



# Human Values Not Family Values

## Discussion Document

### What is the family?

Politicians and moral pundits tend to talk about 'the family' as if the definition of the family is simple and straightforward. This obscures the fact that there have been a variety of family forms throughout human history. Whether one uses the label "the family" to describe all the various arrangements for the upbringing of children and regulation of sexuality is largely a matter of definition and (contested) academic convention. For instance, studies of kinship rules have shown how definitions of relationships vary from society to society. Some kinship rules require marriage with close relations; others prohibit it. Some societies use the terms "mother and father" only for the biological parents, others use it for the biological parents and their siblings, namely those defined in western culture as "aunts" and "uncles" (Fox 1967).

Indeed in some historical circumstances such as slavery in the New World and the condition of the working class in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, the family virtually disappeared for the oppressed and exploited masses. What did the "sanctity of family life" mean for parents who saw their children sold into slavery or for the populations of industrial cities where the average age of death was in the early twenties?

Comparative perspectives on "the family" indicate that the two parent generation nuclear family is not universal. Many societies recognise more extended family ties and obligations. Indeed to a considerable degree, despite the dominance of the model of the two-generation nuclear family, many elderly people are looked after by their own families, across all ethnic groups within Britain. For some ethnic minority families in Britain the failure by immigration authorities to recognise responsibility for the care of elderly relatives has led to denial of access and separation of families.

Despite the promotion of "the nuclear family" in media imagery, in fact the most common household type in Britain consists of a married or cohabiting couple with no children, and the next most common type is the single person household. According to the 1995 General Household Survey, 28% of households consisted of one person only, 9% of lone parents with children, 36% of married or cohabiting couples with no children, and 24% of married or cohabiting couples with dependent children. What these statistics show is that many people live alone at least at some stage of the life cycle, such as early adulthood or old age. They also show that the nuclear family constitutes less than a quarter of all households. Households of lesbian and gay couples are not identified in the statistics, but may figure in the 3% of households classified as "other".

A 1997 report from the Office for National Statistics shows that 22% of families with children are headed by lone parents. 34% of children are born outside wedlock, 40% of recent marriages will end in divorce and the number of first marriages per year has halved since 1970. All this shows that the "traditional" family is in a state of great flux.

Given the great variety of actual family forms and the fact that many people live in single person households, we must ask why is there such a political and cultural focus on the family? Why are people's lives only treated as worthwhile if they are members of families? The emphasis on the family is partly a matter of property inheritance,



in a society organised around the principle of private property, and partly as a result of the increasing decline in welfare state provision, which leads to pressure on the "family" and the "community" or in less romanticised terms women, to fill the gaps caused by the dismantling of the welfare state.

## **Social exclusion of people outside families**

If the family is defined as the only acceptable provider for people's material and emotional needs, then this excludes millions of people. As Barrett and McIntosh argue in "The Anti-Social Family", if all other forms of social provision are judged as second-best to the family, there is tendency for them to become so, and for life outside the family to become impoverished. They write:-

"The world around the family is not a pre-existing harsh climate against which the family offers protection and warmth. It is as if the family has drawn comfort and security into itself and left the outside world bereft. As a bastion against a bleak society it has made that society bleak. It is indeed a major agency for caring, but in monopolising care it has made it harder to undertake other forms of care. It is indeed a unit of sharing, but in demanding sharing within it, has made other relations tend to be more mercenary. It is indeed a place of intimacy, but in privileging the intimacy of close kin it has made the outside world cold and friendless, and made it harder to sustain relations of security and trust except with kin. Caring, sharing and loving would be more widespread if the family did not claim them for its own." (Barrett and McIntosh 1982 p.80).

Moreover if we look at the legal position, the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act prohibited discrimination on grounds of marriage not marital status. Thus it was legal to discriminate against single people; for instance employers could lawfully pay moving expenses to married but not single employees. Holiday companies can lawfully (and do) charge high single person supplements, in return for which the single traveller may receive a small room, capable of accommodating only one person, without amenities such as a balcony. Thus in many respects in life single people pay more and get less.

Another possible source of attack on single people comes from the communitarian agenda. The communitarians, who argue for a balance of rights and duties and the restoration of community and of moral consensus in society, have influenced politicians such as Clinton and Blair. Their writings place a strong emphasis on the importance of the family and contain negative stereotypes of single people, who are seen as not well integrated into society. For instance Etzioni, the leader of the communitarian movements, writes:-

"Because people outside lasting relationships are often damaged in every sense of the term, the moral voice of the community should repeat what our forefathers and mothers knew a long time ago, people are born as halves and gravitate toward one another to find their completion." (Etzioni 1985 p88).

Single people have much to fear from the communitarian agenda, if people who live outside the family are defined as "damaged in every sense of the term."

## **The traditional family**

The supposed value of the "traditional family unit" recommended to us by politicians from all parties is that it provides social cohesion and stability because the family home is a place where two adults live and care for each other and for their children, where needs are met, moral values inculcated, and personal happiness ensured. While



this may be the reality of family life for some of the 24% who do live in the traditional family unit, it is obvious that family life does not always live up to the claims made for it.

Behind the idealised version of marriage may hide a number of other realities. Research has indicated that one in four women in a relationship are or have been victims of domestic violence.<sup>1</sup> Domestic violence accounts for 25% of all reported crime and in most cases a woman will have been assaulted on average 35 times before reporting it to the police.

Professor Lawrence Stone in his book "Broken Lives" points out women previously had only two options: staying in the marriage, or leaving and losing everything. "The overwhelming ideology of female subordination and inferiority drilled into every member of society by clerical sermons, state regulations, marital handbooks and both elite and popular culture induced docility in most wives". This could be why so many marriages once answered society's ideal of lifelong commitment to one person.

Capitalism has exploited women's unpaid labour in the home and created changing fashions of what a woman's role should be, eg during World War II women were encouraged to work outside the home, and at the end of the war they were made to feel that "real" women must be housewives and mothers.

Community care policies developed by Conservatives in the 1980s, with their ideological and financial attacks on state benefits and services, aimed to reduce people's dependence on the welfare state and thus required the family's responsibility for caring to be emphasised. In reality, this has meant that care of children, the disabled and the elderly has largely devolved upon women.

While for the majority of children raised within the nuclear family the home may be a safe and relatively happy place, it is now clear that for a significant minority this is not the case and children may be subjected to a variety of emotional, physical and sexual abuse within the very environment which is held up to us as the panacea of all social ills.

## Who suffers from the emphasis on "Family Values"

The political rhetoric about family values contains attacks on anyone who does not fit the so-called "norm". "Family values" is often a code phrase for anti-lone parents, anti-abortion and anti-gay.

### a) Lone Parents:

Lone parents, particularly lone mothers, are often portrayed as if they are entirely to blame for their situation. Many single-parent families were two-parent families once, but relatively little social opprobrium falls on the absent parent, in the majority of cases the father. Moreover the assumption that simply being a single-parent family automatically makes its members a social problem is an objectionable piece of stereotyping. Many single-parent families do suffer from poverty and bringing up children may be more difficult for one parent. Many single parents, however, such as women widowed after two world wars in this century, have brought up children on their own successfully. Nonetheless some current political discourses imply that lone parent families are not only a problem on account of any disadvantages their members suffer, but are both cause and symptom of moral decay and social decline.

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<sup>1</sup> Domestic Violence – Guidance for Branch Officers: NATFHE



The situation of lone mothers indicates too how for some people a woman's place is "always in the wrong". Lone mothers are told that they cannot expect to bring up their children at the expense of the state and must find paid work to support themselves and their children. They will, however, as working mothers be blamed if their children are ever left unattended, do not do well at school or get into trouble with the law. While many lone parents wish to find paid work, and should be helped to do so with decent childcare provision and flexible employment practices, the discussion is often conducted as if bringing up children is not real work in itself. Even if a child is in nursery or school, while the parent is at work, there are beds to make, clothes to wash, meals to cook, a house to clean and now a proposed "contract" between parent and school for twenty minutes reading time per day.

The reality is that we are in a society where, as a result of longer working hours and increased pressures on people in the workplace, even two parent families are often struggling to reconcile the demands of work and family life. It is noticeable too how the responsibilities of employers in these matters are ignored. Instead of calling in single parents for interview about their plans for finding work, it would be much more effective if the Government called employers to interviews to explain how they support their employees in meeting their caring responsibilities.

### **b) Women:**

Women stand to lose from the attacks on their abortion rights, which often hide behind the slogan of "family values". Abortion in the UK is still a criminal act under sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861. The 1967 Abortion Act did not decriminalise abortion, it only made it permissible in certain circumstances. While the pro-choice movement has successfully defeated attempts to restrict the 1967 Act by parliamentary legislation (the White Bill of 1975, the Benyon Bill of 1977, the Corrie Bill of 1979 and the Alton Bill of 1984), abortion provision has come under both financial and ideological attack. Many health authorities operate rationing systems and deny women abortions. Abortion is seen as one of the operations which can be denied if funding is scarce, even though the costs of childbirth are higher. This is partly because of an ideological climate in which access to abortion is not seen as a woman's right, but rather as something she may be allowed if she presents a sufficiently deserving case.

The present situation is one in which abortion is effectively available on demand in the UK if a woman has sufficient money and knows the address of a charitable clinic. This creates a situation in which there are major inequalities in access to legal abortion, depending upon a woman's financial position.

The 1967 Abortion Act came about in a pre-feminist climate in which legal abortion was seen as a regrettable necessity and a means of preventing social evils, such as back street abortion, illegitimacy and the production of unwanted children. Subsequently, however, the feminist campaigning in its defence, especially with the establishment of the National Abortion Campaign in 1975, based its argument on the principles of women's autonomy and women's choice. Within this ethical and political framework the decision by a woman to terminate a pregnancy could be seen as a conscious and moral act. Slogans of the time contained positive images of women, for instance:-

Abortion on demand - A woman's right to choose  
Not the church, not the state, women must decide their fate

Since then, however, there have been various ideological attacks on the pro-choice position. TV soap operas feature characters who have abortions but feel guilty about it. The anti-abortionists have invented the disease of "post-abortion trauma", something women never suffered from in the days of back street abortions, and refer



continuously in their publications to women having abortions as "victims", thus denying the women any conscious choice or agency. More direct intimidatory tactics have also been used at times by anti-abortionists such as attempts to blockade clinics, (in the USA) assassination of abortion clinic personnel, and harassment of women entering clinics.

Within the Labour Party in Britain, while party policy is to support a woman's right to choose and for free abortion on request, Tony Blair has stated that Labour MPs should be free to vote according to their consciences, not party policy, on the abortion question. This confuses the issue. The real problem is that the anti-abortionists want to legislate their consciences on the whole of society. The more the Labour Government seeks to present itself as pro family values, the more it is likely to distance itself from Labour Party policy on abortion.

There is a further issue for women whether married, in a relationship, or single, who choose not to have children. Because the dominant image of "the right way to live" is that of the nuclear family, there is an assumption that childless women are to be pitied because they "couldn't" or, if it is believed that they are childless by choice, they may be labelled as weird, cold, unnatural, unwomanly. Equally, for those women who do wish to have children and can't, the unhappiness they feel is compounded by the social atmosphere that decrees that living with a partner and children is the only path to happiness.

### **c) Lesbians and Gay Men:**

For lesbians and gay men the espousal of family values by the Government presents a number of dangers. This can be seen most clearly in areas such as child custody. Tony Blair has explicitly stated that children are best brought up by two parents, one male and one female. The rejection of other family forms rests upon certain assumptions about the naturalness of gender roles and the greater stability of the heterosexual family. Instead of focusing on the quality of parenting, the key issue in child welfare, the emphasis is placed on the sexual orientation of the parents. Already lesbian mothers often lose custody of their children in court because of their sexuality; government advocacy of family values will increase this trend.

Organisations such as the Children's Society have a policy on fostering and adoption that excludes lesbians and gay men. There is absolutely no evidence that children raised by same sex partners suffer any disadvantages compared to those brought up by opposite sex parents.

While the present Parliament may equalise the age of consent for homosexual and heterosexual activity, there is little indication that any general anti-discrimination legislation is forthcoming in relation to sexuality. Lesbians and gay men are an oppressed group in society without legal protection against discrimination in employment, housing and other areas of life. The absence of legal protection creates a climate in which bigotry is more easily expressed. Many lesbians and gay men are not out in the workplace, because of the real dangers of victimisation and dismissal. A 1993 Stonewall survey found that 48% of respondents had been harassed at work. A 1993 SCPR (Social and Community Planning Research) survey found that one in three heterosexual people said they would be less likely to hire a lesbian or gay job applicant.

However, several cases of discrimination based on sexual orientation are now before the European Court of Justice. Unless the UK Government takes action in the meantime, the issue of the legal rights of lesbians and gay men should be resolved at the ECJ.

Anti-discrimination legislation could affirm the equal value of heterosexual and homosexual relationships. It could also address the rights of lesbian and gay men to transmit property, tenancies and custody of children to their



partners, both through the recognition of gay marriages and through provision for registered partnerships. The debate within the gay community about gay marriages throws an interesting light on the nature of social pressure. Some argue for such marriages on the grounds that without them gay partners will never have equal legal rights to heterosexual partners. Some argue against, saying that gay marriages are merely imitating heterosexual norms and the demand for such unions only reflects the need to conform as far as possible. The fact that the present parliament contains four openly gay MPs (at the time of writing) is a step forward and a tribute to the effectiveness of the lesbian and gay movement in changing the climate of public opinion. While the Labour Government is committed to "family values", however, this presents a real barrier to the enactment of legislation for the equality of lesbians and gay men.

#### **d) Disabled people:**

Disabled people can in effect be ignored in debate about the family. They may be stereotyped as asexual or at best sexually inadequate. Assumptions may be made that they cannot conceive, give birth or impregnate, that if they are not married or in a long-term relationship it is because no-one wants them and not through personal choice to remain single or live alone.

### **NATFHE members as educators**

What do all these debates about family values mean for NATFHE members as educators?

In terms of pastoral care for students, many teachers recognise that students live in a variety of personal situations, and do not assume that everyone lives in a conventional family. The focus of politicians on "family values" may lead to a decreased sense of personal worth among those of our students who are lesbian or gay, those without partners, and those whose families of origin are "unconventional". We need to emphasise that we as teachers value all students equally, whatever their sexuality and their family and personal circumstances; and we should demand that our universities and colleges do the same.

This ethos has permeated the educational establishment. The previous Government's curriculum advisers produced a statement of values (Consultation document published 2 October 1996 by the School Curriculum & Assessment Authority), which could form the basis of lessons in morality. The statement addressed four areas: society, relationships, self and environment (see Appendix 1) and was condemned by the previous Education & Employment Secretary for failing to give clear support to traditional family values.

As educators, we must have some concerns about the proposals in the Dearing Report for the expansion of Higher Education to occur through more students being home-based. While home-based study is often appropriate for mature students and may suit some younger students, for many students home-based studying will involve considerable losses in terms of their personal development. The experience of living in another part of the country and learning to cope away from home has traditionally been part of university education, which contributes to both the maturity and employability of graduates. Many parents too welcome the fact that young people will leave home at eighteen.

There are some groups of students who will be particularly disadvantaged if they are forced to study while based in their parents' home. A small minority of students have such dysfunctional families that their education will be seriously damaged by the demands made on them by their families. For female students whose parents do not value women's education, being home-based can lead to continued pressure to do the housework and care for



younger siblings instead of studying. Those students who know they are lesbian or gay or are in the process of defining their sexuality and coming out, if their parents are not supportive, will find living at home extremely difficult. Some students may come under pressure to help in family businesses to an extent, which is detrimental to their studies.

Respect for the lives of all people, regardless of family situation, should also influence curriculum content and delivery. Teachers need to be aware so that they do not teach in a way that assumes that everyone is heterosexual and lives in a "conventional" family. This is not only a matter for Social Studies teachers; it applies equally to areas such as conversation about the family and household in language classes.

The debate within the educational establishment on the moral basis of teaching continues with some wishing to push family values and others aware of the damaging effect on pupils. A set of 11 guiding principles was drawn up by the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers in May 1997 which includes the statement that teachers should be sensitive to the diverse social backgrounds of their pupils, ensure equality of opportunity and avoid stereotyping.

## Conclusion

Historically cycles of orchestrated panic about the decline of traditional morality continually recur, mostly linked to concern about the state of the family. The tabloid press sees stories about moral decline as a means of selling newspapers and politicians of all parties see support for traditional family values as a vote-winner.

The waves of panic are sometimes set off by specific events – eg the advent of AIDS and the fear of an epidemic spreading to the whole population was used by some as an excuse to push monogamous heterosexual relationships as the only possible model of human behaviour. For teachers, this led to a variety of measures including Section 28 which banned "promoting... the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" and Department of Education guidelines published in 1993 stating that "promoting homosexuality through resources or teaching is prohibited".

Sometimes, however, there is no specific reason for the wave of moral panic. Journalists and politicians often see an advantage in tapping into the popular sense that we are in moral decline, that things were better in the past, and that "normal" family life is the solution to all social problems. This appears to be what happened in the run-up to the May 1997 general election.

However, as evidence continues to grow that there is little likelihood of the majority of the population living within the "normal" family unit for all of their life, there is also some encouraging evidence that society generally is becoming more tolerant and realistic in its attitudes.

As educators, we have a duty to support all our students. Obviously, this does not mean that we should denigrate the traditional family. For many people, this unit continues to provide a relatively safe and happy basis for living. Living within such a unit is now, however, one of the many life choices open to people. We should seek to provide an educational environment in which all - men, women, parents, childless, married, single, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, disabled, non-disabled, black, white, old, young – feel valued as human beings and not judged as inferior or superior on the basis of how they choose to order their living arrangements.



## Appendix I

### School Curriculum & Assessment Authority – Consultation Document

#### Statement of values

##### **Society**

We value truth, human rights, the law, justice and collective endeavour for the common good of society. In particular we value families as sources of love and support for all their members and as the basis of a society in which people care for others.

On the basis of these values we as a society should:

- understand our responsibilities as citizens
- be ready to challenge values or actions which may be harmful to individuals or communities
- support families in raising children and caring for dependants
- help people to know about the law and legal processes
- obey the law and encourage others to do so
- accept diversity and respect people's right to religious and cultural differences
- provide opportunities to all
- support people who cannot sustain a dignified life-style by themselves
- promote participation in our democracy
- contribute to as well as benefit fairly from economic and cultural resources
- make truth and integrity priorities in public life

##### **Relationships**

We value others for themselves, not for what they have or what they can do for us, and we value these relationships as fundamental to our development and the good of the community. On the basis of these values, within our relationships we should:

- respect the dignity of all people
- tell others they are valued
- earn loyalty, trust and confidence
- work co-operatively with others
- be mutually supportive
- respect the beliefs, life, privacy and property of others
- try to resolve disputes peacefully

##### **Self**

We value each person as a unique being of intrinsic worth, with potential for spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical development and change. On the basis of these values, we as individuals should:

- try to understand our own character, strengths and weaknesses
- develop a sense of self-worth
- try to discover meaning and purpose in life and how life ought to be lived
- try to live up to a shared moral code



- make responsible use of our rights and privileges
- strive for knowledge and wisdom throughout life
- take responsibility for our own lives within our capacities

#### **Environment**

We value the natural world as a source of wonder and inspiration, and accept our duty to maintain a sustainable environment for the future. On the basis of these values we should:

- preserve a balance and diversity in nature wherever possible
- justify development in terms of a sustainable environment
- repair habitats devastated by human development wherever possible
- preserve areas of beauty wherever possible
- understand the place of human beings within the world

#### **References**

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Etzioni A (1995) *The Spirit of Community*, Fontana

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*General Household Survey* (1995)