FAMILYPLATFORM

A Research Agenda on the Family for the European Union

The consortium consists of the following 12 organisations:

- Technical University Dortmund (Co-ordinators)
- State Institute for Family Research, University of Bamberg
- Family Research Centre, University of Jyväskylä
- Austrian Institute for Family Studies, University of Vienna
- Demographic Research Institute, Budapest
- Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon
- Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milan-Bicocca

- Institute of International and Social Studies, Tallinn University
- Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics
- Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (COFACE), Brussels
- Forum Delle Associazioni Familiari (FDAF), Italy
- MMMEurope (Mouvement Mondial des Mères-Europe), Brussels

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Four Steps to the Research Agenda

FAMILYPLATFORM is a project involving twelve organisations from leading research institutes and family associations working together to elaborate a European research agenda on the family.

- **First step**
  Charting, assessing and reviewing contemporary knowledge of families and family research in the EU.

- **Second step**
  Critically reviewing existing research, developing questions for future research and identifying key policy questions.

- **Third step**
  Elaborating future scenarios of family life in Europe and identifying challenges facing families and family policy in the future.

- **Fourth step**
  Bringing the main results together and drawing conclusions from this work, ultimately proposing a European research agenda on families.

Representatives from scientific, policy and civil society organisations have been consulted at every step of the way. Their input has been central to the overall character and content of the research agenda.

Background

Several interlinked societal trends form a background to – and impact upon – family life in the EU.

1. One powerful trend is **globalisation**, which includes more demands on flexibility and mobility, increased migration such as long-distance commuting and 'living apart together', and increasingly precarious employment.
2. This is strongly linked to **individualisation** and **pluralisation** of life-styles and living arrangements, and to changes in gender roles that include moves towards equality between men and women. Together, these processes have led to growing uncertainty over the entire life-course and especially in transitional situations.
3. All of these societal trends are brought together with **demographic change**, which can be summarised as comprising decreased fertility rates, delayed family formation and an ageing of the population.

As regards family life, longer periods of education, and longer periods of retirement are having knock-on effects to social security systems. In addition, the development and spread of new information communication technologies are further important factors to take into consideration when researching families in Europe

All in all, these developments often manifest themselves as stress, uncertainty, **difficulties in managing** everyday family life, and more sophisticated care arrangements. This is especially so in relation to the so-called 'rush-hours of life', when many potential transitions come together – such as when people decide on family formation, or when parents become grandparents. These conditions have made it harder to establish sustainable family solidarity and cohesion, and European families experience higher levels of separation and divorce as a result. They raise questions of how European policies can increase family wellbeing and thereby encourage family cohesion.

Challenges for Policy and Research

A series of challenges for families and family-related policy and research have been identified through the work of FAMILYPLATFORM.

Care

Resources such as time and social services are running short, and it is a growing challenge to provide for the care needs of people of all age groups. There is general agreement that the best arrangements guarantee freedom of choice and match care demands. But in order to achieve this, more research is needed about how flexible and attractive leave schemes, flexible working time arrangements, quality external care, and financial support for family care work might best be designed and implemented.

Everyday family management

Despite moves towards gender equality in employment and education, this has not been accompanied by significant changes of gender roles in the home. The dominant model of 'doing family' still relies disproportionately on the mother and other female members of the family, putting them under increased pressure. More research is needed into how policies can support the management of everyday family life, for example by encouraging men to participate more actively in family life.

Spatial mobility

European citizens have the right to move freely, be employed, and to settle down. Migration within and into the European Union is enriching the plurality of family arrangements in all Member States. In addition, work-related demands on mobility are challenging family life, leading to the emergence of new forms of living arrangements. More research is needed on migrant families, the effects of work-related mobility on families, and how schooling, housing, employment and the local living environment can take these developments into account.

Life-course transitions

Policies should facilitate life-course transitions - such as the transition to parenthood - but this is not always the case. More research is needed on how policies can help ease them, for example by assessing the merits of higher and longer parental benefits and provision of high-quality care for children and the elderly.

Inequality

In the face of growing inequality and persistent poverty, the EU recently made combating poverty and inequality one of its key objectives. Poverty is often inherited and children are at particular risk. It is multi-dimensional, and factors affecting it include gender, ethnicity, migratory status and social class; these factors can sometimes combine to create forms of double or even triple discrimination. Although policies supporting every generation and measures to empower people and reduce social exclusion can help, more research is needed to help support coherent policies that can turn the tide.

Empowering families

Families face a lot of uncertainty because of individualisation, changes of gender roles, and difficulties reconciling work and life. Research is needed on how parents can best be supported and empowered to successfully cope with the everyday tasks of family life, and provide their children with a good education and secure living environment.

Family mainstreaming

Because families are a cross-cutting policy issue and because they are affected by many different policy areas, family mainstreaming - consideration of the effects of all policies on families - is essential if the wellbeing of families is to be increased.

Selection of Research Areas

At least 14 thematic areas were discussed within FAMILYPLATFORM, but through discussion these were incorporated and narrowed down to Care, Life-Course and Transitions, 'Doing Family', Migration and Mobility, and Family Polices. These five areas are described in further detail in this booklet.

Other thematic areas included:

- Violence
- Media and the Family
- Insecurity and Poverty
- Family Relationships
- Family Education
- Housing and Living Environment
- Minorities

Adequate space cannot be given to the additional topics here. Interested readers should refer to the full research agenda for more information.

Area 1: **Care**

Care work involves carers within families as well as external service providers, and it is influenced and regulated by different policies. Recipients of care have a wide range of individual needs and abilities. A growing proportion of care workers are immigrants to the European Union.

Research on the following issues would enable more informed policy making:

- **Current situation.** Compare the current care provision situation in each Member State. Distinguish between different types of care recipients such as children, the elderly, people with temporary care needs, and persons with disabilities.
- **Needs and wishes**. Examine the needs and wishes of care recipients and care providers. Ascertain the expectations of both parties and develop future care schemes in accordance with the wishes of family members.
- **Care decisions.** Understand decision-making processes within families in order to assist them to provide care.
- **Children.** Establish how satisfied children are with their current care arrangements, and the impact that these arrangements have on child wellbeing.

- **Migrants.** Assess and consider challenges relating to the legal status of migrant carers (and the fight against illegal employment), guaranteed minimum income schemes and minimum wages, the affordability of care services in general, and the quality of the care provided.

It is especially important that longitudinal methods are used to research care. This is because care relations have an impact on life-courses and future life opportunities of carers. Innovations in care might provide valuable information on how to improve care relations within families, and how to co-ordinate family care work better with external care providers. Further research is needed on how information technologies can assist care-givers and encourage the independence of care-receivers.

👪 Area 2: **Life-Course and Transitions**

Family life changes over the life-course of family members, and needs and interests are dynamic and shifting. While transitions such as family formation and transition to parenthood have become more difficult, others have become more frequent such as family break-up. Despite growing awareness of the utility of the life-course approach, there is a lack of research making use of it.

Research on the following issues would enable more informed policy making:

- **Family formation.** Little is known about the effects of policy decisions on patterns of family formation. A scientific investigation of the decisions involved in family formation is necessary to understand the impact of social policies, and to compare the welfare systems and social policies in place in the EU. In order to achieve this, data needs to be collected and surveyed from all Member States.

- **Different family forms.** Most people in Europe have an increased tolerance of non-traditional family forms, but more information is needed about specific challenges facing married, unmarried, single-parent, same-sex, teen-mother, patchwork, as well as migrant or ethnic minority families.

- **Dissolution and separation**. With a focus on child wellbeing, there is a need for research on projects and interventions that aim to stabilise relationships. Care and custody arrangements need to be researched, as do questions about how family relationships are hindered or sustained after separation, and how and when children should be involved in making decisions.

Area 3: **'Doing Family'**

It has become increasingly difficult to manage daily family life. Satisfying arrangements are important for the stability of partnerships, and therefore for the growth and development of children too. 'Doing family' relates to gender equality and the increasing participation of women in the labour force. It involves matching demands from different parts of society - the economy, education, and the family - all of which have their own systems and act according to their own set of priorities.

Research on the following issues would enable more informed policy making:

- **EU level data.** There is a need for comparable information from all Member States. It needs to be based on reliable approaches to measuring unpaid work such as household tasks and childcare. Because they are often carried out at the same time, overloading factors and gender-related differences are just as important as subjective experiences of overload and stress.

- **Gender roles.** Women's views and perspectives on changes to gender roles are needed. But the question of how men's lives have changed is also important. In addition to Europe-wide collection of data on attitudes to gender roles and daily practices within families, innovative models of work-life balance need to be examined and researched.

- **Children's perspectives.** Both the contribution of children to the daily life of the family and views and opinions of children of existing arrangements are important. This should be studied Europe-wide to enable differentiation of ethnic, regional and socio-economic factors.

Area 4: **Migration and Mobility**

The European Union experiences increasing flows of people, both internally and from outside its borders. These migratory flows are not only of general political relevance, but also relevant to families.

Research on the following issues would enable more informed policy making:

- **Mobility.** Work related mobility can impact greatly on family life, but there is very little research on it from a cross-European comparative perspective. This is especially true as regards family formation, the careers of spouses, the quality of partnerships, and the stability of relationships.

- **Immigration.** The assimilation of migrants and development of cultural diversity is very high on the policy agenda. To support this agenda with relevant knowledge and data, research needs to:

  - distinguish between the origin and education of migrants,

  - explore whether family structures of migrants resemble those of 'source countries' or those of the host country,

  - examine the impact of family resources on processes of integration,

  - focus on various factors that play a part in the perceived success or failure of integration.

Financial, emotional and moral support might turn out to be essential factors for integration, and research needs to address the family as a whole rather than just as individuals. This requires the use of qualitative and quantitative methods that can identify family resources, paying particular attention to factors that promote or hinder integration.

Area 5: **Family Policies**

While the European Union is committed to free migration, gender equality, and female employment, national policies can sometimes work to undermine these. There is a real need for more knowledge about family policies across the European Union, their underlying motivations, and their intended and unintended impacts.

Research on the following issues would enable more informed policy making:

- **Monitoring.** The first step towards understanding is monitoring of EU and Member State family and family-related policies. Developmental processes and cultural factors need to be taken into account. Existing welfare state typologies have to be reconsidered in order to allow for a more precise comparison of data between Member States and different types of political interventions.

- **Definition.** What constitutes family policy? How might we standardise a definition? Against a background of demands for family mainstreaming and evaluation of policies, these questions become extremely important. Greater insight is also needed about how the experience and knowledge of different stakeholders finds its way into the decision-making process, and if and why any stakeholders are excluded from the debate.

- **Impact.** The intended impacts of different family policies need to be understood, as do the unintended impacts of other policy areas on families. Areas of particular interest include the outcomes of different policies on child development and on demography.

- **Evaluation.** What kinds of evaluations are most effective, and in which situations? At the moment there are few evaluations of family policies *per se*, and little agreement about what kinds of evaluations should be employed.

A Note on Research Methods

Any discussion of a research agenda on the family would be incomplete without referring to the research methods that need to be employed.

- There is a need for more basic data that is comparable across Europe. It is necessary to discuss existing indicators and find new ones that describe the situations of families and countries more precisely.

- More information is needed on national and cultural differences between different parts of the EU, particularly regarding rare family forms. This means going beyond the household unit, and collecting data at the individual, family and community level in order to understand the importance of relationships and support networks.

- Research is inherently static yet seeks to describe dynamic aspects of family life. This can only be achieved through use of multiple research methods and through longitudinal studies. Explorative studies would sharpen our views on the living conditions of different family forms and children's perspectives.

- Indicators of wellbeing need to be developed, to help describe the lived reality of families in the EU.