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## **Chapter 16**

### **The economic crisis and women's part-time work in Hungary**

Erika Kispeter

#### **Introduction**

Women in Hungary, as elsewhere, often seek part-time work to reconcile work and family responsibilities. Unlike many Western European countries, historically the rate of part-time work in Hungary has been very low. Some argue that low rates of part-time work contribute to the country's large maternal employment gap. During the economic and financial crises the share of part-time employment among women increased a great deal: from 5.8 percent in 2007 to 9.8 percent in 2012 ([HCSO 2017](#)). This chapter aims to explore the impact of the crisis on women's work in Hungary at the microlevel, based on qualitative data gathered from focus groups of mothers of young children.

The analysis presented in this chapter complements the existing macrolevel studies on the gendered labor market effects of the crisis in Hungary ([European Commission 2013](#); [Frey 2014](#)). Focusing on women's experience of finding employment during the financial crisis and the way they make sense of their work-care decisions, I will discuss how employment opportunities were shaped by the crisis. I will also examine the ways in which the crisis shaped women's gender ideologies, in particular their beliefs about combining paid work and childcare.

The key finding of this study is that a group of mothers, who lived in the more developed areas of Hungary and had access to some formal or informal childcare, benefited from the financial crisis in an unexpected way and found it easier than before to find part-time jobs. These job opportunities were created in reaction to the crisis and national government policy. I argue that the sense of insecurity associated with the crisis shaped women's decisions about paid work and

childcare and made it easier for mothers of young children to resist societal pressures and resume work before their children reached the age of three.

The analysis is based on qualitative data, collected in five focus groups, which were conducted in 2013 in a relatively prosperous city in the Western part of Hungary. The city was selected because its local economy was strongly affected by the crisis ([HCSO 2010](#)) due to close links between its local manufacturing industry and global companies.<sup>1</sup> Mothers of young children were invited to participate in five focus groups, to which they were assigned according to their current parental leave status and formal educational qualifications. The groups included a total of thirty-one women, with the youngest participant in her early twenties and the oldest in her forties. Of these, fourteen women worked part-time or flexible hours during or immediately after their parental leave; some of them were employed formally, while others worked informally and received cash-in-hand payments.

Participants were initially recruited via local civil society organizations that organize activities for children and families or support parents. The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. I read, reread, and coded the Hungarian language texts until patterns emerged. All translations in this chapter are mine. Names and some personal details have been changed to protect participants' privacy.

### **Theoretical considerations: mothers' paid work**

In this section I will draw on two closely linked bodies of scholarship: theories of mothers' inclusion in the labor market and debates about women's work-care decisions. I will include literature that is specific to Hungary or the wider post-state socialist context.

Feminist scholarship on gender and work has shown that mothers of young children may be excluded from or marginalized in paid work because they do not conform to the norm of the

“ideal worker,” one who is free of caregiving responsibilities ([Acker 1990](#); [Hochschild 1997, 2005](#)). At the same time, in certain feminized segments of the labor market, mothers may be the preferred choice of employers: as Rubery and Wilkinson argue, “the domestic circumstances of married women” make this group a source of flexible, cheap, yet committed labor ([1994](#), 31–32). In all state-socialist societies, mothers’ participation in paid work was the norm: it was, in fact, an important element of the Marxist-Leninist project of women’s emancipation and the state’s commitment to full employment ([Fodor 2003](#); [Molyneux 1981](#); [Zimmermann 2010](#)). To reconcile the demands that full-time paid work and caring for young children place on women, an extended maternity leave (until the child’s third birthday) with a job guarantee was introduced in Hungary in the late 1960s. Although this later became a gender-neutral parental leave policy, it continues to be used almost exclusively by mothers. Paid child-care leave days are also available for parents to look after their children when they are sick. These “maternalist” policies ([Haney 2002](#)) supported women’s inclusion in the workforce, but at the same time contributed to their segregated and inferior position in terms of pay, prestige, and access to managerial authority ([Fodor 2003](#)), constructing women as “worker-mothers” rather than “workers” ([Einhorn 1993](#), 40; [Haney 2002](#)).

After the collapse of state socialism the existing maternalist work-family policies remained in effect in Hungary.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a new, even longer parental leave was introduced and central government support for day care for children under the age of three was withdrawn in an attempt to reduce unemployment by withdrawing mothers of young children from the labor market ([Kampichler and Kispeter 2014](#)).

Although parental leave regulations continue to include a job guarantee, employers in the private sector now have considerable freedom in hiring and firing decisions, and rampant discrimination

against mothers of young children emerged in the post-socialist period ([Blaskó 2011](#); [Glass and Fodor 2011](#); [Szalai 2006](#)). This is exacerbated by the fact that hiring and dismissing employees in Hungary is relatively easy and inexpensive, according to an international comparison ([Cazes and Nesporova 2007](#)). The maternalist policies are often quoted by employers as justification for not hiring mothers of young children, who they claim are less reliable and more costly employees than men or childless women ([Glass and Fodor 2011](#)). Part-time work, a common method of work-family reconciliation, remains rare in Hungary although research has demonstrated that that middle managers and more senior staff may be allowed to work part-time or to work from home when their children are young, as companies are keen to retain their trusted employees ([Glass and Fodor 2011](#); [Oborni 2009](#)).

In countries where child-care services and other work-care supports are not available, part-time employment has played a key role in promoting mothers' paid work ([Hegewisch and Gornick 2011](#)). However, in countries where good quality childcare is available and affordable, there is no clear link between motherhood and part-time work ([Lyonette 2015](#)). Rates of part-time work among employed women vary widely, from over 70 percent in the Netherlands and almost 50 percent in Germany to around 10 percent in Hungary and Poland in 2015 ([Eurostat Database 2017](#)).

Part-time workers often have a segregated or even marginalized position in the workforce, characterized by poor work conditions and low pay ([Grimshaw and Rubery 2007](#)). Among those with higher educational qualifications, part-time work often involves “working under potential,” as part-time jobs typically are not available at senior levels ([Grant et al. 2005](#)). However, many women say they like working part-time (e. g. [Scott and Dex 2009](#)). A study conducted in Hungary in the early 2000s found that a quarter of women outside the labor force and 18 percent

of those on parental leave said they would resume work if they could take a part-time job ([Frey 2002](#)). A recent qualitative study found that lacking reliable, accessible and affordable childcare, Hungarian mothers of young children could not meet the demands of full-time, inflexible jobs on offer in the formal labor market and they turned to informal work ([Fodor and Kispeter 2014](#)). The second body of scholarship relevant to the analysis in this chapter is about women's work-care decisions. After long debates about women's so-called "choices" between paid work and family responsibilities (e. g. [Hakim 2002, 2003](#); [Crompton and Lyonette 2007](#)), there is consensus in the research community that work-care decisions are influenced by multiple structural and interactional factors as well as an individual's gender ideology. In other words, mothers' decisions are necessarily constrained. The concept of gender strategy, defined as an attempt to implement one's gender ideology in everyday life, given the opportunities and constraints ([Hochschild 1989](#)) is very useful when analyzing such decisions.

Hungarians hold rather conservative gender ideologies ([Blaskó 2005](#); [Takács 2008](#)). [Takács et al. \(2011\)](#) have shown that among the seventeen European societies they examined, Hungary was the only one where traditional attitudes to the gender division of labor did not decline between 2005 and 2010. Furthermore, while employees in most countries started to attribute higher value to the security of employment over this time period, employed women in Hungary continued to value the work-family balance aspect of jobs above all else. Regarding the employment of mothers with small children, "maternalist" parental leave policies and the gender ideology embedded in them, which focuses only on children's assumed needs, have mutually strengthened each other over the decades, establishing the "magical" status of children's third birthday and naturalizing the belief that children are not ready for day care before this age ([Szikra and Haskova 2012](#)). [Blaskó \(2011\)](#) has shown that while individual mothers do not necessarily share

this maternalist gender ideology, it provides the discursive framework in which most work-care decisions are made, and mothers who take shorter parental leaves also make sense of their decisions by referring to their children's needs.

## **The Hungarian labor market and policy context**

### *Women's position in the labor market*

In the transition from a centrally planned to a market economy in the early 1990s, over a million jobs were lost—more than 20 percent of the total employment of Hungary at the time. Men and women were affected by these losses relatively equally ([Frey 2014](#)), but women's position in the labor market was weakened further by the backlash against their state socialist emancipation ([Frey 2014](#)).

In 2007, just before the financial and economic crisis hit Hungary, women's employment rate<sup>3</sup> was 51 percent, lower than the OECD average (57 percent) ([OECD 2013](#)). However, the female full-time equivalent employment rate (50 percent) was almost equal to the OECD figure (51 percent) for the same year, which indicates that the relatively few employed women worked long hours ([OECD Database 2017](#)). In 2012, immediately after the crisis, women's employment rate was slightly higher at 52 percent but the full-time equivalent rate did not change, which also shows that the women who entered the labor force tended to work fewer hours.

The “maternal employment gap,” defined as the difference between the employment rate of women aged 25–49 years with at least one child below the age of 12 and their counterparts without such children was 29.9 percentage points in Hungary in 2010—the largest in the European Union ([Miani and Hoorens 2014](#)). This sizable gap is likely to be caused by the lack of child-care services and jobs suitable for mothers of young children as well as the maternalist gender ideology.

### *Parental leaves and public childcare services*

New mothers who were employed before the birth of their child are entitled to a twenty-four-week paid maternity leave and to receive 70 percent of their previous pay. After this period, either parent (provided they are employed) is entitled to the insurance-based parental leave until the child's second birthday and to receive 70 percent of their former pay (with a rather low cap of twice the minimum wage). After the child's second birthday, either parent can take the universal parental leave, with a flat-rate benefit that equals the amount of the minimum old age pension. Uninsured parents can claim the universal parental leave and benefit from the birth of the child. Parents who raise three or more children can extend the universal parental leave with the flat-rate benefit until the youngest child reaches the age of eight—many Hungarians refer to this type of parental leave as “full-time motherhood.”

Parents are allowed to work part-time while on parental leave (after the child's first birthday), but very few of them do ([HCSO 2011](#)), arguably because there are few day-care places for children under the age of three, especially in rural areas, and part-time jobs are rare. Most mothers take long parental leaves: about 10 percent of working-age women are on parental leave and counted in official statistics as outside the labor market. At the same time, less than 1 percent of those on parental leave are fathers ([Frey 2014](#)).

Publicly funded nursery places for children under the age of three are concentrated in cities, especially in the capital. About 10 percent of children between the ages of one to three are in nurseries, but almost none under the age of one ([HCSO 2012](#)).

### *The crisis and the reorganization of work hours*

Hungary was strongly affected by the crisis ([Karamessini 2014](#)), which reached the banking sector of the country in autumn 2008. Employment began to decline at the end of 2008: in the first phase,

primarily skilled male workers in the automotive, manufacturing, and construction sectors lost their jobs. By the end of 2010, the female employment rate had already reached its pre-crisis level, while that of men's remained significantly below its pre-crisis level ([Frey 2014](#)). Female employment rates bounced back due to a decrease in the number of women outside the labor market. Labor economists argue that this suggests an added worker effect: the labor supply of married women increased because their husbands became unemployed.

To cut labor costs, companies tended to freeze wages and reduce working hours in addition to layoffs. The two governments in office during the crisis (2006–2010 and 2010–2014) introduced a number of policies to mitigate the employment effects of the crisis. Employers who committed to keeping their staff, reduce working hours and use the “idle” time for training were given financial support ([Hijzen and Venn 2011](#)). This policy affected employed men and women alike. The second set of policies were aimed at mothers of young children: employers who rehired parents (in practice, mothers) returning from parental leave were also given financial support ([Szikra 2013](#)) and since 2010 public sector employers have been under a legal obligation to offer part-time jobs for employees raising a child under three ([Frey 2014](#)). It is important to emphasize that these policies have not been motivated by the goal of promoting gender equality but rather by policy makers' desire to increase the birth rate by making it easier for mothers to combine paid work and raising a family.

The share of part-time work among all employees rose during the crisis: among female employees, from 5.8 percent in 2007 to 9.8 percent in 2012 ([HCSO 2017](#)).

## **Analysis**

In this section, I analyze the focus group data, starting with the impact of the crisis on women's paid work and their work-care decisions and outlining some of their stories and reactions. Then I

discuss how the women talked about their decisions: what arguments they used and what discourses they drew on. Finally, I outline how women talked about the influence of their partners on their work-care decisions. When analyzing how the women explained their decisions about combining paid work and childcare, it is important to bear in mind that the different arguments I have identified were closely intertwined, as it will be clear from the quotations.<sup>4</sup>

### *The impact of the crisis on women's work-care decisions*

Some focus group participants reported work-care decisions that were directly linked to the financial crisis: women decided to go back to work because they had foreign currency bank loans, and as the Hungarian forint became very weak, their monthly mortgage payments skyrocketed.<sup>5</sup> Mariann, for instance, did not feel ready to go back to work, but her earnings were needed. She is working full-time, but from home:

It is very difficult to work from home. In fact, I only chose to do it because the mortgage was about as much as my parental leave pay. We were living on my partner's salary, and after a year it was quite hard. So really, it was a necessity... I went back to work, but I am working from home. (Mariann, Focus Group 2 [9 March 2013])

When she started work, however, she realized that it was very important for her to regain her financial independence: "When the first month ended, it was like coming up from under water. I didn't go shopping immediately, but it was great to know that I could." (Mariann, Focus Group 2 [9 March 2013])

Nelli said that they could have continued to live on her husband's salary despite the mortgage, but she decided to go back to work (part-time) because she needed her financial independence:

It drove me mad... The parental leave pay arrived in my bank account, and it went on immediately to pay the mortgage, and then my balance was almost zero... My husband

kept telling me that I should tell him if I needed money, which really got to me... I felt so dependent... He is the more dominant person in our relationship anyway, and this made it worse. (Nelli, Focus Group 2 [March 9 2013])

Timea was working from home to supplement the parental leave pay, but the work was drying up after the crisis hit local businesses. Luckily, she managed to find a part-time job and soon realized that she preferred going out to work. Her only complaint was that she was expected to work long hours: "I officially work six hours, but it's always more than six." She was conscious of the time she spent at work not only because she wanted to spend more time with her family, but also because she continued to do ad hoc jobs from home to supplement her part-time salary: "I also do some extra work, so that we are financially secure." (Timea, Focus Group 3, [11 March 2013]) This example shows that women may be reluctant to give up their informal "mini jobs" (Fodor and Kispeter 2014) even when formal employment is available.

The women quoted above decided to take up part-time or flexible work due to financial pressure, but discovered that they enjoyed their financial independence and the experience of leaving the home after years of parental leave.

#### *The impact of the crisis through the employers*

While many companies dismissed workers or at least did not hire new ones during the economic crisis, some employers decided that taking back women after the parental leave might benefit their business. The women whose stories are discussed below were already well known to their managers and had established a working relationship with them prior to the parental leave. In addition, as mentioned above, special policies were introduced during the crisis that provided financial incentives to companies if they hired parents returning from leaves.

Nora wanted to stay at home for three years with her children, but when she received a call from her employer asking her to resume work, she said yes, as long as she could work part-time. This way she could remain on parental leave but also keep her job:

I got a call, and they told me that I can go back, but I was only two years into the parental leave. At first, I didn't know what to do. I could have stayed at home, but what if they won't take me back in a year's time?... So ... I told the HR manager that I can work four hours a day and we'll see how the children put up with it. (Nora, Focus Group 1, [9 March 2013])

She was satisfied with this decision and now wanted to work six hours days. Nelli was the only mother in the focus groups who wanted to return before the parental leave ended and was very happy to hear that her manager wanted her back, especially as she was offered reduced working hours. She suspected that she got the job because her manager wanted to take advantage of a recently introduced government policy:

This "workplace protection action plan"<sup>6</sup> ... was certainly beneficial for me... When we sat down with my boss to see whether I can return or not, he said he would consider it, and then a couple of months later he said there was a four-hour position. He said that ... there was a budget only for four hours, and I said, that's great! (Nelli, Focus Group 2, [9 March 2013])

Regardless of what motivated her manager to offer a part-time position, Nelli felt very lucky with the part-time offer.

Renata was convinced that she was offered a job because the company could save on the social insurance contributions, which reduced the costs of employing her. She was the only person on the shop floor of the local company to have a part-time job:

A friend took my CV to the production manager and recommended me. Then I was called in to do a test, and I did okay, but I didn't hear from them for weeks. When they finally called me, they said I could have a job working twenty hours a week. (Renata, Focus Group 4, [13 January 2014])

While the women above felt happy about resuming work before they used all their parental leave, Dori felt coerced into work. She told us that her manager had unexpectedly asked her to return from parental leave, adding that if she did not take this opportunity, she would lose her job. Dori went back to work because she knew that finding another job, especially a part-time one, would be very challenging:

My boss told me that either I go back to work now, or I don't have to go back at all. At the end of the day, it is fantastic that I can work six hours a day, but my daughter is passed from one grandparent to the other, because we didn't get a kindergarten place. She's really unhappy, but there is nothing I can do about it, unfortunately. (Dori, Focus Group 3, [11 March 2013])

Even though her manager's behavior was against the Labor Code, Dori blamed the state for her situation, arguing that she had to take her employer's offer because the low parental leave benefit did not allow her to stay at home longer: "And the state doesn't help much either, with the parental leave benefit. So it's really not great at the moment." (Dori, Focus Group 3, [11 March 2013]) In contrast, a few women said they were happy to be on parental leave and receive the benefit, as their jobs were lost due to the economic crisis: "The crisis did not help jewelry shops, a lot of them closed down. Now I'm on parental leave, but I don't know what job I will find and where." (Anna, Focus Group 3, [11 March 2013])

Others were affected by the crisis through their husbands' losing their jobs or having their working hours and earnings reduced, which put pressure on the women to become "breadwinners." Emma was employed in the third year of her parental leave, earning the minimum wage. Her partner, who had a well-paid job in the local factory, often made fun of her because she earned so little. Emma was planning to reduce her working hours at least for a few months when their daughter started kindergarten (after attending the nursery), to help the child adapt to the change:

The kindergarten opens at 7:30, and I have to start work at 7:00. So I didn't know how to drop her off in the morning. I thought I would ask if I can work part-time for a few months, until she gets used to the new place. (Emma, Focus Group 4, [13 January 2014])

Then her husband suddenly lost his job, and Emma became the sole earner in the family. Although her husband soon found another though less well-paid job, Emma did not ask for a reduced hours contract but continued to work full-time and paid a babysitter (from her minimum wage) to help out in the mornings. She seemed to have learned that she could not count on her partner's income and became more committed to her own job.

Kinga learned a different lesson when she faced the insecurity of her husband's job, stating that the parental leave benefit was much more reliable than wages:

I think the main advantage of social benefits is that they are reliable. Your husband's job is not secure, but you can rely on the parental leave benefit: it will arrive on your account for two years, every month. Nowadays, this is a major advantage. (Kinga, Focus Group 3, [11 March 2013])

Most of the women quoted in this section took up jobs during the economic crisis despite their preferences. In other words, they have responded to the changing circumstances by changing their

gender strategy: they still believed that the extended parental leave is the best for children, but they adapted their behavior. Some of them felt coerced into work but their anger was not directed at their employers, rather at the state which did not offer a parental leave benefit that would be a good alternative to their wages.

In the next section, I will highlight a few examples where women talked about how their partners were involved in their decisions concerning combining paid work and childcare.

#### *The influence of partners on work-care decisions*

Nelli and her husband agreed that it was a good idea for Nelli to work for pay, but the husband insisted that self-employment was the best option, while she argued, based on her own negative experience, that it was not right for her:

My husband is still pushing me to be self-employed, because he is convinced that it's good for a mother. [He says that] "You can go home whenever you want, you can work whenever you want and you can schedule your own time." I don't think it is like that at all. When you are working from home, can you tell your children to play quietly?... My son is hanging around my neck all the time. I can't even write a single letter. (Nelli, Focus Group 2, [9 March 2013])

Other women mentioned that their partner or husband was concerned about losing his job and "encouraged" the woman to start earning while on parental leave. Erika told us that her husband kept suggesting that she should go back to work. She agreed with him that they needed more money and that she might be happier if she worked. As she explained, "My husband would like me to work part-time, for financial reasons and because he thinks it would make me happier. It's been too long, three years at home." (Erika, Focus Group 3, [11 March 2013]) However, she was not yet ready to go back, partly because she felt that her children benefitted from having a stay-at-

home mother and partly because she did not want to take any odd job that did not match her qualifications: “I have invested a lot in my studies; I am a dance therapist and I want to work as a dance therapist. This is what I like. I do not want to be a self-employed consultant.” (Erika, Focus Group 3, [11 March 2013]) She felt it was better to invest in further training, hoping that she would find a job that she likes at the end of the parental leave.

Only one mother mentioned that her partner actively supported her return to paid work by sharing childcare. Adel’s husband took the last year of parental leave with their son while she went back to a full-time job:

When I went back to work, my husband was there, he was willing to take parental leave.

Not all men are capable of this, and with the older children he wasn’t, either. But he was there for our son from the age of two to three.... That’s how I could become an employee again, working from 8:00 to 4:00. (Adel, Focus Group 2, [9 March 2013])

It is somewhat ironic that despite all the praise for flexible and part-time working options, Adel was happy to resume a regular full-time job when her husband was willing to share the child-care responsibilities.

So far the analysis has concentrated on how women responded to labor market changes during the crisis. Many of the quotes above include references to why and how they made decisions. I will now discuss how the women made sense of the developments.

#### *Arguments used when talking about work-care decisions*

Based on the discussion above, it is safe to argue that the heightened risk of unemployment and the anxiety related to the austerity measures made the employed women in our study feel insecure about their financial situation and their employment options. In response, some of them resumed work earlier than planned while others came to appreciate their existing jobs more. Nora, seemed

grateful to her employer for giving her a job at all, despite her two young children: “I really like my job because they don’t mind that I have two kids and I’m raising them alone.... The company is very understanding, or rather, my managers are, so I can’t complain.” (Nora, Focus Group 1, [9 March 2013])<sup>7</sup>

Yet women’s ideas about good mothering did not change overnight, and despite the economic crisis, they considered paid work acceptable only as long as it didn’t “harm” their children.

Veronika stated clearly that money was important but that, for her, the children came first:

When you have children, you need more money, but it is very important [to decide] how much you can work, how you can fit in work. I have three kids and they come first, so I can only work part-time. Motherhood is my full-time job, and work is part-time.

(Veronika, Focus Group 1, [9 March 2013])

Timea, a professional woman who wanted to start work during the parental leave also emphasized that it should not “harm” the child: “It’s best to start work gradually, [to get] some extra money and some experience. This would not be harmful to the child.” (Timea, Focus Group 3, [11 March 2013])

Apart from financial pressure and employment insecurity, when talking about their decisions to resume paid work, many of them referred to the tenet of popular psychology that only a happy woman can be a good mother. Women with lower- and higher-level qualifications stated that paid work makes them happy and improves their mental health:

I know that work is good for me, or doing things that I like is good for me, and if it’s good for me, it’s good for the child, too. Even if I spend less time with them, they get a mother who is in better mental health. I can be myself with them. (Adel, Focus Group 2, [9 March 2013])

In this framework, paid work is seen as something that mothers do for themselves and that makes them happier, which is also good for their children.

Another argument that many women in our study relied on when talking about their decision to resume paid work was that it provided them with “self-realization.” When Mariann, a professional, explained what she missed when not working, she said, “What I was missing the most was a sense of success and a sense of cooperation.” (Mariann, Focus Group 2, [9 March 2013])

Arguments about work being good for mothers and a form of self-realization, were interconnected and both were linked to the argument about children coming first, as the following quotation from Timea illustrates:

If I could work legally ... in a way that does not take time from the children ... that would be great. It would keep my brain active, and I would ... meet other people and use my creativity, my adult creativity. And when it's the end of the [parental leave], I could say, yes, it's me who did all these things. (Timea, Focus Group 3, [11 March 2013])

All the arguments quoted were concerned with combining work and motherhood. Another important aspect of women's gender ideologies is their beliefs about the gender division of labor with their partner. While many women criticized their partners for not sharing housework, only one of them referred to the link between her unpaid work in the household and her partner's ability to devote himself fully to his career. Anita argued that women who were fully responsible for childcare and the household because their partners worked in demanding and well-paid positions should not depend on their husbands' earnings. Rather, she claimed, the state should acknowledge their work and compensate them, interestingly, not for their care work, but for the sacrifice they make by giving up their own careers for their families. When she argued against the patriarchal

arrangement of the wife depending on her husband financially, Anita referred to a woman's right to self-realization through paid work:

For those women who are at home to ensure the background for their husband who has a high-level position and high salary, it shouldn't be the husband who gives them a monthly allowance for caregiving but the state. ... The state should honor it to some extent that the woman pushes herself into the background for a few years. (Anita, Focus Group 2, [9 March 2013])

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the ways in which the economic crisis has impacted mothers' decisions about combining paid work and childcare in a Hungarian city, focusing on women's working arrangements and the way they talked about and made sense of their decisions. As it has shown, the economic crisis opened opportunities for some mothers of young children to engage in part-time or flexible forms of paid work, a development that was the outcome of several factors, including government policies and employers' interest in reducing labor capacity and costs.

The economic crisis motivated some mothers who were on parental leave to look for jobs and reconsider their beliefs about ideal mothering, and while some women in this study felt pressured to give up full-time childcare and work for pay, most of them found something positive about their jobs in addition to their earnings.

The majority of the women interviewed for this research were happy to work part-time or from home because it made work-care reconciliation, especially child-care arrangements, easier for them. Part-time work also fit with the motherhood ideologies of these women, most of whom believed that their children would suffer harm if they worked full-time when the children were

still very young. Their gender ideology remained unchanged, but they adapted their gender strategy to the new circumstances.

When making decisions regarding paid work and childcare, the children's well-being was the most important factor. Arguments linking maternal well-being to work were also invoked, and paid work was often discussed as something that the mothers enjoy and chose to do for themselves. Professional mothers tended to emphasize the self-realization aspect of their paid work over their earnings.

Overall, I argue that this group of mothers, who lived in the more developed areas of Hungary and had access to some formal or informal childcare, benefitted from the financial crisis in an unexpected way and found it easier than before to find part-time, flexible employment. The analysis highlighted the "path dependency" of women's relationship to paid work ([Pfau-Effinger 1998](#)): the long parental leave policy which originates in state socialist policymaking had a very strong influence on women's practices and beliefs and many of them felt that it was ultimately the responsibility of the state and not that of employers to support women in combining work and childcare.

The analysis also revealed that women's relationship to paid work and their gender ideologies are shifting: they are shaped by the available employment opportunities and the wider labor market context.

Although motherhood ideologies change slowly, the general sense of insecurity associated with the financial and economic crisis made it easier for mothers to resist societal pressures and resume work before their children reach the age of three. In other words, the economic crisis shaped the ideological context in which their work-care decisions were made.

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<sup>1</sup> The city was included in the European Commission-funded project 'FLOWS: impact of local welfare systems on female labor force participation and social cohesion' as the Hungarian case study.

<sup>2</sup> This was not the case with all post-socialist countries: the maternalist arm of the welfare state has been largely dismantled in Poland ([Glass and Fodor, 2011](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Defined as a proportion of employed women of all women aged 15–64.

<sup>4</sup> Several other types of arguments were made about paid work and childcare, but here I concentrate on those that were related to the economic crisis.

<sup>5</sup> The devaluation of the Hungarian currency (forint) meant that those who had taken out foreign currency loans started to be charged very high monthly mortgage payments.

<sup>6</sup> The government policy which offered financial support to employers who rehired parents returning from leave.

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<sup>7</sup> This comment illustrates how natural it seems to have become to mothers of young children that they are routinely discriminated against in the labor market; see [Glass and Fodor \(2011\)](#).