DEFINING THE FAMILY

No single definition of “the family” captures the many forms of family units around the world. The question of who lives with whom and how large the family unit is varies among and within societies. Furthermore, new economic and demographic trends are rapidly changing family lifestyles and composition across the globe, breaking down traditional notions of women’s and men’s roles in the home.

Given that the family is a fundamental social institution and that male-female unions have historic significance, discussions on family formations tend to be highly politicized. In general, families include groups of two or more adults who perform separate tasks, and share such things as a residence, social activities, and emotional ties. While marriage between a man and a woman is widely seen as the first step in family formation, many other types of unions exist, including cohabitation, visiting, consensual, and homosexual unions. The majority of families, however, comprise mother and father and children, a mother and her children, or a childless couple, with grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other kin living either close by or far away. The world community took a major step at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo when it acknowledged the many family forms around the world.

As poverty, urbanization, international migration, wars, and other factors place increasing strain on family networks, countries and communities are seeking laws and policies to support and protect the family and its members. The Programme of Action adopted in Cairo urges governments to create policies for housing, labor, health, social security, and education to support family life. The Programme also recommends that governments and other relevant institutions develop the means to monitor the impact of social and economic decisions and actions on the well-being of families, on women’s status within families, and on the ability of families to meet the basic needs of their members.
The concept of family is broadening. Now, it includes everybody who lives under one roof and expresses love and solidarity.

Magaly has two small children. She lives with them and with her mother who takes care of them while she works. Who can say that this isn’t the family of the future?

The traditional concept of “the family” — comprised of a mother, father and children — is changing. This model, called the nuclear family, will continue to be the central axis of our societies, but the next century will see the consolidation of other, no less important systems.

The International Foundation for the Global Economic Challenge (FIDEG) holds that a family is comprised of everybody, whether related or not, who lives in the same dwelling. Blood ties no longer appear to be the parameters that define family. Costa Rica is not unfamiliar with these new structures of living together which Costa Rican demographer Luis Rosero calls “sui generis families.”

“What’s happening is that the concept of the nuclear family is increasingly less common in other societies. In Costa Rica, it has been gaining ground, but it’s likely that in the future other concepts of family will live here in greater strength,” Rosero told Viva.

The expert explained that in Costa Rica, there are various family models: the classical nuclear family, comprised of the father, the mother and the children; the extended family, which was common in yesterday’s Costa Rica and includes the unmarried aunt, a grandparent, an orphan cousin; single-parent families: men or women who live with their children; and modern families, which are those in which persons remarry and each one brings his or her own children.

Luis Rosero explained that modern families will be more common in Costa Rica of the future. Rosero also stated that sui generis families are being organized. Members of a homosexual couple who live together, for example, fall into that particular category.

Two distinguished American family therapists, Marianne and Suzanna Walters — mother and daughter — agree that lifestyles and the reality of current society force us to rethink the concept of nuclear family. For example, in the United States, 50 percent of children are the sons and daughters of single mothers or fathers, but especially of single women.

In Costa Rica, according to the State of the Nation Report, the number of women heads of household has increased by 20 percent. In all, 52 percent of Costa Rican families are comprised of a heterosexual couple and their sons and daughters. Women, however, head 90 percent of the remaining 48 percent of families. The Walters therapists say that at this stage in human history it makes no sense to think that a family comprises “a man, a woman, sons, and daughters,” because that is not how society lives.
Families in Transition

SARAH AKROFI-QUARCOO: Hello, and welcome to “Focus.” Today, panelists will critically examine some of the challenges facing the modern family and the implications for social policy. I am Sarah Akrofi-Quarcoo. On the panel today are Dr. Clara Fayorsey, senior lecturer of the Sociology Department of the University of Ghana; Minister of Mobilization and Social Welfare, Alhaji Mohammed Mumuni; and Mrs. Angela Dwamena Aboagye, women and children’s rights advocate.

MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: What is the family, Dr. Fayorsey?

DR. FAYORSEY: The word “family” is very difficult to define, because it varies from society to society. In one sense, it means blood relations, people who are descended from a common ancestor. In another sense, it may mean people of the same household including husband, wife, children, and servants, and sometimes even lodgers. It is the basic unit of society, and it is characterized or is supposed to be characterized by certain things like common residence, economic cooperation, reproduction. And it can, in the technical sense, include adults of both sexes, their own children, and adopted children. There may be different forms of the family. So, we have nuclear family, we have extended family, we have polygamous families, compound families, and so on.

MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: Why is the family so important to society? Why is everybody talking about the family as the basic unit of society?

MR. MUMUNI: The family is important because as you know, it is really the reference point in life for the people that are in that family. They are able to define their own position with reference to their family. And also, it is the primary socializer for our children.

MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: Recently, family has become such a controversial issue when it is linked to issues like abortion and women’s rights. Angela, you are a women’s rights advocate. What do you think?

MRS. ABOAGYE: The family is a sphere of life that nurtures human beings. At the same time, the family represents a place where you find the most pervasive forms of abuse against women and children, and where you find the kinds of situations that are difficult to handle on an official basis. Now you find that things are changing, and women are not prepared to just sit down and let one person be the family head from whom all orders, decisionmaking responsibility, and everything comes. Women are also bearing more responsibility, and definitely this is going to challenge the very basis of families as we see them.

MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: Mr. Mumuni?

MR. MUMUNI: As a unit of society, the family is under serious pressure and stress from all kinds of factors. As a result, the roles of the members of the family, as traditionally defined, are continuing to shift and change. And with these changes in roles, demands begin to be made. For instance, women are taking on more and more responsibilities and therefore correspondingly, there is the need to adjust the power … relations in the family, but this is often also resisted.