

Review:

Emirhaizovic Mirza, Tali Heiman, Marton Medgyesi, Catarina Pinheiro Mota, Smiljka Tomanovic, and Sue Vella (Eds.).(2022). *Disadvantages In Starting A Family Across Europe. Family Formation Among Youth in Europe: Coping With Socio-Economic Disadvantages*. Information Age Publishing Inc.

reviewed by Selma Alispahić

Selma Alispahić ¹

¹Department of Sociology, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo, ORCID iD: 0009 0003 2029 3162

The multidisciplinary volume titled "Family Formation Among Youth in Europe: Coping with Socio-Economic Disadvantages" was published in 2022 with the support of the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST). It examines the specific challenges and opportunities for young people related to the processes of family formation in ten European countries and Israel. Its aim is to provide a research basis for reconsidering old and formulating new state family policies and outlining both structural and individual factors about the condition of ageing societies. This represents a global demographic phenomenon predicted to continue in the future and to "impact upon all aspects of human life" (Bond et al., 2007, p.2), thus presenting a challenge to both developed and developing countries and urging policymakers to seriously consider its effects (Clark et al., 2004).

Although a universally accepted definition of well-being does not exist, the term is most often used to denote "the quality of life of people in society" and many scholars regard it as a "multi-dimensional phenomenon" (Pollock et al., 2018, p.2-3). However, while individual preferences and satisfaction with the quality of life are important, it is also crucial not to lose sight of the objective conditions in one's life, such as income, wealth, and education, or

of the importance of the "social context" (Brown, 2008). Both objective and subjective aspects of the young adults' experience, together with the sphere of commonly held values and beliefs are accounted for in the volume. It is divided into eleven chapters, each focusing on one of the following countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, and Serbia. Drawing on key demographic sources and the most relevant research on the topic, the chapters first illustrate the national background or the "national context" of the countries. The demographic trends that are relevant to family formation are also reviewed in the chapters, together with the normative frameworks. The sections dealing with the general socio-economic conditions, as well as the institutional frameworks and family policies, are also included in the chapters, together with the overviews of the country-specific challenges to family formation and youth autonomy.

The first chapter of the book is about Bosnia and Herzegovina. Among demographic trends identified by the authors of the chapter - Mirza Emirhafizović and Andrea Puhalić - are the ageing of society, out-migration of youth, and decreasing birth rates and fertility, while the main challenges young people meet are

high unemployment, distrust in state institutions, and a widespread “experience of helplessness” (p.2). By virtue of valuing traditionalist and religiously painted images of family and despite the existence of moderate Westernization effects, BiH represents a familialistic or “family-centric society” (p.3), which is not reflected in the data on family formation-related trends in a quantitatively positive way. Considering the abundance of structural impediments for young people to start an independent and family-formation-oriented life, the authors claim that dealing with the structural issues must be the state’s top priority in order to prevent “a very pessimistic (and at the same time realistic) future demographic scenario” (p.13).

The second chapter, written by Vera Kucharova, highlights the climate of liberalism and tolerance in the Czech Republic with regard to different modes of partnerships and parenthood, which is reflected in the existence of the so-called “universal family policy” not based on a rigid definition of family. With respect to young people, the chapter reports that their attitudes towards single parenthood are accepting and they largely do not perceive marriage as an “imperative”. (p.27). It is significant that housing represents a challenge that young people encounter due to high housing prices, and they are the group most vulnerable to poverty. The author states that although it can be said that in the Czech Republic family is perceived as a value, and despite the existence of favourable “economic conditions for family formation” such as steady economic growth and a low unemployment rate, this is not reflected in the “actual reproductive behaviour” (p. 32).

The third chapter, written by Dirk Hofäcker, starts with an observation that Germany is a society with a large and increasing percentage of the older population in comparison to the younger population. A strong trend that can be noticed in Germany is the destabilization of the traditional family model, also described using the terms “pluralization” and “deinstitutionalization”. (pp. 41-42). One of the ways in which this is manifested is a large drop in marriage rates in Germany, while divorce rates are

simultaneously increasing, which indicates a change in the understanding of marriage and its representation as “an outdated institution” (p.44). While Germany offers a variety of structural conditions beneficial for family formation, such as a stable economy, low unemployment, good welfare system protection and family policy, and high levels of life satisfaction, fertility levels and birth rates are, paradoxically, low. Precarity and flexibility of work and employment are among the factors negatively influencing the processes of family formation among youth.

The fourth chapter highlights the specific challenges to family formation that young people face in Hungary. Márton Medgyesi, the author of the chapter, explains that while there was a relatively long period in Hungary during which the marriage rates declined and divorce rates increased, this tendency has undergone a reversal in the recent past. This is not the case with the fertility rates, which have remained low up to this point, along with the mortality rate decreasing, thus “bringing about the ageing of the population” (p.57). Young people in Hungary are facing more economic issues and obstacles in the labour market in comparison to the overall population, and they encounter difficulties in securing housing. A specific challenge underlined in the report is that young people’s success is often determined by their “parental background” (p.62), while unemployment and emigration of the youth are other obstacles which have profoundly influenced family formation processes in the country.

The fifth chapter, written by Tali Heiman, Dorit Olenik-Shemesh, and Merav Regev-Nevo, concentrates on family formation in Israel. Throughout the article, it is emphasised that family is an essential part of Israeli society, which is mirrored in “high marriage rates, fertility rates and the cultural ideals surrounding them” (p.67). A specific feature of Israeli society is that both traditionalist and modernist factors shape the social ambient in it, combining liberal attitudes with ethnoreligious views. In addition, the authors stress its multicultural and multireligious character, which leads to the inability to speak about the notion of the “all-

Israeli Family" (p.79). The fertility rates in Israel are exceptionally high, which is explained as a form of response to historical trauma, the Holocaust and persecution, and a continuous state of armed conflict. The unemployment levels are low, but the cost of housing is on the rise and, despite the growing economy, poverty is a difficulty affecting a noteworthy percentage of the population in Israel.

In the sixth chapter, Rosy Musumeci examines the situation in Italy, a country which has one of the world's largest economies. The chapter reports that Italy is an ageing society, with low fertility rates and which was "the country with the lowest natality in the world in 2017" (p.85). It is also noted that marriage rates are low, young adults delay marriage and having children, and childlessness is increasing. Young people and young families in Italy are reported to be vulnerable to poverty, unemployment, and job insecurity. They often stay with their parents for an extended period of time, mostly because of education, difficulties finding a job, and a lack of affordable housing opportunities. Furthermore, the author explains that even though the influence of modernisation has modified the traditional perceptions of family, Italian society values family and children, i.e. it is regarded as "familialistic" (p.94), notwithstanding the fact that family policies suffer from fragmentation and insufficiency.

The seventh chapter addresses family formation in Latvia. The authors Līva Griņeviča and Dina Bite draw attention to the low fertility rates, high mortality and high emigration which are among the most daunting demographic challenges leading to the population decrease and ageing of Latvian society. Young people tend to prioritise acquiring an education and building a career over the goal of starting a family, which can partly be explained as a manifestation of consumerism (p.116). The authors state that in Latvia, family is considered "a crucial factor of people's well-being" (p.109), and it is highly valued among young people, although most of them tend to postpone starting a family. While unemployment is low, young people in Latvia often struggle to secure stable incomes and overcome poverty, which in turn affects their

reproductive behaviour. State family policies aim to increase fertility and marriage rate as "a prerequisite for the future existence of the Latvian nation" (p.116), but they have not proven sufficiently effective.

In the eighth chapter written by Edita Štuopytė, attention is drawn to the change towards the modernisation of the family in Lithuania. This phenomenon is noted through the decrease in marriage rates, the postponement of marriage, an increase in the non-traditional forms of partnerships in comparison to heterosexual marriage, and the low birth rate. According to the author, these trends, along with the increase in divorce rates, voluntary childlessness, and single-parent families are instances of the "so-called 'postmodern family' that undermine traditional family values" (p.130). Young people tend to prefer alternative forms of partnership because of their professional and work-related aspirations, whereas the unemployment of the youth, difficulties integrating into the labour market, and dissatisfying social policies represent restraints to family formation. In addition, the author states that the current state of the Lithuanian economy and society, best described by the terms, "globalization", "individualism", and "consumerism", cannot be evaluated as a favourable environment for family formation (pp.134-135).

In the ninth chapter, the authors Sue Vella and Joanne Cassar explore the conditions of family formation in Maltese society. Due to the size and population of the country, there is an atmosphere of familiarity and connectedness among people, where family ties are strong and pronounced. Family, in other words, has a "paramount importance" and is sometimes described as the "hallmark of the Maltese identity" (p.140). The chapter stresses the importance of Catholic religious views and morality for the understanding of family and its functions in Malta. The authors also inform that Malta is characterised by high economic growth and low unemployment, and that marriage rates are high, whereas birth rates are low and declining. Poverty rates are low, but costs related to family formation (such as buying or renting a house and organising a wedding) can still interfere with their intentions

to start a family, along with “young people’s mental health and general well-being” (p.151).

The tenth chapter by Catarina Pinheiro Mota, Helena Carvalho, and Paula Mena Matos examines the case of Portugal. It reports that there are low levels of births, low fertility rates and a trend of ageing in Portugal which testify to the need for better family policies. Young adults tend to postpone marriage and delay leaving their parental homes, often because they find it difficult to afford their own or rented housing. The influence of religious ideas on the perception of family is also elaborated on in the report, particularly when it comes to the importance of marriage for the family. However, an increasing number of people in Portugal cohabit, divorce, and have children outside of marriage which reflects the broader attitudes in society such as the high valuing of education, career, and individualism, and is related to precariousness, competition and uncertainty in the economy and labour market (p.171). The problem of reconciling work and family life for young women is highlighted as a hampering factor for family formation, leading to its postponement.

The eleventh chapter, written by Smiljka Tomanović and Dragan Stanojević, looks into the structural conditions of family formation in Serbia. One of the most pressing issues in the country is corruption and young people exhibit low levels of trust in state institutions and frequently emigrate. Under the influence of traditionalism and religious revival, familism is reported to be strong in Serbian society and manifested as “the high value placed on starting a family, marriage and childbirth” (p.183). There are many instances of extended family forms in Serbia, which originates in both the socially embedded views on the family as well as in the financial difficulties for young people to acquire independent housing. They find the need for “existential and emotional certainty and security” a crucial prerequisite for family formation (p.186), and such feelings are often blocked by the objective circumstances they live in, from the flexible labour market, job precarity, poverty, low institutional support, and lack of housing opportunities, to gender inequality.

As attested by the data presented in the chapters, the situation with respect to the family formation processes in the examined countries has its decisive macro-level material, structural, and socio-economic causes. These represent the objective conditions of well-being, i.e. the conditions of living, working and dwelling that the youth find themselves in, which can discourage their aspirations towards the transition to marriage and parenthood by calling into question their sustainability. Although it might appear contradictory, the societies in which there is a widespread appreciation for so-called “family values” have not proven to be societies with high fertility rates, which can also be said for some societies in which life-standards and socioeconomic conditions are favourable. A conclusion may be reached that neither of these important factors can contribute much in terms of young adults’ well-being if taken in isolation and apart from the specific challenges and struggles that young adults face when compared to the overall population.

References

- Bond, J., Peace, S., Dittmann-Kohli, F., & Westerhof, G. J. (2007). *Ageing in Society: European Perspectives on Gerontology* (3rd ed.) SAGE Publications.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08952840802633834>
- Brown, B. V. (Ed.) (2008). *Key indicators of child and youth well-being: Completing the Picture*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Clark, R. L., Burkhauser, R. V., Moon, M., Quinn, J. F., & Smeeding, T. M. (2004). *The economics of an aging society*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Emirhafizović, M., Heiman, T., Medgyesi, M., Pinheiro Mota, C., Tomanovic, S., & Vella, S. (Eds) (2022). *Family Formation Among Youth in Europe: Coping with Socio-Economic Disadvantages*. Information Age Publishing Inc.
- Pollock, G., Ozan, J., Goswami, H., Rees, G., & Stasulane, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Measuring Youth Well-being: How a Pan-European Longitudinal Survey Can*

Improve Policy. Springer International Publishing.

Author Bio

Selma Alispahić is a Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo. She holds a BA degree in Philosophy and Sociology (2017), MA degrees in Philosophy (2019), Sociology (2020), and Democracy and Human Rights (2022), and a postgraduate degree in Gender Studies (2022). The main fields of her research interest are ethics, political sociology, sociology of culture, sociology of religion, antifascism studies, and feminist and queer theory.