

“Is Gender Equality an Obstacle to Decisions on Family Formation?”

Belgrade, Institute of Social Sciences, 24th September 2024.

„Da li je rodna ravnopravnost prepreka za odluke o formiranju porodice?”

Beograd, Institut društvenih nauka, 24. septembar 2024.

During June and July 2024, a qualitative research study was conducted within the project “Is gender equality an obstacle to decisions on family formation?” as a part of the internal call for the Institute of Social Sciences SEED Research Grant, financed by SAIGE (Serbia Accelerating Innovation and Growth Entrepreneurship) and the World Bank. The initial idea was to take the first step toward understanding the transformation process of gender roles in heterosexual partnerships among young people in Serbia, aiming to shed light on important issues related to family life, gender roles, and their relation to policies on youth, family, and gender equality.

The workshop was the final activity of the project, which was conducted by research associate Milena Sekulić, MSc, with mentorship from Dr. Ankica Šobot, both of whom are researchers at the Centre for Demographic Research at the Institute of Social Sciences. The purpose of this event was not only to present the results but also to foster cooperation with representatives of the government agencies dealing with gender issues, youth, and family policies.

The key topics of the workshop were related to gender equality in partnership and parenthood, understanding gender roles, and issues related to balancing work and parenthood. The focus was on the barriers that young women and men in Serbia face today before deciding to get married and create offspring, but also on the reasons for their postponement, or possibly “not choosing” marriage and parenthood.

Representatives from the Ministry of Tourism and Youth, the Cabinet of the Minister without Portfolio in charge of gender equality, prevention of violence against women, and economic and political empowerment of women and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, along with members of the scientific and academic community, responded to the invitation to participate in the workshop.

In the first part of the workshop, project manager MSc Milena Sekulić presented the project and its qualitative research results. Highlighting the motive for conducting the study, she pointed out several questions that prompted it: How do young people who are not yet

married perceive gender equality? What are their attitudes on gender roles and gender relations within partnerships and marriages? And what is their influence on decisions about family formation? Referring to the purpose, she emphasized that the qualitative research aimed to identify differences in the attitudes of girls and boys and understand how these attitudes shape their behaviour. The goal was to use the findings to foster a climate of better mutual understanding, establish, and develop high-quality, stable partnerships and communities among young people.

The qualitative research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with women and men aged 19 to 35, not yet married at the time. In the interview guide, respondents were asked questions about partnership and emotional connection, marriage, gender roles, the disconnection or connection between marriage and parenthood, as well as gender equality as factors influencing relationship and marriage stability. During the analysis of the results, three key themes were identified. The first related to the respondents' attitudes to marriage, specifically their opinions about it. Four response patterns emerged: personal experiences of marriage, the meaning of marriage without children, reasons for getting married, and reasons against marriage. The second theme referred to understanding gender roles. The identified response modes were the role of women - acceptance of a modern role combined with traditional behaviour; the role of men - the presence of a traditional model blended with contemporary elements; and gender equality in marriage - reflecting personal attitudes and preferences shaped by upbringing and cultural norms. The third theme addressed gender equality and partnership stability,

including various statements emphasizing the importance of mutual communication and understanding regarding gender roles, as well as the potential impact of gender equality on relationship quality and family formation decisions.

The second part of the workshop consisted of a discussion and idea exchange on the topics raised with the colleagues from the academic and scientific research community, as well as with the representatives from public policy.

Full professor at the Faculty of Geography, Dr. Mirjana Devedžić, was the first to speak and pointed out that in Serbia, sociologists mainly focused on this topic, and that it was included in demographic research for nearly as long. She emphasized that gender roles were best understood through marriage and family, and that a quality partnership was essential for a stable marriage. She pointed out the concern that young men had about gender equality, stemming from their effort to balance traditional and modern values, and identified it as a possible barrier to marriage. Dr. Mirjana Devedžić concluded that young people still inclined toward patriarchal patterns of behaviour, but the change process had begun and was progressing slowly.

Men's perspectives and attitudes toward partnership and gender equality significantly influenced the discussion. Dr. Vesna Lukić, scientific advisor at the Centre for Demographic Research of the Institute of Social Sciences, observed that men were not only unwilling to provide more detailed answers, but also reluctant to participate in the research. She suggested that a closer approach in quantitative research could potentially change this. Dr. Lilijana Čičkarić, scientific advisor at the Centre for Sociological and Anthropological Research of the Institute of Social Sciences, stated that

men were confused, not scared, by the transformation of gender roles. She also emphasized that it was just as challenging for men, as it was for women, due to high expectations, tasks, and obligations. Dr. Ankica Šobot, research associate at the Centre for Demographic Research of the Institute of Social Sciences and a project mentor, emphasized the importance of the socio-economic aspect in the decisions concerning family formation, particularly from the male perspective.

During the discussion, the question of the connection between gender equality and decisions on family formation was raised more specifically. Dr. Irena Ristić, research associate at the Centre for Political Research and Public Opinion of the Institute of Social Sciences, suggested that it would be helpful to examine more specifically whether gender equality acted as an obstacle to having children. Dr. Petar Vasić, associate professor at the Faculty of Geography at the University of Belgrade, stated that the family of origin influenced attitudes toward gender equality and the decision to delay marriage, emphasizing that traditionalism should not be equated with inequality.

Jovana Stanar Vuković, representative of the Cabinet of the Minister without Portfolio in charge of gender equality, prevention of violence against women, and economic and political empowerment of women, pointed out the importance of the findings as a starting point for future research. She observed that young people did not fully understand the concept of gender equality, which led to fear, resistance, and misunderstanding. She emphasized that it was necessary to include both men and

women equally when discussing gender equality and that it was essential to educate both young women and men equally about the concept. Additionally, she highlighted the need to pass regulations and harmonize the legislative framework.

The workshop was an opportunity not only to summarize the findings of the research conducted early in the participants' careers, but also to foster closer communication with more experienced colleagues and representatives of government institutions where the issues were discussed. This event facilitated the exchange of knowledge and perspectives between the researchers and government representatives, laying the groundwork for a stronger cooperation regarding the relationship between gender equality and family formation. The workshop only hinted at potential research and practical contributions. It was especially significant that the participants engaged in a meaningful discussion during which ideas for further scientific exploration of this topic were generated, as well as potential practical impacts aimed at promoting a favourable climate toward gender equality as a vital aspect of family life.

Milena Šećerov 

Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade, Serbia

Correspondence:

Milena Šećerov,
Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade,
Kraljice Natalije 45, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia

Email:

msekulic@idn.org.rs

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