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Saturday, 27 July 2013

'Family' values and the privatisation of welfare



If women have a baby outside a stable relationship, they may break the social security system.

A couple of news items in the weekend papers have piqued my interest in the ongoing conservative putsch to retain the centrality of the family in society. The first of these was a story about the Federal Opposition MP, [Kevin Andrews](#), who has signalled a 'socially conservative change' to welfare policy under a coalition government. (Andrews' views on family are well known.)

The second is a [piece in the Weekend Australian](#) by Catholic pro-family conservative writer, Angela Shanahan opining about the importance for women of marrying a stable man. For the children.

These uncritical views rely on a combination of sentimentality and 'facts' about how society benefits from this institution. What they fail to reveal is the history of paternal control over women and children central to the effective operation of the family in a patriarchal society. And by family, what they mean is a married heterosexual procreative union.

These views of family implicitly blame single mothers and their children for the breakdown of society. I maintain that it is instead the narrow construction of the institution of 'family' that feeds into the moral (conservative) panic of social collapse. What we need instead is a re-imagining of society.

The economic family

If we accept that Australian family norms are derived predominantly from English social and legal norms, it is worth remarking on its history. The family was in the pre-industrial era a lot broader an institution than presently constructed. The movement of people to the cities following industrialisation resulted in the evolution of family into a nuclear unit defined according to the sexual union of man and woman for the purpose of reproduction. The institution of marriage was eventually definitively brought within the aegis of the law, being regularised under [Lord Hardwicke's Act 1753](#). This followed a long tussle between the authority of the Church and the Crown over matters matrimonial.

The state-sanctioned family served a number of purposes.

1. It transferred women's wealth to their husband. Until the [Married Women's Property Acts](#) of the late 19th century, married women had no legal identity - they could not

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- sue, enter into contracts or own property.
2. It resolved paternity, presuming that a woman's husband was the father of her children. This absolved the local parish from financial responsibility for children and their mothers. That is, it privatised welfare.
 3. It invested power in men as the head of the household, as proxies for the patriarchal State.
 4. In conjunction with the weight of social norms and public opinion, it controlled women's sexuality, reinforcing a patriarchal disdain for women's uncontrolled/uncontrollable natural urges.

Some also regard the family as the foundation of modern capitalism. [Malthus](#) argued that the mechanisms of marriage in England explain the nature of the English economic and demographic development. He attributed fewer children in English culture to late marriage. Additionally, in contrast to agrarian societies, English children were considered a cost to be borne, rather than a profit centre of shared production. These ideas put the husband-wife (marriage) relationship at the centre of family. Importantly though, these ideas reinforce the family as an economic institution.

As society adapted to the increasingly capitalist economy, the married couple was viewed as 'mutual society and companionship, an identity of interests in an otherwise competitive and individualistic world' ([Alan MacFarlane 'Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840'](#)). Albeit this 'true friendship' involved the dominance of the husband over his wife.

The sentimental family

While children in this Industrial English model of the family were farmed out - to relatives, schools, or put into service - the Victorian model of the family reconstructed the idea of the child and the contemporary ideal of the private nuclear family became dominant. In this model, the status of both husband and wife implied a set of behaviours and norms that defined women and men and their roles both in domestic life and in public. These gender-based norms retained the proscriptions on women's participation in the world of the market and the polis and constrained their physical autonomy.

The family and one's status in it continued to determine rights to property, including property in women's very bodies.

[Milton C Regan](#) argues that modernity and postmodernity have eroded intimacy that is necessary to sustain healthy and long-lived marriages. He suggests, as does [Angela Shanahan](#), that individualism and a consumer choice of life options has wreaked havoc on our relationships. He urges a return to status - without, he tells us, the gendered nature of marriage roles - to provide us with boundaries. Knowing what our roles are, as husband, as wife, will invigorate our commitment to our closest and most intimate relationship - the marriage.

His argument is akin to a communitarian philosophy, whereby one's identity as an individual is fulfilled in a relational way; that we become a whole person through our engagement with society and through participation in social institutions.

Family and sexism

These arguments fail to address society's systemic sexism; sexism that infuses social institutions, including marriage and the 'family' (as it is mostly constructed). It is impossible in my view to disentangle marriage from gender. Its very foundation is to construct and therefore constrain according to gendered norms. And this is the problem.

In contrast to Regan's thesis, [Martha Fineman](#) rejects the presupposition that the (hetero)sexual man-woman dyad is the basic unit of society. She argues instead for a basic unit of mother and child. Women would then be released from social and State demands that they be linked with a man as a precondition to social acceptance and, importantly, financial security. A reconceived 'family' would do away with the idea of 'single mother' - as she points out, we never hear 'married mother'. Single mother is laden with judgement, presupposing motherhood is tied inextricably to marriage (or a marriage-like relationship).

Whether or not one accepts such a radical reconfiguration as that suggested by Fineman, she makes some important points that are ignored by Shanahan and Andrews.

First, relative to men, women remain economically disadvantaged in society. The [gender](#)

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wage gap remains at 17.5%. Feminised industries attract lower rates of pay. Women have less superannuation. Women's working lives are disrupted through child bearing and, because of social expectations of womanhood, through child rearing.

Secondly, because of expectations on women to nurture and care, and because women earn less than men, women tend to take primary responsibility for caring for children, the infirm and the elderly. This reinforces women's economic disadvantage. And to the extent that they are not financially supported privately (ie by a parent or spouse), they will rely on welfare.

Additionally, women continue to face violence, harassment and discrimination. They face this as women, as Indigenous women, as older women, as women with disabilities, as breastfeeding or pregnant women, as unmarried mothers, as intersex, as same sex attracted women... I would probably consider Shanahan's assumptions about unmarried mothers as an example of the sorts of attitudes embodied in discrimination based on marital status.

Unmarried women breaking all the social security systems

Shanahan cites the figures on children born 'out of wedlock', assuming that this is of itself a problem, and blames these figures on extra-marital cohabitation. Because of insecure full time work for men and the 'pernicious effects of the sexual revolution', (uneducated) women who cannot find 'stable partners' are having children anyway. Were it not for these factors, these women 'would have married and made excellent mothers'. Shanahan argues that this scenario:

is a huge factor in the breakdown of social security systems all through the developed world.

In my view, Shanahan has this back to front. What if it is the social security system that is no longer suitable for our society? What if we chose to address entrenched sexism that disadvantages women socially and financially? Rather than demand that women alone bear and rear children and do not enter the paid workforce, could we not aspire to a society in which we share responsibility for child rearing, and support (financially and socially) women who bear children?

It is not clear to me why we need to maintain the implied underpinning institution of marriage to achieve social equity and good outcomes for women and children. Instead, commentators such as Shanahan and Andrews rely on the shorthand 'family' to promote the privatisation of welfare. This longstanding model of welfare, central to the idea of marriage, relegates women to remain appendages to their legally sanctioned sexual partner - through marriage or marriage-like relationships.

Posted by [Kate Galloway](#) at 13:21

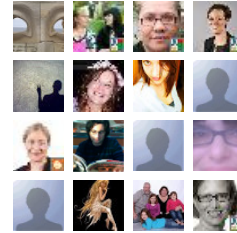
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