# *Trends in women's employment in Hungary, with a focus on women returning to the labour market after childbirth and maternity leave*

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## SUMMARY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

**Nowadays, the reconciliation of work and private life is a hot topic not only for families but for companies as well. The situation of women with small children is especially difficult in this respect as they have to perform two roles: they have a fundamental role in caring for the children and managing the household, while also having to contribute to the household income. Our survey was designed to look at how women coped with this problem, as well as any new methods available to employers to resolve these issues.**

**In our survey, 84.5% of our respondents felt that women with children were at a disadvantage in the Hungarian labour market – a thought-provoking finding. The gravest problems encountered by employed mothers included discrimination, lack of self-assurance, lack of crèche services, difficulty finding a person to care for a sick child at home, etc. On the other hand, it was found that the attitude of mothers with young children often did not automatically meet the expectations of the employer. Often, employers had to make a compromise regarding the nature and content of the job if they wanted to employ a mother. These burdens often render the reintegration of women in the labour market more difficult, which can affect their taking on a job and can prolong their inactive status.**


## INTRODUCTION

Thanks to globalisation, the technical and scientific development, the pluralisation of families, some new challenges have appeared and had an effect on the life of employers and employees alike. Although macroeconomic purposes would demand a dynamically increasing labour market presence of men and especially women, but even so, we could witness the dramatically decreasing activity rate after the collapse of the socialist regime in Hungary.

The domestic employment of women can be influenced by various factors: the existence of traditional gender roles, the financial situation of the family, the education of women, etc. The rate of women's employment has been decreasing since 1992, bottoming out in 1997. Although employment for women has been increasing since 1998, the exact figures change in different sectors of the economy. Owing to changes in, and the modernisation of, the economic structure, employment rates in different sectors have changed, including those of women. While more than 346 thousand women were employed in agriculture in the year 1980, this number decreased even with the slight overall increase in women's employment after 1997 (*Végh – Gulyás, 2003*). Seeing women's employment from

the point of view of the industrial sectors, it is a fact that most women work in the service industry, while their presence in the industrial and agricultural sectors is much smaller. It is true that the performance of agriculture has diminished since the change of regime; however, it still plays a great role, especially in rural areas, where this activity can be done within the family framework.

And although after 1997, the female employment rate slowly increased, but the Hungarian figures are far from the average rate of the EU. While in 2007, the average female employment rate calculating within the age-group from 15 to 64 was 58.3% in the EU 27, in Hungary, this figure was 50.9% at the same time (EUROSTAT). The Table 1 summarizes certain key elements of women's employment.

Table 1

**Some key female employment indicators in Hungary**

| | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Total population (000) | 5270 | 5258 | 5241 | 5234 | 5228 |
| 2. Total employment (000) | 1751 | 1788 | 1773 | 1775 | 1781 |
| 3. Employment in Services (% total employment) | 71.7 | 73.9 | 74.9 | 76.1 | 76.4 |
| 4. Employment in Industry (% total employment) | 24.7 | 23.5 | 22.6 | 21.2 | 20.9 |
| 5. Employment in Agriculture (% total employment) | 3.6 | 2.6 | 2.6 | 2.7 | 2.7 |
| 6. Total unemployment (000) | 101 | 106 | 116 | 143 | 152 |

*Source:* Eurostat

It must also be declared that in the last years, some employment initiations were born which tried to approach this question from other aspects. One of them focused on the awareness of the issue of reconciling family life and work, and tries to draw the attention of employers to this employment method. Thanks to this innovative approach on the part of employers, the commitment and motivation of employees can increase, which makes financial sense to the companies. As the problem of reconciliation appears most markedly in the case of women with small children, in our study, we are trying to focus on their position and prospects on the labour market, especially after maternity leave, when they would like to return to work. Therefore we are presenting the results of our survey which was conducted among 100 women who would like to be back to the labour market after childbearing, or who have just started work after maternity leave. In our questionnaire, we were interested in how women with small children assess their position in the world of work. Additionally, we are comparing women's expectations with reality, and we are trying to present some keys to resolve the problem.

## PROSPECTS OF WOMEN AFTER MATERNITY LEAVE ON THE HUNGARIAN LABOUR MARKET ACCORDING TO THE OPINION OF WOMEN

According to the sociological and demographic analyses, family is more important than other areas of life in Hunga-

ry (*Tóth, 1997*). The traditional roles are approved by the Hungarian society and they include the notion that the first task of women is childcare and housework. At the same time, the Hungarian family can not afford to miss the salary of women from the household budget, so they have to become a breadwinner and contribute to the support of their family. This tendency is well represented by a *Tarki survey (1999)* in which more than 70% of the Hungarian respondents were of the opinion that women work because it is in the interest of their family, and less than 17% of the participants stated that the main reason for a woman to work is her career. As women have to be in active status on the labour market for economic reasons, they have to face with two burdens: to be a good mother and wife as well as to be a good worker.

In order to get to know these problems, we have conducted a survey among 100 mothers with small children who were planning to go back to work in the near future or who have already worked after maternity leave. As we could not reach all spheres of the society, and the number of samples is not too much, our survey is not considered to be representative; however, the results illustrate the present situation in Hungary well. In the future, we are going to make an effort to increase the number and content of the samples. Our questionnaire consisted of some open questions, but the majority of them were closed. We processed all the questionnaires, and the results were evaluated by simple statistical methods in Microsoft Excel program.

The youngest woman participating in our survey was 23 years old, while the oldest was 45. As for their marital status, 78 women were wedded, 17 of them lived in common -law marriage, and 4 respondents were single; one participant did not mark anything. The number of children was the most in the case of women who were married. These women often bore not only 1 or 2 but 3 children, so the rate of 3 children in a family was 15%.

Irrespective of whether a child was born in marriage or outside it, the 3 year maternity leave is guaranteed for each mother to stay at home with their baby in Hungary. This long period decreases the chance of women to reintegrate into the labour market. At the same time more than 40% of our respondents had been inactive for 3 or more years and 70% of the mothers approved of the 3 year absence of women from the labour market. 6% of women did not agree with working, and more than 48% of the respondents partially approved of taking on a job during the maternity leave.According to our survey, the opinion of employers about this long period of absence differs from the expectations of mothers. 52% of employers were glad of the childbearing of their employees, but 5% of them were not delighted with it. At the same time, 48 of the women answering the questionnaire were sure to work again at their former firm, and in order to keep their job and position, 90% of them kept in contact with their former employers. The Fig. 1 shows what kind means are predominantly used in communication.

In our survey, we would have liked to clarify what kind of workplace was preferred by women with children. In order to achieve this, we asked women to rank some aspects according to their own priorities, so the given features need have been listed by them according to which were very important, important or not important. The answers confirmed our expectations that the priorities of the women with children is primarily focused upon the family and not career.

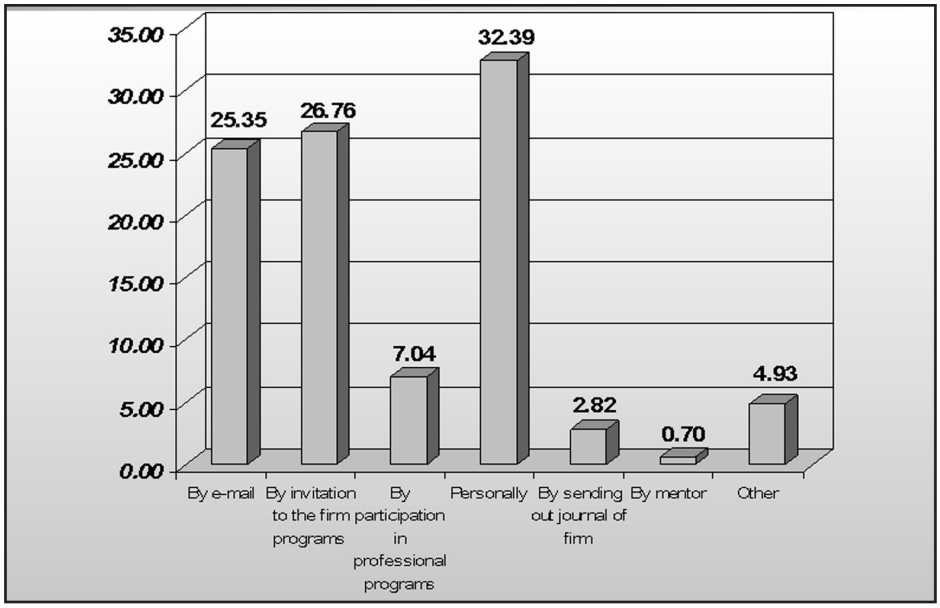
52% of the respondents were of the opinion that salary is a very important factor, so this result is in accordance with the earlier mentioned research (*Tarki*); this confirmed the fact that there is especially an

economic reason why women are active on the labour market.

The offered position as a factor in choosing a job was significantly more important among those women who had higher education because those with a degree are in more favourable position on the labour market than those mothers who attended only secondary or primary school. Two other factors, the quantity of overtime work and the reconciliation policy of the potentional workplace, have been evaluated as very important features, which symbolises the priority of family in contrast to the importance of workplace from the point view of female workers with child.

Figure 1

**How can women keep in contact with the former employers (%)?**




*Source:* own graph

Finally, we also tried also to reflect how women could meet the requirements of employers and how it is affected by family commitments. Therefore, we were interested in how women could have answered the questions below if they would have participated in a job interview. The Fig. 2 shows the prevalence of answers to some questions.

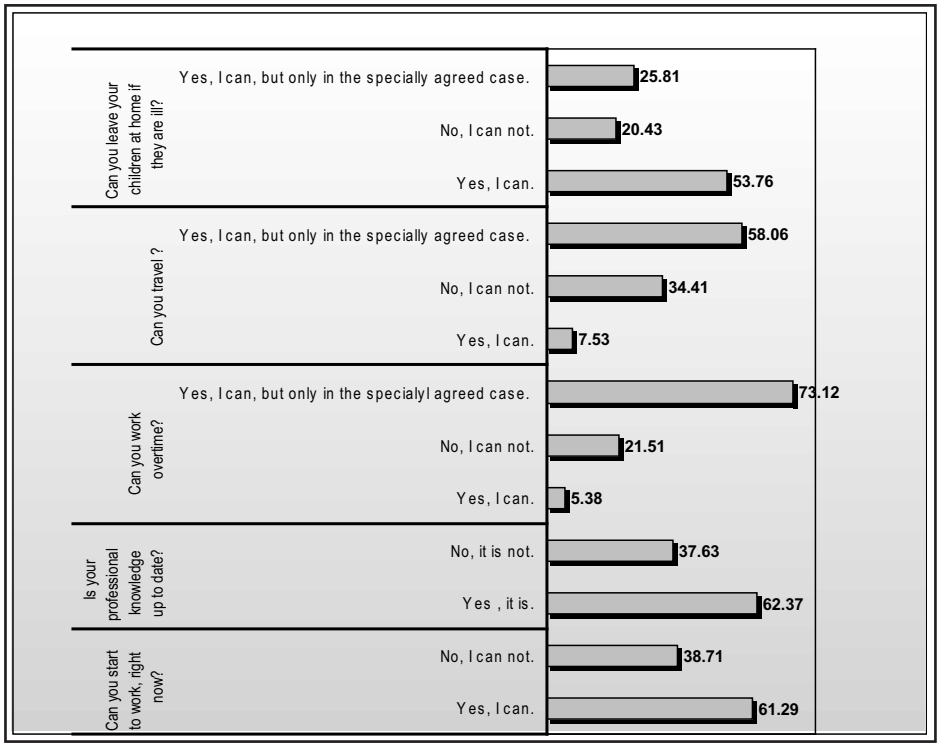
The results indicate that women often expect compromises from their employers because of their family duties, while employers are not always willing to comply with this.

## HOW CAN WE HELP THE REINTEGRATION OF WOMEN AFTER THE MATERNITY LEAVE?

According to our results, the position of women with children on the labour market can be associated with negative attributes. Although our macroeconomic interest is to increase the participation of women on the labour market, at the same time, the acti-

Figure 2

**How can women meet the requirements of employers (%)?**




*Source:* own graph

ve social system assures the 3 years absence of women from the work.

On the other hand, the child-care benefit and the child-care allowance introduced earlier respectively did not lead to sustained growth in the birth rate: it only strengthened the traditional family role of women (*Tóth, 1997*).

In order to promote the female employment from the part of state, some new innovative programs were introduced, which try to encourage the employers with tax allowances to employ people at a disadvantage, especially women returning from maternity leave (Start Plus Program). Additionally, the Labour Code is often family-friendly approaching in many questions and it guarantees the employees 'rights in this approach (which often opposes the interests of employers). It is also true that the actors of the market often don't validate the act regulations, in which case, the employees can turn to the Court of Labour Affairs in order to assert their rights.

The role of the state is further to submit and affiliate the atypical working-time agreements, for example part-time working, teleworking, etc. Although women's participation in the labour market can be motivated by, for example, part-time work, the part time rate is below 5%, while at the same time, for example the share of female part time workers reached 75% in Netherlands.

One of the main burdens to apply women returning from maternity leave is that there

are few of crèches (in 2005, the number of institutions was less than half of the number of 1987) so thanks to there not being enough space, mothers can not resolve the daytime care of their child. Although there are some new forms of private initiation connected with child care services such as private crèches, family day nurseries but they are too expensive and a lot of domestic families cannot afford them.

Some firms have already realised the advantages of family friendly policy and successfully built it in the company culture. Albeit the number of these companies is dynamically increasing, the fact is that the reconciliation of family life and work is not universally put into practice by the domestic companies. In turn, with a little attention and expenditure, not only employees but also employers can profit from the benefits.

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