

## FACTORS AFFECTING THE REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR OF THE POPULATION IN LATVIA

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**Abstract.** The reproduction of society is affected by a series of social changes, as a result of which various objective and subjective factors influence the reproductive behaviour of its inhabitants. The purpose of the article is to study the factors influencing the reproductive behaviour of the population in Latvia. Research approach: qualitative research methods - expert interview, semi-structured interviews and document analysis, a quantitative method - questionnaire survey. It is concluded, hypothesis that subjective factors are the most important factor influencing the reproductive behaviour of the population has been confirmed. According to the respondents, the most significant factors influencing reproductive behaviour are: the desire to have children 65%, a stable partner and his support 53%, financial stability 51%. The tendency of modern society to "postpone the birth of children as late as possible" is a significant factor influencing reproductive behaviour has been confirmed. The birth of a child is delayed by the population for subjective reasons, such as uncertainty about the future, the desire to accumulate capital, to live and travel, and so on. The general population does not value their reproductive age. In general, the population does not objectively assess their reproductive age, because the average age of the respondents is 37.2 years, 40% of all respondents do not have children, but the answers show that respondents would like to have 2-3 children, in case all the conditions are favourable.

**Key words:** reproductive behaviour, subjective factors affecting the reproductive behaviour.

**JEL code:** I12; I39

### Introduction

Low birth rate and general ageing of society are current problems not only in Latvia, but also in most developed countries. The population of Latvia has been decreasing since 1990, and within 30 years until the beginning of 2021, it has decreased by 775 thousand or 29%, including as a result of migration - by 469 thousand (Demografija, 2021). Demographic experts name the ageing of the population, constant migration and the increased fertility age of women as the main causes of depopulation. According to "Eurostat" forecasts, in the period from 2019 to 2100, the population of Latvia will most likely decrease by 43.7% (Eurostat, 2020 a).

The reproduction of the nation is affected by a series of social change processes and the reproductive behaviour of the population. In this article, the authors will examine the subjective and objective factors that influence reproductive behaviour, including the choice or desire to have children. In the framework of the article, reproductive behaviour is defined and explained as a determinant of child planning. This definition was adopted based on various foreign authors (Jennings et. al., 2012; Mills, 2011; MacDonald, 1997; Antonov, 2011) for their works in the context of the topic.

In Latvia, in studies related to reproductive behavior, the idea of reproductive behavior is also associated with the concepts of reproductive health and sexual behavior (Parskats par Latvijas iedzīvotāju reproduktīvo veselību, 2003-2011; Seksualas un reproduktīvas veselības aprūpes pakalpojumu pieejamība un iedzīvotāju riska uzvedība COVID-19 laikā, 2021). Foreign researchers characterize reproductive behaviour through the influence of the environment on reproductive abilities, as well as by analysing the importance of reproductive behaviour in the social context, which either leads to delayed fertility and reduced birth rates, or creates interest and increases birth rates (MacDonald, 1997). In other studies, scientists emphasize that it is reproductive behaviour that determines the quality of reproductive health (Arhipova, Hamoshina, 2018). It is also stated that reproductive behaviour is a system of actions and

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relationships that mediate either the birth of a child or the refusal to bear a child within or outside of marriage (Kozlova, Sekicki-Pavlenko, 2020), because reproductive behaviour is in a way transmitted from generation to generation, where intergenerational connection and support are of great importance (Jennings et. al., 2012). Sociologist Anatoly Antonov defines reproductive behaviour as a process consisting of a chain of reproductive events throughout the life of a person and family, related to the birth of children. In this process, there is an interaction of biological and social factors that determine the social content of reproductive behaviour (Antonov, 2011).

Reproductive behaviour trends are changing and there are several factors that influence this; Latvia is experiencing a change in society's reproductive behaviour model: postponing the creation of a child to a later stage of life, trying to combine a working career with family life, and both partners creating non-legal, but more equal relationships (Tautas ataudzi ietekmejosu faktoru izpete, 2013) etc. Such a context of social change is summarized in the first table below, revealing the theoretical perspective of sociology.

Table 1

**Explanation of the concept of reproductive behaviour in various fields**

<b>Science field</b>	<b>Reproductive behaviour</b>	<b>Source</b>
<b>Health sociology</b>	The context of social change operates at multiple levels, using multiple strategies to determine the way in which norms and behaviours can change. Evidence shows that compliance with social norms imposed by peers, families and communities is a key means of improving young people's ability to develop healthy sexual relationships and behaviours.	Institute for Reproductive Health, 2022
<b>Family sociology</b>	Gender roles and power relations between husbands and wives influence reproductive behaviour. However, the proximity and presence of family members serves as a precondition for many forms of social support. Thus, differences and changes in kinship network, composition and division affect family fertility.	Bras, 2022

**Source: created by the authors based on the findings of Institute for Reproductive Health (2022) and Bras, (2022)**

Latvian society is still in the process of change, which arose as a result of the interaction of the historical role of the family and the individual with socio-economic processes. How society functions and what specific characteristics are observable provides the necessary background to understand how these changes are to be evaluated. According to D.Reher, it is precisely in the countries of the post-Soviet zone, which suffered from war and authoritarian regimes, that relatively less developed state politics, complex and long-term changes can be observed, while at the same time there are still strong ties between generations throughout life. There are such phenomena as decision-making with family consent, late and incomplete transition to adulthood, weak civil society - low level of individual trust, distrust of the government - tax evasion, lack of trust in political systems and social institutions etc. (Reher, 2021).

Today, contradictory trends are still observed in Latvia. On the one hand, society develops at the level of individuality of people, on the other hand, traditional family expressions can be observed in society, which hinders the fastest possible development processes of individuals and hinders children's maturity. According to "Eurostat" data, in 2019 the EU men left their parents' home on average by the age of 27.1 years, women - by the age of 25.2 years (Eurostat, b 2020). People who strive for individualization and still live according to family traditions are unable to develop as they would like. The increase in the importance of individual values contributes to the achievement of individual goals and tasks, allows assessing independence and self-sufficiency.

Nowadays, the change of traditional family models is visible not only in Europe, but also in other parts of the world. For example, as noted in an Iranian study (Zohreh et.al, 2017), the rise of individual values and individualism in modern society is a mass phenomenon, as is the education and independence of

modern women as a social characteristic that affects reproductive behaviour. This was also noted by Chinese scientists (Lianchao et al., 2021), trying to understand why after abandoning China's birth control policy, when there is a loosening of rules and people can give birth peacefully, there is no obvious increase in the birth rate. These aspects and trends show that one of the determining factors in the birth of a child is the pragmatic behaviour of families or mothers, which is emphasized in the theories of consumer behaviour and rational choice in sociology. Fertility rates in many post-industrial societies are now below 1.5 children per woman, according to research. At the same time, most young people consider a family with 2 children as ideal. Many young people say they would like 2 children, but in reality plan less. The results show that the gap between ideals and intentions is larger in countries with very low birth rates, but even in countries with higher birth rates, the gap is still observable (Brinton et al., 2018). Although the reasons for the gap between ideals and intentions may vary depending on the context, the following trend can be traced. As stated in the study (Latvijas ģimenes paaudzes, 2018), creating a family is mainly associated with positive feelings; joy in life and life satisfaction are expected to increase, enabling the pursuit of other goals. This may indicate that subjective intentions are subject to objective reasons that concurrently change reproductive behaviour and affect birth rates.

There is a body of research that suggests several new social phenomena in the context of reproductive behaviour; the authors will mention some examples to sketch the processes of change that are currently being studied in different societies in the context of the analysed topic.

Firstly, *Childlessness or Childfree* - absence of children in a person's life (conscious or unconscious choice). Today, a significant number of women experience infertility, suffer from stigmatization and insults, sometimes from physical violence. Accordingly, the situation of childlessness creates gender inequality, women are usually condemned for not having children, considered selfish or condemned for not being able to conceive. However, childless men are considered interesting and not stigmatized (Gounie et al, 2022). Thus, the responsibility for childbearing falls on women, regardless of their desire or ability to bear children. Likewise, voluntary or involuntary childlessness can affect relationships with a wide social network, such as friends and colleagues (Shaw, 2011). On the one hand, women's higher education is associated with a higher number of childless women both within and between countries, especially after the age of 30. On the other hand, more egalitarian gender relations and gender equality in society increase birth rates. In recent decades, childlessness has increased between the ages of 30-34 and 40-44 for both men and women across Europe, with few exceptions. But the proportion of childless women aged 40-44 in the countries of the post-Soviet space, including Latvia, is still low (below 10%) (Mettinen et al, 2015).

Secondly, *Herbivore men* - passive men who have lost their masculinity. Japanese sociologist Fukasawa Maki introduced this concept in 2006. These are men, especially young men, who are not interested in marriage and romantic relationships but are not asexual (Fukasawa, 2006). Japanese scholars studying the herbivore men phenomenon and its implications have concluded (Ghaznavi et al., 2020) that the proportion of young Japanese male adults who are not married and not in heterosexual relationships has been steadily increasing over the past three decades. In 2015, every fourth woman and every third 30-year-old man was single. About half of singles, or one in five women and one in four men aged 18-39, reported that they were not interested in a romantic relationship with someone of the opposite sex (Ghaznavi et al., 2020).

Thirdly, *loneliness and the consequences of COVID-19* - the phenomenon of loneliness has been present in society at all times, but in modern society this problem of loneliness has become more visible. Theoretically, social loneliness describes the quantitative aspect of loneliness, that is, the absence of a subjective wider support network. In contrast, emotional loneliness is a subjective feeling of aloofness, thus reflecting a qualitative aspect of loneliness associated with the absence of deep and significant

relationships. Therefore, the increase or decrease of loneliness cannot be considered as an age-related phenomenon; on the contrary, such changes are linked to individual experience. As the researchers note, loneliness appears to lie directly between the poles of stability and change. Much of the variation in loneliness appears to occur at the individual level, and future research will face major challenges in uncovering the conditions and consequences of this individual variation (Mund et al, 2020). A quarter of EU residents said they felt lonely in the first months of the pandemic. Compared to 2016, the increase in loneliness in the age group from 18 to 35 was fourfold. The issue of loneliness has also doubled in media coverage during the pandemic, while awareness of it varies widely across Member States. The survey data shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem. The proportion of respondents who already felt lonely often doubled after the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, young people felt loneliness more strongly (European Commission, 2021).

Subjective and objective factors influencing reproductive behaviour are: control of reproduction; role and image of women; reluctance to have children due to education and employment; changes in reproductive behaviour patterns; changes in the man's role in the family; postponement of childbirth; increase in fertility; reluctance to have children; gender equality; changes in gender roles; changes in partnerships; housing availability; economic uncertainty; reproductive limits etc. (Mills, 2011). The interaction of subjective and objective factors is difficult to distinguish, however, within the framework of the article, the authors explain subjective factors as human feelings, perceptions and desires, goals and abilities. The objective factors are the social environment or the socio-cultural form of the society (Chernikova, 2010). Subjectivity focuses on a person's mind and beliefs, not on a general, universal or scientific position. Thus, the influence of a set of subjective factors on reproductive behaviour is based on the individual's personal judgments. Objective factors have no connection with the individual's own (subjective) feelings; they refer to facts or the surrounding environment, which in one way or another can affect the individual and his reproductive behaviour ("Subjective" vs. "Objective".., 2021).

**The purpose of the article** is to study the factors influencing the reproductive behaviour of the population in Latvia. The main tasks are related to the description of changes in reproductive behaviour in Latvian society and the study of factors influencing subjective and objective reproductive behaviour.

The authors put forward two hypotheses. Firstly, the reproductive behaviour of the population is most significantly influenced by subjective factors. Secondly, in modern society, the tendency to postpone the birth of children until as late as possible is a significant factor affecting reproductive behaviour.

To achieve the goal, a combined research approach was used using several qualitative sociological research methods: an expert interview with public health specialist Rita Kubuliņa (duration 32 min., held on the Zoom platform on 13 April, 2022), semi-structured interviews. In the research, 10 informants (5 men and 5 women) were interviewed, who were selected according to the principle of a purposefully accessible sample, representing different ages, education levels, places of residence and family status etc., and they lasted an average of 25 minutes. Among the quantitative methods, a survey using random sampling was chosen. The survey was conducted online; the questionnaire was posted on the Visidati.lv website, spreading information about it on social networks and chats, in March and April 2022. 211 respondents aged 15 to 75 took part in the survey; the average age of respondents was 37.2 years. In both qualitative and quantitative approaches, questions were issued based on the following aspects: understanding of roles in building relationships and planning and raising children; the most acceptable family model and age for starting a family, the desired number of children, the desired age for the first child; factors affecting both subjective and objective reproductive attitudes and behaviour etc. Despite the

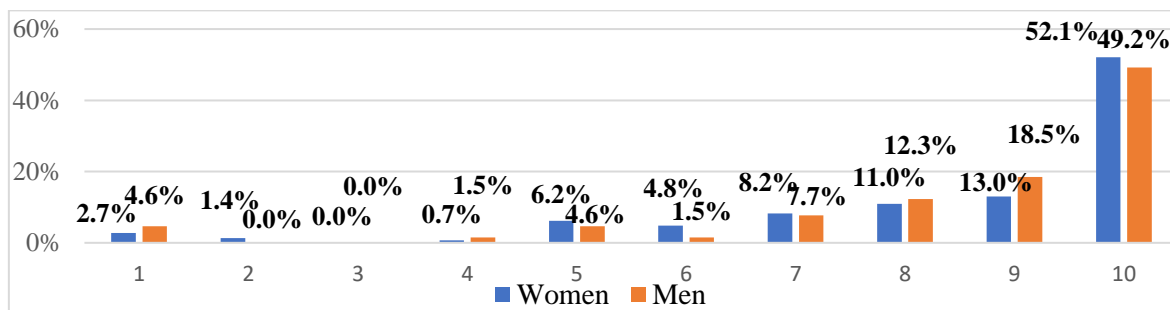
fact that the sample size data are not representative, they nevertheless allow the characterization of traits related to reproductive behaviour that have been little studied.

## Research results and discussion

The results of the research show that in the area of social changes that have taken place in Latvia, the factors related to ageing and migration are mainly highlighted. Factors influencing these changes are the material side and prosperity, as well as uncertainty about the future. Analysing the information obtained in the interview with the expert, it should be noted that R. Kubuliņa, when talking about changes in society, mentioned a rapid decrease in the birth rate as the most important thing. This is also evidenced by statistical data; the most significant birth rate jump was in the period until 1987, when there were 2.16 children per woman, while at present it is 1.55 children.

Changes in society have become very visible; there is a causal relationship between subjective well-being and reproductive behaviour (Mencarini, Vignoli, Zeydanli, Kim, 2018). Respondents believe that well-being is an important and influencing factor. According to the respondents, such factors as **security for the future and well-being** have greatly influenced the changes in society. Security about the future was mentioned as an important factor by 44.1% of respondents, and well-being - by 40.8%.

The authors will analyse the factors affecting reproductive behaviour by looking at the responses by gender. Sociologist D. Reher emphasized that it is precisely in the post-Soviet countries that changes from quantity to quality in the attitude towards children are very noticeable today. When asked what factors most affect changes in society, R. Kubuliņa admitted that they are objective factors - **cultural and environmental changes**. According to the respondents, reproductive behaviour is strongly influenced by **financial stability** (Fig. 1).



Source: created by the authors based on the results of the survey data, 2022. (n=211; women n=146; men n=65; ten-point measurement scale: 1- does not affect at all; 10 - affects very much)

Fig. 1. Financial stability as a factor affecting reproductive behaviour

The informants believe that since they cannot count on sufficient support from the state, the birth of a child should be planned. The respondents' answers also showed how modern women are more concerned about financial stability: this was indicated by 52% of women, and this factor can affect women's desire to get an education first and only then to plan a family and have a child. On the other hand, almost half or 49% of male respondents noted that financial stability greatly affects their reproductive behaviour.

Today, not only the cultural and social environment has changed, but also the understanding of family formation and family models. The expert noted that today there are many different family models and all of them are considered families, regardless of their composition and size. The informants also believe that today there is no longer a family in the traditional sense, consisting of married parents and children. Today there are different family models, and if people want to have a child, the main condition is to have the ability and desire to do so. Although the data of some studies show that there is a tendency for liberal relationships to spread (Generations of Latvian families, 2018), the majority of respondents still prefer

married relationships. Several respondents answered that children are planned after marriage. Women are more convinced that marriage is important: 55% of women and 42% of men think so. Most men believe that they can live in an unregistered cohabitation. But 12% of male and 11% of female respondents note that all options are acceptable.

In the question of how difficult it is to build relationships and families nowadays and how the understanding of gender roles in this matter has changed, the informants' answers indicate changes in gender roles, as most believe that a woman should be equally active in building relationships as a man. Patriarchal views of men have diminished. In general, respondents mostly think that both partners should be equally active - 88.2% of respondents support this opinion; only 7.6% believe that men should be more active. This indicates that nowadays the **gender roles** have really changed, as there is no strong opinion that the man is the initiator of the attitude, as it was in the past, which was mentioned by the informants in their answers.

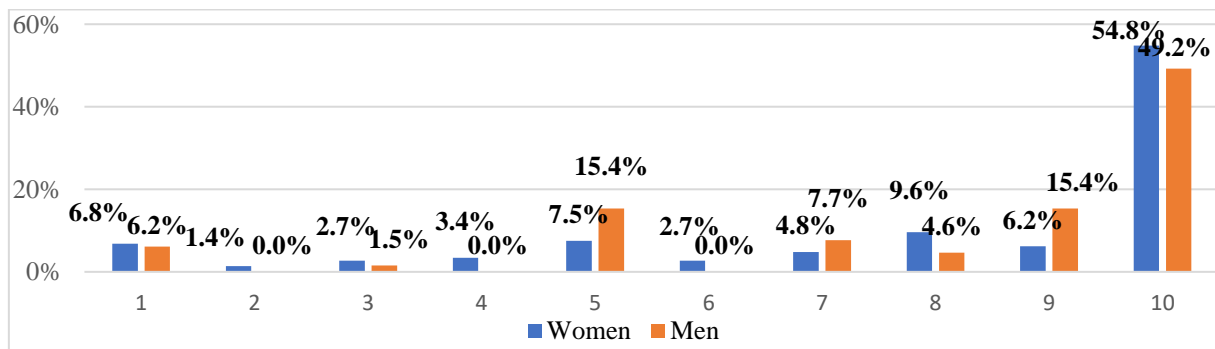
In general, informants believe that it is more complicated to build relationships now. On the one hand, technological changes have made many processes and life easier; on the other hand, building relationships today is more complex than before. In the age of consumption, the scientist E. Fromm also talks about how people assess each other from the consumer's point of view. However, in order to create a family, you must first find a partner, because the presence of a **constant partner** and his support is a very important influencing factor for creating a family and having a child. This was indicated by the majority of respondents - 92.2%. On the other hand, the support of family and friends for starting a family is not a priority nowadays, as it was considered before. However, some respondents still indicate this as an important aspect; all respondents - 54% respectively - believe that support is important. The remaining 17.3% remained neutral on this issue, while 28.5% believe that the support of family and friends is not important.

According to the respondents, it is possible to create a stable relationship at any age, even though most of the respondents note that the ages 20-29 years and then 30-39 years are more suitable for this. This is logically intertwined with the respondents' answers about the age at which women should give birth to their first child. 86% of women believe that it is better for a woman to give birth to her first child between the ages of 20 and 29; the remaining 14% of women believe that the age between 30 and 39 is the right time for the birth of the first child. These age stages were also noted by men - 91% of men believe that it is better to give birth to the first child between the ages of 20 and 29, while the remaining 9% permit the age between 30 and 39. Based on the theory, it can be concluded that **at this moment a gap appears between subjective intentions and objective environmental factors**. Many respondents claim that it is better for a woman to give birth to her first child between the ages of 20 and 29. But nowadays, based on statistical data, the reproductive age of women has increased, and continues to increase every year. As noted by J. Houman, people interact and make their rational choices based on the social environment. And since a child is often associated with additional costs, people postpone having a child until later. Today there is a late maturation which automatically delays childbearing.

A positive trend of gender equality can be observed in modern Latvia; parents and potential parents believe that both parents should be equally responsible for planning and raising a child. Both partners should plan to have children - 92.4% of respondents gave this answer. Similarly, the respondents answered the question which of the partners is more responsible for raising the child. The absolute majority or 94.3% believe that both partners - both men and women - are equally responsible. When asked who it is better to go on parental leave, the largest number of respondents answered that it is better for a woman to do it. The majority of women (53%) and men (63%) think so. Although the majority of respondents believe that a woman should be on leave to take care of a child, the rest of the female respondents tend to be neutral

on this issue. In this respect 15.2% of women strongly agree that men should be on paternity leave. It should be noted that some men - 18.5% - believe that they could be on childcare leave. Also, when it comes to raising a child, the respondents no longer really rely on the help of grandmothers or nannies, 76.8% point to this, and only 2.4% completely agreed that raising children can also be entrusted to other persons.

**The decision to have or not to have children is mostly influenced by subjective factors.** Most of the respondents answered that the factor influencing the birth of a child is a personal desire for a child. Accordingly 49.2% of men and 54.8% of women answered that it is a very influencing factor (Fig. 2).



**Source: created by the authors based on the results of the survey data, 2022. (n=211; women n=146; men n=65;- ten-point measurement scale: 1- does not affect at all; 10 - affects very much)**

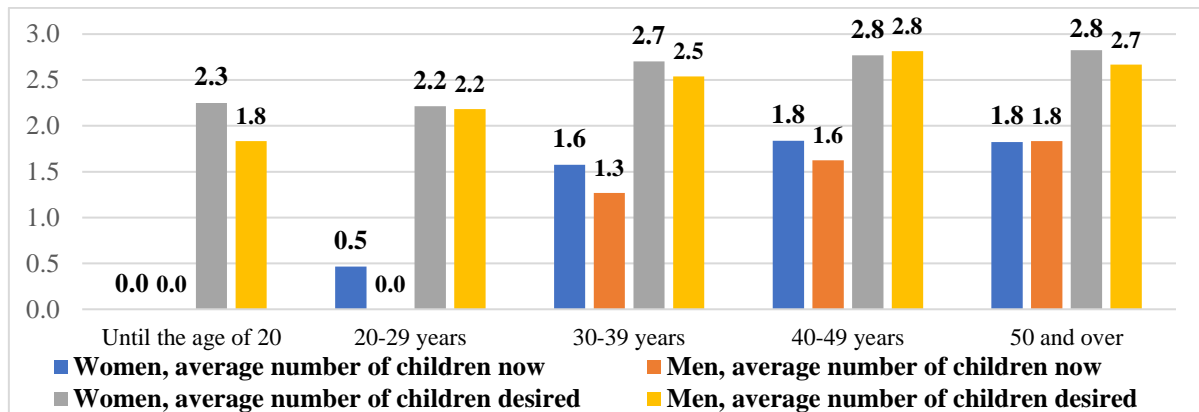
Fig. 2. **The desire to have children as a factor affecting reproductive behaviour**

The desire to obtain an education and build a career are less influencing factors than the subjective desire to bring a child into this world. Career development was indicated by 57.7% of respondents; **stable employment** was indicated by 45% of women and 46% of men. Respondents with a stable job and more stable income feel more financially secure. Respondents believe that **health status** is important - 89.5% of respondents agree with this. The **suitability of housing** as an important factor influencing the decision to have a child was emphasized almost equally by both women (39%) and men (40%). When answering the question whether **access to educational institutions** is important for children, the views are the same for both women - 69% and men - 69%. According to the respondents, 57.9% believe that a **friendly, green environment** influences such decisions. State support, according to the respondents, could have a greater influence on the decision to have a child. It was noted by 56% of men and 56% of women as a factor influencing the decision. The remaining 44% emphasized that support from the state does not influence the decision-making process. Respondents pay more attention to economic stability in the country than support from the state: 67% of men and 65% of women indicated that **economic stability** in the country influences decision-making.

According to the respondents' answers, about the birth of the first child, 38% of men and 61% of women state that their first child was born before the age of 29, but 9% of women and 11% of men had their first child before the age of 39. The rest - 51% of men and 29% of women - do not have children, but the average age of the respondents is 37.2 years. As mentioned above, the majority of respondents believe that the first child should be born before the age of 29. Information was gathered about the respondents' future plans, whether they plan to have a child in the next 1-3 years. The majority of respondents do not want and do not plan to have children in the future - this was indicated by 58.1% of women and 49.2% of men. In turn, 32.2% of women and 46.2% of men plan and want children. The smallest part remained neutral, not expressing any opinion - it was 10.5% of women and 15.4% of men.

When answering the question about the desired number of children if all conditions are favourable, an interesting inclination can be observed: out of 211 respondents, only 6 answered that they do not want

children under any conditions. The rest, in case of positive factors, would like 2.5 children, despite the fact that earlier in many answers they had indicated the opposite (Fig. 3).



Source: created by the authors based on the results of the survey data, 2022. (n=211; women n=146; men n=65)

Fig. 3. Actual and desired average number of children

It can be assumed that the individual decision of the respondents is influenced by their rational choice, so the birth of a child is postponed; and, as a consequence, the **phenomenon of "postponing children for a later time"** appears. According to the respondents' answers, residents assess their reproductive behaviour according to real events; here it should be taken into account that the majority of respondents (146) were women.

When asked **how the reproductive behaviour of the population can be changed**, R. Kubuliņa notes that a complex approach is needed. In general, the informants admit that a reevaluation of values is needed today. The country needs stability so that the citizens can feel safe. In particular, it is necessary to create a vision of the future for families with children, which would show that life does not become more difficult with children. Also, state financial support is needed, because people are afraid to have children due to various subjective fears, as they are not sure about the future.

### Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

- 1) In society, there is a gap between subjective ideas and intentions and actions, which results in changes in reproductive behaviour. New social phenomena related to reproductive behaviour are spreading around the world, and some of the characteristics of these phenomena can also be applied to the behaviour of Latvian residents.
- 2) The main objective influencing factors are social and cultural changes – transition from family traditions to individualism, changes in the family institution and the understanding of gender roles.
- 3) The results show that there is a positive attitude among both women and men regarding building relationships and planning a child, that both genders have an important role and that care and responsibility should be taken in this aspect of reproductive behaviour.
- 4) The research hypothesis - the reproductive behaviour of the population is most significantly influenced by subjective factors - was confirmed. According to the answers of the respondents, it can be concluded that the following factors most significantly affect reproductive behaviour: the desire to have children - 65%, a stable partner and his support - 53% and financial stability - 51%.
- 5) The research hypothesis - in modern society, the tendency to postpone the birth of children until as late as possible is a significant factor affecting reproductive behaviour - was confirmed. Residents postpone having a child because of subjective reasons, such as uncertainty about the future, the desire to accumulate capital, live for themselves and travel etc. It must be concluded that the population does



not assess their reproductive behaviour objectively, because the average age of the respondents is 37.2 years; 40% of the respondents do not have children, but the answers show that the respondents would like 2-3 children if the conditions were favourable.

6) Based on the results of the study, the topic of reproductive behaviour should be studied more from a sociological point of view in the future, because, according to the authors, it would be useful to analyse in depth the factors influencing reproductive behaviour in the context of the renewal of society.

7) The Ministries of Education and Health Protection, in cooperation with non-governmental sector organizations, should purposefully study reproductive behaviour in order to clarify the importance and limits of reproductive behaviour in the context of societal reproduction. Also, young people should be purposefully informed about reproductive behaviour and its limits, because the view presented at the moment is limited only to the explanation of sexual and reproductive health.

8) The Latvian government needs to re-evaluate family support programs and direct them in a more targeted manner, because financial stability and security for the future are very important factors. A comprehensive set of measures should be created - financial, educational, health etc. in areas that would provide real support to families so that families with children feel stable and safe.

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