



# The Institute of Family Living

## GENDER AND FAMILY JUSTICE IN OUR PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

Family therapy is always subtle and complex, and never more so than when we face the challenges of gender and family justice. For many clients, true transformation requires that social institutions such as marriage and family be rethought and redefined so as to be inclusive of diverse approaches.

In the world we now live in, “one size fits all” is far too narrow a paradigm. Such change frequently happens in four related areas: *structurally*, where there is a reconfiguration of roles and tasks; *politically*, in the balance of intra-family power relations; *relationally*, in the way individuals interact with one another; and *culturally*, when the attitudes, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour shift within a particular community.

For several consecutive years, Toronto has been named by the United Nations as “the most multicultural city in the world.” Here, we regularly witness the struggle of diverse peoples to maintain their cultures – their identities, family traditions, and community values – within the context of urbanization, rapid social change, and market-obsessed economics.

This struggle is devastating to men; it may be even more devastating to women, who are often breadwinners as much as their husbands, yet who come home after work to traditional expectations of domestic labour. These women work a “second shift” – cooking, cleaning, planning, organizing the children – with a resulting breakdown in their physical and emotional health. Health Canada’s report *Women and Stress* suggests that this “second shift” is the single most serious hazard to the health of women in Canada. Breakdowns from such stress do obvious harm to entire families, and the solution is *not* for women simply to stay at home.

We therapists learn a great deal about courage and faith from all our clients. The IFL community’s privilege of working within a multicultural team of family therapists, doctors, psychologists, and addiction specialists allows each of us to grow in our own understanding of what constitutes true gender and family justice. Since many of our therapists have themselves been new Canadians from Asian and Caribbean backgrounds, we have learned a great deal from each other about the effects of globalization and acculturation on gender and family relations.

Christians in our group have learned from our Jewish colleagues, some of whose family members are survivors of the Holocaust. Our work with clients from Toronto’s Jewish community has opened our eyes to the long-term effects of genocide and the resulting massive psychic trauma. Recently, we were profoundly moved by the personal story of a survivor of the genocide in Rwanda.

At an IFL staff meeting, this young Christian woman, some of whose family members were murdered, spoke tellingly of the need for truth followed by reconciliation. This is not a superficial forgiveness that never faces the bitter memories and emotions that

genocide creates, and thus never *truly* forgives. She made it quite clear that the process of reconciliation in Rwanda is ongoing, very difficult, but nonetheless imperative in a small country in which both perpetrators and victims must learn to live side by side again.

Certain social trends in the modern world have challenged gender and family relations in many countries, whether industrialized or not. The breakdown of economic cooperation between sexes and generations, the increasing de-institutionalization of marriage (as seen in such phenomena as high divorce rates, temporary cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, male migration, and family desertion), and the privileging of the nuclear family over the extended family are cases in point.

The near-worship of economic growth and the cult of the individual have reaped a terrible harvest: the loss of the idea of community, the common good.

Last year, the federal government unveiled its National Canadian Children's Policy, which seeks to address the impact of poverty on children. Our reality is harsh: one in three children in Canada's cities lives in poverty and depends on food banks. Many single mothers, urban aboriginals, recent immigrants, the disabled, and elderly women can be classified as poor, far out of proportion to their numbers. Fifty-nine percent of single mothers in Canada live in poverty. So do 36 percent of women over the age of 75. In urban settings, lack of day care and lack of adequate subsidized housing are major impediments to improving the situation of disadvantaged women and children.

As therapists who work with family systems and communities, as citizens who live in Toronto's pluralistic milieu, we are challenged by issues of gender injustice and families under siege. People have a hard time meeting the demands of the myth of individualism, the atomization of the larger society, and a ruthless, supposedly "value-free" market economy.

In our globalized age, here are just a few of the specific challenges we try to help our clients deal with:

- *Increasing divorce*, resulting in the absence of fathers and the pauperization of women and children;
- the complexities of *remarried* and/or *blended family* systems, *same-sex* domestic partnerships, and *interfaith* marriages;
- the difficulties of *immigration*, and *cross-cultural* marriages and families; and
- a variety of *medical-ethical issues*, ranging from reproductive technologies (such as in vitro fertilization) to questions of life and death (such as euthanasia).

Whatever our religious beliefs and social theories, IFL's therapists are learning to deal practically and humanely with such issues and the clients who embody them. We pray that we will be up to the challenge.

*by IFL Therapists*



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