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Between wishful thinking and reality – the battleground of family policy

Family policy issues have rarely been as intensely debated as they are today in Switzerland.

Social and economic developments have radically altered our home life, but notions of the ideal family continue to cloud the view of reality.

By Jürg Müller

Far from everyone will adopt the same approach to achieve the same goal. Paradoxically, not everyone even wants to attain the same objective. Swiss family policy clearly illustrates this point at the moment. All the political parties want to strengthen “the family”. However, exactly what they understand by the concept, which family models and objectives their demands are based upon, remains vague and varies dramatically. Some conjure up the spectre of the “nationalisation of children” when calls are made for more child day-care facilities, while others evoke the image of the “little housewife” when women dedicate themselves full-time to their children and home. There are arguments over tax breaks and family allowances, external childcare and day schools, paternity leave and uncaring mothers, and after-work fathers and child minders – or, generally, about the right and wrong kind of lifestyle model.

These issues are often heatedly debated as two family policy referenda last year illustrated. It was evident that it goes far beyond the family. It is a question of ideology and societal blueprints, of role models and equality issues. Several policy areas are usually affected at the same time, namely education, social affairs, the labour market, taxation, finance, housing policy and urban development. And, of course, as all parties without exception claim, it is first and foremost about the child’s welfare.

Family policy is a perennial issue in Swiss politics. Remarkably however, it has never been and still is not an independent policy area in Switzerland. Transport, education, youth, old-age, regional, business and economic policy – all these areas and more have constitutional status and possess their own article in the federal constitution. The same is not true of family policy despite all parties programmatically proclaiming the family as the “fundamental unit of society”.

“A developing country in terms of family policy”

This certainly does not mean that nothing is being done. Most parents receive child allowances at a level governed by federal law. Various forms of relief for families exist under tax law. Deductions from taxable income are granted for every minor and all young people in initial training and further education. Tax deductions have also applied to some external childcare costs for some time as well as to child health insurance premiums. Federal government provides start-up funding to support the creation of new day nursery places, an initiative that has been extended twice and will expire in 2015. There is also maternity insurance for women in employment. Further state aid is also provided for families in need, such as reduced health insurance premiums as well as additional benefits in some cantons. Many communes and cities offer a number of subsidised day nursery places.

However, provision is far from lavish. Social spending on families and maternity is significantly below the European average. The risk of poverty is disproportionately high in Switzerland for large families and single parents. Remo Largo, an emeritus professor in paediatrics at the University of Zurich and a best-selling author, painted a dramatic picture in a recent interview: “Switzerland is a developing country in terms of family policy. In comparison with the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland spends a third less of gross national product on children and families. Despite all the private and public protestations, money is more important to us than children.” A study conducted by the Social Work Division at the Berne University of Applied Sciences on behalf of the trade union umbrella organisation Travail.Suisse reveals that Switzerland’s expenditure on families is low in comparison with the other OECD countries. Standing

at 1.3 percent of gross national product (GNP), it lies below the OECD average of 2.23 percent. Germany spends 2.8 percent of GNP on families, Austria 3 percent and France 3.7 percent.

Of course, it would be desirable if “every family were able to take care of its own future, development and material needs independently. However, the basic requirements for meeting this objective do not yet exist in Switzerland”, explains Thérèse Meyer-Kaelin, President of the Federal Co-ordinating Committee for Family Affairs, an advisory body of the Federal Department of Home Affairs. A “sufficiently effective family policy” does not exist in Switzerland, she says, and goes further: “The typical excuse of the supposed protectors of the family to ensure nothing is ultimately done” is to declare the family a private matter. Achieving a balance between family and working life “is often like an obstacle course”. Yet the family is “the most important unit for enabling the harmonious development of society and allowing each person to flourish individually”.

80 percent of women are in employment

Little progress has been made in balancing the social reality with family policy measures. The traditional family model with the strict division of roles – the father as the provider and the mother looking after the home and children – is still looked to by some but no longer usually reflects reality. This form of family life certainly still exists but has not been the predominant way of life for some time.

A look at the facts, figures and structures underlines this finding. Over 80 percent of women are in employment of one form or another. There have never been so many single-person households. Between 1970 and 2008 the number of family households fell from 75 percent to just over 60 percent. Households consisting of married couples

Largely a myth: the typical 1950s family – the stay-at-home mother responsible for bringing up the children and the working father as bread-winner



and partners without children increased significantly over the same period. A key indicator for the family situation are the employment models in these couples. The following details are provided by the Federal Statistical Office – the proportion of couples with a male partner in full-time employment and a female partner not in employment fell significantly between 1992 and 2012. In households of couples where the youngest child is under seven years of age the proportion has declined from around 62 to 29 percent. The model with a male partner in full-time employment and a female partner in part-time employment is the most common today.

Couples with children where both partners are in part-time employment are still a minority today although their proportion has doubled.

The middle class under pressure

It is therefore still women who ease up in their careers when children arrive. It is predominantly women who face a dilemma and who have to ask themselves the question of career or children. This predicament is leading to a declining birth rate and to undesirable effects on the economy and society. Many well-educated women are withdrawing from working life completely or at least partially, causing a shortage of urgently re-

quired specialists who then have to be recruited abroad. A greater provision of external childcare places might help here. Around 40 percent of couple households and 54 percent of single parents are already using these today; where the youngest child is under seven years of age the figures are as much as 52 and 70 percent, respectively.

However, childcare costs in Switzerland are record-breaking. According to an OECD report, families spend around half their income on childcare, which is more than in any other country. High day nursery costs of up to 2,500 Swiss francs a month for full-time places also often use up a considerable chunk of the second income.

Many middle-class families who are dependent upon a second income can testify to that. As day nursery rates are income-dependent in Switzerland, low earners are paradoxically slightly better off because they receive allowances. However, this results in disincentives for the middle class that could prove disastrous, especially in times when there is a shortage of specialists in the workforce. Some companies have recognised the problem and now provide internal childcare places and also bear a large share of the costs. It is nonetheless usually only very large companies that can afford to do this as it is too expensive for many small firms. This is where the state has to step in.

Family policy voting marathon

The opportunity to move closer to a solution in the foreseeable future was passed up last year. A constitutional article on family policy was defeated by a cantonal majority in March 2013 despite the majority of the Swiss people voting in favour of it. The project was initiated in Parliament by the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP). The new article would have obliged federal government and the cantons to promote the reconciliation of family life, employment and education. The expansion of childcare outside of families and schools would primarily have strengthened the position of working mothers.

The second family policy proposal in the same year was defeated in November 2013. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) wanted to provide tax relief for families who look after their children themselves. They argued that this was only fair as parents who send their children to day nurseries can claim tax allowances. Wrong, said opponents of the SVP's popular initiative – the bill would fiscally favour the "traditional" family with the woman at home looking after the children.

But the parties have not given up – the CVP is now exerting pressure with two initiatives which will spark debate this year. One of its popular initiatives seeks to make child and educational allowances exempt from tax, while the other aims to abolish the so-called marriage penalty whereby married couples are disadvantaged under the old-age and survivors' insurance (AHV) system. The pension of a married couple today stands at 150 percent, whereas

cohabiting partners receive two full pensions.

The Social Democratic Party too is thinking out loud about launching an initiative. It is focussing on demands for a better work-life balance, more affordable childcare places and an increase in child allowances.

Burying certain myths

This level of activity indicates that politicians have realised how dramatic the changes to family structures and couples' relationships are. The Federal Statistical Office provides the following summary in its comprehensive 2008 family report: "Various taboos have been broken as a result of the individual gaining independence from society, the emancipation of women, and also the relinquishment of religious and bourgeois values." It should nevertheless be recognised that the taboos that have been broken are not that old at all. Cultural conflict over the "correct" family model and adequate family policy are often based on myths that do not stand up to historical analysis.

The "traditional family" with the fixed allocation of roles between men and women is actually not that old: "This ideal was only first adopted by wide sections of the population in the boom years after the Second World War," reveals Regina Wecker, emeritus professor of history at the University of Basel in an article for the German newspaper "Die Zeit". What is often portrayed as something natural and of eternal value existed as the norm for around three decades from 1960 and has not reflected the reality of a majority of people in Switzerland either before or since.

The fact that women undertake employment does not make the present day a historical anomaly either, as it was the norm for centuries. Women made up "the majority of the workforce in the newly created textile factories up to the mid-19th century". Women had simply worked from home prior to that, in the home textile industry, for example.

External childcare is not a recent development either. This phenomenon is only "new" if you do not look back beyond the 1960s. Many children during the 18th and 19th centuries were not raised by their parents. This is not because they had childcare in the modern sense but because their par-

ents had already died or had no time for their offspring because they had to work. Until the introduction of old-age and survivors' insurance (AHV) in 1948, it was common to place children with other families if a parent died. And, generally speaking, "the requirement for children to have special care and to be looked after only emerged in the 19th century and could not be met until well into the 20th century. Not even by the birth par-



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Photo: Keystone

ents because they had no time," says Regina Wecker.

The debate over family policy would be much enhanced if historically untenable myths were not presented as arguments. The single legitimate family type does not exist and never has.

JÜRGEN MÜLLER is an editor with the "Swiss Review"

The transparent family

Whoever is selected is first amazed – and then groans. In Switzerland, the statisticians want to know exactly what the family does, how it is organised, who spends money on what in the family and who earns how much and how. Three thousand families have been randomly picked and then meticulously scrutinised each year since 2000. Those who consent are flabbergasted at the effort involved. They have to record all their purchases and break them down into the tiniest details. They have to note down whether friends invite them to brunch and the monetary value of this invitation. The wife's singing lessons, the day nursery costs, the voluntary assistance to an aunt and the annual donation to the association of Friends of the Mongolian Horse are all documented. And even in the frosty month of January the question "Did you harvest vegetables from your own garden today?" still has to be answered every single day. The statistical drama unfolds over two months – with preliminary meetings, instructions, trial recordings and the subsequent daily noting of every detail for four weeks. There are also additional telephone interviews on top of that about health and wellbeing, the weight of the youngest child and all sorts of other matters.

Thanks to this survey we know a lot about the average Swiss family. We know that it includes 2.23 people and consumes 2.945 kilograms of meat per person each month – almost twice as much as in 1950. We know that it spends just under seven percent of household income on food shopping. Expenditure on "accommodation and energy" has climbed to 15.356 percent or 1,474.78 Swiss francs. We know that the said household spends 768.34 Swiss francs a month on its mobility – 621.24 francs on the car but just 2.89 francs on "transportation of persons via the waterways". The average household is not very epicurean: it contents itself with monthly consumption of 0.449 litres of Swiss white wine and 2.946 litres of beer, while 38.51 francs' worth of cigarette smoke fills the air. Spending on "other tobacco products including drugs" stands at 2.44 francs.

Why the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) explicitly analyses households rather than families is easily explained – the forms home life takes are changing dramatically and the model of the "middle-class family unit" is fading away. In light of this, for statisticians the "household" now equates to family life irrespective of its form. Anyone wishing to find out whether, despite this, their own household matches the Swiss image of the family to some degree will find some comfort in this comment from the FSO: "The traditional small family remains deeply rooted in Switzerland and is the reality experienced by most of the population." But the picture becomes very mixed upon closer inspection. Of the 1,139,800 single-family households with children recorded in 2011 – in lay terms we would simply call these families – only 769,100 were traditional models consisting of a married couple with their own young children or teenagers. The second-largest group was made up of single parents – with 166,900 single mothers and 29,500 single fathers with children. In addition, there were tens of thousands of so-called patchwork families (married couples with children from previous relationships), cohabiting partners with their own children, and family units arising through relationships other than marriage which also consider themselves "patchwork families". There were also several dozen same-sex couples with children.

Marc Lettau