

## **Age and Considerations on Entry into Motherhood**

Evidence from Slovakia and Poland

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Fertility postponement and especially a delay in entry into motherhood are currently observed in all European countries. In many cases – especially in the western and southern part of the continent – the mean age of women at the first childbearing is approaching 30 (e.g. 29.4 in Switzerland, 29.3 in Spain, 29 in The Netherlands, 28.7 in Ireland and Italy; European Demographic Datasheet 2008). Mean age at first childbearing is lower in CEE countries (25.9 for both Slovakia and Poland; European Demographic Datasheet 2008). The process of fertility postponement has started only in the 1990s in the region, although it has been more rapid than in Western Europe. In general, women in Europe enter motherhood after the age 30 more and more often, but at the same time, large differences between the countries are observed. Consequently, childbearing postponement has been of a major interest to researchers, who investigate fertility patterns in Europe.

A substantial amount of studies has been conducted to investigate reasons for and consequences of women having their first child in more advanced ages (e.g. Lesthaeghe 2001, Billari and Philipov 2004, Philipov, Speder and Billari 2006, Sobotka 2004). They show that

delayed entry into motherhood results most of all from prolonged education and a desire to settle in the job market, and be financially secure before the family formation (e.g. Billari and Philipov 2004, Happel, Hill and Low 1984, Kreyenfeld 2005, Meron and Widmer 2002, Rindfuss, Morgan and Offutt 1996).

Much less attention has been dedicated to a role of non-economic factors in shaping people's decisions as to when enter parenthood. In particular, we still lack knowledge on how age is perceived by individual actors and how it is taken into consideration when they make their choices on timing of childbearing. Our study contributes to filling this gap.

We present two, complementary case-studies, conducted in post-socialist Central European countries. Poland and Slovakia are very similar in respect to patterns of fertility postponement, family formation patterns and many other cultural, social and economic developments. In previous studies we documented that social meanings of age and age-norms for transition to motherhood greatly overlap in the two settings (Mynarska *forthcoming*, Potančoková 2009). In this paper, we attempt to illustrate actual relevance of age-related considerations for entry into motherhood.

We employ a qualitative methodology in order to explore women's perception of age in relation to their fertility choices. Based on in-depth interviews, conducted in Bratislava and Warsaw in 2004-2005, we investigate how age is considered for intention to have a first child and how it was relevant for actual decisions to enter motherhood.

For the purpose of this study, we analyse 22 interviews conducted with Slovak and 18 interviews with Polish women. The field work was carried out in Bratislava (October 2005 – January 2006) and in Warsaw (September 2004 – June 2005). In the Slovak case-study we purposively sampled for women, who experienced childbearing and who differed in timing of transition to motherhood (interviewees were aged 25 to 35 at first birth). Thus, we obtained rich retrospective data on women's reproductive histories. In the Polish case study, the focus was on fertility intentions and we purposively sampled for childless women. The Polish interviewees were 20 to 30 years of age at the moment of the interview and at different stages of family formation process. Consequently, these interviews provided us with in-depth data on women's considerations and intentions as to when become a mother.

The interviews were conducted and analysed in original languages (Slovak and Polish). They were transcribed verbatim and coded applying coding procedures of the "grounded theory" approach, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998, cf. Glaser and Strauss 1967). In interviewee's narrations we identified all passages related to age and childbearing desires, intentions and experiences. Within this material, by the means of *open* and *axial*

coding (“bottom-up” coding, Straus and Corbin 1998) we categorised and defined the different ways our respondents considered age with regard to motherhood.

In our previous studies, we showed that Slovak and Polish women perceive similar age deadlines for motherhood (age 30 in particular) and they use similar arguments to justify them. In this study, our first results show that considerations on age have an actual impact on fertility intentions and reproductive behaviours. Not only is the age an independent factor in decision-making process, but it also influences women’s perception of other conditions, important for childbearing. In particular, it has an impact on how women evaluate their economic security and financial resources, necessary for motherhood.

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