

# Impact of Family Structure Changes on Child Wellbeing

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## Abstract

The family is the basic social unit which plays an important role in care, nurturing and socialization of children. Family systems theorists postulated that the family is an organized unit where family-level processes effect children (Maršanić & Kušmić, 2013). They contextualized the child with the reference to family system and conceive its wellbeing dependent on its entire functioning (McKeown & Sweeny, 2001). This paper analyzes the impact of the change of family structures on child wellbeing in Western developed countries and Western Balkan countries during the last decades. Using secondary data, it concludes that more longitudinal and cross-sectional research is needed to understand the direct impact of the change of the family structure on child wellbeing. It highlights the importance of application of multidimensional interventions that promote a sustainable family institution and child wellbeing.

*Keywords: family, family structure, family systems theory, children, child wellbeing.*

## Introduction

The ongoing change of the family structure during the second half of the twentieth century resulted in a decline of married couples and transformed family life. This was evident in Western developed countries and Western Balkan countries. The traditional family model composed of an employed father, a homemaker mother and their children became more uncommon (Cancian & Reed, 2009). Union formation mostly took place without a marriage and new forms of living arrangements emerged altering both the institutional utility and the symbolic significance of the family (Cherlin, 2004; Rosenblatt, 1994; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). Continuous adaptation of the family to societal and global transformations affected family ties and changed traditional perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of family members (Carr, 2006; Conway & Li, 2012; Shaff et al., 2008; Turner, Hamner & Orell, 1993).

Many people have published research concerning the impact of the change of family structure on child wellbeing (Cancian & Reed, 2009; Cherlin, 1992; Fahley, Keilthy & Polek, 2012; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Parke, 2003; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Wise, 2003). Family structure provides a social address, and knowledge about its characteristics helps in the understanding of the environment where one lives (Brown, 2004; Wahle, 1976).

Family systems theory considers the family as a holistic unit where its members cannot be viewed in isolation. The members are interconnected and interdependent, profoundly affecting each other's thoughts, feelings and actions in various ways (Rosenblatt, 1994). Therefore, the family unit functions well when relationships among its members are maintained in an emotionally matured manner (Cancian & Reed, 2009).

Drawing on seven interlocking concepts of family systems theory, this paper uses secondary data and reviews findings of various studies conducted in Western developed countries and Western Balkan countries on socio-economic and demographic changes of the family structure and living arrangements of families during the last decades, discussing the impact of these changes on child wellbeing. The paper provides a general overview of the concept of the family and new forms of non-traditional family structures. However, due to the broad scope of this paper I will not fully discuss the root causes of the family structure change. Being aware of the lack of consensus about the definition of child wellbeing (OECD, 2009), this paper analyzes the impact of these changes on children based on seven aspects respectively, a) family caring environment, b) child behavior, c) child poverty, d) child health, e) child abuse, f) child educational achievement, and g) child emotional development. Finally, implications of these changes for development practice are presented to guide the conclusion that every policy intervention should be multidimensional and supplemented by other interventions to recognize the bottom-up dynamics of family life, to empower diverse family structures, to strengthen parent-child bonds and to ease within-family stress to improve child wellbeing.

### **Methods and limitations**

To answer to its two main research questions: 1) What is the impact of the family structure change on child wellbeing in Western developed countries and Western Balkan countries? 2) What are its implications for development practice and policy makers? I will present the results of a literature review and use the findings of various studies and research conducted during the second half of twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first century. The literature review will be mainly focused on a) reviewing the concepts of family

systems theory, in general, and its seven main interconnected constructs in particular, to depict the role of the family on child wellbeing; b) on reviewing the concept of child wellbeing. Secondary data will be used to statistically indicate the consequences of family structure change on child wellbeing. Findings of various studies will be analyzed to highlight consequences of family structure changes on child wellbeing.

But, this literature review has some limitations which derive from the level of development of diverse living arrangements in Western Balkan countries compared to those in Western developed countries. Combined with limited studies and research they provide a vague picture of the dynamics of these phenomena, in general, and of the magnitude of their consequences on child wellbeing, in particular. For instance, same-sex families are not legalized in Western Balkan countries. Therefore, research on the impact of this new family living arrangement on children is almost inexistent. Limited research exists for children living with cohabitating parents and stepparents. On the other hand, not many longitudinal research studies on the impact on the family structure change on child wellbeing exist in any Western Balkan country.

### **Overview of the change of family structure in Western developed countries and Western Balkan countries**

Family is an essential care institution that exists within a broader socio-economic context. Family structure varies across cultures and changes over time (Cancian & Reed, 2009; Hill, 2012). Family is a cornerstone that cultivates social bonds and impacts people's life. Sociologists and anthropologists have provided various definitions for this term. Murdock (1949) defines family as a social group composed of adults of both sexes who have a common residence, maintain a socially approved sexual relationship and have one or more children from their sexual cohabitation. Coser ([1964] 2004) defines family as a group of people composed of husband, wife, and their children born in their wedlock and united by moral, legal and social rights and obligations. Hill and Tisdall (1997) defined the family as consisting of children under 18 years old where family ties are significant in adult-adult relationships.

Sociologists have identified two family types: a) nuclear family composed of two adults of different sexes and their children (own or adopted); and b) extended family composed of two or three generations of relations living together (Bilton et al., 1996; Giddens, 1993). What definition one takes of this social universal institution is crucial because it influences our understanding of child wellbeing (Cancian & Reed, 2009; Manning, 2006).

Research indicates that over the course of the twentieth century family structures and characteristics changed remarkably in developed countries (Bianchi & Casper, 2000; Waldfogel, Craige & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Political transformation of Western Balkan countries by the late 1980's and the beginning of 1990's changed the universal pattern of family structure marking a rise of new family forms (Philipov & Dorbritz, 2003). As they moved towards a market economy, individualism started replacing community values. Increasingly personal freedom influenced beliefs, values and norms concerning the institution of family (Thornton & Philipov, 2007).

The starting point of a traditional family was marriage, which formalized social and legal relationships between two individuals of different sexes and family history. They related with each other and had children. The traditional family was viewed as a single unit where parents shared physical and psychological demands to achieve the balance required for freedom of their children to grow (Coontz, 2005; Oliver, Kuhns & Pomeranz, 2006). Before 1990s, some of the Western Balkan countries had pronatalist policies designed to encourage early marriage, early childbearing and family formation (Thornton & Philipov, 2007). The dissolution of the government in this region at the beginning of the 1990s, combined with political changes and economic declines weakened institutions, laws and enforcement devices. Therefore, decisions for family formation, marriage and childbearing changed (Thornton & Philipov, 2007).

A significant decrease in the marriage rate and high increase in the divorce rate weakened the connection between marriage and childbearing, increasing the popularity of other non-traditional living arrangements. Marriage is not longer seen as a necessary component of family (Costello, 1999) and the landscape of traditional family structure composed of a married couple and their co-resident children significantly declined (Jenkins & Evans, 2009).

Diversity and the dynamics of various less stable unions and structures that emerged were in response to the change of the socio-economic milieu in which the family institution was embedded as well as a response to the change of the nature of relationship within the family (Cancian & Reed, 2009; Jenkins & Evans, 2009; Hill, 2012; Pryor & Rogers, 2001). On one hand, increased geographic mobility of young families, rapid influx of young mothers into the paid labor force and smaller family size shrank access to extended family support and changed the traditional perceptions concerning the roles and responsibilities of family members (Cancian & Reed, 2009; Turner, Hamner & Orell, 1993). On the other hand, changes in legislation that allowed formalization of new kind of families, relaxation in attitudes towards sex and reorientation of social values reduced the stigma of single parenthood and

cohabitation, increasing the prevalence of divorced families, single-parent families (by choice or accident), cohabiting-parent families, blended families, stepfamilies and same-sex couple families (Miller, 2002; Parke, 2003; Wise, 2003; Waldfogel, Craige & Brooks-Gunn, 2010).

A growing number of studies indicate that nowadays families continue to evolve with an increasing complexity of their living arrangements. The family can even change several times during the time a child is in the home (Jenkins & Evans, 2009). The short-lived living arrangements of cohabitation have increased the family's instability. After breaking up a union in the family of origin, the majority of children spent their childhood living with one parent or with a parent and the stepparent (Bianchi & Casper, 2000; Cancian & Reed, 2009; Shaff et al., 2008; Wise, 2003). ). This has an effect on the children. In particular, children from never-married families who enter stepfamilies are more fragile than children whose divorced mothers remarry (Cancian & Reed, 2009; McKeever & Wolfinger, 2008).

However, research conducted in the United States indicates that the change of family structure differs among racial and ethnic groups because the meaning of cohabitation is not constant (Manning, 2006). Black children, for instance, experience more family instability and transition than do white children in the United States. In 2000, the marriage dissolution rate was about 30 percent among married black families versus 16 percent among married white families (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

### **Theoretical overview of family systems theory**

Family systems theory, initially developed in 1970's by psychiatrist Murray Bowen, offers a unique perspective on human functioning within the context of a family system (Casey, 2000; Campbell, 2007). Family system theory is rooted in general systems theory, which is based on the assumption that the system as a whole is more and different from the arithmetic sum of its individual parts taken in isolation (Bratcher, 1982; Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). Family systems theory is concerned with family dynamics including functioning, structures, roles, boundaries and actions occurring within the group (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000; Rothbaum et al., 2002). It explains why family members behave in a certain manner in a given situation (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000; Christian, 2006).

According to family systems theory, a human family is a multigenerational, natural living system where the family's network of relationship serves an important purpose in the family life (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Cornella et al., 1995). Thus, it takes into account communication,

interaction, separation, connectedness, loyalty, independence and adaptation to the stress in the context of the whole family as opposed to the individual alone (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). It focuses on the family as an emotional unit composed of interrelated members and structure (Bowen, 1985; Carr, 2006; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). As such, the shift in one part of the current functioning of the entire family system affects the functioning of other parts of the family (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; O’Gorman, 2012; Rothbaum et al., 2002). Two main assumptions underlined in this theoretical framework are: a) the family is a very strong emotional system. It functions as an organic whole which shapes the life and behavior of its members; b) family relationships are characterized by circular, reciprocal and repetitive motions rather than linear ones (Charter & Orfandis, 1976; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Titelman, 1998).

Family systems theory brings both theoretical and applied approaches to the understanding of family life (Beavers, 1977; Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). It combines elements of psychological and sociological perspectives where the family is viewed as a complete organization which functions as rule-governed and self-regulated system (Bratcher, 1982; Bronfrenbrenner, 1979; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2011). The family system is seen in a continuum with its own boundaries to distinguish its members from those who are outside its system. It develops its certain working principles that help them understand the influence of multiple complex interactions on every aspect of the individual’s life within this unit (Bratcher, 1982; Carr, 2006; Wahle, 1976; Weisner, Belze & Stolze, 1991). Seven major interconnected constructs of family systems theory are: differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, emotional cutoff, multigenerational transmission process, and sibling position (Bowen, 1976; Casey, 2000).

Differentiation of self refers to the capacity of a family member to think and act for self apart from the surrounding togetherness pressures (Bowen, 1976; Casey, 2000; Friedman, 1985). Thus, it includes the capacity of an individual to discern between thoughts and feelings in the midst of anxious systems and take maximum responsibility for one’s own destiny and emotional being (Casey, 2000; Friedman, 1985).

However, individuals vary on their ability to cope with the demands of life and meet their own expectations (Gilbert, 1992). Bowen (1976) argues that individuals with a low level of differentiation of self are less adaptable and more dependent on others to function. In contrast, individuals with a high level of differentiation of self are less impulsive in their behavior and more rationale in decision-making (Casey, 2000). In this context, the process of differentiation of self shows a conscious effort to strengthen the functionality of intellectual system. Kerr and Bowen (1988) see the concept of differentiation of self as

interplay of individuality and togetherness. While individuality propels an individual to think, feel and act for oneself, togetherness creates a desire to function as part of a group (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Friedman (1985) points out that the functioning of children is influenced by the level of differentiation of their parents. Parents function in ways that make their children achieve about the same level of emotional separation from them that they achieved from their parents in their family of origin (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Therefore, parents' ability to maintain their own functioning influences on upbringing of independent and successful children. Bowen (1976) termed the passing of the level of differentiation of self from one generation to the next multigenerational transmission process. He viewed connection of the present generation to the past generation as a natural process where the future can be predicted on the basis of the past while the past can be reconstructed on the basis of the evolving present (Friedman, 1991).

Family systems theory suggests that triangles are set up within a family to relieve some of the pressure experienced by a dyad (a couple) with approximately equal level of differentiation (Bowen, 1976). It views them as molecules of any emotional system and the total system as a network of interconnected triangles (Bowen, 1978). These basic emotional units are a natural function of living system that can have positive or negative influence on it depending on the capacity of the family members to cope with anxiety and pressure (Brown, 1999; Casey, 2000).

Nuclear family emotional system focuses on family functioning in a single generation. Bowen (1976) assumes that individuals who create a sustained relationship such as marriage come to it with a similar level of differentiation. This level of differentiation of each person is the outcome of emotional process in his/her own family of origin. But, in practice, the level of emotional maturity is incomplete. As a result, the relationship becomes vulnerable. The impact of different levels of differentiation identified in a marriage is manifested in one of three categories: a) couple conflict; b) illness in a spouse c) projection of a problem onto one or more children. In a fused relationship, partners slide into over-adequate and under-adequate roles being both equally undifferentiated because they define themselves based on the reactions of the other (Brown, 1999). In the extreme case, one partner becomes incapacitated because of illness or general lack of direction without impacting the functioning of the next generation (Brown, 1999; Casey, 2000).

Family projection process describes how parental lack of differentiation impairs the child or children and how it is used by the couple to stabilize the system (Bowen, 1976; Casey, 2000). The family projection process usually begins with the tension in the parents' relationship that establishes a pattern of

infantilizing the child. The child responds anxiously to the emotional fusion created leading to the development of symptoms (Brown, 1999; Casey, 2000; Kerr, 1981). In this type of child-focused family, the cycle of reciprocal anxiety leads to the child becoming more vulnerable or impaired (Brown, 1999).

Emotional cutoff is described as the way used by the people to manage unresolved fusion in the family of origin (Brown, 1999; Casey, 2000). The individual decides either to withdraw or to get others to change. The degree of the emotional cutoff between the individual and the family of origin indicates his level of emotional maturity or differentiation. If he considers himself as part of the family system, he can stay in contact with the family of origin and change himself (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The more differentiation of self in the family of origin makes cutoffs less possible (Brown, 1999; Casey, 2000).

Sibling position in a family helps one understand the role of individuals in relationships (Brown, 1999). Toman (1959) recognized that sibling relationships can play a number of functions and their interactions can supplement parent-child relationships. Taking into consideration the different position of siblings in the family constellation, a concept developed by Toman (1959), Bowen (1978) postulated that birth order determines the position of triangles in the family unit. The behavior associated with sibling position is influenced by the level of differentiation of self in the family and the triangles operating within a certain family system (Casey, 2000).

### **Impact of the change of family structure on child wellbeing**

The change of family structure impacts the role of the family to provide care and meet child's needs and therefore the child's wellbeing (Cancian & Reed, 2009; Costello, 1999). Research indicates that child wellbeing is a multidimensional concept that encompasses a wide range of issues relating to child development (Costello, 1999; OECD, 2011; Pollard & Lee, 2003). However, a very limited number of papers deal solely with this notion (Amerijckz & Humblet, 2014) and there is no consensus on its definition (OECD, 2009). Understanding of this concept differs because various researchers and authors have adapted it on the subject under study. Thus, some view it as being a context-specific process located in cultural and historic aspects (Camfield et al., 2010), while the others refer to the concept of child wellbeing to highlight how factors obstructing its wellbeing can negatively impact the individual as an adult (Costello, 1999). This article discusses the impact of the change of the family structure on child wellbeing focusing on seven aspects respectively, a) family caring environment, b) child behavior, c)

child poverty, d) child health, e) child abuse, f) child educational achievement, g) child emotional development.

Knowledge of the family functioning, structure and characteristics is crucial in determining child wellbeing because it is a measure of the whole family unit in the context of the whole family interaction (Costello, 1999; Wise, 2003). The change of certain characteristics of the family structure impacts patterns of interaction and communication within the family unit.

### **Family caring environment**

From various sociological, legal, psychological and institutional support standpoints, stepfamilies or cohabiting-parent families cannot be as effective as biological families to provide care and support to its members (Amato, 2005; White, 1994). Research indicates that cohabiting biological parents tend to separate more easily (Andersson, 2002) and provide lower family environment than married biological parents (Aronson & Huston, 2004). Other researchers have found that a non-biological cohabiting partner is likely to invest less time in children of the partnership than would a partner in a marriage where the children are his biologically (Waldfogel, Craige & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). On the contrary, children who grow up in the families with two continuously married parents or with two married biological parents who create a warm family environment are less exposed to stressful and conflicting family situations and are emotionally closer to their parents than their peers who come from divorced families or fragile cohabiting couples (Amato, 2005).

Analysis of family dynamics showed that fragile cohabiting partners have lower levels of psychological wellbeing than married couples have. This suggests that the presence of an unstable cohabiting partner or surrogate parent in the family will not improve the quality of its caring and supporting environment (Berger, 2004; Brown, 2004; Waldfogel, Craige & Brooks-Gunn, 2010).

Research indicates that sensitivity and responsiveness are two main dimensions of quality parenting in early childhood. In the case of fragile cohabiting-parents and single-parent families these two dimensions are not fully applied. Usually, harsh and punitive parents and partners provide less warm and nurturing to children (Berger, 2004; Waldfogel, Craige & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Economic disadvantage along with lack of parental support increases parenting deficit leading to less effective functioning of parents and provision of less emotional support to their children (Amato, 2005).

Moreover, stepfamilies and blended families show diverse living arrangements because they depend on parents' relationship histories, number

and age of residential and non-residential children (Wise, 2003). When children have different patterns of biological and non-biological relatedness to each other they show more problems in adjustment and family relationships than they show in simple stepfamilies (Hetherington, Henderson & Reiss, 1999). Regardless various forms of stepfamilies, stepparents show less warmth toward, tend to be less nurturing, less attached to and less involved with their stepchildren compared with biological parents (Costello, 1999; Wise, 2003).

Some studies indicate that children raised in same-sex parent families are subject to potential confusion in terms of gender identity and personal development. Born or adopted into the context of heterosexual couple relationship that latter dissolved (Wise, 2003), children might be harmed from family disruption (Patterson, 1992). Different levels of social acceptance, parental relationship and parental psychological functioning will impact the child's attitude (Wise, 2003). But Meezan and Rauch (2005) argued that there was no evidence that children of same sex parent families were confused about their gender identity and were more likely to be homosexual. They said that some studies concluded that female children of lesbian parents showed more open attitudes toward various sexual identities and were willing to question their own sexuality. However, more research is needed to determine the indirect effects of the impact of ever-changing perceptions of these family living arrangements on child wellbeing.

### **Child behavior**

According to family systems theory, behavioral concerns are embedded in family's network of relationships (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). As such, they are tied to the current functioning of the whole system where a shift in one of its parts impacts upon other parts (O'Gorman, 2012). Data from the Child Health Supplement of the 1988 National Health Interview Survey in U.S.A indicated that children living with two biological parents were less likely to experience behavioral problems than children living in families without their biological fathers (Dawson, 1991).

Research indicates that multiple transitions in the family structure increase the risk of exposure of children to various behavioral problems (Brown, 2004; DeGarmo & Forgatch, 1999; Peterson & Zill, 1986). Usually children suffer from parents' divorce. In some cases, the response to the divorce turns into long-term psychological damage (Emery, 1989). Children from divorced families tend to associate with antisocial peers, engage in earlier sexual activity and substance use because of high level of autonomy, low level of parental monitoring and lack of quality of parenting responsibility (Amato &

Keith, 1991; McLanahan, 1999; Neher & Short, 1998). Using data from three waves of the Fragile Family Study (N= 2,111) to examine the impact of mothers' partnership changes on the behavior of children between birth and age 3 in United States, Osborne and McLanahan (2007) found out that children's behavior problems increased after each transition. Therefore, the impact of the family structure changes on child wellbeing is the sum of the effects of each transition plus the effect of the current status of the mother (Thomson & McLanahan, 2012).

In the majority of cases, children who live with divorced mothers spent some time with a stepfather. Due to multiple disruptions in the family, there is an increasing tendency of various partners coming to reside in the home for various intervals. As a result, children of these families develop various antisocial behaviors such as theft, vandalism and drug use, which are also against the law (Moore, Jekielek & Emig, 2002).

Evidence indicates that in two-parent families with strong within-family relationships, teen's social behavior is under control. For instance, teen pregnancy is very low when highly demanding parents act maturely and offer appropriate understanding with parental rules (Hymovitz, 1997; Weisfeld & Woodward, 2004). Ambert (2006) concluded that intergenerational transmission of single parenthood could lead to teen pregnancy. The opposite is identified among unstable family structures where teen are pushed to early sex and subsequent pregnancies by lack of parental warmth, affection and care (McCullough & Scherman, 1991; Rosen, 1997).

On the other hand, mental and psychological wellbeing of the parents is positively related to the wellbeing of the children (Waldfoegel, Craige & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Studies report that 24 percent of cohabiting mothers are psychologically distressed compared to 29 percent of single unpartnered mothers and 14 percent of married mothers (Brown, 2002). Low and unstable emotional and psychological wellbeing of parents in non-traditional family structures might increase children's behavioral problems (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001).

### **Child poverty**

Socio-economic resources of the parents in married-couple families are stronger than those of cohabiting-partner families (Brown, 2004; Manning, 2006). Even though living with the two biological parents does not always guarantee economic security for children, child poverty is higher among children living in single parent families or other forms of non-traditional family arrangements. These findings indicate that in non-traditional family structures,

economic resources are not shared in the same way as in the traditional family structure leading to fewer benefits for children (Manning & Brown, 2003).

High levels of economic hardship and insecurity increase economic deprivation of children because cohabiting partners face various difficulties to provide adequate food and material goods necessary for their healthy development (McLanahan, 1997). Research indicates that the divorce of parents has been associated with loss of economic resources for children. Low income of divorced female-headed families has increased the malnourishment of their children and pushed them into various behavioral problems (Emery, 1999; McLanahan & Sanderfur, 1994). In general, cohabiting unions are short lived and sharing of resources is less certain (Cancian & Reed, 2009).

Poverty cycle increases challenges of unwed adolescent mothers (Rosen, 1997). Due to low level of education and lack of working experience these mothers usually cannot find a job and sustain their life and their children's life. As a result, children's basic needs are unmet (Rosen, 1997; Tripp & Viner, 2005).

### **Child health**

A healthy child means less costs, strain and internal pressure for the family system. Even though child health is a public good, investment in the health of a child differs among family structures impacting the child's health trajectory over time. Report of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010) on selected measures of access to health care for children under age 18 by family structure, age, sex and race indicates that children who live in nuclear families were healthier and more likely to have access to health care than children living in non-traditional families. In general, children in nuclear families composed of two married parents were less likely to lack health insurance coverage, or to have learning disabilities or ADHD compared to other children living in other family types.

Conway and Li (2012) investigated the relationship between family structure and child health outcome at a particular point in time using data from the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Results of this study indicated that the health situation of children varies in various sets of the family structure depending on the gender of the bio-parents. For instance, non-residential mothers showed a unique influence on the health care the child receives. But, this was diminished when a partner is added. Children in traditional family structures have more access to health than children from blended families because decisions about health investment are more valued by biological parents than by stepparents or temporary parents. If the bargaining

strength is not strong enough within the union (marriage or cohabitation) then health outcomes of the children will be worsened (Conway & Li, 2012).

However, there is a gap in health outcomes of children in single father families. Thus, further research is needed to explore how single fathers make decisions about a child's health access and service.

### **Child abuse**

Change of family structure influences family functioning, limiting the time and possibility of the family members to fulfill the needs of the children and create a safe environment for them. As a result, it is possible that child abuse, neglect and maltreatment are increased in various non-traditional family living arrangements.

Research indicates that parental divorce increases vulnerability of children to physical and sexual abuse occurring after parental divorce (Hester & Patford, 1997; Wilson, 2002). Maltreatment of children in single-parent families is higher than that of the children in two-parent families due to limited resources to devote to child care (Dubowitz, 1999). Lack of required balance between fulfillment of child's physical needs for food, shelter and rearing and freedom for the child to grow emotionally and physically increases the chances of child abuse (Oliver, Kuhns & Pomeranz, 2006). The single resident parent must fulfill multiple tasks, which can lead to responsibility overload due to low level of involvement of other cohabiting partner in task sharing. As a result, some of the child's needs might be overlooked, exposing the child to various developmental risks (Cherlin, 1992).

Berger (2004) used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in U.S.A to explore the effects of family income and structure on child maltreatment. Results indicated that children in single-parent families and families with a biological mother and non-biological father tend to have a lower quality of care giving and a higher maltreatment rate than children living in mother-father families. Research conducted in UK concluded that children grown up in always-intact married families showed the lowest levels of abuse while those in stepfamilies showed an abuse level of six times higher (Whelan, 1993).

Moreover, stepfathers or cohabiting male partners who step into a parental role may have little motivation to meet the needs of female partner's children (Oliver, Kuhnz & Pomeranz, 2006; Waldfogel, Craige & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Usually a stepfather accepts the biological mother's child as part of the initial bargain to have the advantage of living in the home. Thus, the stepfather is less communicative and comprehensive with the stepchildren than

their biological father thus increasing the stepchildren's vulnerability to neglect (Henderson & Dalton, 1995). British data show that the abuse rate of children who live in family structures composed of a mother and her boyfriend (who is not the biological father of the child) is 33 times higher than that identified in the intact married family (Whelan, 1993).

In the case of single-parent families with working mothers children are more exposed to various forms of neglect because of lack of possibility of the breadwinner to regularly monitor and care for them. Less parental monitoring might increase within-family tension and expose children to physical maltreatment and emotional abuse.

### **Child educational achievement**

A comprehensive review of research conducted over the last years indicates that the change of family structure affects children's educational achievement in various directions. It impacts preschool readiness, school attendance, educational achievement, school misbehavior such as alcohol and drug consumption, and the age of first pregnancy in girls (Institute for American Values, 2005). Parke (2003) reviewed literature concerning the effects of family structure on child wellbeing in U.S.A. She concluded that children who grew up in families with both their biological parents in a stable and low conflict marriage progressed well in school and had good results versus those who grew up in single-, step- or cohabiting-parent families. Shaff et al., (2008) used data from the Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 in U.S.A to investigate how reading and math achievement changed in children in divorced and never-married-mother families after parental remarriage. They concluded that children in remarried families progressed better than those in never-married and divorced families.

Furthermore, McLanahan and Sanderfur (1994) found that children born to unmarried parents had a higher tendency to drop out of school than children from divorced families, while children from divorced families had a higher school dropout rate than children from intact families. High residential mobility of children from never-married mothers along with low level of interest to know their biological fathers increases their risks of low school achievement (McKeever & Wolfinger, 2008). The main reasons of high school dropout among children from divorced and separated families include adverse impact of parental conflict, reduced parental support and encouragement (Evans, Kelly & Wanner, 2001). In the case of children who live in single-parent families, economic hardship of the single parent put child education at risk because of

lack of financial resources to afford school expenses and educational demands (Amato et al., 1995).

In addition, low educational achievement and deviant behavior in the school is also identified among children who live with divorced mothers and spent their childhood with a stepfather or various partners who reside temporarily in their home (Moore, Jekielek & Emig, 2002). Research conducted in France indicated that parental divorce shortened the total time of children in education and increased their dropout rate in high school (Archambault, 2002).

### **Child emotional development**

A growing body of research indicates that parental divorce affects children emotionally. The effect continues in their adolescence and adulthood, influencing their intimate relationships and wellbeing (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cunningham & Thornton, 2007; Rodgers, 1994). This stressful life event experienced in their childhood increases their risk of encountering various problems in adulthood such as relationship instability, personal loss and development of depressive symptoms (Ahrons, 2007; Ge, Natsuaki & Conger, 2006; Hetherington, 2003; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007).

In his study to examine the impact of the family formation change on the emotional wellbeing of children in U.S.A, Amato (2005) found that children who grow up with two continuously married parents have a low tendency to experience a wide range of emotional and social problems during their childhood. Stable two-parent families are emotionally closer and less exposed to stressful events. In the case of divorced families, children show weaker bonds with their mothers and fathers compared to their peers in two-parent married families. School attendance and progress is impacted in children who live in the extreme situation of non-married mother families with high residential mobility. As in the previous studies (McKeever & Wolfinger, 2008), Amato (2005) finds that stepfamily formation is seen as being stressful for many children because they have to move in new place, learn new rules and be adaptable.

Fahley, Keilthy and Polek (2012) used data from Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) survey to examine the structure and quality of family relationships and explain links with parent and child wellbeing among the families of nine years old children in Ireland. They conclude that children who live in traditional families enjoy consistent advantage in their emotional development compared to children who live in cohabiting or single parent families. The authors identify the importance of well-educated parents who stay together on child wellbeing if all other things being equal.

In their eleven year longitudinal study to assess the effects of parental divorce on children during their adolescence and early adulthood, Ge, Natsuaki and Conger (2006) found that a) depression symptoms increase during mid-adolescence and decline during young adulthood especially for females; b) development of depressive symptoms differ by gender because females have a greater number of depressive symptoms than males have; c) age of parental divorce experience matters because children who have experienced it by age of 15 years show a sharper increase of development of depressive symptoms; d) the period of parental divorce effect matters on children because when experienced shortly after parental divorce, mediate effects on depressive symptoms.

### **Implications of the change of the family structure in development practice**

The family system can be healthy when family members are capable to balance a sense of separateness from and togetherness with others, as well as control their emotional life (Walsh & Harrigon, 2003). The impact of the ongoing change of the family structure and functioning on child wellbeing indicates that children are innocent victims of the decisions of their parents who are unable to maintain family harmony and stability (Amato et al., 1995). This has several policy implications in development practice which can be best addressed using a multidimensional framework covering multiple influences on children, individual child factors, intra-familial processes and broader evolving socio-economic context (Wise, 2003). Increasing prevalence of single motherhood along with increasing divorce rate of two-parent families shrank fatherhood in modern culture. This has limited the model of fathering to take place within intact two-parent families. This fact should be addressed by policy makers in various family strengthening strategies designed to promote family stability.

Even though marriage is not always the sole guarantee for stable and healthy child wellbeing, increased cohabitation among young generation as a key prerequisite before potential marriage has increased the total number of births outside marriage. This means that a new generation of children is growing up living with only one resident parent. In this regard, support of the institution of marriage should be provided to create sufficient resources for parents to afford upbringing of their children.

The evolving dynamics of the family structure have increased the vulnerability of the family relations, exposing family members to various risks and fragility (Denven, 1996). Increasing number of children and new adults

with various psychological problems, disabilities and depressive symptoms inherited from their dysfunctional unstable childhood in the family of origin raises the question the quality of life of citizens and the society as a whole. Thus, fragmented policies that focus on marriage promotion and enhancement of marital stability will not yield positive outcomes if they are not combined with other interventions that aim at strengthening family cohesion, parent-child bonds and parenting role.

Low level of educational achievement of children from non-traditional family structures should be addressed through designing specific needs-based academic assistance. In the majority of the cases, these children have parents with less education, thus a joint intervention targeting children and their parents might improve educational outcomes (Shaff et al., 2008).

Low socio-economic support provided to families should increasingly address their access to various community-based institutions in order to benefit from their health, social and welfare services. This will provide alternative ways for parents to improve their self-esteem and increase their financial resources in order to successfully raise their children.

Policy makers and development practitioners should recognize various challenges faced by increasing complex family structures and design effective policy interventions to reduce the negative impact on child wellbeing and family instability. The Family Impact Lens approach proposes bottom-up empowerment and strengthening of family system (Bogenschneider et al., 2012). It suggests that policy and practice should support family functioning rather than substitute it. This implies that programs and community-based services should help families build their capacities and take over their responsibilities. They should promote bottom-up family stability through reinforcement of family commitment and dedication to have a better balance between allocation of its resources and freedom for development of its members. Development policy and practice should recognize family ties and diversity to tackle cultural, ethnic and racial differences and disparities when addressing the special needs of the families. Family-centered interventions should be identified and incorporated to ensure that families improve their functioning and are not disconnected from various planning processes. Active involvement and participation of family members and couples in various family strengthening and promotion agenda will help effectively address various overlooked shortcomings and gaps.

In addition, development practitioners should increase their flexibility to timely prevent various long-term negative phenomena that derive from poor family functioning and diverse family structure. They can actively facilitate access to various community-based services for vulnerable families who come

from minority groups or are headed by disabled people. In addition, they can provide needs-based assistance to other families that face various problems such as low access to the labor market, low access to child allowance schemes, low academic progress of children in the school, family conflict.

However, more community research is needed to capture evolving impact of non-traditional family living arrangements on child wellbeing to prevent intended and unintended consequences. It requires both longitudinal and cross-section studies targeting various categories of the new family forms such as single-father headed families, same-sex headed families, ethnic group families.

### **Conclusions**

A growing body of research indicates that socio-economic and legal changes of the last decades have transformed the institution of family, eroded its symbolic meaning and impacted child wellbeing in western developed countries. These can also have implications on Western Balkan countries. New non-traditional family structures emerged and are showing a high level of instability, ongoing internal conflict, high vulnerability to various forms of risks and low capacity of the parents to maintain family harmony. Family systems theory views family as a unit where its members are interrelated and interconnected. It explains that the change of one part of the unit (for instance, parents' relationship) impacts the change of other parts of the system (for instance, child wellbeing and family wellbeing). Thus, the strengthening of the family system to improve child wellbeing is important and should be multi-level addressed. The Family Impact Lens approach provides a bottom-up intervention that aims at empowering this basic societal unit by supporting its functioning, stability, social cohesion and child-parent bonds.

However, generalization of the findings of this literature review are limited due to various gaps identified in research conducted about the impact of the change of the family structure on child wellbeing. Findings reviewed indicated that studies conducted did not use consistent definitions of child wellbeing and family. They were more context-specific depending on the subject of the study. From this standpoint, more research is needed targeting other non-traditional family arrangements such as single-father families, same-sex families, minority and ethnic group families, etcetera.

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