

IMPACT OF FAMILY RELATIONS ON HEALTH AND MORTALITY
IN CONTEMPORARY BULGARIA
(POST-COMMUNISM: THE FIGHT FOR THE SOULS)

The recent trends of mortality and health in Bulgaria are typical for a post-communist country: between 1980 and 1995 a stable tendency of decreasing life expectancy of males is observed (73,8 years in 1980; 74,7 in 1990; 74,9 in 1995). After 1995 an increase is registered (up to 75, 1 years in 2000). The main causes for the negative trends are cardio-vascular diseases and accidents, the first appearing mostly in middle aged, and the second – in the young ages. In the higher ages, after 65, life expectancy and other mortality indicators of males are stagnating over time. For the females the trends of life expectancy at various ages are quite different: there is improvement in the period 1980-1990 and stagnation thereafter.

It is obvious that the difficulties of the transition period did not have the same effect on both sexes: women were less fragile and performed better than men in the face of high unemployment, radical changes in the political life, mass impoverishment, opening to the Western culture, etc.

The questions raised in the paper are: What are the main determinants of these trends, and why are men more vulnerable to social change? What is the impact of family life and family relations in the explanation of these processes of deteriorating health and mortality conditions of men, while for women the changes in health and mortality are much smaller. What are the possible sociological and psychological explanations of the positive trends in male's health and mortality in the very recent years (after 1995), while for the females the stagnation is still going on?

In order to address these questions we first consider some theoretical background of the sociological and psychological interpretations of mortality determinants in the context of Bulgaria and Eastern Europe, linked to the communist ideology and the overall social and political atmosphere in the communist and the post-communist context. The main hypothesis is that the replacement of religion by the dialectical materialism (philosophical core of the official and obligatory Marxist ideology) has created moral instability, with serious implications on family norms and behaviors, and therefore on psychological stability and health. A point is made on the impact of family relations, norms and values (on spouses roles, parenting, the care for the elderly, etc.) on social cohesion and caring for health on the personal and family level, as well as in social policy.

After the Second World War Bulgaria, as well as other European countries, entered in a so-called "socialist" (communist) phase of social and economic development.

Demographic processes and family relations were modified by the domination of the communist party in political life, and its (Marxist) ideology, dominated by dialectical materialism (its philosophical core). This change from religious to (Marxist) atheistic foundation of the official ideology had numerous impacts on the individual behavior, reinforced through social institutions and the state policy. In the case of Bulgaria it was coupled by an intensive modification of the way of life, linked to a mass migration from rural to urban areas, and an unprecedented raise of female economic activity, attaining some of the highest levels ever observed in the world. The rapid change of the role of women was intensified even more by the early liberalization of

abortion on request in 1958 (later limited to unmarried women and married women with more than two children).

These social processes have created an atmosphere of instability in the relations between men and women, as well as in the structure of the family, and its main functions: running household economy, sex, the raising of children, the care for old people, division of labor, authority and management of resources in the family, the well-being of all family-members. The greater vulnerability of men is supposed to be the consequence of rapid upward social mobility of women, greater access to education, modern life style, etc. The role of divorce regulation is considered in the same perspective.

The possible impact of each one of these family changes on health and mortality trends on each sex is examined by using statistical methods: comparing statistical distributions, examining trends, etc.

Empirical evidence is provided from the following representative surveys conducted in Bulgaria between 1977 and 2000:

- 1) Bulgarian Family. Institute of sociology, 1977. Published data in: Kyuranov Ch. (ed.), *Dneshnoto bulgarsko semeistvo (Contemporary Bulgarian Family)*, Sofia, 1987;
- 2) Men and Women in the transition to Market Economy. National Statistical Institute, Institute of demography, 1995.
- 3) Reproductive Health of Women in Bulgaria. University of South Carolina, National Center for Public Opinion Research, 2000.