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# The Gender Regime of Anti-Liberal Hungary

Eva Fodor

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## The Gender Regime of Anti-Liberal Hungary

“This authoritative analysis of anti-liberal Hungary’s twenty-first century twist on ‘Kinder, Küche, Kirche’ exposes its exploitation of women not only as unpaid carers in the home but also as a source of cheap paid labor. Fodor deftly links the Orbán regime’s notorious opposition to gender equality to its embrace of pronatalism, xenophobia, and expanded funding for church-based childcare and eldercare. A terrifying, essential read.”

—Ruth Milkman, *City University of New York Graduate Center*  
and author of *On Gender, Labor, and Inequality*  
(Illinois, 2016) and *Immigrant Labor*  
and *the New Precariat* (Polity 2020)

“Eva Fodor’s new book is an important contribution to the understanding of the worldwide drift from liberal democracy to anti-liberalism (or illiberalism) during the past 10–15 years. The study focuses on a case, a small country, which took a lead in this process: Hungary. A major contribution of the book is the description of the gender regime of anti-liberalism, what she calls a ‘carefare regime.’ While liberalism tends to commodify care work, anti-liberal regimes reemphasize women’s role as mothers and housekeepers, and the poorest of the poor are turned into a ‘female underclass’ who have to keep their (usually miserable) market incomes and also deliver unpaid care services. Great book about anti-liberalism and especially its gender regime.”

—Ivan Szelenyi, *William Graham Sumner Emeritus Professor of Sociology,*  
*Yale University, USA*

“Finally, a book that offers brilliant insight into the seemingly perplexing: the gender politics of the contemporary Hungarian state. With sharpness and wit, Fodor reveals how the public attack on gender—indeed, even on the concept of gender itself—goes hand-in-hand with the rise of authoritarian rule and right-wing populism. Giving this new gender regime a name, ‘the carefare state,’ Fodor uncovers how it became so foundational to anti-liberal currents in Hungary. Part history of the present and part social policy analysis, *The Gender Regime of Anti-Liberal Hungary* makes an enormous contribution to understandings of anti-democratic politics, gender relations, and social inequality in Hungary and beyond.”

—Lynne Haney, *Professor of Sociology, New York University, USA*

“Eva Fodor’s *The Gender Regime of Anti-Liberal Hungary* insightfully dissects the anti-gender ideology of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s government, which has eroded measures in support of gender equality and against gender-based violence, as well as the academic study of gender and sexuality. Fodor provocatively discusses a successor to neoliberalism’s workfare, namely a ‘carefare’ regime in which child protection and women’s paid and unpaid labor are regulated in the interest of preserving tradition and the Hungarian nation. Illustrating the gendered dynamics of carefare through a case study of fostering, Fodor’s analysis is as somber and troubling as it is cautionary, telling a tale to which scholars and policy makers should carefully attend.”

—Gail Kligman, *Distinguished Professor of Sociology,*  
*University of California, Los Angeles, USA*

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of Anti-Liberal  
Hungary

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ISBN 978-3-030-85311-2      ISBN 978-3-030-85312-9 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85312-9>

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This Palgrave Pivot imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was researched and written amid a great deal of chaos and a series of crises, most of them political, some pandemic—related. Typically, this setup does not bode well for in-depth scholarly thinking but I am convinced that this case is an exception.

I started this project in 2015 and did most of the data collection in 2015–2016. Then in the Fall of 2016, I was appointed Pro-Rector for Social Sciences and Humanities at the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest where I had been working for a decade. What seemed like a fairly peaceful administrative job in a small college changed overnight when in the Spring of 2017 the Hungarian government passed a modification of the higher education law, which made the operation of CEU in Budapest impossible. This was a straightforward political attack, part of the vilification campaign of the university’s founder, George Soros.

Given my high-level administrative position, I was thrust into the midst of the political struggle to save the university and keep it working in the place where it had deep roots and had been operating for 25 years, in Budapest. This put a quick stop to the progress of my research but gave me a first-hand ethnographic view of sorts into the workings of anti-liberal power, especially as it targeted institutional academic freedom. Eventually, CEU lost the battle with the government and moved its graduate education to Vienna. While a ruling of the European Court of Justice in 2020 invalidated Hungary’s modified higher education law, the decision came two years too late to help. This would have been a different book had I

not been able to witness and participate in this political struggle on a daily, hourly basis over the course of two years. In the process, my colleagues at CEU have taught me a great deal about politics, resistance, resilience and the sheer will to just go on and do the job of a university under all circumstances. I am eternally grateful.

On a more technical but similarly grateful note, the open access publication of the book was made possible by the Provost's Open Access Publishing Fund at the Central European University.

I owe heartfelt thanks to my over 80 respondents whose stories make up the argument in Chap. 3: foster parents, advisors, guardians and policy makers in the field who allowed me access to their work through participant observation and interviews. They are doing admirable work and it was uplifting to be part of it even if for a short time only.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge my family—the three most important men in my life—without whom this book may never have been written because scholarly ideas, political struggle and life itself would have a very different meaning without them.

# CONTENTS

1	Orbánistan and the Anti-gender Rhetoric in Hungary	1
2	A Carefare Regime	29
3	Fostering in a Carefare Regime	65
4	Conclusion	103
	Appendix	111
	Index	115



## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	The number of articles which mention the term “gender” in Magyar Idők/Magyar Nemzet	17
Fig. 1.2	Appearance of key terms in articles which contain the word “gender”, 2018–2020 (in percentages)	18
Fig. 2.1	Changes in men’s and women’s employment rate, 15–64 year-olds. (Source: Eurostat 2019c)	48
Fig. 2.2	At-work poverty risk by gender. (Source: Eurostat 2019e)	49

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	A comparison of the logics of carefare versus the “two-earner family” model	31
Table 3.1	State expenditure on child protection and foster care (million HUF)	71



## CHAPTER 1

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# Orbánistan and the Anti-gender Rhetoric in Hungary

**Abstract** This chapter introduces Hungary’s anti-liberal political rule and its gender regime. It traces policy changes in Hungary since 2010, discusses the legacies of the state socialist gender regimes and the formation of a new, anti-liberal one. I introduce the term “carefare” and discuss how the concept of “gender” has been deployed by Hungarian politicians to legitimate an increase in women’s unpaid care burden and their lack of attention to gender inequality in the labor market. I end the chapter with a description of my research methods and provide an outline for the rest of the book.

**Keywords** Illiberalism • Anti-liberalism • Post-state socialism • Gender regime • Hungary • Anti-gender rhetoric

Hungary is proof positive that history did not end, as Francis Fukuyama famously predicted, after the collapse of the state socialist regimes in the early 1990s. Within 20 years, the country became the poster child of democratic backsliding, right-wing populism and anti-liberal authoritarian rule, all combined with a capitalist economy whose operation oscillates between global neoliberal and eastward-looking neo-patrimonial principles. This novel form of governance is closely intertwined with a novel type of state gender regime—a combination of old and new elements in an

exorbitantly patriarchal mix—which I call “carefare”. This book describes the concept of carefare and its real-life manifestation in anti-liberal Hungary. Admittedly my argument is about a single country, but since elements of anti-liberal governance are gaining ground every day, the lessons here should serve as potential for comparison elsewhere.

“There is no such thing as gender!” claimed a high-level Hungarian politician in response to critiques of the government’s ban on masters’ degrees in Gender Studies in 2018. And in denial, the term “gender” has been spread far and wide. After its landslide victory in 2010, one of the first pieces of legislation Viktor Orbán’s government introduced ended the requirement to eliminate gender stereotypes in the national curriculum of kindergartens. Soon the government moved from kindergarteners to a wide range of other social groups. The Parliament refused to ratify the “Istanbul Convention”<sup>1</sup> by claiming offense at the word “gender” in the document, enshrined the requirement that families consist of a biological male and a biological female, passed numerous pieces of legislation which reformulated, restricted and rigidified the social roles assigned to women and men, threatened women’s reproductive rights, prohibited the option of sex change, as well as adoption by unmarried or non-heterosexual individuals. Members of the government have lobbied aggressively for the elimination of the term “gender” along with the concept of gender equality from policy proposals of international organizations. The government stopped funding NGOs which addressed gender equality problems and put an end to all government agencies that designed, implemented and monitored legislation to promote women. Through policies like these, accompanied by unabating government-inspired media propaganda, an anti-liberal gender regime has been constructed. Although this gender regime has its roots in the lengthy history of Hungary’s varied past political orders, and carries some elements of both institutionalized gender relations in Western neoliberal democracies and the Central European state socialist gender regimes of the recent past, it is also distinctly different from both.

Institutionalized patterns of gender relations or “gender regimes” are shaped by and themselves are constituent parts of political-economic governance (Connell 1987; Walby 2020). The literature on the

<sup>1</sup>The “Istanbul Convention” or more precisely the “Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence” came into force in 2014. It was signed but not ratified by Hungary.

transformation of gender relations in anti-liberal regimes, especially in Hungary and Poland, has primarily focused on the ways in which the term “gender” has been used to create political mobilization and legitimacy, build internal loyalty and gather votes (Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kováts 2020; Krizsán and Roggeband 2018). In this book I want to highlight different aspects of the newly emerging state gender regime: the transformation of women into carefare workers and the gender regime’s—potential or real—impact not only on gender but also on class inequalities.

Since 2010 the Hungarian government instituted policies and policy practice which offer a novel response to the “crisis of care” problem (Fraser 2016). In anti-liberal Hungary, care work is not commodified, instead it is sentimentalized in a specifically gendered way. It is not outsourced to poorly paid immigrant laborers, or widely available for purchase on the market from for-profit providers. It is also not offered—in sufficient quantity or quality—at a more moderate cost in institutions of care maintained by the state or by community-based non-governmental organizations. Instead, anti-liberal Hungary has been aggressively promoting the intensification of women’s domestic care load through its all-encompassing pronatalism which ties social citizenship rights to having children, yet offers highly selective state support for the long-term work of caring for small children, even less for other forms of care. Simultaneously, women’s paid work is required to maintain the family’s subsistence (and often their access to state subsidies for children) but labor market gender *inequality* is openly embraced. Most women end up combining an increased volume of unpaid care work with long hours of full-time paid work in an economy that is shamelessly slated against those with care responsibilities. Compliance with such an exacerbated and unequal work burden is elicited through the rejection of gender equality as a principle, the elimination of alternative life courses for women, and a sustained political discourse which sentimentalizes and naturalizes women’s care responsibility. Highlighting the analogies with workfare and prisonfare regimes of neo-liberal capitalist economies (Peck 2001; Wacquant 2010), I call Hungary’s state gender regime variant “carefare”. Carefare, I argue serves as one of the main political, ideological and economic backbones of Hungary’s anti-liberal regime.

## HUNGARY SINCE 2010: BUILDING AN ANTI-LIBERAL STATE

Right-wing, antidemocratic, authoritarian-leaning parties and governments have been emerging onto the international political scene in record numbers all over the world, but Hungary's case is one of the starkest. Hungary is the only European country whose democracy has been downgraded by the independent watchdog Freedom House to the category "Transitional or hybrid regime" and the only country classified as only "partly free" within the EU (Freedom House 2021). Political scientists cite extreme party polarization (Enyedi 2016) and emerging populist tendencies (Rupnik 2016) as key enabling factors leading to democratic backsliding. The instability of democratic institutions after 1990, a pre-war tendency toward right-wing conservatism, the weakness of a professional middle class and the lack of a lively civil society will have also contributed to the ease with which Orbán's anti-liberal discourse and political rule gained ground. The economic trauma brought about by the collapse of the state socialist economy, the devastation of the ensuing economic crisis, the quick disillusionment with the unequal rewards of global neoliberal capitalism, which became especially evident during the 2008 economic recession were also important causal factors (Krastev 2016; Scheiring 2015, 2020). In this context, populist and nationalist ideologies promoted by Viktor Orbán and his party, FIDESZ–KDNP<sup>2</sup> found fertile ground. The alliance won a landslide election victory in 2010 and started the work of building a new form of governance. Borrowing Fareed Zakaria's term (Zakaria 1997), Orbán himself named his rule an "illiberal democracy" in 2014 and later a "Christian Democracy" in 2018.

There is no consensus among political scientists about what aspect of this new form of governance is the most important or the most enduring. Some point to the dominance of a single party (Scheppelle 2014), others emphasize its populist features (Enyedi 2016; Müller 2016). Bálint Magyar (2016) describes the regime as a "mafia state" where systemic corruption serves the interests of the political rulers and their loyalists. Other terminologies, emphasizing yet other features, include "hybrid regime" (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018), "authoritarian capitalism" (Scheiring 2015),

<sup>2</sup>The full name is FIDESZ—Magyar Polgári Szövetség (FIDESZ—Hungarian Civil Association) in alliance with KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party). The term FIDESZ itself is an abbreviation of the original name of the party until 1995, Fialat Demokraták Szövetsége (Alliance of Young Democrats). I will call the ruling alliance FIDESZ–KDNP from here on.

“neoliberal authoritarianism” (Szalai 2016), “managed illiberal democratic capitalism” (Szelenyi and Csillag 2015) or “national authoritarianism” (Kelemen 2017), to cite just a few. My emphasis when writing about gender relations is on the regime’s radical and explicitly stated rejection of everyday liberal values, of the principle of equal opportunities, of tolerance of difference from a preconceived norm—hence I call it an anti-liberal regime.

While there may not be a consensus about how best to name the regime, there is little doubt about the fact that during its more than a decade (so far) in power, Orbán’s government has profoundly reshaped the principles and practice of political rule in the country: it has centralized and cemented its political power through legislative changes, decreased media freedom, freedom of speech and important forms of academic freedom, it has spent vast amounts of taxpayer’s money on hate-mongering propaganda to serve its political goals and created a regiment of loyal cadres through corruption and cronyism. At the same time, the government has followed many of the prescriptions of neoliberally minded structural adjustment policies: keeping the state deficit low, enforcing state austerity in areas where it would have served the vulnerable, weakening the rights of labor in successful bids to court foreign investors. It has also wasted resources from the European Union’s structural funds and from the economic boom following the 2008 crisis by spending on frivolous investments designed to boost national pride and strengthen Hungarian identity, not to mention the personal wealth of select loyal followers, while neglecting to channel resources into health care, education or social support. It may be worth reviewing these policies in some detail before we proceed to discuss the gender regime built to support and service them.

Upon gaining power the FIDESZ–KDNP government rewrote electoral rules in a way that favored the ruling party (Law CCIII/2011). But the government went well beyond familiar acts of gerrymandering: the new electoral law passed in 2011 cemented its power by making the decision on district boundaries pass as a “cardinal law” which could only be changed by two-thirds of the votes in Parliament. The new legislation turned the elections from a two-level system to a single-round one, and gave voting rights to typically right-leaning ethnic Hungarians living outside the borders of Hungary. These were some of the main actions taken to favor the incumbent party and guarantee its long-term hold on power (Scheppele 2014).

Next, the government produced a new Constitution and the FIDESZ–Központi Demokratikus Nemzeti Párt (KDNP) dominated Parliament hastily passed it without much consultation or debate. Since the party had a two-third majority they did not need the support of opposition parties, so the procedure could be sped up. This new Constitution started the work of dismantling liberal democracy. It centralized power in the hands of the ruling party, weakened the power of the Constitutional Court and the role of the judiciary. The government made an attempt at replacing judges whom they considered too independent (Bánkuti et al. 2012). In the following decade the European Union (EU) initiated numerous legal procedures against Hungary to enforce the principles of the rule of law, none of which really steered the government off course. Orbán managed to resist even more radical attempts, such as when in 2020 the EU sought to include a clause in its budget that would require that countries abide by the principle of the rule of law in exchange for receiving EU funding. Hungary and Poland vetoed the budget proposal and the pandemic rescue package attached to it, which forced the Union to postpone and soften the measures and allowed Orbán to claim, yet again, “victory over Brussels”.

Numerous other formerly independent institutions, large and small, in areas from finance to culture were gradually drawn under government control. To start, the government revised the media law and the vast majority of mainstream media were sold to government-friendly investors, who promptly steered them into a direction of absolute loyalty to the government. FIDESZ cadres were appointed as editors-in-chief, and journalists were expected to produce stories and accounts which corresponded closely to the message the government wanted to popularize. By 2018, several local media entities were united in a single conglomerate—a pro-government media empire of vast proportions. All national public television and radio channels, practically all regional papers and many internet outlets have essentially become propaganda machines reminiscent of the worst of the state socialist era (ATLO 2020).

Cultural and academic freedoms have similarly been curbed. The government extended its financial and educational control over all state universities—in some cases more radically than in others. The self-governance of academic institutions was eliminated and the decision-making authority of the universities’ Senate was replaced by the rule of government-appointed committees. Other scholarly institutions suffered similar or worse fates: the rights and budgets of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences were significantly reduced and its research institutes were reorganized in a



way that allowed political actors to have a vast influence over the distribution of research funding. The government passed an amendment to the higher education law in 2017 specifically targeting Central European University (CEU)—a US accredited graduate school founded, among others, by George Soros—and proceeded to force it to leave the country. Appeals to the European Union eventually led to a ruling of the European Court of Justice in favor of CEU, but the three years it took the Court to come to this conclusion made the decision moot. More granular-level interference into academic life has been a daily occurrence and incidents are too numerous to list here. One may be mentioned as it is of particular significance for the theme of this book: in 2018, the government unilaterally and without consultation or notice de-accredited gender studies MA degrees in the country.

In addition to the media and educational/research institutions, non-governmental organizations also came to be targeted by government ire: those which worked in areas that did not please the government were simply de-funded. Externally funded international NGOs have been suffering ongoing persecution. To retain a semblance of grassroots action, the government instead initiated and funds generously a loyal circle of “civil” organizations serving the party’s agenda, and has been channeling vast amounts of money to a limited number of handpicked, loyal churches.

Government-appointed loyal cadres manage these institutions in fields as diverse as the economy and financial oversight, through the judiciary, to the cultural field, including managers of theaters, the national library and various museums, too numerous to count. In a fashion painfully reminiscent of the early days of the state socialist era, a new intellectual-professional upper class is in formation, and appointments depend primarily on loyalty rather than actual professional expertise or excellence in the given field. These new cadres then receive a significant income through salaries and kickbacks from government funded projects as well as all the power of their office, as long as they are willing to deliver what the government expects.

Parallel to this is the creation via corruption of a wealthy upper class, a new bourgeoisie, whose economic prosperity depends solely on the amount of money they siphon off government- and EU-funded investments. Some of these assets remain in their own bank accounts, but most find their way back to the coffers of the ruling party. Corruption is extremely widespread and has increased precipitously in recent years in Hungary. This has been noted by practically all international agencies

dealing with the issue (see, e.g., a report by GRECO 2020). The process of informal, illegal channeling of monies to individuals and politically loyal companies is built into the very core of the economic system, from the expectation that physicians get “tipped” in state hospitals to the Hungarian franchise of large software companies which receive kickback from state clients. Even proven obvious cases of corruption go unpursued and unpunished as Hungary’s Attorney General, a loyal party cadre, is extremely reluctant to prosecute them.

Notwithstanding its political populism and anti-liberal tendencies, the Orbán government did not altogether abandon all principles of neoliberal capitalism. FIDESZ–KDNP came to power in 2010 in the midst of the economic crisis and the economic performance of the country was weak in the first few years. By 2013–2014, however, production picked up, as the international economic and financial context improved and European Union structural funds continued to pour in. By the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Hungary’s economic growth outperformed EU averages, employment growth was striking, and real wages increased spectacularly in every year.

Much of this success was based on Hungary’s ability to attract foreign investors (Bandelj 2007) and these investments increased radically after EU membership. Well-known economists have argued that Hungary and other Central and East European countries may be net losers of EU membership, because multinational profit extraction is higher than the gains obtained via EU structural fund payments (Piketty 2018). Other accounts enumerate the various benefits multinational production has brought to the country and which cannot easily be expressed in cash payments (Meszaros 2018). For our purposes it is enough to note that the government’s desire to attract foreign capital is undeniable and courting foreign direct investment has required creating a labor market structure where wages are low and reasonably trained workers are docile. In 2021 Hungary had the second lowest minimum wage in the EU overtaking only Bulgaria in this regard, and recent media accounts claim that over 40% of people do in fact work for the minimum wage, at least as per their formal employment contract. Although average wage levels significantly increased in the late 2010s, they still remain one of the lowest within the EU (Eurostat 2021a). And in recent years, the government has passed several other regulations with the goal of directly pleasing foreign investors and weakening labor rights: compulsory school age was reduced to 16 to feed the unskilled labor requirements of companies, the amount of overtime work an

employer can require was increased by 25% and a great deal of flexibility was guaranteed to employers to compensate for the period, unemployment benefits were cut to almost nothing, the strike laws were changed in a way to make it more difficult for the already weak Hungarian trade unions to organize, work hours were lengthened and vacation time cut in some sectors (Scheiring and Szombati 2019).

Even in times of economic prosperity when wage growth was fairly steep and the state budget flush with money, the government neglected to channel resources into the three key areas which typically would increase the wellbeing of the population in a forward looking manner: health care, public education and social support. These, not coincidentally, are the sectors where female employment is especially high. While tax cuts and income linked benefits guaranteed higher income for the more advantaged, researchers note an ongoing stark state austerity in cash support targeting those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In terms of health care, the glaring shortage of doctors, hospital beds and nursing staff, partly due to the out-migration of trained professionals because of the extremely low salaries and punitive work conditions, became clearly exposed during the coronavirus pandemic. In a period when economic growth leveled at around 4–5% annually Hungary spent less and less of its GDP on its already underfunded health care (Eurostat 2021b). Public education has suffered the same fate: teachers' salaries are exceptionally low, work hours are increasing, educational segregation is officially endorsed and expenditure on education is declining in real value. The consequences are obvious: Hungary is doing poorly in international comparisons in life expectancy and especially healthy life expectancy, as well as in the performance of children in literacy and others skills tests. Hungary meets EU standards in access to childcare for children over three years of age, but is well below the recommended level for younger children. With the support of European Union funding, a small number of new nurseries have been built in the past years and others have been reclassified into this category to boost the numbers in international statistics. Yet the quality of childcare varies: childcare workers receive close to the minimum wage in a lot of nurseries, and access to care is extremely uneven geographically. Parents who live in more prosperous areas may find it easier to get a spot for their child, while parents in rural areas must travel far to find care.

Nowhere is austerity more obvious than in the allocation of social benefits. Unemployment benefits have been drastically cut in length and generosity and the government has sought to replace payment with public

works programs. Social spending to support people in need has been reduced to the bare minimum, especially cash support for the vulnerable (Vastagh 2017). The only policy area where state spending has been boosted is “family protection”, specifically encouragement of and incentives for married working couples to have more children (Rat and Szikra 2018). I will discuss these measures, their logic and consequences in the next chapter.

### GENDER REGIMES OF THE PAST

Orbán’s anti-liberal government may be unique in the intensity of its single-minded pronatalism but women’s social citizenship was, arguably, conditioned on their maternity in earlier times as well. In her now classic history of the Hungarian welfare state, Lynne Haney argues that from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s Hungarian women could make successful claims on the state on the basis of motherhood and protested vehemently the shift in emphasis toward material need as the main basis of claims making in the 1990s (Haney 1997, 2002). This is just one, albeit central, feature of the state socialist gender regime which explains the seamlessness of the transition toward anti-liberalism. There are at least three further areas where I see notable continuities between Hungary’s state socialist legacy and our modern-day gender arrangements: women’s historically high participation in gender segregated paid work, their concomitant, unchanged responsibility for care work of both the paid and the unpaid kind, and a general disdain for feminism and independent civil organizations fighting for women’s rights.

First, a word on the concept of “gender regime” is in order. A gender regime is constituted by “patterns of gender arrangements”(Connell 1987), which describe how members of a society are classified into groups designated as men and women, the distinct social roles and responsibilities assigned to each, their symbolic representations, along with the inequalities built into these structures. All our social institutions are built on assumptions about and practices of gender: from the production process to reproduction, sexuality, institutions of politics and power, as well as emotions and cultural expressions. While gender may be manifested somewhat differently in each of these institutional arrangements, institutional gender regimes are deeply connected and in Connell’s terminology cohere into a societal level “gender order”, or following Walby’s terminology, a new form of patriarchy or “gender regime” (Walby 2020).

State socialist countries developed new patterns of gender arrangements after World War II under the leadership and supervision of the Soviet Union. At the time when, after the devastation of the war, Western European countries reveled in an increase in their birth rates and celebrated the stay-at-home housewife, women of all social classes were required to join the paid labor market in Hungary and in the other Central and East European states ruled by newly instituted communist parties. Women's paid work was understood as essential for women's emancipation according to the Marxist–Leninist doctrine. Not coincidentally, women's contributions was also sorely needed in the intensive industrialization project Central and Eastern European countries embarked upon after the destruction caused by World War II. Women's potential had been a vastly underutilized resource (Csányi 2019; Zimmermann 2010). The main goal of early women's emancipation policies was to cajole, and occasionally to force women to take up paid work. After World War II, about a third of all women had been working for wages in Hungary (Gyáni 1987) but by the end of the state socialist era this percentage climbed to over 75%. Similar rates were recorded in Nordic countries but, unlike there, in Hungary women worked full time all through their adult lives (Fodor 2021). Although employment levels plummeted after the collapse of state socialism and the attraction of the image of the middle-class stay-at-home housewife featured prominently in the imagination of many over-worked Hungarians, material reality only really allowed the very few at the top of the social hierarchy to drop out of work voluntarily. Women's full-time labor force participation in Hungary has varied but remained high overall for the past 70 years, indeed higher than in most EU countries when expressed in full-time equivalency rates (OECD 2019).

Inequalities at work were, however, rampant all through the state socialist period. Although data from the period are notoriously unreliable, researchers have found higher levels of occupational segregation in state socialist countries than in comparable capitalist ones during this period (Rosenfeld and Trappe 2002). In Hungary too, two-thirds of workers in sectors such as clothing or food production were women, and these jobs paid less than work in other sectors of the economy, which resulted in a wage gap that was measured at around 30% during the late state socialist era (Zimmermann 2010). This may have been somewhat compensated by the vast array of benefits in kind that workers received directly from the company they worked for, including kindergarten places, medical services, vacation home rentals and so on. Perhaps more importantly,

housing—rented at a nominal cost from the state for life—was at least partly allocated by employers, and families with children as well as single parents enjoyed some privileges (Scheiring 2020). In the case of a divorce, mothers were typically granted full custody over children and, as a consequence, they also usually retained the right to the apartment. With a high divorce rate this led to difficult life circumstances and/or increased homelessness for men, as well as some financial advantage for women.

Similarly on the positive side, women's education attainment increased noticeably under state socialism and this, along with their growing work experience, led to their more equal share in positions of mid-level authority. Compared to neighboring Austria, which had started with a roughly similar gender regime after World War II but followed an altogether different route afterwards, women's labor market advancement in state socialist Hungary was significant (Fodor 2003).

The need for women's paid work has a long history in Hungary, as does the unequal division of household labor. Communist parties proclaimed their intention to socialize child and elderly care as well as domestic work. After World War II kindergartens were opened, children and adults were offered subsidized meals in school and factory canteens, laundry facilities were available at a low cost in larger cities and so on. None of these proved sufficient, however, to ease women's reproductive burden to any significant degree, especially not in the context of a general shortage of services and goods required for the maintenance of a household. Women, as time budget surveys and ethnographic accounts attest, worked long hours in their paid jobs followed by a lengthy second shift at home (Ghodsee 2005).

Some of the burden of reproductive work was alleviated by shared households. The proportion of multigenerational living arrangements was always higher in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe and remained so, partly because housing shortages had affected the whole state socialist period. But mobility from the countryside to the cities also increased, and mobile families could not draw on the contribution of older generations in care work. It is thus not surprising that the birth rate, high after World War II, started to drop precipitously soon afterwards, and by 1959 Hungary's total fertility rate dipped below what would have been required to keep population levels stable. Partly in response to these problems and partly because intensive industrialization slowed by the mid-1960s, the logic of the communist party's women's emancipation policy shifted and even more of the care burden was moved to the realm of the family and onto the shoulders of women. Lengthy, paid maternity

leave opportunities were instituted in almost all countries in the region in the mid-1960s. In Hungary, new mothers (and mothers only) could withdraw from paid work for up to three years upon childbirth and were guaranteed their jobs back upon return. Kindergarten places for children over three years of age as well as other social services related to childrearing became increasingly available and a balance was struck: it remained primarily women's responsibility to take care of children without much support from individual men but with some, typically in-kind, contributions from the state. In exchange, women continued to be employed as full-time workers. However, working for wages in the socialist economy proved significantly less demanding than in its capitalist counterpart: work hours were shorter, overtime less frequent and the expectation of work intensity varied. "We pretend to work, they [the state] pretend to pay us" was the popular joke of the time and women's account of their work day often included doing the shopping in local shops or in the facilities within their work enterprises. Indeed, given the vast labor shortage and the political guarantee of a paid job for everyone, except for smaller pockets of the population, among them, for example, the Roma minority in Hungary, people could fairly easily find a new job if they found that the conditions in a specific factory or office were incompatible with their domestic responsibilities.

Nevertheless, women worked significantly longer hours than men overall. To illustrate, a time budget survey taken in 1986 shows that among married couples with two children women spent 63 minutes a day on childcare and 227 minutes on domestic work for a total of 290 minutes. Fathers of two, on the other hand, dedicated only 61 minutes to these two types of activities combined. This 229-minute (almost 3.5 hours!) gap is not compensated for by the fact that men spent on average two more hours on doing paid work than women. Overall married mothers of two children had significantly less leisure time than similar men and a very long—almost ten-hour-workday altogether (KSH 2012). State socialist policies, except for a few initial steps in the early 1950s, mostly ignored the unfairness of this domestic division of labor.

Disdain for feminism, Western women's movements and for the conceptualization of women's equality in terms of human rights is shared by anti-liberal and state socialist political regimes. While the notion of "women's emancipation" was an acceptable formulation in Marxist–Leninist ideology, those working toward it could under no condition be called "feminists" (Barna et al. 2018). State socialist policy makers banned

Western feminist literature, and confiscated it when they found intellectuals trying to smuggle it into the country. Achieving gender equality may have been an oft-repeated political goal, but it had to be initiated and carried out on the terms of the Communist Party. Women's grassroots organizations, numerous before World War II, were replaced by the Hungarian National Women's Association, which historians argue, had some degree of independence but was far from a true representative of women's interests nationally, and certainly did not invite a diversity of women's voices to be heard (De Haan 2010; Funk 2014; Ghodsee and Mead 2018).

It is not surprising, therefore, that when Hungary joined the European Union, gender mainstreaming measures enforced by the accession requirements were not widely welcome (Kováts 2020). Indeed, in international surveys Hungarians tended to express more conservative gender role attitudes than citizens of other countries in the Union (Pongracz 2005). Without much conviction, the socialist government of Hungary introduced the necessary regulations and set up the required institutions that monitored the main indicators of gender equality, but popular support for the term or for women's struggle in general was negligible. Small feminist groups worked toward specific goals, including violence against women, or reproductive rights, but funding primarily came from international organizations as did, often, the specific agenda and discourse (Fabian 2014). The EU's gender mainstreaming policies did not gain widespread popularity (Ghodsee 2005; Gregor and Grzebalska 2016).

In sum, women's ongoing participation in paid work was necessary in both state socialist and post-state socialist gender regimes, but little real effort was made at redistributing or socializing care work. Not unrelated to this, neither the state socialist emancipation effort nor the EU's haphazardly enforced and rather limited gender mainstreaming agenda generated much enthusiasm for the concept of gender equality. It is no wonder that in 2010 Orbán's new government could simply dismiss with impunity both the rhetoric and the reality of gender equality policies and assemble a new form of gender regime to support anti-liberal state building.

### AN ANTI-LIBERAL GENDER REGIME

But is this anti-liberal gender regime really new? I have identified a number of continuities with Hungary's state socialist past and many of the policies I describe in the next chapter will be familiar from there or from elsewhere in the world. Sylvia Walby, for one, argues that the gender



regimes of authoritarian states are not necessarily unique. Walby (2020) traces the evolution of gender regimes (or forms of patriarchy) from what she calls “domestic” to “public”, and distinguishes at least two varieties of modern public gender regimes: neoliberal and social-democratic. She acknowledges the authoritarian turn in European politics but claims that authoritarianism is easily compatible with neoliberalism, so gender regimes of authoritarian states do not necessarily constitute a unique form. In a similar vein, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015) claim that populist governments have diverse gender ideologies, left-wing in Latin-America, right-wing in Western Europe, hence, they argue, the position of populists on gender issues is unclear and depends on the national context, it is not a unique variety of gender regimes. Perhaps what we are witnessing is simply a turn toward conservatism, characteristic of neo-patrimonial regimes, such as Orbán’s or Putin’s (Szelenyi and Csillag 2015)? Or the continuation of the state socialist legacy of gender inequality? Csányi (2019) connects the new regime’s emphasis on traditional gender roles with the exploitation of women’s cheap labor. He emphasizes the continuities from the 1950s, and describes the novelties emerging after 2010 as primarily in the realms of cultural representations. Or perhaps inconsistency and ambiguity are the defining features of Orbán’s gender policies (Kováts 2020; Szikra 2018)?

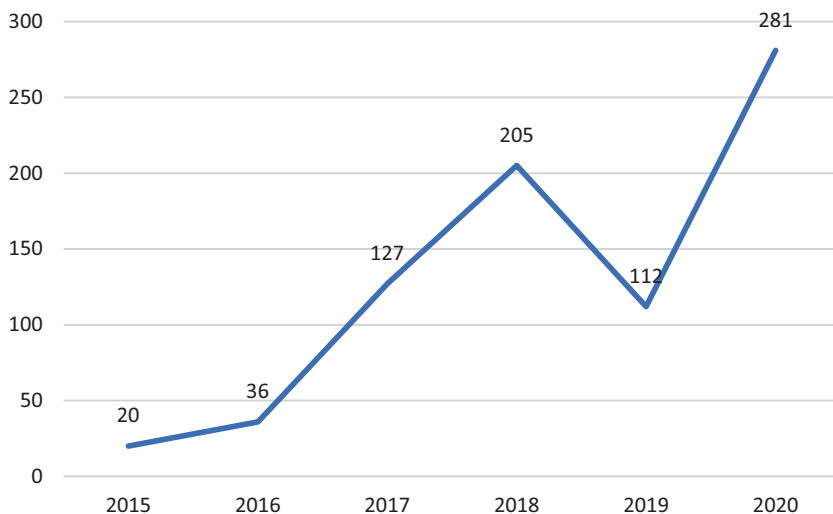
Yet others emphasize the coherence and uniqueness in the institutionalization of gender inequality in the social fabric of countries which deny their allegiance to liberal democracy. Historical accounts, for example, point to similarities with “conservative authoritarian gender regimes” in Japan and Germany of the past (Shire and Nemoto 2020). Grzebalska and Pető (2018) claim that Hungary’s and Poland’s authoritarian governments have a unique “modus operandi” closely tied to their gender ideologies, and highlight the foregrounding and mainstreaming of the family rather than gender equality policies (Juhász 2012), the appropriation of the space for fighting for gender equality, and the use of an anti-gender rhetoric to gather all political enemies under one umbrella (Kováts and Poim 2015). Krizsán and Roggeband (2018) also point to the closure of civil space for a gender equality agenda, the relationship between nativism and nationalism in policy making, and the weakening and elimination of women’s movements as common features of gender regimes in illiberal states.

I side with those who see a new variety of gender regime emerging. I argue that since the mid-2010s the government has redefined the problem

of care into one of demographic decline and proceeded to pass a policy package using principles of “carefare”. Carefare policies—to be described in more detail in the next chapter—discipline women into accepting an increased unpaid care work burden combined with unequal treatment in the labor market in exchange for economic survival or, in some cases, slight improvements in the financial position of their families. The government’s gender policies aim to reorganize not just gender relations but social stratification itself by trickling down some limited resources to select “deserving” social groups, whose contributions to the economy is essential and whose votes and political loyalty the government is counting on. To legitimize these policies, the government increasingly relies on the rhetoric of global “anti-gender” movements.

### SETTING THE STAGE FOR STATE MANDATED PATRIARCHY: ANTI-GENDER DISCOURSE IN HUNGARY

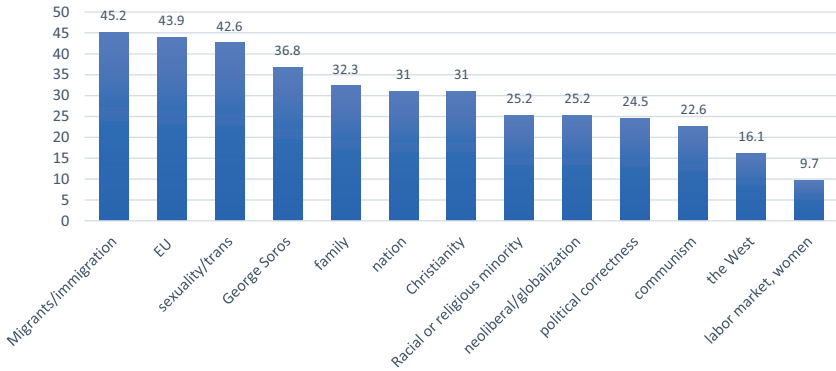
Numerous authors describe the global spread of the rhetoric against “gender ideology” and its important role in official political communication in Poland and Hungary (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kováts 2018; Kováts and Pető 2017; Kováts and Poim 2015). “Gender” in this context has come to signify political issues and affiliations well beyond the actual reality of gender relations. In Hungary too, the Orbán government has successfully divorced the term “gender” from actual policies about women’s and men’s social participation and turned it into a frenzied political rallying cry. It is not alone in these efforts. Democratic backsliding in several countries (from Poland, Romania to Brazil and beyond) has been accompanied by state-sponsored propaganda which denies the usefulness of the concept “gender” in regulating women’s and men’s role in society (Kováts 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). This “anti-gender” discourse has common themes but a different focus in different countries, a phenomenon, which supports the argument that it is primarily a political tool, a “symbolic glue” which holds allies, enemies and topical political themes together (Kováts and Poim 2015). I will briefly indicate a few elements of the Hungarian variety here and argue that, even though the discourse is not about gender relations, the use of this rhetoric has a lot to do with gender: it sets the stage for ignoring gender equality policies and reinforcing state mandated gender *inequality*.



**Fig. 1.1** The number of articles which mention the term “gender” in Magyar Idők/Magyar Nemzet

Hungary is a relative late comer to the anti-gender scene, but the deployment of the concept of “gender” has accelerated in the past few years and is fiercely ongoing at the time of writing this book. Even a cursory analysis of a FIDESZ-owned, self-proclaimed pro-government national newspaper, *Magyar Idők* (in English *Hungarian Times*, later renamed *Magyar Nemzet*, or *Hungarian Nation*) illustrates this point. As Fig. 1.1 shows, *Magyar Idők’s* online portal published only 20 articles which used the term “gender” in 2015, while by 2020 a whopping 281 appeared in the paper. (Another pro-government outlet, *Origo*, also increased its attention to gender going from publishing 18 articles, which mention the term “gender” in 2017, to 32 articles in 2018, to 50 in 2019 and 65 in 2020.)

*Magyar Idők/Magyar Nemzet’s* output represents a more than ten-fold increase within a five-year period between 2015 and 2020 and one which meant that the term gender has been used almost daily on the portal for the past three years. The government whose self-proclaimed goal is to eliminate “gender”, and whose representatives deny its very existence, nevertheless deploys the term more often than has any previous government before them.



**Fig. 1.2** Appearance of key terms in articles which contain the word “gender”, 2018–2020 (in percentages)

This increased usage does not mean, however, an intensification in public discussions about gender relations. Partly in an effort to avoid just that, the government has emptied the meaning of “gender” as a concept signifying relationships and systemic inequalities between men and women, and has repurposed it for use to distinguish and legitimize its political agenda.

I read, coded and analyzed 156 articles published on the online portal of the newspaper in the months of February, May and December of 2018, 2019 and 2020 to get a sense of the government’s message and overall understanding of the term “gender”. During these three years the term gender almost never referred to relationships between men and women. Indeed, as Fig. 1.2 shows, individual women or even women as a group are practically never mentioned in the 155 articles, and in only 15, fewer than 10%, is there any discussion of gender inequality or women’s social position. Most of these 15 address issues of violence, only 3 mention labor market status or social welfare. Even motherhood or parenting is not on the agenda, only the abstract term “family” features with regularity.

Instead, “gender” was most prominently used during these three years to weave a story about migration and Hungary’s struggle against the European Union’s migration quota. Figure 1.2 demonstrates this claim. In 2018 43.6%, in 2019 41.4% and in 2020 47.1% of all articles which contained the term “gender” also mentioned migrations and migrants. For example, *Magyar Nemzet* expresses concern about what it sees as “the

aggressive propaganda about gender and migration” (December 26, 2020) threatening the integrity of the Hungarian nation in one of its articles during the Christmas period. In a similar vein, an article two weeks later assures the public that “Hungary ... resists the integration of masses of migrants and the gender craze” (Jan. 13, 2021) emanating from the West.

The European Union features prominently: 44% of all articles which mention the term “gender” also cite the EU, typically as a pro-gender enemy of the Hungarian nation. A single example suffices to illustrate this from an article published on December 14, 2020: “I was reminded: the gender lobby is hard at work and as part of the migration action plan 34 million migrants will get voting rights in the EU” (December 14, 2020). The relationship between the “gender lobby” and the “migration lobby” is not made explicit, the two are used simultaneously, indicating that they are the same or at least the same people are behind both. The blame for the EU’s migration policy falls on the shoulder of the “gender lobby”. Along the lines of what researchers have described elsewhere gender policies or gender ideology is simply used as a way to identify the “enemy”, the “other side” or “left-liberal forces”, specifically those who seek to impose migrants on the country (*ibid.*).

Gender ideology—if defined—refers to the acceptance of transgender people as legitimate members of society. The Hungarian government and its propaganda machines are openly and increasingly homophobic and reject all forms of sexual identities which are not hetero. Homosexuality is in fact seen as analogous to the problem of migration: several of the EU’s norms, including those related to gender and migration, are understood as detrimental to Hungarian’s values and as externally imposed and alien (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Increasingly during the three years, stories about sex changes and variability in gender identity are problematized, laying the groundwork for various policies on the theme, including Hungary’s ban on sex change, the prohibition of adoption by non-heterosexuals or the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in education. It is no wonder that OECD statistics from 2018 show that Hungarians are the least tolerant of all OECD countries toward ethnic, sexual and religious minorities, a sharp increase from 2008 when the views expressed by Hungarians were no different from the average. Gender is one, although not the only, political tool to construct an external enemy and mobilize for resistance against it.

The concept of “gender” is thus used by Hungary’s top-level politicians and government-controlled media to reinforce, communicate and persuade the population about their anti-liberal agenda. Depicted as a “foreign” concept—hence the use of the English term *gender*—it is steadfastly associated with other themes in the government’s political repertoire and is described as dangerous to Hungarians, indeed to the fate of civilization itself. The government is thus tasked to reject these agents of evil and, as David against the Goliath of Brussels, to fight for the ultimate good of all against the “gender lobbies”, “genderism” and the “gender ideology”.

Indeed, much of this discourse is not directly about gender or gender equality. But it does serve the purpose of taking attention away from gender equality policies and the possibility of claiming rights for women as women. The government has successfully tied the concept of gender equality to “liberalism”, that is, politicized it and associated it with a specific side of the political spectrum. As it is rejecting liberalism, it can thus legitimately and without further explanation reject gender equality policies as well. Note the close association between “gender ideology” and “liberal open society” in the text of Hungary’s Minister of Justice, Judit Varga in a Facebook post on February 1, 2021: “We experience with great concern the breakthrough of the liberal open society. ... Religion, nation, traditional family model ... traditions have no place in that. ... Instead, there is gender ideology, Christian persecution, a technological dictatorship of opinion, destruction of nations, and the creation of a grey uniform society in which everyone must be liberal and an individuality” (the translation is from the original post available online).

## OUTLINE OF THE BOOK AND A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH METHODS

This book utilizes original data from several research projects I have conducted over the past six years. Chapter 2 explains the concept of carefare: its manifestations in social policy and political discourse, as well as some of its consequences for social and especially gender inequalities. To make the case I primarily rely on data from aggregate sources, such as Hungary’s Central Statistical Office, OECD and Eurostat datasets. In addition, I present results from statistical analyses of data from the dataset EU SILC from the years 2011 and 2017. The European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC) is a harmonized, annually collected EU-wide survey with a large enough case number to allow the analysis of

smaller social groups. I use it to measure what is called the “motherhood penalty” in Hungary and its change over time.

The third form of data come from a series of interviews I conducted with my colleague, Christy Glass over a decade-long exploration of the motherhood penalty in Hungarian firms, the nuances and conditions of its application, as well as how it is experienced (Fodor et al. 2019; Fodor and Glass 2018; Glass and Fodor 2007, 2011, 2018). The most recent series of interviews took place in 2019 when we talked with 24 mothers working in state administration, who responded to questions about the cut in vacation days and the lengthening of work hours, measures introduced simultaneously with the government’s new pronatalist family policies. We sought to find out how this group of young professional women, who are clearly targeted by the family policies, evaluate their significance from their own points of view.

Finally, in Chap. 2 I also present data from my analysis of a document published on the occasion of the International Women’s Day in 2019 by a government funded organization called FICSAK, “Organization for Young Families” (FICSAK 2019). In this heavily subsidized and promoted booklet, high-level Hungarian male politicians and a handful of public personalities offer greetings to women to celebrate the occasion. I only used the quotes from politicians, ignoring otherwise famed participants, but politicians represented the majority. Each quote—altogether 90 of them—is a few paragraphs long and they are collected in a booklet entitled *Women’s Soul as Seen Through Male Eyes*. These texts highlight better than most other documents what role is assigned to women, what achievements and character traits are praised most by top-level policy makers. I coded the quotes by theme and will cite the relevant sections in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 describes how principles of carefare are realized in practice in the special context of Hungary’s child protection system, and specifically among foster care workers. Orbán’s government transformed this area of social service through a new piece of legislation in 2014 and the process and its outcome illustrate brilliantly several aspects of the workings of a carefare state. I started studying the work of foster parents in 2015. During the past six years I conducted over 80 interviews with various actors in the foster care system, most importantly with 52 foster parents living in Pest county, in and near Budapest, as well as in a handful of small towns and villages in the north-east of Hungary. These areas are two of the most populous in terms of foster families. They are also quite different: I

interviewed in the poorest and ethnically most diverse region of Hungary as well as in better-off areas around the capital. I initially got in touch with foster parents through their agencies, so I first talked to those who were preselected possibly for their performance or easy collaboration with the agency. But I gained further contacts from the foster parents themselves so I could broaden the circle of interviewees. Nevertheless, I most likely conducted interviews with foster parents who were generally satisfied with and proud of their work, in addition to a few who held a major grudge and wanted to talk about that. Most interviews were conducted in the home of the foster parent and lasted between 90 and 180 minutes. Foster parents are used to having strangers in their homes who ask about their lives, so they have also developed strategies to respond in a way that preserves their privacy and dignity. But most people who visit them ask about their children and I was interested in them as workers, their daily routines, their experience, their lives and choices. This was a novel experience for many who felt underappreciated as workers and parents, so they typically welcomed the chance to talk. I taped and transcribed the interviews and analyzed them using the software NVivo. Names and minor demographic details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

In addition to talking to foster parents, I conducted regular participant observations in two large foster parent agencies during birth-parent-foster child visitations, and helped out at other events at one of the agencies during the years of 2015–2016. I interviewed over 30 foster care advisors and various actors in the child protection system, including policy experts, managers of foster parent networks and politicians in Ministries who were in charge of the transformation of the system. I obtained data from the Central Statistical Office, the Hungarian Treasury and the Ministry of Economics. Experts and policy makers provided me with numerous documents which were also used for the analysis.

Next, let's explore the concept of carefare.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# A Carefare Regime

**Abstract** Hungary’s anti-liberal government has invented a novel solution to the care crisis, which I call a “carefare regime”. This chapter describes four key features of the policies, policy practice and discourse that make up Hungary’s carefare regime. I argue that in contrast to welfare state models familiar from developed democracies, in post-2010 Hungary, women’s claims to social citizenship are most successfully made on the basis of doing care work. The state is re-engineered rather retrenched: services are not commodified but “churchified” in an effort to redistribute resources and build political loyalty. Women are constructed as “naturally” responsible for reproduction and care and this responsibility is tied to sentimentalized notions about femininity and true womanhood. In addition to providing care in the household, women are increasingly engaged in the paid labor market too, where the tolerance for gender inequality is officially mandated. A carefare regime provides limited financial advantages for a select group of women, while simultaneously increasing their devalued work burden both in and outside the household: it feeds a growing underclass of women workers.

**Keywords** Care crisis • Welfare regimes • De-familialization • Re-familialization • Carefare • Wage gap • Labor market • Gender inequality • Social citizenship • Demography • Family policies

“And I hope that you—yes, you—have the ambition to lean in to your career and run the world. Because the world needs you to change it.” Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean in: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013)

“Do not believe that we, women must always compete with men. Do not believe that we must compete in every moment of our lives, or that we must have the same position, the same salary as them ... let’s be happy that we were born women. ... Let’s be happy that we were given the gift of being able to love and take care of others.” Katalin Novák, Minister for Families in Hungary in a video message to women, (HVG 2020)

Over the past decade and a half the problem of the care crisis has gained traction in both the academic literature and in popular media (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Rosen 2007; Williams 2018). Recently, Nancy Fraser (2016) has argued emphatically that a “crisis of care” was looming in western capitalist societies caused by the increasingly unresolvable conflict between the logic of social reproduction and that of aggressive capital accumulation. Fraser points out that although capitalist production requires healthy, socially apt and highly skilled human beings to meet its ever-growing profit targets, the work that goes into producing these individuals and the communities in which they thrive, that is, the work of social reproduction, has become devalued to the extreme by the very same logic of accumulation. Financialized neoliberal capitalism, she claims, has aggravated the above contradiction to the point of an inevitable explosion, although Fraser muses about the possibility of the emergence of creative “mutant” regimes, which would offer temporary solutions to patch up evolving crisis tendencies.

Hungary’s anti-liberal gender regime is such a mutant. I argue that since the mid-2010s the Hungarian government has been offering a novel response to the care crisis, one which is successful in generating a sufficient degree of political legitimacy even in the face of growing inequalities and social disintegration. I call Hungary’s anti-liberal solution a “carefare” regime. Carefare is a form of state response to the care crisis, a set of social policies, policy implementation and related discourse within an anti-liberal political culture and an authoritarian capitalist economy. Carefare is not the only possible anti-liberal response to the crisis of care, but it is certainly one of them and a successful mutant at least in the short run.

Below I discuss in detail four features which jointly distinguish “carefare”, Hungary’s response to the crisis of care, from the generic model of

**Table 2.1** A comparison of the logics of carefare versus the “two-earner family” model

	<i>“Two-earner family”</i>	<i>“Carefare”</i>
Basis for claiming social citizenship rights	Social insurance and means tests Claims as individuals	Care work is combined with waged work Claims by heterosexual families
Extent of public responsibility for reproduction	Disinvestment Services are commercialized	Selective disinvestment “Churchify” instead of commodify
Responsibility for care work	Either externalized to family or commodified by global care chain Reproductive work is seen as a yoke that holds women back	Falls on native women, absolutely not on immigrant labor Reproductive work within heterosexual working families is what gives meaning to life for women and is their responsibility toward their families/the nation
Who works for wages?	Women are expected to work, and “lean in”	Women are encouraged to work but not “lean in”
Is gender equality important?	Equality measures exist Diversity is celebrated	Gender equality policies are rejected, replaced by sentimentalization of work Gender inequality is acceptable

the “two-earner family”, found, with variations, in numerous western countries guided by principles of neoliberalization (Fraser 2016; Walby 2020). None of the elements of carefare are particularly new. Indeed, several authors point out the direct links and similarities between elements of anti-liberal and neoliberal governance (Jessop 2019; Scheiring 2020). Yet the combination of these features results in a unique discursive interpretation of the care problem and a set of social policies, which do, in fact represent a novel answer. Table 2.1 below summarizes the four set of features in comparison. After a short discussion of the history of anxieties about the size of the population in Hungary, I explain and provide evidence for each in the rest of this chapter.

*First*, in a neoliberal capitalist welfare state, successful claims on the state are made on the basis of social insurance and, secondarily, material need. These constitute the bases of social citizenship. Doing unpaid care work does not carry a social insurance scheme, and claims to the state cannot be made on the basis of raising children, or being good parents. This is indeed the crux of the conflict between production and reproduction (Fraser 2016). In Hungary, however, care work has become a centrally important axis of social citizenship claims. *Second*, anti-liberal states are



powerful and extensive, unlike their neoliberal counterparts which tend to disinvest in general and in social reproduction in particular. Hungary's anti-liberal state has increased already generous funding for several important aspects of social reproduction. In addition, instead of commodifying and marketizing previously state provided services in an effort to cut costs, it directs centralized state funding in a way as to maximize not profit or cost-cutting but political loyalty. *Third*, in Hungary care for children and the elderly is enthusiastically and selectively familialized. State policies assign care work to women and identify the heterosexual family home as its principal location. In neoliberal regimes, care work is increasingly outsourced to vulnerable, often immigrant domestic workers, to market-based providers, and/or to state institutions. The main focus of policy objectives is typically to ensure that native, working age women do less care work, while in Hungary the opposite is the case. A political discourse which associates care with women's "natural" essence supports this process. *Fourth*, in addition to doing care work in the home, women are also incentivized to do waged work. This is done through tying reproduction related social benefits to work history and family income levels in addition to care work. This necessitates a dual earner couple. But state provisions do not address work-life balance problems, and gender equality measures are summarily rejected by Hungary's anti-liberal political leaders. A truly vicious trade-off is emerging where women must accept inferior work conditions in exchange for the possibility to meet care responsibilities. This is especially problematic for women in the lower educational brackets and those living in rural areas where work options are limited.

One consequence of carefare is obvious: it increases women's work burden while leaving men's untouched. In addition, carefare reinforces and exacerbates class inequalities because better-off families can utilize more of the income-based provisions than those with lower wages. At the same time, however, the logic of carefare rearranges patterns of socio-economic disadvantage at the bottom of the social hierarchy too. Pronatalist provisions boost the wellbeing of specific working class groups: those who have several children and some semblance of formal employment. These families have suffered vast social disadvantages in the past. Carefare promotes them into the category of "deserving families" and legitimizes their successful claims to social benefits. It is to these families that some of the economic growth gains and EU funding trickle down, even amidst growing overall social inequalities. If authoritarian policies serve as a political strategy to overcome conflicts generated by the growing inequalities of

neoliberal capitalism (Scheiring 2020), carefare serves the same purpose via different means.

### “CARE CRISIS” AS A DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS IN HUNGARY

Hungarian policy makers have long acknowledged a pervasive crisis of care but only in one area of reproduction: the declining number of births to Hungarian women which they closely associated with the impending death of the Hungarian nation. Indeed, defining the declining birth rate of the native population as a “demographic crisis” is well known in European Union-wide thinking as well, although policy recommendations from the EU include a variety of measures which could potentially reduce the burden of care work on women. As I will show below this was not the direction the Hungarian government took.

To understand this rather narrow re-conceptualization of the problem of care, we need to understand the lengthy history of deep-seated anxieties about the size of the population in the country. Hungary is a small country of about 10 million people and this number has been shrinking steadily since 1981. The total fertility rate (TFR) has not reached what is typically considered sufficient for reproduction since 1959 (KSH 2019a). In this regard, Hungary’s demographic characteristics are quite similar to those of many other post-socialist countries, which started to experience a decline in births in the 1950s. This then continued steadily throughout the twentieth century with a sharper drop in the fertility rate in the early 1990s after the collapse of state socialism, which brought about a deep economic crisis and major societal upheaval. Two decades later, the recession of 2008 produced even more societal stress all over the region and resulted in a further decline in fertility in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Soon, however, total fertility rates began to increase in all post-state socialist countries, with Hungary lagging somewhat behind, but picking up speed by 2013. In 2019, Hungary’s total fertility rate was in line with that of the EU 27, even if the number of births had not shown a similar increase due to the smaller size of the cohort in reproductive age in the late 2010s (Eurostat 2018a; KSH 2019a).

Although Hungary’s fertility rate is not significantly different from that of other Central and East European countries, or even the EU 27 average, the country’s crude death rate is one of the highest in the European Union, and life expectancy, as well as healthy life expectancy, is one of the lowest (Eurostat 2018b). Indeed, all Visegrád 4 countries exceed Hungary

in life expectancy and only Romanian and Bulgarian women die younger than Hungarians within the Union (*ibid.*). On the plus side, this is one of the reasons why Hungary's old age dependency ratio is somewhat lower than the EU average of roughly 30%. Hungarian policy makers have mostly ignored the problem of early deaths and conceptualized the demographic crisis primarily as a threat to Hungarian nationhood and only secondarily as a potential human resource shortage.

### ANXIETIES ABOUT POPULATIONS

Biopolitical concerns about the size and quality of the population have long plagued Hungarian political discourse (Melegh 2019). The country lost a great deal of its territories and over half of its population following World War I—some to the damages of the war itself, most to the dictates of the post-war Treaty of Trianon. The pain of the war loss intensified debates about demography and specifically about the phenomenon of the “single child” popular in rural households in certain regions in Hungary (Andorka 1975). The anxiety about the size of the population was explicitly connected by politicians, writers and public figures alike with the future of the Hungarian nation and the looming threat of German invasion (Heller et al. 2015).

After World War II even though war losses were significant, discussions about demography were silenced for a while, as issues related to industrialization, war recovery and an ideological commitment to the fight of the international rather than the national proletariat were considered more important by the leaders of the Communist Party. However, by the middle of the 1950s, when the post-war baby boom failed to materialize in Hungary, the government decided to take a radical step and banned abortions altogether (Pongráczné 1999). The number of births increased temporarily but political pressure forced the government to abandon the measure in 1956. In the absence of other types of contraceptives, abortion became the primary form of birth control for Hungarian women: between 1960 and 1973 the number of abortions, legal and accessible, exceeded the number of births (KSH 2019a).

After the revolution of 1956, the Hungarian government's population policy started to lean toward incentives rather than prohibition. In 1967, a three-year paid maternity leave was introduced as a way to encourage births and also to regulate the labor market. But as a backlash against permissive abortion regulations and the extremely high number of

procedures, the government created a new population policy in the early 1970s, which added a set of restrictive measures as well. Around this time an extensive public debate took place on the pages of Hungarian magazines and weeklies. Public figures, writers, sociologists and demographers expressed concern about the developments in population trend, linking the problem of fertility decline to classic tropes ranging from the death of the nation and the disappearance of Hungarians from the planet, to moral concerns about abortions, the idyllic image of large healthy families of the past, as well as to the relationship between women's emancipation and labor force participation and their willingness, inclination and ability to produce more children (Heller et al. 2015). Current definitions of the problem of care resonate deeply with many of these ideas.

Population concerns were not limited to Hungary, of course, but in the 1970s and 1980s the primary global concern was the "population bomb" rather than depopulation. It was after the turn of the twenty-first century that the issue of demography came to the attention of policy makers in the European Union.<sup>1</sup> As the first cohort of baby boomers entered retirement age and looked forward to decades of happy retirement, the notion of old age dependency came to be conceptualized as a looming problem. The size of the EU's population started to shrink in 2015 prompting further discussions about depopulation, the cost of aging and population projections.

Although nationhood, national identity and demography had been points of interest for the Orbán government immediately after its accession to power in 2010, it was the refugee crisis of 2015 which cast the population problem in an altogether different light and allowed it to gain the political momentum to profoundly change social policy. In the summer of 2015, a large wave of refugees entered Hungary. In average years about 2000–3000 people sought asylum in the country, by early fall of 2015 the number was close to 180,000 (KSH 2019b). Refugees from Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Iraq and Kosovo arrived in Budapest, submitted their request for asylum status but moved on toward more prosperous and inclusive parts of Europe, such as Germany, France or the UK. The flood of asylum seekers entering the EU through the Serbian–Hungarian border took the country by surprise and no humanitarian support was

<sup>1</sup>I want to thank Zsolt Spéder (head of the Hungarian Demographic Research Institute) for his lengthy consultation with me on topics related to population policy in Hungary and globally. See also Melegh (2019).

forthcoming. Instead, the Hungarian government constructed the notion of the “refugee crisis”, built a wall to restrict entry on the southern border and started a country-wide propaganda campaign which depicted refugees and migrants as potential terrorists and threats to the social and cultural wellbeing of all. A second propaganda campaign demonized George Soros, and argued that he, with the complicity—even direct assistance—of key politicians in the European Union encouraged and funded migration in an effort to destroy the purity of European Christianity. Hungarian politicians were not ashamed of their openly racist and xenophobic messaging which had the expected influence: Hungarians developed a real and measurable fear of the person of the “refugee”, even though most of them had never actually met one in their lives. Within three years, the number of asylum seekers plummeted to levels well below those pre-2015, yet the government kept up its anti-immigration xenophobia.

It is against this backdrop that Orbán’s government decided to tackle the crisis of care by foregrounding the problem of the demographic crisis at the cost of any other issues related to the problem of care. “We want more children, not migrants” said Hungary’s prime minister as part of his re-election campaign in March 2018 (Erdélyi.ma 2018), and Hungarians found this call appealing. In 2018 Orbán won his third election victory and gained a qualified majority in Parliament. The scene was set for the final development of the carefare regime.

### SOCIAL CITIZENSHIP CLAIMS IN CAREFARE REGIMES

In her now classic account of the history of the Hungarian welfare state, Lynne Haney (2002) notes a shift around 1985 in the “architecture of need” that underpins the logic of social citizenship. Before the mid-1980s claims to the state socialist welfare state were most successfully made on the basis of maternity. State socialist social policies and centralized redistribution guaranteed that women with the same number of children received the same amount and types of subsidies regardless of other circumstances, such as need or work status. In my previous work I argued, in agreement with Haney, that women during state socialism were constructed as a “corporate” group, with specific skills and unique contributions to society, typically maternity. This guaranteed specific rights and privileges, different from those of the group of men (Fodor 2003).

But in the mid-1980s these “maternalist” principles changed toward what Haney calls “materialist” ones. She argues that instead of

motherhood, material needs came to be seen as the basis of social citizenship: new measures were introduced that targeted the group newly defined as needy, state provisions were allocated on the basis of material need, evaluated by local rather than central governments and in a way that differentiated among women, rather than offering similar support to all in the same care work or parental category. Means tests were utilized and benefits favored those who had paid social insurance, although benefit levels differed according to other characteristics too, such as the length and type of previous employment or education. Overall, subsidies were cut back significantly, or they lost their real value in the context of inflation and became subject to political struggles. “Child rearing was no longer considered a social responsibility deserving remuneration; women were no longer guaranteed compensation for their maternal labor; and claims to state assistance were no longer framed around one’s contribution as a worker, mother, or family member ... women would be recognized only as ‘needy’ individuals” (Haney 2002: 189).

“Materialist” welfare principles are part of the logic of neoliberal statecraft; and neoliberal-leaning capitalism was understood in the early 1990s as the brightest possible future for the country. Notably, as distinct from membership in the corporate group of women (i.e., potential, present or past mothers), neoliberal citizenship rests on the notion of the individual. As Rose (1998: 165) put it, “The political subject is ... an individual whose citizenship is manifested through the free exercise of personal choice amongst a variety of options”. Individuals are expected to develop their human capacities in order to compete successfully on various markets and they must strive to rely on these markets to satisfy their needs. The state is of minimal importance, providing financial support only in cases of dire need.

Anti-liberal Hungary moved away from this individual-based principle of social citizenship. In Orbán’s “carefare” state claims to the state can again be made on the basis of membership in a community, specifically the family and, indirectly, the nation. (This is not the only basis of claims making but certainly a new and very significant one.) In the words of László Kövér, the President of the Hungarian Parliament, “Who is a decent Hungarian citizen? Not someone who speaks Hungarian. It is someone who has 3–4 children, 9–12 grandchildren, they all speak Hungarian and are committed to the Hungarian nation” (László Kövér’s speech in Gyergyószentmiklós, August 2019). In his interpretation, citizenship—including social citizenship—is based on active membership in a fertile,

populous family. Government policies have been duly transformed to reflect this principle.

A quick review of the regulations introduced between 2014 and 2020 makes clear the explicit goal of encouraging childbearing—as well as the additional requirement of parents' participation in paid work. I have enumerated the very long list of the main policies—both new and old—in the appendix. Column 1 identifies the basis of receiving the benefit. Note that the state has eliminated, shortened, cut or devalued all universal cash benefits paid to people as a citizenship right. As an example, see the backbone of family protection legislations since the mid-1960s, the flat rate three-year parental leave allowance (line 3 in the table in the appendix). For the past several decades this has been the main social benefit available to new parents, which allowed mostly mothers to withdraw from paid work for up to three years after childbirth to raise children. Parents receive a lump sum payment, retain social insurance and the promise of their jobs back upon return. Parental leave is an extremely popular measure in Hungary, where the majority of the population is convinced that children do best if they are raised at home by their mothers until age 3 (Blaskó 2011). Only one government attempted to abolish the three-year leave as part of a broader austerity package, but the policy was soon reinstated. The actual sum the participating parent receives equals the minimum old age pension in Hungary, which has been set at 28,500 HUF (or less than 80 EUR) since 2008. At that time in 2008, the parental leave benefit represented 41% of the national minimum wage, while in 2020 it amounts to only 18% (and about 7% of the average wage). To counter any hope that this may be adjusted, the government additionally passed a regulation which essentially froze the value of the minimum pension/parental leave benefit at this level forever (Government decree 707/2020. (XII.30); Portfolió, 2021). At the same time a different type of parental leave benefit has been raised generously: the one that mothers with formal employment can claim for the first six months of their leaves. The government has boosted the value and conditions of insurance-based parental leave options, while allowing the universal flat—rate benefit to devalue.

To complement the parental leave allowance, the “family benefit” has served to support families raising children since before World War II. The regulations and eligibility criteria of the family benefit have changed several times over the years, but it has been a universal support scheme since 1998 (Spéder et al. 2020). However, its value has fluctuated significantly. At the end of the state socialist period in 1989 it represented 21% of the

average wage per child, which was a significant contribution to the family budget. It was devalued after 1990, then adjusted during the reign of the Socialist government in 2008. Since then, neither the Socialist government in power until 2010, nor Orbán who took over in the spring of that year, has changed the amount of support allocated per child. This means that in 2019 the benefit for a single child amounted to less than 5% of the average net wage (author's calculations based on data from Central Statistical Office, and Jarvis and Miklewright 1992). Both major universal benefits—the three-year parental allowance and the family benefit—which people receive without consideration of class or work status have lost a significant portion of their values and the government has announced that it has no plans to change this. Several other types of social provisions met the same fate (Scharle and Szikra 2015).

Successful claims on the state are nowadays made on the basis of significant care work combined with some employment history. Claim makers are typically “families” (defined as heterosexual married couples with children and employed in the formal economy) rather than individuals. The first and most significant of new family benefits is the earned income tax credit, which was re-introduced in 2011. On its official webpage, the government describes it as reflecting two basic values: “work and childcare done in addition to paid work”. Note the emphasis on the combination of care work and paid work—this is certainly not a traditional “back to the kitchen” ideology! Working parents can claim a portion of their taxes back, which in 2021 could yield, at the maximum 33,000 HUF per month (about 100 EUR) per child if a family has at least three children. The tax break is significantly smaller per child if the family has fewer children, which is not surprising since the government has an openly pronatalist agenda and the measure is meant to encourage childbirth. The goal is in fact noble: demographers had long argued that Hungarians wanted more children than they would actually end up giving birth to, so the government claimed that it sought to redress this problem and enable families to have as many babies as they desired (Kapitány et al. 2019). But earned income tax credits can only be claimed by those in formal employment, and informal work arrangements are widespread in Hungary (Hegedűs 2020). In addition, the total family income from formal employment must exceed a certain level, otherwise parts of the tax break are lost. In 2019, families had to have a joint income of at least 330,000 HUF, which was about 10% lower than the average gross wage for full-time work for one person. Recent studies, however, show that about 40% of employees are



registered at the minimum wage in Hungary, although they may or may not receive additional income “under the table” (Hornýák 2019). The minimum wage was 149,000 HUF per months in 2019, so even two parents working full time on the minimum wage were not eligible for the full sum. If parents divorced—and about a third of marriages end up in divorce in their first 15 years (Makay and Szabó 2018), only one party can claim the tax credit, typically mothers, whose income alone may not be enough to receive the full sum. Nevertheless, a significant number of families can and do utilize these earned income tax credits—the precise number is simply not available. Those without employment or formal employment are not eligible. Following a similar logic, working mothers of four or more children do not pay income tax—a benefit that is tied to both paid work in the formal economy and significant care work responsibilities.

In addition to the tax credit, married couples can take a variety of loans which do not have to be paid back if they give birth to the requisite number of children. The centerpiece is a 10 million HUF loan (about 27,000 EUR, introduced in 2019) for couples who plan to have children. The loan can be used for any purpose and a portion is forgiven after the second child. It turns into a non-repayable grant once the third child is born. Couples do not pay interest in the first five years, or at all once they have their first child. Significantly, this is a loan, which can only be taken if at least someone from the family has a three-year work history, a sizeable formal income, and if the couple is married. Its value, as must be obvious from the above, far exceeds that of the flat rate family benefit.

A second set of provisions helps “families” buy, build or renovate their homes. If married couples promise to have children, they become eligible for a grant to be spent on real estate, the size of which is dependent on the number of children they have, or promise to have, and the qualities of the home. There are additional subsidized loan opportunities, mortgage reduction and a handful of other variations on this benefit. The main point is that they are all tied to employment, being married if the couple has no children yet, age (she has to be under 40), and the couple must have significant resources of their own because the state subsidies are not enough in and of themselves to buy/build or even renovate any real estate. Interestingly, there is a special provision for those who want to build a multigenerational home, which the government encourages and offers special subsidies for. Grandparents are encouraged to be involved in care work via other means as well: they can take parental leave instead of the

birth parents of the child. In that case, however, not only the grandparent but *both* parents of the child must be insured, thus working for wages.

All combined these provisions target married couples with some formal employment and savings of their own, who have or plan to have at least two or more children. The sum they can claim from the state is sizeable, while provisions available outside this social category are lower and disappearing. In Hungary's state socialist "maternalist" welfare regime, mothers of all social categories received similar benefits regardless of employment, marital status or social class. Social citizenship claims in Hungary's carefare regime, on the other hand, are conditioned on a combination of criteria related both to formal employment and to unpaid care work done within a married couple family.

### SELECTIVE DISINVESTMENT AND CHURCHIFICATION

What Peck and Theodore (2012: 179) call "the prosaic and frequently tawdry practice of [neoliberal] deregulatory statecraft" typically involves disinvestment in social protection measures, and the decentralization and commodification of formerly state provided services. David Harvey (2015) goes even further to claim that neoliberal states have become active agents in capitalist "accumulation by dispossession" and under the pretext of deregulation seek to create a favorable climate for business interests, protect the integrity of financial institutions over community interests, and redistribute wealth in a way to keep large segments of the population impoverished and corporate capitalist greed satisfied (Harvey 2015). In this context it is the "overgrown penal state", which keeps the poor under control, and thus neoliberalism "entails not the dismantling but the re-engineering of the state" (Wacquant 2012: 6), specifically "market-conforming" state crafting. This is a political rather than an economic project, in which the state re-regulates the economy, commodifies existing services, imposes disciplinary social policy to replace both welfare and workfare systems, and uses penal policy and the discourse of individual responsibility to keep people in line (ibid.). It is in this context that the crisis of care becomes more apparent than ever. The exclusive emphasis on profit leads to a devaluation of reproduction, and reduces support for the birthing and raising of children, caring for the sick and the elderly, and maintaining social ties which hold together families and communities (Fraser 2016; Isaksen et al. 2008).

In good neoliberal fashion, the Hungarian state has also withdrawn funds from social protection in the past decade. In 2010, Hungary dedicated 17.4% of its GDP to social protection expenditure, which was reduced over the years to 13.3% by 2018, while the EU-27 average remained stable at roughly 19% (Eurostat 2019a). Indeed, as Prime Minister Orbán pointed out, the aim of the Hungarian government was to transform Hungary from a welfare to a workfare state, which meant reducing need-based provisions to the bare minimum, and securing workplaces to those willing and able. Following this logic, the Orbán government invested in developing a public works program which soon grew to be one of the largest in the world, and, as noted above, cut cash payments of all varieties, replacing some with benefits in kind. The length and value of the unemployment benefits was decimated, access to long-term sick pay became cumbersome and the value of a variety of social provisions to the needy was devalued. OECD statistics confirm that the proportion of the country's GDP spent on cash transfers decreased significantly while in-kind services have remained stable since 2010 (OECD 2019).

Up to this point, a familiar picture is presented: parts of the world exposed to global neoliberal economic policies and the structural adjustment requirements of international financial organizations often follow these patterns. In fact, this strategy is not altogether different from what several rather liberal Hungarian governments had pursued in years prior to Orbán's accession to power. On closer inspection, however, one important distinction emerges. In 2019, Hungary and Germany were recorded as the two countries within the EU which spent the largest share of all social protection costs, 12%, on a specific function, namely "family protection". When the costs of earned income tax credit are added, Hungary is one of the world leaders in this regard (Makay 2018). To be clear, family protection is euphemism for pronatalist policies offering incentives to heterosexual Hungarian families to have more children. So while spending on other areas of social protection, such as welfare and unemployment declined, "families" have been targeted with generous support. (The quotation mark is a reminder that only one specific form of household is considered a family: heterosexual couples with children and with some form of paid employment.) The government has been funding this specific area of reproduction generously. Although this is just one segment of care work, it is an important one, and one which demonstrates that instead of neoliberal state retrenchment, in Hungary we are witnessing the reorganization of state capacity in line with specific political goals.

Critiques of neoliberal governance note with alarm the increase in deregulation of state services in western economies. A curious alternative has been emerging in Hungary. First, certain state services have in fact expanded: the government has been building nursery schools and has increased access to state provided childcare. Although a small number of private providers are also on the market, their share is insignificant: fewer than 10% of children spend time in paid day care (KSH 2019c).

In other areas, the state is in fact deregulating, but favors only a specific type of provider: a handful of trusted churches. In this case the goal is not to cut costs, as the state funds these services more generously than it does its own institutions. Instead, the goal is to build political loyalty for present and future generations. Churches have played a growing role in social services in Hungary since the collapse of state socialism, but their participation has increased exponentially in the past decade. By 2020, churches ran about 25% of homes for the elderly and the disabled, provided 45% of all basic social services, and 60% of all child protection services (Magyar Nemzet 2020, quoting the Minister for Social Affairs). Care in these institutions is not paid for by donations from members of the church community. Instead, the Hungarian state allocates resources to a small number of established churches to provide the same service as the state or civil organizations do. Only churches receive more funding per capita than a state or non-governmental provider would and they are not obligated to spend all of the money on the actual service in question. By a recent decree, the largest churches also receive the property rights of the institutions they run, cementing their role in the field and allowing them space for independent economic activities. The lack of separation of the church and the state is especially poignant in primary and secondary education, where religious schools have multiplied at the cost of funding good quality secular public institutions. In 2001, fewer than 5% of children attended schools run by churches. In 2019, 15% of primary school students and 25% of secondary school children did so. While in western liberal democracies engaging for-profit and non-profit providers allows states to control and cut costs, in Hungary state services are not commodified or marketized but churchified: increasingly overseen by politically and ideologically loyal religious organizations, which preach a specific ideology, and support the sustenance and reproduction of an anti-liberal political order.

## WOMEN DO CARE WORK IN “FAMILIES”

“I would like to make a deal with Hungarian women, Hungarian ladies, about the future and their role in it as well as the new opportunities the government could offer”, suggested Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in a radio address on the national radio channel in April 2018, soon after his third election victory. His offer clearly reflects a key principle of the new pronatalist policies he was referring to: having children is women’s job, women’s decision, they are the ones responsible. Since women are expected to do the work of birthing and caring for children, the prime minister’s offer addresses women and women alone. The third feature of carefare regimes is the unashamedly unequal distribution of care work and the emphasis on the household as the location for care.

The literature on the de- and re-familialization of care is extensive (Mahon 2002; Morgan and Zippel 2003). Familialism denotes policies, which encourage care, especially childcare, to be carried out within the family. The opposite of the concept is de-familialization, that is, when policies encourage the outsourcing of care and thus open up space for women’s successful participation in paid work, the two-earner family (Javornik 2014). Tendencies of re-familialization have been observed in most post-communist societies and several typologies exist to describe different types of policy packages (Fodor et al. 2002; Haney 2003; Javornik 2014; Rat and Szikra 2018; Saxonberg and Sirovatka 2006; Szelewa and Polakowski 2008; Szikra and Szelewa 2010). These studies typically take into account two large sets of policies—parental leave and the availability of childcare—and show how various combinations offer different options for women. Some encourage them to do care work at home, others to work for wages and send children to childcare institutions, while yet others allow families to choose between these two options. My argument is that in Hungary’s carefare regime women are assigned care work and care is primarily relegated to the home, and simultaneously, they are expected to work for wages full time. The conflict between reproductive work and work is solved via women’s increased work burden and exploitation.

Hungary’s recent “family protection” policies aim to increase the number of births. While most demographers agree that they are unlikely to raise the total fertility rate to the point of replacement, the policies could, at least temporarily, increase the birth rate in at least some segments of society (Spéder et al. 2020). Indeed, following the introduction of the tax credit-based benefits, in 2014 the number of births increased in Hungary,

and after a drop, picked up again in 2020. Birth rates have grown fastest in the poorer regions of the country, while the decline in births continued in the capital of Budapest (KSH 2020).

As the number of births per woman increased between 2010 and 2020 from a low of 1.33 to 1.5 and is likely to grow further, families' reproductive burden is also expected to become heavier. And, as time budget surveys indicate, the brunt of this extra work will most likely be shouldered by women. In 2010, the year for which the most recent data are available, mothers of two children, living with their spouses, spent 96 minutes a day on childcare (while their spouses also dedicated 37 minutes to this task). But in families with three children, mothers spent an additional 82 minutes more a day on childcare, over three hours altogether, while fathers of three children only did 15 minutes more than fathers of two. The extra care burden of another child is clearly carried by women (Falussy and Harcsa 2000) and even if we count the gender difference in the length of paid work, mothers had about an hour less free time per day than fathers in 2010 (KSH 2012).

Mothers' burden is likely to increase especially as intensive mothering is becoming more popular in Hungary too. In a small survey we conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that while all mothers increased their care work during the lockdown months more than fathers did, educated urban mothers' workload grew about four times more than the average (Fodor et al. 2020). In general women at all levels of education spent more time than fathers helping their children with school work and educated women especially seemed to have internalized the expectation of intensive mothering and the notion that they were responsible for making sure their children were not left behind (Geambasu et al. 2021).

More children thus mean more work, and that work will most likely be women's responsibility. While a great deal of propaganda is dedicated to encouraging women to have more children, no mention is made of men's role in carrying at least some of the care burden. The Hungarian government has made several generous adjustments to parental leave benefits which are almost exclusively used by women. However, it did not increase the length of paternity leave from five working days, which is significantly lower than the EU average of 12.5 days.

Welfare typologies usually consider the division of labor with a nuclear family—type household in mind (although see Utrata 2015). In Hungary, familialization has traditionally included the mobilization of grandparents

for care work as well. Although the proportion of multi-family households has declined in Hungary over the past 50 years, still about 23% of women and 18% of men over 65 live with their offspring (Monostori and Gresits 2018). Most grandparents are heavily involved in the care of children: in 2016, two-thirds of 55–79-year-olds participated in this activity. The younger, healthier and more educated they were, the more likely it was that they helped out (*ibid.*): an impressive 80% of college-educated grandparents looked after small children in Hungary in 2016. Interestingly, in this age group there was little gender difference: grandfathers were almost as likely to take care of children as grandmothers (*ibid.*). Building on this tradition of multigenerational care, the government has created financial incentives for grandparents to take parental leave instead of their children, and is offering special support to those who seek to build multigenerational households and to retain care responsibilities within it. In return, the government enshrined in the Constitution of 2011 the obligation that children take care of their elderly parents in need. This, obviously, is another glaring instance where care is familialized, although not via incentives but legal decrees.

In conclusion, in Hungary's carefare regime mothers are primarily responsible for care work in the home. A very small number of families can afford to rely on paid help, although more take advantage of grandparents' availability. The government's pronatalist policies have already resulted in the birth of more babies and this is likely to continue. There is no public mention of the fact that having more children will surely increase women's care work load.

### BEYOND “BACK TO THE KITCHEN”: WOMEN AS WAGE WORKERS

The fourth feature to note in Hungary's carefare regime is the one least discussed in the literature: the necessity for women to be engaged in paid work in addition to producing additional Hungarians for their families and the nation. As I showed above, benefits claimed on the basis of care responsibilities are also tied to employment history, either explicitly or because they require a level of income which is only achievable by two earners. In addition, specific targeted regulations directly encourage women's return to work. For example, in 2014 a change in parental allowance was introduced, which means that women can now keep receiving the

allowance even if they go back to work and, unlike before, they can work full time. Employers too have long had some incentives to hire women with small children through a reduction in taxes on labor. This distinguishes Hungary's anti-liberal carefare regime from European conservative welfare arrangements, such as, for example, in Germany or Austria (Shire and Nemoto 2020). In this carefare regime the “male breadwinner” model or the notion of the family wage are not ideals to be followed, quite the opposite.

In Hungary, women have long been permanent participants in the labor market, and their wages have been essential for the family budget. At the same time, women are also responsible for care work in the home: they drop out of the labor market for lengthy periods after childbirth and dedicate significantly more time than their spouses to the daily chore of raising children and doing other types of care work. This necessarily limits their opportunities in paid work, puts them in a precarious position in the labor market, and occasionally forces them to accept trade-offs between wages and the ability to meet their reproductive responsibilities (Mandel and Semoyonov 2006; Petit and Hook 2009). Two issues clearly differentiate carefare regimes from others which encourage a dual wage earner model. First, the stated goal of achieving gender equality in the labor market is missing in Hungary as are policies which require that employers, including state employers, guarantee transparent and reliable work–life balance measures. Second and related, instead of equality legislation or workers' representation, women's work is “sentimentalized”: women are constructed in official political discourse as primarily carers, even in the workplace. Care work is devalued and, as elsewhere, it is understood as part of women's true feminine identity, not as part of their job description (England 2005; Hochschild 1983).

The combination of these two factors—sentimentalization and the lack of gender equality/care work reconciliation measures—result in an increase in the “motherhood penalty”, that is, the disadvantages mothers suffer at work, and exacerbates workplace gender inequality, especially at the bottom of the social hierarchy. It leads to the emergence of an underclass of women workers, who may have the opportunity to be earning an income in humiliatingly underpaid jobs but must struggle on a daily basis to hold on to their positions and manage their care responsibilities simultaneously (Gregor and Kováts 2018, 2019). I will start with a discussion of this latter phenomenon.

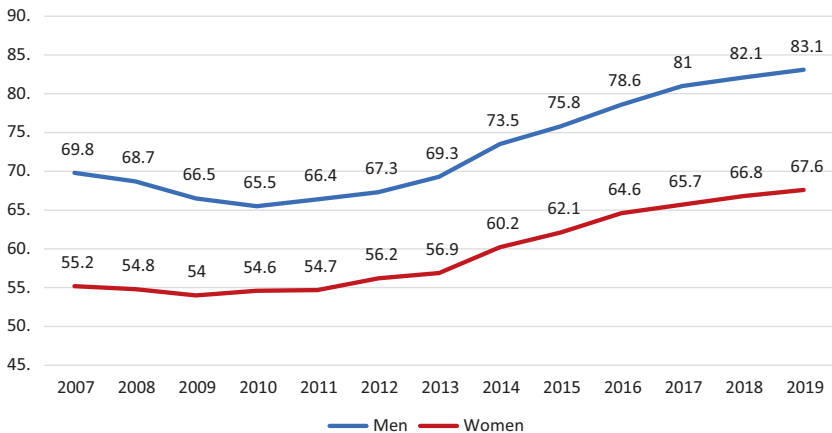


### *An Underclass of Working Women*

Paid work opportunities soared after 2015 as the Hungarian economy, partly fueled by payments from the European Union’s structural funds, picked up speed in the aftermath of the economic recession. In 2019, the unemployment rate stood below 4% and remained under 5% even during COVID-ridden 2020. As Fig. 2.1 shows, both men and women were able to find work and while in the early 2010s Hungarian women’s labor market participation rate counted as one of the lowest within the EU, by 2020 it had climbed to average levels (Eurostat 2019b).

Two points are important here. First, women’s employment growth seems to be slowing after 2012: the gender gap in employment started to widen slowly but perceptibly. Indeed, Eurostat data indicates that, compared to men, women in Hungary are less likely to be able to transition from unemployment to employment. This is true for most countries but the gap in Hungary was five percentage points in 2019 (as well as in several prior years), which is twice the EU-27 average, and higher than in other CEE countries (Eurostat 2019c). The COVID pandemic further increased the difference in the number of employed men and women (KSH 2021).

Second, the gender gap in access to paid work is particularly large among those with lower levels of education, that is, at the bottom of the



**Fig. 2.1** Changes in men’s and women’s employment rate, 15–64 year-olds. (Source: Eurostat 2019c)

occupational hierarchy and there are significantly more women than men in this group. But the number of employed women in this category has been growing. While in 2011 only about 31% of women with elementary education were working for wages, this percentage increased to 46% by 2019—a close to 50% growth, larger in absolute numbers and percentage terms than in any other educational groups (*ibid.*). This is the underclass of women workers I mentioned previously. Working for wages is not all bad. Employment opened up new, if rather limited, financial opportunities for women at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. It, however, also exposed them to more gender inequality, more work and harsher exploitation.

Women's wages are lower than men's in Hungary and women in the lower educational category experience roughly the same wage gap as the national average of 16% (Eurostat 2019d). Lower wages are less likely to help pull someone out of poverty and this is what we see in Fig. 2.2. Women's at-work poverty risk had been lower than men's until 2015, after which it started to exceed men's. Working women's risk of poverty doubled from 4.6% in 2010 to 8.7% by 2019 and exceeded men's which stood at 8.1% in 2019 (see Fig. 2.2, based on Eurostat 2019e). In other words, parallel to the mass entry of women into low level jobs, the risk of in-work

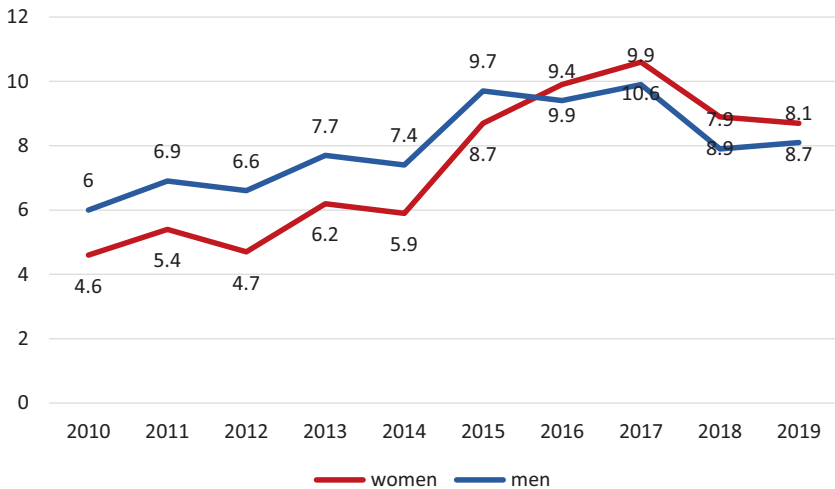


Fig. 2.2 At-work poverty risk by gender. (Source: Eurostat 2019e)

poverty increased, suggesting that women's wages are less likely to move their and their families' living conditions above the poverty line than men's. Note that the women who are classified as poor in this chart may have been poor before 2016 as well, but they were not included in these statistics as they did not have paid employment. In the middle of the 2010s they started to join the ranks of underpaid, precarious workers.

This underclass of women is heavily overrepresented among workfare workers. In an effort to eliminate what Prime Minister Orbán called a “welfare society”, the Hungarian government boosted workfare programs to the point where close to 200,000 people participated at the peak in 2016. Workfare participants get paid a fraction of the minimum wage and typically work in menial jobs, which do not enhance their labor market chances (Cseres-Gergely and Molnár 2014). Studies suggest that in rural areas workfare opportunities are often allocated in exchange for political favors (Róna et al. 2020). Yet, workfare arrangements are popular because the alternatives are even worse. As noted before, the government has all but eliminated other forms of support for those who lost their jobs. And workfare has other advantages as well: it is a form of formal employment in reasonably regulated, typically single-shift, and occasionally part-time, conditions. These are job characteristics which are not easily available to low skilled workers. Importantly, given that workfare workers are in the formal economy, they also become eligible for tax benefits for children. As a result of all these and other labor market related factors, workfare programs have become feminized in the past years (Fekete 2021).

In summary, more women have been working for wages in the Hungarian economy in the late 2010s than at any time since the transition from state socialism but job growth was largest at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy, among the unskilled and also among those who work in the vastly underpaid government workfare programs. In addition to the opportunity to claim child benefits, women also occasionally choose workfare jobs over other types of employment because regular employment—shift work, informal work without contracts, the requirement to do unannounced overtime, the lack of control over the timing of the work period and the difficulty in finding part-time options—make it hard for women to reconcile childcare and paid work duties. In a recent study Dorottya Fekete (2021) asked workfare workers with children about their motivations. She found that what they appreciated most were the family benefits they gained access to, as well as the more family friendly work option of the possibility to work part time in single day time shifts.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 further exposed the vulnerabilities of women’s employment: in Hungary, as in many other countries around the world, more women lost their jobs than men. According to aggregate data from the Hungarian Statistical Office, between the end of 2019 and 2020 (the last quarter in each year), the employment rate of men aged between 15 and 64 in fact increased by 0.2% (even though the actual number of those employed declined somewhat), while women’s rate decreased by 0.4%. Job loss was more pronounced among those with less education, and among those employed in public works programs. However, even among the college-educated population where the number of the employed in fact continued to grow during the pandemic, men did significantly better than women, widening the employment gap within this group (KSH 2021). This is most likely explained by the extremely unequal division of care work which prevailed in this social stratum (Fodor et al. 2020). The “motherhood penalty”, as this phenomenon is called, is the topic of the next section.

### *Inequalities Among All: The Motherhood Penalty*

Hungary has the most generous set of parental leave and family benefits policies in Europe, yet also the fewest and most stingy work–life balance measures. Together with the requirement for mothers to be working for wages, this creates obvious inequalities. Indeed, as my calculations based on the Survey of Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC) data show, mothers of children under 16 years of age, net of other characteristics—such as age, work experience, education, number of subordinates, work hours, marital status and whether or not they live in a multigenerational household—make less money than women without children. Fathers, in fact, experience a bonus over non-fathers. This was true in 2010, and the coefficient had increased statistically significantly by 2017: the motherhood penalty had grown.<sup>2</sup>

This is not surprising if we consider the dearth of policies aimed at supporting those with care responsibilities in the labor market. Researchers often talk about the reduction in labor rights during the Orbán era: strike

<sup>2</sup>The dependent variable was the log of income, individual variables are listed in the text. The variable of interest is the interaction between parental status and gender and I ran joint models for the two years with interaction terms to make sure that the change was significant. More information is available upon request.

laws have been changed, overtime payment was reregulated to favor employers, unions were weakened and so on (Scheiring 2020). Rather less discussion has been dedicated to the extremely weak rights workers with care responsibilities have (for exceptions, see Gregor and Kováts 2019; Juhász 2012). Work hours in Hungary, as in other post-state-socialist societies, are higher than in most EU member states. Yet an extremely small number of people can work part time, only 4% in Hungary, one of the lowest rates in the EU. This is partly women's choice: wages are so low that a part-time salary is not enough to maintain a household. At the same time, even if they want to, it is difficult for women to negotiate part-time options with their employers (Fodor and Glass 2018; Glass and Fodor 2011). According to data from EIGE, the European Institute for Gender Equality, Hungarians are less likely to be able to set their own work hours than other EU states, and women, in particular, claim that they have no flexibility in this regard. In comparison to citizens of other EU countries Hungarians are less able than to adapt their work hours to external needs, they are less likely to be able to determine their own work hours and face difficulties when they need to take an hour or so off for personal reasons during the workday (EIGE 2019).

None of this is surprising as no consistent government incentive exists to prompt companies to enact work–life balance policies. Quite the opposite. In 2014, a new regulation was passed, which required that state administrators in one of the largest ministries (state department) and its local administrative offices work ten hours a day from 7:30 to 17:30. At the time, the minister in charge did not mince words when he claimed that “Our job has a beginning but it has no end, so this state department is unfortunately not a family friendly workplace” (János Lázár’s speech in November 2014). The claim was preposterous, not only because of its lack of acknowledgment of the care work burden of his mostly female workforce, but also because Lázár ignored national legislation about compulsory work hours. Nevertheless, a ten-hour workday was instituted and was in effect for four years before it was rescinded, just as abruptly as it had been implemented. Note that this rule came to be applied to several other state institutions as well, all offering the type of pink-collar work that is typically understood as representing an opportunity for mothers to reconcile work and care responsibilities elsewhere. The Hungarian government did not exactly show a good example to privately owned companies, which clearly demonstrates its lack of dedication, attention and consideration to those with care responsibilities.

Even during the pandemic, a relatively low number of people could work from home in Hungary, although more women did than men (Eurofound 2020). An OECD survey showed that, in general, Hungarian workplaces are not flexible in terms of work location: in 2015 fewer than 20% of mothers could do their jobs from a home office at least once during the year, placing Hungary into the bottom third of this distribution within Europe (OECD 2019). This is so even though quantitative and qualitative surveys demonstrate that women with care responsibilities would very much prefer to have this option available (Gregor and Kováts 2018).

Institutional childcare eases some of women's care burden. Kindergarten places for children over three years of age are fairly easily accessible in Hungary, with the exception of areas far from larger settlements. This is not the case for nurseries; although Orbán's government has dutifully utilized earmarked EU resources to build more child care institutions. This is reflected in a moderate increase in attendance over the past decade. In 2010, over 90% of children under three years did not attend any formal childcare institution, while in 2019 only 83% did not, which is still far from the EU average of 35% (Eurostat 2019f). In addition, childcare facilities are rather inflexible in opening hours: most close at 5 pm and there is little leeway for extra hours or a different schedule. This constrains parents', mostly mothers', work time options.

Even when work-life policies do exist, their implementation is not necessarily automatic: women feel that they are asking for a personal favor. In a research project conducted with Christy Glass among professional mothers in Hungary we found that they do not consider part-time options (although legally guaranteed for women returning to work with children under three years) or parental leave policies (also enshrined in law) as true entitlements. Instead, they had to negotiate the terms of their leave, as well as their return, and were dependent on the goodwill of their supervisors. As a result, some women managed to get an arrangement that was acceptable and allowed them to balance work and family, while those whose supervisors were less understanding did not; in some cases this resulted in major breaks or shifts in women's careers (Fodor and Glass 2018). Personal connections and the importance of social capital are deeply embedded in Hungarian social institutions and history, which is one of the reasons why the women we interviewed did not find the necessity to negotiate legally mandated rights problematic.

*Instead of Gender Equality Policy: Sentimentalization*

Through its anti-gender discourse and conspiracy theories about the EU's gender lobby, the government absolved itself of responsibilities regarding women's equal opportunities in the labor market. The quote at the beginning of the chapter from the Minister of Family Affairs reinforces this. Katalin Novak suggests that women should not be seeking equal wages to men; they should be content with the opportunity to be "real" women, to give birth and to take care of others. She is not alone in her open denial of the principle of equality. The President of the Hungarian Parliament argued this in 2019:

We should not overemphasize equality as that would mean the abolition of genders and in the end the rejection of femininity and women's virtues. (LaszlóKövér, in FICSAK 2019)

In other words, equality would threaten women's identity as women; femininity is essentially the opposite of gender equality. It is in this spirit that the Hungarian government has ignored EU-wide gender equality action plans, road maps and policy recommendations. A national-level round-table involving experts, NGOs and government officials on gender issues was discontinued, the section of the ministry which dealt with gender equality closed down, and the government first de-funded and then closed the Equal Opportunity Commission which had been designed to oversee problems related to gender-based discrimination, despite the fact that it is an EU requirement to have an EOC in place. The Hungarian Parliament has refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention on the elimination of violence against women, including domestic violence, and the Prime Minister has threatened to veto any EU regulation containing the word "gender", including the Action Plan for Gender Equality III.

I argue that instead of striving toward gender equality, the government has started to sentimentalize women's care work and closely confound it with women's identity as women. To illustrate I analyze quotations from a government funded publication in which men wrote laudations to women on the occasion of the International Day of Women in 2019. These were collected in a booklet and published by an organization called the Organization of the Club of Young Families (FICSAK 2019). (More on the publication in the methodological section of Chap. 1.)

Practically each one of the quotes from top-level politicians published in the booklet mentions how women excel in care work, both in the home and in the workplace. As the Minister for Defense argues: “We think of women as the weaker sex, but they represent real spiritual power. They represent persistence, selfless dedication and love and all they expect in return is respect, attention, appreciation, love and kindness.” Or in the words of the Minister of Human Affairs: “You [women] are caring, attentive, empathetic, beautiful. You give birth to children, you are the heart and soul of families.” To quote a state secretary in the same ministry, “We need women to make our institutions, our communities, our families accepting, warm and caring”. In all these cases womanhood is associated exclusively with caring and related attributes including kindness, devotion, gentleness, understanding and so on, and the production of these feelings in various communities is assigned to women and women alone. At the extreme, here is an example from a deputy minister who explicitly identified women’s role as being men’s primary support mechanisms. He wrote, “It is women who help hold the World together, and who we, men, can rely on day after day in our work, at home, in our communities”.

The quotes associate women with acceptance, warmth, providing care and support, and none mention productivity, creativity or intelligence, even within these attributes. In the workplace too, women represent the very same qualities. “I want to thank my own female colleagues ... that they always suggest the possibility of a compromise not only in the family but in the workplace as well” chimes in a state secretary from the Ministry of Finance. Importantly, several men acknowledge the fact that it is hard work to be caring for a family and working for wages simultaneously. Women are expected to be overworked, and it is considered to be women’s special skill to tolerate this. As a state secretary put it, “Only you [women] are able to do this: be a mother and a wife and at the same time do well in your job as well”; or in the words of another high-level male politician: “We often forget the many challenges women must face in our world today. They have to work for wages and must be perfect wives, mothers, problem solvers.” “Nothing compares to women’s performance. In addition to their visible—paid work ... [they also take care of their family]. ... This is hard work. It is a calling, rather than a simple job yet they do it smiling, without complaint, naturally” (Minister of Finance).

Although the men acknowledge the exceptionally hard work women do, note the multiple references to a calling, rather than a form of skill or hardship that requires or warrants compensation. “Being a woman is more



than a simple task. It is a calling” repeats one of the state secretaries of the Parliament. Women are due respect and appreciation but not tangible rewards. The politicians here sentimentalize women’s work: they elevate it to the level of a calling, where financial incentives and rewards seem meaningless. Let us end this section with the words of Hungary’s young Minister of Finance, who seems to be familiar with the term “invisible work” and acknowledges that women do most of it, both in the family and in the workplace. But “they do this out of the kindness of their hearts without expecting remuneration of any form, simply because they consider it the right thing to do”.

In Hungary’s carefare regime, femininity is closely tied to selfless care work within and outside the family setting. Men take part at their pleasure, but care is women’s primary responsibility. The work is much appreciated, it is considered important and socially valuable, but not remunerable. Care work is sentimentalized rather than commercialized.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that a new response is emerging to the crisis of care in Hungary. The policy direction I call “carefare” aims to eliminate the contradiction between intensifying production and the need for reproduction by piling additional work burden on the shoulders of women and taming their possible reluctance by discursively connecting femininity to care work.

As several researchers have pointed out, the role of the state in managing the economy, society and redistribution is extremely important in anti-liberal Hungary (Magyar 2016; Scheiring 2020). From this position, the government has made good political use of Hungarians’ long-standing anxieties about the disappearance of their bloodline and the death of the national culture due, allegedly, to women’s reluctance to reproduce. Demographic revival was placed on the agenda of the Orbán government immediately upon gaining power in 2010 and it became its true focal point after 2015. As a consequence, over the past decade, the Parliament has passed a whole slew of policy measures to encourage births, specifically to encourage births to heterosexual, married, working families. In the process, the state has created a carefare regime: encouraged women to have children, and do most of the associated care work, while simultaneously constructing them as second-class, female workers on the paid labor market. Claims to social citizenship are now most successfully made on the basis of parental and work status combined.

This move toward a carefare regime has a number of consequences that are already visible: the most important is the growing underclass of female workers who work for extremely low wages in exchange for being able to maintain their labor market status while also taking care of their dependents. I also noted the increased work burden that a higher level of reproduction—within the context of the unequal distribution of care work—means for women.

At the same time, carefare provides political capital to the Orbán regime: it functions as a mechanism to lessen the pain of increasing social inequalities. Especially among the lower middle classes, women's extra work may buy households out of poverty, or at least allow them a degree of upward mobility, even though this may be limited or fragile. Economic growth has resulted in a significant increase in class inequalities in Hungary, although some resources have trickled down to certain groups of the population, especially to families with children with some attachment to the formal labor market. They are some of the government's most loyal supporters and the voters who brought FIDESZ into power (Róna et al. 2020). Their families are doing better financially under the FIDESZ regime, thanks, in part, to the wide range of "family protection" measures available to them in the form of loans and government grants.

The most positive development has been that the poverty rate of children has declined rapidly during the last few years in Hungary. In 2011 the poverty risk of a family with three children was a shocking 35%, but now it stands at 11.4%, one of the lowest in the European Union (Eurostat 2020). The same pattern is visible among families with fewer children, bringing the poverty risk of children down to levels below the EU average (*ibid.*). At the same time, however, the poverty risks of single people, of the elderly, especially elderly women, have all skyrocketed: they have been left out of the government provided windfall. While the reduction of child poverty is laudable, it should be noted that less than half of all households have children, fewer than a quarter have two or more children, and an increasing number of people are living alone. For them the carefare regime has little to offer.

In conclusion, carefare regimes come with political benefits to anti-liberal governments. Carefare eases some of the social tension which results from a rapid increase in social inequalities, obvious corruption and cronyism. By redistributing a sizeable, but still relatively small, amount of resources to a select group of "deserving" families, by increasing their social mobility chances, even if to a significantly lesser degree than that of

families at the top of the social hierarchy, the government buys the loyalty of an important constituency. What we must not forget is that this is happening on the back of women, on the condition of women's increased contribution to care work and compromise in work options.

In addition, upward mobility, even among those most favored by government policy, may be fragile. Over a third of all marriages end in divorce<sup>3</sup> in Hungary and the small steps toward upward mobility may fall away quickly as divorcing couples have to share responsibilities for mortgages and loans, or when the promised number of children do not arrive, or as the job market ebbs and family income dwindles to the point where meeting interest payments becomes problematic. In this context women's sacrifice will be even more starkly visible.

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<sup>3</sup>Of couples who married in 2000, over a third got divorced within 15 years (Makay and Szabó 2018).

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## Fostering in a Carefare Regime

**Abstract** This chapter is about foster parents and their work. Recent changes in the regulation of foster care illustrate the formation and operation of a carefare regime: the transformation of state policies and services and the integration of foster parents into the “deserving” female working and caring underclass. Relying on two years of participant observations and interviews with foster parents, experts, guardians, social workers and foster parent agency personnel, I describe the highly skilled care work most foster parents provide in demanding circumstances for a practically endless number of work hours. I explain how their status has been transformed from being volunteers to being contracted employees who work in increasingly precarious circumstances for extremely low wages. I argue that sentimentalization of care work is used by policy makers to discipline foster mothers into accepting the new terms of their relationship and by foster parents too to rationalize their compliance.

**Keywords** Carefare • Foster care • Welfare state • Child protection • Gender inequality • Professionalization • Labor control

In Chap. 2, I argued that since 2010 the Hungarian government has created a carefare regime, that is, introduced a set of policies, political practice and discourse which exacerbate the exploitation of women through their care work and in the paid labor market. In turn, the government utilizes this process to legitimate and maintain an anti-liberal rule.

This chapter is about foster parents, their work, their skills, their wages and work conditions. A recent change in the regulation of fostering provides a classic example of the emergence of principles of carefare, it is thus worth studying the process in depth. Until 2014, most Hungarian foster parents worked as volunteers but were then reclassified as gendered carefare workers with employment contracts, wages, social security benefits and increasingly difficult work conditions. They have become part of the predominantly female “deserving” underclass-in-formation that the previous chapter foreshadowed.

Hungary’s carefare regime did not simply withdraw state funding from child protection. Instead the government has “creatively” (Bátory 2016) recycled it for future political gain. The meager national child protection budget has been put to use in a way that strengthens the political power of the regime and feeds its loyalists more than it feeds abandoned children. The state budget for child protection and foster care is co-utilized to reproduce political power. After a brief look at the history of child protection in Hungary this chapter describes the turn toward carefare, both within the state organization of fostering, and in the everyday world of foster parents.

### FOSTERING IN HUNGARY: A QUICK LOOK TO THE PAST

Hungarian children grow up reading the story of “Árvácska” [Little Orphan] a literary classic of Zsigmond Móricz, which describes the long list of abuses suffered by a poor orphan girl at the hands of foster parents in the 1930s. Hungary’s first child protection legislation was passed in 1901, three decades before her story and the new law institutionalized state responsibilities for abandoned children (Demény 2015; Herczog 1998; Mészáros-Tóth 2014; Veczkó 2000). A central state-run orphanage was established in Budapest and the state recruited foster parents or “tápszülők”, literally “feeding parents”, who received payment for taking in children. Over 80% of abandoned children were raised in foster families in the first decades of the twentieth century. Life in these foster homes, as evidenced by the story of Árvácska, was notorious for its hardships, heavy workload and vile treatment. Hungarian orphanages were also vastly underfunded, even compared to similar institutions within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (Varsa 2020).

After World War II, state socialist policy makers reconceptualized the needs of abandoned children altogether: the communist regime wanted to

put an immediate end to individual fostering and emphasized its association with child labor in politically objectionable “kulak” (rich peasant) families in the countryside. As a result and following famous Soviet author and pedagogue Makarenko’s ideas described in his widely popular *Pedagogical Poem*, state authorities saw a chance in abandoned children to realize their dream of communal upbringing in the service of producing the new communist men (later women as well). Replacing foster care, children who were removed from their homes for a variety of reasons, including material hardship, health and moral abandonment, were sent to newly built state-run institutions (Varsa 2020). This new “scientific pedagogical” model was understood to be the most modern way to raise children, and institutional care was considered politically more trustworthy than individual families. In addition, the supply of women at home who would have time to devote to raising children dwindled as state socialist policies pushed everyone to take on paid work. To meet children’s needs so defined, state authorities nationalized several large mansions that had belonged to the upper bourgeoisie and turned them into children’s homes. This move was to serve a double purpose: to strip upper class Hungarian families of their private property, and to demonstrate the regime’s commitment to the most vulnerable. What could serve as better demonstration of the ideological direction of the new political regime than stories about previously starving and disheveled children playing happily in gorgeous playgrounds and parks of the kind they could never imagine even approaching before. To this day, a number of state homes for abandoned children can be found in these now decrepit villas surrounded by beautiful parks with century-old trees, some in the most sought after locations in and around Budapest. As a model solution, in 1957 Hungarian state authorities opened “Children’s City” 20 kilometers north of Budapest in what used to be a castle of the Károlyi family and its surrounding 140 ha park. In its heyday the complex housed some 800 children along with 200 social workers and teachers and had its own schools, infirmary, lake and park with rare and protected trees, movie theater, sport courts and other services on its premises. Like many infrastructural establishments, children’s newly appropriated homes in the early 1950s may have been considered “modern” at the time they were built or renovated for use but were henceforth vastly underfunded and gradually deteriorated. News of abuse and deprivation was silenced and critiques of the conditions in state-run children’s homes only resurfaced after the 1990s (Varsa 2020). During the state socialist era, only about 20% of abandoned children grew up with

foster parents (Herczog 1998), a steep decline from the 80% a few decades earlier. Children were only placed in individual homes if and when places in institutions were not available. (See state regulation 2111/1954 (VIII. 25) MT.)

However, in the 1980s a slow change started in how the needs of abandoned children were understood. By this time it became obvious that the political agenda of educating children as model communist citizens had failed. Psychological research started to gain prominence in the early 1970s, and studies showed a high rate of criminal behavior and addictions among children who grew up in childcare centers (Demény 2015). The more progressive psychologists argued, based on local experience as well as increasing contact with Western European experts, that children do better if they are raised in families or at least in more intimate settings (Veczkó 2000). In addition, the mansions of the 1950s started to crumble and their maintenance proved to be an insurmountable cost. As a result, attempts started to resurrect elements of the foster care system and larger state institutions were broken down into smaller, “family like” units.

The fall of the communist regime in 1989 accelerated the pursuit of these ideas already familiar to more progressive groups among child protection experts. In 1991 Hungary ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Hungarian experts and social work professionals looked to Western European models, primarily in Anglo-Saxon areas, to overhaul the Hungarian child protection system (author’s interview with Mária Herczog, 2015). After a period of intense debate, a new Child Protection Law was passed in 1997 which set the tone for further developments. Following the lead of the UN Convention and the existing international wisdom on children’s needs, this legislation strengthened the rights of birth families and established a basic framework of social support for families in need to prevent the removal of children by providing basic services once children were identified as in danger. The new law prohibited taking children away from their birth families for financial reasons, and state agencies were tasked to meet the financial needs and basic services required by troubled families. Social services were decentralized, local providers were to offer services and local agencies determined and met needs. This legislation was one of the first of its kind in the Central and East European region, and one most similar to existing Western principles. Then in 2014 the Orbán government passed a new law which radically transformed the Hungarian foster care system again; this will be the subject of discussion in this chapter. First, in line with EU and UN

recommendations, the law stipulated that children below 12 years of age should grow up in foster (or, in ideal situations, adoptive) families rather than in state institutions. Second, the work of fostering was reclassified from a volunteer unpaid activity into the category of a special paid employment relationship outside of the remit of the Hungarian Labor Code. A number of related regulatory mechanisms were further introduced to change the working lives of foster parents as well as of the agencies overseeing their work.

There are about 20,000 children registered in child protection in Hungary in 2020 and 14,000 of them are growing up in approximately 5500 foster homes. The number of children has been increasing, while the number of foster parents remained stable in the decade of the 2010s (KSH 2019a). Child protection and within that fostering is a small segment of the state apparatus but one that vividly demonstrates the real-life functioning of a carefare regime. In the next section I describe changes in the role of the state in regulating child protection. Then in the following part of this chapter I examine how the lives of foster parents have been transformed.

### CENTRALIZING AND RE-ENGINEERING STATE SERVICES

Austerity has been one of the guiding principles of all state institutions in the past 25 years in Hungary, child welfare being no exception. A key reason why the institutional shift in fostering was initiated and successfully pursued in 2014 was the fact that it was considered cheaper in the long run than financing large state-owned institutions, with their crumbling walls and decrepit furniture. In the state socialist era, the villas appropriated for children in the 1950s were barely maintained and now required major renovation. Or, alternatively, they offered an opportunity, since instead of restoration they could be sold on the prime real estate market. Soon enough, even the largest institution, the one described above in the city of Fót, was sold to cronies of the government, with children moved to smaller institutions and foster care. “The costs of care with foster parents is about 1 million HUF per year, while in a children’s home, small or large, it amounts to 2.8 to 4 million HUF per year per child” (Author’s interview with a high-level state executive in the Ministry of Human Resources, June 2016).<sup>1</sup> Others, however, claimed that good quality fostering was

<sup>1</sup>The quotations in this chapter are from interviews conducted during my research on fostering. See more information on the methodology in Chap. 1.

just as expensive as care in state institutions, but this quality was not reached in Hungary exactly because of the scarcity of funding available. Indeed, all agencies complained about the low level of staffing, where those supporting foster parents (advisors, guardians) typically look after many more children than is mandated by the state legislation, and where funding is not available for each agency to have its own psychologist, even though all children removed from their birth homes would need one. To explain why she is about to quit her job and look for employment in a different sector, a social worker in a large foster parent network agency told me: “I know what each and every family would need to survive, I usually know it very well. But those services don’t exist, so I more often than not can’t help them. That’s what’s really frustrating” (Marina, foster parent advisor, Budapest).

How much did the state spend on child protection after the transformations in 2014? That is difficult to tell. Unlike neoliberal efficiency-oriented work organizations with their audits, benchmarks and indicators (Shore 2008), transparent data collection and presentation is not of high importance for anti-liberal rulers. In principle, state spending on child protection is public information in Hungary. But getting reliable and systematic data requires a very long wait, personal connections and favors. I managed to obtain some, but only some of the required information from the Hungarian Treasury for the years of 2010–2017 and a selection of the relevant line items is included in Table 3.1.

The data are difficult to interpret because, as experts at the Treasury warned me, the rules and principles of data collection regarding child protection services changed twice during this seven-year period. In 2013, the data collection on government spending was revamped and activities were reclassified in a way that made comparison with later years impossible (hence the gray shades in Table 3.1). In 2014 the child protection system was completely transformed based partly on the argument that foster care was cheaper than institutional care. Yet at least for the years 2014 and 2015 it is impossible to separate the amounts spent on fostering and on institutional care—they are grouped together as per the regulation of 2013. The rules changed again in 2016 and spending data are again available in detail. Whether or not the categories cover the same expenses is altogether unclear and information on this was simply not accessible. The meaning of a category “Programs supporting the life quality of children and youth”, which had no allocation in 2016 but amounts to over 10% of

**Table 3.1** State expenditure on child protection and foster care (million HUF)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Specialized protection for vulnerable children</b>	<b>38,021.6</b>	<b>35,266.4</b>	<b>33,441.5</b>	<b>38,617.6</b>	<b>44,014.4</b>	<b>47,788.7</b>	<b>42,830.3</b>	<b>49,032.6</b>
Spending on child care institution	22,475.6	20,831.7	20,081.1	25,136.6	36,876.7*	38,454.4*	28,307.5	32,386.6
Spending on service to children in foster care	9550.8	8300.49	7559.16	7553.7	n/d	n/d	6521.3	7971.7
State support to non-state providers in the field of child protection	5251.4	7465.4	11,095.8	9879.7	11,507.4	14,772.1	18,162.3	19,885.0
<b>Child protection altogether</b>	<b>78,783</b>	<b>78,031</b>	<b>76,584</b>	<b>85,261</b>	<b>107,291</b>	<b>89,808</b>	<b>129,342</b>	<b>185,628</b>

Note: \* Includes both institutional and foster care

Source: National budget accounts (Hungarian State Treasury)



the overall child protection budget in 2017, is impossible to penetrate. And the classification rules changed again in 2020.

With these caveats in mind, what do we learn about possible changes in the amount of state spending on child protection over the years? Shall we describe this as a period of grave austerity? To the extent that this is discernible, given the lack of transparency in the data collection and presentation, there is no sign of state retrenchment for the child protection sector as a whole. Instead, we see fluctuation—possibly due to classification changes or to actual cost-cutting—and some overall growth toward the end of the period. Between 2010 and 2013 the data show stagnation and decline in spending for the first three years then an 8% growth in the fourth, in 2013. The overall four-year change is smaller than the cumulative inflation rate over this period, which means that the real value of spending stagnated at best, most likely declined. After the first major change in the classification system in 2014 note the sizeable fluctuation over the years and a sudden increase in 2017. Some of this increase has to do with the rising cost of nursery schools, which is also included in this rubric, but there seems to be a general tendency toward increased spending on vulnerable children in every category of the table. There is one exception as the third line in the table attests: foster care. While the number of children in foster care increased by over 25% between 2010 and 2017, spending on fostering recorded in the central budget remains unchanged. This, given the rate of inflation, means a significant, roughly 30% decline in real value. However, there is another budget line, “state support to non-state providers”, which is the source of additional funding for some foster care agencies. I explain these below.

Contrary to the deregulation tendencies of neoliberal states, the Hungarian government has centralized the management and financial control of child protection: in 2012 it wrestled responsibilities and power away from county seats and local governments and established a new institution of the Ministry of Human Resources, which is tasked with the oversight of child and family protection services. Yet simultaneously, another type of deregulation was initiated. Neoliberal states encourage commodification with the assumption that market-based distribution and provisions are the most efficient, or at least the cheapest (Wacquant 2012). In a process counter to this logic, the Hungarian state has “churchified” child protection: it allocated significant resources toward the establishment and financing of Church organizations based providers. The penultimate line in Table 3.1 demonstrates that funding to such providers almost

quadrupled over the seven-year period and has increased further since. The impact is clearly noticeable too: in 2010 about 7% of children grew up in church-affiliated foster parent networks, but by 2018, almost half, 47% of them did (KSH 2019b). Practically all large established churches operate foster parent agencies in 2020: I counted 17 different church-based and 3 civil or international networks in addition to the state's agency.

It is not merely out of a calling to help the down-trodden that churches have so successfully got involved in the business of child protection. Hungary's anti-liberal government pays a quota for each child in the child protection system to the state provider, yet pays an additional 70% of this amount as extra for each child who belongs to a church-affiliated agency. This is the sum in the line "state support for non-state providers" in Table 3.1. Ninety-seven percent of the money allocated in this rubric goes to religious organizations. The basic head quota must be allocated toward the designated service, in this case, child protection or fostering, even if it is managed by a church-affiliated provider. But churches do not have to give account of how they spend the additional funding: it may or may not go toward the care of children. Foster parent network directors, whose organizations came to be affiliated with churches as a survival strategy after this legislative change, told me that their organization received between 10% and 20% less than the full state allocation—this is the amount that the church keeps for its own budget of what is technically allocated for "child protection services".

In addition, a legislation was passed in early 2021, which gives church organizations running social services, including child protection, property rights over the real estate in which they are currently operating. In the first round in 2021, 29 real estate properties were passed on to various churches by the Hungarian state. This also means that the churches are now eligible to apply for and receive funding from the European Union to renovate the buildings, some of which have exceptional value. This increases the wealth and political role of churches that are hegemonically loyal to the government. It also allows the state to channel EU funding to organizations over which it has significant control.

As I noted above church organizations use most but not all of the allocated state funding to support their foster parent networks. Their insistence on the religious education of children varies from a tolerance of positions to a clearly stated expectation of participation in religious services. My field notes from a conversation with social workers in a recently church-affiliated agency describe the position of the agency's leader:

We switched affiliations in 2012 and since then [the Church] is our maintainer. Every week a representative from the Church visits to discuss everyday issues. Practicing the religion is not compulsory but they did insist that children follow their religious practices in the summer camps. At the same time, they are not forcing us to change our professional work because of their faith. (Director of foster parent network, Budapest, Nov 3, 2016)

Other churches are significantly more demanding. I talked to the extremely professional and compassionate manager of a then relatively small foster parent agency run by the Catholic Church. She was quite insistent on practicing the faith because she considered it a better way of living.

It is not compulsory for foster parents to be familiar with the teachings of the Catholic Church. We cannot hold them responsible for that ... but we would like them to be aware. I mean aware of Jesus' mission, the basic values of the Church, we teach those. This is not proselytizing ... we obviously don't do that. But there is a softer version of evangelization, for example, that we celebrate religious holidays and include the children and the foster parents and we celebrate together. Or we have these obligatory foster parent trainings. The next one will be taught by [a well known Catholic priest], so there is certainly an influence, not forceful, but it is important to pass on our values. (Head of foster parent agency, Budapest, 2016)

The Protestant Church's foster parent network is based not only on faith but requires belonging to, or at least being familiar with, local church organizations. The head of the agency explained:

You can only become a foster parent if you have a recommendation letter from your local minister. This is a guarantee that the person is not doing it for the money. And it is important for the children to join the church community, because those who belong there are more likely to lead a Christian life, a solid, stable, organized, harmonious life. (Head of foster parent agency, 2017)

The principle of the separation of the state and church is clearly not of high importance here. The political gains are obvious. First, FIDESZ governs in coalition with the remnants of the Hungarian Christian Democratic Party, and even though the latter has little independence in most matters political, they tend to contribute to the discourse on family, children,

gender, morality and so on. Also, surveys have shown that the governing parties are significantly more popular among those who claim that they are religious, so measures promoting religious organizations is a form of catering to the demands of the electorate, indeed, creating these demands in the hope of reaping electoral benefits later (Policy Solutions 2015). In addition, media accounts describe numerous instances when “recommendations” on voting were shared from pulpits before elections—making the support of churches an eminently sensible political investment.

In summary, it is difficult to interpret data on the volume of state funding for child protection. It is clear that we cannot talk about major cuts in funding, but neither is there any sign of additional support from a supposedly family friendly state to a growing number of needy children and those who take care of them. What is absolutely clear, however, is that in recent years a significant chunk of child protection services along with their funding have been outsourced to loyal church organizations. The everyday control of these institutions is variable but the potential for comprehensive oversight is there. The churches receive additional funding and bonus real estate from the state to encourage their participation. Then they can use the opportunity to expand their networks, their follower base and evangelize, if desired. The state, on the other hand, spends additional taxpayer money on offering religion-bound services and buying political loyalty from and via church organizations.

### CAREFARE: THE WORK OF FOSTERING

Along with this faith-oriented re-engineering of state functions, the position of foster parents vis-à-vis said state has also changed. Before 2014 with the exception of a handful who qualified as paid social workers, the vast majority of foster parents worked as volunteers and provided a service to the state out of kindness and dedication. This changed abruptly when a new piece of legislation eliminated the volunteer foster parent category and transformed foster parent contracts into paid employment relationships. As of January 2014, foster parents have become “professionals”. They are working for wages at a designated foster parent agency, receive a set salary and occasional bonuses as well as social security coverage, including old age pension benefits.

This may sound like a turn for the better for the kind volunteers. But below I argue that using the pretext of “professionalization”, foster parents have in fact been hired to work on the principle of carefare: they have

become part of the working female underclass. Relying on two years of participant observations and about 80 interviews with foster parents, experts, guardians, social workers and foster parent agency personnel, this chapter will demonstrate that foster parents provide highly skilled care work in extremely demanding circumstances for a practically endless number of work hours, often for wages amounting to less than the national minimum. Having been classified as “workers” means an increase in control and surveillance on the part of their employers, less independence and more supervision for the foster parents themselves. This process of integration into carefare was described as “professionalization”.

### *Professionalization*

In the Parliamentary debate on the legislative changes involving the status of foster parents, Mrs. Ronaszeki, who introduced the bill and was an MP for the government and member of the Committee on Youth, Social, Family, and Housing Affairs, pointed out that “It [was] important for foster parents to turn their relationship to the state into one of employment in order to ‘professionalize’ the activity and increase its social prestige” (Mrs Ronaszeki, 2013 in the Hungarian Parliament).

She was not alone. Child protection experts had long argued that the social context of fostering had changed and required more skills, expertise and energy on the part of the carers.

The children are more vulnerable, it used to be much easier. We don’t do well at the early stages of the [child protection] process, when they are registered in the system, there’s not enough help. So the children arrive in the system really worn out ... even 3–4 year old kids need therapy. (Foster parent advisor at a Budapest agency)

In sociological parlance, professionalization is the process of creating distinctions amongst those who belong to a specific occupational group and those who do not, between “professionals” and “amateurs”. Since the Middle Ages occupational groups have been fighting to establish themselves as professions, a position, which typically brings distinct privileges, such as higher earnings, the possibility to claim monopoly over access to clients, as well as respectability and status (MacDonald 1995; Wilensky 1964). The establishment of a profession is often a contentious process as was, for example, the case for midwives (Bourgeault 2006), or librarians

(Abbott 1988). What makes a professional is widely contested: some acknowledge their expert knowledge, established practice of the trade and self-regulating professional associations (Parsons 1968), while others refer to their position in the social hierarchy which allows them to exclude others and construct themselves as members of an exclusive, elite group (Abbott 1988; Larson 2012).

An altogether different process of professionalization has taken place in the case of Hungarian foster parents: it has been initiated and enforced by the state. Foster parents did not claim to be professionals, quite the opposite, many of them actively resisted the term. Yet state policies, new legal regulations and institutions have decided to construct them as such, and they have allocated some dubious distinctions while simultaneously imposing a new set of expectations and obligations. Historically, there have been other instances of professionalization that involved more than just grassroots actors. McClelland (1991), for example, describes “professionalization from above” in nineteenth-century Germany, where the state had an important role in the regulation of entry into professions, such as medicine and law, even engineering and chemistry, as distinct from what he calls the more autonomous “professionalization from within” process of the Anglo-Saxon model. Our current case of the professionalization of the child protection system in Hungary is an extreme version of professionalization from above, where those proclaimed to be professionals had little input into a process shaped instead by politicians, policy makers, as well as local and international experts.

Professionalization targets foster parents who are expected to transform themselves from warm-hearted women raising children in need, to professional paid carers with expertise and lengthy training. They must adjust their work schedules to satisfy these criteria, enroll in specialized training programs and write lengthy dissertations and reconfigure the way they raise children to fit the principles of childcare considered suitable for the “modern” world by experts on child development. They must also meet new institutional expectations as professional carers and subject themselves to even more supervision and surveillance than before, while simultaneously losing further degrees of control over their work process to the requirements of professionalized processes.

In administrative terms, foster parents must enter a formal employment relationship with a network agency; for better or worse they become part of the formal labor market. In fact, professionalization from above can be understood as a new form of labor control exercised by various state

authorities over foster parents who are employees working in a context where typical methods of supervision are not easily applicable. Researchers have described different mechanisms of increased supervision and coercion, such as scripting or digital automation (Wharton et al. 2008), emerging in the post-Fordist economy. But there are limits to the possibility of despotic control in a setting where clients and customers also feature in and complicate the labor process (Leidner 1993; Sallaz 2015; Sherman 2007). In such contexts other mechanisms such as “permanent pedagogy” (Sallaz 2015) or “relational work” (Mears 2015) function as substitutes. How to regulate the work of people who do it in their own homes, however? Fournier (1999: 281) argues that flexible work practices create a “discretionary gap” which “needs to be regulated through new softwares of control. Professionalism is one of the strategies deployed to control the increasing margin of indeterminacy or flexibility in work.”

Professionalization from above is thus not a politically innocent strategy. “It is through their ‘professionalization’, through their inscription into systems of expert knowledge, that individuals become targets of liberal government” (Fournier 1999: 284; also Burchell et al. 2014) as well as targets of anti-liberal government, we must add. Professionalization from above, I argue, is the way in which foster parents get more tightly integrated into the lowest rungs of the carefare regime, often against their explicit will, occasionally with their informed, or uninformed consent.

### *Beyond Parenting*

It is easy to assume that fostering is nothing but the kind of regular parenting that millions of people do, most of them in addition to their paid jobs. But a closer look at the daily activities of an even mildly conscientious foster parent quickly proves this statement wrong. As one foster parent, a mother of three biological children, succinctly put it: “You’d think you know what you’re doing until you get a foster child. Then really basic issues come up that you had never encountered before, stuff you’d never even dreamt of” (Ibolya, birth parent of three, adoptive parent of one, foster parent of two). Foster parenting is extremely taxing work. For one, it requires being on call 24 hours of the day on every day of the week and it opens up one’s home to ongoing scrutiny from others. More importantly, fostering requires a number of special skills. Below I describe three sets of these relying on the accounts of the practitioners themselves: (1) a working understanding of child psychology and the management of

emotions—their own and those of others, (2) advocacy skills to be exercised in adverse conditions, and (3) an exceptional level of understanding and daily practice of logistics and administration. We all need and rely on these skills in our everyday lives. But the stories below demonstrate Ibolya’s claim: none of us are expected to use these with the intensity and within the specific conditions that foster parents do.

### *Child Psychology and Emotional Work*

Children arrive in foster homes from a variety of domestic or institutional circumstances and in varied mental and physical conditions, and the encounter is rarely simple. The child is typically traumatized not only from her past experiences but also from having been removed from her previous surroundings, landing in a rather different setting often all alone, and having to adjust to yet another set of rules and constraints. The foster parent and her family, much as they may be expecting the child, have to make adjustments and many recognize the process as difficult. The first task of the foster parent is to help the child adjust to his or her new circumstances, which in the case of deeply traumatized children is not a simple task. Edina, a foster parent with a great deal of practice described the arrival of her three-year-old daughter:

She had a rather hectic background at birth, poor baby, and we were up all night for, I am not exaggerating, at least 6 months. She screamed through the night, no matter what we did. It was horrible. That was the worst. (Edina, three foster children)

Foster Parent Network Agencies do not exactly expect parents to treat children with psychological needs, “merely” to handle them with tact, kindness and understanding. They should be able to recognize problems, seek help and then follow the treatment suggested by the experts. But the hands-on support the agencies can afford to provide is rather limited. Even the largest foster parent agencies have a single in-house psychologist in their employment and some do not have any at all. Even when there is a psychologist working for the agency, they have a variety of tasks related to institutional needs. They must, for example, participate in the evaluation and screening of foster parent applicants. Their time to work with children and their carers is thus limited. One psychologist who had spent several years at one of the large agencies told me that her job required total



devotion, daily traveling of several hundred kilometers as well as endless work hours. “You can only do this if you are a saint and I am no saint”, she said explaining why she quit the job she loved after a few years.

Given the limitation in resources available through formal channels, foster parents often use their own practical experience and knowhow to deal with at least the easier problems, and these are numerous. The example below comes from a very experienced, loving foster parent:

They [her two fostered children, who are siblings] are different in many ways. ... But they both come with a big baggage. Viki, for example, has a number of unexplainable fears of things. And bedwetting. Tomi was six years old when he got out of diapers and Viki is well past six yet she wets her bed nightly so I put a diaper on her to sleep. (Eszter, Pest county, foster parent of two)

I heard countless accounts of acts of destruction from spreading feces on the wall with regularity to throwing heavy objects at television sets. The foster parent is expected to calm the child, quietly clean up and try to deal with the cause of the problem. No damages can be claimed and this behavior is not considered out of the ordinary or as needing external support.

Older children express their anxieties in different ways and foster parents must work not only with their own families but also with their broader environment to make adjustments. This can be especially difficult in smaller settlements where families know each other. This was the case of one foster parent who lives in a village some 60 kilometers east of Budapest when his foster children, a pair of siblings, arrived about five years ago. He is still embarrassed about being the “talk of the town” even though the problem was in fact resolved.

At the beginning Dani [his fostered son] stole other kids’ snacks and this came up at a meeting of parents at school. I told them [about the background of the child]. So the parents then understood and I am sure, well, I hope that they explained it to their own children and then this stopped. (Gabor, fostering two school age children and parenting biological twins who attend the same school a few years ahead of the fostered siblings)

This foster parent had to find the right way to discuss the issue within the community, make sure the child and his own family are not excluded from the village for their unruly behavior and negotiate the child’s needs

which resulted in his stealing snacks. He only had perfunctory help from the foster parent agency to tackle the problem and mostly had to rely on his own skills as a negotiator, mediator and child psychologist. Another foster parent describes the way she “tamed” her son, Alex, who came with serious mental and psychological difficulties.

I have managed to get him to the point where he doesn't bite or kick, where tools and other objects are not flying around ... so you see, this is a first step. Now he only screams. Which is better than when he threw half a brick at me. (Nikolett, foster mom to 2 children, with a great deal of fostering experience)

Alex's rage was successfully controlled by this foster parent without the help of an expert psychologist. She relied on her research online, the advice of her social worker, as well as her experience with previous children, to get to the point where the child was no longer destructive, a feat previous carers in institutions or private homes had not been able to accomplish.

Some people foster children with known disabilities, for example, Edit, who decided to do this work for the purpose of helping sick children. Both of her fostered toddlers have Down syndrome yet she received no training in how to raise children with Down.

I looked it up at the Down Foundation in Budapest. The first step was that we went to a clinic for children with Down syndrome. That's in Budapest. There they told me in detail what medical tests need to be done. No one had explained that to me within the [foster parent network] agency. If I had had to wait for them, we still wouldn't have gotten anything done. Because I think they themselves don't know what this [raising children with severe Down syndrome] really means. (Edit, fostering two children, in a small town in Pest county, about 80 kilometers from Budapest)

Her case may be one of the extremes, but for all, ongoing attention, tolerance and intense emotional and physical work are required. A small fraction of foster parents can afford to pay for psychologists out of their own pockets, others may lobby networks to help them cover the extra costs. Many said that they read books on childrearing and popular psychology, and browse internet websites in search of possible solutions to behavioral/psychological problems. They may also consult with the social worker in their children's school as well as with the agency's foster parent advisor, who visits regularly and advises foster parents on all issues related

to caring for their wards. They participate in supervision and small group training workshops in at least some of the foster network agencies and discuss problems with other foster parents. Altogether, foster parents accrue a great deal of practical knowledge in child development and psychology and are expected to utilize these skills in their everyday work of raising children, who typically have grave social and psychological disadvantages which must be tolerated, handled and in the best scenario, treated successfully.

Never is the need for skillful emotional work more acute or evident than before, during and after the regular visitation meetings between birth parents and their children. These visits are required by law and happen at regular intervals, typically bi-monthly, or monthly as per the agreement between the courts and the birth family. In Hungary the management of these visits is the responsibility of the foster parent, although about half of the time the actual encounter happens in a location designated by the agency with some professional personnel and supervision present.

Some birth parents only show up irregularly and sometimes skip visitations without advance notice. This makes for wasted trips and even worse, bitterly disappointed children. One foster parent talked about how he took his children outside so they can yell their feelings into the air—a technique she gleaned from a book on child psychology. Foster parents often develop elaborate strategies to avoid these disappointments, from not telling the child in advance about the meeting, to planning fun events to be done near the meeting place in case the birth parents do not show up.

One time we set off with the two kids [for Budapest to meet birth parents] and when we were [entering Budapest] they called to say they couldn't make it because they got sick. So imagine this child, who had carefully prepared a drawing [for her birth mom], who hadn't seen her parents in 6 weeks or so and then we finally leave and we are almost in Budapest. At every village she asked "is this Budapest already?" And then they tell us not to bother going. We turned back and we simply couldn't comfort Barbie, the older child. It was really hard on her. That and the next few days, those are always hard. The kids somehow can sense it that the four weeks are up, even though we try not to talk about [the upcoming meeting with the birth parents], just in case [it gets cancelled]. They can sense that it's time for the meeting and they behave accordingly. (Gabor, foster parent of two, who takes the children for visits once a month and lives in a small village about 40 kilometers from Budapest)

When the meeting does happen, the adjustment back to the reality of life in the foster home must be managed carefully. Birth parents may, sometimes in the best of faith, sometimes out of negligence, make promises they cannot keep, and this leads to confusion, anger and anxiety that foster parents must somehow manage.

You see, the birth father takes out this child. When they meet, he promises the skies to her and then he disappears for two months. So we try to digest this. Of course then I know why the kid is going crazy, why she is throwing things around or why she bites her classmates so badly that they bleed. (Kata, foster mother to four, Budapest)

Other times children may have memories of trauma in their birth homes and find the meetings stressful. The quote below describes this, probably coupled with the foster parent's animosity toward and fear of the birth parents because of their alcoholism, unruly behavior and anger toward her and the Foster Parent Agency. Even if the latter is taken into account it is a good example of the psychological stress produced by and to be managed at meetings (or missed meetings) with birth parents. Says Viktoria, foster mother of a baby:

This child, Csilla, whom I fostered, she was terrified of her parents. Imagine an eight-month-old child desperately hanging on to my clothes when she saw her parents. It took 2–3 days after each visit for her to calm down. When the parents were forbidden to see her for a few months she became so happy and relaxed just because she didn't have to meet with them. And no matter what I tell a psychologist, they can't do anything about it. There is a serious problem here with the legal regulation. (Viktoria, currently fostering one child)

The legislation she refers to is the Child Protection Law which gives birth parents extensive rights over their birth children, which foster parents often see as unwarranted and undeserved. Indeed, most birth parents are not especially well equipped to spend two meaningful hours with their children whom they had not seen for at least two weeks. The situation in which the meeting takes place does not help matters either. The visitations are typically arranged in a large room of the foster network agency, where several other foster-birth family couples are also present. Sometimes the encounter is monitored by the foster parent herself and one or more supervisors of the foster agency. These are tumultuous affairs. I spent

several months helping out at visitation hours at two different Foster Parent Network Agencies, observing and occasionally helping with these rather awkward get-togethers. Parents arrived, unpacked soft drinks and sweets, had snacks with the children but then had trouble expressing their love and devotion to their child in this heavily supervised context and in the way it was expected of them. The meeting rooms are packed with toys, so children could run amok, but birth parents rarely had the skills, the patience or the mood to play along or to simply engage with children, apart from watching and embracing them and feeding them snacks.

There is no parent–child relationship between them. She'd say, come here and then embraces him but that's all, nothing more. She hands him her phone and tells him to go ahead and play. So these visits are not exactly meaningful in that way. (Mrs Csicsó, long-time foster parent, currently of three children)

Truly excellent foster parents take it upon themselves to manage the situation in a way that it becomes comfortable for everyone. This is difficult because birth parents' needs must be taken into account as well, as well as the limitations in their ability or desire to parent. Here is how one foster parent of many years described what her role is during the visitations.

When Moni and her parents don't know what to do with each other I try to ease the situation because it's so embarrassing to just sit there and look at each other. And of course Moni would come to me as she does on every other day of the week. And then I would tell her, come on, let's show Mummy what has happened. And I tell the mother what happened to Moni that week but I try to get her involved and get her to say something and Laci [her younger child] too, so he would say something as well about what happened. And I ask the parents about their lives because of course they also have lots of problems. (Erika, foster mom of two in Budapest)

This is the exception, rather than the rule, as cultural, class and ethnic differences—not to mention the built-in animosity on the part of the birth parent toward the Agency and its representatives for interfering in their lives—often make even simple communication between birth and foster parents difficult. Many foster parents had no patience for dealing with birth parents whom they often blamed—directly or indirectly—for the problems the children faced. But the most successful ones took on the task

of bridging the class/ethnic gap and specifically “teaching” birth parents how to parent. This required a great deal of personal dedication and skill.

Szandi’s mom comes the second Saturday of every month and then we try to do something together. Because she [the mother] is a pretty neglected person, we take her to the Zoo as well, or to swim in lake Velence or Balaton. We kind of adopted her as part of the family and on that day she is also our child. So we go together. (Andrea, foster mother of two children)

### *Exercising Professional Technologies of Self*

Professional foster parents are expected to relate to their children in a professional manner and exercise what is called “smart love” in their work activities. Broadly speaking this means loving the child without a sense of ownership and full commitment. Foster parents are taught to love their children but love them with reservations; to handle them as members of the family yet view them as temporary additions, and as people whose ultimate fate is not in their hands. Most experts agree that this is a tall order: “Foster parents must have a split personality: they are expected to tell the children that they belong there, they are members of their family, yet must also encourage them to return to their own birth parents” (Foster parent advisor, explaining why he could never do this job). Indeed, this is a difficult balance and most foster parents are somewhat unsure about what “smart love” means or whether or not they should strive to provide it. The best explanation I heard highlights the vast amount of emotional work that goes into “smart love”, well beyond a simple love for children.

Well, you have to do everything the same as with your own child. That kid needs lots of love in their first three years, so they can be self-confident later. You must love them the same, only you have to be strong when it is time to let them go. Because it is a lot worse for them if they see that I am reluctant to let them go, then he will feel guilty. (Bori, an experienced foster parent, who has raised a number of very small children who were later adopted, as well as a few who grew up in her household.)

Indeed, “losing” a child to adoption or return to their birth families is often rather traumatic to foster parents many of whom grow to genuinely love their children. This requires so much emotional work that some agencies offer psychological counseling on the otherwise rare occasion when a child leaves.

Knowledge of child psychology, complicated emotional work and tolerance of psychological distress are all practiced by good foster parents on a daily basis. While the work itself is often acknowledged by agency personnel, the skills that go into managing the foster child–foster parent–birth parent triad is rarely noted (for an exception see Demény 2015).

### *Advocacy Within Boundaries*

While foster agencies do not expect foster parents to be able to solve all the child's psychological and learning problems, they do expect them to advocate for the child in various contexts. This is harder than expected because foster children are often surrounded by discrimination and distrust, both because of their status as protected children and because many of them belong to Hungary's largest minority, the Roma. Hungarians in general express a great deal of animosity toward minorities of all stripes. Anti-Roma sentiments are especially strong and have increased over the past decade. In recent surveys 73% of the population said that they would not consent to a member of the Roma minority moving into their neighborhood, and news and academic reports describe increasing violence against the Roma (FXB 2014). Terms, such as "Roma criminality" abound in the media and the supposedly problematic "lifestyle" of Roma groups is routinely pathologized by Hungarian politicians. In this context, advocating or simply standing up for the rights of Roma foster children requires exceptional courage and determination. Advocacy is especially hard as foster parents have limited rights over the child: the final decision maker is the child's guardian. In addition, foster mothers—who have typically graduated from a technical high school with a certificate in a specific trade—have significantly less cultural capital than the teachers and doctors they must negotiate with.

It is no surprise then that the ability to advocate for their child was one of the key requirements listed by agencies when recruiting foster parents. In fact, this is one task agencies typically claim is "work"-like. As Sára, a foster parent advisor told me:

For this [foster] child to be able to persuade people that she is valuable, not a waste, she must be at least beautiful. But if she is naughty, and ugly and god forbid, Roma and maybe even steals occasionally, poor thing, then the parents in the school will collect signatures against her ... so the [foster par-

ent] will have to lobby hard for her ... she will have to represent the child's interests. (Sára, foster parent advisor, large network in Budapest)

At the same time foster parents must act with a great degree of decorum and be careful to behave in a manner considered "civilized" by the mostly middle-class and middle-aged experts of the foster agency. They are expected to represent the child, but true "tiger moms" are frowned upon too. Ildiko, a middle-aged seamstress in a rural town fostering a small boy who was mistreated in kindergarten was told off by her advisor when she made a scene at the childcare center.

Then [the foster parent advisor] told me on the phone that I was too loud and I didn't behave appropriately and this behavior is not suitable for a foster parent. So I said, yes? I would have been curious to see what you would have done if they had treated your child like this, what would you have done? Of course foster parents must stand up for their children, how could I not? Stop kidding me, should I just laugh when they mistreat him? Come on ... I said that was out of the question, don't even say such things to me. (Ildiko, foster mom of one, her two biological children have already left home)

Worse than frowned upon, in fact, this woman was threatened with the removal of her child when she raised hell for what she perceived as unfair treatment bordering on violence. Foster parents are expected to represent the child's interest vehemently, but within what is a typically moving target of "professional boundaries", something that is not necessarily part of the vocabulary of lower middle-class blue—or white-collar families. Here's another example from a woman who talks about the same problem though formulated in different terms:

You as a foster parent cannot act as a "tiger mom". Because in the end I have no rights at all, all I can do is shut up and raise the child. If I don't do something perfectly, the child may get taken away, in fact even my own kids may be taken. (Viktoria, foster mother of infants, birth mother of two, living in a rural town)

The foster parent above may be expressing more anxiety than is probably warranted, but her point is on target: foster parents must navigate between the Scylla of middle-class civility and the Charybdis of vehement advocacy in difficult situations. This requires an understanding of how



institutions work, refined interpersonal skills, self-control and perseverance.

Dealing with authorities when children have health problems or run-ins with the police are similarly difficult. Says Erika, who raises six children in a small rural town and teaches religion in kindergartens part-time:

[There was a period of time in the life of her fostered daughter when] I spent more of the nights at the police station than in my own bed. But what really broke the camel's back was when she started using drugs. So I told her to stop, everyone else did too, the whole foster parent network came to talk to her.

Erika was barely equipped to deal with police issues, not to mention problems related to drugs and alcohol use. She had received no training which may have taught her how to manage these issues. Neither did she get sufficient help from her advisor and agency, even though she had alerted them to the problem. They came to talk to the child, but in the end it was always Erika who had to bail her out from difficult situations.

Anita fosters a girl who just turned six when I talked to her, but she had started noticing problems when she had enrolled her in kindergarten there years earlier. She spent about 20 minutes of the interview describing her trials and tribulations during the process of getting the child some help, of which this is a short excerpt:

So I took her to lots of doctors. I told this local doctor that something was wrong. He saw that too so sent us to all sorts of places, from the Child Development Service to speech therapy, I took her everywhere. [She needed permission for each expert visit, as well as financial support from the agency. Neither of these could be attained without lengthy petitions, numerous phone calls, explanations and occasional surprise visits to the relevant official's office.] In the end, she received some developmental training and speech therapy, we did this for 2–3 years ... we went to a whole list of therapy classes. (Anita, foster mother of 2)

While birth parents often have to go through the same process, the incidence of developmental lags is much higher in the case of fostered children. In addition, foster parents must ask for permission from the child's guardian and the foster parent agency for every move they make, they must rely on guardians to manage the paperwork, which often takes

months, and they face discrimination at every step of the way from authorities, including schools and health care providers.

Foster parents must thus advocate for children in a society where discrimination against the Roma and indeed against children growing up in untraditional families of any sort are rampant and where their own relationship to the child must be negotiated among the different actors, including the child, in an ongoing manner. This is a skill acquired through the process of fostering and is developed in everyday practice. Foster parents themselves talk about learning the ropes through their own mistakes and doing better on subsequent occasions. Yet, neither the skills, the effort nor the hours are acknowledged when fostering is categorized as an unskilled job and when its wages are set.

### *Managing a Foster Family*

Managing a family requires a great deal of invisible work: women's mental load has been described at length in both academic literature and the media (Daminger 2019). However, managing a foster family is an enterprise on an altogether different scale. Let us review some of the administrative and management duties unfamiliar to most of us.

In addition to their own wages, foster parents receive an allowance to cover the living expenses of their child. The full sum must be devoted to the needs of the child and, in many although not in all agencies, the money must be placed in a separate account. Whether or not foster parents must collect receipts of everyday or only larger purchases for their wards (such as clothes or books or food) varies. In some agencies, this is the norm, and receipts are checked randomly. At other agencies, only certain items must be accounted for.

Oh and the clothes money. We have a certain sum we must spend on clothes each year. We are very lucky in this regard because we don't need a separate bank account and simple receipts will do. So I have a separate folder where I keep the receipts [for each child] from clothing purchases. (Erzsébet, currently fostering four children)

All foster children receive pocket money, which needs to be accounted for. In fact, each child starting at the age of three must sign a form each month to acknowledge that they have been given this amount. The foster parent advisor, during her bi-weekly or monthly visit, regularly asks

children what they do with their pocket money as a way to check on whether or not they have received it. Foster parents, as a result, develop a variety of techniques to make sure the child understands that his or her money is spent on the toy or food item he chooses and they try to imprint this on the child's memory.

During my interviews at a foster parent agency, I was shown the dossier of a foster parent, which contained a long list of days with signatures. This was required because two of the children raised in this family studied at a live-in high school in a different town. This meant that the foster parents only got a part of their salary, proportionate to the actual time the child spent in their homes rather than in the dorm. These days had to be documented on a separate sheet, every month, and filed with the foster agency.

Finally, foster parents must keep a diary of the life of their foster child in view of the fact that they may be able to go back to their birth homes or may get adopted.

Here's the diary, let me show you. It is about the children, exactly because they are here temporarily—so to say. If they move on to anywhere, are adopted or able to move back to their birth parents, I must be able to show what happened to the children while they lived with me, how did he get to where he is now. This is his life ... it is part of our contract, one of our tasks, to have this life history diary. We must do it. Now, we can decide how we do it. This one (she is showing me the book) I wrote in this every day at first, later only once a month. And then he made drawings. This was written to them by their parents, I insert these as well, all sorts of experiences. Now I am starting to add photographs as well. I just thought it's much more practical from my point of view to write down if something happened immediately that evening, rather than go back to it in a month. (Ilona, foster mother of three)

Not all foster parents are as conscientious as Ilona, and some simply keep pictures of the child's life in a folder on a computer or smart phone. I've seen many variations of life diaries as foster parents are typically proud of their children and celebrate their achievements with enthusiasm. The documentation varies in depth and quantity and it must be made available at the request of the foster parent advisor. This is in addition to the bi-annual reports that are filed by the child's guardian, but are in fact typically compiled at least in part by the foster parent herself. While birth parents may be somewhat careless with the personal documents of their children, foster parents must have all personal and legal documents as well

as the history of the child's life organized and potentially accessible at any time.

Administrative work is a hidden aspect of all parenting, but the lives of fostered children need extensive and in-depth documentation, which must be made available for scrutiny at a moment's notice. Indeed, foster parents are now trained in the legal and administrative aspects of their jobs in the preparatory fostering courses they are required to take. The newly introduced employment contract brings further administrative burdens for the parent as an employee, and this requires regular revisions, because wages fluctuate with the number of children in the home and other minor changes.

In summary, fostering is extremely difficult work, which requires the kinds of skills typically associated with women and especially mothers: emotional work, caring and advocating for others, negotiating, administering, organizing and managing people's lives. As women's work it is often seen as being a "natural skill". But as the foster parents themselves have described above, the contexts in which they do their work, and their overall work burden are hardly simple extensions of women's feminine selves: they are examples of highly skilled labor, exhausting the body and the soul. It is thus especially appalling to understand the wages and work conditions of foster parents, which I argue place them squarely into the category of the carefare underclass.

### *Wages*

Over 90% of active foster parents are women, and while several men are also certified as part of a foster family, only exceptionally can men without female spouses house fostered children. Single men in fact face a great deal of suspicion and discrimination when they aspire to the job, and foster parent advisors have asserted several times that fostering is really for women. This is relevant because female-typed care occupations (such as teaching, childcare or nursing) are especially devalued in Hungary, as indeed they are internationally (England 2005). As one foster parent said and this was not at all meant as a joke: "This is women's work, because men can't bear to work this much".

Formal educational requirements are fairly low. Foster parents are expected to have completed elementary education only, but then they have to take a special skills training course of 500–600 hours and pass an examination at the end. Experience in successful childrearing is important

in the selection process. Some agencies explicitly require that applicants will have raised a child of their own. They consider this important to demonstrate that the foster parent applicants are aware of the job of parenting, they have a track record of having raised children and also so they are less likely to think of foster children as their own.

While everyone involved agrees that fostering is extremely difficult and complex work, most foster parents earn less than the national minimum wage. Their salaries are set by state regulations and foster parents working for all agencies and with different levels of experience get the same amount, although some agencies may be more or less generous with covering special costs for children or distributing an occasional bonus payment. All foster parents earn 30% of the national minimum wage, and another 20% of the national minimum is added for each child they foster. This means that a foster parent makes only 90% of the national minimum wage if they foster three children, which is the typical number in Hungary.<sup>2</sup> In addition, women who foster children under age 2 may also receive parental leave benefits on top of their wages. Interestingly, while this benefit is set at 70% of the minimum wage for other women who do not have a higher income of their own (e.g., university students), foster parents only receive 50%.

Note that there are two types of minimum wage settings in Hungary: one for everyone, and another for skilled workers whose skill is required on the job. Many foster parents have secondary school qualifications and in any case they are expected to graduate from a year-long training course which endows them with a diverse number of specialized skills—as the syllabus of the program attests. As we have seen above, they employ all those skills and more in their everyday work. Yet the minimum wage that applies to them is the generic national minimum, not the specialized one, which would be 30% higher. Importantly, no distinction is made among foster parents by their educational level or experience, as is customary in other segments of the labor market. The only addition is an extra 5% of the minimum wage if a foster parent raises a child with special needs. This amounts to about 8000 HUF per month or 22 EUR, which is roughly the price of ten Big Macs, to use this index of purchasing power parity.

<sup>2</sup>The minimum wage in Hungary is the second lowest among EU members states after Bulgaria. A foster parent who raises three children gets paid 144,900 HUF (gross, taxes are payable), which is 400 EUR per month in wages in 2020.

The handful of professional foster parents already fostering before 2014 in Hungary earned more than this amount, regardless of the number of children who were placed in their households. However, fewer than 10% of all foster parents worked as professionals, the remaining 90% received an honorarium of 15,000 HUF a month per child, which was seen as a symbolic gesture of thanks, rather than a wage. This means that now the majority of foster parents receive more remuneration than they had before they were “professionalized”. They are now covered by the social security system, and the years spent fostering count toward their old age pensions. Yet the fact that they are getting wages below the national minimum for extremely taxing work that takes up every second of their lives is not missed by foster parents. As one of them succinctly put it: “If you insist on calling this paid work, you might as well call it slave work” (Ilona, foster mother of a small boy in a rural town).

In addition to the salary, each child receives an allowance from the state. This sum must be solely dedicated to his or her living costs, and, as I have already noted, foster parents must document the spending in detail. The size of the allowance is tied to the minimum old age pension payment (it amounts to roughly 150% of it). As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the level of the national minimum old age pension has not changed since 2008 and thus has been devalued by about 30% since 2010. Most foster parents and social workers agree that the cost of raising children is higher than the allowance, especially for older children or children with special needs. Some agencies allocate extra funds for foster parents for specific costs (such as glasses or dental work) but these are unpredictable and vary across agencies. Similarly, foster parent network agencies occasionally distribute treats on special occasions, such as vouchers to buy gifts at Christmas or Easter—the spending of which has to be carefully documented. Nevertheless, several foster parents claimed that they supplement the cost of food and basic necessities from their own salaries or that they couldn’t afford to foster if their husbands had not been making a decent salary.

### *Increased Work Volume*

Many child protection experts agree that the job of fostering is getting harder and harder. As I pointed out earlier this argument was used to justify the need for disciplining, regulating, “professionalizing” foster parents. Here is another very experienced foster parent advisor describing the situation:

Children come from increasingly difficult life conditions. Their problems are often more complex and difficult to deal with. So practically every single child would need a learning therapist, a psychologist, psychiatrist, a developmental therapist, a physician. What I mean is that life had been harder on these kids than for those who we had years ago, and to help them and treat this is no small task. (Foster parent advisor, social worker, Budapest agency)

This is especially so because foster parents raise a growing number of children. The number of children in need has been increasing, yet national campaigns to recruit foster parents have not been particularly successful, so their numbers have been stagnating. In 2000, 25% of foster parents raised three children or more, in 2010 almost 40% did, and in 2020 the figure stood at over 50%. Until 2000 more than half of all foster parents raised only one child. Now there are fewer than 20% working in this category (KSH 2019a). More children, especially more children with major psychological or developmental issues, means significantly more work per parent. This process started earlier, but the incentive structure set up by the 2014 regulation has reinforced it. It is making increasingly more sense to consider fostering as one's only paid job rather than as something to do in addition to working elsewhere. In this context, more children are needed to make a livable, even if meager, income.

### *Heightened Expectations, Surveillance and Control*

As foster parents' relationship to the state turns into one of employment, expectations on the part of the employers increase as well. The administrative burden has grown with the employment relationship. As a policy expert in the Child Protection Service explained to me: "We expect them to be more disciplined, more cooperative. This is in fact the goal of changing the relationship into a professional one. That and that they should be required to participate in trainings." Both the agencies and foster parents agreed with this claim. To illustrate I selected the words of a foster parent who compared the heightened expectations to the ridiculously low compensations she receives:

Especially now that they [the state] put them [the legal guardians] on my shoulders too ... sure I get some money in return. Now I get all of 30,000 HUF. And this should make me feel really good because I now have a salary and this will allow them to tell me what to do. (Viola, foster mother of two children)

As already suggested in the above quote, in addition to an increased workload, heightened expectations and low wages, the process of professionalization is also accompanied by an intensification of surveillance over foster parents' work.

I'd like to help children live in a happy, safe, well-balanced, normal family. But instead, I assign them [the foster parents] an external guardian, send a foster parent advisor on them, maybe more than one guardian because each child could have a different one. And I turn the home of foster parents into a zoo ... who, by the way, I force to take the child to visitation meetings with birth parents every weekend. (Director of a foster parent network agency, Budapest)

At least two supervisors visit families on a regular basis: the foster parent advisor is the most important and is the parent's primary contact to the agency. In addition, as of 2014 each child has a legal guardian, who is a representative of the state, and who makes all final decisions for the child. He or she also visits regularly and, as the quote suggests, guardians are assigned to children, not families, so a family may have several such officials involved in their lives now. In addition, representatives from the agency may also stop by for a variety of reasons. Some of these visits are unannounced, but most are arranged in advance, depending on the schedules of the parties involved. Most foster parents had only a vague idea of how often exactly the visits are supposed to happen, but they did sense that they must accommodate someone almost weekly. This coupled with the bi-annual weekend trainings they must attend, network-wide holiday gatherings, as well as the bi-weekly or monthly birth parent visitation sessions, which also often happen at the agency's premises with supervision from the agency, all taken together provide a great deal of opportunities for contact.

Typically, foster parents try to build a good relationship with their advisors as they see them not only as their direct supervisors but also as their contact to the agency. Advisors also serve as a source of practical advice or emotional support. During their monthly visits, the foster parent advisor talks to the child and the foster parent, but also has the right to open refrigerators, wardrobes and toy storage boxes to make sure the child has all that is prescribed by law and deemed necessary by the agency. They also assess the cleanliness of the home in general, and comment on it should they find it not up to their standards.



I am being continuously monitored. When Adam came to live with us, they [representatives of the foster parent network agency] visited me twice a week. I cleaned more than ever, because I was worried that they would find something amiss. Then, after a while I got used to the visits and gave up on the extra cleaning. (Natalia, foster mother to newborns, living in a small town)

Natalia is a relatively recent foster parent who specializes in looking after newborns until they get adopted. She has a college degree, but gave up her job as a marketing manager a few years ago, and now lives with her husband, three school-age birth children, and a varying number of fostered babies in a small town about 60 minutes east of Budapest. She is perhaps the most vocal about the ongoing surveillance, but several foster parents told me horror stories they had heard of especially brutal advisors, for example the one who stopped by randomly during the weekend lunch period and looked into pots to see what the children were being fed. The stories may not be true, but they do reflect foster parents' understanding of their vulnerability to the gaze of their advisors, which penetrates even the walls of their bedrooms.

Their lack of control over their work lives manifests most often when they are assigned children or when children leave their homes. Several accounts describe how foster parents are increasingly unable to influence these two vital processes. One foster parent, for example, was asked to take in three children with exactly two days' notice. She had space for two children, but had no control over either the number or the timing of their arrival.

Once they identify a child they ask you to host, they call you on the phone. In principle you would have time to discuss this with your family and give an answer in a few days. Yeah, dream on. I'll tell you how these three children landed here and you'll see. When we were just receiving an honorarium we could say no. Then we had this training and they told us that we'd better agree to accepting the children they send us. (Anikó, foster parent of four children, rural town)

Foster parents are especially prohibited to reject children on the basis of ethnicity. This is an important issue, since—according to estimates—between 30% and 50% of the children in the system are of Roma ethnicity and, as I explained above, discrimination against the Roma are widespread. Foster parents are not immune to racism either, even though they are

trained explicitly to avoid it. Some express fear of how the child will be accepted in their local communities, others are concerned about meetings with the birth parents. Yet others simply feel animosity toward a child who looks “different”. Thus some of the prohibition against picking and choosing of children has to do with the agency’s fully justifiable desire to avoid racial discrimination. But the point here is that foster parents noted a change in attitude toward them since the start of their employment relationship and argued that they became more vulnerable as a result of the new form of dependency.

For their part, foster parent advisors are well aware of their role in the system.

I try to stay friendly with them [the foster parents] so they wouldn’t see the supervisor in me but the helper. But obviously my main role is to follow up on whether or not their work serves the interests of the child. But I am usually friendly with them and I do the checking up part while we are chatting and I help a great deal if needed. (Emese, foster parent advisor, rural town)

Until 2014 most foster parents had legal guardianship rights over their children, but in 2014 each child was assigned a separate guardian, and foster parents could not take on this role any more. This was experienced as a logistical hurdle, but also an expression of lack of trust and loss of control.

One [problem with the new situation] is that they don’t trust us [to make the right decisions for the child]. The other is that we have another person who we are accountable to. (Marika, long-time foster parent, now raising four children)

Or as another experienced foster parent explained why she found it offensive that legal guardians now have the final word on major life decisions about the child:

You know, it is really strange [to have a guardian overseeing her work]. I am raising this child. I know what he needs. I am responsible for him too. Yet, I don’t make the decision, I am sometimes not even asked. (Paula, foster parent to two children)

### *Gendered Altruism as a Form of Resistance*

Consistent with the logic of carefare, work conditions have worsened and wages are appallingly low. Why do foster parents agree to these employment conditions? One possible answer is that they simply have no alternatives: the “whip of hunger” forces them to accept even these conditions. But this is inconsistent with what I heard from my interviewees. Most foster mothers I talked to could list several job alternatives, or positions they gave up for fostering. Granted, some of those jobs required long traveling, shift work or working very long hours, but they did not necessarily mean more overall effort than the work they were doing now. Several of my respondents said that they chose fostering because they wanted to help children, and associated caring for others with their true feminine identity. In other words, they evoked altruism and the importance of a meaningful, caring life as a form of highly gendered moral rationality (Duncan and Edwards 1999), that is, as a rational choice, which was not based on economic gain but on a specific orientation to life and a system of values sharply at odds with the mainstream expectations. A good example is Zsuzsa, an engineer, one of the few foster mothers I interviewed who had a professional, full-time job in addition to raising two fostered and two biological children (with a stay-at-home husband). She told me that her friends and family do not quite understand why she and her husband chose to foster on top of all her other work. But, she said, “We wanted to do something meaningful, something that we can later explain to our children” (Zsuzsa, fostering two children, biological mom to two in Budapest). Blanka, who used to work as a nurse in a nearby hospital before she resigned to raise foster children explained to me laughing: “I know this sound silly but I don’t like to be working for money” (Blanka, foster mom to 2 toddlers, small rural town).

As a corollary, foster parents often claimed that what they did was not work but part of the natural flow of their lives, part of who they were. One example of this position comes from Tanya, a long-time foster parent who lives in a village outside of Budapest. She acknowledges that fostering requires energy, but makes a sharp distinction between work and family. The term “work” has no place in the “natural” setting of a family:

I don’t think of this as work. Because I think this is a natural thing. We have children, we come home, just like raising my own kids, this is not work either. I mean there’s a lot of work with this, yes, and I get really tired by the evening ... but this is not a job for me. It is family. (Tanya, foster mother of three)

Other women claim that what they do does not require special skills, only their womanly instincts. Kata, a foster mother of two with two biological children of her own said this:

I am not trained as a nurse, I cannot offer anything extra. I am just a mommy who is simply capable of raising healthy children.

She is seconded by another foster parent who, when I asked her if she considered what she did as work, replied: “I ... I don’t really know. To me this is really routine, not a big deal at all. No, this is not work” (Juli, long-time foster mother, currently raising three children).

An important correlate of altruism is that love seems incongruent with financial compensation: both foster parents and their agencies subscribe to the “hostile worlds” argument (Zelitzer 1997). This was one of the reasons why I heard repeatedly that fostering should not be thought of as paid work. Instead, foster parents and their advisors used a variety of different words to describe what they were doing including “love”, “calling”, a “hobby”, a “lifestyle”, a “way of life”, a “service”: fostering was thought of as outside the realm of paid work as something opposite to the world of work and financial compensation.

If I were a child, I wouldn’t want my foster mother to get paid so she would love me and keep me in her family. I don’t think that would be good, not even for the self-respect of foster parents. With this move [the 2014 legislation] they took away the only important thing, that they can do charitable activity, that they can help kids. Now we say this is their job, like for a teacher or child care worker. (Diana, experienced foster parent advisor in Budapest)

Or as another policy expert put it:

This is all about children, we cannot treat this as work. A foster parent must be a lot more than that. It is not enough just to satisfy the daily needs of the child, to offer clean clothes, room and warm food. An institution can offer all that. A foster parent needs to give more: her soul and her love. (Social worker, policy expert)

Soul and love cannot be bought and, it seems, need not be compensated for either.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter illustrated an important yet well-hidden aspect of Hungary's carefare regime: the construction of primarily female, paid—but barely so—care workers through the process of professionalization from above. A new piece of legislation, fully in line with expert recommendations, transformed the relationship of foster parents to the state into that of employment. As employment contracts go, this one is quite unfavorable to foster parents: it increases their work volume, the expectations placed on them and the length of training required for the work, it exacerbates the surveillance foster families are subjected to by state actors, and wrests from them even more control over the work process. In exchange for work done in these extremely precarious conditions, foster parents get paid less than the minimum wage. They also became part of the social insurance scheme and now expect to draw pension benefits—proportionate to these wages. Foster parents thus joined the underclass of female care workers whose exploitation forms one of the foundations of the anti-liberal regime. The transformation in this area of child protection also highlights the re-engineering of the state in an anti-liberal political direction: the channeling of public funds into the coffers of politically loyal religious organizations.

Both the discursive justification of the changes in state policies, and foster parents' resistance to these, are based on the assumption that caring is women's natural skill and the ultimate meaning of their lives. State agencies can afford to pay precious little for the vast amount of work foster parents do, and foster parents can justify their acceptance of these extremely precarious work conditions by relying on a gendered hostile world argument: love for children and proper financial compensations do not mingle, and women's ultimate expression of femininity is in the work of caring selflessly for others. As long as foster parents, especially foster mothers, agree to conceptualizing their employment relationship as one of motherly altruism, and feminine meaning making, carefare will thrive.

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## CHAPTER 4

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# Conclusion

**Abstract** This chapter is a brief summary of the main arguments and a development of the point that carefare policies form an integral part of the political success and legitimacy of the anti-liberal regime. The chapter also shows how selective and exclusionary the policies are.

**Keywords** Anti-liberal • Hungary • Gender inequality • Class inequality • Carefare

“God created men and women so they together may form a whole, which—when complemented by children—we call a family. In the family and in society women embody gentleness, devotion, care, empathy, beauty, complementing men so they together can show the way to the next generation. Mothers are the heart and soul of families, the whole society and the nation.”  
(Official Facebook post by MiklósKásler, Minister of Human Resources, March 7, 2021)

To mark International Women’s Day in 2021, the European Commission issued a statement which enumerated women’s multiple contributions to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic: their work as doctors, nurses, teachers and shop assistants. The communiqué emphasized the European Union’s commitment to gender equality and listed a



range of measures to be introduced in the near future to this effect.<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian Minister of Human Resources, for his part, took a rather different angle. In a statement on his Facebook page quoted at the top of this chapter, he chose to greet heterosexual mothers only on International Women’s Day and laud them for their gentleness, caring and kindness. He emphasized the fact that women’s role was to complement men’s work and reminded us that women’s contributions to families, society and nation all belong to the realms of the heart rather than to the material world. The contrast between the two approaches—the European Commission’s and the Hungarian government’s—could not be sharper and could not illustrate more clearly the main arguments in this book.

A new type of political order has emerged in Hungary since 2010: a form of authoritarian capitalism with an anti-liberal political and social agenda. An important part of this agenda directly targets gender relations, specifically women and women’s work. To conclude and summarize the points I made in the previous chapters, let me start with Gabor Scheiring’s (2019: 254) analysis of social and political developments in Hungary. Scheiring calls the post 2010 Hungarian state “accumulative” and shows how FIDESZ and its cadres are deeply involved in reshuffling the existing class structure: they are creating their own politically loyal and economically powerful bourgeoisie through the process of state-assisted, dubiously legal, capital accumulation. The expropriation of resources, however, is taking place at the expense of those in the lower half of the social hierarchy. Scheiring points out that this is bound to lead to polarization and social tension, which may explain the authoritarian turn in Hungarian politics. Authoritarian rule, specifically authoritarian populist strategies are being deployed to retain the support of the economically disadvantaged. The government’s discursive construction of “moral panics” successfully transforms conflicts about widening economic inequalities into disagreements about cultural and ideological issues (*ibid.*). Indeed, one key example of such a moral panic has been the government’s purported struggle against what they call the international “gender lobby”. As I pointed out

<sup>1</sup> See *Statement by the European Commission ahead of the International Women’s Day 2021*. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_21\\_890](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_21_890). Numerous critiques question the EU’s commitment to and limited conceptualization of gender equality (see, e.g., Repo 2016). The point here is the contrast between the messages directed at women in Hungary and in the European Commission only.

in Chap. 1, this has been sustained, if with slightly modified content, by the government-friendly media for the past four years.<sup>2</sup>

Starting in the mid-2010s Hungary's anti-liberal political regime began to deploy an even more spectacular strategy to ameliorate social conflict around redistribution: pronatalist family policies. The decrees passed from 2014 onward provide a significant amount of cash support—some earmarked for specific purposes, others freely usable—to families with children. Better-off families receive and can utilize a larger share of the subsidies but even lower-class, working families are able to access several of the newly introduced tax credits, baby loans and mortgages. This may open new financial possibilities for eligible families among the roughly one-third of Hungarians who had been unable to set money aside as savings and for whom investment in housing, for example, may have seemed like a hopeless goal. In other words, the financial rewards of the newly introduced family policies reach social groups in the lower half of the social hierarchy, many of whom had been losing hope when faced with the difficulties of finding decent, stable jobs which pay a living wage, and the sluggishness of the rate of intergenerational upward mobility (Huszár et al. 2020). The “family protection measures” of the recent Orbán government guarantee that some limited resources trickle down to this group, who are a crucial part of FIDESZ's electoral base (Róna et al. 2020). The process does not ameliorate class inequalities because of the highly selective targeting of the rewards of family policies, but the measures have, nevertheless, impacted and partially reorganized not only gender relations but also the stratification order. Hungary's anti-liberal government has utilized the re-regulation of gender relations to modify socio-economic inequalities in a politically efficacious way.

<sup>2</sup>The most recent variety of the “gender panic” at the time of writing this chapter is related to homosexuality and the supposed threat it poses to the future of the Hungarian nation, Christian civilization and/or the morality of children. In the first three months of 2021, *Magyar Nemzet* [Hungarian Nation], the vehemently pro-government online daily I described in Chap. 1, published 79 articles containing the term “LGBTQ”. (Of the roughly similar number of articles on “gender” in the same period almost half contained the term LGBTQ and many more lamented the threat of non-heterosexual forms of sexuality without explicit reference to the term.) Nothing proves better the fact that this is a “moral panic” artificially created for political reasons is the admission of the Hungarian Minister of Family Affairs, Katalin Novák, herself who pointed out that issues related to non-heterosexuality, specifically gay adoptive parents, is not among the “top 100 problems of Hungarian people” (February 20, 2021). It is nevertheless kept on the political agenda by the government-controlled media.

The principle of “divide and conquer” is part of this political strategy. Not everyone is eligible for the tax benefits or the child allowances. First, the vast majority of funding is tied to sustained participation in the formal paid labor market, and more than one income within the family which is above the national minimum. In 2018, 73% of the working age (20–64 years old) population was employed for wages. Although employment rates have increased most among the least educated social groups in recent years, vast inequalities among the Roma ethnic minority and the non-Roma majority remain: in 2018 the employment rate of Roma men and women was 44% and 23%, respectively, compared to the employment rates of 81% for non-Roma men and 65% for non-Roma women. Most of the Roma population are thus simply excluded from the government windfall, notwithstanding the fact that they are more likely to have children than the majority of the population and certainly are more likely to be in need of support in order to move out of poverty. In addition, according to recent estimates, close to 40% of all employees are contracted to work for the minimum wage, reducing the possibility for other groups to partake of the newly available resources. Second, even among those who are employed and financially eligible, the majority do not have children in their households: about 22% of those employed have one child, 17% two children and only 6% have more than two (Bakó and Mészáros 2019). This means that only about 40% of the population between 20 and 64 years of age are eligible to apply for the subsidies which are tied to both labor market participation and the presence—or promise—of children. It is these white, heterosexual, working families—constructed as “deserving” by mainstream political propaganda—who are targeted by the recently passed measures.

The benefits received via the wide range of pronatalist policies and related measures do not guarantee long-term compensation for raising children. However, in the late 2010s, when paid work was plentiful, the primarily one-off benefits allowed a respite, offered new opportunities to buy a larger house, to renovate a home and to spend a little more money on necessities, which might not have been possible otherwise. In addition, those at the bottom of the income distribution saw a proportionately larger increase in their wages, thanks to the tax credits, than those at or above the average.<sup>3</sup> This potential upward mobility is quite fragile: in the

<sup>3</sup>If you are a member of the “deserving” families and you are employed and make the minimum wage and together with a spouse can claim tax credits for two children, your joint

case of someone losing their job they also lose eligibility, yet loans still need to be paid back. A divorce—not a rare occurrence in Hungary—may leave women especially vulnerable, and a variety of life events may prevent a family from having the number of children they had promised when they signed up for the government’s loan. The positive impact of these policies may last until the next election in 2022 but the risks involved for individual people are numerous.

Anti-liberal rule is thus built on the backs of women, especially on the backs of hard-working, ambitious, lower-class women. Women’s work burden is likely to increase if families are to access the tax credits, the baby loans, the cheap mortgage and other subsidies. The funding is available on condition that they have more children, and—given the typical division of labor within households—take on more care responsibilities, dedicate more time to care work. At the same time, they will continue working for wages too. But employers in the Hungarian labor market—both state and private, domestic and international—operate by regulations which largely ignore care responsibilities and thus disadvantage women. Alternatively and increasingly, the carefare state offers job opportunities in the care industry specifically for mothers—such as fostering as Chap. 3 demonstrated—with the typically appalling work conditions that approximate those available to live-in migrant care workers in other parts of the world. Should women accept these conditions, their families may access these precarious “gifts” endowed by the government, but should they reject any parts thereof, they immediately become second-class social citizens. Furthermore, the participation of eligible women and families in the programs lends legitimacy to the government policies’ singling out and constructing the “deserving”, working, heterosexual family with children as the social group responsible for the country’s future and the only true hope for it.

I have called this set of policies “carefare”. Carefare policies, like workfare or prisonfare, are designed to discipline vulnerable workers into doing

net monthly salary increases from 220,000 HUF to 260,000 HUF, which is an increase of 18%. But if both you and your spouse make the average wage and receive 560,000 HUF a month, the additional 40,000 HUF tax credit for two children amounts to a mere 7% of your income. In other words, those at the bottom receive a higher increase relative to their wages through the child tax credit system. Similarly, a “baby loan” of 10 million HUF is of significantly more value to those at the bottom of the social hierarchy than to those whose regular income is higher. If, however, low-income families do not produce the required three children, the burden of paying back the loan is also much heavier.

vastly undervalued work in exchange for claiming their social citizenship rights. Even though its elements are familiar from welfare policies elsewhere, Hungary's carefare regime represents a novel response to what has been called the care crisis emerging in financialized global capitalist economies: the conflict between the intensification of claims made on workers' energies by their jobs and the simultaneous necessity to provide intensive parenting to children and care for others in need in local communities (Fraser 2016). Hungary's anti-liberal government has not fully resolved the conflict but it is experimenting with a new solution. The incentive structures of carefare policies, government propaganda which sentimentalizes women's work and sets it in contrast to remuneration, the lack of feasible and enforceable gender equality measures and economic alternatives, and the non-existence of woman-friendly trade union or women's rights movements all work together to force women into having to increase their work burden and accept inferior and thus more vulnerable positions in the paid labor market.

This book has described Hungary's gender regime. There may be an elective affinity between anti-liberalism and pronatalist "family protection" policies or the rejection of the principles of gender equality, but the relationship is certainly not deterministic or causal. Hungary's geopolitical position, its economic dependence on foreign investors and EU structural funds, its history of failed modernization projects tied to a variety of women's emancipation agendas, the underdevelopment of democratic institutions, the recent trauma of social upheaval and numerous economic crises, as well as the history of authoritarian leaders and centralized propaganda, all add up to a confluence of conditions that lead to unique outcomes. Anti-liberal, authoritarian-leaning political rule is spreading fast in every part of the world; thus Hungary's carefare regime should serve, if nothing else, as a framework to guide future comparative work on gender, social citizenship rights and the conditions of paid and unpaid work.

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## APPENDIX

### List of major “family protection” policies, Hungary 2021

	<i>Basis for claim: social insurance/citizenship</i>	<i>Who is targeted?</i>	<i>Allocation</i>
Maternity leave (CSED)	Insurance	Mothers who just gave birth	6 months benefit at 70% of salary, raised to 100% in 2021.
Birth allowances	Citizenship	Lump sum upon birth	225% of minimum old age pension, value unchanged since 2008. In addition, 425,000 HUF/child deposited in a state-sponsored bank account.
Parental leave—flat rate (GYES, 1967)	Citizenship	Parents with kids under 3	100% of minimum old-age pension, value unchanged since 2008.
Parental leave—insurance based (GYED, 1985 and GYED extra)	Insurance	Parents with kids under 2 years of age	70% of the parent’s income, capped at 70% of the doubled minimum wage. 50% of minimum wage only for foster parents.

*(continued)*

(continued)

	<i>Basis for claim: social insurance/citizenship</i>	<i>Who is targeted?</i>	<i>Allocation</i>
Child-raising benefit for large families (GYET)	Citizenship	Parent with at least 3 kids up to age 8 of youngest	100% of the minimum old age pension, value unchanged since 2008. Can only work part time while receiving this benefit
Paternity leave	Insurance	Fathers of newborn	5 paid days of leave at 100% wages.
Family benefit (under 2 different names)	Citizenship	All families	About 13,000 HUF per child per month, no change in value since 2008. Tied to school attendance of school age children.
Free textbooks in schools	Universal	All children in school	Changed from means tested to universal.
School meals	Means tested	All children in school	
Earned income tax credit (revised version, 2014)	Insurance	Fathers and mothers with children, in case of divorce where kids live	Maximum sum received as tax savings: 1 child = 10,000 HUF, 2 children = 20,000 HUF/ child, 3+ children = 33,000 HUF/child.
No income tax for women with 4 children (2019)	Insurance	Mothers of 4 or more children	Working mothers with 4 or more children do not pay income tax (Hungary's flat tax rate is 15% in 2021).
1st marriage benefit (2015)	Insurance	Newly married couples	5000 HUF net per month for 2 years.
Baby loan (2019)	Insurance	Married couple in childbearing age planning kids in the future	Couples may take a 10 M loan, interest free. They do not have to pay it back if family has 3 kids within 5 years. If fewer than 3, sum reduced proportionately.

(continued)



(continued)

	<i>Basis for claim: social insurance/citizenship</i>	<i>Who is targeted?</i>	<i>Allocation</i>
Grandparent GYES, GYED (2019)	Insurance	Working women and men with grandchildren	Working age grandparents can also take parental leave. Both parents have to have formal employment, for GYED version the grandparent also. Not retirees.
CSOK, rural CSOK (2014, with many modifications)	Insurance	Parents with children Married and childbearing age only if they do not have children yet but commit to having them	State benefit to buy house/apartment. Have numerous components. Main one is a lump sum ranging from 600,000 HUF to 2.75 million HUF to buy house, depends on size/quality of house and number of kids.
Subsidized mortgage to buy home (CSOK—loan, reduction in VAT and application fees (2019+ later additions)	Insurance	Parents, married or single	Subsidized loan following the previous benefit. 10–15 M HUF, depending on number of kids or newly or not built apartment at 3% interest.
Special subsidy for multigenerational homes (2021)	Insurance	Parents if plan to live with their parents, same as CSOK above	Same as CSOK above.
Mortgage release (2019)	Insurance	Parents who promise to have more children	1 million HUF for each child the couple has.
State benefit to renovate and subsidized loans to renovate (2021)	Insurance	Parents, married or single	Special benefit to support families who want to renovate their existing home, benefit + subsidized loan.
Subsidized loan to buy 7-person car (2019)	Insurance	Parents with at least 3 children	Subsidized purchase of at least 7-person family van.

(continued)

(continued)

	<i>Basis for claim: social insurance/citizenship</i>	<i>Who is targeted?</i>	<i>Allocation</i>
Nursery school construction program (2019)	Cost is means tested Availability tied to paid work	Priority: working mothers	The promise of nursery school places to be built (mostly on EU funds). Children of working parents have an advantage in getting places in nurseries. 3/4th of mothers utilize the full length of the 3-year leave.
Extra vacation days for parents (2019)	Insurance	Working parents, both, individually	For both parents as individuals, 2 extra days for 1 child, 4 days for 2 kids, 7 days for 3 kids. Double in state admin jobs.

# INDEX<sup>1</sup>

## A

Abortion, 34, 35  
Altruism, 98–100  
Anti-gender, 1–22, 54  
Anti-immigration, 36  
Anti-liberal, 1–10, 13–16, 20,  
30–32, 37, 43, 47, 56, 57, 65,  
70, 73, 78, 100, 104, 105,  
107, 108

## B

Baby loan, 105, 107, 107n3  
Birth, 11, 12, 33, 34, 39–41, 44–46,  
54–56, 68, 70, 78, 79, 82–88,  
90, 95–97

## C

Care work, 3, 10, 12, 14, 16, 31–33,  
37, 39–42, 44–47, 51, 52, 54–58,  
65, 76, 107

Carefare, 1–3, 16, 20–22, 29–58,  
65–100, 107, 108  
Central and Eastern Europe, 12  
Childcare, 9, 13, 39, 44, 45, 50, 53,  
68, 77, 87, 91  
Child protection, 21, 22, 66, 68–73,  
75–77, 93, 100  
Children's home, 67, 69  
Church, 7, 43, 72–75  
Churchify/churchification, 41–43  
Class inequality, 3, 32, 57, 105  
Commodification, 41, 72  
COVID-19, 45, 51, 103  
Crisis of care, 3, 30, 33, 36, 41, 56

## D

Demographic crisis, 33–34, 36  
Deregulation, 41, 43, 72  
Deserving family, 32, 57, 106n3  
Disinvestment, 41–43  
Divorce, 12, 40, 58, 107

<sup>1</sup>Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

**E**

Earned income tax credit/tax credit, 39, 40, 42, 44, 105–107, 106–107n3  
 Emotional work, 79–86, 91  
 Employment, 8, 9, 11, 32, 37–42, 46, 48–51, 66, 69, 70, 75–77, 79, 91, 94, 97, 98, 100  
 Employment rate, 48, 51, 106  
 European Union (EU), 4–9, 11, 14, 18–20, 32–36, 42, 45, 48, 52–54, 57, 68, 73, 92n2, 103, 104n1, 108  
 Exploitation, 15, 44, 49, 65, 100

**F**

Familialization/familialism, 44, 45  
 Family benefit, 38–40, 50, 51  
 Family friendly, 50, 52, 75  
 Family protection measure, 57, 105  
 Father, 13, 45, 51, 83  
 Femininity, 54, 56, 100  
 Fertility/fertility rate, 12, 33, 35  
 Foster home, 66, 69, 79, 83  
 Fostering, 65–100, 107  
 Foster parent, 21, 22, 66, 68–70, 73–100, 92n2  
 Foster parent advisor, 70, 76, 81, 85–87, 89–91, 93–95, 97, 99  
 Foster parent network/foster parent network agency, 22, 70, 73, 74, 81, 88, 93, 95, 96

**G**

Gender equality, 2, 3, 14, 15, 20, 32, 47, 54, 103, 104n1, 108  
 Gender equality policy, 14–16, 20, 54–56  
 Gender ideology, 15, 16, 19, 20

Gender inequality, 3, 15, 16, 18, 20, 47, 49  
 Gender regime, 1–3, 5, 10–16, 30, 108  
 Grandparent, 40, 41, 45, 46  
 Guardian, 70, 76, 86, 88, 90, 94, 95, 97  
 GYED/GYES, 92

**H**

Heterosexual, 32, 39, 42, 56, 104, 106, 107  
 Hostile worlds, 99, 100

**I**

Illiberal, 4, 5, 15  
 Informal work, 39, 50

**L**

Labor control, 77, 78  
 Labor market, 3, 8, 11, 12, 16, 18, 34, 47, 48, 50, 51, 54, 56, 57, 65, 77, 92, 106–108

**M**

Male breadwinner, 47  
 Materialist welfare state, 36  
 Maternalist welfare state, 36  
 Migrant, 18, 19, 36, 107  
 Migration, 18, 19, 36  
 Minimum wage, 8, 9, 38, 40, 50, 92, 92n2, 100, 106, 106n3  
 Mother, 12, 13, 21, 37, 38, 40, 41, 45–47, 51–53, 55, 78, 83–88, 90, 91, 93, 94, 96, 98–100, 103, 104, 107  
 Motherhood penalty, 21, 47, 51–53  
 Multigenerational, 12, 40, 46, 51

**N**

Nation, 19, 20, 33–35, 37, 46, 103, 104, 105n2  
 Nationalism, 15  
 Neoliberal capitalism, 4, 8, 30, 33  
 Neoliberalism, 15, 41  
 Nursery school, 43, 72

**O**

Orbán regime/government, 8, 16, 35, 42, 56, 57, 68, 105

**P**

Paid work/waged work, 3, 10–14, 32, 38–40, 44–48, 50, 55, 67, 93, 99, 106, 108  
 Parent, 9, 12, 31, 38–41, 46, 53, 78–80, 82–86, 88, 90, 91, 94, 95, 97, 105n2  
 Parental leave, 38, 40, 44–46, 51, 53, 92  
 Part-time, 50, 52, 53, 88  
 Population, 9, 12, 13, 20, 31, 33–36, 38, 41, 51, 57, 86, 106  
 Poverty rate, 57  
 Precarious, 47, 50, 100, 107  
 Professional, 4, 7, 9, 21, 53, 68, 74–77, 85–86, 93, 94, 98  
 Professionalization, 75–78, 95, 100  
 Pronatalism, 3, 10  
 Public works, 9–10, 42, 51

**R**

Refugee, 35, 36  
 Reproductive work, 12, 44  
 Roma, 13, 86, 89, 96, 106

**S**

Sentimentalization, 47, 54–56  
 Smart love, 85  
 Social citizenship, 10, 31, 36–41, 56, 108  
 Social insurance, 31, 37, 38, 100  
 Social policy, 20, 30, 31, 35, 36, 41  
 Social protection, 41, 42  
 Social reproduction, 30, 32  
 State expenditure, 71  
 State socialism, 11, 12, 33, 36, 43, 50  
 Surveillance, 76, 77, 94–97, 100

**T**

Tax credit, 39, 40, 42, 44, 105–107, 106–107n3

**U**

Underclass, 47–51, 57, 66, 76, 91, 100  
 Universal right, 38–39

**W**

Wage gap, 11, 49  
 Wages, 8, 9, 11, 13, 32, 38, 39, 41, 44, 46–57, 66, 75, 76, 89, 91–93, 95, 98, 100, 105–107, 106–107n3  
 Welfare regime, 41  
 Welfare typology, 45  
 Workfare, 3, 41, 42, 50, 107  
 Work hours, 9, 13, 21, 51, 52, 76, 80  
 Working class, 32  
 Work-life balance, 32, 47, 51, 52