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WOMEN'S PATHWAYS TO CHILDLESSNESS IN LITHUANIA

The article explores pathways to childlessness among two generations of women in Lithuania. The authors employ both quantitative and qualitative research methods. For the quantitative part, in order to assess the demographic context of childlessness in Lithuania compared to other European countries the authors analyzed data from Human Fertility Database (HFD) and Generations and Gender Survey (GGS). The authors' qualitative analysis is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in Lithuania (n = 44) with childless women aged 28–47 (younger generation) and 50–71 (older generation) at the time of the survey (2017–2018). The authors' research results show that compared to other European countries, the level of permanent childlessness in Lithuania seems to be about average: significantly lower than in some Western, Northern and Southern European countries, however, higher than in most Eastern and Central European countries. Long-term trends also indicate increase in permanent childlessness in Lithuania. Analysis of the subjectively perceived causes of childlessness revealed the different ways the two generations of women experience childlessness. In the context of circumstantial childlessness, women from the older generation tend to perceive their “childless” state as something that has been predetermined, decided by God or fate, whereas, younger women appear to employ a more active approach to their lives in terms of relationships and family formation. In terms of voluntary childlessness, the differences among women of the two generations are even more prominent. Older women never openly say that they have chosen to remain childless, even though they admit never really wanting children. In contrast, narratives of voluntary childlessness among the younger generation are full of clarity, with women openly declaring that it was their choice and that they are enjoying it. Lastly, in the case of involuntary childlessness women's experiences from both generations seem to converge: they point to dissatisfaction with the healthcare system in the field of infertility treatment.

Key words: childlessness, permanent childlessness, circumstantial childlessness, voluntary childlessness, involuntary childlessness, differences among generations, Lithuania.

Sieviešu bezbērnotības fenomens Lietuvā

Šajā rakstā tika pētīts sieviešu bezbērnotības fenomens, salīdzinot divu paaudžu sievietes Lietuvā. Rakstā tika izmantotas gan kvalitatīvās, gan kvantitatīvās izpētes metodes. Kvantitatīvās metodes tika izmantotas *Human Fertility Database (HFD)* un *Generations and Gender Survey (GGS)* datu analīzei ar mērķi izvērtēt bezbērnotību Lietuvā demogrāfiskajā kontekstā

salīdzinājumā ar citām Eiropas valstīm. Kvalitatīvā analīze tika balstīta uz daļēji strukturētajām intervijām, kas tika veiktas Lietuvā ($n = 44$) ar bezbērnu sievietēm, kuru vecums aptaujas laikā (2017.g.–2018.g.) bija no 28 gadiem līdz 47 gadiem (jaunākā paaudze) un no 50 gadiem līdz 71 gadam (vecākā paaudze). Pētījuma rezultāti liecina, ka, salīdzinājumā ar citām Eiropas valstīm, galīgās bezbērnotības līmenis Lietuvā ir tuvu vidējam: tas ir ievērojami zemāks nekā Rietumu, Ziemeļu un Dienvidu Eiropas valstīs, bet augstāks nekā vairākumā Austrumu un Centrālās Eiropas valstīs. Turklāt, ilgtermiņa tendī liecina par galīgās bezbērnotības līmeņa pieaugumu Lietuvā. Subjektīvi uztveramo bezbērnotības cēloņu analīze ļauj secināt, ka divu paaudžu sievietes dažādi uztver bezbērnotību. Apstākļu radītas bezbērnotības gadījumos vecākās paaudzes sievietes uztver savu “bēbērnu” statusu kā kaut ko iepriekšnoteiktu, likteņa vai Dieva nolemtu, kamēr jaunākās paaudzes sievietes parasti ģimenes veidošanas jautājumus izskata daudz aktīvāk. Brīvprātīgās bezbērnotības uztverē atšķirības starp abu paaudžu sievietēm ir vēl izteiktākas. Vecākās paaudzes sievietes atklāti neteica, ka pašas bija izvēlējušās palikt bez bērniem – pat tad, kad viņas atzina, ka nekad nav isti vēlējušās bērnus. Turpretī jaunākās paaudzes sievietes atklāti teica, ka tā ir viņu pašu izvēle, un viņas to izbauda. Izrādījās, ka piespiedu bezbērnotības gadījumā abu paaudžu sieviešu pieredze ir līdzīga – visas norādīja, ka ir vīlušās veselības aizsardzības sistēmā saistībā ar neauglības ārstēšanu.

Atslēgas vārdi: bezbērnotība, galīga bezbērnotība, apstākļu radīta bezbērnotība, brīvprātīga bezbērnotība, piespiedu bezbērnotība, atšķirības starp paaudzēm, Lietuva.

Феномен женской бездетности в Литве

В данной статье изучен феномен бездетности у двух поколений женщин Литвы. Авторы применили как количественные, так и качественные методы исследования. Количественные методы были использованы для анализа информации из *Human Fertility Database (HFD)* и *Generations and Gender Survey (GGS)* с целью оценки демографического контекста бездетности в Литве по сравнению с другими европейскими странами. В свою очередь, авторский качественный анализ основан на данных полуструктурированных интервью, проведённых в Литве ($n = 44$) среди бездетных женщин в возрасте 28–47 лет (младшее поколение) и 50–71 года (старшее поколение) на момент проведения опроса (2017–2018 годы). Результаты проведённого исследования показали, что по сравнению с другими европейскими странами, уровень окончательной бездетности в Литве приближается к среднему: он значительно ниже, чем в некоторых странах Западной, Северной и Южной Европы, однако выше, чем в большинстве стран Восточной и Центральной Европы. Кроме того, долгосрочные тренды указывают на рост уровня окончательной бездетности в Литве. Анализ субъективно воспринимаемых причин бездетности выявил различия в объяснении и переживании своей бездетности у двух поколений женщин Литвы. По отношению к обстоятельству бездетности женщины старшего поколения склонны воспринимать своё «бездетное» состояние как нечто предопределённое, ниспосланное Богом или судьбой, тогда как женщины младшего поколения обычно более активно подходят к вопросам создания семьи. В свою очередь, по отношению к добровольной бездетности различия между двумя поколениями женщин ещё более заметны. Женщины старшего поколения не говорили открыто о том, что сами решили остаться бездетными, – даже тогда, когда признавали, что никогда не хотели детей. Женщины молодого поколения, напротив, открыто заявляли, что это был их собственный выбор и им это нравится. Но в случае вынужденной бездетности опыт женщин двух поколений практически «сошёлся»: и те, и другие отмечали свою разочарованность в системе здравоохранения в области лечения бесплодия.

Ключевые слова: бездетность, окончательная бездетность, обстоятельственная бездетность, добровольная бездетность, вынужденная бездетность, различия между поколениями, Литва.

Introduction

During the last decades, the level of childlessness in some Western, Northern and Southern European countries has been steadily increasing (Tocchioni 2018). It is a manifestation of increasing individualization of Western societies, changing family models and gender roles. Similar processes have been observed in Lithuania, however, the phenomenon of childlessness so far has not gained much scientific attention. In this paper the authors aim to explore pathways to childlessness in Lithuania by comparing two generations of women and employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Childlessness is usually defined as the “absence of biological or adopted children in an individual’s life” (Miettinen et al. 2015). This is a rather narrow definition of childlessness, as it disregards other types of fatherhood and motherhood, such as, for instance, participation in the life of partner’s children (Miettinen et al. 2015). However, due to the drawbacks of available data, this definition proves to be rather functional and so the authors adopt it. Conceptually, childlessness is usually classified into three types: involuntary childlessness (e.g., infertility); voluntary childlessness (also referred to as being “childfree”); and childless by circumstances (neither voluntary nor involuntary, e.g. the delayed childbearing or the lack of a partner) (Buhr, Huinink 2017). In their analysis the authors follow this framework, at the same time recognizing that childlessness is a complex phenomenon, caused by various factors and in some cases the distinction between certain types of childlessness might be blurred.

1. Sociohistorical context of childlessness in Lithuania

During the Soviet period, conformist behavior and high standardization of transition to adulthood, with major life course events happening in a short period of time, were typical. People born in 1945–1949 and later generations established the calendar of events in the transition to adulthood, such as leaving parents, acquiring profession or education, starting working career. For the 1950–1970 generation the transition from one institutional environment to another was strictly standardized and the majority of the events marking adulthood were experienced in 5–8 year period. Those born after 1970 started to deinstitutionalize the established calendar, and the process of becoming an adult was prolonged (Kraniauskiene 2016). The traditional normative sequence of events (end of education, first employment, leaving parents’ home for the first time, first marriage, birth of the first child) was typical for only part of Lithuanian youth in the Soviet times (Kraniauskiene 2011). More popular were variations of this sequence, when the first three stages (end of education, leaving parents’ home, and first employment) were interchanging, but matrimonial and procreational events were kept in the traditional standard sequence. The first partnership and marriage most often coincided, and the birth of the first child concluded the process of becoming an adult (Kraniauskiene 2016). In the cases of pre-matrimonial pregnancy couples used to urgently marry, and for this purpose juveniles needed permission from the executive committee of the party (Kraniauskiene 2016).

According to Soviet propaganda, an ideal woman was first of all married, a committed wife and mother, moreover, she had to have a specialized secondary or higher education and be employed in a public sector (Marcinkeviciene 2009; Zvinkliene 2009). Creating a family and having children meant a higher status for Soviet woman (Marcinkeviciene, Praspaliauskiene 1999). In 1944 support for pregnant women, single mothers and mothers with many children was decreed and the title of honor “Mother-hero”, the medals “Mothers’ glory” and “Medal of motherhood” were established (Leinarte 2014). However, only small part of Lithuanian families benefited from this support, as large families were quite rare (Leinarte 2014). During the collapse of USSR, in the Soviet Baltic states more than 80% of women were working full day seeking to accomplish the roles of “worker-wife-mother” (Pascal, Kwak 2005).

After Lithuania’s Independence was restored and the process of democratization was developing, interwar catholic women organizations were reestablished, for example, Catholic women community *Caritas*. This organization spread ideas of large families and sought to prohibit abortion. Restored secular women organizations (in Lithuanian: *Lietuvos moterų sąjunga, Moterų atgimimo sąjunga*) tried to restore the image of the woman-mother (Jurenienė, Ibianskiene 2018). According to D. Marcinkeviciene and R. Praspaliauskiene (1999), during this period, the role of woman-mother was not questioned, only the ideal image of the Soviet “wife-worker-mother” was reduced to “wife-mother”. Women were encouraged to “return to the family”, the state aimed to increase the birthrate, and national ideas coincided with the ideas of antifeminism and traditional gender roles (Zvinkliene 2009).

A study of childlessness’ representation in women magazines between 1991–1996 revealed that motherhood was idealized, and childlessness showed up rather indirectly – through sexual education of adults and teenagers, family planning (temporary childlessness), infertility and abortion (as risk of final childlessness), loneliness of adults (as consequence of childlessness). Having no children was presented as destiny, deviation from woman’s mission, and their abandonment – accusatory (with an exception in case of material reasons) (Sumskaite, Rapoliene 2019). Twenty years later some changes in discourse are visible. An analysis of childlessness representation in internet portals and women magazines of 2011–2016 found relative rise of the topic of voluntary childlessness (Rapoliene, Sumskaite 2019). It is presented as modern rational “Self” project, whereas motherhood as woman’s mission and traditional image of family is questioned.

2. Research methodology: quantitative and qualitative

In this article the authors employ both quantitative and qualitative research methods. For the quantitative part of the article the Human Fertility Database (HFD) and the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) data were analyzed. The authors used HFD calculations on the level of permanent childlessness in 16 European countries for cohorts of women born from 1955 to 1973. Analysis of GGS data allowed the authors to estimate the prevalence of different types of childlessness in Lithuania and compare it with several older member countries of the EU (Austria and Germany)

and several countries representing Central and Eastern European region (Estonia, Bulgaria and Romania).¹ The first wave of GGS in Lithuania was conducted in 2006.

In the second part of the article the authors analyze qualitative data gathered in the framework of the project “Childlessness in Lithuania: Sociocultural Changes and Individual Experiences in Modern Society” No. S-MOD-17-3, financed by the Research Council of Lithuania. In 2017–2018 the authors conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 44 childless Lithuanian women. Two generations of women participated in this survey:

1. Women aged 28–47 at the time of the interview. This group of childless women is referred to as younger women/younger generation in the article. The age of 28 refers to the average age of the first childbirth, which, in 2017 in Lithuania was 27.5 (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas 2018). The majority of these women are still in the process of remaining childless and reflect their decisions to postpone pregnancy or remain childless in the current ideological, economic and societal environment.
2. Women aged 50–71 at the time of the interview. The authors refer to this group in the article as older women/older generation. They reflect their life course events, experiences and decisions in a retrospective way and provide a deeper understanding of the social processes that shaped fertility decisions in the late soviet period and the first decade of the Lithuania's independence (1990s).

The authors included all types of childlessness in their research, therefore, voluntarily/involuntarily/circumstantially childless/childfree women were interviewed. Interviewees were selected according to the criteria of heterogeneity. Interviews were conducted in different areas of Lithuania, covering large cities, small towns and rural areas, with women of different social backgrounds (including socioeconomic status, level of education and partnership type, i.e. single, married or cohabitating). In order to maintain confidentiality, interviewees were given a pseudo name, which, together with their age, is indicated in brackets, below each quotation.

In the analysis phase all interviews were coded, codes categorized with the help of the software MAXQDA 2018.

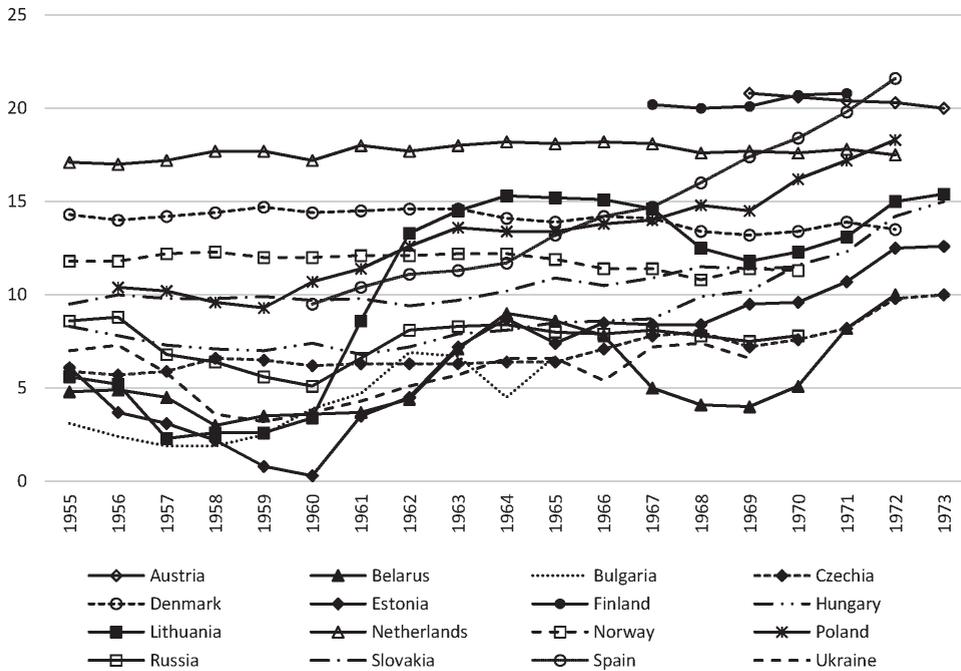
3. Demographic context of childlessness in Lithuania

3.1. Trends in permanent childlessness

Levels of permanent childlessness can be estimated using various data sources: population censuses, surveys, population registers, vital statistics. Each source has strengths and drawbacks which might result in different estimations of permanent childlessness (Sobotka 2017). In this article the authors use calculations of women's cohort childlessness in 16 European countries from HFD.

¹ The authors were not able to include Latvia in this comparative analysis, as Latvia participates neither in the Generations and Gender Survey, nor in the Human Fertility Database – the data sources the authors used for calculations.

Figure 1
Level of permanent childlessness for cohorts of women born from 1955 to 1973, 16 European countries, %



Source: Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Vienna Institute of Demography 2020.

Long-term trends indicate an increase in permanent childlessness in Lithuania – among women born in 1955 only 5.6% were childless, whereas among women born almost two decades later – in 1973 – 15.4% remained childless (see Figure 1). It could be also observed two periods of decrease in childlessness in Lithuania: for women born in 1957–1960 and 1967–1969. It is important to note that estimations of childlessness in HFD differ from calculations conducted elsewhere. For instance, according to T. Sobotka's (2017) estimations, the level of permanent childlessness for Lithuanian women born in 1965 and 1968 were 8.9% and 9.3% respectively. HFD estimates for the same cohorts are 15.2% and 12.5%, thus, significantly higher. Therefore, it is likely that the level of childlessness, at least for these cohorts of Lithuania's women, is slightly elevated in HFD.

Compared to other European countries, the level of childlessness in Lithuania seems to be about average: significantly lower than in some Western, Northern and Southern European countries, however, higher than in most Eastern and Central European countries. For instance, while the share of childless women among the youngest cohorts in Lithuania is 15%, it is more than 20% in Austria, Finland, Spain and less or around 10% in Czechia, Belarus, Russia, Ukraine. The only Eastern and

Central European country that has a higher level of childlessness than Lithuania is Poland – 18.3% for 1972 cohort.

3.2. Prevalence of different types of childlessness

The level of infertility (involuntary childlessness). Infertility as a public health issue worldwide has been recognized by World Health Organization (WHO). It is estimated that around 4% of all couples remain involuntary childless (Lechner et al. 2007). Studies focusing on the EU region have estimated that the proportion of lifetime infertility among women aged 25–44 in 1991–1993 was 11.3% (Olsen et al. 1998). According to Lithuania's GGS data, the proportion of childless women who replied that they would like to have a child, but are definitely sure this could not happen because of physiological reasons was 5.4%. Even higher proportion (6.8%) referred to the probability of infertility. Lithuania takes the middle position between Germany, Bulgaria, where proportion of infertile women is much smaller, and Estonia, Romania, where the levels of infertility are the highest between the included countries. Thus, the comparison has not revealed any tendencies according to differentiation between the old and new member states of the EU.

Table 1

The proportion of women currently wanting to have a child and having/not having physical possibility for this, %, 2006

Physically possible to have a child	Lithuania		Austria		Bulgaria		Estonia		Germany		Romania	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Definitely not	8	5.4	9	4.3	10	2.1	12	9.6	6	1.7	11	7.9
Probably not	10	6.8	12	5.7	16	3.3	10	8	5	1.4	4	2.9
Probably yes	77	52.4	46	21.8	229	47	25	20	47	13.1	42	30
Definitely yes	52	35.4	144	68.2	232	47.6	78	62.4	300	83.8	83	59.3
Total	147	100	211	100	487	100	125	100	358	100	140	100

Source: the authors' calculations based on the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute 2006.

Intentions to remain childfree (voluntary/intended childlessness). As in other countries of Eastern and Central Europe, the level of intentional childlessness (respondents who do not have and do not intend to have children) in Lithuania was low in 2011 (Miettinen et al. 2015). Even smaller numbers from the EU countries were estimated in Estonia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Cyprus, Slovenia and Bulgaria. GGS questionnaire also allowed measuring intentional childlessness. Considering that differences in intentional childlessness between the Central and Eastern Europe are very low, we have chosen to compare only two countries – Lithuania (representing Eastern and Central Europe) and Germany (representing old members of the EU). The highest proportions of women who responded that they do not intend to have children at all were found between the oldest groups of reproductive age (35–45) in both countries. However,

the levels of intended childlessness in the youngest groups in Germany are much higher compared to Lithuania. Considering that the approval rates of (voluntary) childlessness are the lowest in formerly communist Eastern European countries (Tanturri et al. 2015), it is evident that social acceptance of childfree lifestyle is higher in German society. This could explain why the share of women who replied they “most probably will not have children at all” is higher in Lithuania among all age groups (see Table 2). In a society where social acceptance of voluntary childlessness is low, it is rather difficult to make a life choice deviant from the standard life path of a woman.

Table 2

**Different procreation intentions of childless women by age groups
in Lithuania and Germany, %, 2006**

Age, years	Do not intend to have children at all	Most probably will not have children at all	Intend to have a child during the next three years	Intend to have children in the future
Lithuania				
18–24	0.40	1.20	24.90	73.40
25–29	1.20	6.10	58.50	34.10
30–34	12.60	20.00	51.60	15.80
35–39	50.30	25.20	11.30	13.20
40–45	81.10	15.00	2.40	1.40
n	324	118	290	449
Germany				
18–24	10.40	4.90	21.5	63.20
25–29	12	7.70	47	33.30
30–34	33	10.40	44.3	12.20
35–39	65.6	14.80	17.2	2.50
40–45	91	5.80	2.2	1.00
n	454	76	227	263

Source: the authors’ calculations based on the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute 2006.

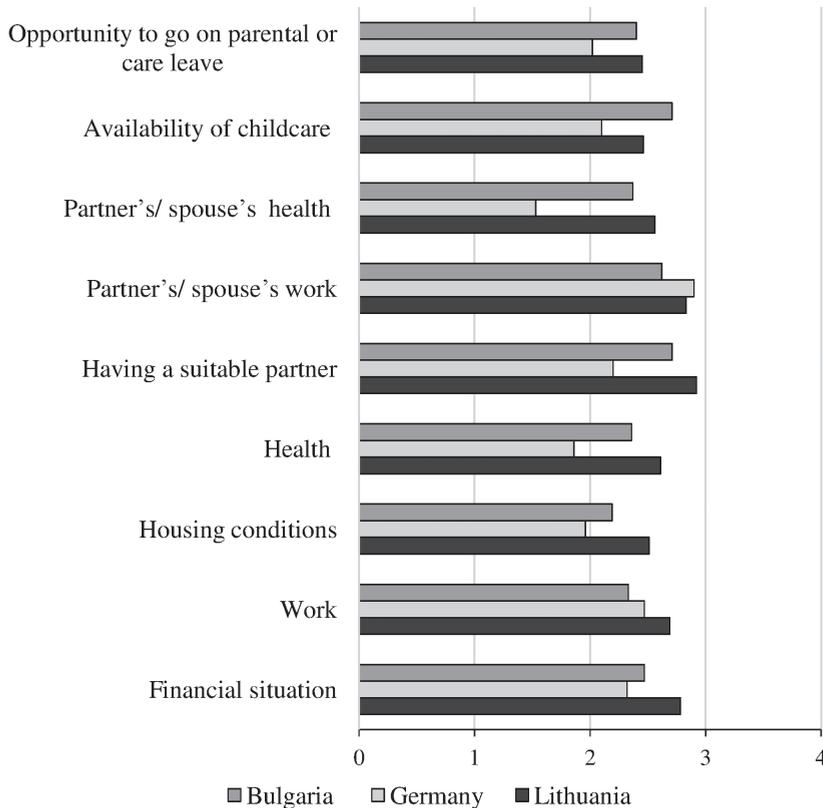
Conditions influencing the decision to have a child (circumstantial childlessness).

Since circumstantial childlessness blurs the distinction between involuntary and voluntary childlessness, it is difficult to estimate the proportion of childless women who remain childless due to certain circumstances. However, GGS data allows to evaluate the attitudes about some conditions that could influence the decision to have or not to have a child during the next three years. The authors compared the mean value on answer the question: “How much would the decision on whether to have or not to have a child during the next three years depend on the listed circumstances?” (4-item scale; the higher value represents higher agreement on a certain determinant – see Figure 2). Interestingly, having a suitable partner plays the most important role for Lithuania’s childless women when considering the possibility of having a child.

Germany's women attribute much less importance to this condition and Bulgaria's women – a little less. The second most important determinant in Lithuania was partner's work and respondents' financial situation. It seems that the determinants/conditions of financial security predominate in all countries compared. The least important determinants in Lithuania are the availability of childcare and the opportunity to take parental or childcare leave. The conditions of childcare leave are rather favorable in Lithuania (were also favorable at the time of the first wave of the survey), that is why these determinants are not seen as obstacles for having a child. Contrarily, the availability of childcare is one of the top priorities for Bulgaria's childless women, which might illustrate higher demand of childcare services in this country.

Figure 2

Attitudes towards conditions that could have an effect on the decision to have/not to have a child during the next three years, Lithuania, Germany and Bulgaria, mean score by the scale, where 1 is "not at all" and 4 is "a great deal", 2006



Source: the authors' calculations based on the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute 2006.

4. Subjectively perceived causes of childlessness: results of the qualitative study

4.1. Childless by circumstances

The majority of women of the older generation in the authors' survey sample (n = 44) remained childless due to the fact that they did not meet/find a suitable partner for marriage.

Interviewer: Have you ever tried to have children?

Interviewee: *No, I have not.*

Interviewer: First family and then children?

Interviewee: *Yes.* (Stefa, 71)

In the period when these women were of reproductive age and were making their childbearing decisions, social norms in relation to sexuality and family formation were strictly traditional, both (previous) religious and Soviet norms supported by the state ideology. Marriage was seen as the only way to create a romantic partnership between a man and a woman and by extension – family, sexual relations before marriage were strongly condemned:

So yes, I don't have [children]. You see, morals did not allow that, fear did not allow that. I mean – morals did not allow to succumb to impulses, because, you know, it's possible to have a child by accident, right? <...> in my time, when I was young, it was indecent to sleep around. (Onute, 50)

As sexual relations were imaginable only in serious, committed relationships, even the possibility of becoming pregnant accidentally for this generation of women, if they never married, was almost non-existent. From the interview with Liucija (62), the authors also see the importance of societal pressure that was used to enforce conformity to these ideals, as she relates that her *mother would have gone crazy* if she were to have a child without marriage, and so she *couldn't even think about that*. Additionally, her account indicates that when it comes to children, marriage was important not only in terms of “morals”, but also on a practical level, for survival, in terms of financial stability. This reflects the fact that in the Soviet times economic and financial family life was based on the dual-earner model:

How can an unmarried, financially unstable woman want a child? There has to be a family, relationship, support. I knew that I wouldn't have any kind of support from anyone. How could I have wanted that? (Liucija, 62)

When relating reflections on their pathways to childlessness women from the older generation elicit calmness, they seem to have accepted the situation. There is also a kind of fatalistic mindset involved, women tend to refer to their current state as childless as something that has been predetermined, decided by God or fate:

We were preparing to get married a few times, but both times something happened that we couldn't. So that means that we shouldn't have because God has protected me my whole life. When I think about it now, how many challenges and none of them were pointless. <...> It was supposed to be like this. (Jurate, 54)

The feeling of predetermination is accompanied in some cases by passivity, women seem to lack agency in their life choices when it comes to family formation. As illustrated by Elena (60), who, after the loss of her boyfriend, did not search for another partner: *Well, my boyfriend died while he was in the army near the Bay of Biscay. In fairness, I didn't even look for anyone else. It was OK the way it was.* Liucija's (62) account is especially extreme, as she states: *I couldn't make any decisions, all decisions were made for me. I could not choose anything.* Here we should remember the strict surveillance of private lives by the soviet state, economically poor life conditions, for instance, no accommodation, no work without registration and at the same time no registration without work, small salaries in case you succeeded to get work, etc. The person who lacked economic, social resources felt as if captured – very dependent. The persistent question in such case was how to survive, and the topic of children did not emerge.

In contrast to the older generation of women, research participants from the younger generation elicit a more active attitude towards relationships and family formation. For instance, feeling that her reproductive years were coming to an end, at the age of 37, Jolanta (at the time of the interview aged 44) started actively looking for a partner by registering on an internet dating site. This step was successful, she did meet her husband there, however, very soon after her menopause started prematurely, so she was unable to conceive. This case also illustrates the complexity of the causes of childlessness and shows how one type of childlessness might turn into another (in this case circumstantial childlessness became involuntary childlessness).

Another narrative, specific to the younger generation, concerns the postponement of childbearing. Having a husband/partner does not necessarily lead to having children (right away) as it was a common occurrence in soviet times. Considerations of things one should do before having a child, worries about the conditions that should be met before becoming a parent manifest themselves. In the following excerpt, Jore (29) relates how she changed her mind about having children in the beginning of cohabitation and how she came to enjoy the freedom life without children provides:

When we started living together, when I felt some sort of security, when I was 27, maybe 26. I thought we should [have children] because my instincts were stronger. <...> We tried at that time, but it didn't work out. <...> I would have had a child already if not for these medical problems, but now, when I look back, I think that it was not the right time yet, so many things were still not done. <...>

Interviewer: How do you feel not having children?

Interviewee: *Sometimes I feel very free! [laughs] <...> I am so free, there's so much I can do, the world awaits me! <...> But if you don't have a permanent, normal job, one that provides you with a stable salary each month, what will you do with a child? (Jore, 29)*

Thus, social conditions have changed making more room for individual agency and consequently the pathways to childlessness among younger women became more diverse as compared to older women. They also appear to employ a more active approach to their lives in terms of relationships and family formation.

4.2. Voluntary childlessness

Regarding voluntary childlessness, the authors see even more prominent differences among women of the two generations. Older women never openly say that they have chosen to remain childless, even though they admit never really wanting children. Their wording is somewhat vague with an emphasis on external conditions rather than on personal decisions. For instance, Tekle (65), who has focused on her scientific career, does say that reaching her goals was important to her, however, at the same time she stresses that *it just happened this way*:

I don't even know how to tell you – have I decided or not decided not to have children. I did not necessarily decide not to have them, I've only decided how to live, what way to go, what career to seek, I had some goals. <...> It just happened this way. (Tekle, 65)

Similarly, Antanina (59) remembers *knowing* that she wouldn't be having children since her birth, but she attributes her childlessness to circumstances – not meeting the right man:

It's strange, but I never imagined having children. Never. Maybe it's some kind of mysticism, but I knew I wouldn't have children. <...> Let's say I didn't find the kind of man who could be the father of my children. I have not met that kind [of man]. (Antanina, 59)

In contrast, narratives of voluntary childlessness among the younger generation are full of clarity, with women openly declaring that it was their choice and that they are enjoying it:

I never wanted to have children. I never needed them. It was always very clear to me. <...> I feel very well, not having children. And I feel I would have missed something had I had them. (Rugile, 44)

This decision [not to have children] came to me when I experienced a break in my career, when I found myself in another sphere that I liked – marketing. <...> And the more time goes by, the more I feel that it was the right decision (Paulina, 32)

These differences among generations reflect increasing individualization in terms of acceptable life scenarios and changing societal attitudes towards family formation. For the younger generation of women voluntary childlessness no longer needs to be latent, hidden from society.

4.3. Involuntary childlessness

In the case of involuntary childlessness women's experiences from both generations seem to converge. Even though reproductive technologies have advanced immensely during the last decades, and therefore, women from the younger generation theoretically should have more options to address their fertility issues, in some cases they encounter the same problems as women from the older generation. This relates in particular to

the medical system and the lack of empathy from its staff. Consider the following quotes – the first one is from a woman in the older generation and the second one – from the younger generation:

It was in 1986 and the doctor told me, what – don't you have a neighbor? Well, excuse me, I am a catholic. (Brone, 53)

A gynecologist once told me that it might be simply a biological incompatibility, so why don't you try to switch the husband. It was such a big shock for me. (Norvile, 36)

Women currently seeking infertility treatment also encounter financial difficulties as these procedures are expensive and are subsidized only partially:

I am very disappointed with Lithuania's doctors. Medical tests cost a lot of money, all our savings, nothing's compensated. I remember I went to one clinic for only 2 tests, when they told me the price I was shocked, good that I had some additional money. (Egle, 29)

Disappointment with the healthcare system when it comes to infertility treatment and financial difficulties discourage women from seeking medical help, thus increasing the likelihood of permanent involuntary childlessness.

Conclusions

Using both quantitative and qualitative research methods the authors explored childlessness among two generations of women in Lithuania. Results of the quantitative analysis show that compared to other European countries, the level of permanent childlessness in Lithuania is lower than in some Western, Northern and Southern European countries, however, higher than in most Eastern and Central European countries. Long-term trends also indicate an increase in permanent childlessness in Lithuania. Analysis of the prevalence of different types of childlessness, based on the data from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), indicates that there are no significant differences among analyzed countries in respect to the level of infertility. However, the level of voluntary childlessness in Lithuania is lower. In terms of circumstantial childlessness, women in Lithuania stress the importance of a suitable partner when considering the possibility of having a child. In turn, women in Germany and Bulgaria attribute much less importance to this factor. Other important determinants in Lithuania were partner's work and respondents' financial situation. When considering conditions that could influence the decision to have or not to have a child in the near future, financial security predominates in all countries compared. For the interpretation of results, findings from the qualitative study are useful.

Analysis of the subjectively perceived causes of childlessness revealed different ways the two generations of women experience childlessness. In the context of circumstantial childlessness, women from the older generation tend to perceive their "childless" state as something that had been predetermined, decided by God or fate, and children outside marriage were not thinkable at that time, whereas, younger women

appear to employ a more active approach to their life in terms of relationships and family formation. In terms of voluntary childlessness, the differences among women of the two generations are even more prominent. Older women never openly say that they have chosen to remain childless, even though they admit never really wanting children. In contrast, younger women are not afraid to declare that they chose to be childfree and are enjoying it. Lastly, in the case of involuntary childlessness women's experiences seem to converge, as women from both generations spoke about the inflexibility of the medical system and lack of empathy from its staff.

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