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BIRTH OUT OF WEDLOCK

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Introduction

In Hungary the ratio of births out of wedlock was low for many decades amounting to only 5–6 percent of all births. In the early-mid 80s this percentage began to grow and increased dramatically during the nineties. In the last two years nearly 30 percent of all births was out of wedlock. This phenomenon is obviously attributable to the growing popularity of cohabitation. Just as in many other European countries, the institution of marriage has entered into an era of change in Hungary.

Despite the growing rate of cohabitation without marriage, this type of living arrangement is still relatively rare in Hungary. As it appears in the microcensus of 1996 overwhelming majority of couples – about 75 percent – are married. Beside the 16–17% of those living in one parent household the 8–9 percent of those opting for cohabitation cannot be considered dominant in this context. However, cohabitation without marriage is clearly becoming ever more popular among couples in Hungary too. In addition, there has been a growing social tolerance towards such life pattern beyond those choosing it. Although the average ratio of couples living in cohabitation is relatively low, in the case of younger generations cohabitation without marriage is widespread reaching an estimated 25–30 percent among people in the age group of 20–29 years. Of course, this does not mean that the members of this cohort will live all their lives in such relationships. Some will marry the current partner or someone else, but the fact that in the most fertile period of their life they choose cohabitation provides an explanation to the dramatic increase in births out of wedlock witnessed recently in Hungary.

In spite of the growing ratio of births out of wedlock and cohabitation without marriage, the attitude of the Hungarians is still fundamentally traditional or conservative. Unlike in some countries in Western and Northern Europe, the question is not why people decide to get married, but just the opposite, why does a major and growing portion of couples prefer cohabitation to marriage? The apparent similarities of cohabitation as a social phenomenon conceal these two different perspectives. Behind the Hungarian perspective there is a marriage-oriented value system and a traditional idea of the family.

According to our previous research, the reservations of the Hungarian society about cohabitation and births out of wedlock are essentially not of moral nature but are connected to the worries about the security of children born out of wedlock. This assumption is supported by statistical evidence according to which cohabitation is a less stable partner relationship and consequently it fails to provide the same level of security to children in the long run as legal marriage. Similarly, the fertility rate of cohabitation is lower than that of marriages and thus their contribution to the reproduction the existing population is smaller. In addition, after giving birth out of wedlock a considerable portion of mothers are left to raise the child alone and the single-parent status results in a number of social and financial problems in raising the child.

The crucial question here is whether the continuous increase of births out of wedlock expected throughout Europe and in Hungary will be accompanied by a change in the internal content of the relationship between the parents that will make this family form more stable. As increasing

numbers choose this living arrangement, will this sort of family relationship become increasingly similar to the pattern of marriage-based family life, and the only difference will be official documentation of the partnership? Furthermore, are mothers raising their children alone rely only on themselves and truly on their own or do new alternatives of family life present an option for them? For example parents although living in separate homes continue to have strong emotional ties. By answering these questions we shall be able to develop novel approaches in terms of the legal, social and family policies for the problems related to births out of wedlock.

The above questions were also incorporated into the survey conducted by the Demographic Research Institute in 1996. The survey sample consisted of 1,500 mothers that gave births out of wedlock in 1995. The primary goal of this survey was to identify how conscious the decisions of these mothers were to have a baby without having a legal relationship with a partner. This involved several questions concerning the nature of their decision to give birth out of wedlock. Was their choice determined by their value system? If so, was this a final decision or was it the result of necessity stemming from individual circumstances that do not exclude future marriage. These questions aimed at answering if an irreversible process was observable eroding the traditional form of family life based on marriage or if cohabitation would evolve as an alternative to legal marriage also surviving the changes. Furthermore the question how these processes will effect the situation, role and stability of families is also of great interest for us.

Historical Background

Public opinion on births out of wedlock and the social status of children born in this manner varied across diverse historical eras and social strata. When in 1850 vital statistics began to be nationally collected on the basis of parish registers in Hungary, the “origin” of children was regarded as a crucial information. Besides the three key data (sex, religion, “viability”) recorded at birth, a fourth question was also asked: whether the given child was born inside or outside marriage (in wild marriage). Some of the children born out of wedlock were born to cohabiting, “concubinary” couples, whether he or she was “legitimate”. While authors at that time showed relative tolerance towards non-marital relationships, they tended to be very pessimistic or critical of the prospects, the mental-bodily progress and social adaptation of the children born in “wild marriage”. They also regarded most of these children as destined to be the “pariah of the society”.

In the late 1800s the rate of “illegitimate” births was about 8–10 percent. This value remained stable for nearly a century, apart from minor war-related fluctuations, until 1980. Considering the revolutionary changes in birth control and the array of contraceptive techniques during this period, we can say that behind the virtually unchanged rate of “illegitimate” births very different sexual behaviours and moral values existed.

Based on the analysis of the dynamics of “illegitimate” births over past decades it seems that the absolute prohibition of abortion introduced in the first half of the 1950s did not have any impact on the rate of “illegitimate” births. As a result of absolute prohibition of abortion one might have expected that unwanted pregnancies resulting in unwanted births would

considerably increase the frequency of extramarital births. On the contrary, legitimate births increased. While the number of “legitimate” births in 1954 was 21% higher than in 1952, the number of “illegitimate” births in the same period increased by only 16 percent. In response to the moral expectations of society at that time, the overwhelming majority of couples were trying to legitimise “illegitimate” pregnancies by getting married. The liberalisation of abortion introduced in the second half of the 1950s resulted in a sharp decline of the number of births which process had a greater impact on “illegitimate” births rather than on “legitimate” ones. This led to the refutation of yet another demographic theory that claimed “illegitimate” births are typical of a relatively constant group of population so a decline in births automatically increases the ratio of birth out of wedlock. All in all, we can conclude that the changes in the number and rate of births over the past couple of decades have mainly been restricted to births to married couples and have hardly influenced the ratio of extramarital births standing steadily at 5–7%. The turning point came in the early 1980s when the extramarital birth rate started an initially slow but ever accelerating increase. As a result, the ratio standing at 7.1% in 1980 rose to 28% by 1999, which means that today every third child in Hungary is born to unmarried parents or a single mother.

Demographic Characteristics of Mothers Giving Birth Out of Wedlock

Not married women giving birth mostly belong to the younger generations.

Table 1
*Distribution of Extramarital Births,
by the Age Group of the Mother, 1985–1998 (%)*

Age group	1985	1990	1995	1997	1999
–16	11.7	10.8	7.0	5.6	2.8
17–19	21.7	23.1	21.0	18.7	17.7
20–24	25.0	26.6	32.3	34.9	35.6
25–29	19.0	16.4	20.4	21.6	23.7
30–34	14.3	13.1	11.1	11.7	13.1
35–39	6.8	8.3	6.2	5.7	5.6
40–49	1.5	1.7	2.0	1.8	1.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Demographic Yearbooks of the relevant years published by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office.

The data above shows marked structural changes (*Table 1.*) On the one hand a vast majority of extramarital births are still given by very young mothers (23% of them are under the age of 20). On the other hand the ratio of very young mothers is on a relative decline with a simultaneous increase in extramarital births between the age of 20 and 30. This trend is well demonstrated by another indicator showing the extramarital birth ratio within specific age groups (*Table 2.*)

Table 2
*Ratio of Extramarital Live Births Relative to 100 Live Births
 by the Age Group of the Mother (%)*

Age group	1985	1990	1995	1997	1999	1999/1990
–16	53.2	78.8	86.3	90.1	100.0	126.9
17–19	17.0	28.9	44.1	54.1	68.8	238.1
20–24	6.3	8.8	18.8	25.0	30.7	349.0
25–29	5.8	7.7	12.9	16.2	19.2	249.4
30–34	9.0	13.3	17.1	20.0	20.9	157.1
35–39	15.8	19.5	23.1	25.2	27.7	142.1
40–49	18.8	25.4	30.1	32.1	31.0	122.0
Total	9.2	13.1	20.7	25.0	28.0	213.7

Source: Demographic Yearbooks of the relevant years published by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office.

Both in the past and today we can see the tendency that the younger a woman becomes pregnant, the more likely that it is a birth out of wedlock. In case of mothers between 17 and 20 years of age every second child is born outside marriage and the same ratio is nine out of ten in case of mothers younger than 17. While there is a declining tendency of having children at a young age, whenever this does happen, it is likely to be out of wedlock. The occurrence of extramarital births at such young ages has never been so frequent as today. As mothers' ages increase, the extramarital birth ratio decreases. These are the age groups with the lowest rate of birth out of wedlock because most of the middle-aged women still live in marriage. However, in these age groups unmarried women have increased the number of births. For example, one third of the very rare births over the age of 40 are out of wedlock, which means every third child of elder mothers is born out of wedlock.

The above mentioned tendencies are closely linked to changes in attitudes toward marriage. The decline in the number of marriages has significantly raised the ratio of singles whereas the radically lower number of re-marriages increased the number of those in divorced and widow/widower status. Unmarried women take a major share in births out of wedlock as they give 81.8% (as of 1998) of the total of such births (this is a higher proportion than in the early 1990s).

The social status of women giving birth out of wedlock is analysed on the basis of their schooling despite of the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to define one's social status according to the number of school-years or the type of employment.

Table 3
*Rate of Extramarital Live Births
by the Schooling of the Mother, 1990–1998 (%)*

Number of school-years completed	1990	1995	1997	1998	1998/1990 1990=100
0–7	49.1	58.7	60.9	63.5	129.3
8	16.2	25.1	30.6	33.0	203.7
9–12	6.3	12.4	15.6	16.9	268.3
13–x	4.5	7.5	9.2	10.4	231.1
Total	13.1	20.7	25.0	26.6	203.0

Source: Own calculation based on primary vital statistic data sources.

The table shows very significant differences in the ratios of extramarital births according to the number of school years completed (*Table 3*). Completion of the 8 year long elementary school seems to be a milestone. For women who attended school for more than seven years the rates of extramarital births nearly decrease by 50%. At the same time, the dynamics of change throughout the 1990s demonstrate that the greatest increase took place exactly in the category of those with higher education (secondary and university). In these groups, the ratios of births out of wedlock have grown by some two and half times over the past eight years, which has reduced the difference based on the highest and lowest education level from eleven-fold in 1990 to six-fold. The increasing extramarital birth rate of women with higher social status is related to this behaviour becoming socially more tolerated and accepted over the past couple of years. At the same time we must note that the increased social tolerance could lead to the further spread and a higher ratio of births out of wedlock.

The distribution of unmarried mothers by labour market status also show interesting variations (*Table 4*).

Table 4
*Rate of Extramarital Live Births
by the Labour Market Status of the Mother, 1990–1998 (%)*

Labour market status	1990	1995	1998	1998/1990 1990=100
Economically active	10.1	15.1	20.3	201.0
Economically inactive	6.9	12.5	20.4	295.6
Dependent	37.0	38.3	40.3	108.9
Unemployed	–	33.2	38.8	116.9*
Total	13.1	20.7	26.6	203.0

Source: Own calculation based on primary vital statistics data sources.

* As compared to 1995.

While in 1990 the rate of birth out of wedlock was the lowest among inactive mothers [(on child care allowance (till the child is three year old), child care benefit (income-proportionate), or retired)], this category now has produced the most dynamic growth in this respect in the 1990s. In the

surveyed period the rate of extramarital births among inactive mothers (primarily those unmarried and on child care allowance or benefit) has nearly tripled. This means there is an increasing number of women deciding to have a second or third child out of wedlock in addition to their existing child younger than three.

All in all, unmarried mothers are typically very young, have below-average schooling and no jobs (i.e. dependent or unemployed). At the same time, analysis of the recent years' data also reveals a structural change. The rates of extramarital births among women of relatively elder age, higher education and active labour market involvement (or inactive because of being on child care benefit/allowance) have increased more rapidly than the average ratio of extramarital births.

Sociology of Birth Out of Wedlock

Social and Value Aspects of Birth Out of Wedlock

The demographic data presented above make it possible to show the key trends of extramarital births and to analyse the most important connections and changes. However, the macro-statistical figures do not and cannot give answers to important questions such as the mothers' actual, *de facto* marital status. The vital statistics provide us with information as to the ratio of singles, divorced and widows but we know neither the ratio of *de jure* single mothers who are not married but still live in cohabitation for some time nor the exact ratio of mothers *de facto* living alone. Survey of the nature and intensity of non-marital relationships is crucial from the perspective of children born. Obviously, the development, education and socialisation of children is strongly influenced by his/her parents living in close relationship – if not in marriage – as compared to his/her mother being alone all the time.

An additional question is whether or not it is a *pre-determined choice* by mothers to give birth out of wedlock, without a *de jure* relationship. Do they base their decision on values? Is it a final decision or is it made *out of necessity* generated by various individual reasons, circumstances that could still lead to marriage eventually? In other words, is this a conscious opposition to *de jure* marriage (“anti-marriage attitude”) that could be interpreted as a passing tendency of radical anti-traditionalism being typical of a specific social stratum? Or are we witnessing a slow transformation, which new trends gradually reduce the importance, significance, timing of a ceremonial act and legal binding within the relationship between parents? Exploration of the weight, trend and intensity of value changes can help us in finding answers to questions like. Is this the start of an irreversible process resulting in gradual disappearance of the traditional family life based on marriage, or can we expect to see various, equally valued living arrangements in addition to the survival *de jure* marriage? This last scenario is supported by previous results showing the lack of anti-marriage sentiments among younger generations. Instead, younger generations revealed their difficulty accepting certain marriage-related “necessities” (such as the obligatory adherence to moral and religious rules, the parents' involvement in family matters, adaptation to judgements of others, etc.). Younger generations seem to have an ever-increasing preference to have sovereign right to choose between living arrangements. They expect an

overall social recognition of this right without making any moral judgement of the advantages and disadvantages of marriage versus cohabitation.

These questions are common in the most recent sociological literature on families. Pregnancy and the birth of a child bring the woman or couple to a crucial point requiring them to make a definite choice within a limited time. Do they want to have the child in a freely selected, looser, more liberal relationship *permanently*, do they prefer “*testing*” their relationship and postponing the decision or do they *choose to legitimise their relationship very soon*? Of course, decisions to marry may be driven by several reasons: to fulfil an internal moral drive, to gain recognition from their family and peers or to assure the future of their child. This crucial period (i.e. the post-natal months) in the family life and the participants’ value-driven decisions can be examined more closely by utilising the 1996 questionnaire of 1500 women who gave birth out of wedlock in 1995.

The data of this survey indicate a cohabitation ratio of 74% proving that the significant rise in extramarital births has mainly been a result of the spread of cohabitation. One fifth of these pregnancies are born to parents in close relationships but living apart and only a small fraction (6%) of them came from occasional relationship. At the time of data collection (within one year of the birth), most of the mothers still lived together with the father of the child. 64% of the mothers were still in cohabitation and 6% had got married, whereas 30% remained single, raising their children alone.

Relevant data demonstrate Hungary’s similarity to several Western European countries in terms of father’s presence. For instance, in Sweden – with a high ratio of births out of wedlock – 80–90% of the parents live in some form of a stable relationship. The cohabitation ratio in the Netherlands and Belgium, with lower illegitimate fertility, is similarly high. In contrast in Germany, lonely mothers make up the greatest group.

Public opinion polls suggest Hungarian society is relatively tolerant towards couples living in non-marital relationship as well as toward young couples deciding to test their relationship in a trial marriage. However, having children outside marriage is less accepted. It is claimed that “if a couple living together expects a baby, they should definitely get married before the birth”. In other words, extramarital births represent a behaviour pattern that remains unacceptable to the majority even if social tolerance is continuously rising in this respect too. This makes it justifiable to explore what causes and life situations lead women to give birth out of wedlock disregarding public opinion.

Why Unmarried Women Give Birth?

Table 5
What Circumstances Made You Decide to Give Birth to a Child?
(Hungary, 1996, %, N=1433)

Categories of reasons	(%)
– it was planned in advance	29.2
– it was planned but for a later date	17.9
– it was primarily the mother's decision	8.4
– it was primarily the father's decision	4.4
– got pregnant and did not want induced abortion	30.1
– pregnancy was detected too late	8.4
– other reason	0.4
– no reason or hard to explain	1.2
Total	100.0

Source: S. Molnár et al. (1998) p. 106.

Based on the distribution of answers we can see the predominance of conscious family planning (*Table 5*). 60% of answers, such as “*it was planned*”, “*it was planned for a later date*”, “*decision by mother or father*”, indicate some kind of planning. However, the ratio of answers referring to the mother’s accidental, unwanted pregnancy is still quite high. Nearly 40% of respondents answered “*did not want induced abortion*” or “*pregnancy was detected too late*”.

The weight and priority of reasons for their decision varied according to the parents living arrangements and the strength of their relationship before and after the birth. Couples living in cohabitation before birth and *getting married afterwards* predominantly answered “*it was planned*” and stressed the consciousness as a result of their stable relationship. However, there were also a significant number of respondents who planned to have children but only at a later date. They presumably would have scheduled their marriage for a later date, too, but the unexpectedly early pregnancy led them to get married after the birth.

Opposite answers came from mothers who had neither lived with the father at pregnancy, nor after birth. In some cases, this pregnancy was the result of an “accidental relationship”. Their answer reveals a special duality of motives. Undoubtedly, most of these single mothers whose pregnancy was accidental primarily gave birth to a child because they were late detecting pregnancy or because they had emotional, moral or health-related reasons for rejecting abortion. At the same time, there is another distinct group of single mothers, which is significantly smaller, who consciously decided to become pregnant and give birth to a child without living with the father. This situation was indicated by the answer “*it was primarily the mother’s decision*”, which had a ratio of 16% among single mothers, twice the average ratio for the entire sample.

The *actual length of co-residence* is also a major factor behind the reasoning of mothers living in cohabitation. In stable, more-than-two-year-long relationships a vast majority – over 60% – of mothers emphasised the conscious, planned nature of their pregnancy. In contrast, those with relatively new, one-year-long relationships mentioned accidental pregnancy quite frequently.

Altogether, we can say that decisions to have children are primarily dependent on the nature and intensity of the parents' relationship. Couples with longer and more stable cohabitation explained their decision with the same factors that the married couples tend to mention in fertility surveys.

Most of the mothers giving birth out of wedlock live in more or less stable relationships and the majority of these couples consciously planned to have children. This justifiably raises the question of why they have not legalised their relationship officially and legally by getting married. This is particularly interesting since they have so consciously acted and their joint decision to have children presupposes both a close relationship and sense of responsibility. Is their current status related to the couples' conscious choice of living arrangement or their decision against marriage is related to temporary obstacles?

Marriage Plans – Reasons for Not Getting Married

Table 6
Marriage Plans of Mothers in Cohabitation
(Hungary, 1996, %, N=1049)

Categories of planning	(%)
– soon to get married	21,7
– perhaps getting married – no decision as yet	35,5
– no marriage is planned	42,0
– had been married to each other but divorced	0,8
	100,0

Source: S. Molnár et al. (1998) p. 109.

(1) The definite intention of getting married is typical of over one fifth of cohabiting mothers, primarily of younger mothers (younger than 24) who have only cohabited with the father for two or fewer years (*Table 6*). In their case this form of cohabitation can probably be interpreted as a trial marriage rather than a fixed living arrangement. The longer this cohabitation lasts, the more couples say they do not want to change this arrangement.

The question of “*why is marriage only planned after the birth of the child*” is primarily relevant for those who say they want to legalise their relationship soon (*Table 7*). The ratio of answers indicates that their postponement of marriage is mainly a consequence of factors over which they have no or little control. Various “psychic” reasons are far less important. Such psychic reasons include the parents’ emotional ties only being solidified after birth and the parents’ realisation after the child’s birth that legalisation of their relationship can guarantee the future and security of their child.

Table 7
*“Why Do You Get Married Only After the Birth of Your Child?” –
 Distribution of Answers of Mothers With Plans to Get Married “Soon”
 (Hungary, 1996, %)*

Categories of reasons	(%)
– marriage was planned before but there were financial/family-related obstacles to it.	59.8
– longer time was needed emotionally to make this decision.	12.2
– decided on marriage primarily to guarantee their child's future and security	16.3
– other reasons	6.6
– no reason or hard to explain	5.1
Total	100.0

Source: S. Molnár et al. (1998) p. 110.

Within the large and varied category of external, financial/family-related obstacles, one of the most frequent reasons for postponement was that at the time of birth the father had yet to break up an existing marriage. Equally common was the reference to financial problems. Especially outside Budapest, the wedding ceremony often presents such an immense financial burden to the families of the couple that often it can only be arranged after long years of saving or with major indebtedness. In this environment, arranging a wedding without the expected ceremony and formalities evokes more criticism than a child born “ahead of time” in a relationship.

(2) The argument is a little bit more complicated among those who say they do not want to get married in the future or who give an uncertain, “maybe” answer to the question concerning plans for marriage. The reasons for “*why not*” are partly the same but there are some variations here too.

In both groups the most often cited argument is that marriage is merely a legal action, a formality, so it is absolutely unnecessary. It is briefly expressed by saying “*no document is needed*” (synonymous explanations include “it is fine in this way too”, “the point is we live in harmony”, “marriage gives no guarantees either”, “this is the way we are used to it” or “marriage is unnecessary”, etc.). These are the arguments voiced by some one quarter of those decisively rejecting marriage and one fifth of those “maybe” getting married in the future.

The lack of necessity for an “official document” is an especially popular answer among mothers with at least secondary-level education as well as among couples where either the mother or the father (or both) is divorced, i.e., those with negative experience regarding marriage.

In the category of second most popular arguments the reasons are already varied between those decisively against marriage and those “maybe” getting married. The first group ranks “*the need for independence*” as second (13% of them mentions this) and the “*fear of restrictions*” and “*need to preserve independence*” are even more emphatically present in the explanations of those relatively older (over 30) and among mothers not having Roma origin.

The rest of the reasons show that there is only a minority of mothers who disagree with marriage as an institution or as a living arrangement to be chosen. Decisions against marriage are rather based on individual ideas,

circumstances, and opportunities than on real consideration of the factors preventing the establishment of a legal form.

For example, it is not a conscious “anti-marriage attitude” when couples become uncertain about “whether it is worth getting married” for very practical reasons. 11% of those “maybe” getting married and 8% of those rejecting marriage say *“cohabitation could perhaps be a better option because of welfare benefits”*.

In addition, we cannot say marriage as an institution is rejected when mothers do not want to marry the father of their child because they do not see him as suitable for the husband role. *“Generally, I do not reject marriage but I certainly do not want to marry the father of my child”* was answered by 10% of those definitively refusing marriage and 2% of those “maybe” getting married.

Nearly one fifth of those definitely refusing marriage and those uncertain cannot accurately explain why they are against legitimising their relationship. This is quite a high ratio and it is even higher among mothers at very young age, with very low schooling and especially among Roma mothers. This also demonstrates that their attitude is not so much determined by some conscious opposition but by circumstances beyond their control.

We could presume that anti-marriage sentiments are the strongest in mothers left alone and raising their child or children without the father since the birth of their child in 1995. This accounts for 30.2% of the total of women with child out of wedlock. The answer to the question of *“have you ever planned to marry the father of your child?”* was a definite “no” in case of over half of single mothers (52.5%). This means they neither considered a future marriage when they entered into an intimate relationship with the future father nor at the time of their pregnancy. However, a not much smaller proportion of single mothers had expected to marry the father (47.5%). The answers to *“why have you not considered getting married”* and to *“why have your marriage plans failed”* clearly show that the ratio of single mothers finding marriage unnecessary is even lower than that of mothers in cohabitation. The main reason single mothers do not marry is the father.

Table 8
*Have You Ever Planned to Marry the Father of Your Child? –
 Distribution of Answers by Mothers Living Alone After Giving Birth
 (Hungary, 1996, %)*

Categories of planning	Categories of reasons	(%)
<i>there have been such plans</i>	Why has it failed? – <i>father do not want to get married (for the time being)</i> – financial or family-related obstacles – other reason or cannot explain	21.3 13.5 12.7
	<i>Total of single mothers with marriage plans</i>	47.5
<i>no such plans because</i>	– it is not considered important, in today's modern world, it does not make any difference if you live in marriage or cohabitation. – desire to remain independent so as to achieve her goals, ideas more easily – no overall rejection of marriage <i>but no intention of marrying the father of her child</i> – not marrying is a better option in terms of entitlement to welfare benefits – other reason or cannot explain	10.9 8.1 22.0 1.4 10.1
	<i>Total of single mothers with no marriage plans</i>	52.5
		100.0

Source: S. Molnár et al. (1998) p. 113.

Overall, nearly half of the mothers remaining alone primarily mentioned individual obstacles to marriage (father not wanting to get married or mother not wanting the father to be her husband – 43.3%). Another 37.7% of them mentioned family-related, financial, social or other obstacles. While less than one fifth of them said “document is not necessary” or “they want to remain independent” (19%). Only this later group may be categorised as opposing marriage. Of course, the term “anti-marriage attitude” is an oversimplification because in most of the cases there is no clear concept of opposition. Instead, people in this category mainly lack the ability or will to accept the legal obligations associated with marriage in their life.

Popularity of the Various Family Forms

Although the data unanimously indicate that the majority of mothers with child born out of wedlock are not at all opposed to formal marriage, it is still worth examining which social-demographic groups of mothers have the strongest sentiments against marriage as an institution. The most important question is whether those pioneering the latest changes in out of wedlock childbirth most intensively hold such sentiments, i.e. women of older age and higher education. The analysis does reveal such a correlation of anti-marriage sentiment with family form, marital status, age, locality and education.

There are two main dimensions in the variation of opinions. Life course variables are one of them. Anti-marriage sentiment is more popular among those in cohabitation or being divorced than those living alone or being single. This is reasonable because most of those in cohabitation (especially

after a longer period of living together) have made their more or less final choice of living arrangement, whereas those being divorced obviously have negative experience with marriage. At the same time, divorced are on average older and have a stronger desire to live independently than young singles do.

Social variables have a more marked and stronger impact than life course variables. This is because attitudes are not only influenced by demographic life course but also by social status. This can be seen via the link between the different attitudes and schooling. As educational level grows, the ratio of those opposing marriage rises too. Mothers with university degree have the strongest desire to lead an independent life (nearly 20% as opposed to the average 7–8%). Even this position among mothers with university degree does not mean a categorical denial of marriage as an institution, rather, they recognise the two forms of relationship as equal choices. The frequencies by education suggests that the recent and rapid changes in conduct among women with higher education are a sign of changes in the value system.

There is a striking difference between the opinions of mothers living in Budapest and in the countryside. As compared to the countryside in Budapest, we have found twice as many women, who had negative sentiments towards marriage. This could be one of the reasons why every fourth child in Budapest was born outside marriage, as opposed to the national average of “only” every fifth, in the surveyed period. Value changes and the impacts of modernisation are more likely to occur in Budapest where the ratio of qualified women is higher than in the country.

Considering their opinions separate from their actual decisions, we find mothers having children out of wedlock more pro-marriage than anti-marriage.

Table 9
*Popularity of Different Family Forms,
by Mothers' Living Arrangements After Birth
(Hungary, 1996, Opinion Poll Type Index With 100 Scores)*

Living arrangements	Average	Single mothers	Mothers in cohabitation	Mothers getting later married
to live in marriage	85	82	85	98
to live in cohabitation	81	69	88	75
to live alone, independently	24	37	19	16
to have close contacts with the father but not living with him	33	42	29	27

Source: S. Molnár et al. (1998) p. 119.

The vast majority of mothers giving birth out of wedlock consider marriage as an ideal pattern but find cohabitation an equally ideal option. Cohabitation is only preferred to marriage by women who actually live accordingly although opinions on the two patterns only minimally differ. As far as those getting married after birth are concerned, we can clearly identify the couples' self-justification for marriage. Since these last couples lived together without marriage till the birth of their child, they also promote the desirability of cohabitation.

The attitudes of mothers left alone are more complex. This is because some consciously chose to live independently (they appreciate this arrangement more than other mothers) whereas other single mothers were living alone despite their own desires otherwise. This latter group would select marriage over cohabitation. The vast majority of mothers living alone would probably choose legal marriage over cohabitation if the decision was left to them alone.

The results of other research projects on value and family planning further substantiate this positive marriage attitude found among mothers giving birth out of wedlock. Research led by László Cseh-Szombathy focused on young adults in the age family formation. This research found that although people between 20 and 40 years–old are strongly in favour of non-legitimised cohabitation, most of them refuse to accept the allegation that “marriage has become an outdated institution by now”. We may draw similar conclusions from our research on mothers raising their children alone. While they recognised permanent cohabitation as a valid option, these women primarily identified marriage as the ideal form.

Conclusion

The majority of Hungarians do not oppose marriage despite the decreasing nuptiality rate, the spread of cohabitation and the increasing number of births out of wedlock. Marriage has a stable position in the social value system. At the same time, it remains to be seen when and how this concept of values will be changed by the demographic tendencies currently in a phase of transformation.

It is a well-established claim that the acceleration of modernisation necessitates the destruction of traditional social structures such that the family becomes less and less an institution governed by social norms and increasingly based on private agreements between partners. However, there are competing interpretations. Our results certainly allow the reasoning that the expansion of alternative norms and values of cohabitation does not mean that the value of the family is diminishing. The distinctive priority of family and children, which is a special characteristic of Hungary, may also be found in other countries where alternative forms of family life are more common practices. We have to accept that nowadays the diversity of approaches regarding family life is a natural and normal phenomenon. Only a family policy and family legislation being capable of responding to these changes in a flexible manner can prevent families – regardless of their traditional or non-traditional forms – from reacting to accelerated modernisation in a way that leads to instability and dysfunction. Let us consider two significant facts from our research. First, a considerable number of mothers avoiding marriage planned and wanted to have a baby. Second, the majority of these women chose to reside and raise their child or children with a partner. These findings support the optimistic hypothesis that even with the weakening of the traditional family framework, the desire for children and a complete family remains strong.

Nonetheless the spread of cohabitation and the rising number of births out of wedlock cannot be considered as a positive process from demographic perspectives. The likelihood of cohabiting couples splitting up

is far higher than that of legal marriages. This makes families increasingly unstable with possible negative consequences on the bringing up of children. It is an additional negative aspect that cohabitation is always associated with a lower fertility than marriage. Thus, the spread of non-marital forms of living together in itself leads to a decrease in fertility.

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