

Understanding Fertility, Work and Family Through a Gender Lens: A Case Study

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Abstract

Women's increasing education in 'developed societies' provokes 'fears' in both population specialists and in the wider public that 'low fertility' will endanger the 'normal reproduction' of societies. For this reason, the author examines, by using semi-structured life-history interviews, the experiences of those individuals that are believed to be mainly 'responsible' for the fertility decline: the university educated. Approaches that have also included men, who have usually been underestimated in mainline studies of fertility behaviour, are discussed. Insisting that men are as important in reproductive decisions as women are, the author draws on critiques of the gender-roles concept to demonstrate that gender roles are not encapsulated in predetermined patterns of reproductive behaviour. Therefore, the author attempts to identify both the 'turning events' related to reproductive decisions of the interviewees through a gender lens, and those domains where gender still represents an 'organising principle'.

KEYWORDS: fertility, Slovenia, qualitative approach, university-educated, gender

Introduction

Fertility decline is increasingly becoming a topic of great interest in various public debates. In these discussions, women's activities as reproducers and primary carers of individuals, families and communities have been strongly highlighted (McDaniel 1996: 84). It is not an exaggeration to argue that many discussions about declining fertility focus mostly on women and their reproductive behaviour. Educated women and women engaged in paid work, in particular, are often perceived as those who are to 'blame' for a 'poor demographic picture'.

Already at the end of the 19th century, the 'reproductive potential' of the nation occupied a prominent place in public discussions (Camiscioli 2001: 593-594). The interpreters of fertility behaviour gave greater emphasis to gender-specific notions about characteristics of the population, linking the responsibility of mothers to the idea of the 'disappearance' of the nation (Cole 1996: 643; Camiscioli 2001: 593-595). Efforts to discourage selfishness among women, who were not giving birth to a sufficient extent, took the form of catchphrase exhortations that pleaded women to bear more children (Folbre 2004: 348).

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However, nowadays, debates on fertility in 'developed societies' are also marked by similar gendered evaluations. For instance, in her content analysis, Krause (2001) showed that authoritative and broadly quoted articles of contemporary Italian demographers systematically and consistently represented Italian women's fertility as a problem. Moreover, Folbre (2004: 345) stated that in the 'Western cultural tradition' women's efforts to postpone or delay motherhood were judged as selfish violations of female responsibility for others. Some other pointed to the ideology of gender that specified 'women's nature' as predominantly sexually reproductive, which differentiates them from men (Hird and Abshoff 2000: 347).

In this essay, I discuss some preliminary results of the case study of reproductive decisions through a 'gender lens' in university-educated individuals in the administrative unit with the highest parity¹ in Slovenia.² Although only women are frequently labelled as 'responsible' for the fertility decline, I hold that men are as important in reproductive decisions as women are. In this regard, I focus on those approaches that have also included men who have usually been underestimated in mainstream studies on fertility behaviour. I draw on various critiques of gender-roles concept to show that gender roles are not encapsulated in predetermined patterns of reproductive behaviour. However, I am also interested in those cases where gender still represents an 'organising principle', particularly in harmonising work and family and work within the household, so stereotypically interpreted as an exclusively women's domain.

Theoretical background

Researchers from various academic fields, including demography, sociology, economics and anthropology, have sought to explain the role of women and men in fertility decline. Greenhalgh (1995: 7) argues that classic demographic transition theory and the wealth flows theory of fertility included only minor references to these issues by proposing a link between women's improved status and reduced fertility. Cotts Watkins has analysed the writings in one of the most authoritative demographic journals *Demography* from its first issue in 1964 until 1992. She has focused on articles on fertility, marriage and family and has found that contributions were dominated by the modernisation and the new home economics approach to fertility. The former is mainly connected to studying societal transformation associated with 'industrialisation' and the spread of new ideas while the latter is focused more narrowly on a set of issues that concern the efficient allocation of time and other resources inside and outside the household (Cotts Watkins 1993: 561; Becker in Cotts Watkins 1993: 561). In Cotts Watkins' (1993: 562) view, both theoretical approaches emphasised women's activities outside the household as crucial for delaying marriage or not marrying at all and for bearing fewer or no children. She further argues that

¹ The term parity refers to the number of children ever born to a woman.

² The study was a part of the basic research project *Social background of low fertility in university-educated in Slovenia* (code J6-6364). The project was carried out by the Sociomedical Institute of the Scientific Research Centre at the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

proponents of the modernisation theory postulated that education influenced both men and women but in quite a different manner. Even though they assumed that education would widen horizons for men and women, they did not hypothesise that the man would abandon his role of the breadwinner. However, they did argue that education would erode the woman's performance of her domestic role (*ibid.*: 562).

Researchers advocating the new home economics theory hold that education increases the amounts a woman could earn if she were to work for wages and consequently raises the opportunity costs of her staying at home (Cotts Watkins 1993: 562). Becker assumed that the gendered division of labour results from comparative advantage - the household maximises utility when women assume the primary responsibility for childrearing and men for providing the greater income through employment (Becker in Presser 1997: 306). In terms of female labour force participation, Cotts Watkins (1993: 562) argues that both approaches share the assumption that women's work outside the home is likely to compete with their domestic activities and that paid work is likely to be more attractive to them than work inside the home. Furthermore, she holds that both approaches share similar understandings of men and women and are rooted in notions of 'gender roles': men work outside the home while women are responsible for activities associated with children and domestic services (Cotts Watkins 1993: 562).

In the 1980s, researchers produced more systematic part-theories of fertility in which the concepts of 'women's roles' and 'women's status' occupied a central place (Greenhalgh 1995: 7). Greenhalgh estimates that one of the most influential scholars of such theories is Karen Mason who argued that women's education and her position in the family and in the household were the most important aspects bearing an impact on fertility (Mason in Greenhalgh 1995: 7). However, Greenhalgh (1995) and Riley (1995; 1998) argue that the use of concepts like 'women's roles' and 'women's status' is questionable. They maintain that proponents of such an approach generally assume that gender is primarily the property of individuals. They also hold that researchers advocating the notion of gender roles ignore the issues of power inequality between women and men and inequalities in larger societal institutions. They also argue that such an approach objectifies women by treating them as passive objects rather than agents in their own lives and tends to universalise the categories of 'women' and 'gender roles'.

In the last two decades, scholars in social history, sociology and anthropology, mainly within feminist theory and in the field of gender studies, have begun to study how reproduction is enwrapped in gender relations, relations of difference and inequality of resources and power (Greenhalgh 1995: 14). Many researchers have stressed that the notions of gender and not the notions of 'women's roles' or 'women's status' should be taken as the central organising concept (Greenhalgh 1995; Riley 1995; 1998; 1999; Gerson 2004). However, the study of gender does not entail acceptance of static, universal and pre-determined notions of men and/or women. Gerson (1990: 303) holds, for instance, that research should move beyond such dichotomous conceptions of gender, as we cannot assume a general uniformity within the group of men and/or women. Riley (1995: 118) also shares the view that the diversity of gender constructions within and among different cultural settings should be studied.

Greene and Biddlecom (1997: 3) identify the quandary of mainstream studies of fertility behaviour precisely in their focus on gender roles, not on gender. They argue that in the 'gender roles perspective', men and women's complimentary roles made women exclusively responsible for fertility and thus information from men was not considered important. Consequently, men were usually excluded from research on family formation (Greene and Biddlecom 1997: 3). Browner (2001: 773) further maintains that research in demography and population studies has typically been informed by consensus models. This has meant that researchers commonly assumed that the interests of women and their male partners were mostly the same. The role of men in family formation was, according to Browner (2001: 773) neglected in research until the late 1970s. This issue came to the forefront of researchers' interest especially in the last decade. A growing number of researchers studying family formation have suggested that it is of crucial importance to include men as important actors in research on family-formation and parenthood. They have emphasised the processes of communication and negotiation between both partners in reproductive decision-making (Greene and Biddlecom 1997: 13; von der Lippe and Fuhrer 1998: 203; Forste 2002: 579).

The increasing entry of women into the labour market in 'developed societies' especially in the second half of the 20th century, has also led researchers to study the associations between their family lives and paid work. Gerson (2004: 163-164) argues that with the rising female labour force participation, the distinction between the male breadwinner and the female as responsible for childcare and household tasks became increasingly questioned. She holds that especially since the 1980s, when research on the work-family intersection increased significantly, it became more evident that work and family life could no longer be conceived as separate domains, and the notion of work-family conflict gradually came to the forefront of researchers' interest (*ibid.*: 164). Although researchers have documented work-family conflict in both women and men, a notorious finding in work-family research has been that women are more likely to experience such conflict due to gendered expectations of family obligations. Women thus tend to take on the majority of family responsibilities, such as household responsibilities and child-care (Hattery in Clancy and Tata 2005: 234; Wolf-Wendel and Ward 2006: 489).

On the one hand, as above demonstrated, researchers within feminist theory and in the field of gender studies have argued that neither the categories of 'men' nor of 'women' can be understood as two separate categories pre-determining individual behaviour. Instead, they point to the diversity of 'gender constructions' and to their changes over the individuals' life-course. Conversely, researchers have consistently proven the pervasiveness of the gendered division of labour within the household and the continuing presence of gender differences in reconciling work and family life. These differences, as many researchers have argued, can best be captured when studying both women and men. Therefore, in this essay, I focus on the diversity and change in both female and male experiences of their reproductive decision-making and on the ways that gender still presents, as Greenhalgh (1995: 24) puts it a 'structuring principle of social life'.

Fertility, family and work in Slovenia

Researchers generally hold that the conscious lowering of fertility in Slovenia first began in cities, in the higher social strata of the population, among the more educated and among employed women and gradually expanded to all social groups and strata (Kožuš-Novak et al. 1998: 9). However, the process of 'educational expansion' for both women and men did not begin later than in the second half of the 20th century, and thus does not coincide with the drop in fertility levels noted by population specialists as early as the second half of the 19th century. The first data available on the educational composition of the population of Slovenia are from the 1953 census. The data demonstrate that at that time, as much as 83 % of the population that was more than 10 years old had completed less than 8 years of schooling. Among these, half were women (Šircelj 2006: 208). From then on, there is evidence of increasing educational attainments for both genders, but more so for women. For instance, in 1961, census data showed that women accounted for only 26.8 % of those completing 'more than secondary school'. In 2002, among all the persons with an educational level higher than secondary school, as many as 53 % were women (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia 2007). These data clearly provide evidence of increasing educational levels for women in Slovenia over the last decades.³

It is not an exaggeration to argue that the socialist political and economic system in Slovenia as a part of former Yugoslavia to a large extent influenced the lives of individuals and families. After the end of World War II in 1945, the Yugoslav State, of which Slovenia formed a part, was constituted as a socialist country and the life of women in this period was extensively marked by socialist political practice (Bahovec et al. 2002: 292-293). This was both a result of the economic needs for a new work force and the needs and interest of women for working outside the home (*ibid.*: 301). Nevertheless, the high labour force participation of women was also a result of the socialist ideological framework that defined women as both workers and mothers and defined paid employment for both genders as a social norm (*ibid.*: 294).⁴ However, this did not entail a decrease in women's obligations in the family, as women were still perceived as primarily responsible for childcare and household tasks. The position of women in the socialism period, as some researchers argue, was at enviable levels in terms of accessibility of education, a high level of employment and thus economic independence, liberal legislation on abortion, birth control and family planning, a reasonably developed and accessible network of childcare, etc. (Bahovec et al. 2002: 302). Such standards have largely been maintained in the changed social circumstances of post-socialism as well. The most noticeable changes, however, as some researchers hold, concern, in particular, the employer-employee relationships in view of the increasing flexibility of labour market and employment relationships (Černigoj Sadar and Vladimirov 2004: 197).⁵

³ For a more detailed historical overview of fertility levels in Slovenia, particularly in relation to education, see Šircelj in this volume.

⁴ The percentage of women in paid employment in Slovenia (% of women in numbers of persons in paid employment) steadily increased: it was 33.4 % in 1955 and as much as 46.2 % in 2005 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia 2007).

⁵ For an intergenerational comparison of individuals growing up and having children in two different political and economic systems - socialism and post-socialism, see the study of Knežević Hočevar in this volume.

Scholars in the socialism period interpreted the lowering of fertility in line with modernisation and demographic transition theory (Cukut 2006: 45). In this vein, Knežević Hočevar (2004: 342) argues that Slovenian demographers at that time explained the fall of fertility as a typical characteristic of 'developed Western countries', and therefore a positive sign of 'progress'. Researchers of fertility from the 1980s, in line with the modernisation theory framework, also identified the changing role of women and their increasing labour force participation as one of the important factors contributing to low fertility (Malačič 1985; Černič Istenič 1994; Boh 1999).

The research on the connections between work and family life and the gender differences in harmonising these two domains has undoubtedly been influenced by the 'traditionally high' participation of women on the labour market in Slovenia. In the last two decades, researchers hold that the most 'popular' research topics in Slovenia that are relevant to the understanding of transition to parenthood are gender division of labour in the private and public domain and the issue of the attitudes about 'gender roles' (Černigoj Sadar and Vladimirov 2004: 198). As to the subject of work-family connections, research has demonstrated the strong interconnection between work and family life with strong gender differences to the disadvantage of women (*ibid.*: 198). Gendered division of labour in relation to motherhood has been studied mainly in the framework of gender studies and feminist theories (*ibid.*: 200). However, lately, researchers are becoming increasingly interested in the role of men in family formation, which is especially evident in studies analysing 'new fatherhood' (Rener et al. 2005).

A case study

In this essay, I focus on three main domains that I identified as topical to analysing the gendered implications of reproductive decisions in university-educated individuals. Firstly, I present collocutors' perceptions of reasons for low fertility with an emphasis on gendered perceptions of low fertility. Then, I analyse individuals' reproductive decisions in terms of initial life plans and in terms of identifying factors that influenced their subsequent reproductive decisions. Finally, I examine gendered patterns of reconciliation between working and family life and the division of labour within the family.

I conducted twenty-nine interviews with women and men living in the administrative unit of Škofja Loka in winter and spring 2006. What is especially relevant for this research location is the fact that it has the highest number of families consisting of three or four or more children⁶ when compared to the statistical average for Slovenia. Compared to the percent of such families for Slovenia (as indicated by the census data from 2002), which is 5.8 % for families with three children and 1.1 % for those with four or more children, the percentages for this administrative unit are 11.3 and 4 respectively (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia 2002). In accordance with my aim to study the diversity of patterns and life experiences through a gender lens, I chose to include both individuals with statistically low and high numbers of children.

⁶ According to the census, the family is defined as a marital or extramarital couple with or without children or a father/mother with children.

The sample consisted both of individuals contacted through the list of the university-educated at the selected research location, obtained from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia and of individuals that I contacted through snow-ball sampling. The interviewees were between 29 and 56 years old, eighteen were women and eleven were men. When both partners agreed to participate, I carried out the interview with both. In some cases, only the female or the male in the couple agreed to participate or one of them had to refuse due to health or time constraints. A criterion of inclusion was that at least one of the partners had to be university-educated, which was usually the case. In the end, I interviewed twenty-seven people with higher than secondary school education, nineteen of these were university-educated, three held post-secondary education, four of them held a master's degree and one held a doctor's degree. Two held secondary school education. Since I wanted to capture a diverse range of individuals' experiences, I also interviewed two single women with one child and one single woman with no children.

In line with the theoretical background, I chose to study individual experiences through which both gender differences in reproductive decision-making and in harmonisation of paid work and family; and the diversity of arrangements of both men and women could be captured. I argue that both the heterogeneity of experiences and the gendered implications of such experiences can be best recorded through a qualitative interview. In line with the presented social and economic changes that, in the view of most researchers, underpin the fertility trends in Slovenia, I chose to analyse the experiences of individuals that were having children in the period when these changes were largely occurring. More specifically, I focused on individuals having children after the 1980s. That was the time when fertility levels in Slovenia dropped to a level that no longer guaranteed the 'simple reproduction' of the population (Čerňič Istenič 1994: 9).

I argue that reproductive decisions are a result of communication and mutual agreement between both partners. However, I do hold that gender represents a 'central organising principle' especially in the area of paid work and family interconnections.

Perceptions of fertility in Slovenia

The interviewees mostly perceived fertility in Slovenia to be low. Some of them viewed this fertility trend as problematic and worrying; only a minority of them mentioned the 'national aspect' in terms of the 'Slovenian nation' shrinking or disappearing. Some noted the problem of labour force shortage and issues related to the pension system. No less numerous were those interviewees that perceived fertility levels in Slovenia as an integral part of the processes taking place not only in Slovenia, but on the European level as well. In this manner, they did not view low fertility as a Slovenian particularity.

The most widely shared interpretation of reasons for low fertility referred to low fertility as a reflection of social processes in contemporary societies. In this manner, the interviewees mostly discussed the inability of people to gain appropriate housing and increasing social and economic insecurity (as compared to the socialism period). A climate of general insecurity was seen as one of the decisive factors that, in their opinions, 'negatively influenced' reproductive decisions. Permanent employment and permanent sources of income were thus cited as the most pressing issues. Some also expressed the

view that wanting children and loving them is simply not enough if one is not able to sufficiently provide for them in economic terms.

The transformation of socialism into capitalism did not, according to the interviewees, only entail changes in economic conditions, but in value orientations as well. Most of the collocutors described the prevalent values today as competitive, materialistic and consumerist, which were values that in their view 'negatively affect' fertility levels. Some thus placed primary emphasis not on economic factors influencing fertility but instead on individuals being spoiled, lazy, easy-going, ambitious and selfish. In this area, explanations of fertility were clearly gendered, although not all interviewees that expressed these views gave gendered interpretations of them. However, interviewees often talked about education and increasing labour force participation of women as one of the decisive factors of lowering fertility. Although the interviewees did not *a priori* view these changes negatively, they offered clear indications of women as in a way being 'responsible' for such a fertility situation. The interviewees did not explain high levels of education as directly influencing fertility levels; however, most of them stated that education bears an impact on postponing births to a later stage in life. This kind of postponement was seen as a 'problem' only for women due to their biological characteristics. In line with this, many of the interviewees (both women and men) provided examples of women they know who might want to have children, but are becoming 'too old' to realise this wish. The following is an indicative example:

The problem is in the changing role of women in contemporary society and in the way women are deciding to have children. I believe men are not problematic in this respect, but women are. Today, women are enrolled in university studies for a long time, they work, have a career, they have different views of the world. In the past, women's main career was to have children; today this is an obstacle to her career (male, 39 years, married, two children).

Or to put it with words of another collocutor:

Well, for women I could only say that they postpone their decision a bit too long. Too many conditions have to be fulfilled in order for them to rationally and consciously decide to have children (female, 39 years, married, two children).

Some collocutors also noticed changes in men's roles, but viewed them as mostly 'positive' in terms of contributing to family life. Contemporary men are, in their opinion, more willing to take part in household chores and childcare than in the past. However, some of them exposed the 'structural aspect' of such gender differences: they stated that the contemporary social climate is not in favour of mothers being absent from work due to family (for example childcare) obligations. In this manner, they emphasised increasing pressure from the employees that leads women with greater difficulties to decide to have children in the first place.

Most interviewees viewed the decision to have or not to have children as a deeply personal and intimate decision and were in this way strongly opposed to the state influencing such a decision through directly encouraging or even 'campaigning' (through the media, for instance) for higher fertility. Only a few of them viewed such policy mea-

asures as potentially effective in terms of creating a social climate that would foster people to have more children. They mostly viewed the role of the state as supportive to having children and not encouraging births directly. However, what were the actual life circumstances and experiences that impacted the collocutors' experiences and decision-making on whether, when and how many children to have?

Initial plans regarding reproductive choices and their realisation

Generally, it could be said that women had more pronounced and definite intentions about their family life than men did. What is especially interesting is that some of them expressed the view that they just knew they would have children and some even had a clear idea that they wanted to have 'a higher number' of children. Men, on the other hand, were less concrete about their plans and expressed them in more vague terms; more often than to women, things were just 'happening' to them. One of them remembers:

Well, I don't know, I probably wanted to make a career and have a family at some point, but this seemed so far away that I simply didn't give it too much thought (male, 40 years, married, two children).

The notions of 'ideal partner' changed to a considerable extent over time: for example, in teenage years, many put more emphasis on visual aspects of the partner or expressed idealist ideas about romantic love. Later, the picture of the partner gradually began to change: interviewees of both genders expressed the wish to find a partner with compatible visions of life. Such visions also pertained to ideas about having children with such a person. An illustration of this is found in the statement of one of the collocutors who explains the break-up of her relationship:

For example, the boyfriend I was with during my years of university: we also discussed the possibility of having children, and to him this was too far away and totally inconceivable at that stage of life. So, this initially led to our break up, as our life visions were no longer compatible (female, 31 years, living with partner, one child).

To both female and male collocutors, having children was usually supposed to happen at a certain stage of the life course. Children were seen almost as an unavoidable consequence of sequences of events: education and completing schooling, getting married or at least living with a partner, having appropriate housing conditions and employment (preferably a permanent one), and only then having children. In this way, it seems that both males and females viewed having children as a final step after having met these 'objective conditions'. For instance, one interviewee recalls:

We met at the university. We were together for four years. In the first three years, we had no definite plans other than finishing our studies. When the end of our studies was approaching, we began to think about the future. So things just happened in this way. We graduated almost at the same time, we decided half a year earlier to get married and start. When one period ends, another begins. So with the help of her parents, we arranged an apartment here; we decided that I would move up here and we just began to swim (male, 39 years, married, four children).

Most women followed this path and first got pregnant only after finishing their studies and having a stable relationship. Most interviewees did not express a clear plan to have the first child; they often said that the child 'happened' or that they simply felt it was the 'right time' to have children. These orientations depended on phases of the life-course, as expressed for instance by one of the women: 'At one stage of my life, I was travelling a lot, and this was important to me. So I could not imagine how I could have children then' (female, 31 years, living with a partner, one child). When women got pregnant quite unexpectedly, some had considered abortion, but none seriously, although two of them did not have the support of their partners. One woman that got pregnant unexpectedly during her university studies recounts how having a child changed her life significantly:

You do not have your own income, so you have to learn to function on pretty low financial means, so this changed my life to a great extent. You are not so careless anymore. Before, you worry about your studies, but you do not have other worries. And then you have to get yourself together very quickly, become more down to earth and grow up very quickly (female, 40 years, married, one child).

Children were also seen by other female and male collocutors as the major turning point in their lives in terms of accepting responsibility⁷ and becoming an adult.

Furthermore, having an appropriate partner was viewed by most of the interviewees as the main precondition for having a child, which was also a motivation for having a second child or further children. The notion of a suitable partner, according to the interviewees, is not linked only to the partner's willingness to have a child. The partner's emotional and personality characteristics and partners' mutual compatibility seemed to play an even more important role. For women, mutual compatibility did not necessarily mean an equal distribution of household tasks but a partner that is emotionally supportive. Being mature and able to take responsibility for the child was seen as a main subjective factor for having children.

The second child was more often 'planned' than the first one. Factors interviewees listed against having a second or third child were: postponing the decision all along; feeling it was not the right time; especially female collocutors linked the decision to difficulties in reconciling paid work and family life. Individuals often linked their decisions to their personal preferences and they did not perceive having children as motivated solely by economic reasons. One female interviewee's comment is illustrative of this:

At this moment we are thinking, we have an apartment, we have a job, we are healthy, and it is only about our preferences. About my wish not to enter, I will put it roughly, into this circle of not being free, when somebody else occupies first place again. In terms of responsibilities for such a small child, a child does not let you breathe (female, 29 years, living with a partner, one child).

⁷ For a detailed analysis of notions of responsible parenthood see the contribution of Čerňič Istenič in this volume.

However, which were the factors that the interviewees viewed as important in having or not having more than two children? Some clearly stated that two children were enough for them and saw this number as the 'right' one. In this view, they believed the quality of the time spent with the child was far more important than the number of children. Economic factors were also an issue. There were, for example, some interviewees that listed lack of living space as the main reason why they will probably not have more children:

My husband and I cannot afford our own apartment. We could take out a loan, but that would mean that we could not provide our two children with as much as we can now living with my parents. [...] It is physically impossible, under normal circumstances. I do not think it is fair to our children. This is the main reason (female, 38 years, married, two children).

Single women identified not being engaged in a committed relationship as the only most important reason for not having (one or more) children.

On the contrary, all the interviewees that had three or more children were not limited by space constraints (they either had large enough apartments, were living in their parents' house or they were building their own house). Space seemed to be an important but certainly not a sufficient factor for having more children. These couples framed their decisions to have more children in statements like: 'children were just happening to us', 'we accepted each child'. A woman with five children recalled:

I would say it was more spontaneous, children were not planned, and natural methods of contraception simply let me down a bit. But there was never any thought about not accepting any of them (female, 45 years, married, five children).

Or to put it with words of another collocutor:

We were postponing the decision to have the first child due to work and starting our own company at that time. So, we waited for things to start running. So, I could dedicate myself to the child. The other children simply came. We had a wish for more children, but not a plan when we want to have them. So with each child we thought it came earlier than we wanted. But we were happy to have each one of them (female, 35 years, married, four children).

Regardless of the number of children and the gender of the collocutors, the interviewees mentioned family networks almost uniformly as the main source of help in terms of both emotional and practical support (childcare, picking up children, etc.). However, these networks are to a large extent gendered with women (mothers or mothers-in-law of the collocutors) performing most of the care work. These social networks were seen as invaluable by the interviewees in view of time-consuming working arrangements to which formal care arrangements (for instance, kindergartens) are not adapted. This already touches upon the last issue I explore in my research: the reconciliation of both family and working life.

How to reconcile paid work and family and how to divide household tasks?

In contrast to the division of labour in families in which the interviewees grew up, where the 'traditional' division of labour within the household prevailed, both female and male

collocutors most often stated that labour in their household was quite equally divided by gender. However, most detailed accounts revealed that women still perform the majority of labour regarding work in the household and childcare, while men are still to a larger extent engaged in tasks around the house, minor repairs or playing with the children. Men reflected on the inadequacies of the 'traditional gender division of labour' and most of them stated that they try to be involved and responsible for at least part of the work in the household.

However, it seems that most of the mundane and routine work in the household including day-to-day care for children is still left to women. Nevertheless, some women did not view such kind of division of labour in the home as problematic. This was especially the case in families where men were (in terms of time constraints and in terms of the work position occupied) more engaged in paid work. It seems this was a kind of a 'silent arrangement' (female, 35 years, married, two children) between the partners. Some even perceived themselves as in a way responsible for such a situation, since they did not engage their partners in household work and childcare early enough or set them standards they were unable to attain. They took most of the workload on their shoulders. However, feelings of guilt, being overburdened and constrained by time seem to be present in females to a greater extent. Among the interviewees, there was one woman with five children who completely gave up paid work after the first child was born and there was one woman with four children who temporarily stopped working in the family business. For instance, the first woman's decision to stay at home was not planned, but more a result of a 'set of consequences'. To put it with her words:

When I was pregnant I found it difficult to imagine that my child was in childcare the whole day, without his/her mother. So, I thought about this intensively at the time of pregnancy. And then we were without help of any of the grandparents and the first child could not be vaccinated and consequently could not be put into institutional childcare. We then decided that I would stay at home (female, 45 years, married, five children).

Some women resorted to part-time work (and only one male collocutor), although this was not a widely used strategy. Staying at home was not a viable option for most of the women, either due to economic reasons or even more importantly, because they viewed their work as a source of self-fulfilment. However, orientations toward work and family seem to change at different stages of the life course. One woman recalls how she placed priority on her family later on in life:

My plans regarding work at that time [in secondary school, inserted by the author] were definitely more ambitious than now. I had greater ambitions regarding my work, but then you come to a point where you simply cannot do everything and you have to give priority to one thing. At that time, family absolutely outweighed work (female, 36 years, married, two children).

Another explains her juggling between paid work and family:

I am now a bit torn between the family and career. I believe it is quite difficult to combine this, especially, if you don't have money. We could not, for

example, afford a baby-sitter, so, things are pretty much left up to me. So, I feel maybe I could have a bigger family, which would mean that my work engagement would be more fragmentary, or I could become more engaged in paid work (female, 31 years, living with a partner, one child).

Male collocutors viewed their existing working arrangements more as a fact they needed to 'adapt' to their family lives in some way. Pressures in reconciling paid work and family life seemed not to be so great for them. However, when talking about priorities, it seems both men and women assign primary importance to their families, but women seem to have adapted their lives to the family and children to a greater extent than men. Additionally, the perception of employers that women with children (especially small children) are not efficient workers is vividly illustrated in the narration of one of the female interviewees:

My boss just told me last week that I was very good at my profession that I do it well. The only thing wrong is that I am not capable of dedicating myself wholly to my job, but I go home and look after the children. He would want me to come back to work every afternoon or evening, if there was an urgent matter (female, 34 years, married, three children).

Conclusions

The research material has demonstrated that individuals' orientations, regardless of gender, are dependent on stages in their life course. Both men and women have mostly followed what they termed a 'typical' life path: completing education, acquiring a stable job, getting married or living together with the partner and only then having children. Nevertheless, many stories demonstrate the importance of turning events that significantly altered their life-orientations and goals. Having children was usually the most important milestone the interviewees perceived as crucial in terms of assigning more time to family in comparison to paid work. For this reason, we cannot draw clear distinctions between being more 'family oriented' and assigning primary importance to paid work (being 'career oriented'). In this vein, the static notion of 'gender roles' as encapsulating pre-determined patterns of behaviour is clearly insufficient for studying reproductive decisions.

The empirical material further proved that the reproductive decisions of the interviewees were strongly influenced by their perceptions that it was the 'right time' to have children. These decisions were made in mutual communication between the partners. Mutual compatibility between the partners (in terms of values and preferences) was assessed by the collocutors as one of the decisive factors for having children. The fact that both partners are actively involved in reproductive decision-making, justifies the inclusion of both females and males in studies of reproductive behaviour.

Gendered perceptions of fertility are prominent both in 'public discourses' as well as among the collocutors, as demonstrated by the empirical material. In these accounts, women are perceived as 'responsible' for fertility decline. However, in such a presumed 'connection' between the higher rates of female labour force participation and the decreasing fertility in 'developed societies', two contradicting notions of women seem to be conveyed and especially the female interviewees communicated these. On the one hand, due to their childcare obligations, employers often do not perceive women as

being efficient workers. On the other hand, the demands of parenting are still greater for women than they are for men. Women collocutors, more so than men, are 'caught between' being 'good parents' and 'good workers'. Thus, gendered effects of public policies related to family and paid work, although not the focus of the analysis, were somehow an unavoidable element of exploring reproductive decisions through a gender lens.

An issue that also came to the forefront quite unintentionally is the gendered nature of social networks that the interviewees perceived as crucial in helping them to balance between demanding and time-consuming paid work arrangements and family obligations. Collocutors' mothers and mothers-in-law were mentioned almost uniformly as an indispensable resource in terms of baby-sitting and driving and picking up children from kindergarten or their after-school activities.

As can further be concluded from the empirical material, some women do indeed perceive motherhood as their primary 'role'. Some have openly stated that their decision to cut back on working hours or not to be engaged in paid work has been a consequence of giving priority to the family and children. Only one male collocutor has resorted to part-time work as a strategy to balance work and family responsibilities more effectively. Men seem not to have adapted their paid work arrangements to their household and childcare obligations to such an extent that women have. They also report on fewer difficulties in reconciling paid work and family life. Such a finding is in line with my presumption that harmonisation of work and family is still a gendered issue.

However, it might be too simplistic to conclude that the 'traditional' gendered division of obligations in terms of the husband acting as a breadwinner and the wife performing most of the household tasks and childcare and reducing work hours or giving up paid work entirely, is solely the result of 'power imbalances' in the family. Moreover, what I could at least to some extent observe in these situations were patterns of 'negotiations' between the partners about arrangements they deemed most beneficial to the welfare of the family. But the latter is again only one of the observed behaviours. Some women, although rarely, expressed the views that work responsibilities and difficulties in reconciling work and family obligations were one of the determining factors for not having more children. They even perceived children as in a way constraining to their 'self-fulfilment' and personal freedom.

In view of various individual experiences, I argue for the need to enable women and men a multiplicity of choices in terms of their paid work and family arrangements. Notions of being actively involved in both domains, in the family and in paid work, which are prevalent for women and men, might need to be reformulated in public policies in order to capture work and family arrangements that are best suited to the needs and experiences of particular individuals. In a society that the interviewees perceived as increasingly insecure and in which most women and men are engaged in paid work, institutional changes seem to be of crucial importance.

Fertility touches upon a vast array of topics, some of which seem only vaguely related to fertility behaviour. However, these topics have proved to be crucial in the reproductive decisions of the interviewees. Interviewees of both genders identified certain pre-conditions for parenthood. These are, for instance, the perception of having a 'suitable partner', possibilities for harmonisation of paid work and family, fair division of labour within the family and the existence or lack of 'objective conditions' for parenthood,

such as housing, permanent employment, sufficient income, institutional childcare arrangements, and the existence of social networks. Therefore, I agree with Riley (1998: 534) who argues that refocusing fertility research might come through a methodology that will focus on women's [and men's, added by the author] whole lives, not only on fertility.

Finally, I argue against employing alarmist rhetoric on contemporary fertility trends, in which 'low' fertility is seen as problematic *per se*. In this manner, researchers might first need to critically and more systematically examine the processes by which 'low' fertility is conceptualised and framed in such terms. Moreover, such an interpretation of 'low' fertility is, as demonstrated throughout this essay, an inherently gendered issue.

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Povzetek

Naraščajoča izobrazba žensk v 'razvitih družbah' med prebivalstvenimi strokovnjaki kot tudi v širši javnosti povzroča 'strahove', da bo nizka rodnost ogrozila 'normalno reprodukcijo' družb. V tem oziru avtorica z metodo polstrukturiranega intervjuja proučuje izkušnje univerzitetno izobraženih posameznic in posameznikov, ki so prepoznani kot 'odgovorni' za padanje rodnosti. Presoja pristope, ki so v nasprotju z bolj uveljavljenimi študijami rodnostnega vedenja, v proučevanje vključili tudi moške. Avtorica zatrjuje, da so moški pri reproduktivnih odločitvah ravno tako pomembni kot ženske. S kritiko koncepta družbenih vlog pokaže, da vzorci rodnostnega vedenja niso vnaprej določeni. Posledično avtorica skozi prizmo spola skuša identificirati prelomne dogodke, ki so vplivali na reproduktivne odločitve sogovornic in sogovornikov, in analizira tista področja, kjer spol še vedno predstavlja pomemben 'princip družbene organizacije'.

Ključne besede: rodnost, Slovenija, kvalitativen pristop, univerzitetno izobraženi, spol