

IN MOTHER'S ROLL: EMPLOYMENT VERSUS FAMILY

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Nowadays the dual burden of women, being a mother, wife and housewife on one hand and being economically active on the other hand is not decreasing, but likely growing.

In ageing European societies, the ratio between active workers and dependants can be improved only by increasing the economic activity of women. Furthermore, the relative decrease in the proportion of older generations and the long-term sustainability of pensions funding can only be safeguarded by having more births and better fertility indicators. In other words, the fulfilment of the reproductive functions of women and families is becoming a key question of national strategy.

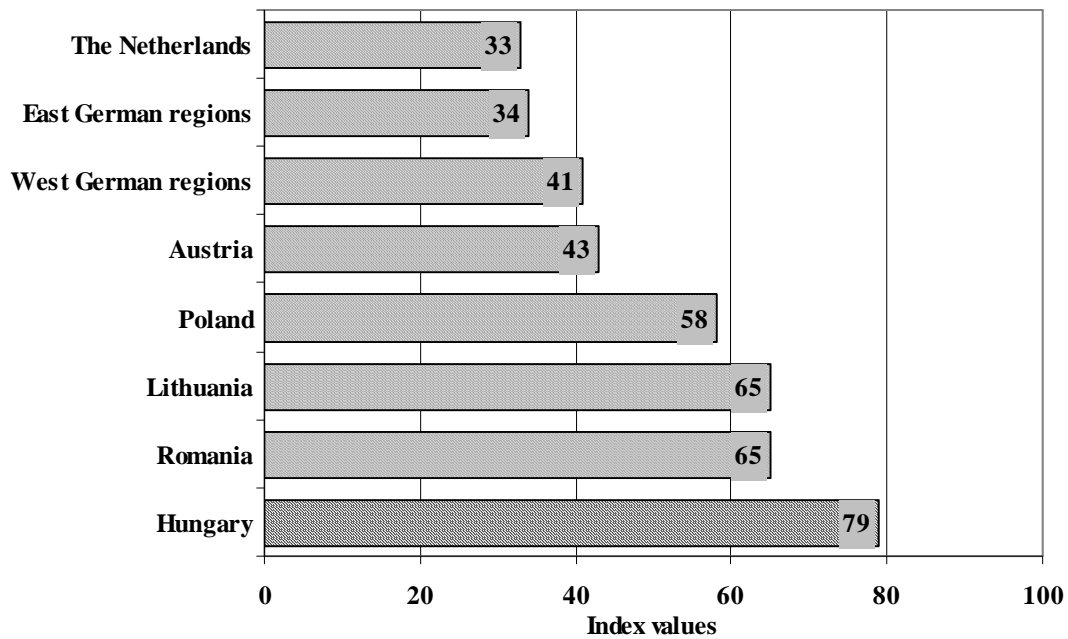
The tasks are clear at the macro-economic level: women must or should have more children, and at the same time they must or should work more, too. The question is, how does this problem present itself at the micro-level, i.e. among women themselves? What do women think about the importance of work and family, and what role does the balance between the two have in their lives?

To answer these questions using data from an international comparative study conducted in 12 European countries between 2000 and 2003.

This international comparison of expectations concerning paid work and family responsibilities becomes interesting and exciting as we consider the different paths that Europe's eastern and western regions have travelled to involve women in economic activity. The enforced female employment so typical of the East, with women going into jobs *en masse* and achieving high employment rates, only to be followed by a sharp decline after the political and economic upheavals of the 1990s, was fundamentally different from the gradual and steady rise in female employment rates in the West.

The first question we examined, what are the women's priorities on the issue of work and family or work or family was phrased as follows: "Although work is important, for most women home and children are more important" (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1



This question was used in the questionnaire of seven countries. Hungarian respondents assigned a very high priority to family and children, and came out on top among the countries under review. Lithuanians and Romanians agreed with the statement at a similarly high rate. The study revealed that their societies, too, favour traditional values. In The Netherlands, in Germany – especially in the former East German regions – and in Austria most respondents rejected the primacy of the traditional family role of women, placing a heavy emphasis on their labour market participation.

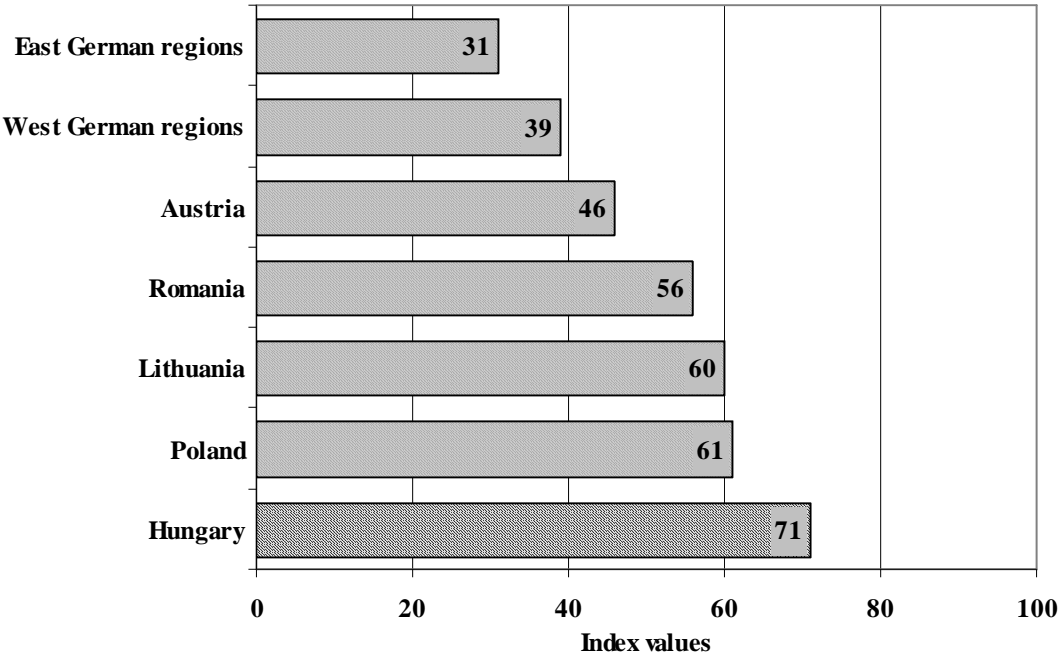
There is no variance in the responses according to respondents' demographic parameters. In family-centred societies – such as Hungary – the younger generations, aged below 30, gave priority to children and family to the same extent as those in older age groups. Similarly, there are no significant differences between the responses of men and women. At the same time, while men and women in so-called conservative countries had the same opinion on the matter, in countries where support for traditional female roles is lower, women proved to be even more work oriented than men, and rejected the priority of family responsibilities more frequently.

In the following statement, there is an evident clash between the conservative and the modern view of gender roles: *“It is the husband’s responsibility to earn money to support his family, and the wife’s task is to perform household work”* (Figure 2).

In fact, this question reflects a division of family responsibilities that was typical of many decades ago. The majority of respondents – especially in the central and eastern part of Europe – have only read of such patterns in them in everyday life, yet it is precisely in those countries where such a traditional allocation of gender roles is considered ideal.

Figure 2

“It is the husband’s responsibility to earn money to support his family, and the wife’s task is to perform household work” – average values assigned to the question, recalculated on a scale of 100, in international comparison, at the turn of the millennium

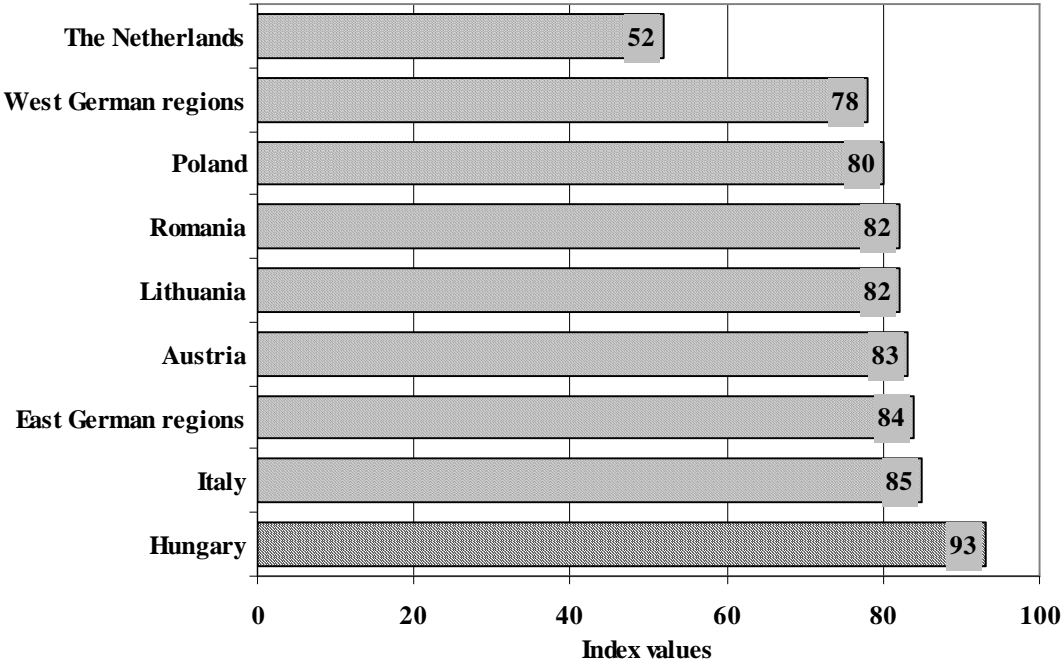


Special note must be made of the very low East German and the very high Hungarian index values. The emancipated and work-centred attitudes of East German women have been demonstrated in many of our international comparative studies, and this result only reconfirms earlier findings. Nor are the Hungarian figures surprising. We examined attitudes toward women’s gainful employment for the first time in 1974.¹ Two-third of the respondents were of the opinion that, in families with children at primary school, the ideal situation would be if the husband could support the family on his salary, while the wife’s responsibility would be limited to caring for the children and doing the housework. This was the opinion that was prevalent in times when around 80% of women wore active workers, and when the ratio of women in their fertile years who were in employment reached 92–93%. The traditional

¹ The topic was part of an interview-based opinion poll that focused on demographic questions, performed on a representative sample of 3,000 people.

approach to gender roles has not changed since, and indeed it appears even stronger in the 2001 research, as the question there preferred not only to mothers, but to women in general. In the 26 years between the two studies much had changed in Hungarian society; however, these changes had no influence on the nostalgia felt for the traditional gender values and the traditional division of family commitments. It should be noted that the concept of, or desire for, the pattern of ‘men acting as breadwinners and women as housewives’ is very popular even among young people aged below 30 with higher than average education, as is confirmed by the 68 points on the index.

Figure 3
 “Today most women must work to safeguard the livelihood of the family” – average values assigned to the question, recalculated on a scale of 100, in international comparison, at the turn of millennium



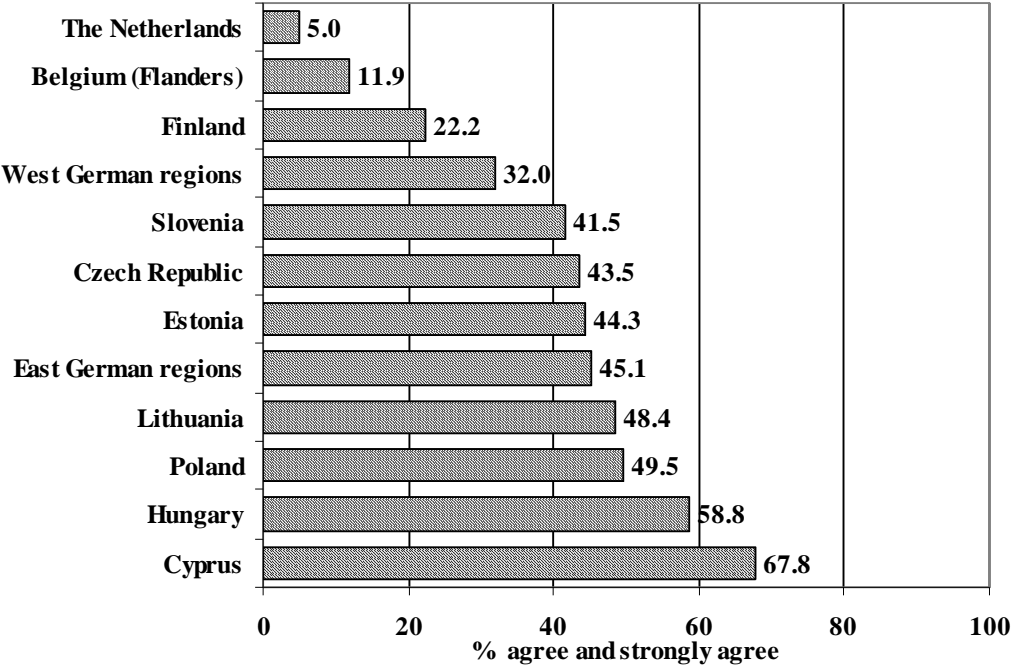
If, on the other hand, we examine women’s employment not from the perspective of a harmonious family life, but in relation to the livelihood of the family, we encounter opinions that diverge sharply from those above.

Responses to the statement “Today most women must work to safeguard the livelihood of the family” were basically the same in all countries. Most respondents agreed that the family cannot afford to forgo the woman’s salary, in other words, when it comes to the gainful employment of women, financial considerations are uppermost in all countries – with the expectations of The Netherlands (Figure 3).

When analysing the issue with a focus on child bearing willingness (family raising patterns) considerable differences have been revealed in people’s disposition to the value of children from country to country. The distribution of answers “agree” and “strongly agree” to the question “you can’t be really happy without having children” is shown in Figure No. 4 as follows:

This question implicates a rather biased approach to the importance of children suggesting that among the vast number of factors contributing to happiness having children is undoubtedly the ultimate one and human life without a child is anything but complete. In the former socialist countries there is a profoundly positive approach to having children while in western countries a child is considered to be the primary factor of happiness to a lesser extent.

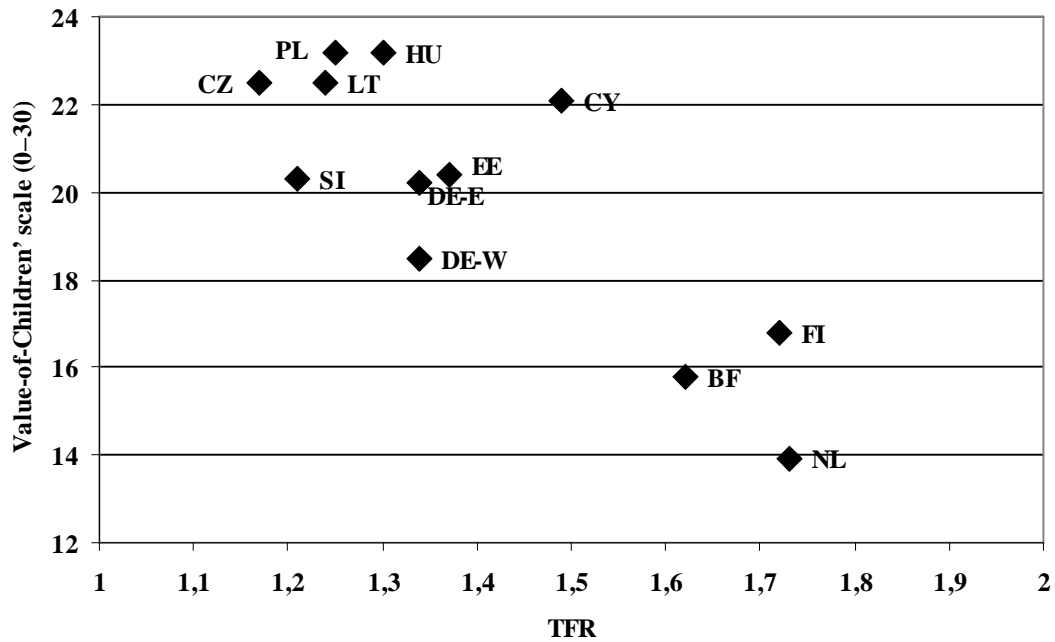
Figure 4
„You can not be really happy without having children”



Nevertheless you would come to a rather astonishing conclusion when comparing actual fertility indices with the degree of child oriented attitude in individual countries as shown in Figure No.5.

Figure 5

Relationship between the 'Value-of-Children' scale and the total fertility in the PPA-survey year by country, age 20–50



Apparently, there is an inverse correlation between the values of child oriented attitude (family orientation) and actual fertility patterns. Relatively high TFR values are coupled with low level of child oriented attitude and also, the ratio of answers attaching significant importance to having children is high in spite of low TFR values.

So, women in Hungary can be claimed to be much more family oriented and they put greater emphasis on being a mother than on having a job or making a career. Yet they attach considerable significance to job, economic activity very much to the benefit of family life and security thereof. Since the need for financial security is an imperative pressure it is the very difficulties in labour market that interfere with the realization of planned number of children. In Hungary women generally plan twice as many children as they give birth to because working conditions do not enable them to materialize such plans. Finding a job while pregnant is simply hopeless constituting similar problems as getting back to labour market after maternity leave. Unless the conflict between family and career is resolved there is no hope for a positive change in family raising patterns.