

Women's Affairs 2018

Societal Problems and Solution Strategies in Hungary

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- The members of society do not regard the majority of the problems faced by women in Hungary as 'women's' problems. On the basis of our research (consisting of focus groups and a survey), the major problems include the financial difficulties also faced by women, the difficulty of making a living and lack of jobs available under decent circumstances and conditions. However, gender inequalities can clearly be detected in the background of those problems.
- Without social welfare systems and adequate assistance, in most cases, women are obliged to arrange the care of disabled, sick and elderly within the family and that is also expected of them by the public. The responsibilities of care are a great source of tension in relation to participation in the labour market. Employers also have a conflicting interest, as the image of an 'ideal employee' is not compatible with the lives of those who also have care responsibilities.
- According to the results of the research, material issues are emphasised more among the problems raised by women than a few topics that were in the target of the feminist movements recently (e.g., sexism, objectifying media representation of women, low political and economic power of women).
- People have clear, low opinion of the extent to which political parties take up the issues causing women problems and more than 50% of the respondents cannot identify any such party. However, according to the results, people are not against having more women in politics, expecting them to also devote more attention to the women's matters.

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1. Introduction

In response to a question from a journalist about the recall of Réka Szemeréki, the Hungarian ambassador to the United States, the Hungarian Prime Minister answered in 2017 that he did not deal with women's affairs. It is justified to ask whether in a country where so few women make it into executive positions, the ambassador to the US also qualifies as a women's matter. However, with his dismissive statement, the Prime Minister rather revealed his attitude issues that he deemed 'women's matters'. In addition, it is not even true that the Hungarian government does not deal with women's affairs. Here is just one example: one day after the 2018 parliamentary elections, Viktor Orbán announced that the next government would have a «demographic focus», which clearly has numerous women's policy aspects. The purpose of our research was to find out what 'women's affairs' are for Hungarian women and what society, both women and men, think about them. We began the research with the intention to map the difficulties and obstacles confronting women in everyday life. We were also interested in the form of language used, to what extent that is the expression of gender inequality and whether the way these problems are addressed compares to the approaches of activists and politicians dealing with the situation of women. We also wanted to find out the extent to which the topics dominating public discourse and the most frequent messages of politics and movements targeted at women are reflected in women's own stories. We also wished to learn from where they expect help with their most burning problems and what they think of the roles of their partners, families, the smaller communities, NGOs, employers and politics.

2. Methodology

The research is based on two pillars: six focus group interviews conducted among women and a national questionnaire-based survey involving 1,000 participants, both female and male.

2.1. Focus groups

The focus group part of the research concentrated on women with lower educational qualifications and a lower status in society, because they are more difficult to reach with traditional sociology survey methods and, consequently, their problems are also less known. Even actors committed to women's affairs find it difficult to convey messages and initiatives to them.

Composition of the focus groups:

- Women aged 25-70, broken down into two age groups (25-45 year olds and 45-70 year olds)
- Groups structured homogeneously in terms of age, school qualifications and social status
- Groups structured heterogeneously according to family status (partners and number of children)

Six focus group interviews were organised with 8 participants in each group, each session lasting for 1.5-2 hours, between 16th and 26th October, 2017. Two interviews were conducted in Budapest and four were held in the towns of Dombóvár, Pápa, Szolnok and Miskolc.

The provincial towns were selected with the intention of covering the various regions of the country. The group participants came not only from the towns but also from the surrounding villages.

2.2. Survey

The survey was conducted using CAPI interviews (computer assisted personal interview). The interviewers visited the respondents between 6th and 14th December, 2017. The sample of 1,000 respondents is statistically representative of the Hungarian population aged over 18, by age, settlement type of the place of residence and educational level (weight variables). Only individuals aged over 18 were included in the sample; all of them were selected using stratified random sampling. The sampling error was estimated at no more than ±3.2 percentage points with a 95% confidence interval for the entire sample, i.e., there is 95% probability that the investigated ratio would be within this value range if the relevant

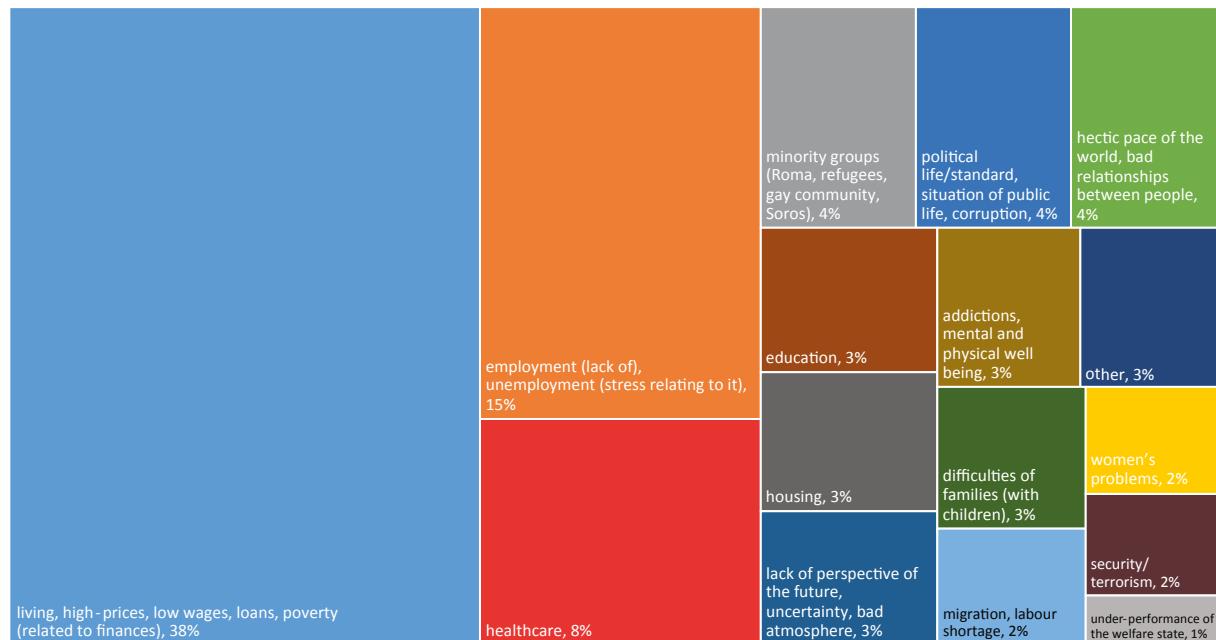
information could be collected from all members of the population. The differences resulting from the sampling and the composition of the population were adjusted using the weighting variables referred to above, with an iterative proportionate matching procedure.

3. The results

3.1. Problems in general

It was striking that the responses to the opening question of both the focus group and questionnaire-based research, i.e., the problems faced by other people similar to them in society, were dominated by the issues of living: wages, prices, loans and housing. In each focus group, the conditions of the workplace were described with harsh words: abuse, exploitation, slavery.

Figure 1: In your opinion, what are the most important problems that people living in Hungary today, in a situation similar to yours, are faced with? (open-ended question, spontaneous answers, maximum of 5 answers, breakdown of mentioned problems, total of all mentioned problems = 2550)



3.2. Women's problems

After sharing the general problems, in the questionnaire-based research the respondents were asked to think of women in similar situations

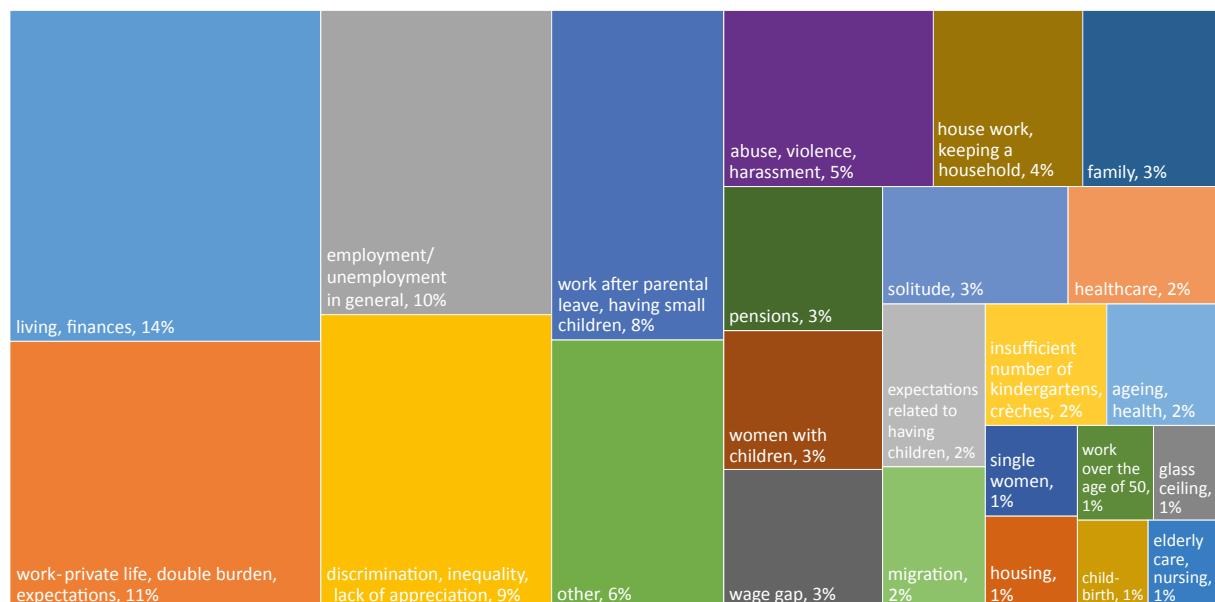
Almost half of the problems mentioned in the questionnaire-based research (one respondent could mention a maximum of five problems) were related to living, the workplace or the lack of it (figure 1). However, problems specifically affecting women were mentioned among the first in the responses to the first question of the focus groups and among the first spontaneous responses of the questionnaire. In the focus groups such problems were: care for the elderly, the lack of tolerance of employers towards the tasks relating to raising children; the gender pay gap; the chronic shortage of time because of children; and the situation of single mothers. In the survey, only two per cent of the spontaneously mentioned problems were difficulties expressly faced by women. They included the 'shortage of kindergartens and crèches' or the burden of 'tiring household work' faced by women.

and to list a maximum of five problems faced by women. While eight out of ten respondents were able to mention general problems, only three out of ten respondents were able to indicate problems relating to the lives of women spontaneously.

A considerable number, almost 25% of the mentioned women's problems, are not specifically faced by women, only affect women too (figure 2). The tension between employment and private life represented the most frequently mentioned

group of problems that can truly and specifically be considered women's problems. These responses stress that women find it difficult to simultaneously live up to the expectations at home and in the workplace.

Figure 2: What are the primary problems that women living in a situation similar to yours are faced with the most? (open-ended question, maximum of 5 answers, breakdown of women's problems mentioned above, all mentioned women's problems = 688)



The second group of women's problems, representing 10 per cent of the mentioned difficulties, contained statements that in general referred to the social inequalities between men and women with negative consequences affecting women. These responses did not include specific problems: the responses provided a general description of the social system and operational mechanisms that create and maintain the hierarchical relations between women and men (e.g., 'male dominance'). The problems of returning to/entering the labour market after childbirth finished in third place on our imaginary podium.

3.3. Tension between employment and care

During the focus group interviews, the situation of the women belonging to the 'sandwich generation' was mentioned in the first round by the three older groups. Such women simultaneously care for their children and their elderly parents.

According to our research, employment was one of the most problematic issues. It was stressed during the focus group interviews that the increased and unpredictable working hours and the inflexible and hard working conditions have an eroding impact on all confidential relations.

The tension between motherhood and employment was mentioned from a specific women's point of view. It is hard to find employment in the beginning: either because childless young women are assumed to have child in the near future that is a risk from the perspective of the employer or if there are children, they may be sick and the more children a mother has the worse are the chances of finding a job and women will be more exposed to employers because they have very little chance of switching jobs. When a child or a family member is ill, employers do not approve of absence and are not cooperative in rescheduling lost tasks or time. When children have already left home, women cannot find a job because they are too old (they

lag behind in practice and are not fast or agile enough or are over-qualified). The participants in the three older focus groups, especially, spent a long time discussing the disadvantages experienced by women in their fifties in the labour market.

Apart from children, the tension caused between caring for elderly parents and the paid employment also emerged in the younger focus groups too. 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.

During the questionnaire-based research, it was also confirmed that women's problems relating to care are considered very serious by the general public. Of 25 problems included in a pre-determined list, the following four problems turned out to be the most severe perceived by both women and men, based on the average score of more than 4.4 on a scale of 1 to 5, scoring the highest average points:

- raising children as a single parent and
- raising durably ill children is a difficult task,
- raising a child involves a lot of expenditure, and
- even though part-time work is often referred to as a solution, it is difficult to live on a part-time wage.

3.4. Demographic focus

It was mentioned as a problem in each focus group that the governing parties admittedly pay a lot of attention to encouraging childbirth. The message that a family should have at least three children has also been conveyed successfully. People understand the normative nature of this message and consider it a burden.

They criticised the message less from the aspect of autonomy and female self-determination than from the conditions of living: they cannot afford three, or often even one or two children. It was a further critical aspect that some contradiction is seen between the intensity of the communication messages and the degree of real assistance from the government (e.g., with regard to an employer who has a contrary interest in regard to employees having children).

3.5. Care as a primarily woman's task

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 persons, individuals, 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 whom they can expect assistance from in finding solutions to the problems of various situations in life.

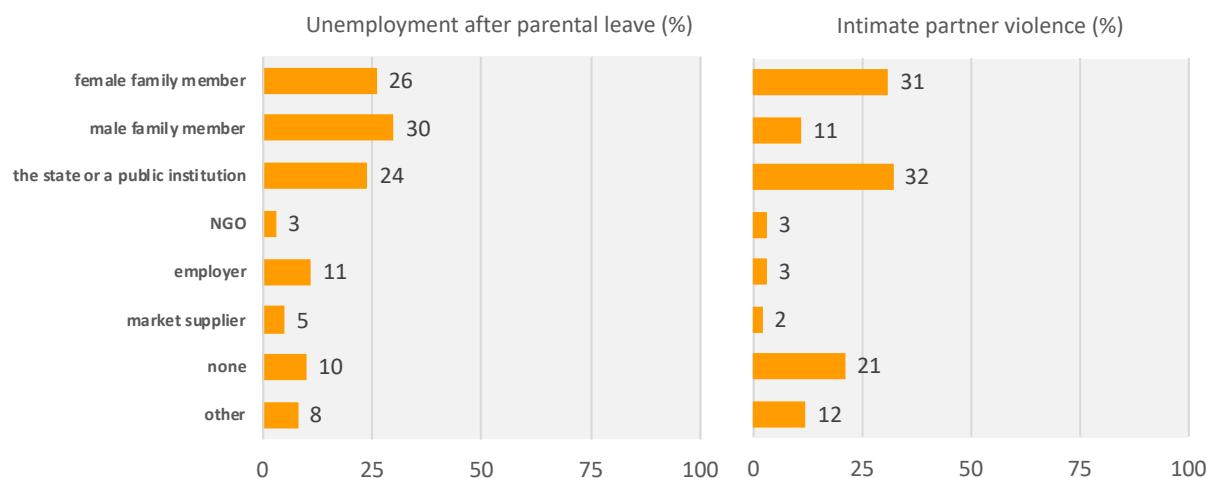
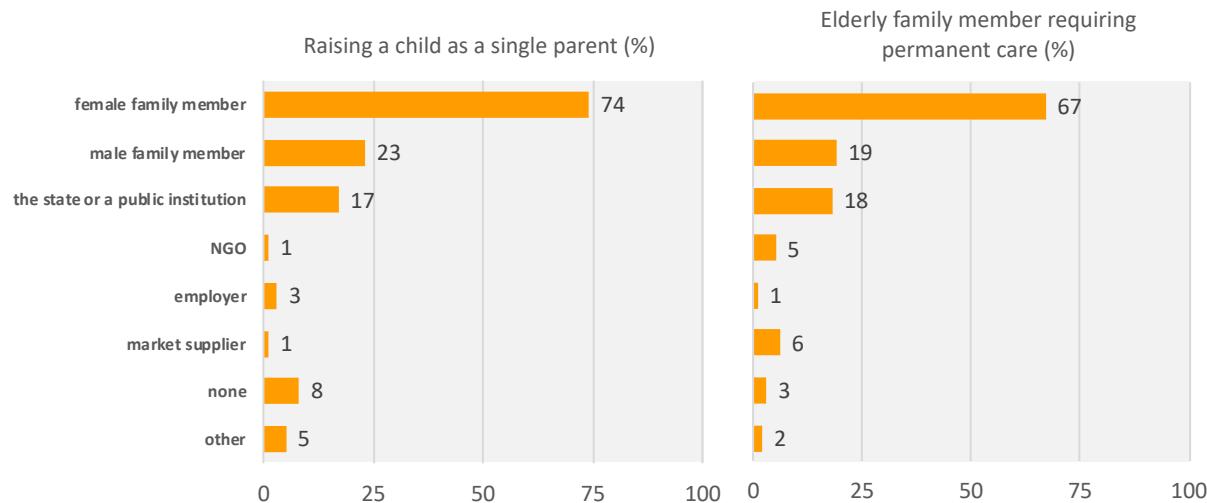
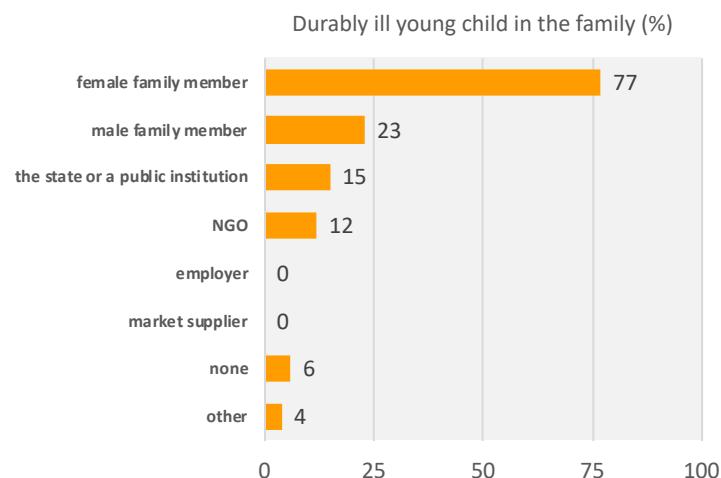
Using five selected life situations, in our questionnaire-based research, we tried to assess who provided assistance in a particular situation in life and who, according to the respondents, should offer assistance first and who should do the same second, in a particular situation in life, namely:

- durably ill young child in the family
- elderly family member requiring permanent care
- unemployment after parental leave
- intimate partner violence
- raising a child as a single parent

Irrespective of the problem, those who had already practically experienced the given situation in life, referred to a female member of their family as the person who provided help in the given situation (figure 3).

Figure 3: Who helped in such a situation?

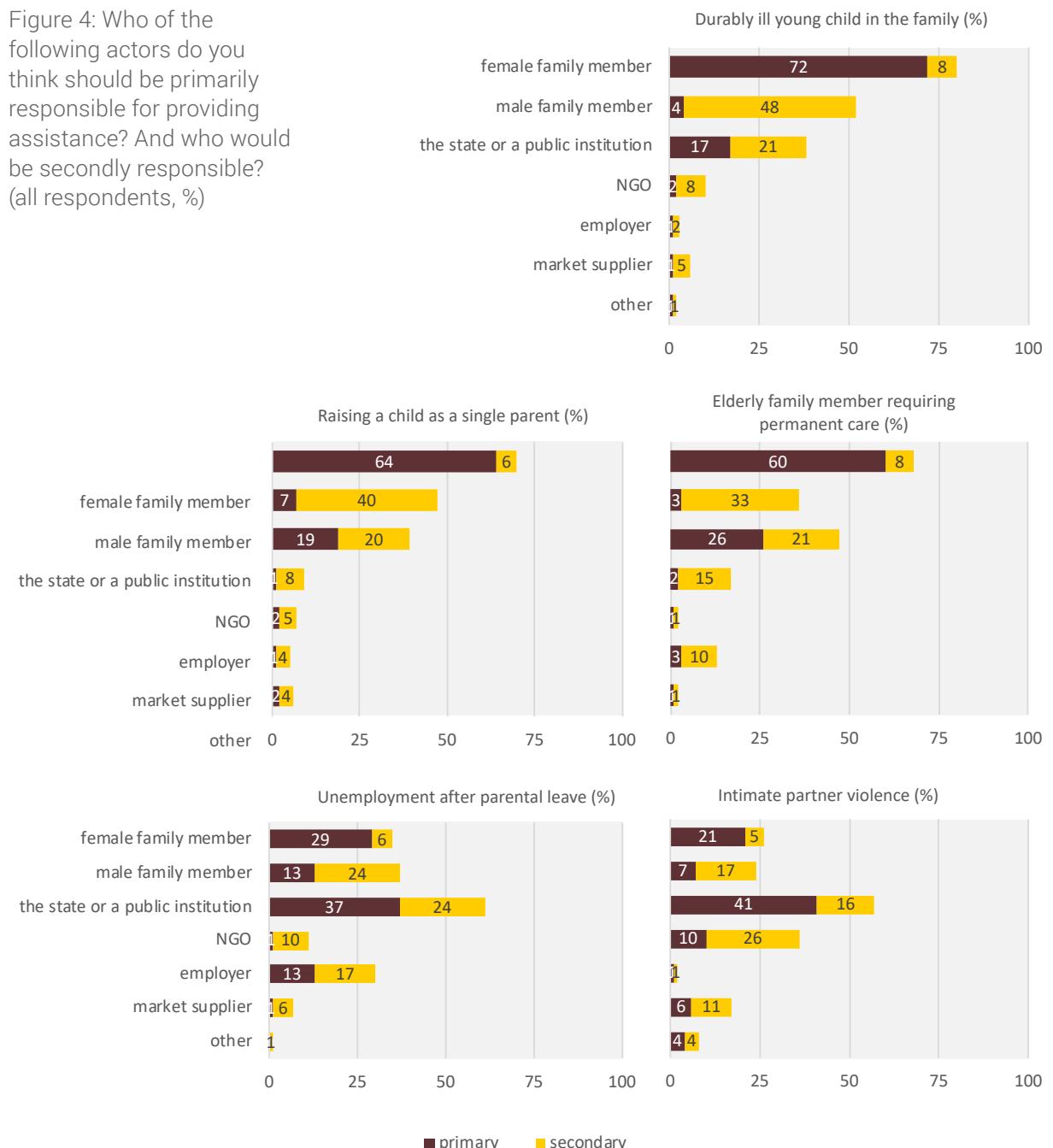
(those who already experienced the particular situation in life in the past or are experiencing it now in relation to themselves or a close relative of family member may provide more than one answer, ratio of mentions, %)



Even the expectations strongly reflect the attitude that women are responsible for such tasks. This places a burden on women, especially given the fact that the welfare system and institutional infrastructure have been generally deteriorating in Hungary since the regime change and government after government have been increasingly withdrawing the state from this area.

Figure 4: Who of the following actors do you think should be primarily responsible for providing assistance? And who would be secondly responsible? (all respondents, %)

Women are left alone in their care tasks. The respondents clearly 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 the particular situations in life (figure 4).



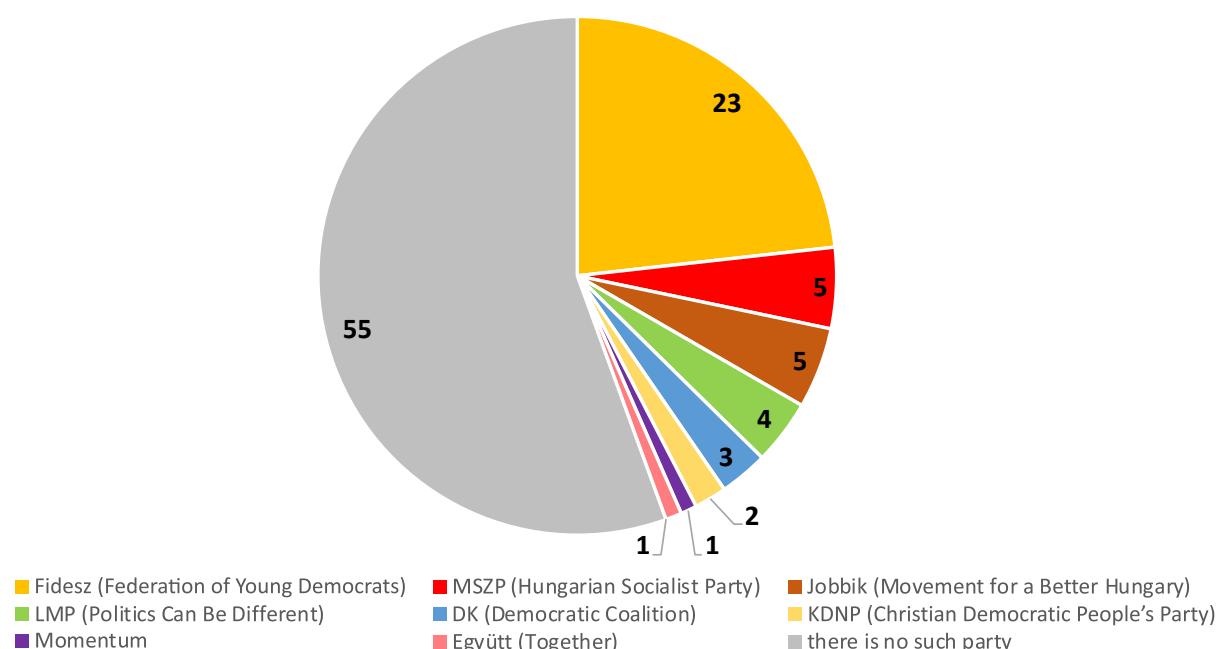
It is striking on how few occasions male family members are mentioned as potential helpers. This may reflect the traditional understanding of the gender roles, according to which care is primarily a woman's responsibility. It may also be an explanation that men cannot be expected to help because they are otherwise burdened, e.g., they are responsible for providing for the family. It is clear that the respondents have much greater expectations in regard to the services provided by the state than the assistance currently available. It is especially obvious in the case of care for the elderly. Assistance in the case of unemployment after parental leave or intimate partner violence is clearly considered the responsibility of the state according to the respondents, while there are also situations in life in which, primarily, family members must come up with solutions. Compared to the other problems, the respondents would also like to see employers taking a greater role in providing jobs to mothers with small children. The difficult situation of the victims of domestic violence is indicated by the fact that every fifth person who experienced such an incident, stated that they could not expect assistance from anyone and were left alone with their problem.

3.6. Women's problems and party politics

During the focus group interviews, reservations, passivity and lack of confidence could be detected in relation to political actors and any assistance expected from them. The participants did not think that any political party would pay any attention to the situation of women or, if they did, it was only during an election campaign or in relation to families (some had positive, others negative views about the latter).

The same was revealed in the questionnaire-based research. The political parties scored poorly in how well they represented issues causing difficulties to women. The respondents and especially women, were very critical even towards the party they voted for in this issue. The imaginary podium is topped by the governing party Fidesz – but even their performance is considered by the respondents to be less than average in that respect. The green LMP (Politics Can Be Different) finished in second place, followed by KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party), the coalition partner of Fidesz, in third place. More than half of the respondents believe that none of the parties represents women's issues (figure 5).

Figure 5: Which party is the most representative of the affairs of Hungarian women? (all respondents, %)

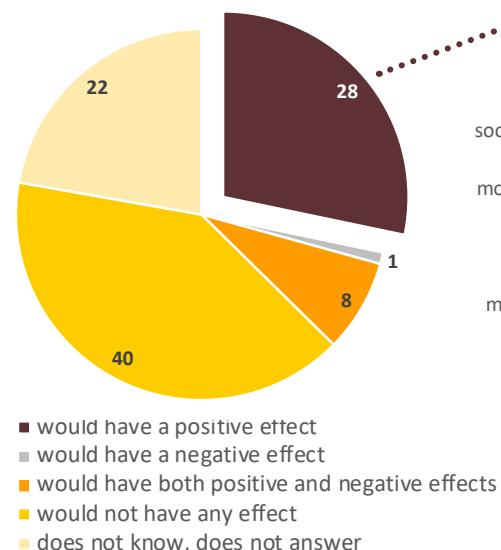


According to four out of ten respondents, no change would occur if more female MPs were in parliament. However, more than 25% of the

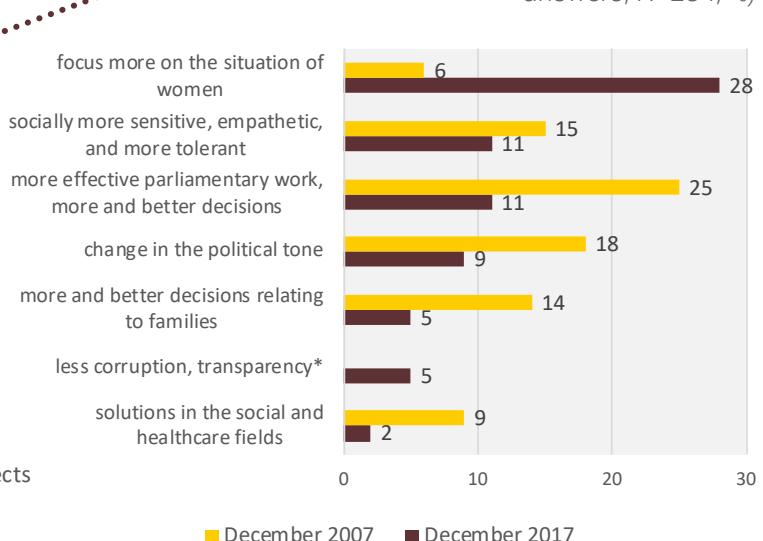
respondents expect a positive change compared to the negligibly low ratio of those who expect a negative change in that regard (figure 6).

Figure 6:

Do you think it would have any effect on the country's political life if more female MPs were in parliament? (all respondents, %)



What positive effect would it have? (among those who think it would be a positive change, open-ended question, spontaneous answers, N=284, %)



*Not included as a category in November 2007.

Those who expect a positive change, generally assume that if there are more female MPs, more attention will be paid to the situation of women. In terms of various social demographic variables and party preferences, there is no difference in the ratio of respondents sharing that expectation and generally hoping for a positive change. However, compared to other research conducted ten years ago with a focus on the same issue, the expectations of respondents expecting positive changes from the presence of female politicians have been thoroughly transformed. Ten years ago 25% of the respondents expected more effective work in parliament from that change, twice as many respondents as now (18%) hoped

for some improvements in the political tone and ten years ago, only 6% expected that if there were more female politicians, more attention would be paid to the situation of women. There may be a number of factors behind the changes. Over the recent years, the female politicians undertaking roles in the scene of politics often supported issues relating to women or, more specifically, mothers, irrespective of their parties and that may have been a factor in the change of the opinion on the issue. However, another interpretation of this change could also be that expectation in regard to female politicians to represent women's matters as women have also become stronger.

4. Recommendations

1. Both women and men understand the social disadvantages faced by women due to the fact that primarily they fulfil the responsibilities of care, even if that is not always described as a *disadvantage*. Besides symbolic matters, these material topics should appear on the agenda (more often).
2. In certain stages of our lives, all of us need care and all of us provide care. This idea could be the basis of solidarity in which care is **recognised as an important value for society**. Care is not a private matter but a political issue.
3. In practice, that would mean recognition of **caring professions**, financial recognition of **individuals caring for minors, the durably ill or disabled or elderly relatives**, and the reduction of their risks of poverty.
4. The efforts that are aimed at **easing the tension between paid work and care activity, by creating an equal relationship between men and women within a family** ('men should also change nappies') **are simply not enough**. The research revealed that, irrespective of whether the task is performed by women or men, **the systemic conditions of care do not exist** and therefore the issue cannot be resolved with the simple restructuring of the distribution of tasks within families.
5. **The usual system-conform narrative of 'work-life balance' does not manage the work-care tension satisfactorily either**, because it does not recognise the contrary interests of employers or that the two sets of interests could only be reconciled by changing the conditions of employment. More effective action is required to reduce such contradictions and to ensure that the ('care free') life of an 'ideal employee' could change in the longer term.
6. The feminist organisations **should build closer cooperation with the movements that focus on these issues**. Such organisations may include **trade unions, movements of mothers raising disabled children, those fighting for women-focused birth care, for nurses and crèche employees**.
7. Consideration should be given to the idea of **whether employment is truly a field of women's emancipation**. While economic independence is one of the fundamental interests of women, one can also see that in the current labour market situation, for most women, employment and work, provided that they have access to it, could not become the place of personal fulfilment.
8. In that context, **the criticism of the three-year parental leave should be seen in a more nuanced way too**. The criticism generally relates to the setback to a woman's career after a long absence and to their subsequent opportunities in the labour market. The women involved in our research experienced as a severe tension, the contradiction between their tasks of care (partly: desire for care) and the constraints imposed upon them by the labour market. Whether they experience the exit from the labour market as a disadvantage or an advantage, greatly depends on the quality of the labour market positions to which they have access. For those who are most heavily exploited, the parental leave can even bring temporary relief from such vulnerability. We should therefore disregard the approach that considers participation in the labour market *only* as a way of emancipation and a long period spent at home to be the pressure of a conservative ideology. Instead of reducing parental leave, efforts should focus on **improving working conditions and the volume and quality of institutional child, elderly and durably ill patient care and on how to increase the low amounts of universal benefits related to parental care and family allowance**, which have not increased for ten years in Hungary.
9. Both the focus group and survey suggest that special attention should be paid to the voice of the **women aged 50-59** soon to face retirement. They are at a point in their lives when they face special problems: instability in the labour market, difficulties in finding new jobs and having to cope with the task of caring for older family members. Due to their age, they encounter a number of situations in life that highlight societal disadvantages related

to women: employment while having young children, gender inequality at the workplace and uneven burdens in family life. Their experience should be stressed in a more organised form in order to find solutions and channelling it into activism.

- 10.** The topics arising during the research, and their descriptions, show partial overlaps with the language and main topics of Hungarian feminist activism.

a. **Intimate partner violence** was intensively discussed during the focus group interviews. The survey revealed that both men and women expressed a need for a greater role of the state in the issue. The degree of dissemination of this problem and the need for the role of the state, are strong arguments for the **ratification of the Istanbul Convention**, based on which, funds should be allocated for treating the systemic causes of violence against women and for providing more effective help to the victims.

b. The **tension between employment and care** was mentioned in the focus groups on many occasions and was referred to as a much more irreconcilable conflict than suggested by the 'work-life balance' phrase. The survey confirmed the same: this tension caused the most serious problem for women.

c. The social disadvantages related to care are not limited to childcare. Care for **elderly, disabled or durably ill** relatives is barely covered in the discourses dedicated to the situation of women in society, while it is an extremely important topic according to the statements of women.

- 11.** The women participating in the research **do not express these problems in a language antagonising to men**. Naturally, all this may be explained with the fact that women lack a set of concepts needed to recognise oppression or that they are unable/do not dare to make a clear statement, specifically due to the nature of oppression. All in all, it seemed to us that there is no demand for the confrontation

reflected in the 'gender struggle'. **A language should be found to express structural disadvantages that grasps the inequalities in the opportunities and potentials in life of women and men in the same position in society without questioning the (low number and fragile) individual trust-based relationships.**

- 12.** More public discussion about the special problems around the living and working conditions of women would serve as a frame through which the existing structural gender inequalities would become more visible. Besides increasing awareness of the societal conditions of men and women, emphasis should also be put on initiatives that recognise the provision of care as an activity important and valuable to society rather than an impediment to employment, irrespective of whether it is provided by a woman or a man.

- 13. Families and small communities** are the only groups that people trust. They should be reinforced and all actors committed to gender equality should come up with meaningful ideas in relation to them.

- 14.** Even if **small communities** cannot be expected to come up with solutions for systemic problems, they can be the first step in the **reorganisation of the fabric of society** and, in a longer-term bottom up activism, which will be one of the main tasks in Hungary over the coming years.

- 15.** In summary, strategies are required that take into account a wider interpretation framework than the current political opportunities:

- a. processes of the last thirty years including feminist activism being trapped in the framework of civil organisations;
- b. Hungary's situation on the semi-periphery and the economic determination of feminist demands;
- c. the reflection of global economic and geopolitical processes in the global crisis of care, in the migration crisis and even beyond;
- d. the systemic preconditions of gender equality beyond the desired norm changes.

About the authors

Anikó Gregor is an assistant professor at ELTE University, Faculty of Social Sciences, where she delivers quantitative and qualitative research methodology courses. In research, she focuses on the sociology of gender. She is the author or co-author of a number of studies examining relations of neoliberalism, feminism and the system of gender inequalities. Earlier she was in charge of a research group at ELTE, which examined the presence of sexism and sexual violence myths as well as the experience of sexual or other sexual-based forms of violence among the students of the university.

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