

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad  
**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad  
**Band:** 41 (2014)  
**Heft:** 2

**Artikel:** The transparent family  
**Autor:** Lettau, Marc  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907274>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 19.02.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

Many middle-class families who are dependent upon a second income can testify to that. As day nursery rates are income-dependent in Switzerland, low earners are paradoxically slightly better off because they receive allowances. However, this results in disincentives for the middle class that could prove disastrous, especially in times when there is a shortage of specialists in the workforce. Some companies have recognised the problem and now provide internal childcare places and also bear a large share of the costs. It is nonetheless usually only very large companies that can afford to do this as it is too expensive for many small firms. This is where the state has to step in.

#### Family policy voting marathon

The opportunity to move closer to a solution in the foreseeable future was passed up last year. A constitutional article on family policy was defeated by a cantonal majority in March 2013 despite the majority of the Swiss people voting in favour of it. The project was initiated in Parliament by the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP). The new article would have obliged federal government and the cantons to promote the reconciliation of family life, employment and education. The expansion of childcare outside of families and schools would primarily have strengthened the position of working mothers.

The second family policy proposal in the same year was defeated in November 2013. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) wanted to provide tax relief for families who look after their children themselves. They argued that this was only fair as parents who send their children to day nurseries can claim tax allowances. Wrong, said opponents of the SVP's popular initiative – the bill would fiscally favour the "traditional" family with the woman at home looking after the children.

But the parties have not given up – the CVP is now exerting pressure with two initiatives which will spark debate this year. One of its popular initiatives seeks to make child and educational allowances exempt from tax, while the other aims to abolish the so-called marriage penalty whereby married couples are disadvantaged under the old-age and survivors' insurance (AHV) system. The pension of a married couple today stands at 150 percent, whereas

cohabiting partners receive two full pensions.

The Social Democratic Party too is thinking out loud about launching an initiative. It is focussing on demands for a better work-life balance, more affordable childcare places and an increase in child allowances.

#### Burying certain myths

This level of activity indicates that politicians have realised how dramatic the changes to family structures and couples' relationships are. The Federal Statistical Office provides the following summary in its comprehensive 2008 family report: "Various taboos have been broken as a result of the individual gaining independence from society, the emancipation of women, and also the relinquishment of religious and bourgeois values." It should nevertheless be recognised that the taboos that have been broken are not that old at all. Cultural conflict over the "correct" family model and adequate family policy are often based on myths that do not stand up to historical analysis.

The "traditional family" with the fixed allocation of roles between men and women is actually not that old. "This ideal was only first adopted by wide sections of the population in the boom years after the Second World War," reveals Regina Wecker, emerita professor of history at the University of Basel in an article for the German newspaper "Die Zeit". What is often portrayed as something natural and of eternal value existed as the norm for around three decades from 1960 and has not reflected the reality of a majority of people in Switzerland either before or since.

The fact that women undertake employment does not make the present day a historical anomaly either, as it was the norm for centuries. Women made up "the majority of the workforce in the newly created textile factories up to the mid-19th century". Women had simply worked from home prior to that, in the home textile industry, for example.

External childcare is not a recent development either. This phenomenon is only "new" if you do not look back beyond the 1960s. Many children during the 18th and 19th centuries were not raised by their parents. This is not because they had childcare in the modern sense but because their par-

Over 80% of Swiss women are in employment: reconciling family life and a career often involves great stress. Working women are portrayed as uncarrying mothers by some parties.



ents had already died or had no time for their offspring because they had to work. Until the introduction of old-age and survivors' insurance (AHV) in 1948, it was common to place children with other families if a parent died. And, generally speaking, "the requirement for children to have special care and to be looked after only emerged in the 19th century and could not be met until well into the 20th century. Not even by the birth par-

ents because they had no time," says Regina Wecker.

The debate over family policy would be much enhanced if historically untenable myths were not presented as arguments. The single legitimate family type does not exist and never has.

## The transparent family

Whoever is selected is first amazed – and then groans. In Switzerland, the statisticians want to know exactly what the family does, how it is organised, who spends money on what in the family and who earns how much and how. Three thousand families have been randomly picked and then meticulously scrutinised each year since 2000. Those who consent are flabbergasted at the effort involved. They have to record all their purchases and break them down into the tiniest details. They have to note down whether friends invite them to brunch and the monetary value of this invitation. The wife's singing lessons, the day nursery costs, the voluntary assistance to an aunt and the annual donation to the association of Friends of the Mongolian Horse are all documented. And even in the frosty month of January the question "Did you harvest vegetables from your own garden today?" still has to be answered every single day. The statistical drama unfolds over two months – with preliminary meetings, instructions, trial recordings and the subsequent daily noting of every detail for four weeks. There are also additional telephone interviews on top of that about health and wellbeing, the weight of the youngest child and all sorts of other matters.

Thanks to this survey we know a lot about the average Swiss family. We know that it includes 2.23 people and consumes 2.945 kilograms of meat per person each month – almost twice as much as in 1950. We know that it spends just under seven percent of household income on food shopping. Expenditure on "accommodation and energy" has climbed to 15.356 percent or 1,474.78 Swiss francs. We know that the said household spends 768.34 Swiss francs a month on its mobility – 621.24 francs on the car but just 2.89 francs on "transportation of persons via the waterways". The average household is not very epicurean: it contents itself with monthly consumption of 0.449 litres of Swiss white wine and 2.946 litres of beer, while 38.51 francs' worth of cigarette smoke fills the air. Spending on "other tobacco products including drugs" stands at 2.44 francs.

Why the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) explicitly analyses households rather than families is easily explained – the forms home life takes are changing dramatically and the model of the "middle-class family unit" is fading away. In light of this, for statisticians the "household" now equates to family life irrespective of its form. Anyone wishing to find out whether, despite this, their own household matches the Swiss image of the family to some degree will find some comfort in this comment from the FSO: "The traditional small family remains deeply rooted in Switzerland and is the reality experienced by most of the population." But the picture becomes very mixed upon closer inspection. Of the 1,139,800 single-family households with children recorded in 2011 – in lay terms we would simply call these families – only 769,100 were traditional models consisting of a married couple with their own young children or teenagers. The second-largest group was made up of single parents – with 166,900 single mothers and 29,500 single fathers with children. In addition, there were tens of thousands of so-called patchwork families (married couples with children from previous relationships), cohabiting partners with their own children, and family units arising through relationships other than marriage which also consider themselves "patchwork families". There were also several dozen same-sex couples with children.

Marc Lettau

JÜRGEN MÜLLER is an editor with the "Swiss Review"