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## Original research article

# Labour market opportunities of women with young children after childbirth

Anita R. Fedor, Andrea Toldi \*

University of Debrecen, Faculty of Health, Nyíregyháza, Hungary

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## ABSTRACT

A survey of 427 women which focussed on attitudes and factors affecting decisions concerning childcare leave (and a return to the workforce) was conducted in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, Hungary in 2014. Previous studies have shown that Hungarian women raising children are less employed (40%) compared to the EU28 average of 63%. In this empirical study of Hungarian women with young children, two sub-groups were identified: those who had returned to work following childcare leave, and those still on childcare leave. Both groups preferred to be exclusively a mother for the first 3 years of the child's life. Those still on childcare leave plan to return to work 6 months later than those who have returned, and those with more children under the age of 5 plan to stay at home longer before returning to work. Divorced or single mothers returned to the labour force earlier than those who are married. The length of time spent on maternity was not related to having a civil or public job, but was related to the level of qualifications (as mothers with lower qualifications returned to work earlier). A “partner bonus” effect was noticed only for those who returned to work earlier, which indicates that they could return to work because there was a caregiver for the child at home. All mothers wanted to (and did) invest in the “social capital of their child”.

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## Introduction

The research focused on the labour market activity of women with young children and their (re)integration into the labour market. One of the main aims was to determine those factors and variables that effect how the mothers' judge their own situation and their chances in the market as well as their subsequent plans and decisions on whether and when to return to the labour market following childcare leave.

Although the employment situation in Hungary seems to be more favourable than in the past, research shows that a poor labour market situation for women is still a common phenomenon. Employment disadvantages between males and females are not unique to Hungary, and similar situations can be found in several EU countries. In 2014, the average difference between the employment of men and that of women was 12.5% when calculated within the same community. In Hungary there has been a 10% average difference between the employment of men and women in recent years [1].

\* **Corresponding author:** Andrea Toldi, University of Debrecen, Faculty of Health, Sóstói str. 2–4, 4400 Nyíregyháza, Hungary;  
 e-mail: [toldine.andrea@foh.unideb.hu](mailto:toldine.andrea@foh.unideb.hu)  
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Before the change of the system, the employment rate for women was one of the highest in Europe, mainly due to the complete employment. However, this rate has fallen and is below the average of the European Union State Members [2]. The reasons for the unfavourable indices for men can be explained by labour market causes, and the high number of men who get a pension-like benefit, or are inactive due to other causes. For women, mainly mothers with young children contribute to the low activity rate [3].

Today, the greatest challenge for women is to decide between children and work. Experts agree that instead of forcing women to decide, they should instead be allowed to make individual decisions or rely on their inner drive. Priorities in their career should be set by themselves; they should decide between work and family, or to try to find a balance between them. The dual-salary family pattern has changed the attitude of women: they are less likely to be satisfied with only the roles of a mother and a wife, however, the exclusive role of a working woman is unacceptable for many of them. The most common career is the so-called “double career”, due to either financial pressure or the desire for self-realization, however, they both influence the final decision [4, 5].

The increasing employment of women has special importance both in Hungary and the European Union. Women’s employment raises another question, namely, how to balance children, family duties and work, and how to have children and be in the labour market at the same time.

One of the most important aspects of the EU’s employment strategy is to harmonize the multiple roles of women. Overburden due to conflicts between work and family life, as well as little free time, might also withhold women with young children from participating in training courses and creating new contacts. Although the conditions of how to achieve balance between work and private life are still not appropriate, more and more efforts are being taken to solve this problem [6]. Successful or unsuccessful reintegration into the labour market after childbirth determines the well-being of the person. Work and the income derived from it contribute to the quality of life of the individuals and the families, and can help to form their self-rated subjective health state [1, 7]. Based upon observations, women’s work experience curve is flatter and its growth is lower than that of men. This may be explained by the fact that women, due to the division of housework and their role in raising children, are less bound to the labour market [8].

This is confirmed by the research results of Fényes [9], who studied the labour market disadvantages of women and the disadvantages of men that appear in the field of education. Engler [10] investigates the labour market returns, and studies women with young children (what do they do while they are at home with their children).

They are not present in the labour market, their earnings and activities (primarily during childbearing and child care) are interrupted several times, and thus they cannot accumulate as much work experience as their male and childless female counterparts. In this sense, having children can be seen as a labour market disadvantage. In other words, having a child keeps women away from

work, which can lead to exclusion depending on the duration of the time spent away from the labour market. However, having children is useful on both individual and social levels. Exclusion from the labour market happens involuntarily, thus it is the obligation of society to create the possibility of integration for the involuntarily excluded [1, 4].

## Materials and methods

Sampling was performed in several stages with the help of the health care service. First, settlement types were determined from 11 sub-regions of the county, which included 25 towns and 204 small towns. From these, 21 representative municipalities were selected to represent all settlement types. From these 21 municipalities a list of all families with children younger than 7 was compiled. Then a representative proportion was selected at random in meetings with the health visitors to form the final sample of 427 mothers to be interviewed. The final sample consisted of 427 mothers, 212 were working mothers and 215 were on childcare leave [7, 11].

Statistical analysis was completed using the SPSS 15. Analyses included the following: Fisher’s exact test as well as the  $X^2$  to determine more accurately the significance not attributable to sample size; factor analysis; ANOVA; Kruskal–Wallis One Way Analysis of Ranks; and the Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney  $U$  test.

## Theory

In recent years, scientific interests have been focusing on research studies analyzing and explaining the labour market behaviour of women raising young children. It is due to labour market and demographic factors. According to the representatives of the sociological approach, although it is beyond rational consideration following norms also plays an important role in the individual’s economic actions. The decision situation must be interpreted in a broader context, and this point of view goes beyond the individual level. As opposed to the economic approach, sociology puts stress on the individual and the family environment. Sociologists point out that individual preferences have great importance when making decisions about employment and child bearing. In addition, the motivation of female labour is strongly determined by the possibility of achieving balance between work and family life. All these facts outline that it is not only the individual motives that influence the form of decisions, but the family environment and the institutional influences also have a great impact on them [12].

According to the economic approach, the decision on child bearing is based on the rational decision theory; the calculation of costs and benefits as a result of having a child. In this case the child appears as goods that has both costs and benefits. Thus having children means long-term expenditures, as their existence continuously burdens the family budget [13]. According to the economic approach, income does not uniformly affect women with

young children. Human capital theories claim that the composition of the supply side varies, it consists of people with different school education level and this difference also appears in their work wages or salaries. In the case of staying away from the labour market due to child bearing, labour market income appears as the predictor of opportunity costs [14]. As this theory states, the higher the wage the more loss it will mean when the mother steps out of the labour market [15].

The opportunity of the economic approach is that the motivation of women rearing young children is largely determined by the presence of the husband; his qualification and his economic activity. Human capital theories say that qualifications and labour market experience, which are an investment into human capital, predicts chances of employment. Taking all the previously mentioned into consideration, it can be assumed, that women with children, who have higher qualification and who have a deeper embeddedness into the labour market, can choose an economically rational decision if they spend less time on childcare leave, because the labour market opportunity cost resulting from child bearing can be reduced in this way.

### **Employment of women in international comparison**

Prior to the political transition, the employment level of women stood at the forefront of Europe, and “in 1990 it even surpassed the average indicators of the member states of the European Union by 18%” [4, p. 10]. However, in 2013, the employment rate of Hungarian women (58.6%) is below the average of the member states of the European Union (66.0%).

In the Eastern-European member states, the employment rates of both women and men are lower than the European Union average. In the 28 member states of the European Union the average percentage of employment for 15–64 year old men is 77.9% and for women it is 66.0%. Comparable average percentage applies in Hungary – 71.0% and 58.6% [16]. Significant lag can be seen for both genders.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the two-earner family model has been typical to Hungary. Due to the change of economic structure after the political transition, the spreading of significant unemployment and therefore the spreading of other types of inactivity rewrote

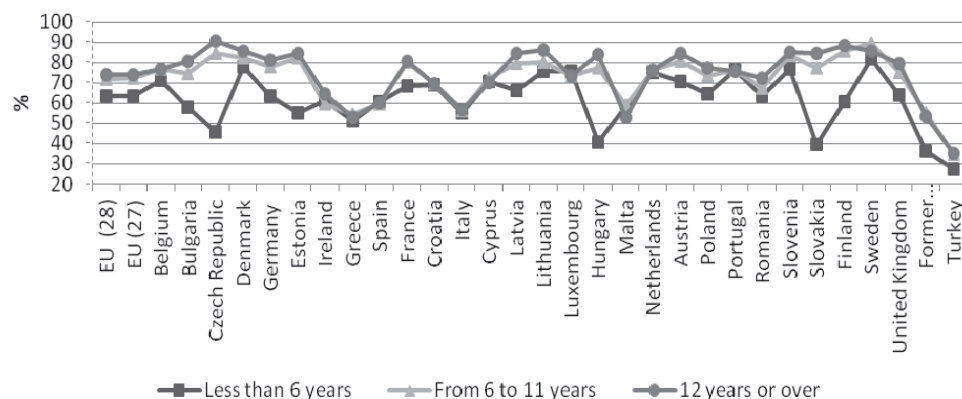
the employment situation. Its stabilization happened in the second half of the 90s. In 2007, both parents worked in 44% of families rearing children under 14, and the rate of families where only one parent was employed was nearly the same (45%). However, in 10% of families both parents were unemployed.

Among women, discontinuation of paid work is a general phenomenon, which can primarily be connected to child bearing. Supported by the research results of Bálint and Köllő [17], it can be stated that in international comparison Hungarian mothers spend a relatively long period at home with their children. Between 1997 and 2005, women stayed at home on childcare leave for 3.7–4.7 years on average [17]. The number and age of children show a connection with the employment rate of women with young children. The Eurostat data collection serves as the basis of its comparative analysis.

Female employment in Hungary is very low (see Chart 1). Compared to the 63% in the EU 28 member states, only 40% of the Hungarian women raising children under the age of 6 are employed. This is almost 23% less than the EU28 average. However, it should be noted that the Hungarian family policy institutional system offers a parental leave up to a maximum of three years for women after childbirth.

The former Yugoslavia, nowadays the Republic of Macedonia (36.2%), and Turkey (27.7%), have an even more unfavourable situation than Hungary. The percentage of employed women with children under the age of 6 is very high in Sweden (81.6%), while in Slovenia, Portugal, the Netherlands, Austria, Luxemburg and Lithuania this percentage is over 70%.

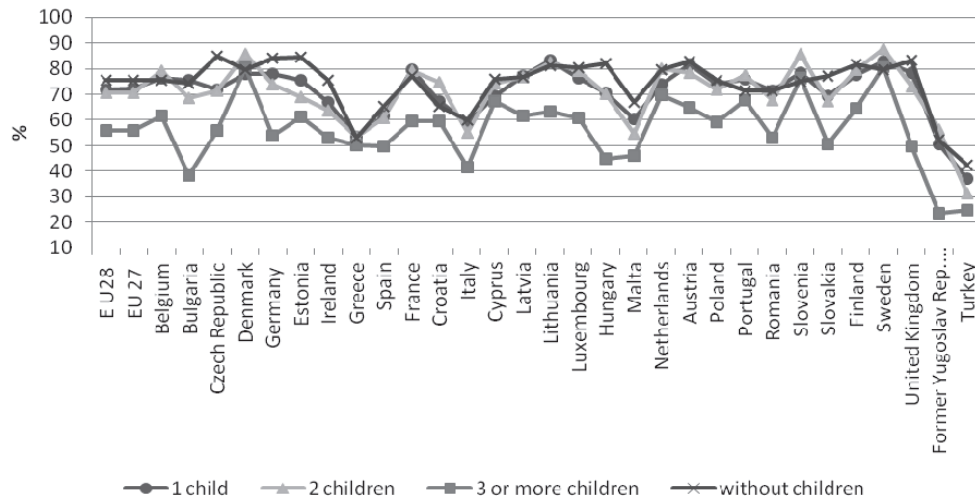
The age of children is also related to the employment of women. With the increasing age of the child higher percentage of women is employed. In most countries, the employment rate of women raising children between 6–11 years of age shows a sharp increase over those raising children under the age of 6. The increase in employment in the next group (children above the age of 12) was not significant. In Hungary, the employment rate of women raising children between 6–11 years of age increases from 40.6% to 77.3%. For women raising 12-year-old or older children, the employment increases to 84.2%, almost reaching the average employment level of Sweden and exceeding the EU 28 average by 10%.



**Chart 1 – Rate of employed mothers aged 25–54 years according to the age of their youngest child in 2014 [18]**

Chart 2 contains the employment rate of mothers based on the number of their children. The data clearly shows that the percentage in the employment of women without children is better (in nearly all member states) than the percentage of women raising children. In addition, there is no significant difference between the percentage in the employment of women with one and two children. The number of children a woman has clearly changes their presence in the labour market. This is especially true for women with three or more children. The percentage of

women's employment is the lowest in Malta (45.9%), where it is even lower than in Hungary (44.9%). Compared to most member states where the percentage is the most favourable (Denmark with 80.5% and Slovenia with 76.5%) and the average of the EU27 (55.8%), Hungary's low percentage is very significant. It should be noted that in Slovenia, parents on childcare leave are regarded as employed. So, all things considered, the presence of more than two children under the age of 3 shows very clearly a negative relationship to the employment rate of women.



**Chart 2 – Employment rates of women aged 25–54 years by number of children in 2014** [19]

In the developed countries, it is very important that during worktime the children of working parents can attend suitable institutions that are operated according to the rulings of the state. The operation of such an institution system has a positive effect on female employment and fertility [20].

This is well illustrated by the example of France, where the majority of women work (59% of the mothers raising children younger than 3) and the fertility rate is also high (in 2012 it was 2.02%). This is due to the fact, that the essential babysitting system is available. Several factors facilitate the coordination of the work and child bearing tasks, for example the various day-care possibilities of children which help parents to choose from among a great number of alternatives. The nature of family policy highly contributes to the French women's high willingness to be employed. Childcare leave can be combined with parttime work from the very beginning, and in addition, support can be claimed for babysitting [21].

The low Hungarian employment rates have a close connection with the scarce prevalence of part time employment. All the experts on this topic, Frey [2], Koncz [4], Bálint and Köllő [17], and Blaskó [20], consider part time work very important. However, they also reveal that part time work in its present form is unable to solve the employment problems of women with young children.

Upbringing of small children influences the employee's attitude towards returning back to work as well as it shows

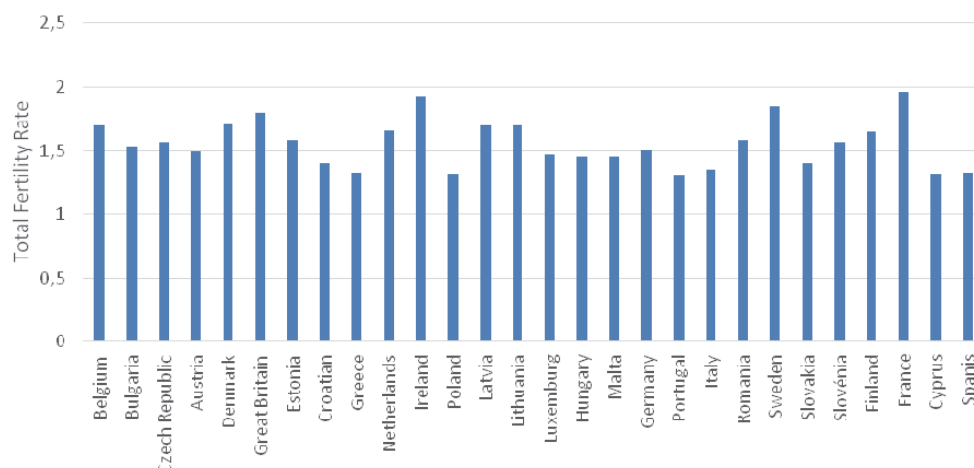
gender differences. It motivates men to be employed, but keeps women away from being employed [2, 9, 22].

In Hungary, the rate of birth declined steadily between 1991 and 1998. The consequence is that from the mid-1990s the total fertility rate has fluctuated between 1.57 and 1.24 [15]. This means that the Hungarian reproduction rate is very low and would require a fertility rate of 2.1. The 2015 data (see Chart 3) shows that although Hungary still belongs to Europe's low fertility countries (1.45), the country's relative situation has improved. While earlier, Hungary was among the countries with the worst fertility rate, now the Hungarians are on the top of the lower third. Among the 28 Member States of the European Union, the indicators are worse for Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia and Italy. Poland is in the worst position (1.32). France (1.96), Ireland (1.92), Great Britain (1.8), Denmark (1.71), Belgium (1.7) have the most favourable data.

## Results

As shown in Table 1, the age distribution of some in the sample varies widely, with the oldest being 44 (years) and the youngest 18 (years). The majority (76.1%) are between 25 and 36 years, which demonstrates the general trend towards having children later in life in Hungary. Having a child has been significantly delayed in the past ten years,





**Chart 3 – Total fertility rate in the European Union in 2015 [23]**

and at present, on average Hungarian women have their first child at age 30 [15]. For this sample, the average age for the first childbirth was 25.6, which is 4.4 years earlier than the Hungarian average [15].

The majority of women studied were raising only 1 child, reflecting the Hungarian demographic trend where 53.6% of mothers have only 1 child, 37.9% have 2 children, 7.3% have 3 and 1.2% have 4 or more children. The average number of children in the sample (1.56) was much greater

than the national average of 1.25 in Hungary. The vast majority (44%) of the mothers have graduated from high school (GCSE) and have a high school diploma (31%), 13.6% have a vocational certificate, this is followed by those who have completed elementary school (4.5%) and by those who have not completed elementary school (1.6%). The overrepresentation of women with a high school diploma and a high school graduation compared to the population may be attributed to their willingness to be interviewed.

**Table 1 – Number of children, school qualification and marital status**

Distribution of child number according to qualification (N = 427)		Distribution according to school qualification (N = 405)		Distribution according to marital status (N = 412)	
One child	53.6%	Less than 8 classes	1.6%	Married	79.1%
Two children	37.9%	8 classes	4.4%	Cohabitation	14.0%
Three children	7.3%	Skilled worker	13.6%	Divorced	1.4%
Four and more children	1.2%	Graduated from high school	44.0%	Widow	0.2%
Did not respond	0.0%	Degree holder	31.1%	Unmarried	1.6%
Together	100.0%	Did not respond	5.2%	Did not respond	3.7%
		Together	100.0%	Together	100.0%

The most important outcome of the research is that there was a difference in the level of time spent on childcare leave between those still on leave and those who have returned to work. On average, those still on leave, plan to restart work 6 months later than those who have already returned to work. For those still on childcare leave at the time of the interviews, when to restart work seems to be in the very distant future and is idealized. Other factors such as taking the child to kindergarten, finding a babysitter while the mother was working, the pressure generated by the demand in the labour market, or the low amount of maternity care in the 3rd year were not yet problems in this early phase of motherhood. Consequently, these factors did not influence the mothers' labour market reintegration planning.

A significant relationship was found between the number of children and returning to work. The author's hypothesis was supported in both sub-groups; the number of children slows/restricts the mother's reintegration into the labour market in that the more children she has the greater the length of time before returning to work. When there is more than one under-aged school child in the family, the mother takes this fact into consideration. She can pay more attention to the other under school-aged children while she is on childcare leave with the youngest one. This is an increased payoff for being at home, and can lead to a decision to not return to work due to the additional positive impact of spending more time with the other children.

For both working mothers and those still on childcare leave, having two-year old or even younger children noticeably influenced when mothers on childcare leave return to the labour market. Having a child under the age of 2 results in a longer time spent at home, while having a child above the age of 2 increases their readiness to work. This finding supports the hypotheses that the child's age affects the return to work and those with younger children will stay at home longer.

Hypothesis if a workplace means safety then the mothers will stay longer on childcare leave was not supported for both groups who work as civil or public servants. The underlying reason appears to be school qualifications and not the sector they belong to, since the majority of those who have a degree or have completed secondary school work in the public sector, have workplaces that are considered to be safe. The relationship supports the thesis concerning the theory of human capital.

Participating in training courses does not significantly modify the date of returning to work in either of the groups. Studying prepares mothers for taking on paid jobs. When the tuition fee is paid by the state it strongly motivates the mothers' willingness to study. Half of the respondents would not mind learning if training courses were free or offered at discount price for mothers with young children.

The hypothesis about a "partner bonus" effect was supported, but only for mothers still on childcare leave. Married mothers are planning to return to work at the latest time, while those living in a common-law relationship are planning it a bit earlier. The earliest date was given by single mothers or divorced mothers. There is no relationship between working mothers' labour market integration and their marital status. The financial activities of fathers do not give an explanation for setting the date of returning to work. In contrast, school qualification does have a significant role in it. When fathers have a higher school qualification it leads to an earlier return to work for mothers still on childcare leave, as well as for mothers who have already returned to work. The hypothesis that having a spouse with high human capital will postpone the date of mother's returning to work was not supported.

The fathers' role in household chores is significant, but it is different in the sub-groups. A number of respondents who could not rely on their partner's help planned the earliest return to work. Mothers already in the workforce who had partners that helped them regularly returned to work the earliest. This implies that the presence of a helper provides the mother with a balanced, problem-free period to be spent at home. Regarding the working mothers, the helper provides a safe background, which makes it possible for the mother to find a balance between family and career, thus there is no need to postpone the date of returning to the labour market. These findings all support Coleman's theory about social capital [24].

Choice between different career models was examined based upon the structural endowment of women, since the authors' survey on value preferences has shown that qualified mothers are less likely to insist on traditional gender roles than those with low school qualifications. Regarding the mothers still on childcare leave, the authors' hypothesis was supported in that the least qualified

mothers are planning to return to work later than women with a degree (who intend to return earlier). The picture is more nuanced in the case of mothers already working, since the ones who return to work the earliest are mothers who have completed secondary school. This result might be accounted for by material reasons, because the financial risks of having a baby fall heavily on them, and the low amount of the maternity allowance in its third year is not sufficient to remain home. For mothers with a secondary school graduation the earlier return to work is a kind of profit sacrifice, because they decide not to take the full term of childcare leave due to rational and financial reasons. This contradicts the economic theory of the family; men put all the effort into the labour market presence providing the financial support for the family, while women devote their energy and resources to domestic activities in order to run the house and create family cohesion [14].

Mothers with the lowest school qualification are most likely to stay at home with the child even beyond the three years, while mothers who have completed secondary school or have a higher education degree do not. It appears that the reason mothers with a low school qualification plan to stay home longer and not return to work is that there is very little difference between the unfavourable wage in the labour market and the amount of maternity allowance. In addition to the lack of difference between wages and childcare leave allowances, the decision to stay home is amplified by the argument to stay at home for a longer time. It has become obvious that mothers with small human capital tend to stay away from the labour market for a longer time, while mothers with higher school qualifications plan to return to the labour market earlier. However, in this sample, the dynamics of the return of working mothers with secondary school qualification or a degree of higher education contradicts research outcomes of this field, since mothers with secondary school attainment return to work the earliest. A dilemma is present in the attitude of mothers with a degree. On the one hand, the early return of highly qualified mothers supports the predictions of human capital theories; the career suspension of mothers with more favourable labour market attachment is likely to yield significant loss in human capital. The longer the career suspension, the bigger the loss. On the other hand, a small part of these mothers took advantage of full term childcare leave. To find the explanation it is worth examining the notion of homogamy. According to homogamy, individuals in a marriage have similar human capital; therefore in families which possess this resource, the mothers' return to the labour market does not seem necessary.

The effect of social capital within the family has been examined through time investment in children, the merit of worry for them and how tasks are shared between the partners. Research has shown that both mothers still on childcare leave and mothers already at work have invested much time into the social capital of their children by spending quality time with them before going back to work. Pusztai [25, 26] examines the impact of social capital within the family in the context of school career. In addition, rarely have they relied on someone's help to look after the child or placed them in a crèche. It can be demonstrated that concern and worry about the child

definitely has an influence on the timing of restarting work. The more worried the mothers are, concerning their capability to spend enough time with the child, the later they postpone the date of their reintegration into the labour market. The presence of a helper may reduce this level of anxiety.

## Discussion

Mothers experience having children as a clear labour market disadvantage. However, a significant majority of mothers consider it important to have a job, but several factors make it difficult to start working after childcare leave. Nevertheless, most of the mothers are committed to being only mothers for three years. According to the research results, mothers have difficulty in balancing the eight-hour work schedule and family tasks. Although women with young children would prefer a part-time job, from employment policy point of view, it does not provide a realistic perspective for most families due to the current part-payment. A solution for the mothers' integration problems in the labour market is also considered important for both employment and population policy. If mothers' employment, childbearing and childcare do not appear as competing alternatives in the life of families, there is no obstacle to raise the employment rate of mothers and the implementation of family planning.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, women in both sub-groups basically preferred being exclusively a mother for all the three years. They gave voice to their opinion that staying at home with the child for three years will bring a profit in terms of the child's healthy development, and a good and long-term mother-child relationship. Accepting the three-year childcare leave is a result of strong and traditional social history, a cultural imprint, in which the identification with the expected behaviour can also be seen. However, three quarters of mothers who already work and almost half of the mothers who are still on childcare leave went back (or were planning to go back) to work before the child turned three years old. This implies that mothers' ideas on the planned date of returning to the labour market have restrictions.

The research figures have shown that the length of childcare leave that a mother can take is hindered or promoted by economic, social and human capital, which tailor the strategy of when and how to integrate into the labour market. The differences between the planned and realized data of restarting work are mainly due to the influential power of the above mentioned types of capital, since in the case of mothers already working the end of the process was seen, while for mothers still on childcare leave these factors have not affected their choice yet; they are still in the process.

## Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this article.

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