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Sweeping epochal change

BY PIERRE-ANDRÉ TSCHANZ

Switzerland has undergone a fundamental transformation and continues to change, as the recently published "Social Report 2000" proves.

THE REPORT, commissioned as part of a programme promoted by the Swiss National Science Foundation, supplements the statistics compiled on Switzerland, and belies the image of immobility which Swiss themselves believe characterises their country's reputation: "The impression of an immobile society may be attributable to the fact that many major changes do not suddenly happen, and that existing conditions and familiar attitudes – the structures of society – are not transformed overnight," writes Christian Suter, publisher of the Social Report and Assistant Professor at the Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich.

Non-statutory higher education has improved for men and women alike. Between 1980 and 1988 the number of 20-year-olds without qualification other than a school-leaving certificate more than halved. This trend is particularly marked among women: the proportion of 20-year-old females with higher educational qualifications has far outstripped the proportion of males, growing from 13 percent in 1980 to 23 percent in 1997 (as opposed to 18 percent of males).

The breakdown of education by age group shows that in 1998 women caught up at the lower (statutory schooling period, elementary education) and moderate (vocational training, immatriculation) levels, while men still predominate at university level. The educational level of non-Swiss

residing in Switzerland is generally much lower than that of the Swiss population, though this varies greatly according to country of origin.

The breakdown of professions by age confirms the classical concept of gender-specific careers: men enter the working life between the ages of 15 and 30. Their profession takes up a great deal of their time for many years, until age 60 when their working hours gradually begin to decrease.

By contrast, many women over the age of 25 give up working (mainly for family reasons). Some manage to re-enter the job market around 20 years later. Since 1980 the number of working Swiss women has

sumption and job flexibility. While the Swiss political system continues to be noted for its great stability, surveys bear witness to a more critical attitude towards politics and public authorities. For instance, the number of popular initiatives more than doubled in the space of a single decade between 1970 and 1980.

The differences between Switzerland's linguistic regions have become more acute due to lines of conflict drawn up in the 1980s and 1990s. The main bones of contention are issues relating to the environment, technology and transport, while the EU question and economic stagnation take second place.

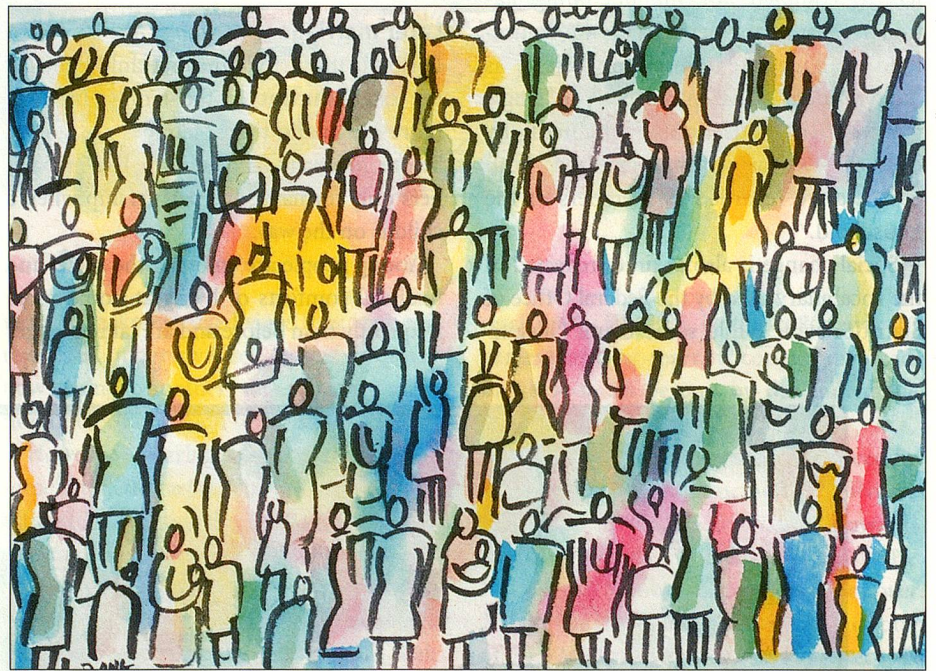


Illustration: Incolor

First impressions are deceptive: Individualisation and pluralisation have impacted social development over the past 30 years.

increased; now almost one out of every two Swiss women work, and the statistics confirm that their pay is roughly a quarter below men's.

New sources of inequality

The "Social Report 2000" points to the growing individualisation and pluralisation of Swiss society. This trend is discernible in the new forms of family and partnership, living and life styles, leisure activities, con-

Social and economic change have created new sources of inequality dictated by gender, age, origin, language and nationality. For example, the inequalities between Swiss and foreigners have not diminished: "The fact that inequality of opportunities between Swiss and foreigners is even more readily accepted than a few years ago is particularly worrying," concludes Christian Suter.



Social Report 2000, Seismo Verlag, PO Box 313, CH-8028 Zurich, CHF 45.