

**Պտղի սեռի խտրական ընտրության դեմ պայքար**  
**“Combating Gender-Biased Sex Selection in Armenia”**

# Համառոտագիր Policy Brief



Ծրագիրը ֆինանսավորվում է  
Եվրոպական միության կողմից  
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# A New Set of Policy Tools for Preventing Gender-Biased Sex-Selection: 2-in-1



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In order to prevent the consistently declining fertility in Armenia, and gender-biased sex-selection, and at the same time to empower women in their economic activities and to promote their participation in labour force, it is recommended to introduce a new benefit system for working mothers taking care of children up to two years of age.

## **Consequences within Concerns, and Reasons within Targets: Prerequisites of Gender-Biased Sex-Selection**

In the recent years, the skewed sex ratio of new-borns has slightly improved: if in 2010, it was 115 boys per 100 girls, in 2014, it was 113 per 100 boys. Still, the sex ratio at birth of 107:100 among first-borns, first observed in 2014, is rather disturbing. If in the past, there was absolutely no sex-selection among first-borns, and the sex ratio at birth was close to the estimated natural ratio, nowadays the ratio is noticeably skewed. Such gender-biased sex-selection essentially attacks the last 'defence line' of natural sex ratio at birth. As recently around half of the new-borns in Armenia have been first-borns, the fall of this demographic 'stronghold' may result in a national security crisis, exacerbated further by the consistently declining fertility. In the coming decades, the country may lose more people, than in the result of a horrendous war: more than 80,000 people.

Indeed, all the three reasons behind sex selection and gender-biased selective abortions are present in Armenia. When there is very low fertility, families with son preference opt for aborting development of a female foetus under the pressure of reproductive decisions and the availability of prenatal diagnosis, which allows them to know the sex of the foetus. This is true especially in case of families with two and more girls, and nowadays even among first-borns. Sex-selection among first-borns has occurred under continuous reduction of the fertility rate. To address this challenge public policy should primarily use measures which contribute to both preventing further reduction of the fertility rate, and appraising girl's role in the Armenian society and family. Such measures have already proved effective in a series of countries, which have overcome similarly grave demographic challenges.

## **A Demographic Swing: Divergence and Convergence of Women's Participation in the Labour Force and Fertility**

Public policy measures to respond successfully to the challenges of declining fertility are indeed few. Sustainable ones require large expenses, consistency, cultural change and should be long-term. Though reproductive decisions are largely conditioned by intrinsic factors, the external ones which affect those factors are numerous and interconnected. Moreover, mutually conducive factors, which in the past might have been such, turn into mutually constraining ones in the present. For instance, if for centuries son preference has promoted fertility, nowadays, when the fertility rate has been below replacement for the recent decade, son preference has become one of the very factors that contribute to the reduction of fertility.



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Such controversial interconnection is apparent also between fertility and participation of women in labour-force. Female labour-force participation in poor, agrarian societies is high, because agricultural activities and family duties are largely compatible. Employment in agriculture does not make childcare and work incompatible. However, parallel to industrial development and urbanization, labour-force participation of women in middle-income countries tends to decline at first, whereas in developed countries, it tends to rise again together with the development of the service sector and women's educational attainment level. Generally, relations between fertility and female participation in labour-force can be either direct or obverse. For instance, contracted job outside home, including all kinds of jobs, except family business; paid jobs in the formal sector of economy; regular, full-time, permanent and guaranteed jobs; fixed working hours; jobs requiring frequent mobility; and quality jobs with prospects of career advancement require dedication. Such jobs may decrease incompatibility of women's various roles, may promote both their social and family status, including their decision-making power regarding reproduction. Such jobs will allow women to increase their economic and financial independence. Having access to such jobs will promote both their work and maternity functions; and will provide benefits and satisfaction from both their employment and having children.

Meanwhile, the evidence from developed industrial countries shows that women's participation in labour-force may result in continuous decline of fertility due to several factors. For instance, it keeps declining, when the conflict between women's employment and their reproductive roles significantly increases the cost of the alternative to having children. It does so, when there is limited availability of child rearing facilities and corresponding support services, whereas clearly women's economic activities are restricted when she cannot ensure the quality and duration of her child's care. When women's non-participation in the labour-force because of the need to tend to the child implies expensive costs; fertility declines. When women's career advancement happens before marriage, and thus results in advancing the age of first marriage and first pregnancy, it declines.

The causal relations are obvious: if in the result of increase in the fertility rate, the female participation in labour-force decreases, or when increasing female participation in labour-force results in declining fertility rates, the work and family roles in economy and society become largely incompatible. However, when increasing female participation in labour-force contributes to increasing fertility, there must be a clear social feedback to the resulting challenges, and this implies a change in public opinion regarding the role of mothers in workplace. This, subsequently, makes it considerably easier for women to go back to work after childbirth.

Relevant discussions in the regions of Armenia reveal that what really matters in reproductive decisions is the breach between perceptions, standards and aspirations for prosperity on one hand, and the opportunities to provide for those standards and aspiration in the present and future, on the other. Since prosperity standards have become significantly higher, while opportunities to ensure achievement of these standards have become meagre, it is practically impossible to bridge this gap, relying on the previous family model with one breadwinner, even if the breadwinner is a workaholic with a very high income.

**Clear Factors; Non-Linear Relations,  
Visible Impact: Usefulness and  
Uselessness of International Experience**

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Efforts to increase fertility in developed countries with sub-replacement fertility rate have been successful only where increase in the prosperity level has corresponded to the increase of female participation in labour-force, at the same time ensuring a possibility to combine work and childcare. Policy instruments to ensure such a possibility target parental care; childcare facilities; regulation of working hours and include, but are not limited to direct monetary benefits addressed to families with children; childcare benefits; subsidization of childcare facilities; and parental leave. Facts, evidence

and evaluations of the effectiveness and impact of these instruments on fertility and female participation in labour-force are numerous, and sometimes rather controversial. It certainly depends on the social-economic and cultural context of a given country, the policy targets and coverage, the quality of relevant services, the duration and dates when the policy is implemented and a number of other factors. Still, all tend to agree on one thing: a concerted use of these instruments is essential. Therefore, though reflections on the unequivocal impact of any these instruments applied singly are fruitless, it is still possible to discuss the unique features and factors of their influence in isolation.

To promote women's participation in labour-force, most countries provide direct financial benefits, including childcare benefits, to mothers of children that have reached the age of three or are of pre-school age. Some research show that general childcare benefits, which are not directly conditioned by the factor of women's employment, to some extent still tend to positively affect fertility. However, the causal relations between subsidization of childcare facilities and the number of children born to families is less clear. For instance, recent research in Spain shows that partial tax refund of working mothers and introduction of tax reduction for all households with children has positively affected both fertility and women's participation on labour-force. Research findings demonstrate also that childcare benefits provided to working mothers have a significant positive impact on women's employment, and contribute to a considerable increase of fertility rate among women with higher levels of educational attainment.

### **Social Support and Fertility Policy: It Is Not "Either...Or", but "Both...And"**

Currently, in Armenia childcare benefits for children up to two years of age can be claimed only by mothers with a previous work experience and in maternity leave. Since January 1, 2016, mothers with no work experience are considered eligible as well. However, mothers who take care of children up to two, and go back to work after a temporary unemployment – a pregnancy and childbirth-related leave – do not get any subsidiaries for childcare. Such a policy is perhaps clearly perceived and justified in terms of social support. However, in terms of preventing declining fertility and promoting female participation in labour-force, it is rather controversial.

Taking into account all the above-mentioned, it is recommended that the state subsidy for childcare for children up to two years of age be directed towards promotion of fertility and female participation on labour-force. Specifically, it is recommended that a childcare benefit worth the minimal monthly salary be provided to working mothers of children up to two years of age after children reach six months of age. Working mothers of children up to two years of age who are on maternity leave are recommended to get a benefit worth a certain proportion of the minimal salary, which should not be less, than the current benefit - AMD18,000. It is also recommended to maintain the currently defined childcare benefit for non-working mothers of children up to two years of age, introduced on January 1, 2016. These recommendations will increase the expenditures from the state budget by an additional AMD 4.5-5 billion annually, and based on the evidence from the international experience, it will positively influence both fertility and women's participation in labour-force.

Certainly, it is necessary to consider other policy instruments mentioned about, including subsidy of childcare institutions, and the need for care of children under three years of age, availability and accessibility of such institutions, quality of such services, duration and flexibility of care hours. Moreover, there are other influential factors, which can either restrict or multiply the impact of the recommended policy, such as perceptions regarding employment in various sectors of the economy, the quality of female workforce to enter and satisfy employment requirements, as well perceptions about gender roles in the society and families, and of the work of working mothers. In this regard, it

is important to provide subsidy within public programmes for professional development and requalification of non-working mothers, to work with employees and to raise public awareness.

*The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the off-the-record round table “Public policy initiatives targeting prevention of sex-selective abortions in Armenia”, which took place on November 30, 2015. Independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of international organizations attended the discussion. The round table was organized within the framework of the project “Combating Gender-Biased Sex Selection in Armenia”, funded by the European Union.*

