy of power and control in capitalist society.
- 7 Women's role in the family is to do housework, to care for children, the sick and the elderly, and to flatter, excuse, sympathize with and pay attention to men. This often disadvantages women in many aspects of their lives.
- 8 The family always benefits either men or capitalism.
- 9 It is important to make further progress in the sharing of housework and childcare by men and women to remove the disadvantages that many women face in the home and paid employment.
- 10 The image of the caring and loving family ignores the violence against women and the sexual crimes, like rape within marriage, which go on there.
- 11 The family exists primarily to pass on private property from one generation to the next, and to prepare a submissive and obedient workforce.
- 12 The family is an important institution in maintaining male power.
- 13 Marriage is perhaps the best antidote to the celebrity, self-obsessed culture we live in, for it is about understanding that our true value is lastingly expressed through the lives of others we commit to.
- 14 When wives play their traditional role as 'takers of shit', they often absorb their husbands' anger and frustration at their own powerlessness and oppression in the world of work, and stop rebellion in the workplace.
- 15 Families are factories producing stable human personalities.
- 16 It is highly unlikely that any society will find an adequate substitute to take over the functions of the nuclear family.
- 17 Policies like equal pay and anti-discrimination laws, improved educational opportunities and paid maternity leave have improved women's prospects in paid employment, giving them the confidence and encouraging them to assert their demands for equal treatment with men in all their personal, family and workplace relationships. This has led to much improved and more equal relationships between men and women in all spheres of life.
- 18 Women's unpaid domestic labour reproduces the workforce at no cost to the capitalist.
- 19 Family breakdown is not only damaging for individuals, it also imposes incredibly high financial and social costs on society as a whole. The government should encourage couples to make a commitment through marriage by offering financial support to those who choose to do so.
- 20 Social policy should aim to remove laws and traditions that discriminate against women who take time out of paid employment to raise children; women should be placed on an equal footing with men, through measures such as cheaper and greater availability of childcare.

