

## BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN RESPONSIBLE REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR OF YOUNG PEOPLE

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** The article presents an analysis of the transformation in attitudes towards marriage and reproductive behaviour of young people in connection with the legalization of abortion and dramatic increase in the availability of contraception in the last decades.

**The aim** of current study is to analyze the socio-psychological problems of out of wedlock births on the ground of family planning services and human rights benefits for the young people.

**Methods.** The study examined statistics on marriages, consensual unions and births in Bulgaria and the European Union during the last decades, as well as the socio-psychological problems of out of wedlock births. The study also covers 108 unmarried mothers in the maternity hospitals in Sofia, Bulgaria, during 2015.

**Results.** The results of research show that consensual unions are preferential choice. Most of the people living in cohabiting unions without marriage are aged 16-39 years. Couples without legal marriage break up more often than those with an official nuptial agreement.

**Conclusion.** The analysis of health risks reveals a general conclusion that there is a need to make better the medical care for the unmarried pregnant women and to invest in responsible reproductive behaviour of the young people through effective family planning.

### RÉSUMÉ

**Les bénéfices de l'investissement dans un comportement de reproduction responsable des jeunes**

**Introduction.** L'article présente une analyse du changement dans le comportement des jeunes envers le mariage et envers le comportement de reproduction concernant la légalisation de l'avortement et l'augmentation dramatique des moyens contraceptifs dans les dernières années.

**L'objectif** de la recherche a été d'analyser les problèmes socio-psychologiques des naissances hors mariage, en se fondant sur les bénéfices pour les jeunes, constituées par l'action des centres de planification familiale et de droits de l'homme.

**Méthodologie.** L'étude a examiné les données statistiques sur les mariages, les cohabitations et les naissances en Bulgarie et dans les pays européens dans les dernières décennies, et aussi les problèmes socio-psychologiques des naissances hors mariage. L'étude a englobé 108 femmes qui avaient accouché hors mariage dans les hôpitaux d'accouchement à Sofia pendant 2015.

**Résultats.** Les résultats de la recherche démontrent que les cohabitations sont un choix préféré. La plupart des gens qui vivent en cohabitation sans être mariés se trouvent dans la tranche d'âge de 16 - 39 ans. Les

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couples sans un contrat de mariage rompent plus souvent leur vie commune en comparaison avec ceux qui ont signé un contrat de mariage officiel.

**Conclusion.** L'analyse des risques pour la santé donne la possibilité de résumer qu'il y a une nécessité d'améliorer les soins médicaux pour les femmes non mariées, et aussi d'investir dans un comportement de reproduction responsable des jeunes par une planification familiale réelle.

**Mots-clés:** naissances hors mariage, révolution sexuelle, cohabitation, comportement de reproduction, planification familiale.

## INTRODUCTION

Around 1970, the European countries experienced a reproductive technology shock. The legalization of abortion and dramatic increase in the availability of contraception gave women the tools to control the number and timing of their children. In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, there have been huge increases in the number of single-parent families headed by unmarried mothers. The usual economic explanations welfare benefits and the declining availability of good jobs explain only a small fraction of the change.

Researchers have found that this rather sudden increase in the availability of both abortion and contraception called a reproductive technology shock is deeply implicated in the increase of out-of-wedlock births. Although many observers expected liberalized abortion and contraception to lead to fewer out-of-wedlock births, in fact the opposite happened because of the erosion in the custom of shot-gun marriages<sup>1</sup>.

Until the early 1970s, shot-gun marriage was the norm in premarital sexual relations. The increased availability of contraception and abortion made shot-gun weddings a thing of the past. Women who were willing to get an abortion or who reliably used contraception no longer found it necessary to condition sexual relations on a promise of marriage in the event of pregnancy. But women who wanted children, who did not want an abortion for moral or religious reasons, or who were unreliable in their use of contraception found themselves pressured to participate in premarital sexual relations without being able to exact a promise of marriage in case of pregnancy. These women feared, correctly, that if they refused sexual relations, they would risk losing their partners. Sexual activity without commitment was increasingly expected in premarital relationships.

Advances in reproductive technology eroded the custom of shot-gun marriage in another way. Before the sexual revolution, women had less freedom, but men were expected to assume responsibility for their welfare. Today women are free to choose, but many men have changed their attitudes concerning the responsibility for unplanned pregnancies. The sexual revolution has made marriage and child support a social choice of the father.

Social scientists provide a convincing explanation that better family planning education, birth control advice, and requirements forcing fathers to give child support are more promising policies to reduce out-of-wedlock births<sup>2</sup>.

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Data of Eurostat project show that the way people live together in the EU has significantly changed in the last decades. Marriage had long been considered as virtually the only way to form a family. This has changed and alternatives to marriage, like consensual unions and registered partnerships, have become more widespread. At the same time, births outside marriage have become more and more frequent<sup>3</sup>.

Data from the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria show that in our country as in many of the EU Member States, the family as a legal union has, for many people, lost its meaning. The number of marriages is declining, while the number of consensual unions is growing. As a result, the birth of a first child often precedes marriage.

The number and share of extra-marital births in Bulgaria increased considerably since 1990. In 1992, 18.5% of infants were born by single mothers, by 2001 the rates had raised to 42.1% and it reached its highest value in 2013 – 59.1%. Since 2006 the share of extra-marital births has permanently surpassed the share of births in marriage.

Comparing the mean age of women at first birth and at first marriage, a tendency is observed for the birth of the first child to precede marriage. An increase is also seen in the average age at which women enter into marriage. In 2001, it was 25 years on the average and in 2010 the age of the first marriage for women rose to 27 years<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Consensual unions – preferred choice***

The changing patterns within the Bulgarian family have a direct bearing on fertility and migration, as well as on many aspects of the organization of society. They are related to social policies and to the ways of influencing the family and marital behaviour of different groups, according to the study of Prof. A. Hristova, Director of the Institute for Population and Human Studies at Bulgarian Academy of Science<sup>5</sup>.

Researchers have also found that Bulgarians postponed the wedding for a long period of time, if they decide to organize an official wedding, and the birth of the first child is also delayed. The shorter duration of the marriage itself is another trend, as many Bulgarians choose to divorce at the age starting from 40 to 49 years. Over fifty percent of Bulgarians with a dissolved marriage fit into this age group. According to researchers, the reasons are both a reevaluation of their human values and the inevitable midlife crisis.

Before 1970, the stigma of unwed motherhood was so great that few women were willing to bear children outside of marriage. Today they put only a few up for adoption because the stigma of unwed motherhood has declined. Data from a national survey indicate that births where the parents live in cohabiting unions reached in 2010 more than half of all births in the country, although there is substantial variation by ethnic group, age, and poverty status<sup>4</sup>.

The age distribution shows that most of the people living in cohabiting unions without marriage are aged 16-39 years. At the same time, the share of people living in consensual unions, without legal marriage, increased considerably. In 2001, 4.7% of the total population of Bulgaria was cohabiting, while in 2011 this share was 9.4%. So far, the percentage of such births is higher in people living in consensual unions aged 30-39 years (13.0%), followed by those aged 20-29 years (6.4%).

### ***Out of wedlock births in cohabiting couples***

The largest increase in out of wedlock births now occurs to cohabiting parents. For 2014 the data show that fathers exist for 72.5 % of the extramarital births, i.e. probably most of the children are growing up in families with parents, cohabiting without marrying. The share of extramarital births in rural areas is higher than in urban ones. Scientists from the

Institute for Population and Human Studies suggest couples without legal marriage break up more often than those with an official nuptial agreement. The children born of these partnerships more often have to overcome issues ensuing from the separation of their parents.

The transformation in attitudes towards marriage and reproductive behaviour of young Bulgarians was captured by our study on socio-psychological problems of out of wedlock births. Our research examines 108 unmarried mothers in the maternity hospitals in Sofia during 2015. We have found that younger women who give birth are substantially more likely than older women to do so outside of marriage. On the other hand, adolescent girls (80%) expect that they will be supported and embraced in their decision to give birth, keep their babies, continue their education, and participate in school activities<sup>6</sup>.

## **CONCLUSION**

Over the last decades, advocates of family planning services have justified family planning on the basis of health and human rights benefits for the young people. Enabling women to have choices in their lives, especially the right to determine the number, timing and spacing of their children free of discrimination, coercion or violence, is key to women's empowerment and gender equality. Researches show that adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to unintended pregnancy; most have inadequate knowledge about contraception, little independence in making decisions about the timing of births and inexperience in obtaining family planning services. They also are poor or lack money of their own or because they are still in school, not working or able to earn only very low wages. The potential benefits of family planning to adolescent girls are especially high.

Investing in family planning is a cost-effective way women to enjoy equal rights and opportunities, including the right to determine their fertility, to be more able to make decisions in the household and participate actively in society. Given the variety of users, the differing country contexts and the many different forms of contraceptive methods, a wide range of service delivery models have evolved over the last two to three decades. Some programs are dedicated to providing only family planning services, other programs are more integrated and provide a range of reproductive and other health services, and some programs try to reach more young people through community outreach methods and through engaging with the social organizations and the private sector under different initiatives<sup>7</sup>.

There is a need of investing in models that go beyond information, education and communication to include elements that explicitly motivate a behaviour change through specific actions, including partner/family communications and decisions influenced by social norms.

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