

Contraception in the 21st Century Lithuania – the Triumph of Family Planning?

The birth of modern and effective contraception that became easily accessible to most of the Western women in the middle of the 20th century has changed reproductive and matrimonial behaviour in such fundamental way that this period was labeled by scientists as „the triumph of family planning“ (McLaren, 1997). Postponement of first birth, transition to very low fertility, increase of extra marital births and other processes of the second demographic transition have become since the 1990s also visible in Lithuania but up till recently there was no sufficient data to analyze whether these changes are accompanied by the changes in contraceptive behavior.

The research is essentially based on the first wave Lithuanian Gender and Generation Survey (2006) but additionally analyzes data from Family and Fertility Survey (1995) which allows to observe the changes in contraceptive behavior in Lithuania in the period of 10 years.

Results indicate that overall level of contraceptive use has since the 1995 increased substantially in all age groups – during the last 11 years it increased 1,5 times and in 2006 was 75 percent (1995 – 47 percent). However, this number also indicates that even one fourth of sexually active women in 2006 did not use any kind of contraception.

Despite the fact that the overall level of contraceptive use has increased, the level of modern contraception use remains very low. Considered to be the most reliable and most often used method of birth-control in Western countries – contraceptive pill – in Lithuania remains uncommon – only 27 percent of female respondents use it. Additionally, one fifth of female respondents indicated that they rely on the so called traditional methods of birth-control – withdrawal and safe period method (rhythm).

The majority of contraceptive pill users are young (20-35 years old) with higher education women. Condoms are most popular among women of the youngest age group (20-24 years old). Female respondents of the oldest age group (40-49 years old) both pills and condoms use rarely, they more often rely on withdrawal or safe period method.

Contraceptive behavior differs in respect to the respondent's marital/ partnership status. Women in cohabiting unions are more likely to use reliable-modern contraception than married women. Another interesting finding is that those practicing one of the newest family types – living apart together – rely purely on modern contraception.

It could be maintained that the overall level of contraceptive use in Lithuania during the past 11 years has increased, however, it is still far away from the Western levels. Individuals adopting new patterns of family formation are also more likely to use advanced modern methods of birth-control. Additionally, two models of contraceptive use by age can be observed – women of younger ages gradually adopt the dominant pattern of modern contraceptive use in Western countries, while women of older ages remain faithful to their habits and continue using unreliable traditional methods of birth-control. Thus, the Western concept of „the triumph of family planning“ at least at the moment could not be attributed to the Lithuanian situation.