

Changing Family Structures in the 21st Century: Trends and Impacts

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Abstract

Every society has a family, which is a social organisation that brings individuals together in cooperative groupings to manage childbearing and upbringing. Kinship is another name for family relationships, which are social bonds formed by marriage, adoption, or blood. The fundamental unit of society is the family. This article examines the numerous works of literature on how family arrangements are evolving in the twenty-first century. This review highlights significant shifts in family structures in the 21st century, with a growing transition from joint to nuclear families and a steady rise in non-traditional forms such as single-parent, cohabiting, and LGBT families. Despite structural changes, all families seek care, support, and emotional connection. These changes influence individual behavior, parenting roles, and child development. The rise in divorce, delayed marriages, and reduced fertility reflect evolving social values. Increased independence in nuclear families may challenge long-term family stability, with potential shifts toward live-in relationships. Understanding these trends is crucial for shaping responsive policies and sustaining healthy family environments.

Keywords: Changing Family Structures, Social Institution, Society, Single-Parent, Cohabiting, LGBT Families, Parenting Roles, Fertility and Childcare.

1 Introduction

Every culture in the globe has institution after institution, starting with the family. Basic knowledge regarding a variety of responsibilities, such as economic support and emotional satisfaction, would be implemented. Numerous sociologists and human investigators have attempted to comprehend the

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intricacy of the family as the cornerstone of all other social structures [1]. People are sociable creatures by nature. The need of doing division tasks arises from living in a community. Examples include the fundamental needs for reproduction, hunger fulfilment, social regulation, and protection from natural calamities. The institution most suited to fulfil all of these needs is the family. However, in contrast to other institutions, the family is also proven to be the primary source of emotional needs being met. The family institution, as a social structure, is universal and important, yet it is discovered to be regulated by many laws and their modified parameter values that fit the community in which it is situated and still see others as superior or inferior [2]. In the reproduction of different socioeconomic classes, culture seems to be a key institution that tinkers with the "right" means of controlling reproduction and the corresponding sociocultural channels. This unrest has been exacerbated by the modernisation process, which has served as the foundation for developments such as industrialisation, educational expansion, and rural-urban migration [3].

In most countries of the globe, especially India, the family has been a fundamental institution of society. The term "family" refers to a group of people who live together at significant stages of their lives and are connected by biological, social, and psychological ties. It comes from the Latin word "familia," which means "household establishment" [4]. The fundamental unit of society is the family. Families come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and they are vital to both society and the individual members' survival and well-being. The family is the individual's main group and acts as a barrier between their needs and societal expectations and demands [5]. The family has been changing as a social institution. Changes have occurred in both its structure and functions. The family has been the main source of support for family members as well as the hub of economic and social life in India and many other traditional civilisations. Over time, India's family structure has seen substantial changes that reflect the complex interplay between tradition, modernisation, socioeconomic considerations, and cultural shifts. This change reflects broader structural changes in Indian society brought about by urbanisation, globalisation, educational attainment, shifting gender roles, and technological advancements [6], [7].

A. Family Structures in Modern-Day Society

Over time, the forms of families have evolved to reflect changes in how contemporary societies tolerate structural changes. According to Love to Know, there are four common family structure types. Importantly, this text stresses that there is no better or worse kind of family structure [8]. Among these constructions are:

- **Nuclear families:** At least one kid and two parents make up a nuclear family. Married parents with their biological or adopted children living together in a family home is what you think of as a conventional family structure. They are also known as "elementary" families, and while their numbers have begun to decline recently, they are still among the most prevalent kinds. Under one structure, parents nurture their children together. This is the fundamental concept of nuclear families.
- **Single-parent families:** In single-parent households, one parent is responsible for the upbringing of one or more kids. Although they may also receive assistance from extended

family, the family unit frequently comprises a mother and her children, a father and his children, or an individual and their children. Due to an increase in divorce rates and the number of children born outside of marriage, single-parent households are becoming more and more prevalent.

- **Extended families:** Many extended family members living together make up extended families. Parents, along with their children and other relatives (whether by blood or marriage), reside under a single roof in an extended family. This includes aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. This organisation is also seen as very conventional, second only to nuclear families. Families often do this in order to raise their children together and provide mutual support.
- **Families without kids:** Couples in serious relationships often make up families without children. To put it simply, some couples are not a family even when they are unable to have children or decide not to have any. To be precise, the number of families without children is increasing as an increasing number of couples today determine that they do not wish to have children. To the contrary, numerous childless households prioritise the care of their pets or the assistance of their nieces and nephews.

B. Changes in family structure

Following the modifications made to India's family structure

- **Change in fertility:** The size of families is declining in India. Due to the successful implementation of family planning programs and the substantial socioeconomic progress attained over the last 20 years, fertility has decreased. The rising expense of raising children has made it unfeasible for many individuals to have big families. The shifting perspective on the importance of children is a key, growing aspect of the contemporary family. More children were favoured over fewer in previous civilisations because human effort was a source of wealth for the family [9].
- **Change in family system:** nuclearisation of families and the near-complete extinction of the conventional joint family structure. The percentage of families led by women is increasing, notwithstanding the patriarchal structure of the system.
- **Change in age at marriage:** Significant drops in fertility are occurring in India; decreases in the number of single persons have often followed or coincided with drops in marital fertility. The steady rise in the average age at marriage is a significant factor in the rise in the percentage of young people who have never married. A decrease in fecundity is indicated by an increase in the average age of first birth. Females who put off marriage had a delay in childbirth, which led to a smaller household. Additionally, rising rates of divorce and separation. a decrease in arranged weddings, an increase in love marriages, and a move towards people choosing their own partners. Declining rates of child marriage and rising average marriage age [10].
- **Change in mortality:** Everywhere, the drop in fertility was preceded by a reduction in mortality, especially newborn mortality. As a result of increased child survival rates, women were increasingly able to have the full family size they had envisioned by the time they were 30. In the past, a much higher number of births was needed to reach the target total family size. In India, infant mortality has drastically decreased over the last three decades, and this trend surely contributed to the drop in fertility. Decreases in mortality and fertility changed both the population's age distribution and the makeup of individual households [11].

- **Change in family size:** Economic challenges, low incomes, high living expenses, the cost of children's education, and the desire to maintain a higher standard of living—which is best accomplished within the more affordable smaller family—could all be contributing factors to the decline in family size in India. Therefore, the traditional extended family, which typically consists of three generations, was quickly displaced by the nuclear family, which consists of parents and children [12].
- **Change in decision making and conflicts:** Kinship bonds are eroding, and parents and children confer often on family issues before making choices. Husbands and wives, parents and sons, and siblings are experiencing increased tension and conflict.
- **Change in fertility and childcare:** During 2019–21, the overall fertility rate fell to around 2. putting off family planning and the first pregnancy. The duties associated with childcare are increasingly falling within the purview of professional caregiving. The family is no longer as important as it once was in helping kids socialise.
- **Change in gender roles:** The acceptability of girls in the household is growing. The role of women in economic activities outside the household and decision-making within the household are both increasing, which is reflected in the increased participation of women in education.

C. Impact of changing family structure

1. Impact on women

- **Increased Autonomy:** Women now often have more autonomy and agency as a consequence of the shift from conventional joint families to nuclear or non-traditional family arrangements. However, there are differences in women's autonomy depending on factors including religion, geography, caste, and economic standing. Richer joint homes, for example, provide women greater flexibility to make decisions inside the family but less freedom to go outside of it [13].
- **Dual responsibility:** Nuclear families are increasingly dual-income homes as more women enter the workforce, forcing women to balance job obligations with customarily assigned caregiving and housekeeping tasks. This may induce feelings of exhaustion, fatigue, tension, and health complications [14].
- **Economic Opportunities:** Women now have greater access to resources for pursuing higher education and skill development, which has resulted in improved employment prospects and financial independence, as a result of the evolving nature of authority in families.
- **Redefined Gender Roles:** Due to their involvement in home decision-making and economic activity, women in nuclear or non-traditional family configurations often defy conventional gender standards. Additionally, they are sharing more and more household duties with their partners.
- **Socialization:** Women's social networks and support systems have been harmed by the breakdown of the joint family structure. This issue is further complicated by the growing prevalence of non-traditional family structures, particularly those headed by single mothers.

- **Burden of care:** The major burden of caring for the elderly and children falls on women in nuclear households. This will remain an important concern as Indian culture ages and family structures change.

2. Impact on Children

- **Identity formation:** While children in joint homes grow closer to their extended family's history and customs, children in nuclear households often acquire a strong feeling of individual identity and autonomy [15].
- **Social Support:** Children's social and emotional development is hampered in small families by the absence of extended family interactions [16].
- **Single-parent households:** Growing rates of divorce and separation lead to single-parent households, which affects children's wellbeing.
- **Cultural identity:** In contemporary family structures, children often get disconnected from their cultural background.

2 Literature Review

(H, 2025) [17] The study looks at the main causes of these changes, including economic shifts, urbanisation, industrialisation, technical developments, governmental regulations, and cultural dynamics. It also looks at the difficulties that contemporary families face, the psychological effects of family changes, and the influence of economic inequality. This study offers a scholarly perspective and empirical data analysis to investigate the adaptability and resilience of family institutions in the face of societal transformations. Although the family structure is still changing, the results indicate that it still plays a vital role in socialisation, financial stability, and emotional support. In order to handle the complexity of modern family life, the research emphasises the need of inclusive policies and flexible approaches.

(Arvind, 2024) [18] Modern factors, including urbanisation, globalisation, and legal reforms, have changed the dynamics and structures of families. The acceptance of LGBTQ rights, modifications to the rules governing marriage and divorce, and the advancement of women's rights via legal safeguards and economic possibilities are some of the major developments. In addition to changing intergenerational ties and causing the emergence of nuclear families, technological improvements and increasing individualism have also changed family arrangements. All things considered, the constant change in family structures is a reflection of larger cultural shifts and emphasises the need of continued adaptation and legislative reform to meet modern demands and goals.

(Kleinschlömer et al., 2024) [19] A decline in the wellbeing of children is linked to changes in family structure, such as the separation of parents or the creation of a stepfamily. We use data from the German Health Interview and Examination Survey for Children and Adolescents research (2003–2006 and 2014–2017) to examine how changes in family structure affect children's stress levels. C-reactive protein (CRP), a biomarker obtained from blood samples and associated with psychological discomfort, is our outcome variable. According to our research, kids' stress levels are much higher when they move to a

single-parent household than when they move to a stepfamily. These findings are significant as childhood stress may have a detrimental impact on wellbeing in later life.

(Tang et al., 2024) [20] The manner that the family environment affects teenagers' development is largely determined by the structure of the family home. Teenagers' emotional stability, conscientiousness, and agreeableness are all much improved by three-generation co-residence families as compared to two-parent co-residence homes, according to the research. On the other hand, teenagers from skip-generation coresidence families show much worse emotional stability and agreeableness. An additional examination of the underlying mechanisms demonstrates that the non-cognitive abilities of adolescents are positively impacted by the family socioeconomic status and parental involvement in three-generation co-residence families. This research promotes policy suggestions aimed at improving non-cognitive skills in teenagers from skip-generation co-residence households and emphasises the need of taking into account grandparents' influence in adolescent development.

(Luminita & Mirela, 2023) [21] In that all other institutions are influenced by the family, it is the fundamental instrumental nucleus of the broader social structure. Often considered to be the cornerstone of society, the family subsequently contributes to societal stability by establishing the tone it sets in regard to society and by influencing its stability. Children's development is complicatedly influenced by their families, and study can identify how certain traits of parents affect children's acquisition of certain traits. A kid or adolescent's development and education are greatly influenced by the home environment, which is also a significant factor in determining educational effects.

(Charan, 2021) [22] The onset of globalisation and industrialisation has caused a transformation in the Indian family structure. Particularly in metropolitan areas, what was once a small and cohesive framework is now reduced to a nuclear formation. The New Indian Family is manifestly progressive, tolerant, and contemporary; it permits its women to pursue a college education and pursue employment after marriage. Women in the urban family also include single parents, highly qualified spouses, and working moms. Gender roles, gender identities, women's autonomy, and women's status within the contemporary family structure are all examined in the following article.

(Johnston & Shannon E. Cavanagh, 2020) [23] The time of young people's entrance into cohabitation, a shift that may have consequences for future relationship instability throughout adulthood, was compared to the family structure trajectories of children from childhood through adolescence. Early entrance into cohabitation was linked to the timing of changes in family structure as well as the kind of changes (e.g., early moving into a stepfamily household). Notably, there were differences in the relationships between family structure trajectories and the date of cohabitation by gender and race/ethnicity (White, African-American, and Latinx). For example, women who entered stepfamily structures early were more likely to enter cohabitation. White young adults and Latinx young adults, regardless of gender, were more likely to move in together if they had grown up in a stepfamily.

(Sanner et al., 2024) [24] Many Americans think that the growth in single-parent households and the dissolution of the "traditional" two-married-parent family are to blame for the ongoing inequalities in

families. In order to counteract the stagnating theorising in the study of family structure, we re-examine long-held beliefs on the superiority of the heteropatriarchal two-married-parent family using both historical and modern data. We contend that in order to advance science, family researchers need to dedicate themselves to theoretical stances that shift us from traditional family viewpoints to critical viewpoints that direct more complex, comprehensive, and contextualised analyses of the real ways in which family structure functions in people's lives.

3 Research Gap

Despite extensive studies on family structures, notable research gaps remain in understanding the evolving dynamics of families in the 21st century. Much existing literature focuses on nuclear and traditional family models, often overlooking emerging forms such as single-parent households, same-sex families, cohabiting partners, and multigenerational living. There is limited cross-cultural and longitudinal research that examines how socio-economic, technological, and policy changes influence these evolving structures. Additionally, the psychological, developmental, and social impacts on children and family members within non-traditional family units remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps is crucial for shaping inclusive policies and support systems that reflect contemporary family realities.

4 Research Objective

- In this article study the various literature's work on changing family structures in the 21st century.
- Study the trends and impact of changing family structures.

5 Research Methodology

This review paper adopts a qualitative research methodology, utilizing secondary data and a comprehensive literature review to examine the changing family structures in the 21st century, along with impact on women and children. The study analyzes academic journals, scholarly articles, official reports, and case studies published between 2015 and 2025 to ensure a current and in-depth understanding of the subject. By synthesizing interdisciplinary insights from sociology, psychology, and demography, the paper explores emerging trends such as single-parent families, same-sex parenting, cohabitation, and multigenerational households, offering a holistic view of how evolving family forms affect individuals and communities.

6 Conclusion

This review highlights the significant transformations in family structures in the 21st century, emphasizing that no single family type is inherently superior, as all seek love, care, and emotional support. While traditional joint families still exist, nuclear families have become more prevalent due to lifestyle changes and a desire for independence. Non-traditional forms, such as single-parent households, cohabiting couples, and LGBT families, are increasingly visible, reflecting broader societal shifts. These structural changes have profound implications for individual behavior, roles, and functions within the

family unit. The evolving nature of family also impacts child development, education, and emotional well-being, as family climate and parental roles significantly influence youth outcomes. A growing trend toward delayed marriage, increased separation and divorce rates, and reduced fertility due to delayed childbearing has emerged, especially among urban populations. Furthermore, the rise in “live-in relationships” indicates a possible redefinition of family and marriage norms in the future. As families become more diverse, the sustainability of traditional structures, particularly the nuclear family, may be challenged. Overall, the review underscores the need for adaptive policies and support systems that acknowledge and respond to the changing realities of modern families across cultures and generations.

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