

Marietta Pongrácz. 2006. “ Opinions on Gender Roles.” in: Ildikó Nagy, Marietta Pongrácz, István György Tóth (eds.) *Changing Roles: Report on the Situation of Women and Men in Hungary 2005*. Budapest: TÁRKI Social Research Institute. pp. 71-84.

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Opinions on Gender Roles
Findings of an International Comparative Study

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The social role of men and women, the social expectations of gender roles, and the needs of those concerned have undergone significant changes in the course of history. These changes have been most visible in the labour market, with a steady growth in the proportion of active female workers. The employment of women gained momentum in the second half of the 20th century, as a result of a decline in the average number of children. Fewer children meant better opportunities for work outside the home, but it also limited fertility and the chances of a woman having a larger family. Alongside work, the reproductive function of women has remained; this does not stop at giving birth, but includes caring for and raising children. Inherent to performing both sets of tasks is the risk of conflict involving the individual, family and work.

For social and demographic reasons, the dual burden of women is not expected to decrease, but rather is likely to grow. On the one hand, in ageing European societies, the ratio between active workers and dependants can be improved only by increasing the economic activity of women. Furthermore, the relative decrease in the proportion of older generations and the long-term sustainability of pensions funding can only be safeguarded by having more births and better fertility indicators. In other words, the fulfilment of the reproductive functions of women and families is becoming a key question of national strategy.

The tasks are clear at the macro-economic level: women must or should have more children, and at the same time they must or should work more, too. The question is, how does this problem present itself at the micro-level, i.e. among women themselves? What do women think about the importance of work and family, and what role does the balance between the two have in their lives? Given the choice, how would men and women divide up their responsibilities to family and society, and is there a difference between everyday gender roles and those deemed ideal or desirable?

We will attempt to answer these questions using data from an international comparative study conducted in 12 European countries between 2000 and 2003. Alongside an examination of the changes in partnerships and in birth patterns, this questionnaire-based study, which used a representative

sample in each country, also looked at the values and priorities related to work and family.

This international comparison of gender roles and expectations concerning paid work and family responsibilities becomes interesting and exciting as we consider the different paths that Europe's eastern and western regions have travelled to involve women in economic activity. The enforced female employment so typical of the East, with women going into jobs *en masse* and achieving high employment rates, only to be followed by a sharp decline after the political and economic upheavals of the 1990s, was fundamentally different from the gradual and steady rise in female employment rates in the West, where changes were not controlled directly from above. The question is whether these different historical backgrounds have given rise to differences in value systems, or if opinions on the priorities concerning gender roles are independent of the social impacts experienced by the different regions, and are influenced by other, non-system-specific factors.

Comparison between East and West is rendered more difficult because the questionnaire did not necessarily feature questions relevant to this topic, and therefore the scope of countries available for analysis is not the same for each question. However, the Hungarian survey included all questions relevant to the topic.¹

Work and family, work or family

The first question we examined was whether there is a difference between men's and women's priorities on the issue of 'work and family' and 'work or family', and whether there are different social expectations for men and women in terms of their family and labour market roles. The question concerning women was phrased as follows: "*Although work is important, for most women home and children are more important*" (Figure 1).

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

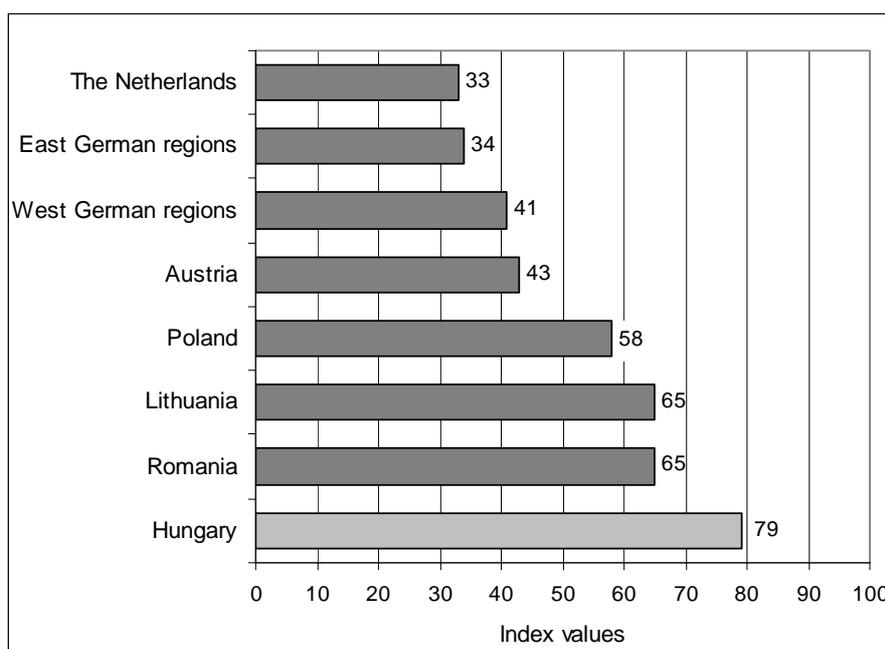
¹ Respondents were asked to rate attitude questions on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 meant 'totally disagree', and 5 meant 'totally agree'. For ease of analysis, we recalculated the responses to an index of 100—according to the practice of opinion polls. The closer the index value is to 100, the more frequent are the positive responses in the given country.

family role of women, placing a heavy emphasis on their labour market participation.

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

Figure 1

“Although work is important, for most women home and children are more important” — average values assigned to the question, recalculated on a scale of 100, in international comparison, at the turn of the millennium



How do matters stand among men? The statement regarding men's conflict between family and work was phrased as follows: *“For men, work must be more important than family”* (Figure 2).

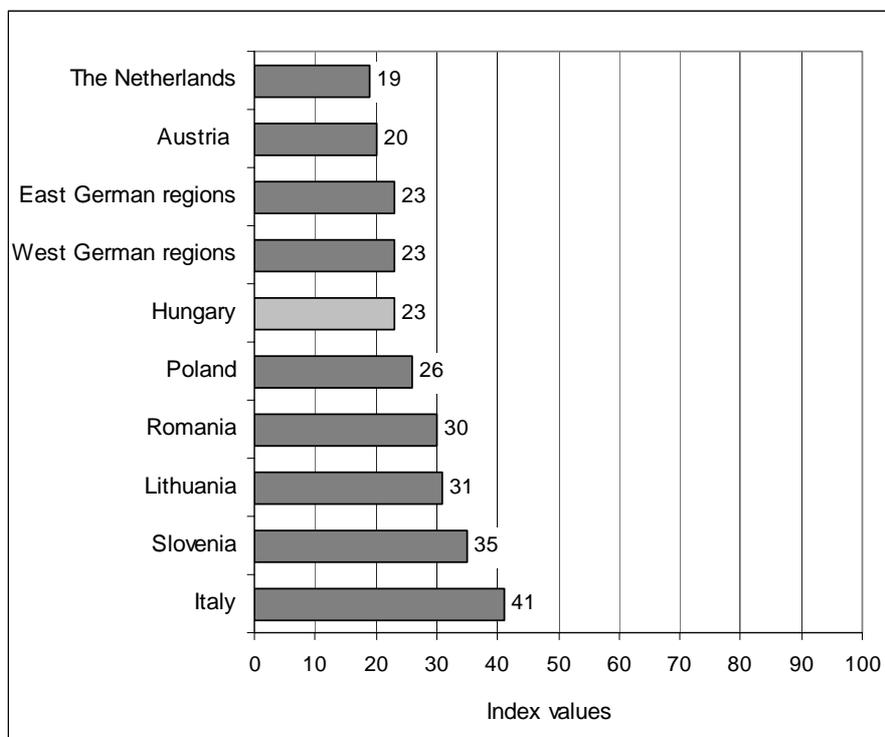
Respondents rejected this statement in all countries; in other words, they thought that family was more important than work, even for men. Comparing the responses to the two questions on the roles of men and

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women, the picture is relatively easy to interpret in countries with so-called conservative values, such as Hungary, Lithuania or Romania. In these countries, family has equal priority for men and women; that is to say, a large or overwhelming section of these societies is clearly family centred. The data from The Netherlands, Austria and Germany are harder to explain. It is more difficult to justify why men are more family centred than women in these countries.

Figure 2

“For men, work must be more important than family”—average values assigned to the question, recalculated on a scale of 100, in international comparison, at the turn of the millennium



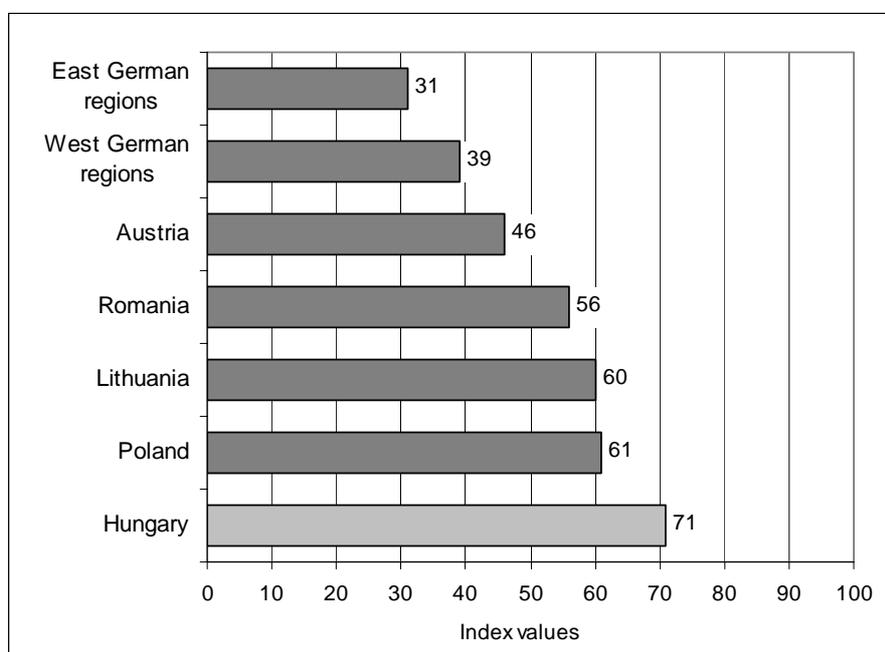
Could it be that the attitudes of women reflect efforts at emancipation, whereas men do not need to declare such reasons? Whatever the reason, the responses rather complicate matters.

In the following statement, there is an evident clash between the conservative and the modern view of gender roles: *“It is the husband’s responsibility to earn money to support his family, and the wife’s task is to perform household work”* (Figure 3).

In fact, this question reflects a division of family responsibilities that was typical of many decades ago. The majority of respondents—especially in the central and eastern parts of Europe—have only read of such patterns in books or heard about them from other people, but have never experienced them in everyday life, yet it is precisely in those countries where such a traditional allocation of gender roles is considered ideal.

Figure 3

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



Special note must be made of the very low East German and the very high Hungarian index values. The emancipated and work-centred attitudes of East German women have been demonstrated in many of our international comparative studies, and this result only reconfirms earlier findings. Nor are the Hungarian figures surprising. We examined attitudes toward women’s gainful employment for the first time in 1974.² Two-thirds of the respondents were of the opinion that, in families with children at primary school, the ideal situation would be if the husband could support the family

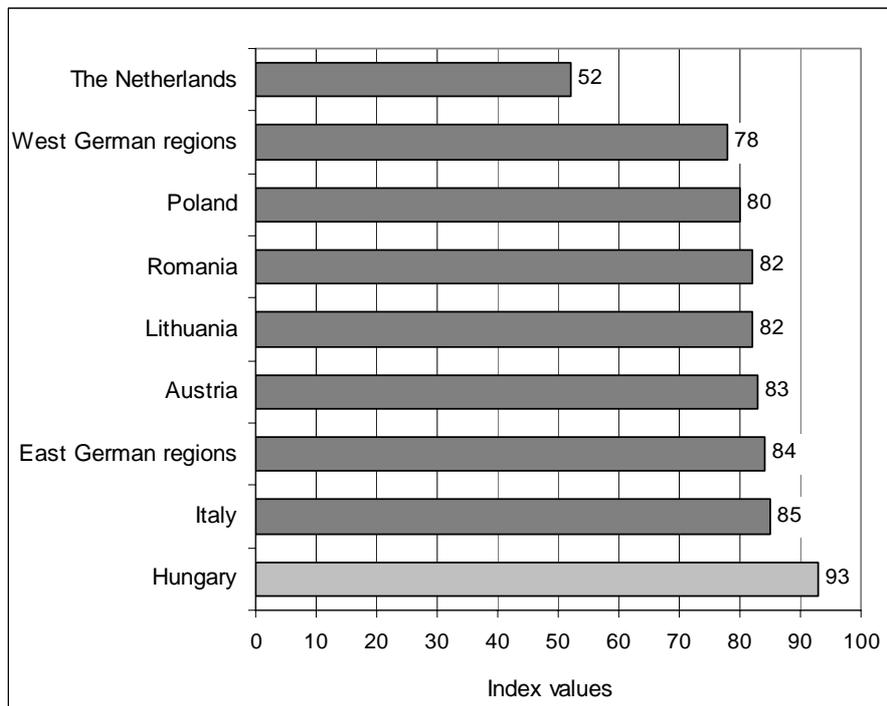
² The topic was part of an interview-based opinion poll that focused on demographic questions, performed on a representative sample of 3,000 people.

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on his salary, while the wife's responsibility would be limited to caring for the children and doing the housework. This was the opinion that was prevalent in times when around 80% of women were active workers, and when the ratio of women in their fertile years who were in employment reached 92–93%. The traditional approach to gender roles has not changed since, and indeed it appears even stronger in the 2001 research, as the question there referred not only to mothers, but to women in general. In the 26 years between the two studies much had changed in Hungarian society—first and foremost, women's educational attainment levels had increased significantly; however, these changes had no influence on the nostalgia felt for the traditional gender values and the traditional division of family commitments. It should be noted that the concept of, or desire for, the pattern of 'men acting as breadwinners and women as housewives' is very popular even among young people aged below 30 with higher than average education, as is confirmed by the 68 points on the index.

Figure 4

"Today most women must work to safeguard the livelihood of the family"—average values assigned to the question, recalculated on a scale of 100, in international comparison, at the turn of the millennium



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

Responses to the statement "*Today most women must work to safeguard the livelihood of the family*" were basically the same in all countries. Most respondents agreed that the family cannot afford to forgo the woman's salary; in other words, when it comes to the gainful employment of women, financial considerations are uppermost in all countries—with the exception of The Netherlands (*Figure 4*).

We have seen that there is a significant difference between Western and Eastern Europe in opinions on the ideal way to share out work between men and women. In everyday practice, though, the reality is somewhat different from the ideal. There are situations when the husband becomes unemployed and the wife takes over as the breadwinner in the family, thus leaving a larger share of childcare and housework to the husband. By making childcare support a parent-derived right, family policy laws have for years been trying to achieve a more balanced division of family responsibilities; yet experience shows that parental leave is never—or very rarely—taken by fathers. It appears, therefore, that a shift in family responsibilities stems from external pressure—unemployment—rather than from a voluntary 'switch' in roles. It is worth looking at the attitudes respondents have in various countries about the situation where "*the husband is at home and is responsible for raising the children, and the wife is the breadwinner in the family*" (*Figure 5*).

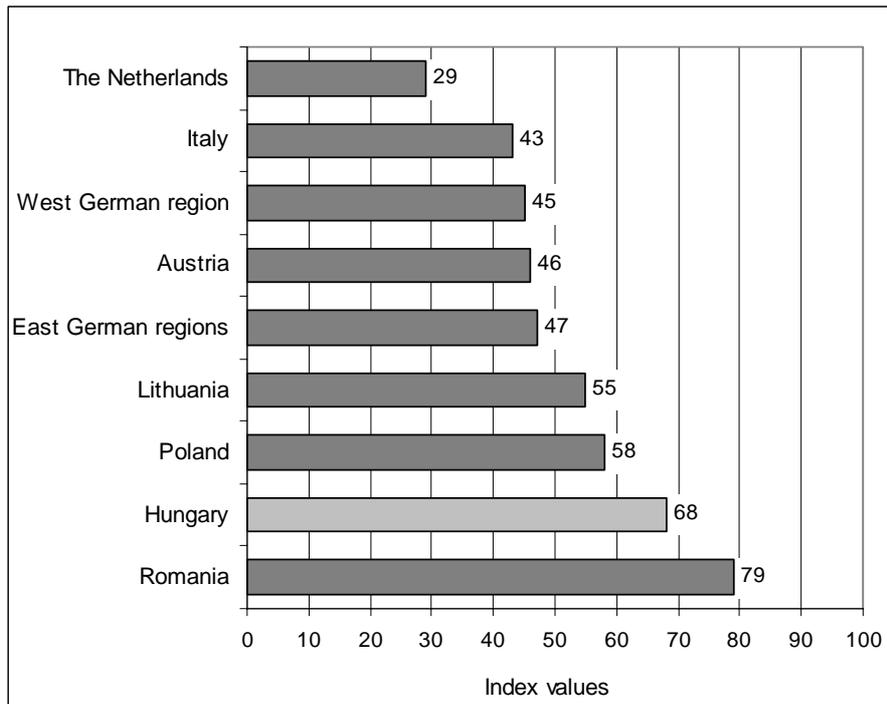
In the questionnaire, the statement was phrased in the negative, starting with "*It is not good when the husband is at home...*". The responses reinforce the impression we formed earlier about the various regions and countries. On the one hand, we have countries with a modern and more emancipated approach to sharing work in society, and on the other we have countries with traditional and conservative views on gender roles. The most modern country in this respect is The Netherlands, where the majority of respondents believe that a switch in gender roles is normal and natural. The basically neutral opinion of Italians is hard to explain. Other fields in the study show Italian society to be traditional, in many ways patriarchal and male centred, and therefore the neutral response to a statement that fundamentally challenges the traditional role of men is surprising.

In Hungary, any switch in the traditional social roles is rejected by most respondents. In fact, resistance is even greater than is indicated by the 68 points on the index, because the rate of those totally agreeing with the statement on the five-point scale was highest (45%) among Hungarian respondents.

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Figure 5

“It is not good when the husband is at home and is responsible for raising the children, and the wife is the breadwinner in the family”—average values assigned to the question, recalculated on a scale of 100, in international comparison, at the turn of the millennium



Allocation of roles in the family

The conflicts that arise from the dual burden shouldered by women of work and reproduction could be reduced or eliminated altogether if partners and spouses took a more equal share of family and household responsibilities. The more active participation of men in domestic work would improve not only women's employment and career opportunities, but also—as is demonstrated by international trends—would have a positive impact on child-bearing patterns. The relatively favourable fertility rates in Scandinavian countries are largely attributable to a balanced division of family responsibilities, where men participate more actively in family life and take on more household work. In contrast, the patriarchal family and social structures in Southern European countries have been responsible for fewer births and low fertility rates over the past decade. The extent to which women can meet the social expectations regarding work and child-bearing is,

therefore, clearly determined by whether the division of household work follows an egalitarian or a traditional pattern.

The bargaining power within the family, and the egalitarian or traditional nature of decision-making is accurately reflected in who is handling the family budget and how income is used. In the international comparative study under review, the question concerning handling of the family budget was asked of married and cohabiting couples in four countries (*Table 1*).

Table 1

“How do you typically handle your family income?”—distribution of responses by gender, in international comparison (%)

	Belgium	The Netherlands	Lithuania	Hungary
<i>Women</i>				
I handle the money.	6	4	15	22
My partner handles the money.	3	2	3	5
We combine all our income and each of us uses as much as we need.	61	59	63	64
We combine some of our income, and we handle the remainder separately.	20	22	13	7
We live on separate budgets.	10	12	5	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
<i>Men</i>				
I handle the money.	3	4	9	4
My partner handles the money.	5	1	7	30
We combine all our income and each of us uses as much as we need.	58	52	61	55
We combine some of our income, and we handle the remainder separately.	23	27	15	9
We live on separate budgets.	10	15	7	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

The typical practice in all countries is to jointly handle some or all of the family’s income. In the countries under review, men very rarely, or almost never, handled the family budget alone. However, there is a great difference between the role of women in the two former socialist and the two Western countries. Whereas in Belgium and The Netherlands sole decision-making is very rare not only among men but also among women, in Lithuania and Hungary women often have control over the family money. It is especially common to have women making the financial decisions in Hungary, with one in four families following this practice. Women acting as family

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‘finance ministers’ is a typical feature of traditional family roles, and therefore this practice of handling the money further strengthens the conservative and traditional view we formed earlier about Hungarian families.

The involvement of partners and spouses in housework—or, in other words, the share men take in the traditional role of women at home—is viewed by many as a key question of equality within the family. There was no detailed question on housework in the questionnaire; the question of who performs household work was addressed only in general terms. Data are available from four countries on this subject, too.

Table 2

“Who usually does the housework in your home?”—distribution of responses in international comparison (data refer to couples aged 20–40, %)

Country	Me	My partner	We share housework equally	Someone else	<i>Total</i>
<i>Female respondent</i>					
Austria	73	4	22	2	<i>100</i>
Lithuania	62	2	34	2	<i>100</i>
Hungary	71	2	34	2	<i>100</i>
Romania	51	5	37	7	<i>100</i>
<i>Male respondent</i>					
Austria	3	67	26	4	<i>100</i>
Lithuania	3	52	43	1	<i>100</i>
Hungary	3	69	24	4	<i>100</i>
Romania	8	34	54	3	<i>100</i>

The table reveals that, by and large, women are in charge of housework in all four countries (*Table 2*). We see practically no households where men are solely responsible for running the home; the few percent of responses in the relevant box seem more accidental than significant. In contrast, the rate of families where members share housework is significant. It is worth noting that male and female respondents have slightly different views on the division of household responsibilities. More women replied that they did all the housework alone, while men estimated their own contribution higher, by mentioning more often that they share work equally with their partner. (In this respect the largest variance between the responses of women and men was seen in the case of Romania.)

In all four countries—including Austria, which belongs to the West—we see a traditional division of housework commitments. The question is whether this picture changes according to women’s economic activity.

Table 3

Ratio of women aged 20–40 who perform housework alone, according to type of employment, in international comparison (%)

Country	Type of employment			Total
	Full time	Part time	Not employed	
Austria	22	28	50	100
Lithuania	41	6	53	100
Hungary	45	7	47	100
Romania	37	0	63	100

Differences are significant between the former socialist countries and Austria, representing the West, according to the type of female employment (Table 3). The ratio of Austrian women in full-time employment who perform housework alone is smaller than in Lithuania or in Hungary. Significant differences exist in the case of part-time employed, which—due to the fairly low incidence of part-time employment in the former socialist countries—was very difficult or impossible to interpret. The Hungarian data are the most shocking. The proportion of women who perform household chores on their own is practically the same, whether they work eight hours a day or are not engaged in paid work.

The heavy burden on Hungarian women and their difficult position are confirmed not only by this study, but also by a series of other surveys. Suffice it to mention the time-use study carried out in Hungary by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office in 1999/2000 or EUROSTAT’s European time-use survey. According to data in the Hungarian time-use study, women in employment spend almost three times as long on household and maintenance work (152 minutes/day) as working men (58 minutes). Similar variances are revealed if we make a comparison according to family composition (Table 4).

Men spend an average of one hour, with a maximum of one and a half hours, doing work in and around the home, almost irrespective of whether they have children, or the number of children. Women, starting from the time of their marriage, invariably spend three times as long doing housework: three hours a day on average, up to five hours if they have three or more children. Preliminary data from the EUROSTAT survey confirm the substantial amount of household work performed by Hungarian women. For instance, married Hungarian women with small children spend 221 minutes a day on cooking, cleaning, washing, doing the dishes and ironing, i.e. on traditional women’s housework; this is one and a half times what the best-

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placed Norwegian mothers with small children spend on housework (140 minutes). Of the ten European countries under review, women in Hungary spend the highest amount of time doing housework.

Table 4

Time spent on housework and maintenance by Hungarian women and men aged 18–59, according to family composition, 1999/2000 (minutes)

Family composition	Women	Men
Single	113	55
Married with no children	215	74
Married with 1 child	197	67
Married with 2 children	220	76
Married with 3 or more children	292	86
Single with child	189	–
<i>18–59 year olds, overall</i>	<i>183</i>	<i>67</i>

Source: HCSO (2000)

The imbalance in the division of housework so typical of Hungarian families was also demonstrated in another of our international comparative studies, this time conducted in 1992. The results are worth briefly discussing here because of the contradiction between the facts and the way they are viewed. The study examined the situation of families with one or more children living in Hungary, Russia and Poland, and in the eastern and western regions of Germany. The responses from mothers and fathers revealed that Hungarian fathers took on the smallest share of housework, but Hungarian women were very grateful even for this relatively little help: compared to women in other countries, Hungarian women were the most satisfied with the support they received from their husbands. Another finding was that fathers in all countries estimated their contribution to household chores to be higher than the women rated their husband's work, yet the difference was smallest in Hungary.

Going back to the international comparative study that forms the basis of this paper, we see no change in the division of household work since the 1992 survey or the 1999/2000 time-use research. Today, in an international context, it is in Hungarian families that the traditional division of household work, the excessive workloads placed on women, and, at the same time, the acceptance by women of this state of affairs are most common. This is corroborated by our studies on the reasons for divorce and marital strife, which show that the division of household work plays no tangible role even among the reasons for marital strife, let alone divorce. However, we should not jump to the conclusion that Hungarian women are the most exploited and oppressed in Europe. Rather, it would appear that, due to the primacy of

family values, their top priority is housework, and that their sense of playing a central and decisive role in the family and of being indispensable is compensation for the extra work.

Conclusions and summary

Summarizing the different attitudes in Europe toward gender roles and the division of work in society, we find a marked difference in attitudes between the eastern and western regions of Europe, between the former socialist countries and those states that have an uninterrupted history of market economy and capitalism. In the former socialist countries the inclusion of women *en masse* in employment began decades ago, prompting us to assume, and indeed to expect, a more egalitarian division of, and approach to, gender roles. However, the data show a different trend. In Eastern European countries, the conditions themselves under which high female employment developed, the related economic and ideological pressure, and the central coordination of the process gave rise to an internal psychological resistance from society, and contributed to the preservation of traditional roles. At the same time, the low fertility rates typical of the region are, to a great extent, attributable to the traditional approach to gender roles and the traditional division of labour at home.

In Western European countries, women's participation in the labour market has increased gradually over time. Although the process was influenced and promoted by society's support for equal rights and for equal opportunities for women, the decisions were ultimately made by women and their families. Attitudes toward gender roles and the main functions of men and women in the family and in society are highly homogeneous in all countries. Nor were any material differences in attitude apparent according to key demographic parameters such as gender, age, family status, number of children, etc.

The eastern parts of Germany, i.e. the region of the former German Democratic Republic, provide an exception to the uniform attitudes witnessed in countries that share similar historical backgrounds. Gender expectations in East Germany's historically work-oriented society are closer to those seen in West German regions than to those typical of the former socialist countries.

As for the main social tasks and functions of men and women, Hungarian society—both in comparison with European countries and with other former socialist states—exhibits especially traditional, that is to say conservative, attitudes. This is obviously related to Hungarian society's very family-oriented value system, and to the fact that the balancing of reproductive functions and work is proving to be an ever more difficult problem in the market economy environment of today. However, women and men do not

perceive a change in gender roles or the better balancing of childcare duties in the family to be a solution to this conflict; rather, they believe that the situation will improve as a result of a further strengthening and promotion of traditional roles.

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