

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF A FUNCTIONAL AND RESPONSIBLE FAMILY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**Summary:** In this paper we shall discuss and analyse the key changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the new SARS-Cov-2 virus, which have affected the family and its functioning in the novel emergency situation. In the first part, the authors analyse the family institution, which represents a most vital social institution, as well as the characteristics of a functional and responsible family. This is followed by their focusing on COVID-19, its characteristics and forms of manifestation, and a presentation of the novel situation arising from the broad range of measures passed by the Government with a view to containing the spread of this infectious disease. The authors have presented and analysed in particular the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the family, emphasising the importance of a functional and responsible family in the new circumstances.

**Key words:** functional family, COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, emergency situation

### **Introduction**

The family represents one of the oldest social groups, which has been present since the formation of society in all social systems alike (Počuča Šarkić, 2011: 59). Family implies the community of a narrower or wider circle of persons interconnected by multiple ties, primarily by the community of life and blood relations, among which exist certain rights, as well as obligations stipulated by law, custom, morality or religion, and which constitutes a historically changeable category. Family has always, especially in times of great social changes, been looked upon as a point of support, and a very important shelter for the individual. However, what characterises today's family reality is a powerful pressure of fast, unexpected and very often radical changes in various spheres of social life (Cvejić Jančić, 2009: 49).

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One such change is the COVID-19 pandemic. It has reached almost all the countries worldwide and brought about powerful restrictive responses in many countries. This pandemic is the greatest social challenge for this generation, threatening to change for ever the life we were accustomed to (Bjelajac, Filipović, 2020: 383). The circumstances brought about by COVID-19 influence the functional properties of the family system and are reflected both on family development in general, and on its ability to function adequately in the new circumstances. The state that this virus has led to – the emergency situation – imposes the need for analysis of the importance of a functional and responsible family, a realistic family functionality, as well as the need for identifying the characteristics of desirable models of family system functioning.

### **The family as the most vital social institution**

The family has developed along with society development, and given its role in the reproductive chain, it is relevant for many scientific disciplines, such as law, economics, psychology, sociology, etc. It is therefore difficult to provide a definition which would include all the relations characteristic of a family, which define it, as well as the consequences following from the fact of its existence. To summarise it all, Počuča (2010: 42) defines a family as “the basic unit of society, in which the spouses, children, domestic partners and other relatives, living in a community of life, create natural and legally defined conditions for the development and well-being of all family members, especially children.” With the surge of industrialisation and globalisation, as well as broader social changes, in our country we have seen an increasing stabilisation of the industrial family type, with its transitional forms. This is the small, so-called nuclear family, comprising the family core, or nucleus, after which it is named, which consists of parents and their children (Tripković, 1995: 224). Although the legislator does not define the family, their standards specifically derive from this family type. A subtype of the nuclear family is a one-parent family, consisting of one parent and child (children). There are many reasons resulting in this family type, such as divorce, the death of a parent, leaving the family, etc. However, notwithstanding the non-existence of one parent, this community has all the family characteristics (Počuča, Šarkić, 2019: 66). On the other hand, in most traditional societies, the nuclear family was part of a kind of a broader network of relatives. When close relatives, and not only a married couple and their children, live either in the same household, or in close and constant interrelations, we are speaking of the extended family. An extended family may include grandmothers, grandfathers, brothers and their wives, sisters and their husbands, aunts and nephews. Family members should be connected by relations of respect, equality and deep emotional bonds, but it is often not so in reality. As regards the position of an individual, a certain democratisation of interpersonal relations may be observed, which is demonstrated by the legal equality of spouses, a rise in the employment and independence of women, and their overloading as a result.

It was said a long time ago that “like family, like society (state)”, which means that the stability of the family is what the stability of the whole society rests upon, given that the family is one of the most important pillars of the social system. It provides the biological foundation of society, alongside economic and commercial organisations, which represent its material foundation (Cvejić Jančić, 2009: 50). In addition, family is one of the main factors of preparation of individuals for taking the primary social roles they have in an industrial society, in particular with respect to extended education, readiness to accept routine activities and orientation towards leisure as a refuge and compensation for what is lost or not obtained in the sphere of work (Tripković, 2005: 32).

Family is the unit which makes „the first mark“ on upbringing, socialisation, education and regulation of general human values, and it is therefore most important in a young person’s formation and development. Compatible functional relations based on love, mutual trust and respect can make up for many other deficiencies, including those material in nature. On the other hand, what is constantly being confirmed in practice is that even the greatest material wealth cannot make up for the greatest family fortune, including: functional relations in the family filled with love, trust, understanding and appreciation, which gives the family the role of a foundation of personality development. However, besides the positive, the family may also have a negative effect on the formation of personality, if it is dysfunctional and if the parents are unable to socialise their children (Poljić, Škrebo, 2017: 173). In the opinion of American sociologists Parsons and Bales, family has two primary functions: the primary socialisation and stabilisation of personality. Primary socialisation is a process in which children learn the cultural norms of the society they were born in. Given that this takes place during the first years of childhood, the family is the most important environment for their personality development. The stabilisation of personality refers to the role the family has through the emotional support of adult family members. However, through emphasising the importance of family in the performance of certain functions, Parsons and Bales disregard the role of some other social institutions such as school, the media, or the state. Furthermore, their theory disregards the family forms which do not fit into the nuclear family model (Giddens, 2007: 189). The definition of the purpose or function of the family is influenced by different factors and depends on the aims the family sets before itself, as well as its ability to satisfy the needs of its members. Their definition, as well as the definition of the family, varies depending on the family transformation, which is constant, and on personal experiences and professional orientation, which means that the content and meaning of the family varies and depends on the social and scientific area within which the family is investigated.

Family has the upbringing-educational function in terms of upbringing and handing down rules in society, while in modern conditions the educational function is for the most part transferred to social institutions, such as schools and faculties. Besides the aforesaid, family has other functions as well, such as the biological-reproductive, psychological-emotional, economic, protective and social. The reproductive function includes the sexual and biological components, and is very important for the family itself which is expanded, but also for society, contributing to a

natality rise. The psychological-emotional function is a function successfully realised within the family, which provides psychological-emotional support, love and understanding, primarily to children, but also to its adult members. The economic function comprises the production and consumption components. However, nowadays, adult family members are regularly employed outside the family, so that the production component of this function has been transferred to society, while the consumption component is realised in every family. More precisely, whatever is earned outside the family is as a rule spent within it, so that the family has nowadays predominantly become a consumption unit. The family's protective function serves to protect the lives and health of its members, provide economic, as well as legal and moral protection (Cvejić Jančić, 2009: 52–54). The social function is reflected through the handing down of values, the teaching and raising of descendants who belong to the family. However, it is not to be ignored that social development has also imposed some other socialisation factors, such as school, the media and the internet, as a specific medium the values of which are often in discrepancy with family values, as it promotes the interests of the consumer society. The family is also a corrective if relations within it are based on love, togetherness and tolerance (Počuča, Šarkić, 2019: 66).

### **The functional family**

The specific nature of the functional family is reflected in a higher extent of recognition for the needs of all its members. This kind of family is characterised by a feeling of belonging and solidarity, and a high regard for individuality. One of the features of a functional family is that it responds to its members' developmental needs, encourages their growth and maturity, and provides support in all the phases of both individual and family life cycles. This kind of family is not static, just the opposite, it grows, develops, changes its structure following the stages of individual and family development. The ability of a functional family is to find ways to resolve, and solutions to conflicts it comes up against. Milutinović and Zuković (2008: 427) state that various terms are used in literature to describe well-functioning families, such as emotionally healthy families, strong families, successful, happy, optimal families, etc. Notwithstanding the terms employed, the primary observation of researchers is that the family members believe they live in a family which functions well, and are satisfied with relations within it. However, the effort to fully understand family functionality requires the elaboration of dimensions which define its functionality, enabling us to distinguish between successful and unsuccessful family functioning.

The function of a family can be observed across three levels: the biological, economic and psycho-social, which provide the criteria for the assessment of family functionality, and dysfunctionality alike. These criteria include: personal functioning which serves as basis for measuring the degree of satisfaction of each individual member with their position and role in the family, the marital functioning which is reflected through the partners' feeling of emotional and sexual satisfaction, parental

functioning which provides protection, support, understanding, love, upbringing and socialisation of children, and socioeconomic functioning which establishes and develops family values, economic stability and conformity with the broader social milieu (Zuković, 2008: 115). In addition to the aforesaid criteria, there are other models which represent a successful and strong family. One of the most well-known is the circumplex model of marital and family systems, established by Olson and associates. This model emphasises that cohesiveness, i.e. emotional closeness of family members, and flexibility, i.e. adaptability, represent the key dimensions of family functionality, as well as communication as a stimulating dimension which enables families to realise cohesiveness and flexibility (Olson, Gorall, 2003). One of the most relevant is also the family strengths model, which distinguishes six general dimensions of family functionality, as follows: commitment, positive communication, affection and appreciation, time spent together, spiritual well-being and successful management of situations of crisis. Commitment implies loyalty, honesty, trust and reliability, while affection and appreciation imply one's interest in and concern for others, recognition of individuality, humour, but also acceptance of certain rules. Positive communication is realised through a sense of sharing, readiness for compromise, avoidance of laying blame on others, and appreciation for different opinions. Time spent together is quality time spent in joint activities, and enjoyment in each other's company, filled with fun and laughter. Spiritual well-being implies unity, ethical values, hope and faith, while successful management of crises and stressful situations represents adaptability in seeking different problem-solving options, which strengthens the family (DeFrain, 1999).

A functional family possesses adequate resources, and is capable of fulfilling its tasks and responding to its members' developmental needs. On the other hand, dysfunctional families postpone problem-solving, and do not respond to the developmental needs of their members. A key trait of dysfunctional families that can be singled out is that those families are unsuccessful in meeting the needs for security, survival, self-respect, development of skills for independent life of one or more of their members, problematic, that they display unpredictable and unacceptable patterns of behaviour, as well as neglect, and immoderation in the sphere of emotions, from excessive emotional reactions to total emotional distance, etc. (Svetozarević, Barišić, Dušin, 2016: 79). This kind of family is constantly in crisis, not recognising the problem until the appearance of symptoms in its members, or the threat of a family system breakdown. Additionally, school and family lost the primacy in education of children and adolescents, and new educational subjects took their place (Bjelajac, Filipović, 2018: 17). The role of these subjects, generally belonging to information and communications technologies brought new challenges for functionality of family.

The functional family concept is very often operationalized via the "healthy family" concept, but the criteria for defining this concept are not sufficiently theoretically and empirically well-founded. It is therefore crucial to fully understand and analyse the functionality of the family system in different circumstances, from the current phases of the life cycle that the family is going through, through the potentials it possesses, and through the external elements which can affect its functionality.

## COVID-19 epidemic – consequences

An epidemic of an infectious disease is the development of the infectious disease in a place in a number of persons which is rising on a daily basis, which displays certain specific features associated with infectious diseases (Kekić, Mladan, 2008: 371). The World Health Organization defines an infectious disease epidemic as the outbreak and transmission of a disease from one person to another, or from an animal to a human simultaneously in a community and in a certain area, with a widespread occurrence of the disease (World Health Organization, 2001: 3). Since the discovery of the coronaviruses in 1967, researchers have analysed their share in human pathology. The first cases of a fatal respiratory disease of unknown cause developed in humans in the Guangdong Province in China around the end of 2002. This was followed by reports on the appearance of a similar disease, which was transmitted among health care workers and among families in Hong Kong, Vietnam, Canada and other countries. This syndrome was called “severe acute respiratory syndrome” – SARS. In March 2003 all the necessary measures were taken worldwide to shed light on the cause of the disease and its prevention. A lot of epidemiological research was conducted with the aim of discovering the etiological agent causing this respiratory disease, which was finally identified as a new coronavirus. The disease developed in persons who were in close contact, so that direct contact was regarded as the most significant way of its spreading. Even though the epidemic was contained soon, world experts pointed out the possibility of reappearance of this disease (Kuljić-Kapulica, 2005), which has become reality. The new coronavirus, initially called nCoV, and after that SARS-CoV-2, represents a totally different kind of virus which has never before been identified in the human population. According to genetic structure, it is similar to SARS-CoV.

The new kind of virus, SARS-CoV-2, was registered for the first time in China, in the city of Wuhan. With a view to containing the spread of the disease, this city was quarantined on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020. However, in the meantime, millions of people had left the city to take part in the spring festival, which contributed to the spread of the disease, which was identified as a virus, on a global scale. As it took only one week for the number of new COVID-19 cases to rise more than tenfold, around the end of January 2020 the World Health Organization declared an emergency on the global level (Hossain et al., 2020). While the epidemic in China was gradually subsiding, new foci appeared across Europe.<sup>1</sup> Even though many details on the emergence of this virus, such as its origin and potential for spreading among humans, are unknown, it appears that more and more cases result from transmission from one human to another (Munster et al., 2020: 692). COVID-19 is most frequently transmitted through close contact with infected carriers, via droplets, by sneezing or coughing. Fever, cough and fatigue are the first symptoms. Deterioration occurs suddenly and is manifested by pneumonia which requires admission to intensive care units. In the absence of specific prevention and control measures, health-

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<sup>1</sup> The first fatalities outside China were recorded in the Philippines on 2 February 2020, in France on 15 February, and in Italy on 23 February.

care systems are focused on general prevention measures. The key measures this includes are travel restrictions, minimising social contacts, putting in quarantine persons who were in contact with infected carriers, the introduction of sanitary and hygienic measures, as well as the measure of personal hygiene and proper use of protective personal equipment (Miljković, 2020).

In the light of modern security challenges and threats, infectious disease pandemics are a new security problem which leads to the emergency situation. Thus the pandemic of an infectious disease was represented as a high-risk emergency situation with the emergence of virus SARS-CoV-2, which imposed the need for creating detailed and precise plans for the functioning of states and other units, including the family in fighting this pandemic. In the World Health Organization document on SARS entitled “SARS Risk Assessment and Preparedness Framework”, it was established that all member states of the World Health Organization should treat the pandemic of this disease as an emergency which should be combatted globally.

An emergency, in terms of its semantic meaning, implies a specific, extraordinary and temporary state which lasts for as long as the circumstances which led to its introduction exist. The aim of declaring the emergency is for the state to be able to overcome different kinds of danger in which it has suddenly found itself, even at the cost of recalling, to that end, the law itself, the legal system and the principles that lie at the heart of the rule of law concept (Avramović, 2008: 509). For the purpose of containing the pandemic, different countries have had different approaches, as the World Health Organization’s recommendations are not binding. At first China introduced extremely strict measures, putting the city of Wuhan and 15 other cities in the Hubei Province under strict quarantine. In this way the Chinese created the greatest sanitary cordon in the history of mankind. Besides that, there were other restrictive measures in place too, which physically prevented citizens from leaving the province. When the spread of the epidemic accelerated, many countries followed the Chinese model, including the Republic of Serbia.

Many countries have resorted to declaring an emergency in the last few months. Thus a state of emergency was also declared in the Republic of Serbia on 15 March 2020. This was followed by a host of measures and regulations which have affected the lives of all the Republic of Serbia citizens. In this paper, we shall focus on the introduced measures which have had influence on the family and its functioning.

### **The effect of COVID-19 on the family**

The crisis resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak has hit the society as a whole, and the nuclear family, as the predominant family form nowadays, which is at the same time most susceptible to any upheavals and changes taking place both in society and the family as such.

The decision of declaring the COVID-19 disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus an infectious disease stipulated mandatory 14- or 28-day isolation for domestic

citizens and foreign citizens with approved temporary residence or permanent residence in the Republic of Serbia. The Government passed the Order on the Prohibition of Gatherings in the Republic of Serbia, in public places in closed areas, the Decision on the Suspension of the Realisation of Teaching in University Institutions, Secondary and Primary Schools, and of the Regular Work of Institutions of Pre-School Care and Education, as well as the Operational Plan for the Continuation of the Work of Schools in Difficult Conditions, including a remote-learning programme for primary and secondary-school students. The Order on the Restriction and Prohibition of Movement of Persons in the Republic of Serbia Territory was also passed, which prohibited the movement of all persons over 65 years of age, and banned the movement of others from 5 PM to 5 AM on working days, and from 1 PM on Saturdays to 5 AM on Mondays. An exception was granted for taking pets for walks in certain periods of time, in the duration of up to 20 minutes, and no more than 200 m away from the place of residence, as of 4 April 2020. In addition to the aforesaid, other measures were also introduced, and all of them were completely revoked with the passage of time. Namely, after 53 days the Parliament abolished the emergency situation, with the recommendation that the emergency measures were still to be observed.

Quarantine, prohibition of movement, self-isolation and working from home have become our everyday life. While living in uncertainty and fighting against an “unknown enemy”, it is obvious that all the world is changing, and the question remains when, or rather if it will ever be the same again. As a result of the stipulated measures, the family has also found itself before a “challenge”. The family has become a closed circle, with its members turning to one another, without the possibility of having any social life whatsoever. Naturally, an alleviating circumstance is the possibility of communication via social networks and internet use in order to create virtual contacts and obtain relevant information relating to the situation that is a global phenomenon. Thanks to the social networks we become witnesses to many activities which are fun, and can be performed in isolation, or those related to skill improvement. In the novel situation, we have also witnessed the solidarity of many famous public figures who streamed live on Instagram, creating a positive and fun atmosphere.

On the one hand, establishing communication is good, but on the other, it can lead to the dissemination of misinformation and the spread of panic. The truthfulness of information which is available to everyone is questioned, which can cause additional stress and raise doubts about the whole system. It is therefore essential to filter the information, and it is on the parents to provide the valid information, so that they are faced with a very serious task. While facing their own fears, the parents have been making efforts to calm down the other family members, and give their children answers which they doubt themselves. Yet, the parents should talk to their children openly and honestly about COVID-19, depending on their age. Namely, the children observe the behaviour of adults and their emotions, and follow the model they see. They overhear conversations and the manner of communication even if they are playing in the other part of the room, seemingly uninterested in what is happening



around them (Marković, 2020). In these situations it is very important for the family to focus on maintaining its balance and unity.

School children stopped attending regular classes, and instruction “moved” to the family environment. The children needed explanations why there were no meetings with friends, birthday parties, why they did not go to their kindergarten or school. The parents found themselves in a new situation, being the ones involved in the activities and obligations their children had online, doing their best to maintain a work atmosphere in a home setting. Families with adolescents were now faced with additional challenges. Adolescents are reasonable and understand the reason for introducing the emergency situation, but it is uncertain to what extent they would comply with the stipulated measures. Their main dilemma is what to do at home all day long, how they are going to meet with friends, etc. For that reason the parents should instruct the adolescents in what activities to take up in isolation, and explain to them that social isolation does not mean dissocializing. Children at this age can maintain social interaction by using different technological options, or can help people in the high-risk group, primarily the elderly, by bringing them groceries. In this way the children will feel useful.

If the family is responsible, and if the parents observe the stipulated measures and recommendations setting an example for children, the children themselves will accept the new situation as normal. What matters is that the family is functional and responsible, as in that case it can flexibly change and adjust its daily routine to the new circumstances, and use the pandemic to strengthen and improve the family bonds.

It is evident that the introduced measures have started significantly changing the life of every family, and that our very existence is uncertain. Most parents were temporarily not going to work, and some of them have even lost their jobs. In this way the survival of the family is put at risk, so that the economic function in these conditions is reduced to devising a strategy for mere survival. Being determined by indicators of poverty, i.e. a lack of material assets, the protective function is also called into question, which leads to a collapse of a society’s value system (Počuča, 2014: 31). As a result, the survival of the family has been extremely threatened by the appearance of COVID-19, and the measures which were introduced with a view to containing its spread. Besides that, the introduction of the lockdown restricted the movement of all family members, especially the elderly, whose movement was totally prohibited, which prevented them from maintaining contact with the younger population (grandchildren). Thus unease entered the family, intertwined with stress and insecurity. In a word, crisis followed. In periods of crisis, a loss of balance appears, along with the effort to restore and re-establish it. With regard to crisis, within a family the focus is on the stressor, i.e. the event which has brought about the changes in the family system (Minić, 2009: 428). It is therefore essential for family members to talk about their feelings and fears, giving support to one another. In this way both children and adults feel a relief and experience a sense of security through sharing their emotions. The idea of having to spend a certain period of time in home isolation may be discouraging, but on the other hand, in the current circumstances the time spent with children can be very pleasant and satisfying. Furthermore, home

isolation conditions require the establishment of a stable daily routine that includes the whole family, which is very easy to establish if the family is functional. Generally speaking, the human population is not successfully coping with discomfort, even though quarantine in particular may give us answers to the question if we are satisfied with our lives (Stolarz, 2020).

## Conclusion

COVID-19 is an infectious disease and represents one of the most serious threats to the survival and functioning of the family, and the whole mankind, even the state as such. We might say that infectious disease epidemics may cause greater damage to countries in economic, human, and any other form than all the wars waged so far. The whole world has been facing a pandemic of huge proportions, the health-related, economic, psychological, political, and many other consequences of which are yet to be investigated. It is fully to be expected that the professional public, and the population, have largely been interested in prevention measures, risk factors, epidemiological indicators and treatment of the infected. With the passage of time it has become clear that it is necessary to pay attention to other aspects of life as well, such as the economic, cultural, social, etc., and to certain social groups such as the family, which is facing different challenges due to the circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak.

Based on the analysis of COVID-19 effect on the family, we may conclude that it is of utmost importance for the family to be functional and responsible, considering that such a family is more capable of overcoming each obstacle and crisis it comes up against. Namely, it is characteristic of a family that the balance between what it gives and what it demands and takes is constantly disrupted and changed, not only following the changes of global society, but also following its own dynamics and logic of existence. As a result, although the crisis of the family is undeniably linked to the general crisis of society, it is never a mere “reflection” of the crisis of society, but has its own specific causes and forms of manifestation which must be investigated and analysed.

The family is the best framework for establishing mutual understanding and appreciation, intimate relations and mutual concern, but also, owing to its natural and inherent isolation and separateness, it is no less an environment for the exposure of hatred, intolerance and conflicts. For that reason, if a family is functional, it will take care of all its members. It is a fact that the novel situation caused by the pandemic will leave long-term consequences on all aspects of life and society on a global scale, but if we have a functional and responsible family, it will adjust more easily. On the other hand, if the family in question is dysfunctional, the crisis gains the upper hand and leads to the breakdown of the family system.

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## ЗНАЧАЈ ФУНКЦИОНАЛНЕ И ОДГОВОРНЕ ПОРОДИЦЕ ЗА ВРЕМЕ ПАНДЕМИЈЕ COVID-19

**Сажетак:** У оквиру рада биће разматране и анализиране кључне промене које је изазвала пандемија COVID-19, изазваног новим вирусом SARS-Cov-2, а које су имале утицаја на породицу и њено функционисање у новонасталој ванредној ситуацији. У првом делу рада аутори анализирају институт породице, која представља највиталнију друштвену институцију, као и карактеристике функционалне и одговорне породице. Затим стављају нагласак на COVID-19, његове карактеристике, начин манифестовања, те дају приказ новонастале ситуације услед широког спектра мера које је донела Влада у циљу сузбијања ширења ове епидемије заразне болести. Нарочито је презентован и анализиран утицај пандемије COVID-19 на породицу, истичући значај функционалне и одговорне породице у новонасталим околностима.

**Кључне речи:** функционална породица, COVID-19, корона вирус, пандемија, ванредна ситуација