Jane Addams draws critical attention to the family life of working people. What external factors come to influence family life? What is the best strategy for meaningful reform?

Addams (2001) argues that democracy, education, society, and industrialization are the external factors that are influencing the modern family lives of working people.

She contends that the family life is affected when the state expects its citizens to act conscientiously in the times of danger and crises. The modern state and democracy are interfering in the family life by legitimizing their political claim on their men—the sons, husbands, and fathers in the family—during wartimes. The family life is also encroached upon when preserving and reconstructing some of “the highest institutions [---] which the race has evolved for its safeguard and protection [---]” is the joint responsibility of both the state and the family (pp. 37-38).

Besides the state, Addams (2001) argues, the society also makes claims on its members that may lead to even their disintegration from their families. She cites example of St. Francis who renounced his filial relations to serve the “universal” duties that the religious revival of the thirteenth century Europe bestowed upon him (p.39). The society also claims the physical labor of its energetic young men and women in voluntary works such as “cleaning neglected allys and paving soggy streets” (p.43).

Addams (2001) also argues that the claim of modern education on women is disturbing the fabric of the traditional family. Education offers the same individuality and freedom of action to the women as that to the men. The college education reinforces the society’s “social claim” on the woman by preparing her to participate in the market economy and enter into employment through the labor market. This brings her education in conflict with the traditional
family values which restrict a woman’s roles within her family and social institutions where her family participates as a unit. In addition, the educational methods are often lopsided. While their goal is the collective good for the society, the training it imparts to its pupils guides them to become individualistic and ambitious and to work toward achieving personal distinctions and intellect (pp. 39-42).

And finally, industrialization brings the most profound shifts in the family life by shearing away the economic roles within consanguinal bonds to the external labor market.

The modern family has dropped the man who made its shoes, the women who spun its clothes, and, to a large extent, the woman who washes them… A man of dignity and ability is quite willing to come into a house to tune a piano. Another man of mechanical skill will come to put up window shades. Another of less skill, but of perfect independence, will come to clean and relay a carpet… (pp.50-51)

On the other hand, it creates an industry of household wage labor in families that employs external workforce. This household wage labor industry competes with the factory for labor (pp. 50-59).

Addams (2001) argues that the best strategy for meaningful reform is to introduce institutional mechanisms that will cope with the tensions created by modernity in the family lives. She cites the emergence of “Child Study” classes wherein the parents redefine their notions of parenthood by understanding the assertion of individuality by their children and the various claims that society, state, education, and industrialization make on them (p.43).

Reference