

### 3.

## FERTILITY

*Balázs Kapitány–Zsolt Spéder*

### MAJOR FINDINGS

- In 2009 fertility in Hungary was among the lowest in Europe, in fact in the whole world.
- Low fertility is, however, not a typically Hungarian phenomenon as all former socialist countries experience an incomparably low level of fertility today. The difference is, however, that while other countries witness a certain rise in fertility in the past few years, in Hungary it is still stagnating.
- The smaller number of children following the change of regimes goes back consider-

ably to the fact that women in their reproductive years postpone childbearing to a later age than the former generations.

- The key factors contributing to the postponement of childbearing are the longer period of education, the shift in the forms of partnerships, the decreasing popularity of marriage, and the difficulties of making an independent livelihood. The personal values underwent a great change, too, namely the realization of individual targets in life overshadows other, more traditional ones.
- The rate of those with two children is expected to decrease in the future, just like that of those remaining without a child, while the rate of those with one child or three children is likely to increase.
- Owing to the spread of cohabitation two fifths of the newborn will arrive out of wedlock.
- Young couples still plan to have more than two children on average but only one third of them can fulfil their plans in the planned period.
- It can be an important target of social and family policy to facilitate the realization of these couples' plans.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION

In 1990 and 1991 there were still 126,000 children born in Hungary but the number of births was steadily decreasing in the years 1991–1998. Since then it has been considerably stable, resulting in 95–100,000 children each year. The year 2009 is likely to fall in this category, too (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. *The number of live births in Hungary, 1990–2008*



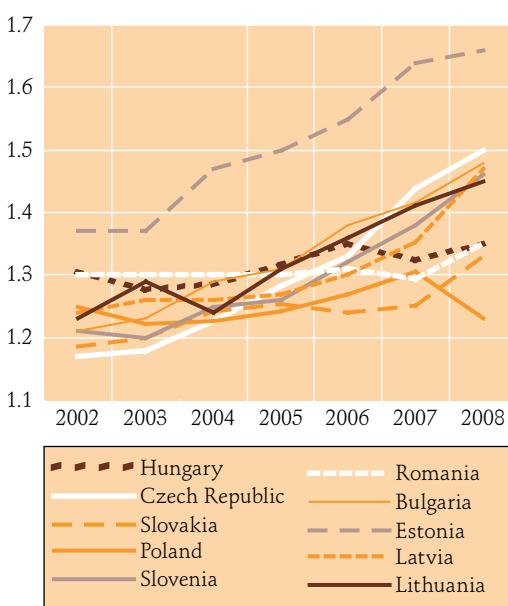
The seeming stability covers incessant changes. Similarly to the conditions in the rest of Europe and the neighbouring countries the tendencies of childbearing underwent a considerable change in Hungary, too, and the proportion of reproductive age groups within the society has changed.

To interpret the yearly number of newborn babies below 100,000 it has to be taken into account that the so-called total fertility rate (TFR) should be higher than 2 in order to reproduce the generation of the parents. In 1990 the total fertility rate was 1.84, i.e., the lag was still a mere 10 per cent. Following the drop in fertility in Hungary in the mid-1990s this rate was regularly between 1.27 and 1.36, which means that

fertility is permanently lower by one third than the level necessary for the reproduction of the population.

According to the data from 2008 Hungary is among the countries featuring the lowest fertility rate in Europe and the world. Among the 27 countries of the European Union Hungary shares the 24th place with Romania. A lower level of fertility can be observed only in Slovakia and Poland. Making it simple, Europe can be divided into three distinct regions as regards fertility. The countries of Northern and Northwestern Europe do not have serious problems concerning fertility. With the exception of Luxembourg the TFR is around 1.8 or higher (in France and Ireland above 2). The lowest rates can be found in Central Europe, while most of the southern states show a fertility rate around 1.4 (Map 1).

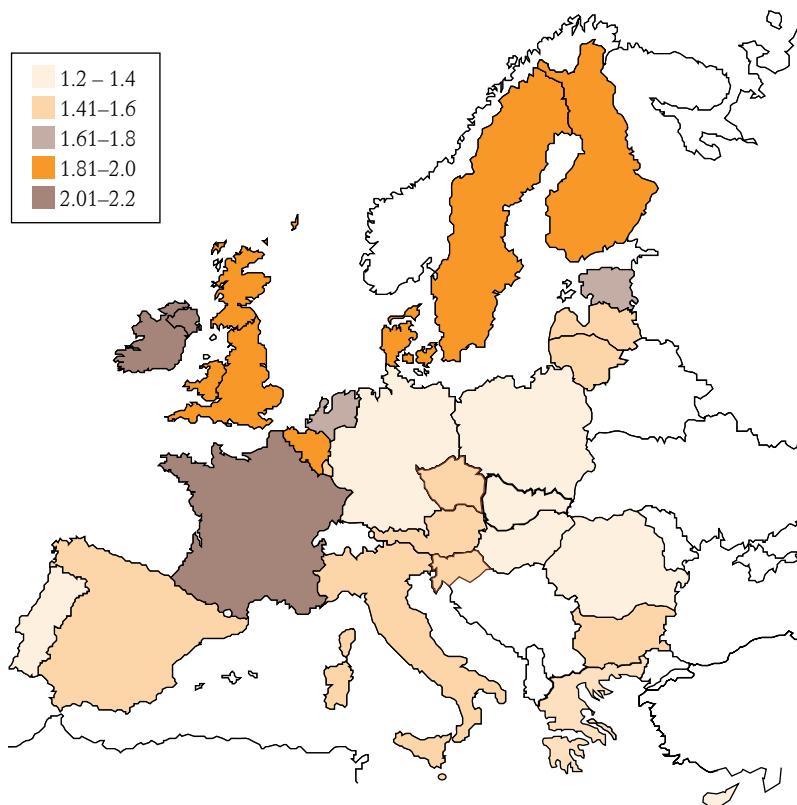
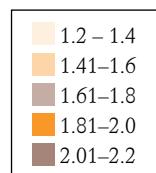
Fig. 2. *Total fertility rate (TFR) in ten new member states of the European Union, 2002–2008*



Source: EUROSTAT

Map 1. Total fertility rate (TFR) in the individual countries of the European Union (EU 27), 2008

Austria	1.81
Belgium	1.82
Bulgaria	1.48
Cyprus	1.39
Czech Republic	1.50
Denmark	1.89
United Kingdom	1.94
Estonia	1.66
Finland	1.85
France	2.02
Greece	1.45
Holland	1.77
Ireland	2.03
Poland	1.23
Latvia	1.45
Lithuania	1.47
Luxembourg	1.61
Hungary	1.35
Malta	1.43
Germany	1.37
Italy	1.41
Portugal	1.37
Romania	1.35
Spain	1.46
Sweden	1.91
Slovakia	1.33
Slovenia	1.46



Source: EUROSTAT, 2009

The present, even in international comparison extremely low number of children in Hungary goes back to the fact that the rise in fertility characterizing other countries of Europe with similarly low fertility rates did not come about in this country. The first years of the new millennium witnessed namely a steady rise in fertility in the ten new East Central European members of the European Union that used to have very low fertility rates (*Fig. 2*).

Hungary still occupied a relatively favourable position among the new member states of the EU in 2002 with its birth rate similar to the present one but the same rate is much below the average today. Conse-

quently, the situation of the 1990s, namely that despite its periodic decreases fertility in Hungary was somewhat higher than that of the other former socialist countries joining the European Union never repeated itself.

### THE INCREASING MEAN AGE AT CHILDBIRTH AND THE CHANGING FAMILY SETTING

The decreasing fertility rates after the fall of communism in the whole East Central European region go back primarily to the fact that the former pattern to have children

young stopped to exist and an ever growing number of women followed the West European example of postponing the birth of their first child to their late twenties or early thirties. Due to this abrupt shift in the timing of the first child the number of babies fell considerably as compared to earlier years. As a consequence of postponement TFR decreased greatly in the given years. Postponement of childbirth comes, however, up to biological difficulties, so it could be hoped that children planned but postponed would eventually be born, anyway.

The replacement of the missing number of children began, however, only in half of the countries concerned (Czech Republic, Estonia, Bulgaria, etc., see *Fig. 2*), and being a new phenomenon, its causes cannot be specified yet. It is especially surprising that the rise did not even begin in Hungary. Demographers calculated, namely, that the numerous generation born around 1975 (the so-called Ratkó<sup>1</sup> grandchildren), having reached their thirties, would start to have the children they postponed while in their twenties.

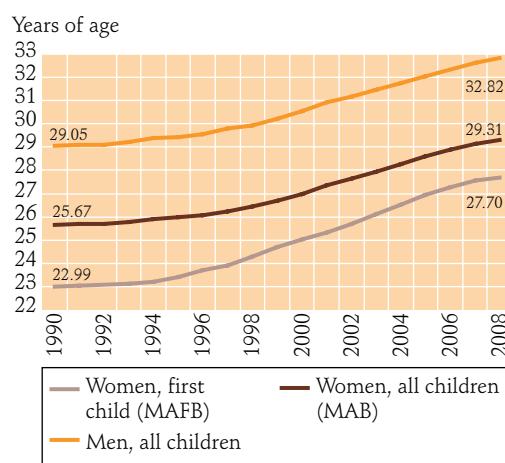
The significant shift in timing that took place within a short period is illustrated by the fact that while in 1990 over three quarters of the women giving birth for the first time were under 25, the respective rate is hardly over one quarter today. A formerly quite general social phenomenon, i.e., childbirth in one's early twenties has thus become a rarity. Side by side with the change in the behavioural patterns the people's views about the timing of children have changed as well. A mother in her early twenties is considered definitely young

<sup>1</sup> Ratkó Anna was Minister of Health in the early 1950s, who introduced a ban of abortions and even introduced a 'childlessness tax' (translator's note).

both by public opinion in general and by the members of her own age-group. The demographic survey *Turning Points of the Life Course* for the years 2008-2009 shows that only 16 per cent of the age group 20-24 thinks that first children should be born before the mother turns 25.

The easiest indicator of the ageing of parents is the mean age (mostly of women) at the birth of their first child (*Fig. 3*) (MAFB; MAB).

Fig. 3. Mean age of women and men at the birth of their children, 1990–2008

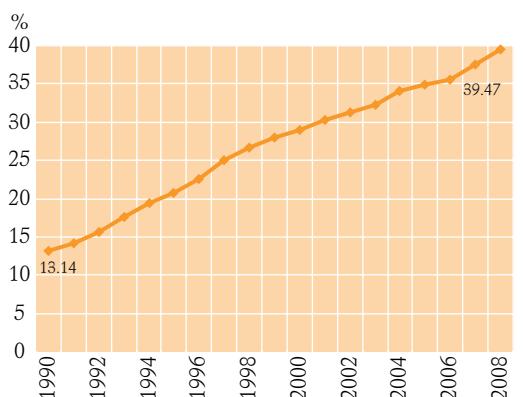


Source: Vital statistics, Hungarian Central Statistical Office–Demographic Research Institute

The mean age of women at the time of the birth of their first child rose by five years, from 23 to 28 in the period 1990-2008. Taking all children into consideration we can establish that the mean age of the parents at child-birth increased by four years, that of the women from 26 to 30 and that of the men from 29 to 33. The tendency accelerated in the second half of the 1990s and continues steadily, though there was a slight slackening in the past two years. The slowing down of postponement was, however, not accompanied by the expected rise in fertility.

Another basic change is that in harmony with the tendencies in the rest of Europe the rate of having children out of wedlock increased greatly, namely from 13 per cent in 1990 to nearly 40 per cent in 2008 (*Fig. 4.*)

*Fig. 4. Rate of births out of wedlock in Hungary, 1990–2008*



Source: Vital statistics, Hungarian Central Statistical Office – Demographic Research Institute

Although the number of births did not change in the past ten years, the number of intramarital births decreased from 109,000 in 1990 to 75,000 in 1998 and is expected to drop to about 60,000 in 2009. At the same time, the number of children born out of wedlock became nearly two and a half times as high as at the beginning of the period. Having children out of wedlock shows a characteristic social distribution. In 2007 over two thirds of new mothers with at best eight grades of primary school were unmarried at the time of the birth of their children, while among those with university or college degree this rate was only 17 per cent (see *Demográfiai évkönyv*, 2007).

The heavily growing number of extramarital births is a result of two processes. Firstly, the rate of children conceived out of wedlock is increasing. Secondly, children conceived out of wedlock are born out of

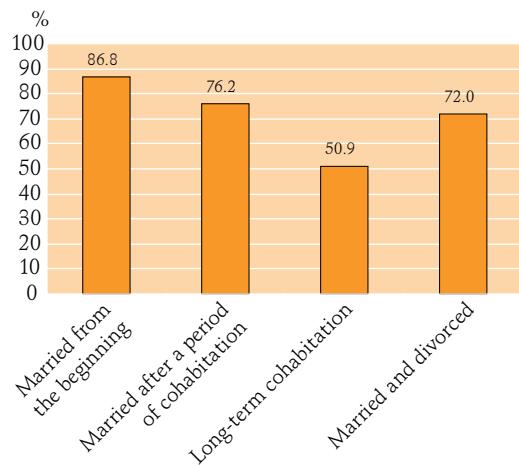
wedlock in higher numbers and in increasing proportions, too, compared to the previous period. This means that parents do not consider the legitimization of their children before their birth as important as earlier.

The spread of extramarital births is in connection also with the shift in the types of partnership. Not so much with the growing number of single-parent families than with the growing popularity of cohabitation (see Chapter 1 of the present volume). According to the researchers' estimates not quite one third of children born out of wedlock today arrive in single-parent families (lacking fathers). Two thirds of them have parents living in a lasting partnership though in a usually less stable one than marriage.

The transformation of partnership is, however, not indifferent as regards fertility. The postponement and the decreasing number of marriages, as well as the growing popularity of cohabitation and the increasing instability of partnership leave their marks on the number of offsprings, too. The lack of a suitable partner is naturally an obstacle in the way of having children. Two thirds of childless persons in the age group 30–34 do not have stable partners. The course of partnerships is not indifferent, either. Examining the first five years of partnerships it can be established that the greatest risk of having children can be observed in the case of those who get married right at the time of moving in together. This group is followed by those who get married after a longer period of cohabitation, and those living permanently in cohabitation are the least likely to have children (*Fig. 5*).

It is naturally not easy to find the reasons and foresee the consequences. It is a well-known fact that prior to 1990 many

Fig. 5. The risk of having children in the first five years of partnership (percentage of those with children).\*



\*= Comprehensive data for all unions formed between 1970 and 1999.

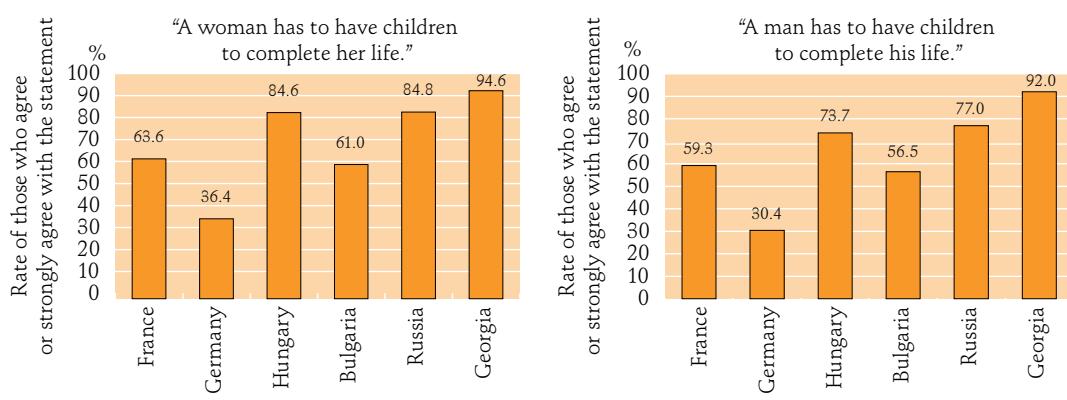
Source: Turning Points of the Life Course, Demographic Research Institute. (Authors' calculations)

couples got married just because the baby was on the way (so-called shot-gun marriages). Today this is a much less frequent phenomenon, though not quite negligible. It seems, however, that the shift among the forms of partnership played an important role in the decrease of fertility rates.

Data referring to the number of children reveal that the predominant family model of the 1980s, i.e., a couple with two children, is losing its significance. Although final results can be obtained only about the age groups above 45, it can be rightly presumed that the rate of childless women and those with one child only will grow among women in their thirties to day, while the rate of those with three or more children will not decrease or can even rise slightly. Due to the growing tendency of relationships to disintegrate, the rate of women with two children by different fathers is likely to increase in the future.

The change of values considerably contributes to the trends concerning the number of children. According to some authors individualism and the desire for autonomy, while according to others hedonism are responsible for the change. A great number of studies prove the role of values and norms in a person's decision about childbearing. It is important to note that the decisive majority of the Hungarian population considers children as important and indispensable assets of life, as proved by the *Generation and Gender Survey*

Fig. 6. Rate of persons agreeing with allegations as to female and male gender roles in six European countries, 2001–2005



Source: Gender and Generation Survey, the authors' calculations

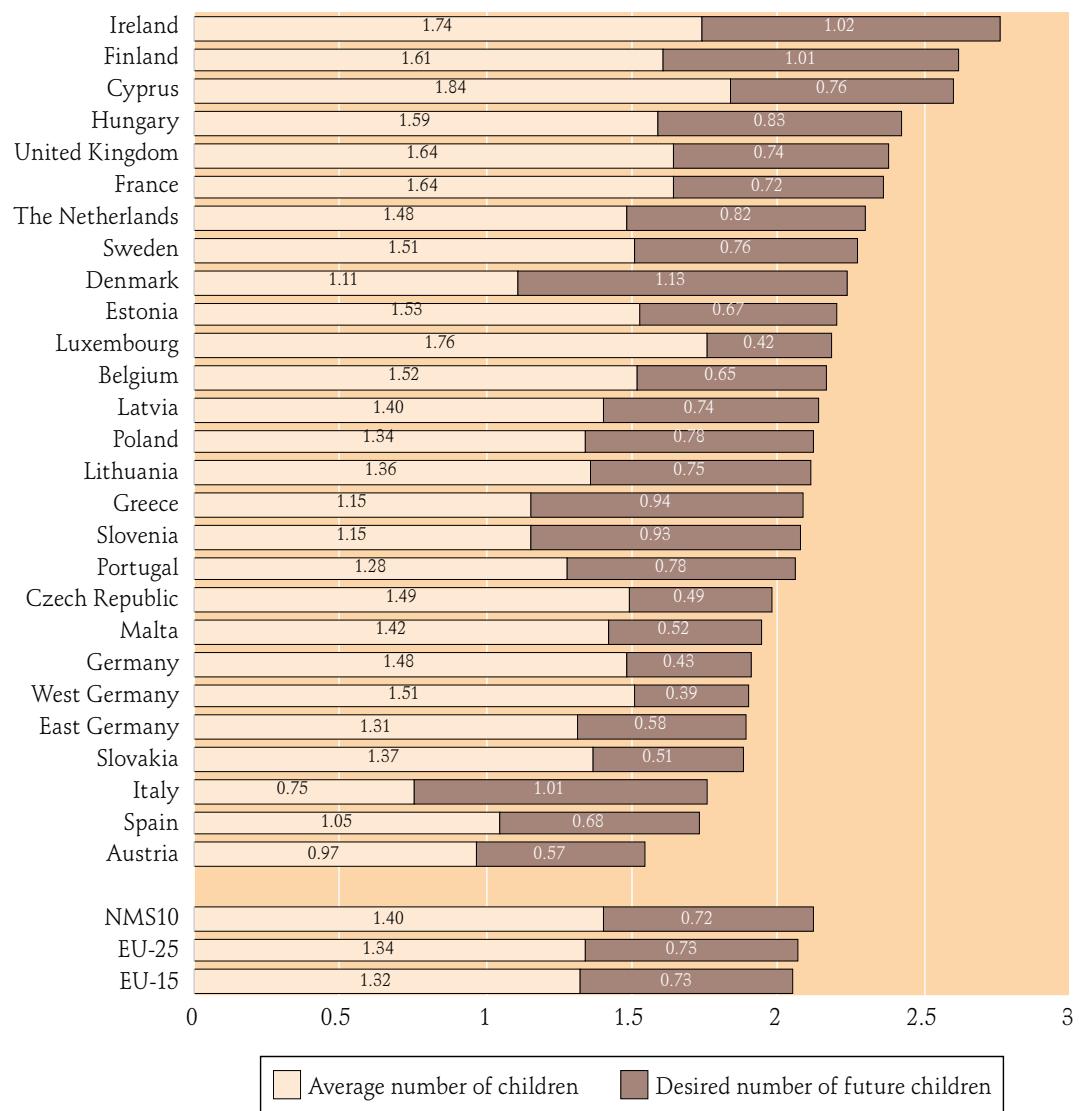
that asked people whether they consider children indispensable for a perfect life (*Fig. 6*).

In most countries people (more women than men) consider children as inseparable parts of life. In Hungary, the proportion of people holding this opinion is higher than the average.

## PLANS AND FACTS

In order to understand decreasing fertility we have to take into consideration the individual plans and desires. In a modern democratic society demographic policy aims at facilitating the birth of all desired children.

*Fig. 7. Average number of children and total number of desired children in the countries of the European Union (EU 25) among women of 25–39 years of age*



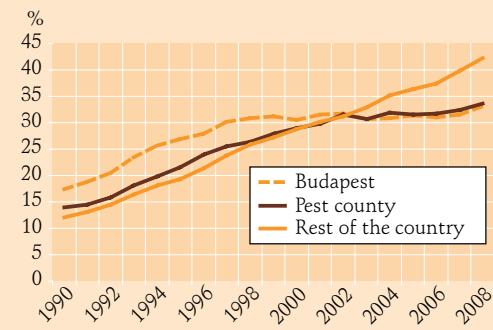
Source: Testa, 2007, p. 364.

**BUDAPEST AND THE REST OF THE COUNTRY.  
SOMETHING HAS CHANGED.**

Indicators of fertility reveal that a shift has recently taken place in this respect. In Budapest the rate of extramarital births has been traditionally high, much above the national average. In the second half of the 1990s it was already about 30 per cent. This rate seems to stagnate in the capital in the past few years just like in the surrounding area where it reached this level around the turn of the millennium. In the rest of the country the rate of children born out of wedlock is, however, steadily increasing and the average of nearly all counties is considerably higher today than that of Budapest and its vicinity. In 2008 at least half of the children were born out of wedlock in 48 statistical sub-regions (LAU1-level) of the country. A rate below 25 per cent could

be observed only in certain “elite” districts of the capital populated mostly by people with higher education, in two high-status suburban sub-regions (Budaörs and Pilisvörösvár), and in the territories bordering Austria.

*Fig. 9. Rate of births out of wedlock, 1990–2008*



Source: Vital statistics, Hungarian Central Statistical Office

Should those in their reproductive years not want to raise as many children as are necessary to avoid the irreversible ageing of the society, politics would not be in the position to change individual plans. In Hungary the situation is, however, different as there is a considerable discrepancy between desires as to the number of future children and the possibility of their realization. The total number of desired children indicating personal plans considerably surpasses the actual number of children and is over 2, which would be sufficient for keeping the population on level. Consequently the main cause of low fertility in Hungary is not that the age groups concerned do not want children but that they cannot fulfil their plans as to the size of their future family.

Why is it important to realize this fact? One of the outstanding results of demographic surveys in Europe in the past decade is that low fertility in the individual countries came about by different num-

bers of desired children. In the years since the turn of the millennium certain countries experienced an abrupt decrease in the number of desired children, far greater than the actual decrease of fertility. Plans for less than two children could be first detected in the German-speaking countries. The Eurobarometer for 2005 indicates that at that time there were already nine EU member states in which the total number of desired children remained below 2 (*Fig. 7*). Hungary does not belong to them.

Finding the reason of the failure to fulfil these plans would help us find a solution to the problem or at least find out measures to help couples having the desired number of children.

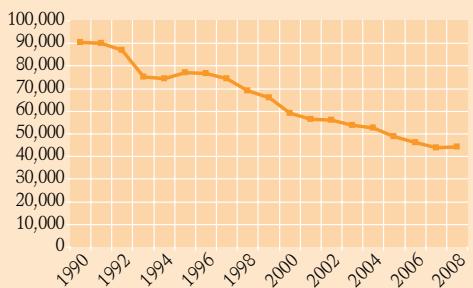
Our surveys reveal that only 29 per cent of those wanting to have children within three years could realize their goals between 2002 and 2005 in Hungary. The majority had to postpone having children in that period and some (about one fifth of

### INDUCED ABORTION

The lasting and considerable decrease in the number of induced abortions in Hungary is one of the few welcome facts as regards demographic processes. While in 1990 over 90,000 abortions were performed, the number dropped to 44,000 in 2008. The degree of the decrease was different in the various groups of society. It was the greatest in the case of very young and elderly women, while in the case of those in their twenties it was smaller than the average. Whereas in the early 1990s over 60 per cent of the induces abortions was performed for married women, today this rate is hardly over 30 per cent. There are regional differences as well. Abortion is especially frequent in Northern

Hungary (Nógrád, Heves, and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén counties) where both unemployment and the rate of the Roma population are equally high.

Fig. 10. *Abortions in Hungary, 1990–2008*



Source: Vital statistics,  
Hungarian Central Statistical Office

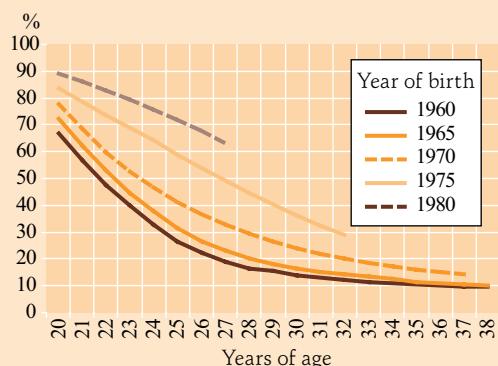
### CHILDLESSNESS

Public opinion and demographers are equally interested in the degree of childlessness within the society. The rate of childlessness among women due to biological reasons (infecundity) is about 4 to 5 per cent. There are still countries where much more women renounce motherhood. For example, in the United States their rate is around 20 per cent, and in Germany about 30 per cent. The excess rate beyond the one justified by biological reasons is partly due to a conscious personal choice, partly to the passive acceptance of the circumstances ("I ran out of time", "it just happened so", etc.).

Although conscious childlessness is not seriously wide-spread in Hungary, the data clearly indicate that among persons in their thirties today the rate of childlessness will rise significantly as compared to earlier generations. As soon as childlessness gets conspicu-

ous on a social level, public opinion is likely to change as regards family and children, which will certainly influence the life of families with children, too.

Fig. 11. *The rate of childless women in some birth cohorts*

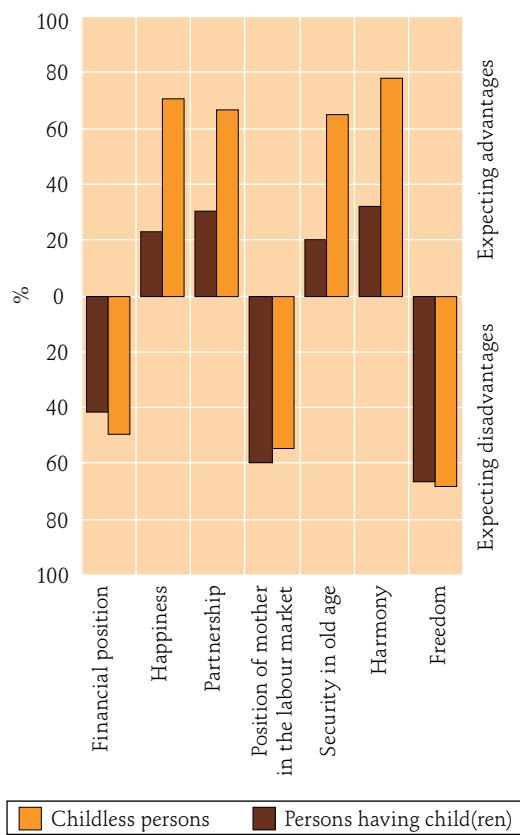


Source: Fertility database, 1995–2005. (Author's calculations)

the concerned) gave it up altogether. Those who succeeded in having children as desired were different from the others in several respects.

There are demographic, social, and institutional preconditions of having the desired number of children. The fact that older age groups fail to have children more

Fig. 8. Rate of persons with or without children expecting predominantly advantages or disadvantages from the birth of a child by various aspects of life, 2004–2005



Source: Turning points of the Life Course, Demographic Research Institute. (Authors calculations)

often can presumably be explained by biological factors, too. It is important, therefore, to call attention to the possible result of postponing children too long, namely to the possibility of the final cancellation of parenthood. As becoming a parent with the birth of the first child brings about the most fundamental change in a person's life as compared to his/her earlier years, it is not by chance that the realization of the plans of childless people is more uncertain than those of people who already have child(ren). Having children

is a decision for life resulting in irreversible changes that closes doors (especially for women) and at the same time opens up new possibilities. The key of success is a stable partnership. Those who live in a LAT partnership (See Chapter 1) realize their plans much less frequently than those living in cohabitation, and people living in cohabitation similarly less frequently than married couples.

Viewing things from socio-political points of view it is especially exciting to reveal what institutional and behavioural factors interfere with the fulfilment of reproductive plans or facilitate their realization. Research results confirm the assumption that the childcare system and the conditions of the labour market play an important part in all that. However, the labour market and the highly complicated Hungarian system of family support do not have a similar influence on all women. Their impact is different as regards the various groups of women by social layers and family types.<sup>2</sup>

To put it simply, as a result of this differentiating effect working women with low incomes realize their reproductive plans to a much greater degree than others. For them the childcare fee (GYED)(see Chapter 4 of the present volume) is a good substitute for their income, which is favourable for them. As a contrast, among those with a higher income GYED is not enough to compensate for the loss suffered by leaving the labour market (opportunity cost).

At the same time, among mothers receiving maternity benefits it is the group

<sup>2</sup> See also Spéder Zs. and Kapitány B. (2007), Gyermek: vágyak és tények. Dinamikus termékenységi elemzések (Children. Desires and facts. Dynamic fertility analyses). *Turning Points of the Life Course. Working Papers*, 6 (Budapest: Demographic Research Institute)

of those with higher education and higher positions in society who are more likely to be able to afford having the second or even the third child, most probably due similarly to reasons going back to the labour market and the childcare system. But as soon as mothers go back to work once the period of childcare allowances is over, the risk of the realization of their future plans for more children decreases considerably. Mothers, namely, think twice before leaving the labour market again as it is more difficult to get back every time. In other words, if the second child is not born while the mother is still on maternity leave with the first one, it is less likely to come into the world at all. Consequently, the labour market and the childcare system play a great part in the fact that the average number of children born to mothers in the medium layers of society with moderate incomes has been rapidly decreasing since 1990 and is the lowest today (characteristically one child only), while the upper layers are getting polarized. The rate of upper-layer women without children or with several children is growing and that of those with one child is falling. (The rate of women with higher education having a single child decreased from 28.3 per cent in 1990 to 23.8 per cent in 2005.) It can be established that in many cases the labour market hinders the realization of reproductive plans and is the most unfavourable as regards the prospective second child and children of higher order of women with average education or educated below the average.

The above research results are in tune with the answers to the question about the consequences of the birth of a(nother) child on the financial conditions of the family, on the employment of the mother, on

the possibility of bringing decisions freely or on the happiness of the family among others. *Fig. 8* shows the rate of majority answers. Figures above the horizontal dividing line indicate the dominance of positive consequences, while the ones below the line indicate that of negative ones. For example, 68.3 per cent of childless people expect the deterioration of their financial position. (The opinions of persons with or without children are presented separately.)

The opinions are fairly uniform as to the advantages and disadvantages of having a new baby. People mostly expect the child to give them happiness, harmony, and security for their old age, at the same time they are aware of the growing financial burdens and the greater limitations as to the mothers' employment and freedom.

## HOME PAGES

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<http://www.un.org/esa/population> – United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division  
[www.unece.org/pau/ggp](http://www.unece.org/pau/ggp) – Generations and Gender Survey

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