

CHANGING FAMILY – CHANGING POLICIES?*

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Abstract: This article presents the findings of a qualitative research project which aimed to map out the political evaluations and the social effects of the changing concept of family and the changing forms of family life. By interviewing political and economic decision-makers we intended to highlight the goals and the motives of the different family policy approaches, the characteristic features of the family concepts reflected by the policy-makers' decisions, as well as the relationship between state family policies and labor market policies on the one hand, and equal treatment expectations concerning both genders, on the other. On the basis of interviews conducted with ordinary people we examined how much people's lives are practically influenced by the family policy measures introduced by the political and the economic decision makers. According to our findings the two different categories of respondents saw specific family policy issues in different ways – however, their interpretations of family policy as a whole were rather convergent. The importance of providing equality of opportunity for men and women, increasing the female employment rate, acknowledging the plurality of family lifestyles, reconciling work and family life – being European expectations as well as conditions of a worthy life – seemed to be overshadowed by the demographic issues of fertility and procreation.

Keywords: family, family life, family policies, labor market policies

The functions of the institution of the family have transformed several times starting from the second half of the twentieth century. Along with the changes in its functions the concept of family has also broadened, that is to say, it is no longer so obvious what we call or can call a family. Many direct and indirect factors contributed to this. Among others, the loss of prestige of the institution of marriage, the growth of permissiveness towards diverging forms of sexual behavior, and the spread of divorce can be listed. Single parent families became more common as a consequence of divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation, and composite family forms are arising through

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various transformations, that is to say, the monoculture of the classic nuclear family was exchanged for a pluralism of diverse family forms. As female employment has gained ground, so the traditional roles of women and men have become debatable, and, – at least in part – lost their function in the division of the tasks of home-making, looking after children, as well as house work, between the genders. Increasing economic independence of women has enabled them to plan their own futures, whilst partner choice was less and less affected by viewpoints of material security that could previously only be achieved together with a man. For all this the feminist – and sexual – liberation movements provided the ideological background. In parallel with women gaining societal independence grave value changes took place: society became ever more individualistic, which often goes together with a preference of shorter-term benefit maximization also at the level of partner relations. Long-term individual planning became a more common phenomenon – for example the accent on individual career goals – alongside the emergence and maintenance of more superficial partner relations (Utasi 2004). Additionally, the emergence of a more universal concept of family contributed to a critical approach to the problems of family life, for example greater attention devoted to the problem of violence within families as well as better understanding of phenomena particular to various ethnic groups that impact on family life.

Changes characterized by the phenomena that broadened the concept of family together with recognized demographic processes – ageing of the population and the decreasing number of children per family, the deferments of marriage and child bearing, the increase in the number of single-person households – affected the situation of families and the transformation of family roles in large measure, and – at least in certain instances – the considerations of family policy.

Our present writing derives from the results of recently conducted research. We wished to investigate the effects of changes in family forms on society, transforming labor divisions of families and their members in society, as well as charting attitudes towards various types of work and the quality of life by means of research based on interviews. Among the main questions there were those referring to the connections between the family and the welfare state and the transformation of gender roles in society. The gender dimension was given special attention in this research because international experience has shown that female reproductive function is not only the basis of female identity within the family, but is also a determining factor of women taking part in education and in the field of work, as well as fulfilling their roles in society in general.

In the course of this work we were therefore on the one hand seeking the answer to the question of how the changes in family forms and family life are challenging Hungarian decision makers: from the view of political and economic decision makers we wished to analyze the goals and reasons of family policy considerations based on various premises, the features of the concepts of family behind these decisions, as well as family policy as part of social policy and employment policy as a part of economic policy, with special attention to the question of legal equality between the sexes. On the other hand, from the side of families, we examined what the family and family life

mean to whom, and to what extent political and economic measures influence these, as well as the lives of family members in practice.

While the rhetorical talk referring to “the family” has consistently been full of positive values for decades, both in the concepts of politicians and experts, the statistical-demographic data on the real lives of families have in the mean time continued to show trends which various authorities have long since interpreted as symptoms of crisis (Pongrácz 1999; Pongrácz and S. Molnár 1998). The continuously decreasing number of children per family, the falling number of marriages contracted, cohabitation without marriage becoming a norm, the continuously high divorce trends, the increasing trends of single parent families as well as the rising trend of children born to unmarried parents all indicate that at the level of facts the concept of family is in transformation. Therefore, when we hear from the makers of scientific opinion (Pongrácz and S. Molnár 1997; S. Molnár 1999; S. Molnár 2001) and the “family-centric” rhetoric from various governments sounding off how the Hungarian population is so especially pro-family, it is hard to decide precisely which kinds and forms of family the population is so much in favor of.

Demographic projections show a view of the future of society in which the ratio of earners to dependents deteriorates to the extent that it can endanger the economic equilibrium. The reality of an ageing population which is also characteristic for our country gives governments of every color the urge to influence the expected tendencies. All this is overshadowed by the set of problems of societal inequality and ethnic-cultural dimensions within the Hungarian population, which are in the first place reflected in the diverging productivity of the various societal groups (Hablicsek 2000). Family-policy measures and conceptions which transcend political rhetoric should therefore go beyond crisis management induced by the use of the – apparently static and very popular – normative concept of family and starting from the pluralism of family forms try to establish concord between the various real needs of families and the political measures aimed at families.

THE EFFECT OF THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF FAMILY ROLES

Changes in the position and opportunities of women in society have also played a very important role in the transformation of family forms and roles in Hungary. The state-socialist system was characterized by a “lopsided” form of female emancipation: “In work, education, culture, and even in politics women became (almost) equal, and could experience equality (almost). However, in private life, in partner relationships, within the family, and furthermore generally in interpersonal relations (also in public life) the traditional configuration of the roles of men and women remained largely unchanged” (Ferge 1999: 17). The socialist modernization as well as life in the apartment blocks of the cities and the use of nurseries, play schools and other free family-assisting state provisions forced the dual earning nuclear family model onto women – and onto men. At the same time there was a kind of nostalgic wish for a return to the era characterized by life within traditional family frames in which the husband

maintains the family and the wife can be occupied with home making and bringing up the children (Neményi 1996). The first government after the system change started to idealize the single earner traditional family model anew, yet the economic transformations obviously played a larger role in the revival of this family model than any political preferences.

Compared with the 1980s the number of Hungarian women who thought that a mother – particularly when her children are small – should be at home grew by the mid 1990s (Tóth 1995). To understand exactly what caused this change in the attitudes of women, several factors have to be taken into consideration: besides the effects of new, or rather, renewed ideologies and traditional approaches the retreat of the state from welfare provisions can be mentioned as a particularly important aspect (Ferge 1999), which could also have contributed to the weakened “attraction” of women’s employment.

The central question of family-policy measures in Western- and Northern Europe is how to help child raising parents (both single parents and couples) reconcile their work with their family lives. In these professional and political discourses the topic of female employment appears as the most important factor influencing family life. The rising level of women’s qualifications and their professional ambitions has become more and more determining factors in Hungary as well (Nagy 1999; Konz 2005). Besides the requirements and expectations of the European Union, the ever broader career possibilities of women are explained by the fact that while the proportion of women employees on the labour market fell compared with the previous era, economically active Hungarian women are ever better qualified. As a result of this the number of women in leading positions is growing and their earnings are catching up with those of men, though in 2002 in Hungary the average income of women was still only 87% of that of men (Bukodi et al. 2004: 116).

In connection with the rise of the level women’s qualifications ever more women conceive of taking up work, beyond the practical necessity of earning money, as an option of self-realization, so for them the conservative governments’ ideological messages – of the ‘home building instead of paid work’ type – do not mean too much. Demographic data appear to support the thesis that women want work and family – but first work and then family. Deliberate childlessness is a relatively new phenomenon in Hungary, which can reflect both the strengthening tendencies of individualization as well as the perceived and actual difficulties of the reconciliation of family life and employment. Among the factors inhibiting any increase in the number of children born is the deteriorating material situation, which, according to previous research results, can affect the value in real terms of family support and its selective character (Vukovich and Harcsa 2002). Between 1991 and 2001 the number of households with children living in poverty grew the most in proportion to the total population – particularly those bringing up at least three children –, while single-person households and couples without children enjoyed the highest levels of income (Gábos and Szivós 2002).

The most common family form has remained the married couple with two children. However, between 1980 and 2001 the married proportion of the population older than 15 decreased from 67% to 52% (in the case of men from 71% to 56%, in that of women

from 64% to 50%), while at the same time the ratio of divorcees almost doubled, and the number of those living alone rose from 18% to 28% (single men from 22% to 33%, single women from 14% to 22%, KSH 2001: 13). In 2001 30% of children were born out of wedlock (Vukovich 2002: 140). After reviewing all these changes, it can be said that while family life and its connection with politics changed in large measure since the system change, considering the previously generous state support and the measure of direct state control, a more rigorously realistic family policy did not emerge in the light of the manifold family forms that are found in contemporary Hungarian society.

OBJECTIVES AND MOTIVES OF FAMILY POLICY THINKING EXPRESSED BY DECISION MAKERS

In the first phase of our empirical research we sought to answer the question of what challenges are faced by Hungarian decision makers due to changes in family forms and family life. Thirty selected interviewees, politicians, economic actors, and leaders of NGOs, whom we chose because their activities were connected to the research topic, that is, family in relation to family policy. The three categories of interviewees were in roughly equal proportion. The majority of politicians were (government and opposition) parliamentary representatives, local government or ministerial officials (secretaries of state, heads of department). Economic life was represented by trade union leaders and the human resources managers of companies, while mainly leaders of women's organizations spoke on behalf of NGOs.

The first round of questions referred to *the legitimacy of family policy*. In this context the majority of respondents were of the opinion that the government has only a limited right to intervene in family life in response to observed changes. Governmental and coalition political actors alike expressed themselves carefully: they stated that they only wished to influence the dynamic of family structure in such a way that the support of families with children is strengthened. However, NGO and trade union representatives typically criticized the lack of practical solutions in the theoretically always very child-friendly conceptions of governments of all colors, as they pointed to the often poorly considered coherence of family policy:

It is good when everyone can have the number of children to suit their feelings and their welfare. There are those for whom one child is a lot, they should not be forced to have more. By the same token we think it fully justified that if someone thinks that for them six children is not enough – let them have more. The state should not place citizens into conflicting interest between the number of children they wish and material considerations. (A national family organization representative)

In the first place it is a very great problem that the Hungarian nation is dying out. Therefore the government has to do something. But this is very complex. Social and economic development is needed so that families can plan with peace of mind. And this has to be left to the families. Because, banning

abortion, which has happened, is not a solution. (A trade union women's branch representative)

However, it was clear that representatives of the socialist-liberal coalition in power at the time of this research would rather stress the importance of equal opportunities, while representatives of the opposition – in line with the central political aim of the previous conservative government – kept those values in focus which strengthen the bourgeois middle strata:

A very direct norms-setting government does not take into account of the kind of pluralism which is typical of family forms today. It prefers marriage and several children for those in the middle class and it does not simply promote an ideal or a norm with words, but the consequences are very tangible: its reward can be counted in money. (A women's organization representative)

The desirable thing is when the state, or the government, only creates the necessary preconditions to ensure freedom of choice. It has no other obligation. [...] Only very small movements and tremors can be started through family political measures. However, the main tendency cannot really be reversed or influenced with these means – neither with material family support, nor for example with the regulation of abortion. The willingness to have children depends in the first place on (people's) positive or negative expectations of the future. (A coalition party liberal politician)

The background is that can help: what are the circumstances like in which you have your child? Whether there is for example a nursery and a play school which would do. Whether your workplace provides this for you free of charge, or whether it costs so much that you wonder if you should go back to work or stay at home. But if a lot of women see this choice of either family or career, and of course, only women have this dilemma, then it will probably really badly affect the tendency of the number of children born. There is data about how this negative trend was reversed, for example, in the Scandinavian countries, where there are nurseries, and play schools, where equal rights for women have really happened and where women are also present in large numbers in public life. The roles of men also changed there, the roles of the sexes in society were equalized. (A ministerial official)

In the past one and a half decades the various government measures have, in part purposefully, in part as a result of measures in other areas, *intervened* in the lives of families: this intervention is judged differently by government and opposition actors. The first socialist-liberal government with their economic stabilization program reduced the support of families with children, while the following conservative government – self-professedly strongly family-party – extended the support system. At the same time, this later extension meant a transformation of the system which went hand in hand with an increase in inequality. At the time our interviews were conducted the new kinds of family-policy conceptions of the socialist-liberal government in

power at the time of this research were only at the rhetorical stage and thus the respondents expressed themselves in the light of the above dichotomy:

The previous government strengthened an exceedingly Catholic religious family concept and sanctified it by law – without any signs of safeguards for the right to self-determination of the individual. On the other hand, we are saying that the family is important – but neither do we represent the developed individualized maximum permissiveness viewpoint. We are saying that first the extant real Hungarian family structure should be strengthened. We do not equate family with marriage, but include every possible variation of living together. Starting with single-parent families, every type should be supported. (A government coalition socialist politician)

Economic – primarily trade union – actors, on the other hand were of the opinion that the low level of active people and significant unemployment, as well as low incomes keep employees down and thus family considerations are of necessity forced into the background. This defenselessness was also felt by those active in the commercial sector:

In the first place, the work has to be done. It is not done to complain about this like that. I am quite certain that there is nobody, who has time to live after ten hours of work and eight hours of sleep. Because this is inhuman. But I am not angry with this company. This is a capitalist firm, and these are the conditions. Those who want to be here have to say yes to this. I understand that. But I would not call it family friendly. (A female manager in the commercial sector)

The second important question area of the interviews refers to *whether the state can prefer certain forms of family*. The central question of the debate turned out to be whether the government is entitled to differentiate between children on the basis of the “worth” of their parents or according to their way of living together. In the course of their elucidation of the diverging viewpoints on this almost all respondents referred to the demographic effects of family support, the stimulating, or on the contrary hindering, consequences on employment uptake, studiously mentioning the relation between the Roma population and having children.

Several of our interviewees expressed criticism of how the previous government preferred middle class families with multiple children to families of the poorer strata, as well as of the way that it fiscally favored those living in married families as opposed to statistically less enduring single-parent and unmarried families. Although the politicians of the present government coalition appeared more open to alternatives to marriage, the political will to support such family forms has not yet been expressed.

They [the previous government] gave those living in marriage with three and more children exceedingly preferential treatment, even those with above average incomes. They did not pay any attention to unmarried couples, even though some 30 out 100 children are born to unmarried parents. [...] Hungarian political opinion was also clearly entirely judgemental and intolerant of homosexuals. (A government coalition socialist politician)

The examination of the conceptions, goals, and justifications of family models brought up serious contradictions – not only among politicians of various streams, but also between politicians and societal actors – in the judgement of the necessity of treating the selected family model as the norm. A typical opposition political opinion contrasted the ideal family model to be preferred by government with “bad examples” from society:

I am convinced that the government is entitled to intervene when it chooses to come out in support of certain life styles and kinds of family structures. [...] In Hungary, too, the birth of the first child is being delayed mainly among those with higher education, while the birth of the first child is much more probable in married households and is becoming uncertain in unmarried relationships. If the government comes out unambiguously, also in its communication, that it regards the family as inviolable, and basically regards the married household as the kind that is positive from the point of view of the future of the nation, then it can orientate society to a certain extent [...] When it stands centrally in the news media that we must love the extraordinary, whether homosexual couples should get widow(er) pension provisions, then that is a very bad message to society. If we are not talking about the joy that raising two or three or even more children can bring, about what beauty is in marriage in itself and what a thing of responsibility it is at the same time, if we do not prefer that, but always the individual, then that sends a signal to society that we can live that way, too... (A conservative politician)

The opinion of societal actors clashed on several points with the above:

It is always terrible when the state interferes and when it does so from population-political considerations and connects this with bad taste nationalism. The state can, however, in order for the population to be able to work after all, intervene in such an indirect way as to raise the level of education for all strata. Thus, even though there may be fewer people, they will be better qualified and it will not happen that 10–20% will drop out of the labor market as happens in Hungary today. (A women’s organization representative)

Welfare states around the world are not really going in the direction of stimulating birth rates in their populations. We should also get to a level, that in our relatively small country, there should be acceptable conditions of life, and I am certain that once that is the case, the number of children will grow. [...] Let women decide about their own conditions, about their own bodies and let them decide for themselves in which phase of their lives how many children they wish – let no one force this. [...] We are also acknowledging that women who live alone can also endeavor to bring up children. (A national women’s organization representative)

The questions of *equal opportunities* for men and women, the treatment of women as second rate employees, and the possibility of the reconciliation of family and career were deemed important problems by all three types of our respondents:

There are some housewives who rate their chances in the labor market so low that they will never be able to get a job. They live on the income of their husbands or from social provisions and such a measure of dependence has arisen that would have been unthinkable under state socialism. (A women's organization representative)

After the system change, when the economic circumstances also changed, a woman could have said that she does not want to live in the way her mother lived, and rather stay at home, because she could then bring up her children without stress, which on many occasions was in fact the ideological disguise of a given economic necessity. [...] Society or the government should scratch their heads about how the relation between the sexes can be transformed, and for example, place child care under state or employer responsibility, or a lot of things that would ease the situation of men and women. (A ministerial official)

The stimulation of part-time, and other kinds of atypical employment of women – for the time being typically not yet of men – often come up as possible solutions to the harmonization of work and family life. However, in the present situation of the Hungarian labor market the possible advantages for employees of part-time employment are less marked than the often experienced disadvantages:

These days the individuals cannot say that they would like to work part-time, but the employer says I will employ to such and such an extent. [...] unfortunately people are glad already if they have work at all, mainly in the countryside, where there is no chance of work, and it is all the same that it is for starvation wages, but at least if there is work and they get something for it then unfortunately they are not going to stand up and say that they are being discriminated, because they are glad that there is work at all. (A trade union women's section representative)

Regarding those in full employment, particularly in the case of women working in the private sector, the virtually unsolvable problem was expressed of how to reconcile their roles as women or mothers within the family, and their performance at work as well as their expectations of promotion:

If you look at the top management, then you won't find any women. Below there are women, there are women at the level of middle management. [...] Obviously women drop out to a large extent, because they have to manage their family lives. When a woman has a child that causes an enormous break if she is by herself, or if she is not enjoying such family support that her husband can run the household, then she must choose between work and family. (A human resource manager, commercial sector)

It is always a very difficult decision to have children, and I think that they do decide to have children, but at a high price. I know of cases where the break is very serious [...] The firm is now in such a merciless pace of change, that those who stay at home for one or two years can only get back with great difficulty. [...] I know that the wives of all the men with whom I am in the management team will have already taken the children home, cooked dinner, and helped with the children's homework. (A woman, middle management, commercial sector)

According to our respondents there are hardly any family friendly workplaces with flexible working hours so desirable in running a family. Atypical forms of employment, – for example, teleworking which can be done from home – are not spreading, although there would be demand for it. There are not really any examples of family friendly workplaces anywhere.

This practice is not really spreading. You won't find it in Hungary. It is really a great problem that there is for example no category of teleworking in employment legislation. Yet teleworking would be such a solution that would allow work to be done at home with completely flexible working hours. (A human resource manager, commercial sector)

When we ask the women what they would like, they say that they would like to be able to choose a job leaving more time to deal with family problems. We are speaking precisely about the evergreen issue of atypical work, that is, part-time work, flexi-working, teleworking, in which people can divide their time in such a way that they have more time to spend with their family. The other question depends on the individual: how people solve it with their partner and to what extent men will take on flexible working hours. (A business development NGO representative)

Through the creation in the past few years of the frames of a developed equal opportunities infrastructure – that is, specifically state institutions and legislation dealing with the advancement of equal opportunities – the questions of *harmonizing work and family life* could get into the ken of governments of both colors:

Where a government can intervene, moreover, I think it is in part the responsibility of the state that it ensures for parents, women as well as men, that they can reconcile their work with their family life. Let the systems be family friendly and allow neither women, nor men to be forced into working for twelve hours, nor to do compulsory overtime, nor to have to lie so they can stay at home with a sick child; that it can be natural for a man or woman to go and collect the child because it is half past four. Men and women should be able to take part-time work so they can be with their families. (A ministry official)

Our respondents, active in NGOs stressed the importance of the development of a state institution system to advance equal opportunity:

The question of women taking up employment is extraordinarily important. Along with the system change (from state socialism) there was an explosion of women being kicked out of work. And it is not only being penniless and all that goes with that, but it is also the awareness of their own responsibilities that is torturing this group. It is therefore important, that the government be open to the question of getting back to work, particularly in the period after having had children. (A national women's organization representative)

However, from the side of the state, precisely the importance of the activities of non-governmental organizations was emphasized:

The NGO movement was very important here. They can pioneer, which a small ministerial bureaucrat who fears for his or her position would not dare, and a politician even less. And the societal actors are not afraid from this point of view, because they are independent. And precisely because of this they are indispensable, mainly in problematic questions. The women's question is problematic because it can disturb the basic power structure. (A ministry official)

The majority of our interviewees are of the opinion that the issues relating to the establishment of equal opportunities have had attention mainly in theory. For the time being it seems that the related questions are being expressed politically, whilst practical measures to deal with the problem are being awaited:

When we stop to think that there is, at any rate, an equal opportunities act, that is, it is developing, and we are tackling violence within the family, that is without doubt movement – not yet in reality, but at the level of political intention. An amount of unresolved conflict is building up on the political stage, which sooner or later can no longer be solved by them saying that this is not politics. (A leading socialist politician)

The topic of equal opportunities arose in all three categories of those questioned and the *ethnic dimension* that is to say in the Hungarian context, the question of support for Gypsy families appeared more important than regional differences or the nuances between the various societal strata:

No one applauds because yet a third child is born to a Gypsy family. So let lots of children be born, just not there. This is the example of society's two-faced value system. (A ministerial official)

There is a strong ethnic watershed in the matter of the Roma. Some family policy measures just about punish Roma people for having children. But obviously there are non-Roma poor people as well: rural areas, poor infrastructure, low quality education... (A women's organization representative)

Most of our interviewees referred to Roma people in the context of the situation of their families – unschooled, disadvantageous regional location, burdened with unemployment, many children – and in that the policy of governments of any color

ought to avoid further marginalization of these families. The representatives of NGOs were of the view that they could only have a limited impact on this problem with their own activities and that they could only exercise modest influence on the government:

Before the system change the view spread that those who have a lot of children are Gypsies. This hurts everyone. Prejudice can be heard from within our membership here and there. We are in regular contact with Gypsy organizations at the level of grants. But until they put their house in order one cannot move: as long as the Gypsy elite looks after its own first – while from the part of Hungarian society not integration, but assimilation is required. [...] (A national family organization representative)

On the basis of the opinions of our respondents we reached the conclusion that some governmental family policy can be considered to have the hidden goal to support those social groups whose members' schooling, share of employment in society, and their capacity to look after themselves provide them with good chances to maintain an economic balance as opposed to those families which can be expected to remain dependent on social provisions. The question of whether focusing on the family is in itself of any value in the eyes of public opinion, the population, professionals and political decision makers, that is, whether some kind of selection, or double standard in the evaluation of certain kinds of family forms and family lifestyles within the compass of governmental family politics makes any sense in practice therefore seems to warrant further investigation.

In the course of the interviews we raised the question whether *joining the European Union* would be of influence on Hungarian family politics. It occurred several times, that European common directives were referred to in the interviews, but government actors, opposition politicians and the economic and NGO actors all regarded the directives as not really being in the forefront or that they saw any steps taken toward equality as cosmetic:

A few things are coming because of equal opportunity: for example, the return into employment of mothers on child support, or their retraining – this is naturally only a very small slice of the equal opportunities project –, a tough nut consumed with grinding teeth, if you will, but at least they are doing something. Probably precisely so much as will not change the approach, neither will the nature of the market economy change – only to the extent that they can wave something at the EU. And they don't mind if it does not succeed. (A women's organization representative)

The European Union was referred to several times in connection with legislation harmonization, with particular consideration for the Equal Treatment and Promotion of Equal Opportunities Act (CXXV) of 2003. However, some considered the act rather as a gesture meant for the European Union rather than a practical advance:

Our view is that unfortunately the law is being made for the European Union, precisely so that it can be crossed off the list like many other things. And how things will happen in the practical realization? That's the question, a large question. (A trade union women's branch representative)

At the same time, the positives of the Equal Opportunities Act were also mentioned:

It is very easy to mark off EU expectations with superficial national reports, with all-embracing analysis of the situation of women and to say that there is a law so that's all right then... But I think that EU obligations do not affect politics directly. [...] In itself this law will not be a miracle cure, but the current situation is improved by one step particularly by the article that the burden of proof will fall on the employer who is taken to task over some kind of discrimination. That the law reversed this situation does not signify a wonder, but it will help in media analysis. Such court cases can be started with more hope for success now, leading to greater media attention and perhaps there will be an effect on public opinion from this. (A leading socialist politician)

In addition certain European Union programmes and financial grants were mentioned, which could positively stimulate the Hungarian political debate of certain – European Union priority – issues:

It could have an effect, if societal actors and non-societal actors are clever in using European Union grants. Because there (in the EU) the women's angle, the gender angle is a very basic thing. There is for example, a program called EQUAL to establish equal opportunities in the labor market. [...] Millions of Euros are at stake, and where there is money it could very much influence the approach here: the way of thinking of employers and local government, too. (A ministerial official)

At the same time, representatives of trade unions and NGOs strongly criticized the treatment of the question of equal opportunities for men and women as part of general equal opportunity policy by governments of all colors, that is, the governments did not, and do not wish to stress the extreme importance of women's policy and equal opportunities for women. As an example of this the Equal Opportunities Act passed in 2003 was referred to, within which, according to several of our interviewees, the mutually dissimilar grievances of the women's question, the disabled, and the Roma are dealt with in the same manner and not at all efficiently.

Here [in Hungary] a law appeared, like a lightning bolt under a clear sky, and that is an all-encompassing law. We say that we don't think it suitable, because this law deals with very much indeed, but unfortunately nothing will come of it properly. (A trade union women's branch representative)

Finally we have to mention a question about which our respondents of all three categories were of similar opinion, namely that criticism could be found in the interviews that the results of scientific *research* are not properly taken into account by politics and if at all, then at the most in a way that governments of every color use expert opinions to justify themselves. At the same time, however – particularly in NGO circles – the lack, and future necessity of impact reports about the effects on

families of political decisions, whether aimed directly at families or indirectly affecting families was spoken about.

FAMILY LIFE IN PRACTICE

In the second phase of our empirical investigation we turned our attention to families and sought answers to the questions of what the family and family life mean to whom, and what is their significance – as well as family members' lives in practice – and to what extent these are affected by the political and economic decisions relating to families. Although generalized conclusions can hardly be drawn from our interviews, the application of a semi-structured interview method concentrating on “typical cases” yielded a dataset on the basis of which we were able to construct a view about how various political measures and messages influenced the family life of persons fulfilling diverse roles in families in differing circumstances. We put together the sample of eighty persons in such a way, that where possible, the interviewees would proportionally cover the possible types of family found in Hungarian society. We took domicile, family state, age, education and socio-economic status into account when selecting the interviewees, as well as making sure that the bulk of the roughly equal number of women and men respondents had at least one or two decades of their own family experience.¹

From our aspiration to present (family) diversity it followed that we did not consider it possible to divide the sample according to the various aspects. At the same time three aspects could be brought forward, which generally appeared to be of characteristic effect during the processing of our data: the approach and reference to the system changes; the aspects of age (somewhat related to the former); as well as the sex of the respondents:

(i) There were system changes in Hungary in 1990 which left virtually no circumstances unchanged that could be of influence on the lives of our interviewees. Economically, the most significant changes were marked by the collapse of socialist heavy industry, privatization, a flood of foreign capital, the appearance of multinational companies, and the startups of small and medium-sized firms. As a consequence of all these, on the one hand, unemployment appeared, – affecting almost every family, judging by our interviews –, which was of a huge scale and unknown to previous generations. On the other hand, people in the different strata of society were faced, admittedly to differing extents, with the fact that their previous knowledge had lost value and new kinds of skills and knowledge had become essential in a country switching to a market economy. Under democratic circumstances well known laws and regulations – among these in our case particularly those which affect families directly, that is, the childcare system, the family support system, the distribution of housing and the housing support system and social policies tied to the workplace – in part ceased

1 Close to 55% of our sample were in the 40–60 years age group, 30% 25–40 years, while 15% were older than 60 years. 30% of our respondents were living in Budapest, 15% in larger towns and cities, 45% in small towns, while 10% were living in villages. Self-professed socio-economic status placed 24% in the higher stratum, 50% in the medium, while 26% were in the lower category.

and were in part transformed. Citizens also had to get used to the fact that subsequent governments introduced major changes in these areas, partly in order to deal with the economic crisis accompanying transition and partly due to their various ideological conceptions. Therefore the year of the system changes marked a sharp divide in life histories. 1990 became an important reference point: in the histories almost everything was expressed in relation to it: “before and after”.

(ii) Naturally, members of the different generations – younger and older people – experienced the system changes in different ways. The older ones, whose years of schooling, becoming adult, taking employment, choosing a partner, starting a family, raising of children, in whole, or in part, took place in the state-socialist decades, assess their own situation, or that of their immediate environment and the members of their family against the conditions they had themselves experienced. This did not mean that those who entered adulthood in the new system, who knew the situation prior to 1990 mainly from their youth and through their parents, were not relating the present situation to the recent past. Nevertheless, the view modes differed since the comparison has different perspectives reflecting age and the phase of life as a member of a family.

(iii) We would elevate a third aspect besides system changes and age, namely that of sex. Regardless of whether we are speaking of older or younger people, almost across our entire sample the life paths of men and women differ significantly and in large measure from each other. It was true for our respondents, both those living in traditional families, and those who live in other alternative forms of family, that at every turn the differences due to their roles as men or women were decisive on all areas determining their lives, that is career choice, taking employment, child rearing, in the field of reconciling family and work, as well as in the attention to contact between generations.

In summary it can be said that our interviewees (who made statements about their own family lives) in contrast to the previously examined opinion of political, economic, and societal actors, showed much less interest in the family-policy considerations, goals, and reasons of governments of every color, and much rather expressed *practical criticism* in connection with how the state could help its citizens in the solution of the problems of family life. Our respondents rejected almost *en bloc* the notion that *politics* should *interfere* in family life: here however, political statements of parties diverged from the judgement of the need of the role of the state independent from party politics. Several questioned the validity of the proposition that the family should become a more efficient political entity:

Is there any need for the family to become a more efficient political entity? It would be good if they could live in peace and harmony and that they should have work, but I think the family should not become a political factor. [...] I wondered about what say families could have: about getting more allowances. But they get as much as is available anyway. (A woman aged 52)

We cannot hope for improvement in the situation of the family from politics and the political organizations and their manipulations of interests, but rather from our own efforts. (A man aged 45)

According to most of our respondents family-policy issues only gain attention during election campaigns because “everyone wants to bribe families so that they will vote for them” (man aged 54). Party-political messages focusing on family issues did not gain favorable acceptance in general, presumably mainly in the circles of those who did not wish, or could not comply with the preferences expressed in those messages:

Politicians have no right to interfere: in other words, no one should say that I should bear three children or four, because that is the target. Whose target? Perhaps that is his goal, but allow me that I should like to have ten children, or two, or none at all. Everyone can say what they want, while families do what suits them. (A woman aged 62)

I think there should be a little unruliness and politics should not strive to wear down the unruliness in people. (A man aged 42)

Many were of the opinion that NGOs are more suited to represent the interests of families than politicians, more precisely certain forms of families with their own particular kinds of problems: in their view these well founded, – in many cases based on personal experience – grass roots initiatives are not yet disconnected from the people so they can deal with the problems more practically.

Nevertheless, for the time being the ability of NGOs to realize these interests seemed to be limited:

Perhaps NGOs yield a good chance of political influence. There are already examples of this: for instance the organization of large families. The problem is quite simply that these organizations do not really have any tradition here (in Hungary), so that it will take a great deal of time for them to be able to assert their influence in politics efficiently. (A woman aged 51)

State intervention is obviously not completely independent of party politics and some – mainly middle aged or older – respondents made the link with the danger of state paternalism:

A list can be made of how bad state paternalism is: see communism. Even more so if it goes together with religion: for example there is Islam, as I am not only speaking about Hungary. ... The care of the state? I can take care of you by hitting you over the head if you don't do what I want. That's what I think about the state. (A man aged 53)

At the same time, there was broad agreement about the *importance of state intervention* “there where there is trouble – at other times families should be left in peace” (man aged 49). Such practical intervention on the beaten track means *violence within the family* or the collection of neglected maintenance payments:

There is such where they don't intervene, for example a lot of battered people live their lives, and they don't interfere, because there are laws that they cannot – in a lot of places they interfere where they shouldn't. (A man aged 35)

The state has the right to intervene in violent cases – and they should, because violence within the family really happens... and that in cases of divorce the men really do pay the maintenance... (A woman aged 53)

There were also critical concerns about *the lack of public information* on the frequently changeable family policy measures. And those who are not clear about their rights and have no knowledge of the regulations cannot exercise their rights to the provisions offered by the state:

Time and again new regulations come and they just say that that is how it is now and you don't know anything. These things are not clear. Only a certain stratum knows. The majority of people don't know, they are ill informed. (A woman aged 49)

Couples starting a new family are in a very hard situation, even more so if there is no help from parents or relatives, then it is very difficult for them to start their lives. It is also difficult that those who don't know the laws, for example, the regulations, can't get to the stage where they can claim their support. (A man aged 35)

A number of responses found connection between fleeting family policy and the uncertainty brought about by changes in the broader socio-economic environment. In this context the role of the state was primarily conceived as a *moderator of social insecurity*. To this end many mentioned the reduction of unemployment, creation of workplaces, as well as the development of the necessary capacities to re-socialize the post-system change market economy as means to alleviate social insecurity:

We grew up in the old communist system; we were not prepared for having to take care of everything for ourselves. This is why the changes were very hard on us: they (state socialism) directed continuously, you didn't have to organize your own work – so with an adult head you lived through these changes and we obviously became unemployed, because we didn't know, suddenly, what to do. Years passed by the time we realized and learned to try to keep pace with the times and try to improve the lot of the family. (A woman aged 53)

Under state socialism everyone had work, so therefore people lived in much greater material security. Not now. These days you can lose your job anytime. I think having children has something to do with material security, or rather the lack of it. (A woman aged 52)

That is not the role of the state. It is the duty of the state to ensure the proper working of the village. But it is the role of the individual to do everything (in her/his power) to maintain her/his family. [...] It is not good that there isn't

any work. I think this is the greatest problem. If a father has no workplace it is a terrible problem in my opinion. (A village woman aged 58)

Whilst our respondents regarded subsistence assistance as a kind of indirect, but very important measure of family policy, they spoke very negatively about various *socio-political benefit payments*. The opinion of the majority can be expressed thus: let the state give proper work, pay, and pension rather than dole:

People obviously do not want to raise children on the dole and on benefits, but they would rather live on their earned income. (A woman aged 32)

I think the state, as it is now, should retreat from this. But this can be done only under one condition: if people get a wage on which they can live and save some, and the older people get a pension on which they can also live properly. (A man aged 51)

... the state has nothing to do with family life. The only thing would be that it should ensure good pay for people; that work is paid for. [...] I don't agree with having to decide how many children I have on the basis of child support provided by the state. That is my private affair. Also if I say that I cannot have more children under the present circumstances. So don't let the state come and say that it will give money if I give birth. I find that unacceptable. And people have children so that it will fit into their budget. If I definitely want to have a lot of children, then I will do so knowing the consequences. (A woman aged 38)

On the one hand, there is a tendency to ward off the direct connection between the state – that is, politics – and personal decisions, a phenomenon mentioned in the results of previous research (Neményi 2003); on the other hand there is dissatisfaction with the amounts of benefit and how they are shared out. Some criticism of the theory and practice of the distribution of benefit was colored by mention of “the minority who give birth because of child support” (Hungarian Roma), which can be related to the also well documented approach “In Hungary not those breed who ought to” (Neményi 2003):

The way I see it is that in very many cases the so-called minority claims these benefits, and I claim household support as well so that is not just they who get it. Though there are a lot of people who would be entitled to it, but they don't bother to claim. However, the minority who has x number of children, I think that is why they have children, so they can claim family support and the like. I don't think those get it that ought to, but those who perhaps only have children so that they can claim. (A woman aged 29)

Amounts awarded under family policy provisions were considered unrealistically low by almost all involved. There were those who compared the tight material support with denigrating alms or charity:

These alms are not for me, I've had it with them. It looks like it, that in this country good social policy is when they try to patch things up with dole. I

say, that it would be much better, both for these families and for me, too, if there was work for me. If I could work in one place, for 15–20 years, because it is important in family life that the wage earner knows that (s)he has a sure job. In this country there is nothing that is certain, if we are speaking of things that go with children. (A man aged 27)

The statements of interviewees markedly showed that *material interests* have but a limited influence on decisions in connection with family life. Almost everyone rejected the notion that material considerations play a general role in the choice of whether to have children. At the same time, several mentioned in connection with the births of their own children that while for the first one or two this did not in general play a role, material concerns did arise in connection with the birth of more children – at least at the level of fear of a more difficult subsistence:

We don't really think it through, that when a child comes, it has to be maintained, and all the extra (expenses) that go with that. [...] We planned the second to go with the first. The third just slipped in, that was an accidental baby. My wife and I both knew that it would be hard to support two and bring them up and that this is just the limit when they can still be healthily maintained ... (A man aged 27)

I think that these days in Hungary two children can be raised and brought up properly, – though serious sacrifices have to be made for this, because everything costs a terrible lot of money. (A man aged 49)

In my young dreams a fourth child was also planned, but I decided after the third, that my mental strength and patience was just enough for that. I didn't feel well at home. After [the youngest] was one and a half I continuously planned to go out to work, I wanted to go among people and do assignments. But it is possible that there was a material attraction as well, because we were living on tight purse strings. (A woman aged 45)

Our respondents were quite clear about the *material sacrifices* that go with having children, which the majority accepted as a natural thing that goes with that. The financial responsibility of bringing up children forced the satisfaction of personal needs into the background, mainly among the older generation:

I cannot stand it when the young women are complaining about how expensive shoes are and how much everything costs [...] I knew I gave birth for myself, not for the state. I am disgusted about them holding their hand out for (state) assistance and everything. [...] we were still of the generation who took care of the children, gave them a trade, and our parents and grandparents, too. (A woman aged 58)

In contrast with this, several spoke of how in the circles of the younger generation a reduction of the standard of life already achieved, or personal needs forced into the background appear to be more serious impediments in connection with having children:

I have friends who dare not give birth, because they are certain they wouldn't get their workplace back. However, they have already established a standard of life with their fellas, which the future father alone would not be able to keep up. (A woman aged 34)

The lack of money can hold people back from having children. Though, at the moment I often meet women who hesitate because of other things. The single lifestyle has really gotten around, so they don't want to commit themselves. (A woman aged 32)

The spread of the “single lifestyle” mentioned by one of our interviewees – which in the words of Ágnes Utasi is “the lifestyle of single young people without permanent relationship, competitive in the labor market, active at work and leisure, with a good standard of living” (2004: 15) – can be connected to increasing individualism and the changes in value preferences that go with that, while at the same time in the context of the examination of forms of family life it can be seen as a symptom that the dilemma “family or career” can not be solved by the – not so – young people looking to establish a family.

The possibility of *harmonising family life and work* – or, in certain cases, rather the impossibility – appeared as one of the most important aspects in our research. Our respondents, almost without exception referred to this topic, yet for the vast majority of both female and male respondents this appeared as a particularly female problem, which must be faced mainly, but not exclusively by women.

We analyzed the answers referring to women with the help of the types of female work and family life preferences used by Catherine Hakim (2000). The three categories are the adaptive, the work-centered, and the home-centered woman. For the *adaptive woman* work and family are both important and neither is given priority in life all the time. Most women can be placed into this category. Occupations that foster the reconciliation of work and family life – for example, careers in teaching – are particularly attractive to these women. A large proportion of women who take on part-time work after having children are in this group. We found instances of the adaptive woman's preference type among our Hungarian respondents:

I am in a very ideal situation, because I am teaching and so there are the summer holidays for me. As I am teaching it meant four, five, or six hours when that was that at school, so when I went home I could occupy myself with the children. For me my children are very important, and the family and the children are first, followed by the profession, so that is the order. (A woman aged 52)

Work-centered women are in a minority, despite the fact that there have been more women with tertiary qualifications in the past few decades, and more women have been working in higher management as well. The work-centered person – men as well as women – like to take part in competitions in public life: career building, sport, political and cultural activities. Their family lives are subordinate to their work and many – even among those who are married – will have no children. They regard gaining qualifications as an investment toward their careers, rather than a safeguard for

their living as is characteristic for the adaptive group. The majority of men can be placed in the work-centered group, while only about 20% of women are in this category. Among our female Hungarian respondents we found no preferences characteristic of work-centered women, but there are two opinions of men that fit:

Often such sacrifices have to be made, mainly this can be seen with women: besides work and bringing up the children there is study and cultural development – not to speak of leisure, I haven't spoken of that yet. The family is quite a miserable thing in truth – as a creative person I wouldn't recommend it, because it detracts from everything. (A man aged 53)

The way I find it is that the average Hungarian man is rather there at work, will rather invest in the workplace than the family. If the average thirty-something man goes to work in the labor market, then the family will be a little bit neglected, because if he wants to live a little better he has to do 10–12 hours a day and after that it is not sure that he will have energy to occupy himself with his family. (A man aged 33)

The third group is made up of *home-centered women*, who are also in a minority as opposed to the adaptive women: moreover, since politics and media these days mainly focus on the problems of working women, this group appears to be completely invisible at times. Home-centered women place their private lives and their families before their work from the time they are married. They are more inclined to live in large families and leave their work after marriage if the family can afford that. Gaining qualifications is not an unimportant concern within this group either, especially considering that educational institutions can serve them not only with education, but also with a promising terrain for finding a partner. According to Hakim their share of society is about 20%, similar to the work-centered group. Among our interviewees we can quote from several women – older and younger – who can be characterized as having home-centered preferences:

I am not a career-woman, I don't want to achieve any special thing – simply work and live from it. But for me the family is more important. So while there were no children I would stay at work and do this or that, but now that the children are here I would rather hurry home. (A woman aged 29)

The most important is that a mother can and does stay at home. It should be her task, like in the old days, that she is at home and takes care of her family. Not her career, not her work, not her living. ... this is my opinion, others are sure to think otherwise. If I were 25 years old, I might say something else, but I am almost double that and people's thoughts change over time. (A woman aged 49)

The ideal family, to my mind, is impossible in today's world. That there are plenty of children: two or three at least, and the father can earn enough so he can maintain the family without the mother having to do any paid work. That doesn't mean that she cannot have the wish to go out and work. But, if say, I would be in the situation, that my husband could support us, obviously I

would work some, a four hour part-time job, but I would devote my entire life to my children. (A woman aged 32)

Assistance in reconciling employment and family commitments is of great importance taking into account the work- and family life style preferences. On the basis of their own experiences, our respondents mentioned family – typically grand parental – and external, paid help in regard of *child minding*. Our interviewees did not speak of day care provided by the state or the workplace. This can be explained – also based on the results of previous research –, on the one hand, because the state institutions ensuring child day care (nurseries, play schools) are still “there for everyone”, whose basic importance will only become salient after they will have been abolished (Neményi 2003). Hence, it can be said, that there is state assistance in organizing child day care – although, for example 90% of nurseries are in Budapest and the larger towns (Frey 2002: 423) –, but perhaps people are not conscious of this form of help because it “goes without saying” that it should be there. On the other hand, however, no – or hardly any – such help could be detected on the part of employers. Flexible and part-time work, as well as family-friendly workplaces permitting family absence, or working from home are rare in Hungary today, yet according to the data of research done in 2002 the greatest help in reconciling family commitments with employment to the majority of those at home with children under three on child care allowance would be flexible work (Frey 2002).

The harmonization of work and family life is closely interrelated to the question of the division of work within the family. “Real work” is still defined as paid work by most people, so housework is often only appreciated as an important activity when it is not done:

It used to be very nice, when I was at home on child care allowance: there were no problems, I did everything. My husband used to come home in the afternoon, and sat down for dinner. Everything was washed up, the children were sleeping, we used to talk for a bit and then go out for a walk and there was no problem. When I started to work, then it came to it, that cleaning and other housework was left to the weekend, and, well, my husband saw that he would have to help and he loves to cook and he cooks at the weekend, which was really a big help, but with the passing of the years he thought that I should be grateful for that, which didn't go down well with me. (A woman aged 45)

An older respondent also pointed out that at the beginning of relationships and marriages the partners are keener to do more housework together as they wish to spend more time together for example to go out.

At first, we did everything quickly, because we wanted to go out as soon as possible. [...] My husband seriously helped with the big jobs, but I did the everyday smaller things. There was a settled way of working. ... I wouldn't say that it was ideal, but what would be ideal? If I would hire a cleaning lady? It is ideal if they complement each other. (A woman aged 63)

Later however, – particularly after the birth of (a) child(ren) – the situation changes. One typical form of family work-sharing model that emerged from the answers of our respondents was that of the home-making woman and the working man:

The basic thing was that I was at home, so I largely did everything. Before the birth of the children we used to share the work a lot more ... he still vacuumed and that sort of thing. Then, after the birth of the children, I took on more. (A woman aged 29)

Another typical stereotype of the dual earning family model is that of the continuously stressed woman:

Women are quite exploited in the family... we have to get a job: we work from the morning until four in the afternoon and then comes the evening shift (at home). If I think back over the past years, it always comes to mind, that I ran through my entire life: we rushed to the nursery, to the play school, when the child was still small, and then to school, and I think the large majority of women in Hungary did exactly the same as I: rushing through their entire lives. Besides the paid work there is the “women’s work” to be done, which is by no means always women’s work, but it is generally left to women to do. (A woman aged 53)

In a third group – work-committed women who intend to return to the labor market – it can also be called a typical case when monotonous housework does not satisfy the creative work ideas of temporary housewives with small children:

For the time being it is the case of a classical family, or in patriarchal societies the norm, when the head of the family maintains his family, but with the really low child care allowance a woman can only stay at home in Hungary if her husband earns [well] – well, this is nonsense. ... And so everything else which goes with everyday life in the family, work in the background, which the woman does, it’s tiring. [...] I can imagine that this is all right for a lot of women, because they think they are good caring housewives ... But for me this is exactly not good. So I can accept it, because I place these concerns under the good functioning of our family, and we are all right ... but I do resent that lost time a tiny bit. You understand? (A woman aged 36)

More and more common attempts of sharing work within the family are when family members really try to divide the housework among themselves, with the man and on occasion larger children also taking on their share:

I try to help my wife. I know that she is quite loaded with the three children, because I am at work all day, so inasmuch as I can help in the evenings and at the weekends I do. This can be anything: if needed, I cook. It was never anything like: “you are the woman, go and clean!” (A man aged 27)

I always emphasize that there are four of us and everyone has their tasks in the family – so I am not a cleaning lady, a laundress, and a char, but everyone has their tasks which have to be done. ... my husband helps a lot with the housework, but I would like to get the children to do their share of the housework. (A woman aged 55)

Considering the topic of sharing of housework it can be said that the majority of our respondents saw this as an issue within the nuclear family. An intergenerational division of work came up mainly in the area of looking after small children in the form of – gladly accepted, but no longer taken for granted – grandparental help. There was little mention of the care of family members who are older, ill, or otherwise in need of care, yet previous examinations of those on child care allowances show that for a good majority the reconciliation of work and family commitments was not only problematic because there was no child care, but also because they had no other way of solving the problem of caring for a dependent adult (Frey 2002: 413).

The “under-representation” of the importance of inter-generational help provision can be explained by the fact that for our respondents the concept of family rarely contained the family form characterized by several generations living together: thus family members physically living away from the nucleus of the family could count less on practical family solidarity in terms of looking after adults needing care. Typically the majority of our interviewees mainly spoke of the disadvantages of several generations living together:

It is an interesting thing that many these days say that the grand families have disappeared, where several generations live together. I think it important that a family should have its independence: so that they can raise their children as they see fit, and nobody should interfere in the way they want to live their family life. (A woman aged 52)

It is not healthy to live together with the (grand)parents, because everyone has different needs and different ways of life. It can give cause to friction, make life hell, and lead to divorce or living apart. (A woman aged 42)

In the course of our investigation in parallel with the changes narrowing the concept of family from certain points of view we were able to witness the emergence of a broader understanding of the idea of family. A middle-aged divorced woman bringing up her own larger and an adopted younger child deemed her own “irregular” family ideal while she considered that the traditional family solidarity was replaced by help offered by friends:

Personally I am not ill content with my own family, because the one mother, one larger child and small child seems to be ideal – at least I don't think that just because something is completely standard it would work better. To me, this is also a family. The circle of friends is able to help much better than a bad family. (A woman aged 53)

CONCLUSION

The two kinds of respondents in the interviews constituting the basis of this study – representatives of family political formations and members of varying forms of real extant families – approached the questions we put to them in appropriately different ways. At the same time, – if not in accent, but in regard to the relevance of several issues – we find similar interpretations of all of family-politics in the two sets of interviews. It stands out that the family means family with children on both sides and that the concept of family policy is subordinated to demographic issues. The equality of men and women, the recognition of, or resistance to the changes in family forms, the reconciliation of family and work issues, the stimulation of women’s employment rates in line with European expectations, and in addition as an important precondition of worthy co-equal life, are mostly expressed in the dimension of having children. Compared with the normative but often sharply contradictory opinions of the “elite” interviews, the “lay” interviews all in all suggest the view that politics must not interfere in personal decisions about having children – but any government has the duty to ensure the material preconditions of the functioning of families. This, however, means in the first place that there should be employment opportunity, proper child day care institutions, provisions tailored to real needs, and family-friendly workplaces, which make autonomous decisions by men and women possible, and not a proactive policy which in given circumstances encroaches on individual freedom.

At the same time, in line with the results of international research, it appears that it is difficult to conciliate the real practices of family life in Hungary with family-connected normative political concepts whose premise is what families should be like and not how they actually work (Silva – Smart 1999). As one of our respondents, an NGO representative put it: the task of the state is that “it puts up with its citizens, and supports them”. In order for citizens to decide for themselves how they wish to live, and in order to prevent decision makers and public opinion, driven by politics and media, from regarding change in itself as dangerous and undesirable, we ought to know more about the real workings of families. We can only hope that research of family sociology can have a role in revealing the true variety of family forms and the changeability in the forms of family life, and that it can raise the awareness of opinion and decision makers as well.

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