

TEENAGE FERTILITY AS A BASIC PROBLEM OF FERTILITY IN BULGARIA

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Summary

Fertility dynamics during the last decades is analyzed in the paper. The central argument is that teenage fertility in Bulgaria is too high compared to the other European countries, what calls the need for a special policy. The society is misguided with respect to the assessment of fertility trends, as far as the general opinion is that it is too low and decreasing, while in reality it has been increasing during the last decade. The present levels of fertility are at the European medium level. The tendencies are upwards, and the expectation based on some demographic arguments (restructuring of the age distribution of fertility) are that this trend will continue in the future. Nevertheless urgent policy is needed to decrease the teenage fertility. With the present policy the high teenage fertility is a modus of poverty alleviation, preformed rationally in a specific (“traditional”) social setting, typical for some segments of the ethnic Roma population. In these settings young people (teenagers) are being pushed to early childbearing by their extremely poor families as a source of income (provided by social assistance allowances distributed upon the income “per capita”) for the whole family. At the same time these teenagers “drop out” from school, which in turn perpetuates the vicious circle of poverty and early childbearing.

Keywords: fertility, teenage fertility, fertility indicators, social policy

INTRODUCTION

Today’s dynamics of fertility in Bulgaria is quite a discussed issue (especially across the media), yet not quite well studied, from a scientific perspective. It is an issue that is particularly speculated on, especially in the pre-election periods as low fertility is commonly used as a political ground “proving” weaknesses in State’s policy, and, in particular, ruling party’s policy.

As a matter of fact, fertility dynamics follows its own intrinsic consistent trends ensuing from a system of historical, ethnic, socio-psychological, political, economic and other factors, among which the economic and political factors would normally enjoy short-lived and circumstantial influence. The changes in the numbers of children born observed for a year or two years vs. the precedent may not in the least be called a “trend”, statistically speaking. We may talk about a trend only if the change

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spans over a relatively long period of time and the direction of development (upwards or downwards) is sustainable. In order to identify whether a trend is “sustainable” special statistical tools must be used; test characteristics to test the adequacy of a model should be applied (for instance, see Ранчева, 2011: 84).

If estimates and comparisons are to be used based on fertility in the precedent decades as the ones used from time to time, the conclusions of such comparisons may not be made either, without knowing the “long” trends or the regularities followed by the dynamics of the reviewed processes worldwide and at a European level. What must be added to the knowledge on these trends and regular patterns is the specificity of our country and especially the specific manifestations and trends in the context of our geographic situation and the socio-economic and political development throughout the last few decades. Carrying out a correct interpretation of the fertility data requires knowledge of political and economic factors having acted over the respective years and periods, tracing the dynamics of numbers and structure of cohorts of women in reproductive age, the influence of external migration on these, etc., etc.

This article will show:

- 1) Over the last decade **fertility in Bulgaria does not feature a reduction trend.**
- 2) If compared to the other European States fertility in Bulgaria over the last few years **remained at an average European level, i.e. ca. 1,5 children per one woman.**
- 3) Our country differs from the other European countries **by its high teenage fertility levels (aged under 20).**

It must be emphasised that fertility as a demographic process may not be taken into account only by the number of births. The very term “fertility” (fertility dynamics, respectively) has a very complicated content involving a variety of possible aspects of the process borne in mind thereby. On the one hand, intensiveness of the process “fertility” (measured by relevant coefficients) may be studied in consecutive periods of time (using the so called “cross-sectional approach” in demography) and across various generations (studied using the longitudinal approach). In turn, the intensity of the process may be presented in relevance to the frequency of events (i.e. births) both considering the population as a total (per 1000 persons of the entire population) and considering the part thereof generating the live births, i.e. the women in reproductive age. In the first case the talk is about of crude birth rates while in the second it is about specific (sometimes called “fertility rates”, e.g. in NSI publications²).

Here we will look at an essential particularity typical of fertility in our country and related to its distribution by age: the teenage fertility rates (aged under 20). The prompt that triggered our interest to this age group lays in the revelation that Bulgaria’s teenage fertility rate is exceptionally high (if compared to the other European countries) and this is unknown to the public. Public talks too much about the so called

² There are terms that are closer to spoken language such as “specific birth rate” and respectively – “age-specific birth rate” rather than “fertility rate” and age-specific fertility rates which have penetrated the Bulgarian statistics via the incorrect translation of the French term “fécondité” (fertility). Detailed explanations of this term are provided in Преса, Речник по демография, 2006.