

“Having a child is not a four-year project”

A summary by Rita Antoni

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung held its workshop entitled “In Search of Lost Demographic Boom – Discourses around child-bearing” on the 22nd of April. The event was organized as a part of a series of public debates called *Dialogue on Gender Equality* (the former occasions focused on Europe-wide mobilisations around the ‘gender ideology’ construction, on motherhood and masculinities), within the framework of the regional gender programme of the Foundation called *Gender Equality in East-Central Europe*, which was launched in 2012. This time foreign and Hungarian experts discussed what factors encourage or discourage having more (or any) children, and what way(s), in which frames are we talking about questions related to child-bearing. Is there a contradiction between gender equality and having or encouraging couples to have (more) children? When we speak of having children, whose children do we mean by it? Whom do we want to help? Can policy measures influence such decisions? – among others, we were trying to find answers to these questions.

Eszter Kováts, project leader in the FES, greeted the participants: representatives of political parties, ministries, trade unions, NGOs, companies, as well as journalists, researchers, university teachers and students. Looking back to the former occasions, she told that she is convinced of the long-term advantages of the specific approach of the foundation – the promotion of dialogue between people of different worldviews. Beside learning to compose our arguments more precisely, our discussion culture can become more respectful, and, even if the parties won't convince one another, the distrust may decrease, misunderstandings – due to which we might demonize each other – may be clarified, and points of agreement or shared purposes may be found.

In the first section, two experts of family policy and demography delivered their lectures.

Dorota Szelewa, assistant professor at the Institute for Social Policy at the Warsaw University and social policy expert at the International Centre for Research and Analysis (ICRA) emphasized that our region still lags behind in fertility. The macro-level consequence is the aging society, where problems arise in the long-term sustainability of financing the welfare state. On the micro level the result is that procreation aspirations remain unfulfilled. Furthermore, after the first child procreation preferences of women and men differ: women with one child are less likely to want a second one than men. The reasons for this are also worth examining.

The most frequent explanations for low fertility are low national economic capacity; changing social norms of child-bearing and marriage; rising cost of having children. However, neither of these seem to be an adequate explanation: in Turkey and in Mexico, for example, the national economic capacity is low, fertility is still high. Furthermore, (just like in Hungary) more and more children are born outside marriage, for example in domestic partnerships, and no immediate connection can be pointed out between poverty and not having children either.

According to Szelewa, the answer can rather be found in whether the policy regimes support work-life balance. Research shows that policy measures which recognize the shift in gender roles (e.g. childcare services) positively influence the willingness to have children. Contrary to the stereotypes – this is also shown by recent research – it is not harmful for children if their mother works outside the home. On the contrary: getting into a community at an early age (which is of utmost importance for disadvantaged children) can even have a positive effect on their later life chances, e.g. they are

more likely to perform better at school.

It is, however, a problematic approach that policy measures aiming at having more children are targeted only at mothers, for whom the long period of child-care leave means a disadvantage in their working career (“motherhood penalty”). In order to decrease women's workload fathers should be incited to do their equal share of housework and childcare. In the Baltic states and Poland fathers get a ten-day/two-week paid paternity leave, and they get one month of it in the exemplary Slovenia (where fertility rate is the highest among post-communist welfare states). According to the international experience, fathers tend to take part of the leave only in countries with “use it or lose it” scheme (ie. when the paternal leave is individual and non-transferable). Furthermore, fathers who, even for a very short time, experience childcare leave, are more likely to share household chores with their partner. It has a demographic consequence, as it turns out from the Swedish-Hungarian survey by Oláh (although Szelewa hinted at the need for further, deeper research): a positive relation is confirmed between the equal share of household chores and the willingness of mothers with one child to have another one, i.e. in case of the father's equal participation women would rather have a second or third child.

The second lecture was held by **Zsolt Spéder**, director of the Demographic Research Institute of the Hungarian Statistical Office. The fertility rate in Hungary between 1989 and 2012 decreased from 1,8 to 1,3. He also mentioned the discrepancy between the number of desired and actually born children: this is the so-called “fertility gap.” According to a follow-up survey, among people planning to have a child in two years, 75 percent of the Dutch couples realized this aim, whilst among Hungarian couples only 40 percent did so. Analysing the reasons it should be considered that after the regime change the expansion of higher education took place, more people began to study at universities, and finding an employment got more and more difficult. Due to the considerable fluctuation the market is unpredictable, one can win and lose quickly, and this makes employment uncertain. In 2013 the unemployment rate of people under 25 is 27 percent. Due to the difficulties of employment more and more people tend to migrate, thus grandparents' help in childcare is not an option.

All these factors contribute to the shift from the model of early fertility to that of late fertility, which means that people, in comparison to times before the regime change, start a family and have children at an older age. According to Spéder the insecurity caused by the regime change is another reason for many to delay childbirth. Demographers could not foresee that domestic partnership will be more and more popular in comparison to marriage (and according to Spéder this also has some significance in the decrease of the number of children), and the number of people living alone also increased (1,3 million). The number of families with one child also increased, while the number of families with two children decreased, and the number of families with three or more children remained approximately the same. Spéder also mentioned that women are more likely to want a second child in case of equal share of household chores.

Hungary, considering the proportion of GDP, spends more on families than some other European countries, but hardly any results can be seen on the fertility rate. According to Spéder the willingness to have children depends on the stability of family policy, and in Hungary we can speak of a „zigzag” pattern of family policy, which means that every government transforms it, in spite of the fact that the main function of family policy is to compensate the above-mentioned insecurities of the market. Social policy cannot affect people's decisions until it remains the object of continuous debate.

During the conversation following the lectures the participants came to an agreement on the harmful effects of the insecure family policy as well as the low participation of men in household chores.

Measures on work-life balance should be targeted at men as well.

Answering the question of a member of the audience Szelewa told that practicing religion is not always connected to having more children: in her study on Poland and Italy she found that in spite of the large number of religious people they make family decisions on an other basis. Another participant asked Spéder about the role of migration – according to the lecturer it won't solve the problem of aging society on the long run in Germany either, because migrants will also get old, furthermore, their attitude about having children assimilates quickly to that of their host country. Finally, participants discussed whether the approach of the lectures was blaming women. Both lecturers said that they intended to avoid it and examine the reasons for low fertility in their complexity.

In the second section three brief opening speeches were held, then the audience could put questions and participate in a debate.

Hajnalka Székely is the director of the National Association of Large Families. Their NGO was formed in 1987, within the Patriotic People's Front, and survived different regimes and governments. At present their membership unites 13 000 families, in which the average number of children is 3,6. (In Hungary a family with at least 3 children counts as a large family.) According to their experience, some people have a lot of children because they grew up in a large family, and others have a lot of children because they had no siblings. (And of course there are also people who grew up in a large family and this is the reason why they want only one child.)

Recently they carried out a survey of their membership on sharing the household chores. In all families they interviewed the mother, the father and the children separately.

Their general experience is that the parents often have different opinions about how equally they share the chores, and fathers usually report the extent of their participation higher than their partners. For example, 59 percent of the fathers, whilst only 25 percent of the mothers claim that they share the housework equally with their partners. 59 percent of the fathers claim that they do the minor mendings in the home, while only 21 percent of the mothers say that their husband does them. A similar tendency is observed when the spouses are asked who is responsible for the family budget and who organizes family events.

As far as the children are concerned, daughters report a higher level of participation in housework than sons. Another interesting result is that the greater part of the children does not want their mother to work outside the home. The Association thinks that women should have the possibility to be full-time homemakers if they want to, so they appreciate the newly introduced flexible maternity leave payment, for which they have been waiting for long.

The most frequent reasons for having a lot of children are: 1. unplanned child(ren), 2. the pleasure of raising children, 3. new family (the spouses bring children from their previous marriages, thus they create a large family).

L'ubica Kobová came from the Department of Gender Studies, Charles University, Prague. She said that Christian-conservative discourse feeds on the desire for a stable, unambiguous world order and dominant ideology, and this is the reason why many people sympathize with them and their campaigns for the “defense of the family” and the “sanctity of marriage.” The lecturer agrees with their critique of the selfish individual, and she shares the view that it is important to call the attention to the importance of relationships and to the people in need of care, e.g. the elderly. The feminist philosopher Judith Butler also writes that “we are precarious beings.”

However, the discourse fails, in her opinion, at the point where it represents the family (and exclusively the traditional family) the only good (and always good), and it completes the critique of

selfishness with the reinforcement of traditional and unequal gender roles. The discourse lays a special emphasis on the self-sacrificing woman, ignores the difference of individual life courses and disregards the fact that the (traditional) family is not the exclusive place where one can give and get care and contribute to society. We can handle our above-mentioned precariousness in other communities as well.

Anikó Gregor, sociologist, teaching at the Faculty of Social Science at ELTE University, Budapest, started out from the fact that the discourse of having children is a highly normative one. For example, the state prefers children born in certain social groups, and explicitly opposes to children born in other social groups (an extreme, but, unfortunately, existing practice connected to the latter is the forced sterilization of Romani women). Furthermore, the discourse of having children focuses exclusively on women, in spite of the fact that “a child is not born in the way that the woman strongly focuses on the idea to have one.” The ideal number of children in a family is also normatively defined (the lowest and the highest number), as well as the circumstances into which one can have a child. Furthermore, these questions are framed by the presupposition that every person wants to have children – people without children, whether they want (childless) or don't want any (childfree), are hardly ever mentioned, or if they still are, they are stigmatized by the society and the state.

Population policy measures always express which social groups the state wants to have children. According to Gregor, the preferred groups are currently the middle and upper class: for example, they are the ones who can take advantage of the tax allowance for families. The recent system of maternity leave payment and childcare benefit is also advantageous for those who were legally employed before childbirth. The insurance period required for maternity leave payment has increased, and this puts people who were not (legally) employed before childbirth at a disadvantage. The “extra” maternity leave payment and maternity leave payment for students in higher education can again be utilized by certain social groups only.

Legal means of population policy are, in Gregor's view, hypocritical. “The state rejoices over the child only until it's in its mother's belly” – after the birth, the mother is left alone. If children are so important for the state, why are recently published data on children's poverty by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Central Statistical Office so alarming?

There are also significant differences between different social groups concerning the mother's chance to return to the labour market. The state took a few steps to facilitate this (e. g. the “extra” maternal leave payment) – but part-time employment is compulsory only in the public sector. Why isn't the state doing anything to put a pressure on the private sector to make flexible hours for mothers with small children possible, the lecturer asked.

After the introductory speeches the participants came to an agreement on the fact that the state cannot (and should not) interfere with people's changing lifestyles, and it should not ignore these changes either. Székely, as Spéder later, emphasized that the traditional family pattern with the father as the breadwinner and the stay-at-home mother as the caregiver is not sustainable today. More and more women participate in higher education, which is, according to Székely, useful because of the intellectual assets society gains.

Although women's biology does not follow the new model of late fertility, it is incorrect and useless, according to Székely, to criticize women. The state should accommodate to the new habits (which it should have faced 15-20 years ago), and should spend more on artificial insemination, in order that women above 35 have better chances at giving birth. The state should also help young people with their problems of habitation: state-sponsored programs for tenement flats would be necessary.

We should also fight against discrimination at the workplace, which young women – potential mothers – may already face at the job interview. It is easier to fight against it with sanctions in the public sector; as for the private sector, companies should get reward (e.g. a partial exemption of tax and social contributions) if they employ women with small children.

According to Kobová, in Slovakia a partial exemption of tax is given to companies which are willing to found a nursery, and/or render part-time employment or job sharing available for women with small children. However, for low-paid assembly workers in a factory part-time employment is not an option, thus people who would need the most help from the state for having children remain in a disadvantaged position. In Kobová's view the best solution would be the reduction of working hours (for the same wages).

Gregor added that in Hungary we have the Equal Treatment Authority, where victims of workplace discrimination can turn – until now, few proceedings have been initiated. In Spéder's opinion it is the affected people's responsibility to bring an action.

Gregor is in favour of maternity leave payment for university students, but she says that universities lack the infrastructural background necessary for attending the university with a small child. There are no baby changing facilities in the restrooms, and there is no day-care for the children of the students, teachers and other employees of the university. According to Kobová, the Czech Republic is more progressive, because, for example, at Masaryk University there is a day-care facility.

It would also be important to make public spaces and institutions accessible – it would make not only moving with a pram, but also the life of persons with reduced mobility easier.

The lecturers also agreed about the importance of men's work in the home in spite of the fact that very often socialization works the other way: several participants experienced the discriminative practice of giving pocket money for sons if they do some housework – but not for daughters, of whom it is taken for granted. Gregor, furthermore, referred to a study by Balázs Kapitány, which points out that even in those families where household chores are shared equally before the birth of a child, a conservative turn takes place after the birth. The 2010 measure which enables women after 40 years of employment to retire can also be interpreted in terms of ambiguity: according to Gregor its aim was to make grandmothers help parents with taking care of the children, in order to compensate for the lack of enough nurseries. It is, namely, much cheaper to make retired women do the childcare work for free than to extend the state-sponsored childcare system (where the low pay of the employees is already a problem).

A participant raised the possibility that the experience of giving birth can also influence the willingness to have another child.

Szelewa agreed: in Poland it is a general practice that women in labour are denied painkillers with the ideological explanation that the pain during giving birth is “necessary” and “natural.” In a series of interviews several women mentioned this practice as one reason why they don't want another child. Women in labour may get painkillers for gratuity – which, again, puts women living in poverty at a disadvantage.

According to Gregor, the general public attitude to idealize the childbirth experience is harmful. Negative experiences are reluctantly discussed, at best, on internet forums.

In Székely's opinion the childbirth experience itself is less important than the presence (or lack) of a supportive environment after the childbirth.

Anikó Gregor mentioned the Finnish maternity package (“baby box”) as a positive example of attentive social policy. This “baby box” is given to each couple by the state after the birth, and contains, for example, baby clothes, bra pads and – keeping conscious family planning in mind – condoms.

In Hungary, poor people often do not have access to contraception because of the lack of state support, although increasing the population with unwanted or unplanned children (and accusing their parents – with whom having a child often just “happens” – of irresponsibility) is not an ideal way of solving the demographic crisis.

On the whole, we can conclude that the strongest agreement was formed on the importance of father's work in the home and the stability of social policy. As Székely pointed out: “having a child is not a four-year project.”