

PARENTING AND LABOR ACTIVITY

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a public debate in Bulgaria about the reconciliation of childcare and the preservation of labor activity. The government policy regarding maternity support is broadly discussed - length of absence, job retention, salary level, career opportunities, etc.

The state has proposed measures to ensure that parents return to the labor market. One option is to return to work before the end of maternity leave. The resources for implementing this policy are provided to the social security system.

The Employment Agency is carrying out a project aimed at ensuring a better reconciliation of the professional and private life of parents with children from 0 to 12 years of age. The desired result is to have a positive effect by preserving the quality of workforce and labor productivity of parents by enabling them to start or continue their careers. The project is implemented with funds from the European Social Fund and national co-financing.

Keywords: *maternity leave, labor activity*

1. Introduction

Family is a key element of the public system and it should be supported. Within the Bulgarian traditions, way of life and culture, family keeps and protects the fundamental values of the society. The parents in the family carry the responsibility of giving birth to, raising and educating the children.

Children are a priority of the government and the families. Each child has the right to a high standard of living, guaranteeing its well-being as well as the right to the best standards of healthcare and education. Spouses and parents have equal rights and responsibilities for raising and educating children. Ensuring efficient equality of men and women in the family is a basic condition for increasing the birth rate and ensuring the possibility for wholesome personal development and high quality of life for children. The equal opportunities for all for a wholesome social, labour, productive and reproductive life and non-discrimination are prerequisites for balanced demographic development of the population and for sustainable economic development and growth of the country.

Economic stabilization and improvement of the standard of living are the key factors for improvement of the demographic situation in Bulgaria and for the transition to a modern type of reproduction of the population.

2. Posing the problem

Economic and demographic changes in Bulgaria in the recent 30 years have material influence on the volume of the work force, the structure of employment

and the standard of living of the population¹. During that period the work force is decreasing at fast rate due to the ageing of the population. This is one of the reasons for the decline in the economic activity. In the beginning of XX century it reached 85% and in the beginning of the 1950s - about 80%. This high labour activity was due to the employment in agriculture. In the last 45 years and especially after 1989, the economic activity in Bulgaria quickly fell to 50% due to the decrease of the work force on the account of the migration processes and the fast ageing of the population. The decrease of the work force is connected with decrease of employment.

Negative trends in employment, economic activity and unemployment in Bulgaria after 1989 give rise to a number of social problems - decline in the standard of living, increase of the crime rate, increase of the morbidity of the population, decrease of the living potential of the nation, etc.

As a result of the economic instability and the lack of clear perspective about the development in 1997, Bulgaria reached one of the most unfavourable demographic indicators in Europe and registered the lowest birth rate in its history. As a result of the short-term and long-term emigration, the number of women in fertile age (15 - 49 years) has decreased, which limits the opportunities for more children being born in future.

In addition to the permanent trend of decrease of the number of women in childbearing age, there is also a wide complex of social reasons and factors for decrease of the birth rate. Such may be sought in the quick urbanised population and the intensive emancipation of women. The isolation and the subordinate role of women in the traditional families and households in the past has been gradually overcome. Own private space has been established,

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spouses have started living independent life, the business relations between them have expanded and deepened. Today women often face the dilemma: Profession, career or family and children and increasingly often this dilemma is resolved in favour of the career. The extended period of education and the changes in the cultural stereotypes, especially among women, have contributed about that and as a result the spouses have formed specific attitudes and views about the number of their children and the sequence of births, which today is known as family planning. The achievement of compulsory high education has actually resulted in two-three times lower fertility. In a more remote period of the Bulgarian history, women used to give birth to their first child at quite low age. In the last years there has been a steady shift to births at a later age, which creates preconditions for limiting births to a single child.

A family with two children is the perfect reproductive option for the Bulgarians. However data from a sample survey conducted during the census in 2001 about birth rates show significant mismatch between the perfect size of the family and the realization of the reproductive wills of women at the age of 15 - 49 years. According to the survey, most Bulgarian families (70%) wish to have two children but due to economic difficulties 60% of them could not achieve that.

That is why the efforts of the government should be directed to creating proper conditions for giving birth to, raising, educating, material assurance and social realization of as many children as the couple would like to have.

3. Creating conditions for giving birth to and raising children

In Bulgaria there are many years of experience in conducting demographic policies that focus on encouraging birth rates and creating optimal conditions for giving birth to and raising kids by combining the personal and professional life.

Active government policy started at the end of 1967. Direct measures for stimulating demographic development are being used, such as a system of cash compensation (paid maternity leave, one-off compensation for giving birth to a child and child allowances), whose size is directed to stimulating the birth of a third child in the family. A well-organized network of facilities for raising and educating children at a pre-school age is being developed. Important steps have been made towards bettering the healthcare of children and mothers. A positive indirect effect on birth rates comes from the introduction of legal norms, aimed at preserving the reproductive health of women - labour protection directives, bans on performing heavy and harmful labour, transferring to a more appropriate job for reasons of health and other forms of protection of pregnant women and suckling mothers.

A large part of the measures for stimulating birth rates continue to be in force even after the social-political reforms in 1989. The following years of high inflation, fall of production and growing unemployment have led to devaluation of the family allowances for children and a strong reduction to their stimulating effect. During 2001, there were changes in regards to the maternity leave. Significant changes in the demographic policy after 1990 were brought in by the Family Allowance Act, effective since 2002. Some of the allowances have a universal character and are available to all without accounting for the income of a family member, others have a specific character with a pre-determined income criterion for access.

In accordance with the principle for equality of men and women in regards to labour and social insurance rights, related to the care and raising of children, as well as support for families with children, several legal options have been regulated in the Labour Code and the Social Security Code.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy conducts specific programmes to support families and children. Measures for boosted participation of women on the labour market are in progress. They are based on an integrated method, aimed at limiting the barriers to labour, encouraging participation in different forms of life-long learning, better balance between the professional and personal life. Unemployed mothers with small children are one of the vulnerable groups on the labour market with the risk of falling into poverty, which becomes even greater if active government policies are not applied.

Despite the condition of the economic development - growth, decline, recession, depression, recovery and etc. the perspectives for labour of mothers with small children must be supported with purposeful actions on the part of the government.

4. Labour realization and motherhood. Combining the family and professional life

Sociological studies categorically show that the labour status and economic standing are among the most important factors when making a decision about giving birth to children among young people. The transition to market economy led to radical changes in the conditions for professional realization of women and the possibilities for its combination with maternal and familial duties.

The level of economic activity of Bulgarian women is traditionally high.

The difference in the level of economic activity and employment between women and men in Bulgaria in comparison to many countries, specifically in the EU is not as prominent. During 2010 the level of economic activity of population aged between 15-64 is 62,3% for women and 70,8% for men, the level of employment is respectively 56,4% and 63,0% and for the age group 20-64 - 69,1% for men and 61,7% for women. These differences have different dimensions for women and

men, relating to education, age, family status, number of children, health status, place of residence, ethnic group. To a certain degree, these differences are owed to the still existing difference between the two genders as to the age for acquiring the right to retirement.

Key factors for achieving equality between genders are: Participation of women in the decision-making process; removing the so called "Glass ceiling for career development"; distribution of chores, prevention of traffic, prostitution, domestic abuse; creating better conditions for combining the family and professional life; guaranteeing leaves adequate for needs of the working parents, diversification and improvement of the quality of the services for raising children or dependent members of the families/households and etc.

Bulgaria has experience in building a normative base and government policies, aimed at combining the family and professional life. Despite that, women continue to delay the birth and raising of children due to the hardships and economic uncertainty that exist on the labour market. The combination of maternity with the professional development of women, set in the regulatory base is not realized in full due to the lack of proper beliefs in men and women on the one hand and in employers on the other, for it to be applied. The control over the implementation of the labour law is ineffective. There are many cases of employers refusing to hire pregnant women and women with small children or dismissal upon occurrence of any of these circumstances. Under the pressure of job insecurity, many women take a position of self-limitations and compromises, affecting their personal and family life as far back as the initial discussions of employment contracts. Especially worrying is the tendency of violating the rights foreseen in the law that ban overtime, hard or night-time labour, as well as the ban of labour under harmful conditions of pregnant women and women with children up to 3 years old. Allowing unfavourable work conditions affects the reproductive health of Bulgarian women.

Combining the work and family responsibilities is made more difficult by the tendencies of increasing the working hours and wider spread of labour during the weekends, especially in the private sector, the family business and the service sector. All this impacts unfavourably the health of working women and their reproductive attitude, limits the time they have for raising children and wholesome parenting. During the last decade, the social empathy towards unequal extension of the working hours has increased due to the fact that in certain cases, the extra work is not paid and the extended time is not compensated, which contradicts the labour law.

Another factor for the existence of imbalance between professional development and maternity is the young families' access to child care and kindergarten services. In the last years, many municipalities in larger cities, where there is a larger concentration of citizens, opened up kindergartens and helped keep the price and

quality of the services as adequate as possible for families. The full use of the existing social infrastructure and building a new one that follows the new forms of raising and educating children outside the state kindergartens and schools, will help overcoming the role conflict between work realization and maternity.

The possibilities for realizing flexible forms of employment, part-time work, work at home, regulated with new amendments of the labour law are underutilized. Applying such practices would change positively the structure of women's employment, carried out in favourable work conditions and work regimes. This would also conserve the reproductive abilities and common health of young women as a precondition for giving birth to and raising children.

The flexibility of the work hours is important for combining the professional and family life. Survey results show that out of all the employed people aged 15-64 that take care of children up to 14 years old or of adults, 91.1% work at a fixed start and end of work hours (determined by the employer) and only 8.9% have a more flexible form of work.

The flexibility is expressed not only in the different forms of work hours but in the ability of people, who work on a fixed time basis, to shift the beginning or end of their work day by at least one hour, if necessary, regardless of whether the absence is compensated or not. Of employees who take care of children or elderly and work on a fixed-time basis, 13.8% state that usually they have the option to change their working hours, if necessary, for family reasons (including taking care of children or elderly, disabled people, sick), 36.2% may do that by exception and 50.0% consider it impossible.

The imbalance between the labour realization and maternity is also maintained by the centuries-long division of labour in the family. According to this tradition even nowadays women with two children spend more than 4 hours a day for household work and consider themselves more engaged with household work compared to men. This introduces uncertainty and cause families and women to hesitate whether to have children. On the other hand, engaging with a greater part of the household work, reduces the opportunities of women for education and qualification improvement and therefore their competitiveness on the labour market; limits their social contacts; narrows their opportunities for wholesome recreation and rest. The working lone and divorced mothers as well as mothers of disabled children are in especially difficult situation due to their very limited mobility and limited opportunities for flexible employment.

Therefore an important element of overcoming the imbalance between the labour realization and the maternity is ensuring gender equality with a view to raising and taking care of children. An issue that requires not only regulatory changes but most of all change of the public attitude through civil education and appropriate media policy.

5. Policies supporting maternity

In the context of reduction of the share of employable population and longer life expectancy, ensuring opportunity for women to return to work after maternity leave is of major significance. The employment policy and law provide opportunities to maintain the participation of women on the labour market even without making them leave work during the years of raising their children.

For mothers with young children however, the participation on the labour market is closely connected with the availability of child care services and for women in general - the availability of services for the elderly because if such services are not available, women generally carry the main burden of care, which increasingly often hinders their access to employment.

Within the dynamically changing economy and most of all the private sector development, keeping the job position and guaranteeing the return on the same position after maternity leave are options that are difficult to be realized outside the government sector. Even in such cases women who have benefited of the full leave they are entitled to, experience difficulties upon reintegration due to their loss of qualification and lagging behind.

Government authorities that implement the social policy take into account the problems of women and the need for active intervention for their solution. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy implements programmes especially designated for women taking into account their specific situation when they return to work after maternity leave.

In a survey within the project "Back to work" it is stated that among the totality of unemployed women, the share of women up to 29-years old is 28.9% and one of the reasons for the high unemployment rate among women up to 29-years old is the unwillingness of employers to employ young women due to the possibility that they may be absent longer due to maternity leave and sick leave.

Among registered unemployed women prevail those with primary and lower education - 54,6% and without occupation - 62,1%. The low level of education and most of all the lack of occupation and qualification affect the duration of registration where more than half of unemployed women - 51.1% are continuously unemployed.

The main purpose of the project is to create conditions for equal access for women to employment and keeping employment by improvement of the quality of work force as well as ensuring conditions for work realization and supporting the professional development of women who have returned to work after maternity leave.

The project "Parents in employment" is realized until 2020. The purpose of the project is to ensure better combination between the professional and personal life of parents of children from 0 to 12 years old and providing employment to unemployed by ensuring opportunities for taking care and raising children.

Through the planned project activities, parents of children from 0 to 12 years old will have the opportunity not only to continue their career development but also to provide secure and high quality care for their children. These activities will contribute to the better combination between professional and family duties of parents and practically will make the labour market more accessible for them. The project will contribute for the return to work of parents who are not able to do that because they raise their children. This will ensure their equal access to employment and jobs.

6. Vision for the future

The reproduction of the employable population is best described by the demographic replacement rate, which shows the ratio between the number of people entering employable age (15 - 19 years old) and the number of people leaving employable age (60 - 64 years old). As a comparison in 2001 every 100 persons leaving employable age were replaced by 124 young people. After 2008 this ratio is opposite - 100 persons leaving employable age are replaced by 91 persons, in 2009 by 82 persons and in 2010 by 74 persons. According to census data, in 2011 that rate is 70, which shows that the country already experiences stagnation with regard to the rejuvenation and development of employable population.

Deterioration of the age structure of the population affects the size and quality of labour resources. The ageing of the work force in the conditions of a dynamic labour market with constantly changing requirements to the qualification and the professional skills of the employed, gives rise to the need of continuous improvement of the general potential and lifelong learning of the work force.

One of the tasks defined in the Updated National Strategy for Demographic Development of the Population of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012 - 2030) is the combination of parenting and professional development. For the fulfilment of that task the following measures are planned:

- Wider use of flexible employment forms (part-time work, reduced working hours, modern information technologies for remote work, etc.);
- Introduction of relieves upon return to work after maternity/ paternity leave (reduced working hours, homework, etc.), for participation in qualification and retraining courses;
- Encouraging employers for active participation in the policy for creating security and protection for pregnant women and mothers at their workplace;
- Expansion of the system of control of employers for observance of the labour law in the part ensuring protection for pregnant women and young mothers and preventing misuse of children's labour;
- Stimulating the equality between women and men with regard to their professional development and their family responsibilities related to raising and educating children.

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