

# **DETERMINANTS OF REPRODUCTIVE INTENTIONS: VIEWS OF RUSSIAN FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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## **Abstract**

The paper presents the results of the Russian round of an international research project in which we studied perceptions about future family and parenthood among female university students. For the Russian round, we surveyed young women from five Russian universities. Our research revealed the following. Firstly, reproductive intentions among female university students are quite low. Secondly, we identified objective determinants of the women's reproductive intentions. These include where the young woman lived before starting university and the size of her parental family. Thirdly, we discovered subjective determinants of reproductive intentions: the girls' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of parenthood, and the significance of children in one's life.

Through our research we concluded that reproductive intentions are significantly influenced by subjective factors, namely ideas about family and parenthood. In turn, they are shaped by social norms and stereotypes, and the young women's experiences growing up. As such, studying family practices and parenting culture to identify types and scope for transformation towards a strengthening of reproductive intentions looks promising. Moreover, potentially damaging demographic trends can be mitigated through changing social norms and stereotypes.

**Key words:** reproductive intentions, female students, parenthood

**JEL Code:** I23, J13

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## **Introduction**

The economic upheavals that Russia faced in 2015 almost completely squeezed demographic problems from the federal informational agenda. Yet the positive trends in Russian fertility that have been observed in the last few years are now starting to look less convincing. Moreover, as of the end of 2015, population growth has given way to decline, which, according to demographic forecasts will only increase from one year to the next. Given the

significance of demographic issues in our country, the study of young people's reproductive intentions remains highly topical today.

Reproductive intentions, which are often measured in terms of preferred numbers of children, are one of the most important indicators of future child birth (Tyndik, 2012). From the point of view of birth rate forecasting, we believe that one of the most promising research areas is the study of reproductive intentions among university students. Firstly, they tend to be easy to reach and are open to cooperation, thus student surveys are usually straightforward to organise. Secondly, forecasting births among future parents with a higher education is important as regards improving the quality of the population (particular in countries with high levels of migrant inflow). Among young people, university students potentially have the most high-quality and thus high-value human capital. Thirdly, time at university marks a period of intense formation of life values and ideals, which will subsequently determine the direction and content of life plans, orientations and attitudes. This period presents perhaps the last opportunity to effectively shape the ideas and values falling into place for a young person.

There is a long history of research into reproductive intentions and attitudes among young people (see, for example, Monnier, 1989; Westoff & Ryder, 1977; Schoen, Astone, Kim, Nathanson, & Fields, 1999). Demographers and sociologists study objective (Berrington & Pattaro, 2014; Tanskanen & Rotkirch, 2014) and subjective (McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Bedrous, 2015; Williamson, Lawson, Downe, & Pierson, 2014) determinants of reproductive intentions. Questions related to the study of reproductive intentions are topical in today's Russia (see, for example, Maleva & Sinyavskaya, 2007; Zvereva & Arkhangelsky, 2012). The aim of our research is to study the intentions of female university students from Russia as regards the size of their futures families and to identify factors that determine these ideas.

## **1 Data and Methods**

We used mixed sampling in our research: simple random sampling to select universities and stratified sampling to select the students. Thus, we surveyed young women from five Russian universities (N=520). Sampling error was below 5%. Data was collected using questionnaires. SPSS 22.0 was used to process and analyse the data.

Our analysis was based on three sets of questions:

1. Questions about preferred numbers of children. We used three indicators in our research:
  - the expected number of children (the question was phrased as: “I believe that I will have ... children”);

- the desired number of children (“I want to have ... children”);
- the desired number of children in a perfect situation (“If all the right conditions were in place, I would want ... children”).

These questions provide insight into the participants’ reproductive plans and intentions.

2. Questions which uncover the female students' ideas about family and parenthood. First of all, we ascertained the young women's views about the advantages and disadvantages of having children. These were closed questions, respondents were able to select multiple options or specify their own answer. Moreover, we looked at the young women's views about the value of children and their purpose in contemporary society. For this, we asked respondents a series of questions of the same type about how many children they thought are needed to actualise in different areas of life.

3. Questions about the socio-demographic status of the respondents. We recorded where the students lived before coming to university, the composition of their parental family and the nature of the relationships with parents and grandparents, religious practices and some other characteristics.

In our analysis, we used descriptive statistics and tests for equality of means, medians and distributions.

## 2 Results

We obtained the following results through our research.

1. In the process of our analysis, we found that young women had quite low reproductive intentions – the modal value for different numbers of children (expected, desired and desired in a perfect situation) was just two (table 1).

**Tab. 1: Statistical characteristics for “number of children” variables**

	Number of children		
	expected	desired	desired in a perfect situation
Mean	2.18	2.33	2.55
Mode	2	2	2

Source: data of the survey

2. In testing hypotheses about the influence of different socio-demographic characteristics on young women’s reproductive intentions, we identified two possible determinants (we will call them objective determinants of reproductive intentions). Firstly, we discovered that numbers of children vary depending on where the young woman lived before starting university. At this point, the significance of these differences is not confirmed by statistical tests and probably requires a larger sample size. However, the identified trends should be noted:

- ✓ in responding to questions about the expected and desired numbers of children, only the residents of large and medium cities selected “4 or more children”;
- ✓ in responding to questions about the desired number of children in a perfect situation, the answer “4 or more children” was chosen by residents of small cities, but not rural dwellers.

Thus, young women from larger settlements seem to have a greater propensity towards greater reproductive activity.

Secondly, we found that reproductive intentions differ depending on the composition of the young women's parental families. In particular, respondents from large families (with three or more siblings) never planned to have many-child families themselves. The maximum number of children they expected, desired, or desired in a perfect situation was 2.

3. We found that reproductive intentions of young women differ depending on their ideas about the advantages and disadvantages of parenthood, and the significance of children in contemporary society (we will call these subjective determinants of reproductive intentions). Firstly, it turned out that the expected number of children varies depending on whether the young woman considers children a financial burden:

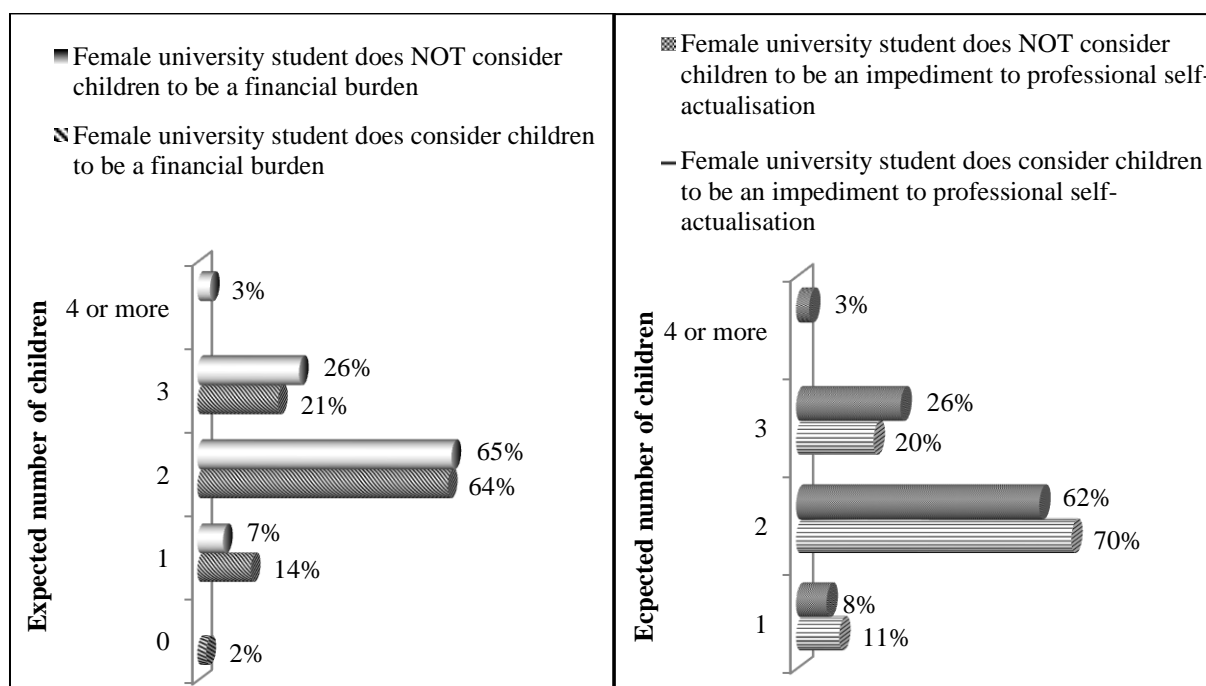
- ✓ respondents who consider children financially burdensome never chose “4 or more children”;
- ✓ conversely, respondents who did not view children a financial burden never chose “no children”

A comparison of the two groups of women showed that perceiving children as a financial burden shifts the distribution of answers about the expected number of children towards reduced lifetime fertility (Figure 1).

Secondly, we discovered that the expected number of children changes depending on whether the young woman considers parenting to be an impediment to professional self-actualisation. There was a similar correlation: the idea that children get in the way of career success pushes the distribution towards reduced lifetime fertility (Figure 1).

Thirdly, we found that reproductive intentions of the young women vary depending on their assessment of the value of children and their purpose in contemporary society. The results of our research showed that in the majority of cases, having children was associated with the need to procreate and secure a comfortable old age. When asked about how many children are needed to fulfil these aspirations, people cited 3 or more children more often than in other situations (Table 2).

**Fig. 1. Proportion of female university students who have indicated a particular expected number of children**



Source: data of the survey

**Tab. 2: Some specifics of the distribution of answers to questions about the number of children required to fulfil certain aspirations in life**

Aspiration in life	Proportion of young women who pointed to the need for 3 or more children, %	Average number of children needed
Procreation	44.1	2.41
Securing a comfortable old age	40.6	2.36
Living life through my children, adding meaning to life	31.5	2.18
Fulfilling my duty and purpose	23.8	1.75
Experiencing life more fully and self-actualising	20.3	1.82
Building greater wealth	15.4	1.42

Source: data of the survey

Moreover, we identified a direct statistical correlation: the more highly a respondent assesses the significance of children in life (that is, places more value on the contribution of having children to fulfilling different aspirations in life), the higher her reproductive intentions (that is, higher numbers of children expected, desired and desired in a perfect situation).

### 3 Discussions and Conclusion

1. Our research revealed a rather low number of preferred children among young women. Given that this number is always less than the actual number of children born, it is likely that the current reproductive intentions do not lend themselves to overcoming adverse demographic trends that prevail in Russia.

On the other hand, a comparison of our results against data from the Federal State Statistics Service (*Brief results*, 2012) imparts certain optimism, since the reproductive intentions of female university students were higher than those among 18 to 45-year-old Russian women generally. Thus, for example, there was a higher share of female university students who said they wanted to or, more significantly, expected to have 2 or 3 children.

Thus, we can suppose that university students are one of the most promising targets for demographic policy aimed at raising reproductive intentions of prospective parents. One potentially effective measure could be an education system focused on reproductive intentions and behaviours, which would be a core component of the entire university education process (Bagirova & Shubat, 2015).

2. Our research showed that young women who live in large cities have higher reproductive intentions. Moreover, girls who grew up in large families are not geared towards having many children in the future. We see several possible reasons for this.

The first is the correlation between the presence of many children with a low quality of life, as well as the proliferation of large families in rural Russia. Research shows that “many-child families have the highest level and the greatest depth of poverty” (Prokofyeva & Kupriyanova, 2009). Clearly, in trying to improve their own quality of life, young women who were raised in rural areas subconsciously steer clear of wanting a large number of children. This aversion is exacerbated by the nature of the young person’s mindset – categorical, egocentric and prone to radical views.

Another possible reason could be linked to psychological factors. Girls who grew up with many siblings may have had negative experiences borne of a shortage of parental love, attention and care. As a result, they want to avoid a repeat of these experiences in their own families and decide against having a large number of children.

The third reason is the presence of greater professional ambitions among young women from rural areas and small towns (Posukhova, 2013). This promotes the view that having a family and children becomes an obstacle to building a career and achieving the sought-after standard of living. We note that our results are to some extent consistent with the

nature of the dynamics of the age-specific birth rate coefficient. According to official Russian statistics, this indicator has seen the most marked decline among the rural population (Table 3).

**Tab.3: Age-specific birth rate coefficients in Russia and their dynamics, 2011-2014**

Age-group, years	Indicator	Population	2011	2012	2013	2014
15-19	Age-specific birth rate coefficients	urban	20.2	19.8	20.5	20.2
		rural	46.7	46.2	45.8	43.3
	Increase, %	urban	–	-2.0	3.5	-1.5
		rural	–	-1.1	-0.9	-5.5
18-19	Age-specific birth rate coefficients	urban	33.6	33.2	35.3	35.5
		rural	89	95.8	96.2	89.3
	Increase, %	urban	–	-1.2	6.3	0.6
		rural	–	7.6	0.4	-7.2

Source: calculated by the authors based on (Data from, 2012-2016)

3. Our research identified the influence of subjective perceptions about family and parenthood on the female students' reproductive intentions. Clearly, most of women have yet to gain first-hand experience as either professionals or as parents. Thus in their ideas about parenthood they draw on the most common societal stereotypes: on the one hand, children are a means of procreation, on the other hand – they get in the way of work.

We believe that the young women's reproductive intentions can be strengthened by instilling a more profound understanding of the advantages of parenthood. Indeed, developing ideas about parenthood as a form of procreation, of getting a greater sense of purpose and a form of self-actualisation can promote growth in preferred numbers of children. An integrated informational programme that is focused on this idea can help drive a greater number of actual births.

Such an informational policy should be based on clear ideas about the need for and advantages of parenthood, which young people can relate to. On the basis of our research, we have distilled ideas that are likely to be highly compatible with the mindsets of would-be mothers, because they do not contradict their existing views. These ideas include:

- ✓ a full family is a large family with three or more children;
- ✓ giving birth to and raising children is labour which raises the social status of the parent;

✓ parenthood has clear socio-psychological advantages, including: fulfilling one's mission in life, self-actualising, raising one's social status, living a fuller life, improving family relationships, avoiding loneliness in old age;

✓ parenthood carries financial advantages because having children may guarantee financial security for the parent in the future.

Based on our research, we concluded that reproductive intentions are significantly influenced by objective and subjective factors; the latter represented by ideas about family and parenthood. In turn, subjective factors are shaped by social norms and stereotypes, and the young women's experiences growing up. As such, studying family practices and parenting culture in the interests of identifying key types and analysing scope for transformation to strengthen reproductive intentions looks promising. Moreover, potentially damaging demographic trends can be mitigated by changing social norms and stereotypes. These, in turn, can be shaped by pro-family informational policies and education that emphasises the possibility of self-actualization through parental labour, not just professional life.

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