

What do children really need?

The future of European families in vulnerable situations

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The main objective of the work summarized here was to inform policy-makers about possible developments and their potential impact on family needs and well-being in the long run.

Background and description of work

The work started by identifying the most important challenges for families and policy-makers in the future. It turned out that the key aspect is vulnerability as it shapes the future well-being of families and particularly the children raised within those families. Vulnerability is multidimensional comprising at least four different dimensions: economic, psychological, physical, and social.

Qualitative research exploited the knowledge of experts and comprised discussions in a stakeholder workshop, as well as focus groups conducted in several European cities:

- In the workshop conducted in Tallinn, Estonia, in January 2014, 25 stakeholders and 12 project participants from different European governmental and non-governmental institutions discussed four pre-selected topics: gender relationships, child-care arrangements, economic (in)security and intergenerational linkages in the family.

This paper summarizes a report* based on the findings of the European Union 7th Framework project 'FamiliesAndSocieties'. IFFD has been part of this project's consortium.

The goals of the project included the investigation of the diversity of family situations, relationships, and life courses in Europe and contributions to evidence-based future policy-making.

One of the twelve work packages addressed possible futures of the families in Europe and its main objective was to inform policy-makers about possible developments and their potential impact on family needs and family well-being in the long run.

* 'Vulnerability and the future of families with children in Europe', prepared by Bernhard Riederer, Wittgenstein Centre (IIASA, VID/OEAW, WU) Vienna Institute of Demography / Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2017).

- Six focus group discussions with policy-makers and civil society actors engaged in family-related issues were conducted in Vienna, Warsaw, Madrid, Stockholm and Bern, plus Brussels as the EU capital, between November 2014 and June 2015.

Quantitative research activities included two online questionnaire studies and two simulation studies:

- One online survey was addressing family experts (scientists and practitioners) while the other one was directed at parents in general. Both online questionnaire studies were drawing upon the outcomes of the prior focus group discussions.

The *expert survey* focused on future societal developments and their impact on vulnerability of families with children. Between December 2015 and March 2016, 176 opinions and views of experts from 29 countries were collected: 61 % came from an academic background, 20 % worked for NGO, 6 % saw themselves as policy-makers and 13 % did not assign themselves to one of these three sectors. These experts worked for administrative authorities, regional or (inter) national organisations, in the health sector, in the educational sector or in the private sector (business, industry or banking). Some of them did research or were involved in policy areas, but they were mainly practitioners.

The *family questionnaire* additionally included assessments of the present situation of parents, policy measures that could improve their lives and worries about their children's future. Data collection started in late March 2016 and ended in early June 2016. In total, 1,370 people submitted answers.

- *Microsimulations focused on consequences* of changing family structures through separation and re-partnering.
- *Simulations using an agent-based model* were aimed at explaining transitions from a traditional regime, characterised by a dominance of the male-breadwinner model (stage 1), to an intermediate regime showing a conflict between individual desires on the one hand and societal expectations and general conditions on the other hand (stage 2), to a regime of advanced gender equity at the household level and at the institutional level (stage 3).

Families at risk

It was concluded that, though there are no family types inevitably vulnerable, some specific family types are more at risk of being in vulnerable situations than others.

In the first place, experts named single-parent families. Across Europe, single-parent households are more at risk of poverty and social exclusion than the average population. It is extremely difficult for them to combine family life with paid employment.

The second family type being at risk are large families with a high number of children. Costs, time requirements, and consequences of many problems are increasing with the number of children. Work-family reconciliation becomes more difficult. Parents with many children sometimes also suffer prejudice (e.g., that they are welfare scroungers not wanting to work who profit from benefits for children).

Other vulnerable situations include families with dependent family members, or families belonging to immigrant groups or other minorities. Most of them suffer from rather specific problems, though one type of vulnerability can lead to others.

Finally, children without families (orphans) also have to be mentioned.

The effects of separation

If the share of mothers having a union disruption is expected to further increase across cohorts, vulnerability of families with children might also increase because single parenthood often entails vulnerability.

Findings demonstrated that less educated women experience a stronger increase in union instability, more spells of lone parenthood, and thus a longer overall time spent as lone mothers than more highly educated women.

Summarising experts' assessments of effects of current and future flows of refugees on future shares of vulnerable families with children in Europe, there are at least three messages:

- It seems that experts expected more negative consequences in the short run (until 2020) than in the long run (until 2050). A share of experts explicitly believes that in particular economic vulnerability of refugees will not have longstanding consequences.
- There were regional differences in the expected effects of refugee flows. These differences are largely in line with the existing variety of prior migration histories of European countries and the affectedness by the arrival of displaced persons in 2015. Partly, these differences were also reflected in focus group discussions. Short-term consequences were expected to be larger in German speaking and northern European countries. But many of them were also among

the main target countries of hundreds or tens of thousands of people seeking for protection in 2015. Nevertheless, they are characterised by different migration regimes. Critical views on immigrant parallel societies and worries about the future were primarily discussed in focus groups in Vienna and Bern while experts in Stockholm were more optimistic about integration processes.

- The effects of refugee flows on the social vulnerability of families with children was perceived as more negative than the future prospects for economic or psychological vulnerability. Social vulnerability refers to stigmatisation, discrimination and a lack of social support. This result can be interpreted as a warning that social cohesion in European societies may be at risk—a thought that should probably stimulate thinking about policies to avoid such a future development. Long-term integration policies are necessary as a large part of asylum seekers might want to stay in Europe. Policies need to strengthen the public confidence and societal trust in migrants to improve the societal climate.

Main findings and policy recommendations

The following lines extract the essence of the research findings and are organised in terms of main messages and corresponding policy implications.

Vulnerability is multidimensional

'Being vulnerable' refers to a situation with an increased risk of becoming disadvantaged. It implies some sort of weakness or inability to deal with challenges or, put in other words, a lack of resources to address upcoming problems. It is crucial to note that vulnerability is not restricted to poverty. Although the economic situation is of central importance, other aspects of vulnerability should not be overlooked.

Reducing vulnerability through policies

Families 'per se' are not inevitably vulnerable. There are only families in disadvantaged positions and bad situations—situations that make them vulnerable. Policies supporting families to avoid such situations or helping them leave such situations behind them are thus capable of reducing vulnerability.

Hindering the reproduction of vulnerability

One of the main challenges for modern welfare states is the ongoing reproduction of inequality—and vulnerability—from one generation to the next. Experts participating in focus groups saw education, employment, and the creation

of a more family-friendly society as indispensable in supporting vulnerable families and protecting the children living within them. While financial transfers are required to address the most urgent needs of vulnerable families, they alone do not solve the problem of reproduction of vulnerability. On the contrary, they might even lead to the socialisation of state dependency. Instead, it is crucial to facilitate families to sustain themselves.

A good gender regime policy fit is a necessity

Higher engagement of women in paid work has a positive impact on family incomes and improves women's situation in terms of financial independence, also with regard to their future pensions. But, on the other hand, pressures it imposed on women should not be overlooked. Without family-friendly workplaces and sufficient childcare, and without changes in men's role perception women may run the risk of being overburdened, given increased pressure to do their best both in the role of a mother and of an employee.

Higher female labour force participation would bring about economic advantages for women themselves, the family, and the society at large (GDP growth). More gender equity would allow for more involvement of men in raising children as well as more economic security and financial independency for (single) mothers at all ages.

The simulation results of the agent-based model showed that increasing gender equity can also improve the well-being of agents: utility derived by individuals from consumption increases as egalitarian attitudes spread through the society. Men's involvement in childcare was perceived to be beneficial for children and fathers. A final point highlighting the benefit of more gender-egalitarian arrangements can be seen in the fact that at present, children stay usually with their mothers after parental separation.

However, a traditional division of tasks that was freely chosen and agreed upon by equal partners is not necessarily opposing gender equity. Also, although families with children share a lot of needs and concerns, different families will always have specific needs that may differ from those of the majority of families. These needs should not be ignored.

Improving work–family balance

Experts emphasised the relevance of work–family reconciliation to avoid vulnerable states. In this respect, they went far beyond childcare and other 'classical' policy measures but rather discussed the necessity for parents of finding time for children and their needs. A better future for children requires both secure financial means and

time for parents to be there for their children. Unsuccessful work–family reconciliation means that either or both are missing.

Mainstreaming family

An adequate income, the provision of adequate childcare, sufficient information for parents, and support in reconciling care responsibilities with employment are desperately needed measures. In addition, it was emphasised that family policies often lack a coherent and integrated policy framework.

Informing families about policies

If policy measures should be effective, their acceptance by parents is crucial. Acceptance includes that policy measures need to be evaluated from the perspective of families, considering their well-being and vulnerability. Furthermore, newly introduced policies should be explained to the public and promoted as it might be that not all parents are aware of their benefits—in particular, if a specific measure is part of a mainstreaming strategy. But also policy measures that were discussed and are not implemented have to be explained. Differences in preferences for specific policy measures between experts and parents suggest that both groups may sometimes have different weightings with regard to short- and long-term benefits for families—and/or different components of family well-being.

Strengthening communication and social cohesion

Findings of focus groups and the questionnaire both showed that experts expected a weakening of personal relationships to increase future vulnerability. Worries concerned intimate relationships as well as more general ones between strangers. Trust in and support by others is essential in vulnerable situations. This is true for all family situations and single-parent families in particular. Social vulnerability can only be minimised by improving communication and maximising solidarity among people. This also holds with regard to immigrant families and asylum seekers.

Children and families who have fled from their home countries due to discrimination, violence and/or persecution, and those who encountered numerous challenges and hard times also during their flight, they are all in vulnerable situations.

Enhancing our knowledge about family issues

Many issues call for additional research including, for instance, the long-term implications of new gender roles for European societies, mechanisms of vulnerability reproduction within the family, interactions of family-related life-course transitions with educational as well as professional choices and constraints, or the development of measures capturing the diverse aspects of (psychological and social) vulnerability.

To give concrete examples, first, an operative policy monitoring would be helpful to identify policy measures that complement or counteract each other in fighting family vulnerability. Therefore, a certain number of policy aspects has to be selected and linked to indices related to family vulnerability. After the development of appropriate indices, monitoring could be implemented. At present, indices constructed and followed by Eurostat can be used for monitoring risks of poverty (and social exclusion)—and thus primarily economic vulnerability. Regarding psychological and social vulnerability, further research would have to identify and combine the components of an appropriate index before efficient monitoring could be implemented.

With regard to the accumulation of wealth and the intergenerational reproduction of vulnerability, research should, second, observe and analyse for which sectors of the societies 'gains' or 'losses' might arise. This is important for several reasons: culminations of disadvantages might be particularly problematic (and unfair) if existing differences manifest themselves over generations—with consequences for society as a whole. For instance, rising inequality resulting from increasing disadvantages to the lower classes might be detrimental to economic growth. Families belonging to lower strata often react to a worsening of their situation by restricting their children's education. In consequence, the potential of future generations will not be fully exploited.

The better the data we have, the more we can profit. Recent scientific surveys, new databases, latest ad-hoc modules and modifications of existing Eurostat surveys all point to the right direction. In many ways, research conducted in the FamiliesAndSocieties project has improved existing knowledge. Nevertheless, longitudinal studies allowing international comparisons are ultimately needed to answer all remaining questions.