

Marriage and Cohabitation in Recent Hungarian Society

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The Christian view of society is based on families founded on sacramental marriages. Although Catholic Social Teaching documents regard family as the vital cell of society, this institution – regarded as a value by the Catholic Church – appears a less and less frequently adopted general norm or a realistic way of life. Due to processes of individualisation, social, economic and legal system changes contemporary Hungarian society faces a constant decline in not only religious but civil marriage rates as well, while alternative ways of living together emerge. Based on data from the first half of the 2010s an average Hungarian woman has 44-percent chance of getting married in her lifetime. While nearly two-third of Hungarian adults lived in marriages at the time of the Hungarian Transition in the 1990s, this rate dropped to less than 50 percent in both sexes. The number of unmarried men and women increased. The strengthening of cohabitation regarded as the most significant contextual factor is affecting changes. This study describes the relationship characteristics in the Hungarian society in the light of current statistics data. It highlights the social factors of demographic changes and processes as well as opportunities for the Catholic Church focusing on challenges in pastoral care. Conclusions concerning the Hungarian society are presented in a European context.

Keywords: *cohabitation, family, Hungarian society, marriage.*

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Introduction

According to the Catholic social doctrine, marriage constitutes the natural base of the family.

»(...) for the good of the spouses and their off-springs as well as of society, the existence of the sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone. For, God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes«.¹

In accordance with the Christian perception, the fundamental characteristics of marriage include openness to fertility, completeness, indissolubility and loyalty. Society has no power over it: matrimony is the natural right of man and woman.²

However, having reflected on the above considerations, it appears that in western societies of Christian roots people are increasingly less able and willing to exercise this right. As a result of individualization processes, political and social changes, the number of marriages has decreased and the spreading of cohabitation continued, while the rate of unmarried young adults has increased. This study examines the system of causes underlying the changes, primarily in the light of the transformation occurring in the Hungarian society in recent decades. The presentation of demographic trends, the description of the changes in relationships can support the development and elaboration of the directions and focal points of the ecclesiastic pastoral activity. The situation of relationships is presented by the author in a non-exhaustive way, through highlighting a number of current processes, focusing primarily on changes and explanations related to the educational system and labour market. As a result, the pastoral recommendations also focus only on certain areas.

1. The situation of relationships in Hungary – overview

Concerning the distribution of the Hungarian population according to marital status, the previously commenced tendencies have continued.³ In the period following the change of the regime, the decrease of the number and proportion of married people accelerated. The proportion of divorcees increased, while that of widowed people remained approximately the same. The proportion of unmarried men and women in society increased significantly. It is commonly known that several of them live in a relationship, thus, the most

¹ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 48, 1965.

² Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004.

³ Gusztáv KOVÁCS, Is there a future for the private sphere? The complex bond between the public and the private in the light of fertility trends in Hungary, *Family Forum*, 1 (2011) 99-111.

significant change of the past 25 years is the spread of cohabitation relationships in addition to the diminishing number of marriages.

Table 1.: Composition of the population aged 15 and over by marital status and sex, 1990, 2001, 2011 (%)

	Never married	Married	Widow	Divorced	Total
Males					
1990	25.1	64.6	3.9	6.4	100.0
2001	32.9	55.6	3.8	7.7	100.0
2011	38.8	47.2	3.8	10.1	100.0
Females					
1990	15.9	58.1	17.8	8.2	100.0
2001	22.1	49.4	18.5	10	100.0
2011	27	41.9	18.2	12.8	100.0
Total					
1990	20.3	61.2	11.2	7.4	100.0
2001	27.2	52.3	11.6	8.9	100.0
2011	32.6	44.4	11.5	11.6	100.0

Source: *Demographic Portrait of Hungary 2015 - HCSO Population Census 2011. Part 4: Demographic data, 2013.*

Concerning population over 15 years of age, at the 1990 census 61% of the population was married. In 2011 the figure was only 44%, and the proportion of divorcees increased from 7 to 12%, while that of the unmarried increased by over 50%. In 2011, among those over 15 years of age, 27% of women and 39% of men was qualified as unmarried. The proportion of cohabitation relationships at least doubled in every age group, with the exception of those over 60. In case of women aged 25-29 the proportion of those living in a cohabitation relationship was equal to that of married women. In the two ten-year cycles (1990-2001; 2001-2011) between the censuses the pace of the increase was different. In the first period, the number of those living in a cohabitation relationship increased dramatically, while in the second phase the proportion of unmarried people increased more. Disintegrating marriages and unstable cohabitation relationships can be detected in the background, and also the proportion of those unmarried people who had never had a permanent relationship became higher. Thus, unmarried people do not necessarily belong to the group of »singles«. The proportion of the group of those aged between 30 and 50, childless, unmarried, voluntarily choosing a work- consumption- and entertainment-centred lifestyle in the given age group in Hungary is only 3%.

During the examined 20 years (1990-2011) the number of marriages decreased by nearly a half. In the past few years (since 2013) a slight increase has

been experienced, breaking the previous tendency of steady decrease. Thus, it appears that the long-term tendency of the declining popularity of marriage has stopped in Hungary.⁴ However, the average age of the spouses at the time of their first marriage is continuously increasing. In 1990 women got married at the average age of 21.5 and men at the age of 24.5. In 2013 the average age of women was 29.5 and that of men was 32.3 years. Since the 2010s, men more frequently get married after their 40th year than before the 25th. The proportion of those remarrying has also increased. This means that the willingness to marry has dropped less significantly among divorcees than among the unmarried. Concerning divorcees, it can be stated that divorced men are more likely to marry than their yet unmarried counterparts. In the case of women this change cannot be detected, in their case divorcees show a lower willingness to marry than unmarried women.⁵

Prior to the change of the regime two thirds of the first permanent relationships started as marriage. Today (data from 2015) this is only true for one tenth of relationships. In Hungary, the cohabitation relationship initially spread as a lifestyle following divorce, thus it was characteristic in the case of middle-aged persons. By the 2010s the rate thereof fell. Currently, in the case of at least two thirds of cohabitation relationships there are unmarried people who have had no previous marriage. Cohabitation relationships are more easily broken up than marriages. Part of these relationships transform into marriage; the rest is continued as previously. Judging by the direction of the change, the number of couples who make their cohabitation official and get married is decreasing. Thus, cohabitation increasingly can be regarded as an alternative to marriage rather than a form of living together before getting married.

An interesting development is that LAT relationships are also spreading in Hungary (LAT = living apart together). The people belonging to this category, despite living in a relationship, due to certain reasons (financial independence, stronger aspiration to an independent life, living together with their own child) do not live in the same household as their partner. According to a data collection carried out in 2012-2013, 13% of participants aged 18-49 has a partner living apart. On the basis of the study it appears that in the case of young participants, LAT relationship serves as the first step before living together, however, the older participants consider it to be a permanent, individual form of relationship.⁶

The decrease of the number of marriages is considered a general trend in the majority of European countries. A number of slight peaks can be observed as a result of certain social policy measures (e.g. financial discounts for those

⁴ Lívía MURINKÓ, Zsolt SPÉDER, Marriage and Cohabitation, in: J. MONOSTORI, P. ÓRI, Zs. SPÉDER (eds.) *Demographic Portrait of Hungary 2015*, Budapest, 2015, 9-26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁶ Balázs KAPITÁNY, 'Látogató párok Magyarországon', *Szociológiai Szemle*, 1 (2012) 4-29.

marrying for the first time), but the tendencies are rarely reversed (with the exception of the increasing willingness to marry in Sweden). In Hungary, a slight increase has been experienced in recent years following, e.g. the similar Polish trends. The indicators concerning marriages in Hungary are among the lower ones in the region. Fundamentally, it is typical that the cohabitation relationship is considered to be an alternative to marriage in Western and Northern European countries, while in Eastern and Central Europe the institution of marriage remains important. However, in the case of Hungary and Bulgaria, the Western tendencies are present.

On the basis of the results of a European study involving women aged 30-34, the Hungarian data are not outstanding in any aspects.⁷ In Eastern countries, the proportion of young women living in their parents' home is higher, however, the delay in forming a permanent relationship postpones separating from the parents in most countries. In the West, approximately a third of the examined women live in a cohabitation relationship. This form of relationship is less widespread in Russia, Poland and Romania (its proportion is under 10%). The proportion of married people in this age group is the highest in Romania and Poland, and the lowest in Norway, Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium. Hungary is in the mid-range in both comparisons.

2. The underlying factors of the changes – theoretical framework

Several economic and social changes underlie the behavioural patterns shaping the trends of starting relationships and getting married. Among the most important reasons are the stronger, more active participation of women in the education system and on the labour market. The expansion of higher education and the paradigm of lifelong learning are a type of reaction to the spreading of workplaces requiring higher qualification in the developed Western national economies.⁸

The cause of the decrease in the proportion of marriages and of the increase in the number of cohabitation relationships and those people living in a single lifestyle may be the blurred, less and less pronounced nature of the previously firm boundaries of becoming an adult (employment, moving out from the parental house, starting one's own family, etc.) Currently, legal independence, political autonomy is rarely connected to other processes of becoming (financially, in terms of leaving the family home) independent.⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁸ Ivett SZALMA, Az iskolai és munkaerő-paici státusz hatása a párkapcsolat-formálódásra, *Demográfia*, 2-3 (2009) 175-206.

⁹ László VASKOVICS, A posztadoleszcencia szociológiai elmélete, *Szociológiai Szemle*, 4 (2000) 3-20.

According to Becker¹⁰ the basis of a marital relationship is mutuality. Traditionally, men share the goods obtained on the labour market with women in return for performing household tasks. In the case of women with high educational qualifications who are also active in external workplaces the benefits offered by marriage disappear, thus the cooperation of the sexes gives way to competition. As a result, educated women do not only postpone marriage but they often forego it completely.

On the other hand, other researchers¹¹ – basing on empiric data – point out that higher educational qualifications do not necessarily mean neglecting marriage, only its timing changes, it is postponed within the course of life. Moreover, the willingness to marry in case of more highly-qualified women is not behind that of their lower-qualified counterparts, it can even exceed that in most European countries. As an explanation of the data, the researchers argue that in the uncertain economic situation of the late 20th and early 21st century, it was two-earner households that adapted the most successfully to the constantly changing external conditions. Thus, a favourable position on the labour market can make women even more attractive from the point of view of marriage. Other studies¹² have also proved that a job of high esteem can increase the change for getting married both in the case of women and men. On the basis of this, an important aspect of choosing a partner is the economic success, labour market status of the future spouse. The unmarried lifestyle spreads more among lower classes.

A typical phenomenon of modern times is the increasing individualization of life courses.¹³ In developed societies, the number of decisions and individual opportunities grows significantly, while the presence of risks and uncertainty is also stronger.¹⁴ As a reaction to changes, citizens avoid long-term commitments, leaving a door open to new, arising opportunities. This behaviour favours the more informal cohabitation relationships and reduces the importance of the institution of marriage. It is not clear to what extent does the system of effects of the risk society undermine the institution of marriage, and to what extent does it postpone the time of establishing a permanent relationship. It requires significantly longer time and more energy than previously

¹⁰ Gary S. BECKER, *A Treatise on the Family*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993, 30-53.

¹¹ Erzsébet, BUKODI, *Ki, mikor, kivel (nem) házasodik? Párválasztás Magyarországon*, Budapest, Századvég, 2004; Valerie OPPENHEIMER, Women's employment and the gain to marriage. The specialization and the trading model, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23 (1997) 431-451.

¹² Szalma, *op. cit.*, 177.

¹³ Ulrich BECK, Elisabeth BECK-GERNSHEIM, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, London, 2002.

¹⁴ Anthony GIDDENS, *Runaway World. How Globalisation is Reshaping our Lives*, Profile Books, London, 1999.

for unmarried people to select the person who fulfils their preferences among the potential partners.¹⁵

Studies concerning the Hungarian society reveal different directions, and they are fundamentally related to the expansion of higher education. Following the change of the regime the role of qualifications became more important, and the value of knowledge capital increased. Concomitantly, after the political changes of 1989-90 the Hungarian educational system became a type of alternative route for the labour market, and thus prevented large masses of young people from appearing as unemployed in the national economy suffering from transformation crises. In the system of higher education, which has become mass education, the time of obtaining a degree has increased, while its value is decreasing. Higher qualifications do not necessarily mean a better labour market status. The forms of employment are also transforming, the proportion of part-time employment and working through one-time commissions is increasing, and the economic activity of younger age groups has dropped significantly. It is difficult to achieve financial independence, and the safe environment of higher education shares the responsibility and financial burdens among the state, parents and young people.¹⁶ Currently, the proportion of those who have obtained higher qualifications is 23,7%, and it exceeds 30% in the age group of 25-34.¹⁷ The rate of qualification of employed women exceeds that of men by the turn of the millennium, 20% more women obtained a degree than men.

Among those attending institutions of higher education, the proportion of those living in cohabitation relationship is high. Researchers also point out that during the period of attending education, which is characterised by limited resources, not only the frequency of marriages but that of cohabitation also decreases.¹⁸ However, data concerning distribution according to gender show significant differences. Student status, on the whole, hinders the establishment of permanent relationships. On the other hand, in the case of women – especially in the case of women in their late 20s – the flexible form of cohabitation without marriage is more frequent.¹⁹ A stable relationship entails financial responsibility, thus it is more common among active, employed people. Among the employed, the non-standard employment of uncertain term influences against marriage, while a stable employment strengthens commitment in a relationship.

¹⁵ Szalma, *op. cit.*, 178.

¹⁶ Rudolf ANDORKA, *Bevezetés a szociológiába*, Budapest, 2006, 452-457.

¹⁷ KSH – 2016, Hungarian Central Statistical Office; http://www.ksh.hu/thm/2/indi2_2_4.html.

¹⁸ Erzsébet BUKODI, Péter, RÓBERT, The Effects of the Globalization Process on the Transition to Adulthood in Hungary, in: H.-P. BLOSSFELD, E. KLIJZING, M. MILLS, K. KURZ (eds.) *Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society*, London – New York, Routledge, 2005, 177-213.

¹⁹ Erzsébet BUKODI, A párkapcsolat formálódás és –felbomlás néhány társadalmi meghatározója, in: I. NAGY, T. PONGRÁCZ, I. Gy. TÓTH (eds) *Szemperváltozások. Jelentések a nők és a férfiak helyzetéről*. TÁRKI, Budapest, 2001, 88-112.

Ágnes Utasi prepared in-depth interviews and case studies with city-dweller single people in their thirties for her work entitled »Feláldozott kapcsolatok. A magyar szingli« (»Sacrificed relationships. The Hungarian single«).²⁰ She detected a strong difference between the qualification and relationship status of men and women. While in the case of men high qualifications increase the frequency of marriage, in the case of women it significantly decreases willingness. In the case of women, the system of marrying up is more strongly present, that is, marrying a partner of higher prestige, qualification and income, to fulfil the need for security. This possibility is only available for a certain proportion of highly qualified women due to the limited number of graduate men, and due to the fact that part of the highly qualified men marries down. Moreover, graduate women find it harder to make compromises – being aware of their better economic status. According to Utasi, at the turn of the millennium the former socialist countries were characterised by semi-modernised values: conforming to tradition, people established a permanent relationship earlier than the citizens of countries offering more favourable conditions for a modern, independent lifestyle, however, in the meantime the increasing individualism can lead to the fast breakdown of relationships if they are unsuccessful. 90% of Hungarian singles would like a permanent relationship and children, however, they spend a long, sometimes overlong time considering this step. In the background, on one hand, is being work- and career-centred, and the wish of freedom, and, on the other hand, the weakening of social networks.²¹

In the case of Hungarian youth, among the local marriage markets (school, workplace, area of residence) mentioned by Kalmijn,²² the role of the area of residence decreases as higher education is characterised by a higher geographical mobility. The workplace frequently becomes the scene of competition. In addition to the expanding educational system, the role of the internet can become increasingly stronger in this respect.

An interesting aspect of relationships is religion. We do not have recent studies in this field, but previous research among secondary school students lead to the conclusion that religious young people tend to support the idea of marriage more and have lower preference for cohabitation relationships.²³ However, it can also be stated that the role of religion in preventing divorce has weakened somewhat in recent years.²⁴

²⁰ Ágnes UTASI, *Feláldozott kapcsolatok. A magyar szingli*, Budapest, MTA PTI, 2004.

²¹ Gusztáv KOVÁCS, *Új szülők, új gyermekek: Miképpen változtatja meg szülői felelősségünket a reprodukciós medicina*, Pécs, PPHE, 2014, 57-74.

²² Matthijs KALMIJN, Assortative Mating by Cultural and Economic Occupational Status, *American Journal of Sociology*, 2 (1994) 422-452.

²³ Eszter KOVÁCS, Bettina PIKÓ, Válságban a család? A középiskolások párkapcsolati preferenciái, *Demográfia*, 2-3 (2007) 282-296.

²⁴ Zsuzsanna BÖGRE, A családok és a keresztény közösség, *Vigilia*, 4 (2001) 273-278; Zsuzsanna BÖGRE, István KAMARÁS, *Vallásszociológia*, Budapest, 2013.

3. *The possible directions of ecclesiastic involvement* – *pastoral aspects*

The members of the church are involved in solving social problems in several areas in Hungary as well. The conscious interpretation of the above-detailed processes and demographic trends, the exploration of the motives underlying the problems can help in detecting the wish of individuals, couples and families for happiness, and not just the deterioration of the traditional values, in the background of the transformation of family life and relationships. This does not mean that we must cease to focus on mutual commitment and the ideal of a monogamous, lifelong marriage. In ecclesiastical communication, presenting the value of marriage as a life partnership based on mutual, free choice is highly significant.²⁵ In the world that is constantly changing and full of risks, the image of a marriage-based family must appear as a sphere of intimacy, stability, dedication and freedom. It also needs to be emphasized on a social and political level: marriage is not simply the private affair of two people, but it also has wider community-related dimensions and functions as the fundamental scene of socialization, thus it can claim the protection and support of society.

»It is the task of the Christian community and of all who have the good of society at heart to reaffirm that the family constitutes, much more than a mere juridical, social and economic unit, a community of love and solidarity, which is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual and religious values, essential for the development and well-being of its own members and of society«.²⁶

The proclamations and the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* of Pope Francis explores the underlying factors and changes of the decrease in the number of marriages.²⁷ These include stressful lifestyle, being overloaded, and the spreading of the individualistic culture of possession and seeking enjoyment. The lack of future possibilities and uncertainty about the future also have an adverse effect on starting a family. We are living in an interesting and ambivalent culture:

»The fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one's personal goals«.²⁸

The challenges mentioned in the Papal document are also present and need to be solved in Hungary: the culture of consumer society, the weakening of faith and of practising one's religion, negative migration trends, domestic violence, sexual abuse, different addictions (alcohol, drugs, television, internet), and the

²⁵ Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II *Familiaris Consortio*, No. 81, 1981.

²⁶ *Compendium*, 229.

²⁷ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, No. 31-57, 2016.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

problem of the media's presentation of the female body as a product. The majority of the above-mentioned problems cannot be solved with legal regulation or social policy incentives. A complex intervention is needed with the cooperation of the state, the churches and the civil sector. The current Hungarian political situation provides an opportunity for the Church to increase its presence in society and expand its activity, but also encumber and weaken the critical role that religious organisations could play in modern societies instead of the politicised media.

The *Amoris Laetitia* designates the »accompaniment of fragility« as a task for pastors, that is, integrating those open towards God but living without a Christian marriage, into parish communities.²⁹ The document outlines several pastoral tasks and methods of assistance. It urges a more efficient participation in ethical and sexual education as well. It designates family pastoring primarily in the scope and activity of parishes. Due to a serious lack of priests in Hungary (similarly to the majority of European states) this responsible work could only be carried out by overloaded parish priests with the wider and active involvement of lay helpers. This, however, cannot be realised without the serious modification of the current framework of the organisation of the church and that of pastoral strategies. The channels of interaction, through which the message of the Church can reach open-minded people, must be established, transcending the existing communication which is active in the church but is carried out involving a small minority.

Conclusion

Due to the current transformation of relationships, a system has been created that is difficult to understand but at the same time features several comprehensible patterns. As it could be observed, the soundness of marriages and the security of relationships are closely connected to the status at the workplace and on the labour market, with income and qualifications. The relationships of groups with lower educational qualifications and limited financial means are more unstable and in their case the probability of getting married is lower. The Church needs to increase its activity concerning the disadvantaged.³⁰ In addition to the current provision of incidental social support, a more complex, organised assistance is necessary, including preparation for the establishment and maintenance of a committed, stable relationship and education for marriage as well. The supportive attitude of religious youth towards marriage proves that religious education can be efficient in this sensitive but highly important area as well.

²⁹ Ibid., 291-312.

³⁰ Gusztáv KOVÁCS, Was wird sich in Ungarn nach *Amoris laetitia* ändern?, *Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego*, 1 (2017) 177-189.

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Brak i izvanbračna zajednica u današnjem mađarskom društvu

Sažetak

Kršćanska se slika društva temelji na obiteljima koje se uspostavljaju crkvenim sakramentom ženidbe. Iako se u dokumentima socijalnoga nauka Katoličke crkve pod pojmom obitelji razumije životno važna zajednica društva, brak koji Katolička crkva promiče kao visokovrijednu ustanovu, sve je manje prisutan kao općeprihvatljiva društvena norma, odnosno kao stvarno doživljen način življenja. Zbog procesa individualizacije i promjena društvenoga, ekonomskoga i pravnoga sustava, suvremeno se mađarsko društvo suočava s neprestanim smanjenjem broja sklapanja ne samo vjerskih, već i građanskih brakova, dok se sve više pojavljuju drugi oblici zajedničkoga življenja. Prema podacima iz prve polovice 2010. godine vjerojatnost da će mađarska žena sklopiti brak tijekom svoga života iznosi 44 posto. Dok su za vrijeme demokratskih promjena 1990-ih godina dvije trećine odrasloga stanovništva živjele u braku, prema popisu stanovništva iz 2011. godine ih je bilo manje od polovice, ali se znatno povećao broj neoženjenih i neudanih osoba. Najvažnijim razlogom tih promjena smatra se učvršćivanje izvanbračnih veza. Oslanjajući se na aktualne statističke podatke, u ovom se radu opisuju glavne osobitosti partnerskih veza u mađarskome društvu. Ukazuje se na glavne društvene razloge koji se kriju iza demografskih promjena i procesa. Nadalje, u glavnim se crtama govori o mogućnostima Katoličke crkve i njezinim pastoralnim izazovima u ovom pogledu. Spoznaje o mađarskom društvu glede braka i izvanbračnih veza predstavljene su u europskom kontekstu.

Ključne riječi: obitelj, izvanbračna veza, brak, mađarsko društvo.

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