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Work–life: balance?
Tensions between care and paid work in the lives of Hungarian women

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Abstract

Based on theories of the relations of labor and care, as well as previous research on the past 30 years of gender inequalities in Hungary, the paper aims to interpret these results and further develop the existing knowledge on the situation of women and gender relations in Hungarian society in the context of the social, economic, and political transformations of the past 30 years while considering the intersecting mechanisms of employment, family and care policies from a gender perspective. In 2017 we conducted six focus group interviews with lower-class women across the country and a representative survey on a sample of 1,000 respondents (both men and women), that will provide the empirical data for the paper. One of the core findings of the research is the striking tension that women experience on the labor market in relation to their care responsibilities incl. elderly care, especially in low-income and working-class groups. The counter-interest of the employers concerning care for dependent family members was a recurrent topic brought up by the participants of our interviews as well as the lack of expectations towards state support and towards men in the share of care work.

Keywords: gender equality, work-life balance, female labor market participation, care work, elderly care, postsocialism, neoliberalism, class inequalities

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Introduction

The paper aims to further develop the existing knowledge on the situation of women and gender relations in Hungarian society in the context of the social, economic, and political transformations of the past 30 years while considering the intersecting mechanisms of employment, family and care policies from a gender perspective.

We will argue that changes in the political and economic landscape built up a gendered system in which inequalities between men and women remained a constitutive element, and class inequalities between women sharpened. In our analysis we will focus on the interplays between the productive and reproductive spheres, while bearing in mind that the separation of the two, just as in the case of the public/private distinction (Gal–Kligman 2000: 37–39, Adamik 1994: 147), is for analytical purposes only, as they are two interrelated domains.

In order to map the difficulties and obstacles confronting women in everyday life and their narrative about these, we conducted six focus group interviews all over Hungary with predominantly lower-class women, and a survey among men and women (see detailed methodology below). The major finding of both the qualitative and quantitative part consists in the huge tension between paid work and unpaid (care) work. While many previous studies highlighted the difficulties of combining family related activities (Neményi–Takács 2006), like childcare responsibilities with paid work in the case of Hungarian women, and analysed the tools of different "work-life balance" strategies (see e.g. Nagy et al. 2016, Nagy et al. 2018, Nagy 2017, Nagy–Paksi 2014), less attention has been paid to elderly care and to lower class women (for exceptions see Czibere 2012, Cukrowska–Kóczé 2013, Kóczé 2010, 2016). In our result, apart from children, the tension between caring for elderly parents and paid employment also emerged as a prominent issue. It was regularly mentioned that childcare problems were tolerated to a certain extent but that no one takes into account the care of the elderly. And all these tensions appeared even more significant among the lower classes. Besides the dominant emergence of the care crisis in both the focus group narratives as well as in the survey, another striking result was that women count neither on the state nor on men in the solution of these most pressing problems.

We aim at analyzing women's narratives concerning both the tensions between care responsibilities and paid work and their lack of trust in the state and men in the context of post-socialist Hungary, concentrating on the question how welfare policies, especially employment policies, family policies, and elderly-care policies affect the perceived tensions between care and paid work obligations of Hungarian women.

In what follows, we are attempting to build up an appropriate theoretical framework that is necessary for the understanding of these problems and to be able to correctly assess the narrative of the women. First, drawing on previous research, we briefly describe the post-transition period from a political economy and gender perspective, including its gender regime pre-2010, prior to the second Orbán government. Then with the help of the distinction between symbolic and pragmatic levels (Szikra 2018) of the gender regime of the post-2010 period we attempt to describe the contradiction of capital and care (Fraser 2016) as it is manifested in Hungary and the specificities of the Hungarian neoliberal gender regime (Walby 2011). The latter expects both productive and reproductive work of women while not touching men's gender expectations, limiting them to their role in the sphere of the economy called productive. After the theoretical part we set out the methodology and by analyzing our results we describe how the fact that the state does not assume responsibility in tackling the care deficit further compounds the tension of paid and unpaid work experienced by women. Due to the lack of state-provided services, this tension is especially harsh for those who cannot afford to buy it from (even lower class) other women on the market, exacerbating further societal disintegration and class inequalities, while providing a certain distorted emancipation (Uhde 2016) for certain groups of women. Then we conclude by describing how our results prove the limits of the framework of "work-life balance" (Lewis et al. 2007) and by suggesting how the contradictory family and employment policies of the current government will likely affect women.

Context in brief

A recent comprehensive summary about the most important trends of gender inequality in the Hungarian labor market showed that after the shocks of transition and later the global economic crisis, for both sexes the employment rates are increasing, mostly due to the public work; unemployment and inactivity rates are dropping, part-time employment rates increased, then recently declined, and remain low, but all the gaps between male and female rates remained remarkably constant in the last 30 years (Köllő 2018: 54–57). At the same time, while gender wage gaps decreased, especially in the female-dominated public sector, wage gaps between the public and private sector grew, mostly due to the austerity policies (see Szikra 2013), and worsened women's average income position well below the level of 1992 (Köllő 2018: 61). Unequal gender relations between the productive and reproductive spheres are usually illustrated by the differences in employment rates of women with and without children. Both the age of the youngest child and the number of children affect women's labor market participation: the more children a woman has and the younger the youngest child is, the lower the chance that she can find employment. Although differences in female employment rates linked to the number of children existed in state socialist times, too, the gap increased dramatically after the transition, especially because of the drop among women with three or more children (Frey 2002: 13–14). This pattern of a positive correlation between lower female employment rates and the number of small children continued in the 2000s as well, especially compared to men, where the opposite relationship occurs (Bukodi 2005: 38, Frey 2009: 37, Vajda 2014: 107–109, Gregor 2014: 74–77).

Elderly care, which is much less commonly discussed in the literature, is also gendered, and in a twofold way: first, because of the age distribution and health conditions- women live longer on the average, thus usually they are in a majority among care recipients- and second, because either professional or informal care work

is assigned to and done by women (Aczél–Gyarmati 2014, Tróbert 2015, Rubovszky 2017, Tátrai 2016). A recent study highlighted that Hungary faces a deepening crisis in elderly care: institutional care is rare, waiting lists are long, the number of professional care workers is declining, and only approximately 5 percent of family caretakers receive any cash subsidy (which in any case falls much below the standard of living) (Gyarmati 2019). In the Hungarian literature, there is also evidence that care responsibilities and providing care for elderly parents are one of the factors that leads to childlessness, as evidenced by interviews conducted on childless Hungarian women (Szalma–Takács 2014: 128).

Theoretical background and key concepts

Gendered and class effects of the economic transformation

We agree with Pascall and Kwak (2005: 1) that the post-1989 transition was not merely an economic and political restructuring. Both the transition and the continuous neoliberal transformation encompassed a change of welfare structures that transmitted its effects to gender relations within both the private and public sphere (Neményi–Takács 2006).

Previous research has highlighted that certain social groups of women were more, others less affected by the changes. Based on ethnographic research conducted in a Hungarian agro-town, Kovács and Váradi (2000) revealed that local women belonging to different social classes (elite, middle class of entrepreneurs and administrators, industrial manual workers) were not just affected differently by the economic changes. Upper- and middle-class women or those who were able to take part in the second economy (see Szalai 2000) had a vast network of economic, cultural and social capital, including the stability of their marriages. That could be mobilized in order to moderate the effect of the changes. However, female manual workers were not able to find any substitute for the security and support the factory provided them before its privatization. Other authors also highlighted the importance of structural position (Fodor 2001) and "revalued resources" (Fodor 1997) in terms of occupying specific revalued professions, for example, in the financial sector or foreign trade.

While during the transition many formerly informal tasks, like care done by women, have been marketized 'from below' and turned into formal occupations (Szalai 2000), such as social work, in the 2000s, especially after the crisis broke out in 2008, the opposite process occurred: women staying on lengthy parental leave, regardless of their educational level, engaged to informal, temporarily, precarious jobs and earning activity (Fodor–Kispéter 2014, Blaskó 2011a). Their decision was intensively shaped by rigid labor market mechanisms and constant discriminatory practices from the employers' side. The latter has been highlighted by other studies (e.g. Fodor–Glass 2011) pointing out that employers, even in multinational companies, rely on various types of specific strategies to lay off female employees, especially mothers with children.

All these findings support the thesis that during the transition emancipation through labor market participation was limited to certain women. This pattern, called 'distorted emancipation' (Uhde 2016), describes a situation where changing patterns in gender relations are fully available only to women who are in a privileged position, whether in terms of socio-economic, geopolitical, cultural or material conditions. In this sense, it also sheds light on inequalities within the group of women.

The contradiction of capital and care

In her seminal essay Nancy Fraser describes the crisis of care as an inherent contradiction of capitalism; however, it takes different forms in different varieties of capitalism. The basic contradiction resides in the fact that *„every form of capitalist society harbors a deep-seated social-reproductive 'crisis tendency' or contradiction: on the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies"* (Fraser 2016). She contends that *„[t]he care deficits we experience today are the form this contradiction takes in this third, most recent phase of capitalist development."*

She calls the recent stage of globalizing financialized capitalism. *„Globalizing and neoliberal, this regime promotes state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare, while recruiting women into the paid workforce—externalizing carework onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it. The result is a new, dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot, as some in the second category provide carework in return for (low) wages for those in the first"* (ibid.).

Critiques of "work-life balance" discourse touch upon this contradiction by highlighting the fact that the related policies promote the most easily available, and primarily individual solutions, like flexible work without questioning "the gendered nature of work or the constraints to individual choices" (Lewis et al. 2007: 369) Others reveal that "work-life balance" discourse, as part of a neoliberal project sets a certain goal for women to achieve and progress, and as such, shifts the focus from questions of social justice to a more apolitical terrain, namely the happy equilibrium (Rottenberg 2018: 42).

Neoliberalism and neoliberal gender regimes

Neoliberalism should be approached as a compound term based on three composite and interrelated elements. The term encompasses, first, an economic system relying on the idea of the free market, minimal state intervention, low taxes, minimal welfare state, and dominance of private property. Second, it encloses a political movement aiming at promoting the idea of the minimal state in order to liberalize competition but what it results in is a captured state, with the dominance of powerful transnational market actors over nation states curbing their sovereignty. Third, neoliberalism as a moral ideology shapes the life world of values actively and as such can be characterized by promoting individualism, individual responsibility, flexibility, effectiveness, and productivity within not just the public but also the private spheres, thus producing a special language in order to cover up social inequalities and injustice. Literature on neoliberalism in East-Central Europe already highlighted that the former Soviet block witnessed "the most radical form of the neoliberal project" (Jessop 2013: 70) in which Hungary became the "poster boy" (Fábry 2019: 73) of the transformation. We aim to show that while the "poster boy" image may have faded away, tensions behind this are still manifested remarkably in the lives of Hungarian women.

In order to describe the social, economic and political context in which our respondents grasp and perceive their problems as women, we apply Sylvia Walby's (2004, 2011) theory on the different types of gender

regimes. The term 'gender regime' refers not just to a set of rules and a particular type of governance aiming to influence gender relations in a given society, but rather to an interconnected system of different terrains like the economy and polity in which different institutional and interpersonal practices shape gender relations (Walby 2011: 7). According to Walby (2011:104–105), gender regimes can take different shapes, such as domestic and public forms, and within the public terrain, gender regimes can be placed between the two endpoints such as the neoliberal and social democratic types. We argue that the term neoliberal gender regime can be applied to pre- and post-2010 Hungary.

Neoliberal gender regimes can be characterized, besides the deregulation of trade, financial and market spheres, including labor market; weak protection of worker's rights, shrinking and limited welfare provisions and social services (workfare instead of welfare), and that social, educational and health sectors are underfinanced, also by the intention to increase the level of female employment rate; and at the same time, these regimes still rely on a traditional gender division of labor when it comes to care activities (children, elderly people, other family members) and household chores. Although women are expected to participate in the productive sphere, the area of reproduction remains their distinguished field of responsibility, and their unpaid work is also required there. Relying on unpaid reproductive work in the process of production and using its human resources, mostly women, is an essential element of neoliberal gender regimes. This tension between productive and reproductive spheres can be solved in different ways, and states with their gender and welfare policies play a crucial role in tuning the system. First, reproductive tasks can be facilitated to be shared with men. Besides this, reproductive activities can be either state provided, or outsourced to private providers on the care market or, in case these market actors are not present (yet), or in case they are, but cannot be afforded by all members of society to an equal degree, they remain in the domestic sphere and are assigned to women. A variant of this is the informal way of outsourcing: to lower class, ethnic or migrant women. This is what Zuzana Uhde describes, as briefly mentioned before, with the term distorted emancipation in the context of the care chains (Hochschild 2000): the emancipation of certain women is contingent on the inequality among women, and the possibility to outsource care work to other women is mostly informal and unregulated, in unequal settings. And for lower class women, who have no outsourcing opportunities, the lack of state provision leads to an extreme tension between the productive and reproductive spheres. We also would like to highlight that the Hungarian gender regime, while it assigns care activities primarily to women, carries a remarkable difference between childcare and care for the elderly in the way the state is involved and provides any help for the affected women. For example, Hungary spends proportionally close to six times more on supporting families with children compared to elderly care (Gyarmati 2019: 5).

Fodor and Kispéter (2014) claimed in the case of Hungarian mothers on extended parental leave that rigid labor market mechanisms combined with discriminatory practices structurally constrain the mother's economic possibilities. Hence, many of them resort to taking on underpaid, informal work during and after the parental leave. This practice stabilizes their role as the 'reserve army', while not questioning their primary role as care providers. Any time when economic processes need an enlarged workforce, through its employment, family, and gender policies, the government might target these women in order to channel them to the labor market. Given that ideologies of political stakeholders are tied to political or economic considerations (see

Neményi–Takács 2006), it presents no real contradiction that a discursively conservative government (conservative in the sense of assigning care work primarily to women) can incorporate women's paid work in their discourse.

Ideological vs pragmatic gender politics

Since the change of regime, while the basic structure of Hungarian family policies remained stable, changes of government and some differences in their mainstream political ideologies (Neményi–Takács 2006: 42) resulted in sharp turns (Darvas–Szikra 2017: 216). Darvas and Szikra (ibid.: 217) identify the following main targets of family policies that overarch the different cycles: pronatalism; maternalism; and strong interplay with employment policies. Dorottya Szikra (2018) describes the family policy of the governing party Fidesz's family policy since 2010 and aptly highlights the changes in its direction after 2014. While in Orbán's second term (2010–2014) discourse and policies were in line (conservative orientation), after 2014 one could observe a change in the sense of actively promoting women's labor market participation, in parallel with the shift from a welfare to a workfare model (Lakner–Tausz 2016). Conservativism was retained in the harsh class politics, including the selective pronatalism of the government and the ensuing policy measures, but concerning the gender regime, it advocates discursively a conservative model, while policy-wise takes women's paid employment for granted (Szikra 2018). That is important to keep in mind, because overemphasizing the discursive level of politics can lead to overlooking important changes (Kováts forthcoming). We contend that this change is contingent on the labor shortage and proves the ideological adaptability of the governing coalition, as well as the fact that assigning care work primarily to women can incorporate their paid labor participation. And if this is not accompanied by 1) the development of child and elderly care infrastructure 2) by assigning care work to men too, and 3) by changing the organization of paid labor through state intervention into employment practices and labor conditions, then this leads to commodification of care for those who can afford it (including growing inequalities among women), and exacerbated work-life tension for those who cannot.

Leitner's (2003) famous familialism-typology applies differently both if we consider symbolical vs pragmatic gender approaches, and if we consider the strong class politics of the governing coalition. Ideologically the government defends explicit familialism for the whole society, meaning assigning care to families, but in practice it applies more to the lower classes: Pragmatically it provides optional familialism for the better-off – where the options do not ensue from state infrastructure but from cash transfers towards the middle and upper classes and therefore more choice possibilities (incl. buying care from the market so that women can take part in the labor market, but also opting out from the labor market and reverting to a male-breadwinner model).

Interplays between structures and attitudes

In their study about the recursive explanatory model of values and decisions, Lesthaeghe and Moors (2000: 405) highlight that while value orientation might affect a decision, the former is also subject to change and adaptation in light of previous value orientations and structural changes during a lifetime. In this sense, when the structural condition of opinions changes, people can easily adapt their views and the values they share in order to conform.

Changes in the social and economic context we previously presented have made a mark on the way Hungarian public opinion has shaped its view on gender roles. Between 1988 and 1994 Hungarian public opinion became more accepting towards traditional gender roles and more inclined to the view that female labor market participation was harmful to children and family life. Also, female respondents tended to agree more than men (Tóth 1995). By 2002, the level of acceptance regarding the gendered division of labor had decreased (Blaskó 2006) and stabilized at a moderate level around 2009 (Pongráczné–S. Molnár 2011). In trying to explain these changes, both Tóth (1995) and Blaskó (2006: 24) highlighted the possible effect of labor market processes, namely that many women had lost their jobs during the transition and seemingly voluntarily chose to "escape" to the sphere of household and reproductive work. Consequently, this structurally forced collective survival strategy resulted in women adjusting their attitudes about gender division of labor and gender roles in order to justify their step.

One of the critical elements of the austerity intervention around the economic crisis of 2008/2009 by the Bajnai government, besides quite a few others that affected women negatively (Szikra 2013), was the shortening of the period of both the labor-related (GYED) and the universally available parental leave (GYES) by one year. Results of public opinion polls showed that wealthier respondents with a higher educational level, regardless of their political views, were more likely to accept these changes compared to those with a lower status (Blaskó 2011b: 37). This result is easy to interpret if we take the different labor market opportunities of these groups into account, especially in times of crisis. The restitution of the original period of payment by Fidesz-KDNP right after their election in 2010 was understood as part of its conservative family policy. However, this step might quickly meet the expectation and need of people living in severe material conditions. Other studies conducted on mothers of young children living in an economically developed and prosperous part of Hungary revealed that by having access to either formal or informal childcare women could more easily switch from parental leave to paid work, albeit mostly part-time work, during the economic crisis (Kispéter 2018). Although their basic ideas about gender roles reflected stable ideologies about the required division of labor between men and women, economic and labor market circumstances could bend their views in order to justify their decision about taking a new job.

One of the key elements of neoliberal restructuring is the reduction of state support for services aiming at socializing reproductive work. As part of this, during the 1990s and early 2000s not only did the availability of places in crèches drop in Hungary, but the quality of the services also weakened. By analyzing interviews with mothers staying on paid parental leave, Blaskó (2011a: 165–166) was able to demonstrate that the support of lengthy parental leave partly stems from dissatisfaction with crèche services. Mothers criticized crèches because of the low quality of service, the crowdedness of groups, and the high ratio of children per carer. Consequently, if mothers perceive crèches as unrealistic alternatives to staying at home with their child, this will reinforce their views about the need for lengthy leave.

In times of care deficit, the intensification of involvement of men in care work usually appears as a possible solution for the overburdening of women, which can liberate their time and capacity. Hence, changes in attitudes and expectations towards men's care-taking and domestic role in the family might indicate the situ-

ation of an intensification of structural tensions between care and production. The already existing literature describes a mixed landscape of attitudes. Among people between 20 and 44 years old, on the one hand, the ratio of those supporting family-oriented male roles over the main breadwinner role did not change remarkably between 2009 and 2016: while one fifth agrees with the former, 3 out of 10 requires the latter (Makai–Spéder 2018, 75). On the other hand, the same study also highlights that nearly half of this age group expect men to fulfill both tasks. Although this ratio dropped between 2009 and 2013, by 2016 it reached the level of 2009; thus, there is no linear tendency in the data. At the same time, the level of education has a significant impact on which pattern is supported more. Lower educated people require men to provide financial security for their families, while higher educated people emphasize the importance of the expressive and emotional contribution of men to family life (Spéder 2011: 224). Besides, while the support of part-time work in the case of a mother with small children became accepted in the public eye during the transition (Gregor 2017), studies revealed that in reality such work is mostly available to upper class women and companies construct it as a privilege that does not require structural changes in the organization (Oborni 2018).

Familism

The term familism refers both to an ideology and a state of society (Dupcsik–Tóth 2014). As an ideology, it encompasses attitudes and opinions that stress the importance of family, family ties, relations, and family obligations in a given society. As a social condition, it is characterized by a low level of trust in social institutions. Familism as a state of society and as an ideology reinforce each other. If the welfare and social structures of society weaken, social risks increase, and social institutions cannot provide a remedy for that, due to the lack of universal material safety net or solidarity net, then the value of family ties increases. In these cases, family replaces a universal and citizenship-based solidarity network and functions as an emotionally, materially, economically resourceful safety net. While on an individual level this can be interpreted as an increase in solidarity, it sheds more light on increasing inequalities from a macro level perspective (Takács 2017). Studies on changes in the personal network of Hungarians demonstrated that the average size of the social network based on core ties showed a decrease and dropped nearly by half between 1987 and 2015 (Kmetty et al. 2017: 237). A similar investigation also pointed out that during the 1990s, the proportion of family-ties has increased, meaning that the resourceful network of people did not just shrink but became limited almost exclusively to family-ties. Although in the 2000s, the proportion of non-kin ties has increased again, it has stabilized around 30 percent, well below the more than 50 percent rate of 1987 (Ibid: 238). Other studies also revealed that family and friends as sources of sense of security became more important during the transition period, while people's sense of security relied less on work at the same time (Dávid et al. 2016: 138–140). A recent analysis on the political characteristics of the Hungarian gender regime also pointed out that the policy-oriented form of familism, called familialism (Yang 2006: 15) plays a key role in the recent political transformation of the country (Grzebalska–Pető 2018: 167).

Methods

In order to answer our research questions and to increase the validity of our findings, we applied a mixed-method design in which we sought to combine and amalgamate the applied qualitative and quantitative research methods. According to the classification of Driscoll et al. (2007: 21) we used a sequential design in which qualitative focus group interviews did not just precede the quantitative survey phase sequentially, but also influenced the content of the questionnaire.

In the fall of 2017, we conducted six women-only focus group interviews with eight participants in each in the capital and in some selected towns in the countryside. In order to improve the validity of the qualitative pillar, we applied the method of spatial triangulation (Denzin 1978: 295) by paying attention to select towns from different regions of Hungary with different economic and social conditions and with possibly different experiences of the change of regime, EU-accession, the economic crisis and its aftermath. As a consequence, we decided to select two county capitals from the East, one middle-sized town from the Southwest and a similar sized from the Northwest. The selected towns with their District Development Index2 ranking (IEER 2016a) can be found in Table 1.

We intentionally targeted lower-educated women with limited financial and other resources for the focus groups because analysis of gender relations within lower class groups is still an under-researched area in the field of social studies, especially in those studies focusing on work-life balance issues. We did not filter the participants along their current status in the labor market. Some of the older respondents had already retired, while among younger participants some were on parental leave or were unemployed, but most had a job at that time. The final composition of the focus groups and the ranking of the locations along the District Development Index (DDI) can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Composition of the focus groups

Group number	Location (town)	Region	DDI rank of district (2014)	Age group of participants	Educational level	Subjective social status	Family status
1	Budapest	Budapest	2.	25-45	At least maturity exam	Average	Four singles, four singles with child(ren)
2	Budapest	Budapest	2.	45-70	At most vocational school	Below average	Four with spouse and without child(ren), four with a spouse with child(ren)
3	Szolnok	Northern Great Plain	39.	45-70	At most vocational school	Below average	Four singles, four singles with child(ren)
4	Miskolc	Northern Hungary	56.	25-45	At least maturity exam	Average	Four with spouse and without child(ren), four with a spouse with child(ren)
5	Dombóvár	Southern Transdanubia	96.	25-45	At most vocational school	Below average	Four with spouse and without child(ren), four with a spouse with child(ren)
6	Pápa	Central Transdanubia	69.	45-70	At least maturity exam	Average	Four singles, four singles with child(ren)

2 District Development Index ranking (IEER 2016a) is a composite index of 25 indicators and indicate the different level of development of Hungarian districts. About the detailed methodology see IEER 2016b.

During the focus groups the following topics were discussed: 1. Problems and difficulties in life in general 2. Female-specific problems 3. Possible sources of help and solutions 4. The role of politics or political parties in problem-solving 5. Future perspectives. Group discussions lasted for 90–120 minutes on average.

All of the focus groups were voice recorded and verbatim transcribed. Transcripts were later thematically coded and content analyzed by the authors by using MAXQDA. MAXQDA is a frequently used software for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CASQDA) in Social Sciences.

Partially based on the first results of the focus group interviews, a CAPI (computer assisted personal interviews) survey on a similar topic was conducted in December 2017, soon after the focus group discussions on a sample of 1,000 respondents over 18 years old and living in Hungary. The sample was representative of the Hungarian adult population along sex, age groups, type of settlement of residence and educational level. While focus groups were women-only, in the survey both male and female respondents were interviewed.

The focus group results influenced the content of the questionnaire by enlarging the detailed list of female-specific problems we wanted to survey separately. The focus groups also helped us to orient our view more in the direction of care-related problems, especially elderly care, and to design questions about them.

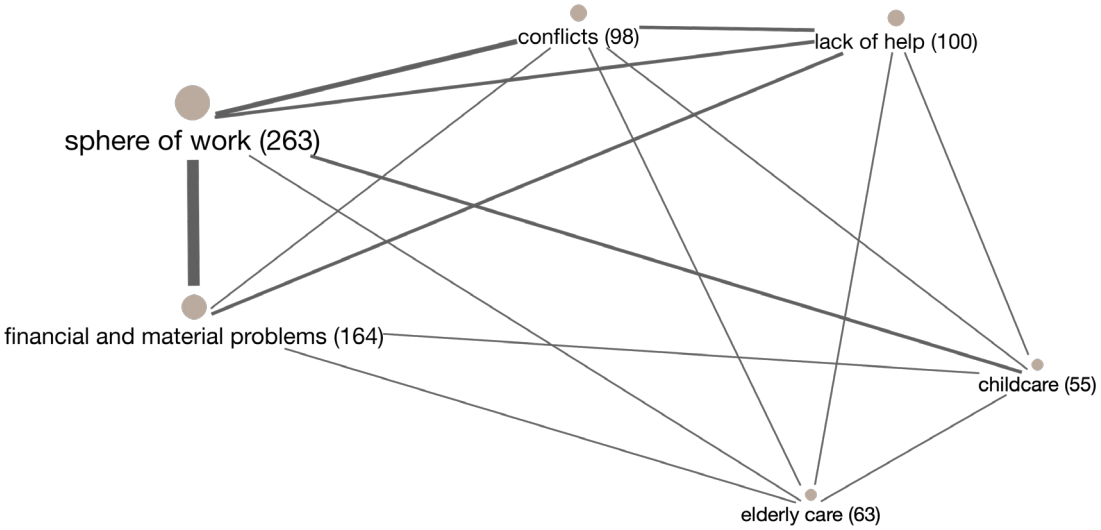
Results

Unsurprisingly, the leading topics mentioned in the focus groups were the sphere of work; material and financial struggles; different kinds of conflicts between social groups (e.g. conflicts with the employer, conflicts between rich and poor, conflicts over social resources and benefits); problems in health care; issues of care; and lack of help and support (e.g. no state help, sense of being left alone) in case of problems. Groups with participants having lower education and/or lower subjective status discussed the topics of material problems and lack of help to a greater extent compared to the others. Besides these general patterns, the lack of support emerged twice as frequently in non-Budapest locations than in groups in the capital. It also became clear that the perception of problems around care is influenced by age: in groups with elder respondents the topic of elderly care appeared six times as frequently as it did in younger groups.

The most common topics are interrelated, as Figure 1 illustrates the linkages. In order to see the relations of the two main types of care (childcare, elderly care) to the others, we use the two subcodes of “care” in the figure. Problems with health care associated weakly with all the others and instead stood as a separate topic. Hence, we decided to omit it from the code network analysis.

Financial and material problems are strongly related to the sphere of work, and their medium co-occurrence with the lack of help indicates the experience of being left alone with these problems. Conflicts are considerably associated with the sphere of work. Taking a look at the subcodes of both reveals that this relation is a result mostly of conflicts with employers in the process of returning after parental leave (see Glass–Fodor 2011, Fodor–Kispéter 2014, Fodor–Glass 2017, 2018) and also, to a lesser extent, to severe working conditions: exploitation and vulnerability.

Figure 1. Co-occurrence network of the most frequent codes based on all focus groups



Note: co-occurrence is measured as proximity of codes with a maximum distance of 1 paragraph. Strength of line represents the frequency of co-occurrence. Numbers in brackets display the frequency of the code. The size difference of labels illustrates the frequency of the codes. The figure was created by MAXQDA MAXMap.

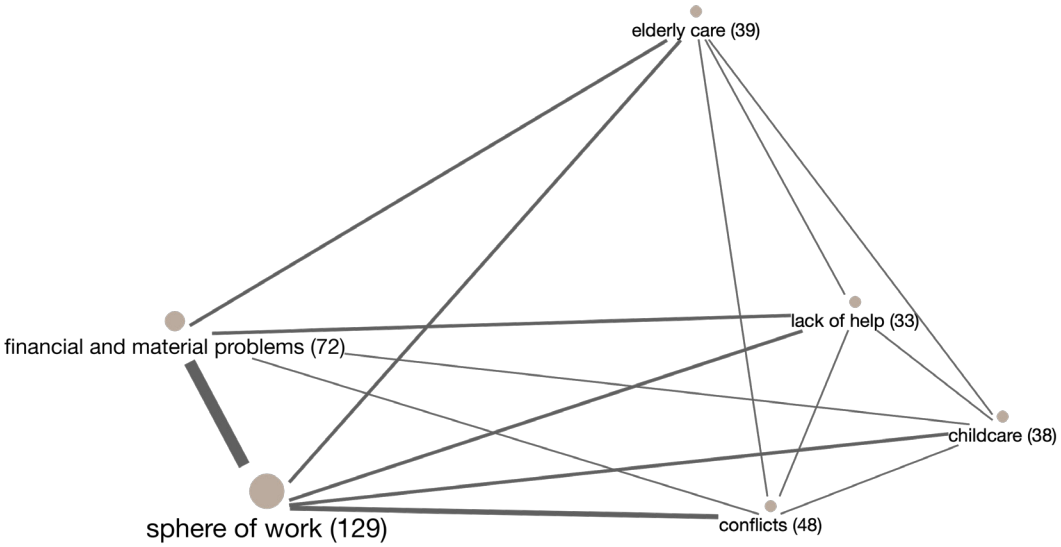
> *"It's unbearable and everyone is expecting that YOU create everything for yourself, create your own ideology, create everything and don't expect anything from anyone else. It's alright if you can survive this 65-year-long working shift, until then you are a slave, if you die of work, no one cares, so there is no attention to each other."* (Katalin, Budapest, above 45)

Although elderly care was less associated with the sphere of work, co-occurrence was due to the tensions between work and elderly care responsibilities of the participants. This conflicting relation has consequences for the financial situations of both the care giver and the care receiver. The following quotation illustrates not just these linkages, but also the hopelessness stemming from the lack of help:

> *„The other thing is to find a solution to the supervision of parents. Once they age, and we are employed full-time, or even with two full-time jobs, we should be supporting our parents, but we cannot because of our long shifts. Nor can we support them financially, when they are on meager pensions, because we ourselves just about reach the minimum wage, on which we survive from one month to the next."* (Anna, Pápa, above 45)

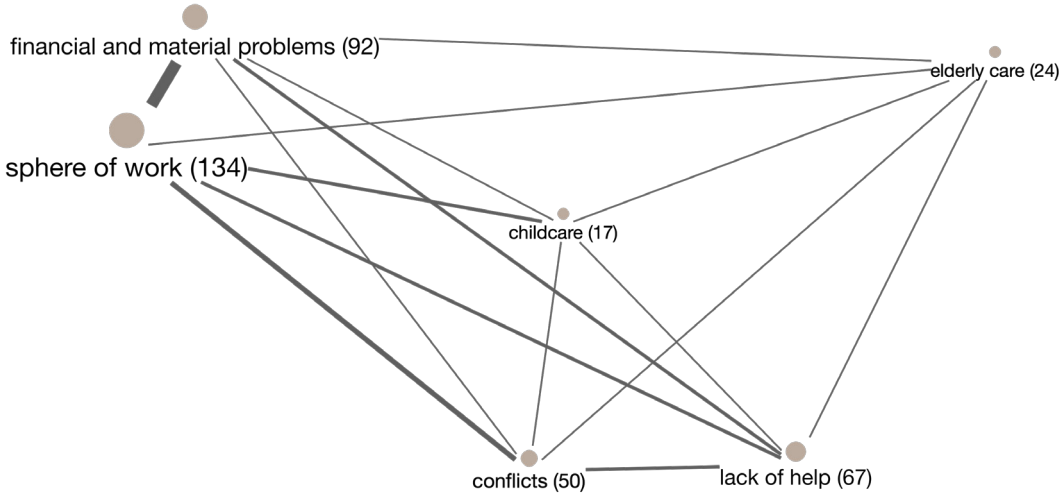
While participants of both the lower and higher educated groups strongly connected financial and material problems to the sphere of work, in some other associations the groups showed some differences as well (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). For example, the topic of elderly care emerged somewhat more frequently in the case of the higher educated group and was also connected rather more strongly to the abovementioned two main topics compared to its prevalence in lower educated groups. Higher educated women have a greater chance to be employed. Thus when they face an elderly family member in need, they might perceive the situation as more conflictual with working life. On the other hand, lower educated women talked twice as frequently about the lack of help as higher educated participants, and they also tied this theme more strongly to conflicts. This pattern shows us that lower educated women in a resource-weak environment are not simply struggling more with their needs, but these difficulties further damage the social network around them, resulting in even fewer possibilities of help.

Figure 2.
Co-occurrence network of the most frequent codes based on focus groups with higher educated participants



Note: see note of Figure 1.

Figure 3.
Co-occurrence network of the most frequent codes based on focus groups with lower educated participants



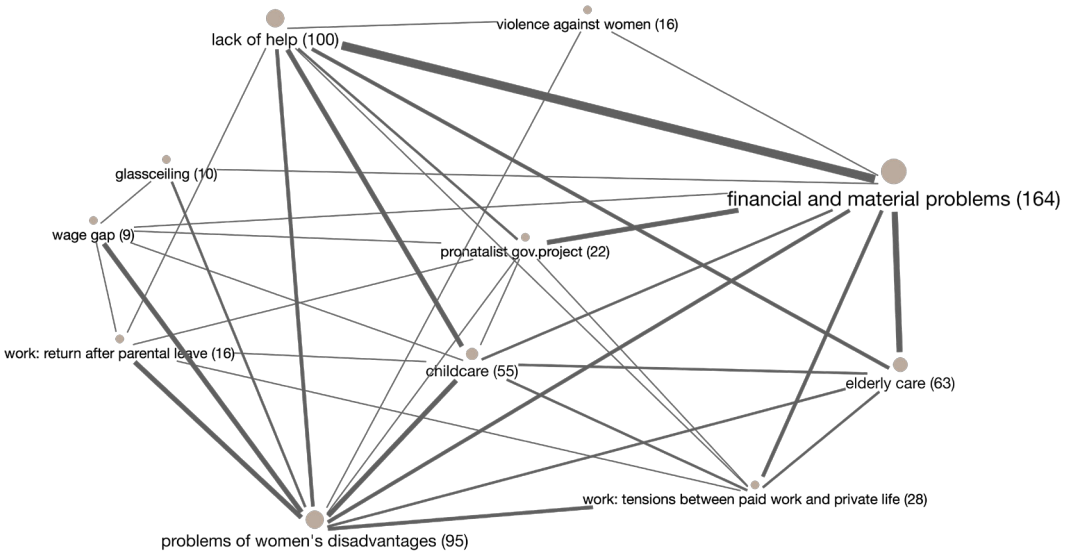
Note: see note of Figure 1.

The weight of the material and financial problems and struggles related to the labor market was even greater in the survey results. Almost half of the problems mentioned in response to the initial open-ended question (one respondent could mention a maximum of five problems) were related to making ends meet, low wages, poverty, and the workplace or the lack of it. Problems related to living, high prices, low wages, loans, and poverty covered altogether 38 percent of the responses and an additional 15 percent referred to unemployment, scarce work opportunities, and precarious working conditions. There was no significant difference between male and female respondents' problem map, even if we take into consideration other socio-demographic factors.

During the focus group discussions, respondents were asked to recall female-specific problems, too. Based on the previous code network analysis, we substituted the general code of "sphere of work" with the

more specific and more appropriate sub-code of it, indicating tensions between paid work and private life. Co-occurrences of these topics with some of the most frequently emerging themes are visualized in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Co-occurrence network of the most important female-specific issues and some of the most frequent codes based on all focus groups



Note: see note of Figure 1.

The co-occurrence map in Figure 4 displays the relations between the topics that emerged as female-specific issues during the group discussions. We coded every segment with "problems of women's disadvantages," in which the respondents specifically emphasized that the problem they shared was linked to the social situation of women. Some topics, like taking care of children, the gender wage gap or returning to work after parental leave were more associated as a female-specific issue (represented with thicker lines) than the others. This pattern does not mean that others are not considered as women's problems in which unequal gender relations may be present. Instead, these results highlight the discursive framing of these issues. For example, the dominance of pro-natalist governmental projects and policies were primarily framed as an economic and material issue (e.g. 'who can afford to have 1, 2, or even more children?') by the participants and they perceived it less as a particular issue of women.

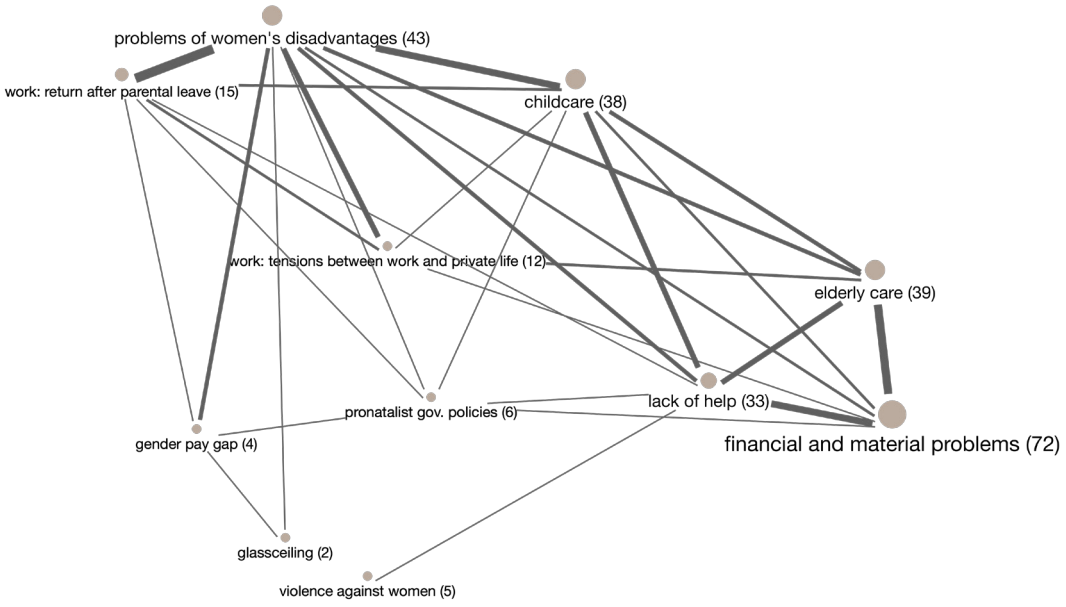
However, when we take a closer look at the thematic co-occurrences along with the status of participants, it turns out that the relatively remarkable tie between the pronatalist governmental projects and the financial and material difficulties emerges more in the case of lower-educated participants (see Figure 5). Another specificity of this group is that they link tensions between paid work and private life more to financial problems. One reason might be that they have to work more to make ends meet; thus they have less time for other activities. Similarly, lower educated participants linked violence against women to financial and material problems. This pattern cannot be detected in the case of higher educated women.

Figure 5. Co-occurrence network of the most important female-specific issues and some of the most frequent codes based on focus groups with lower educated participants

Note: see note of Figure 1.

What is an even more striking difference in the thematic co-occurrence between the two groups is that higher educated women talked more about work-private life tensions and framed them as a female-specific problem (see Figure 6). Problems around returning to jobs after parental leave were raised only among higher educated women and were strongly connected to women's disadvantageous situation. At the same time, lower educated women framed material and financial problems more as a female-specific issue.

Figure 6. Co-occurrence network of the most important female-specific issues and some of the most frequent codes based on focus groups with higher educated participants



If we focus on care, elderly care was also a bit less associated with women's problems in general than childcare. In our understanding, this result reveals that in the public (and scientific) discourses negative consequences of childcare on women's life is more in the forefront, while the effect of expectations regarding elderly care is under-discussed. However, the respondents directly referred to its connection to tensions with the sphere of work. This highlights that contradictions between the productive and reproductive spheres (Fraser 2016) do not stem only from childcare responsibilities but in relation to elderly care, too. The following quotation describes how women carrying out elderly care themselves see this as the other part of the care-burden and frame it as labor:

> *„Elderly care is like childcare but follows the decline of the person. And this 20,000 Ft [app. 65 EUR] of care fee, I never even took it, I was there without any money, I thought I could make ends meet somehow. And that simply ain't worth nothing. This is a problem somehow: elderly people would be cared for better if caregivers were paid well. A salary should be given, it's hard work. 24/7, I cooked, I did the gardening, took them for walks and all."* (Edit, Budapest, above 45)

A recurrent element was the lack of time regarding elderly care that stresses that women's resources (physical state, material resources, financial resources and time) are not unlimited indeed but above a specific age, elderly care falls on their shoulders as a job to do. The following excerpt highlights the specific resource problems of the so-called 'sandwich generation' (Miller 1981), the adult children of the elderly taking care both of their own children and their parents or in-laws:

> *"Nowadays a young person cannot afford to stay beside an elderly person, because they themselves have to make ends meet somehow, multiple generations no longer live together. Life rushes by, let's take, for instance, a parent, even if they have a child, the child works for their own kid, in order to make ends meet and an 8 hour working day is not enough, and they have no time or energy left to look after their parents as well. If they are alone, would they be expected to run around, they simply cannot, perhaps they live 100 km away, when should they catch up with them?"* (Maria, Szolnok, above 45)

This quotation also sheds light on 'family' as the mostly available possible solution to the problem: multiple generations living together. The same notion appears also in the following excerpt:

> *"Life is only about that [what is] old, bad, throw it away, you don't need that, regarding everything, but why is that? In old movies one can see, that in the past, 17th or 18th century, an old person was taken care of, family unity was revered. And that was good."* (Elvira, Budapest, above 45)

However, we know that this romanticized vision of the dominance of large families in society is more of a myth: nuclear families already dominated 4/5ths of Hungarian households by the start of the 19th century (Dányi 1977, cited by Tomka 2000: 57) and family formations were just as various as nowadays (Tóth 2017).

It was clear from the discussions that according to the respondents strong ties like family relations, friends, neighbors, and other small communities of trust are and need to be available in case of problems when someone is in need. The state was perceived as an actor that should help but in most cases state resources are inadequate. This is precisely 'familism in practice': while the family can obviously be an inherent resource of safety, community and warmth, the importance of family as a resource intensifies in periods when no other help seems to be available. At the same time, as we will show soon, 'family help' is reduced to mean almost exclusively women.

The survey results reflected a somewhat similar pattern of female-specific problems. After sharing the general problems, in the questionnaire-based research, the respondents were asked to think of women in similar situations and to list a maximum of five problems faced by women. A significant ratio, almost 25 percent of the women's problems mentioned, are not exclusively faced by women, but only affect women too. This category included the most frequently mentioned group of problems containing general issues relating to financial difficulties and living. Additionally, every tenth problem touched the issue of lack of jobs and unemployment, and as such, connected to the previously mentioned group of general financial troubles. Just as in the case of the general problems, there was no serious difference between male and female respondents in the perception of the frequency pattern of female-specific problems, which also means that men too do perceive women's difficulties.

Among female respondents, the most remarkable differences between different social strata's responses were found in answers to the open-ended question (see Table 2). While 44 percent of women having a degree mentioned at least one female-specific social problem, less than half of this ratio, namely 18 percent of women having primary education at most spontaneously mentioned any. A similar pattern occurred along with the categories of the respondents' current or last occupation: while almost half of those women working in a leader or supervising position were able to provide any concrete issue as an answer to the question, only 18 percent of their unskilled blue-collar worker counterparts did so. This result highlights the filtering effect of social class among women on the ability to articulate problems in public that is an essential step towards overcoming inequalities.

Table 2. Response rates to the open-ended question about the knowledge of female-specific social problems, female respondents (%)

	Response rate
LEVEL OF EDUCATION[a]	
Primary at most (N=177)	18%
Vocational school (N=79)	20%
Maturity exam (N=178)	30%
Diploma (N=100)	44%
OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORIES (present or last occupation)[b]	
Leader or supervisor (N=26)	46%
White-collar employee (N=187)	35%
Skilled blue-collar worker (N=143)	24%
Unskilled blue-collar worker (N=146)	18%

Notes: a Chi-square test: p = 0.001<0.05; CV = 0.19
b Chi-square test: p = 0.001<0.05; CV = 0.19

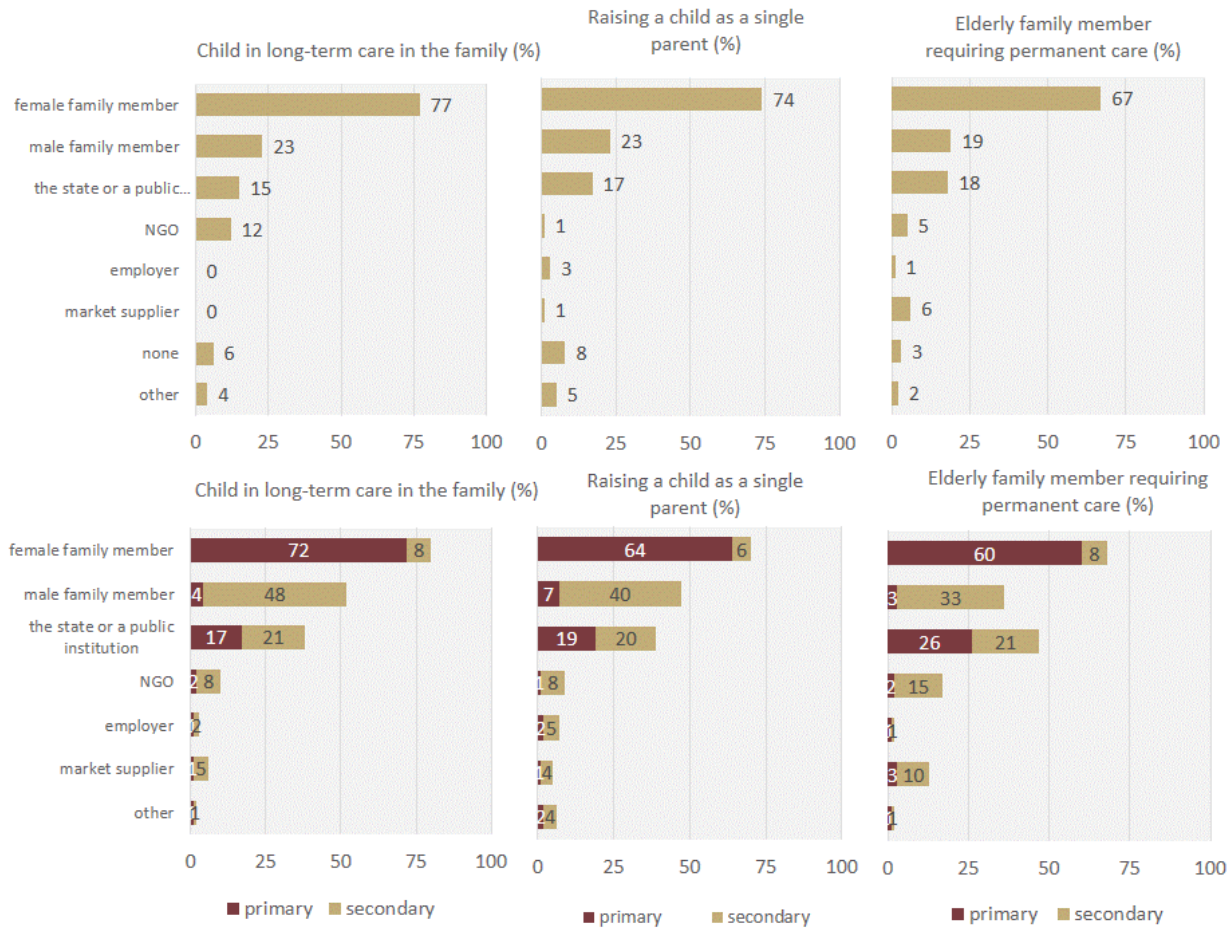
At the same time, social status affected weakly the characteristics of female-specific problems that female respondents mentioned. While 42 percent of all female-specific problems mentioned by skilled blue-collar women were related to financial difficulties and lack of jobs, leaders, supervisors and other white-collar employees mentioned half as many.. Interestingly, while unskilled blue-collar women were the most likely to problematize the struggles of mothers with small children (21 percent of all problems), e.g. with labor market

reintegration after coming back from parental leave, skilled women and those in leadership positions saw it as less problematic. This would reflect the more fragile and precarious position of unskilled mothers in the workplace even if they have a workplace to enter or return to. Women with higher status were the most likely (18 percent of all problems) to problematize the impossibility of balancing between paid work and private life, running a household and having paid employment at the same time. This problem was only half as frequently mentioned by unskilled women.

One of the great lessons of the focus group research is that the participants feel that they are absolutely left alone when the issue arises of what people or institutions, they can rely on in finding solutions to various women's problems. The feeling of being neglected is reflected not only in the extent to which they are affected by such situations in life but also in who they can expect assistance from in finding solutions to the problems.

In the survey, we tried to assess who assisted in a particular, care-related situation in life (first row) and who, according to the respondents, should offer assistance first and who should do the same second, in that particular condition (second row) (Figure 3).

Figure 7. First row: Who helped in such a situation? (those who already experienced the particular situation in life in the past or are experiencing it now in relation to themselves or a close relative of family member may provide more than one answer, ratio of mentions, %).
Second row: Who of the following actors do you think should be primarily responsible for providing assistance? And who should be secondarily responsible? (all respondents, %)



Not just the actual experiences, but even the expectations strongly reflect the attitude that women are responsible for such tasks. Female respondents were slightly more likely to expect female family relatives to help compared to male respondents, especially in relation to childcare. Also, those who already witnessed directly or indirectly any kind of caregiving assigned more of these tasks to female relatives compared to those who had not previously had experience of seeking it. Meanwhile they did not show a greater than average insistence that men or the state should play a greater role in care activities. We also found that the social status of women showed a weak U-curved association with the likelihood of assigning help to either female or male relatives in the case of an elderly relative in need (Table 3). Those female respondents having the lowest and those having the highest social status3 were the most likely to say that female and/or male family members should provide help in such a situation. While this finding needs further investigation, we might assume that there are different explanations behind this pattern. Lower status women would rely more on family ties because of the unavailability of institutional or privatized help as a consequence of the lack of financial and other resources. Higher status women, on the other hand, while they might be more able financially to outsource care tasks to institutions and private service providers, still might consider this situation a female responsibility that female relatives should manage. The keyword here is 'managing': in her book about the tendencies of outsourcing the different personally related intimate activities in the private life terrain, Hochschild (2012: 162) provides an example of a mother who treated motherhood as a professional activity with managing the household at the centre of it. When she later hired a professional help even for this managing task, it remained unquestioned that this task should be supervised by a female family member, namely her. Nevertheless, this assumption and explanation need further investigation in the future.

Table 3. Ratio of those female respondents in social status quintiles saying that female/male relatives should either primarily or secondarily provide help when an elderly family member requires permanent care (N=534)

	1st (lowest) quintile	2nd quintile	3rd quintile	4th quintile	5th (highest) quintile	Total female respondents
Female relative[a]	69%	79%	55%	66%	71%	68%
Male relative[b]	40%	23%	34%	34%	43%	36%

Notes: a Chi-square test: p = 0.015<0.05; CV = 0.15
b Chi-square test: p = 0.037<0.05; CV = 0.14

Following on from this, it is very striking that neither male family members, nor the state are expected to provide support in the first place in any of the situations we asked about. Overall the state is somewhat more required than men, e.g. in the case of elderly care 26% think the state should assume the primary role. This places a burden on women, especially given the fact that the welfare system and institutional infrastructure have generally been deteriorating in Hungary since the regime change and government after government has been increasingly withdrawing the state from this area.

3 Social status variable has been constructed as a composite measure based on the possession of durable goods in the household, educational attainment, and occupation category by applying principal component analysis. Missing values were imputed by standardized predicted scores with OLS regression estimation based on gender, age, type of settlement, educational attainment, and region.

Women are left alone in their care tasks. The respondents associate these problems with the scope of responsibility of individuals and, primarily, of women. Even though the possible answers include actors other than female family members, only a low percentage of respondents think that other actors should help, either primarily or secondarily, in particular situations in life. As one of our respondents in a focus group painfully summarizes:

> *"Once you have problems with your child, they are disabled or durably ill, then you may as well bury yourself because no one will help you."* (Lilla, Miskolc, below 45)

Concluding remarks

The language used in the focus groups describing working conditions was all about exploitation and slavery, and the conflicts with employers when it comes to work-life balance issues were very prominent in the description of the problems brought up. This was in line with previous research on how these conditions shape attitudes and preferences combined with research on the interplay between general trust and importance of families. These results can further explain the permanence of conservative attitudes incl. familism and the popularity of long parental leaves despite the low amount of subsidy. Labor market participation in such conditions is far from being the sphere of full emancipation for lower class women. Women who feel forced to constantly work overtime and/or take second jobs are far from experiencing „individual emancipation" or even economic independence (from men)– a recurrent topic was dependence incl. housing poverty that holds broken marriages or (even abusive) relationships together. By pointing to the circumstances shaping attitudes, our results also showed a way out of the false dilemma of taking women's narratives word for word or conversely ignoring them by dismissing them as "false consciousness". Women's low expectations towards men and the state are, at least partly, results of systemic conditions. Therefore, instead of awareness raising these latter structures must be addressed. The explicit familialist policies of the current government can be perceived as emancipatory at first, because at least on the symbolic level it recognizes care (as opposed to discourses and policies, such as the one mentioned of former PM Bajnai, that treat care only as a burden to paid labor) (Kováts 2020), and because societal trust has in the past thirty years already been eroded, and many cannot perceive any community larger than the (extended) family as a realistic scale and refuge.

The research confirmed Fraser's framing of the growing care deficit as a new manifestation of the contradiction of capital and care in the current form of capitalism in the post-socialist semi-periphery: production is contingent on unpaid care and more broadly social reproduction, but the way capital accumulation is pursued undermines its very possibility. This can be alleviated for better-off women – through outsourcing part of the care to lower class women who themselves feel the burden of the care crisis more strongly, therefore exacerbating inequalities between classes, and between women of different classes.

When the social reproduction is to this extent invisibilized and taken for granted by the state and markets, calls for attitude change on behalf of men or for specific measures targeting men e.g. paternal leave, are necessary, but not sufficient. The preconditions for social reproduction are not given –either for the majority of men, or even more so women – in the current organization of the labor market and state-market-family relations, therefore an improvement of the situation cannot be expected in the near future.

This can be best illustrated by the current policy changes and propositions. In light of its worry about demographic decline, the Hungarian government is pursuing a selective pronatalist policy, providing cash transfers to (future) families of the higher classes. While there is no reason to doubt the sincere efforts of the government to boost fertility among the preferred classes, the room for manoeuvre for the government is constrained by the workforce shortage and admitted pressure by (multinational) companies to handle this with more flexibility for employers. While our research comes to the conclusion that the largest problem of employees with children is the impossibility of combining paid work with care duties, nevertheless, from January 2019 onwards a new amendment to the Labour Code makes it possible for employers to order up to 400 supplementary hours per year in overtime (to be paid within three years). The generous family policies based on financial incentives for couples with employment status can therefore hardly fulfil the aspirations of the government in the field of fertility as the biggest burden of carers: working conditions are still not being addressed by it. This contradiction between family policy (for the better-off) and employment policy is yet another proof of the contradiction of capital and care and shows the limits of a neoliberal gender regime: while the conservative ideology of the governing parties can very well incorporate women's paid labor on the pragmatic level, the fact that market actors have such a huge influence on the state (at least, the legitimacy of the political system is dependent on economic success, at worst, transnational companies might directly influence labor policies), it makes it impossible to address the burden on families, and – given the unequal share of unpaid work – on women. As our research illustrated very strikingly, this burden is even more pronounced among the lower classes, who, besides having the difficulties of making ends meet and having a weaker negotiating position in relation to employers, cannot rely either on state institutions (especially in the case of elderly care), or on private actors.

Our results show that the tension between paid employment and unpaid care work cannot be fully resolved either by individual strategies (e.g. better time management or fathers' increased share) or by system-level solutions (telework, part-time, paternal leave, longer opening hours of creches). The available choices are gendered and classed (e.g. the promotion of part-time jobs only to women means partial pay and a wider gender wage gap), and more favorable conditions can be achieved among the given circumstances only for the privileged few. Without a more comprehensive framework one cannot address this major contradiction, and any solution that gives emancipation to certain women on the shoulder of other women cannot be welcomed from a feminist point of view.

Conflict of interest

The research was funded by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). The fieldwork was conducted by Závecz Research. Eszter Kováts was an employee at FES during the period of the fieldwork. Anikó Gregor contributed to the research of FES as a paid contractor of research services. The research report entitled „Nőügyek 2018" (Women's Affairs 2018) was published in May 2018, and can be accessed via the following link in Hungarian: http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/14461.pdf and a summary in English: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/14462.pdf

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