

Starting A Family: Views And Trends Among Young Romanians

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify current opinions, views, attitudes and trends among young Romanians regarding marriage and parenting and their relationship with other important aspects of their lives such as career. The research included a sample of 108 students of a Romanian university. Research methodology consisted of a questionnaire specially built for the purposes of this study, “The Opinions and Attitudes Regarding Marriage and Parenting Survey.” We found that the desired age at marriage and at first birth were quite advanced, whereas the age of sexual initiation was, on average, much younger. Other results regarded the tolerance to family interference, the attitude towards the relation between marriage and career, towards marriage and alternatives to it, as well as towards children and unintended pregnancy. We concluded that the results mainly confirmed the existing global trends of postponing marriage and childbirth and that gender differences in attitude had become less significant.

Keywords: age at first birth, age at marriage, age at sexual initiation, number of sexual partners, attitudes towards marriage, attitudes towards parenting, gender role stereotypes

1. Overview

After 1989, Romania has begun to face major social, cultural, political and economic changes. While family remains a relatively conservative environment that generally tries to perpetuate traditional values regarding family and parenting, school has gradually changed the values it promotes, and media allowed the influence of the American culture – which often conflicts with Romanian traditional values – to enter and, finally, to dominate. In the spirit of democracy, lifestyles once considered unacceptable (such as consensual union, sexual encounters, same-sex union or even marriage, etc.) are now accepted as alternatives to marriage. By promoting the importance of career and independent achievements, market economy determined the act of starting a family to be postponed more and more, and the increasingly higher standards in terms of economical and social status, as well as in terms of physical appearance and sexual “performance,” made the process of choosing a partner even more difficult. Therefore, the last decades have brought an increase in the age at first marriage and in celibacy rate, in spite of the decrease in the age of sexual initiation. Moreover, the current economic crisis makes young people focus on the necessity of obtaining a stable job and an income that would ensure a decent living to the future family. Significant changes in the young Romanians’ conceptions and attitudes are therefore expected.

The Romanian family goes through a process of overturning traditional values, democratization, secularization and liberalization (Mihăilescu, 2000, as cited in Popescu, 2007, according to Robu, 2008). Money is probably the most important issue for young couples, still economically dependent on the family of origin (Robu, 2008). In this context, in the last decades, there is a progressive increase of the distance in time between sexual initiation, marriage and birth of the first child, due mainly to a mentality that separates sexual life from the context of marriage. This phenomenon has been noticed mainly among women, which almost equaled the average age of sexual initiation of men (De Sandre et al, 2000; Dalla Zuanna, 2005, according to MMT, 2005). As main recent trends, the following are mentioned:

- The marriage rate has decreased;
- The age at first marriage has increased;
- The divorce rate has increased;
- The frequency of cohabitation has increased;
- Fertility rate has decreased;
- The age at first birth has increased;
- The proportion of children born outside marriage has increased;
- The proportion of professional activity of women has increased at the expense of domestic work (MMT, 2005).

In the last decade, in Romania, the fertility rate has constantly been placed at around 1.3 children/woman (well below the 2.1 that would ensure generational replacement) (ibid.). Turliuc (2012) spoke of a “lifestyle without descendants” as a result of people moving their attention from the needs of their offspring toward their needs as adults (e.g. desire for independence and professional achievement).

In pluralistic societies there are a variety of ways of living together. About the traditional marriage, Turliuc (2012) states it has two psychosocial dimensions: a public one (what “can be seen”) and a private one (the “backstage” of it). Both dimensions entail compliance with social norms regarding marriage along with the married couple choosing their their own particular path. Regarding the legal aspect, the distinctive features of marriage would be, according to Lușan (2001, as cited Turliuc, 2012):

- It is a union between a man and a woman;
- It is freely chosen;
- It is monogamous;
- It is solemn;
- It is civil;
- It is supposed to be lifelong;
- It is based on the full equality of rights between men and women;
- Its purpose is starting a family.

From a psychological perspective, however, emphasizes Turliuc, marriage goes beyond these formal aspects, involving mutual accommodation and the formation of a new identity, of the couple as a unit. Maybe for this reason, because of the awareness of the major psychological impact of marriage on personality, resulted in the increasingly "realistic" answers of young people to the question “How marriage changes the lives of women and men?” (Kersten and Kersten, 1981, as cited Turliuc, 2012), alternatives to marriage are gaining more and more ground. Consensual union, considers Turliuc (2012), constitutes a reaction to the restrictive rules of the society, providing an intimate relational context with a focus on the quality of the relationship at the expense of its

duration. Intimacy of an authentic love relationship, as individuals who live in consensual unions see it, must not allow interference of the state. Celibacy has also become more common in the same context of individualism and of the pronounced need for socio-professional affirmation. Alternatives such as homosexual unions are still sufficiently controversial, yet their acceptance by society increased.

On the other hand, with the lowering interest in marriage, the age of sexual initiation is also lowering. A study carried out by Krauss et al. (2012) in eleven European countries showed that nearly half of the adolescents aged 15-19 had ever had sexual intercourse (the frequency was higher in males than in females). The study revealed that the age of sexual initiation was usually placed near the lower limit of the mentioned age interval. Moreover, in Germany, for example, the average age of sexual initiation was 14.5 for girls and 12.6 for boys. The authors highlighted the fact that the general decrease in the age of sexual initiation over the last decades was much more significant for boys than for girls.

2. Purpose

This research aims to verify the validity of studies conducted to date on this subject, by investigating the following aspects: the ages considered ideal for marriage and first birth, the desired number of children, the age of sexual initiation and the attitude towards premarital sex and alternatives to marriage, the reaction in case of a possible unwanted pregnancy, the attitude towards the relationship between family and career, etc.

3. Research methodology

For the purposes of this study, we have created and used *The Opinions and Attitudes Regarding Marriage and Parenting Survey* (see Appendix 1). The instrument contains 21 open-ended, closed-ended and combined items. The items cover:

- The age considered optimal for marriage;
- The financial situation perceived as minimal for a person to consider marriage;
- The time sequence perceived as normal for career and marriage and the importance given to marriage in relation to career;
- Perceptions on consensual union and on the differences between it and marriage;
- The attitude towards premarital sex;
- The expected impact of marriage on life;
- The presence of pressure from the family towards marriage and the attitude towards such pressure;
- The perception on the most advantageous and least advantageous option among marriage and some alternatives to it, as well as the justification of the choices made;
- The age of sexual initiation and the number of sexual partners;
- The age considered optimal for the birth of the first child and the age range outside which the respondents considered that having a child would not be indicated;
- Desired number of children;
- The justifications perceived as valid for a person to not want a child;
- The reaction to a possible unwanted pregnancy.

The research was conducted on a sample of 108 students of the “Ovidius” University of Constanța, aged between 19 and 23 years, 60 women and 48 men (convenience sampling). Participants were asked to self-administer the questionnaire anonymously, without time limits.

4. Research results

The first item referred to the age perceived as optimal for marriage. The result was an average of 26.47 years for women and 28.56 years for men. The overall average was 27.43 years. The z-test was used to measure the difference between men and women was significant ($z = 4.06$, $p < 0.01$).

For item 2, the average income considered necessary for starting a family was 1664.71 RON (495.88 USD) for women and 1680 RON (500.43 USD) for men (the overall average being 1671.88 RON (498.01 USD)).

The results for items 3-7 are summarized in the table below. Written in bold are the maximum frequency values of the answers for each item, for both sub-samples (F – women and M – men), as well as for the entire sample (T- total).

Table 1. The answers to the items 3-7

	Totally agree (%)			Agree (%)			Disagree (%)			Totally disagree (%)		
	F	M	T	F	M	T	F	M	T	F	M	T
I believe people should make a career before considering marriage.	60	62.5	61.1	25	25	25	15	6.3	11.1	0	6.3	2.8
I could accept being unmarried if I had a successful career.	5	18.8	11.1	20	18.8	19.4	60	18.8	52.8	15	43.8	16.7
Consensual union involves fewer obligations than marriage.	5	12.5	8.3	55	56.3	55.6	25	18.8	22.2	15	12.5	13.9
Marriage involves more faithfulness to the partner than consensual union.	15	31.2	22.2	20	43.8	30.6	50	6.3	30.6	15	18.8	16.7
Marrying before sexual initiation is absurd.	5	31.3	16.7	35	6.3	22.2	35	43.8	38.9	25	18.8	22.2

We note that participants strongly agreed to the idea that making a career should precede marriage, but not substitute it. Another observation is that, despite the fact that both sexes seemed to regard consensual union as involving fewer obligations than marriage, women didn't agree to the idea that it allowed you to be less faithful. As for the statement “Marrying before sexual initiation is absurd,” opinions were divided.

As shown in the figure below, consensual union is regarded by both sexes mainly as a necessary means of knowing your partner before marriage, therefore as a preliminary stage of marriage.

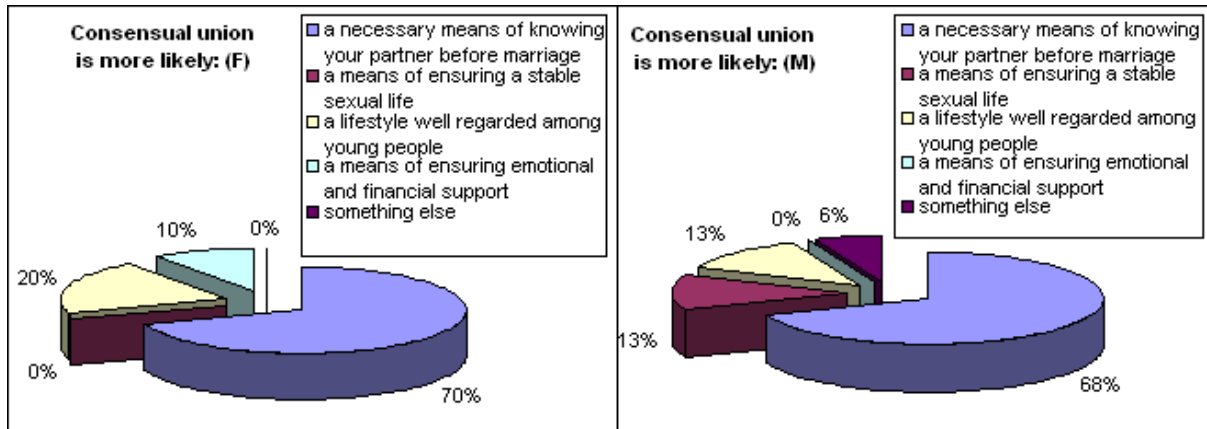


Figure 1. Distribution of the answers to item 8

Item 9 referred to the expected impact of marriage on life. As shown in figure 2, most of the respondents, regardless of gender, perceive marriage as a major event with profound implications:

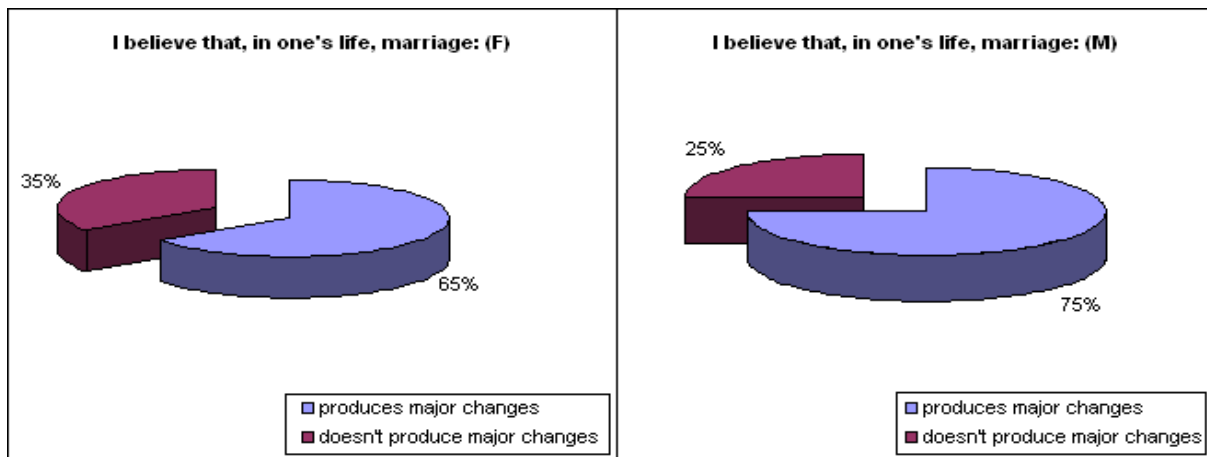


Figure 2. Distribution of the answers to item 9

The great majority of the participants denied the existence of family pressure on them to get married. Secondly, most respondents stated that they considered this kind of interference unacceptable (see figure 3).

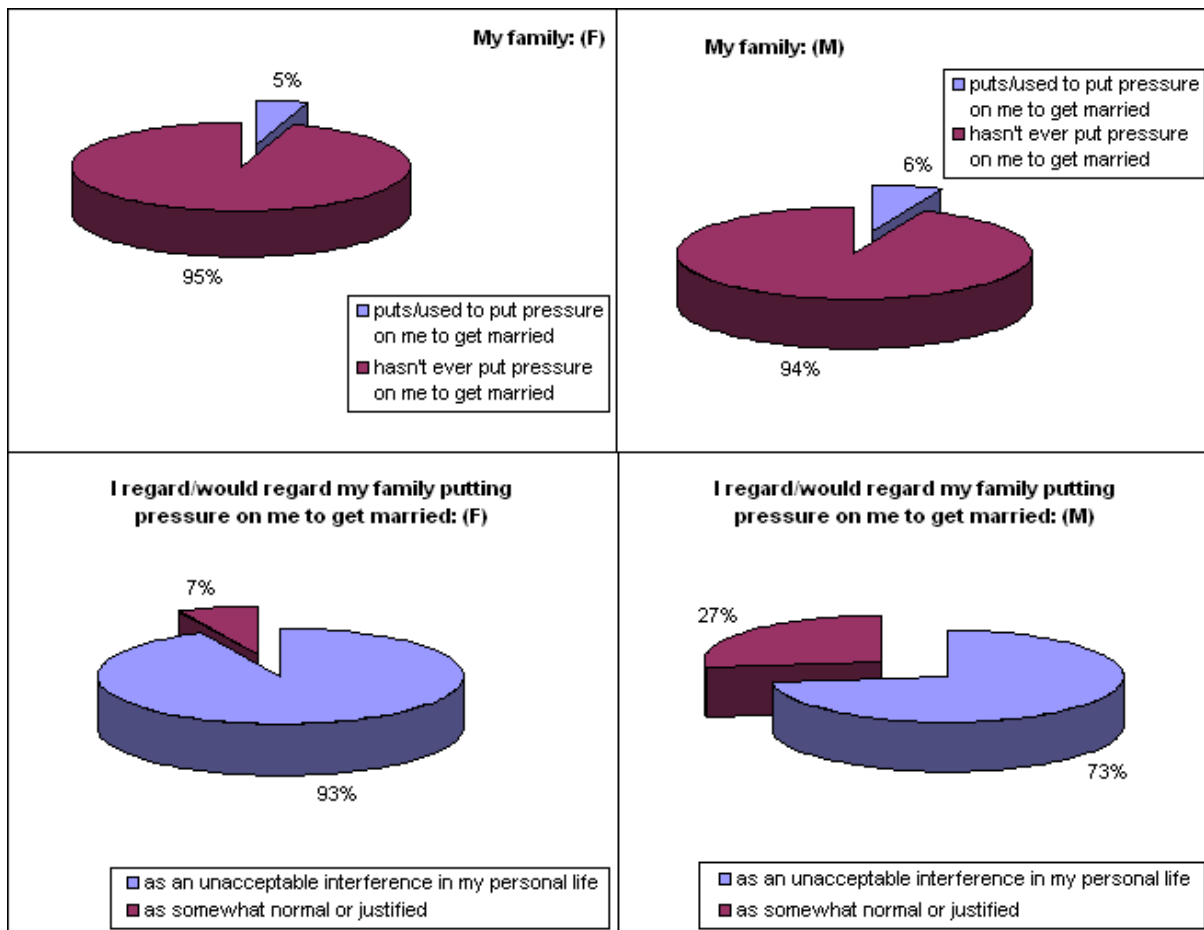


Figure 3. Distribution of the answers to items 10-11

The most advantageous variant of cohabitation was considered consensual union. For both sexes, the second most frequent option was marriage (see figure 4).

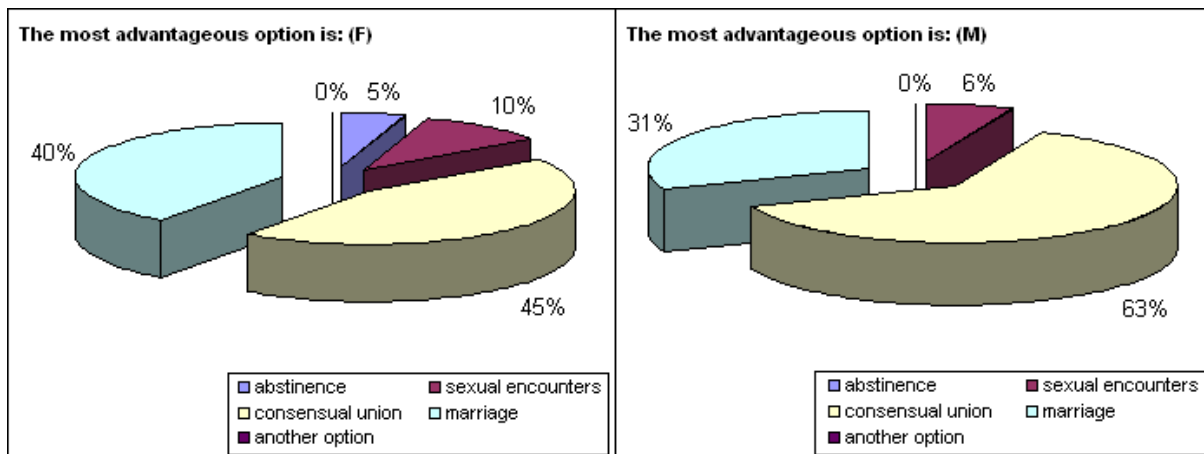


Figure 4. Distribution of the answers to item 12

Participants justified their option as follows:

- Among those who chose consensual union, the most frequent arguments were that it involved fewer obligations, but allowed you to know your partner better and could be regarded as a

- training for married life. Some men insisted on the advantage of safety and hygiene, as opposed to sexual encounters;
- Marriage was perceived by those who opted for it as involving the greatest emotional and financial stability and support and as providing a normal and peaceful lifestyle;
 - Women who chose sexual encounters based their decision on the lack of involvement this lifestyle provided; men who chose sexual encounters didn't justify their option;
 - Participants who chose abstinence didn't justify their option.

As a conclusion, most arguments in favor of consensual union focused on the lack of obligations and the better knowledge of the partner before marriage, whereas most arguments in favor of marriage included financial and/or emotional stability and security. In another train of thoughts, we note that women who chose consensual union tended to relate it to marriage, whereas men related it to more to sexual encounters, by referring to sexually transmitted diseases. Responses largely confirmed the percentages from item 5.

Figure 5 shows the answers regarding the most disadvantageous option in the participants' opinion. Overall, abstinence gathered the most rejections, leading the top of rejections for the subsample of men, but not for the subsample of women who, in their majority, considered sexual encounters as the least favorable option.

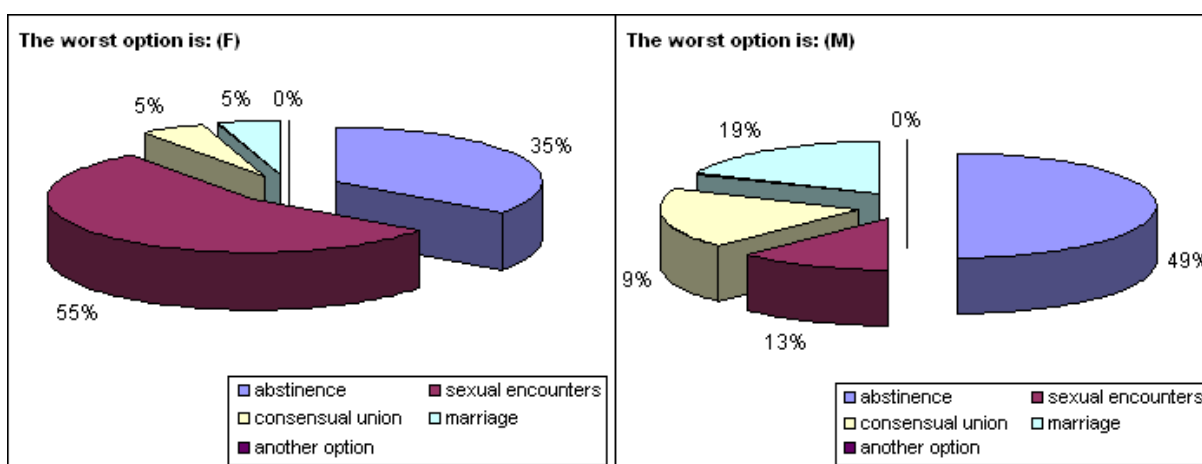


Figure 5. Distribution of the answers to item 14

- Participants justified their option as follows:
- Women who chose abstinence as the most disadvantageous option declared they saw sexual life as healthy and necessary, whereas men argued that abstinence was strange, prevented you from “enjoying the pleasures of life” and from satisfying your partner at marriage;
 - Women who chose sexual encounters stated that they were immoral and women who had this kind of relationships were disfavoured by society; other answers were that they were unhealthy, involved trouble and they were against the respondents' moral principles; as for men, they simply stated it didn't provide stability;
 - Participants who chose consensual union didn't justify their option;
 - Women who chose marriage didn't justify their option; men argued that it represented a waste of time and money, it was stressful and seemed more like business than an emotional relationship, or that the model of their parents' married life dissuaded them from wanting a similar experience.

We note that most of the women who considered sexual encounters the most disadvantageous option referred primarily to the moral and rarely to the medical aspect. This can indicate the persistence of gender role stereotypes.

Least than half of the participants declared they had had at least one sexual partner (see figure 6). The difference between men and women from this point of view was insignificant (chi-square 1.08, $p > 0.10$). The age of sexual initiation was on average 17.62 years for women and 16 years for men. The age difference, measured with Student's t-test was also significant ($t = 2.9$, $p < 0.01$). The average declared number of sexual partners up to the date of the survey was 0.93 for women and 3.09 for men.

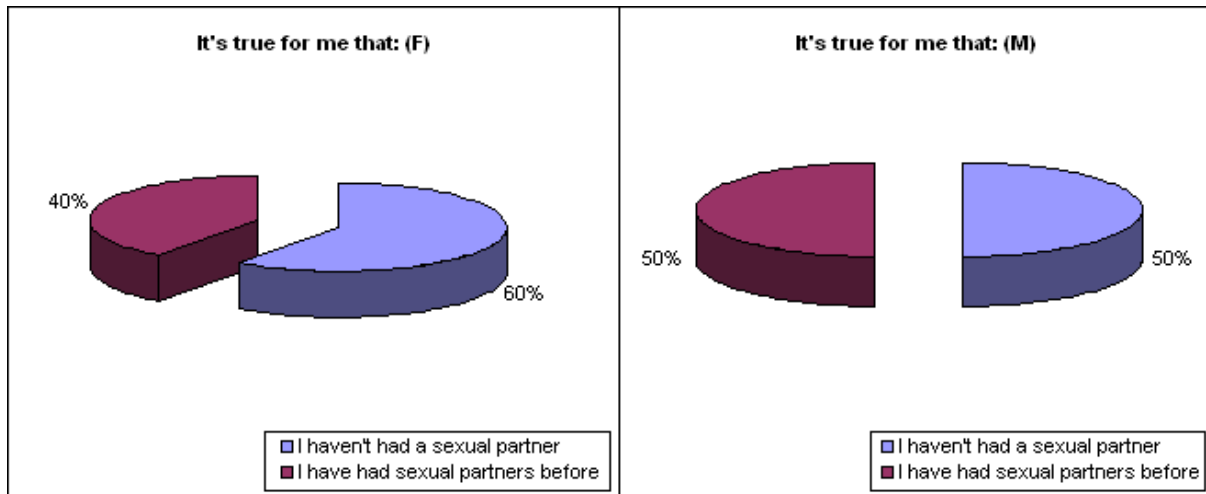


Figure 6. Distribution of the answers to item 16

For item 17, the age considered optimal for the birth of the first child was, on average, 27.68 years for the subsample of women and 28.5 for the subsample of men (28 years overall). The difference between the optimal age chosen by women and the optimal age according to the men was not significant: $z = 1.4$, $p > 0.05$. Among the participants that declared themselves sexually active, the average age considered optimal for the birth of the first child was significantly ($z = 2.58$, $p < 0.01$) smaller: 27.38 years, compared to 28.67 for the participants that were not sexually active. We mention here that, for the age considered optimal for marriage, there was no significant difference between the sexually active participants and the others ($z = 0.39$, $p > 0.05$).

For item 18, women considered ages below an average of 21.89 years or above an average of 38.15 years improper for having a child; men set the inferior limit to an average of 22.92 and the superior limit to an average of 37.69 (resulting in an overall average of 22.31 for the inferior limit and 37.97 for the superior one).

For item 19, the desired number of children was on average 2 for women and 2.33 for men (2.14 as an overall average).

The responses for item 20 are shown in figure 7. The most widely accepted reasons for a person to not want a child were the possibility of a genetic disease in the child and the precarious financial situation, for women in this order and for men in reverse order.

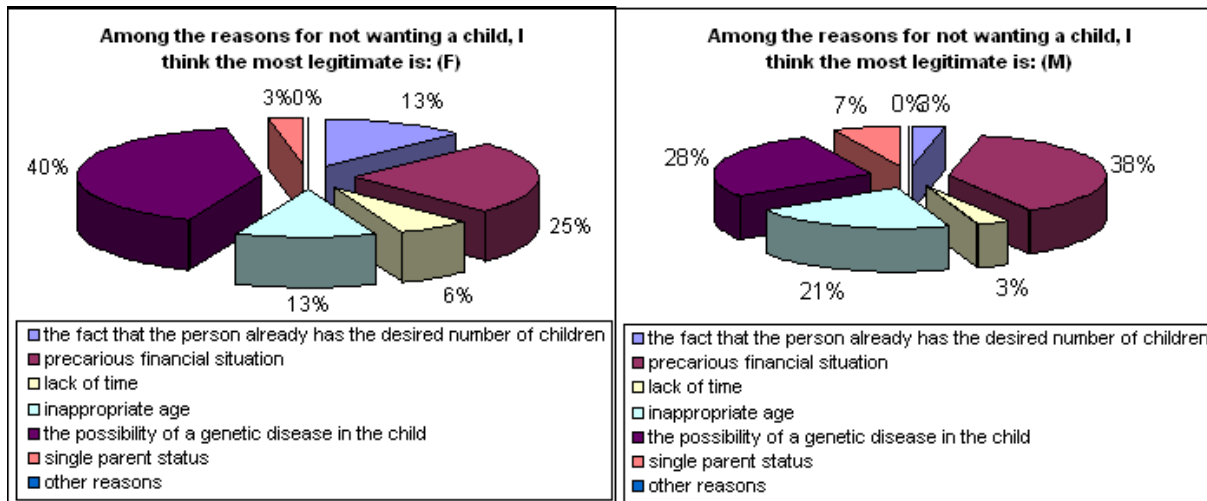


Figure 7. Distribution of the answers to item 20

Finally, for item 21, most respondents of both sexes declared that they would try to raise by themselves a possible unwanted child. However, as it can be noted by analyzing figure 8, a relatively significant percentage of the subsample of men considered abortion or giving the child up for adoption as the best solution.

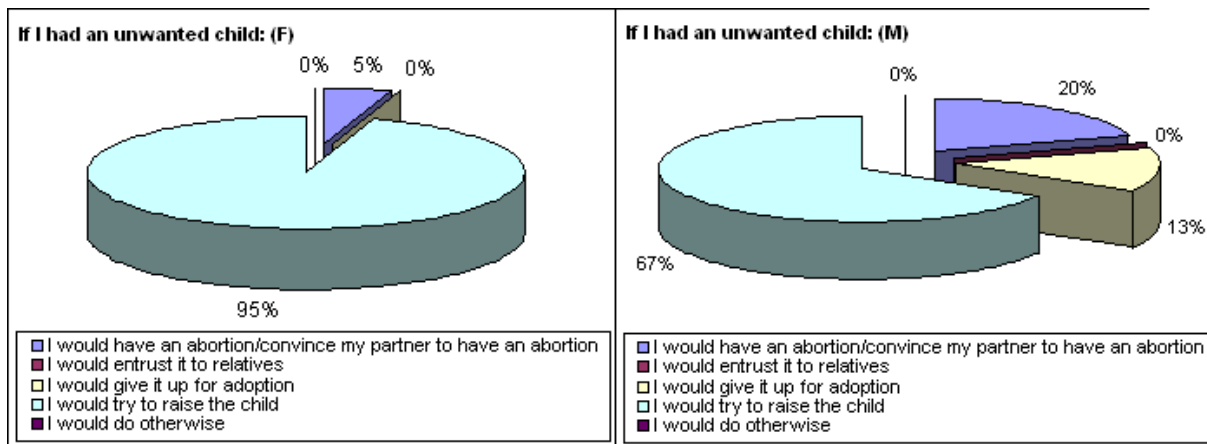


Figure 8. Distribution of the answers to item 21

5. Conclusions

From the present research it results that alternatives to marriage have gained in popularity, especially consensual union, that surpasses marriage among the preferences of both sexes. However, the participants' responses indicate that it is rather a preliminary stage of marriage, so it does not substitute it. Overall, women's responses were similar to men's except some small predictable differences. For example, men had begun their sexual life earlier, had had an average number of sexual partners more than 3 times bigger than women's, preferred to marry and have children at an older age, and seemed to attribute a more pronounced sense of freedom to consensual union, while women's expectations towards consensual union were close to their expectations from marriage. In addition, we note that, in the case of women, moral reservations regarding sexual encounters persist. We also note that, while the overall average age considered optimal for first childbirth is approximately equal to the average age considered optimal for marriage, women's ideal age for first childbirth is older than the one for marriage. This suggests that women still tend to

want the legitimacy of their offspring ensured. Otherwise, the respondents' tolerance to the interference from the family of origin and their attitudes towards marriage and alternatives to it, as well as towards children and unintended pregnancies didn't seem to depend on the respondents' gender. We believe that, overall, these relatively minor differences between men's and women's responses may indicate an attenuation of gender stereotypes. It is worrying that, as previous research showed, the average age of sexual initiation is young (below 17 years) and placed a long distance away from the age considered optimal for marriage (over 26 years for the sexually active participants and over 27 years overall). Another concern is the average income deemed necessary for starting a family, that exceeds the average net salary in Romania (1611 RON / 479.88 USD in May 2013), let alone the minimum. As for the positive aspects, the desired number of children is situated at a satisfactory rate of 2.14, higher than the 2.1 needed for generational replacement. Equally encouraging is the (at least claimed) willingness to assume responsibility for raising an unwanted child. In general, we believe that the results of this study confirm the trends identified by previous research on Romanian population.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

The Opinions and Attitudes Regarding Marriage and Parenting Survey

This is a questionnaire targeting your opinions and attitudes towards marriage and parenting. For the sentence completion questions, please write your answer over the ellipses; for the multiple choice questions, please check the answer that you find most suitable.

Thank you!

Age: **years**

Gender: M F

1. I believe that the most appropriate age for marriage is years.
2. I believe that one should not marry if one's monthly income is less than RON.

	Totally agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Totally disagree (%)
3. I believe people should make a career before considering marriage.				
4. I could accept being unmarried if I had a successful career.				
5. Consensual union involves fewer obligations than marriage.				
6. Marriage involves more faithfulness to the partner than consensual union.				
7. Marrying before sexual initiation is absurd.				

8. Consensual union is more likely:

- a necessary means of knowing your partner before marriage
- a means of ensuring a stable sexual life
- a lifestyle well regarded among young people
- a means of ensuring emotional and financial support
- something else, namely:

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9. I believe that, in one's life, marriage:

- produces major changes
- doesn't produce major changes

10. My family:

- puts/used to put pressure on me to get married
- hasn't ever put pressure on me to get married

11. I regard/would regard my family putting pressure on me to get married:

- as an unacceptable interference in my personal life
- as somewhat normal or justified

12. The most advantageous option is:

- abstinence
- sexual encounters
- consensual union
- marriage
- other option, namely:

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13. I believe that the variant chosen in the previous question is the most advantageous because:

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14. The worst option is:

- abstinence
- sexual encounters
- consensual union
- marriage
- other option, namely:

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15. I believe that the variant chosen in the previous question is the most disadvantageous because:

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16. It's true for me that:

- I haven't had a sexual partner
- I have had a number of sexual partners so far, the first of which at the age of years

17. I believe that the most appropriate age for the birth of the first child is years.

18. I believe that one should not have children if one is younger than years or older than years.

19. I intend:

- to have a number of children
- not to have children.

20. Among the reasons for not wanting a child, I think the most legitimate is:

- the fact that the person already has the desired number of children
- a precarious financial situation
- lack of time
- inappropriate age
- the possibility of a genetic disease in the child
- the single parent status
- other reasons, such as:

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21. If I had an unwanted child:

- I would have an abortion/convince my partner to have an abortion
- I would entrust it to relatives
- I would give it up for adoption
- I would try to raise the child
- I would do otherwise, namely:

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