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## Unattainable Desires? Childbearing Capabilities in Early 21st-Century Hungary

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### 1. Introduction

This chapter addresses the issue of weak capabilities for having and caring for children in Budapest as being reflected by the views of 100 working parents on their fertility-related desires. Capabilities are understood as the freedom to achieve valued functionings; in our case that is the parents' notions of the *real opportunities* they have regarding the (family) life they may lead (Sen, 1987), more specifically, being a working parent with as many children as they would like to have. The aim of my study is to highlight the many ways in which Hungarian parents' fertility-related capabilities are constrained, which can be detected not only in their achieved fertility, but also already at the level of their desired family size.

If fertility desires are interpreted as somewhat fluid cognitive constructions, much less tangible than achieved or completed fertility, one can question why a researcher would devote time to study this aspect. Fertility desires, I argue, reflect people's assessment of their personal, interpersonal and social conditions, as well as internalised norms. Desired fertility is influenced by how people see their freedom to achieve various lifestyles (Sen, 1999) in their specific social settings, where public policies can act as capability expansions or limitations. In the context of economic uncertainties and risks, unknown in the former state-socialist countries until quite recently, capabilities are especially important to address in relation to childbearing decisions, also taking into account the possible influence of normative expectations woven into the policy environment, as well as discursive constructions of media and everyday life.

## 2. The Hungarian context

Fertility desires are usually measured as the ideal number of children. In Hungarian demographic research, it is hard to find another macro-level indicator that has changed as little and as slowly as the mean value of this measure, being quite stable at around two children per woman (or couple) for decades (S.Molnár, 2001). However, at the beginning of the 21st century a slight decrease in the level of fertility intentions and desires seems to have occurred. Young people aged 18–20 reported planning to have fewer children than those belonging to the same age group did five to ten years ago when, at least, the childbearing plans of young couples averaged around two, even if the realisation of these plans remained mostly unfulfilled (Kapitány, 2002). Declining fertility and declining family size ideals are not specifically Hungarian features though; similar tendencies can also be observed in other Eastern European countries (Bradatan and Firebaugh, 2007). A recent study on demographic trends in Central-East European capitals revealed extremely low fertility levels (Figure 6.1), with the average number of children per woman ranging from 0.97 in Warsaw to 1.23 in Riga and to 1.41 in Vienna as the highest levels (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2005). These figures reflect a *culture of low fertility* that emerged first in German-speaking countries at the end of the 20th century

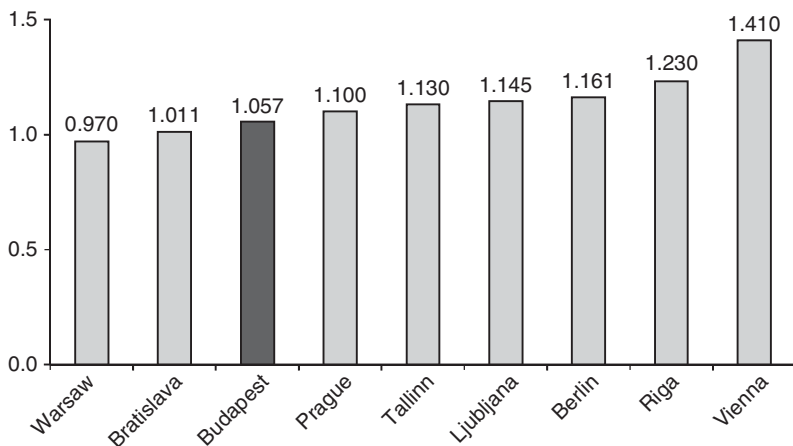


Figure 6.1 Total fertility rates in nine Central and Eastern European capitals (2003)

Source: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (2005).

(Goldstein et al., 2003; Sobotka, 2009). Yet, the mean ideal number of children is still around two, or slightly higher in most parts of Europe (Testa, 2006).

Hungarian women generally wish to have almost twice as many children as they actually have, as difficulties in combining work and family life seem to interfere with the realisation of their childbearing plans and desires (Testa, 2006; Pongrácz, 2008). Similarly to other former state-socialist countries, there is a higher prevalence of child-oriented attitudes than in Western Europe (Pongrácz, 2006), which, however, does not appear in actual fertility rates. Indeed, women in Hungary seem to be highly family-oriented and they put greater emphasis on being a mother than having a job or making a career. For example, in the *European Social Survey* in 2006, Hungarian respondents, especially women, expressed the highest level of agreement with the statement that a *person's family ought to be his or her priority in life* – followed by respondents from the Ukraine, Poland and Greece (Takács, 2008). At the same time, Hungarian women seem to attach considerable significance to their own job and economic activity as being beneficial for safeguarding the livelihood of the family (Tóth, 1995; Blaskó, 2005).

The dominant family pattern in Hungary, similarly to a number of other European countries, is still a married couple with two children. However, significant changes have been observed in partnership arrangements, characterised by the declining omnipresence of marriage in general, and its gradual replacement by cohabitation as a first partnership in particular (Spéder, 2006). The pattern of early marriages prevailed in Hungary only until the 1980s (Kamarás, 2002), as the traditional difference in marriage and family formation patterns between the Eastern and Western parts of Europe (Hajnal, 1965) diminished (Kulcsár, 2007). At the beginning of the 21st century, Hungarian women tended to marry for the first time in their late twenties, and men in their early thirties. In 2008, the average age of marriage for women was 30.7 years, and 33.7 years for men (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2009). As a consequence of these changes, the percentage share of extramarital births of all live births has increased greatly in the last decades, from 7 per cent in 1980 to 25 per cent in 1997, and over 37 per cent by 2007 (Vukovich, 2002; Eurostat, 2010). The declining share of marriages in partnerships is often interpreted by Hungarian demographers as a bad omen in connection with fertility (Spéder, 2006; Spéder and Kapitány, 2007), notwithstanding that rising levels of non-marital childbearing seem to be a general feature in Europe, including countries like Sweden, France

or even Ireland, characterised by relatively high fertility rates (Eurostat, 2010).

During the last 30 years, the married proportion significantly decreased in the Hungarian population aged over 15, from nearly 70 per cent in 1980 to less than 50 per cent in 2007, while the proportion divorced nearly doubled, reaching about 10 per cent. During this period, the percentage share of single women and men also nearly doubled reaching around 30 per cent (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2009). However, being single is not necessarily an intentionally chosen lifestyle: most people would like to live in a relationship but not all succeed. Empirical findings indicate that nearly every fifth person aged 30–49 lives alone in Hungary, and there seems to be a gender-specific pattern in their situation: single women in this age group are more likely to be highly educated with more marketable skills and live in a more urbanised environment, while single men at these ages are more likely to have lower education, fewer marketable skills and live in smaller settlements in the countryside (Utasi, 2004). Not being able to build and/or maintain close relationships leading to longer-term partnerships can have several causes, including the increasing lack of solidarity as a norm both in society at large and at the interpersonal level, as well as the pursuit of career-centred lifestyles, where private life is subordinated to work goals, especially in terms of time management (that is work goals enjoy priority).

Despite the early marriage pattern up until quite recently, Hungary has never been characterised by very high fertility (Spéder and Kamarás, 2008). During the second half of the 20th century up to the early 1990s, women had about two births on average except for a higher average number of children in the 'Ratkó era'<sup>1</sup> of the early and mid-1950s when abortion was prohibited, which has also led to a second peak in fertility in the 1970s. Since then, fertility has been declining, and the demographic wave effect caused by the coercive fertility intervention of the Ratkó era has gradually been erased by a trend of postponed childbearing during the transition to market capitalism. Up to the early 1990s, women aged 20–24 had the highest fertility, but between 1995 and 2006 the 25–29 age group displayed the highest rates, and in 2007, for the first time 30–34 year old women had the highest fertility (Vukovich, 2002; Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2009). In the 1990s, second childbearing decreased the most, while the postponement effect was strongest for first births (Husz, 2006). Between 1980 and 2009, the proportion childless in the female population aged 15–49 increased from 28 per cent to 43 per cent (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2009), given fewer and

later births to the reproductive age groups. In 1993, of women aged 18–41 years 54 per cent planned to have two children and only 1.5 per cent wanted to have no children at all. Ten years later, the preferred number of children was still two, but about 10 per cent of women and 15–20 per cent of men under age 25 stated that they did not want to have children (Kamarás, 2002; Vukovich, 2002). Intentional childlessness is a relatively new phenomenon in Hungary that may indicate the strengthening of individualisation tendencies among younger generations and their awareness of difficulties in achieving a satisfying work–life balance when having children (Hobson et al., 2011).

Current trends in the Hungarian labour market, especially a growth in insecure employment forms, also seem to contribute to work–life balance deficiencies even before deciding to have children. In Hungary, in the 15–64-year-old population the proportion of those employed with a fixed-term contract increased from 6 per cent in 2000 to 8.5 per cent in 2010, while part-time-employment increased from 3.7 per cent in 2000 to 5.5 per cent in 2010.<sup>2</sup> Fixed-term contract employment is equally characteristic for both genders, while part-time employment is somewhat more widespread among women: in 2010 only 3.6 per cent of men and 7.6 per cent of women were employed part-time. In the young age-groups, that is below age 25, the proportions temporarily employed doubled from somewhat below 13 per cent in 2000 to 25.9 per cent for women and 24 per cent for men in 2010, and the share of part-time employed increased even more rapidly from 3.3 per cent to 12.3 per cent among women and from 1.8 per cent to 6.3 per cent among men in the same period (Eurostat, 2011). In other European countries, for example in the Netherlands, part-time employment is often seen as a useful means of reconciliation, especially for women (Plantenga and Remery, 2009), but in Hungary it is considered less optimal even for parents, mainly because of the low level of earnings it provides, which is hard to live on (Hobson et al., 2011). The awareness of economic uncertainty and risks is increasing in society not only due to the rapid growth of fixed-term contracts, especially among the young, but also because unemployment rates increased from 6.9 to 11.2 per cent among the 15–64-year-old population, and among those below age 25 from 12.4 and 10.8 per cent for women and men in 2000 to 26.6 and 24.9 per cent respectively in 2010 (Eurostat, 2011).

Work–life balance issues are problematic in present-day Hungary, as paid work often hinders people spending time with their family. At the same time, family members tend to become increasingly intolerant towards job-related pressure, while a growing number of people

experience difficulties in concentrating on work because of family responsibilities (Takács, 2008). Yet, in many Hungarian families only paid work is considered 'real work' and housework is appreciated only when it is not done. At the beginning of relationships, couples usually share the housework as they wish to spend more time together (Neményi and Takács, 2006). After the birth of children, however, the situation often changes, and women end up doing the lion's share of the housework with little or no help from their spouses (Bukodi, 2006; Pongrácz, 2006). This may partly explain why work–life balance issues are rarely seen as of central importance in society, while being employed is considered an asset in itself. Hence, parents – especially mothers – are increasingly likely to experience a time squeeze, reinforced by structural characteristics of the Hungarian labour market, such as insecure employment, long working-time regimes, limited opportunities to work part-time and low wages forcing people to take a second or even third job (Frey, 2009; Hobson et al., 2011).

The reconciliation of work and childrearing (for women) along with promoting births has been, according to Hungarian family policy experts, one of the main goals of childcare allowance (GYES) and childcare benefit (GYED), introduced in the late 1960s and the mid-1980s respectively, while childrearing allowance (GYET) is, since 1993, an acknowledgement of parenthood (mainly motherhood) as work that should be paid for (Korintus, 2008). GYES is a flat-rate benefit that equals the amount of the minimum old-age pension; it is not tied to insured status gained by previous employment, thus it is available to all citizens. GYED, in contrast, depends on employment for at least six months during the two years prior to a birth, covering 70 per cent of previous earnings up to a ceiling. It is paid from the National Health Insurance Fund, financed by employers' and employees' contributions, and is available until the second birthday of a child. GYET is confined to large families only; it is a flat-rate benefit that either parent of three or more children can receive while on leave during the period between the third and eighth birthday of the youngest child. Along with these paid leave schemes, utilised nearly exclusively by mothers, public childcare provision has been the main tool promoting work–life balance for parents in the past four to five decades in Hungary. However, the number of crèches, providing childcare services for children younger than three years, decreased rapidly during the 1990s – their capacity having been reduced by more than 50 per cent: today, the participation rate in childcare services for children under three is estimated at around 7–11 per cent, while for children aged three to five

it is around 87 per cent (Blaskó, 2009). From the age of five it is compulsory for children to attend kindergarten and take part in preschool activities.

The current system of family policies can be criticised on the one hand as financing absence from work for educated women for an unnecessarily prolonged period of time, being the most generous cash support system in the developed world; and on the other hand, as failing to offer appropriate assistance to women with weak ties to the labour market (Bálint and Köllő, 2008). The negative labour supply effects derive from the amortisation of human capital during the extended period of leave; hence, the universal flat-rate benefit (GYES), the insurance-based benefit (GYED) and the childrearing allowance for large families (GYET) can be seen not simply as schemes providing parents with the possibility to raise their children themselves instead of relying on public or varying forms of private childcare, but also as probably the most significant form of public support to inactive women under the age of 40, insulating them from the labour market. Furthermore, return to the labour market after a long period of parental leave can be quite problematic, especially for people with less education and for those living in smaller settlements: while more than 75 per cent of Hungarian parents, mainly mothers, plan to continue working in their old jobs after their leaves, their actual return rate is below 45 per cent (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2006). There are various reasons for the difficulties to return to the labour market, such as the employer being dissolved, one's old position being terminated or a new position available being unsuitable for the returning employee.

The substantial reduction in public childcare provision, especially for children below age three, along with rigid labour market structures may have contributed to the rapid decline of childbearing desires among women with a medium-level socio-economic status, that is a vocational or secondary education, since 1990, and they typically have only one child on average, as a consequence of their uncertain labour market position (Spéder, 2003; Spéder and Kapitány, 2007). At the same time, a growing number of women with higher social status either remain childless due to postponing motherhood for too long given extended periods of enrolment in education and/or pursuing other life choices than motherhood, or having at least two children. In fact, the proportion of one-child mothers decreased among the highly educated from 28 per cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 2005 (Spéder and Kapitány, 2007). More highly educated women start their fertility careers later than those who had fewer other career options, but if they enter

motherhood they have more children within a shorter time period. The least educated women are the least likely to delay childbearing, still having relatively high fertility. Their childbearing behaviour does not seem to adjust to the changes in the labour market and in formal childcare provisions, unlike the decreasing fertility of the more educated displaying not only tempo but also quantum effects, that is later and fewer births, especially apparent among women with secondary-school certificates whose period fertility in 2000 was only about two-thirds of that in the early 1990s (Husz, 2006).

According to the Eurobarometer findings (Testa, 2006), among the younger generations, that is below age 40, the ideal age of becoming a parent for both men and women is higher than the age of first childbearing (Table 6.1). On average, young Hungarian men and women would prefer to become parents about a year later than they actually do. At the same time the upper limit of the age range suitable for becoming a parent has been extended too. Comparing the views of older Hungarian respondents (aged 40–65) with those of younger ones (aged 25–39) we find a year difference, on average, between the latest acceptable ages of having a first child, which is about age 41 to become a mother according to younger women in contrast to age 40.3, the perception of older women, and age 46.9 to become a father according to younger men as opposed to age 45.9 suggested by older male respondents. The changing perception of childbearing age norms does not only reflect greater tolerance towards various individual life strategies but as previous Hungarian studies indicate it can also affect the actual childbearing age (Spéder and Kapitány, 2007).

*Table 6.1* Mean actual, ideal and latest age at the birth of the first child in Hungary (2006)

Gender/Age	Actual age when one became a mother	Ideal age to become a mother	Latest age to become a mother
Females 25–39	22.9	24.6	41.0
Females 40–65	22.8	23.8	40.3
	Actual age when one became a father	Ideal age to become a father	Latest age to become a father
Males 25–39	25.5	26.7	46.9
Males 40–65	26.0	26.2	45.9

*Source:* Testa (2006).



The deferment of family formation and childbearing decisions cannot be separated from the broader changes in the structural conditions affecting women's education and employment opportunities, including both the expansion of higher education and the diminishing childcare provision in recent decades. During the state-socialist era, when women's emancipation basically meant that they had equal rights with men to be gainfully employed, solutions to reconcile employment and family responsibilities for working mothers were provided by the state (Oláh, 1998). The free and geographically widespread public childcare provision was especially important for work-life balance. As a long-lasting effect of the state-socialist welfare regime in people's minds, public services (most importantly childcare) and generous cash benefits facilitating reconciliation, are still being taken for granted. While the generous programmes supporting the bearing and rearing of children, especially formal childcare at both preschool and school ages, were either abolished or diminished, the legacy of state-controlled modernisation is often coupled with renewed nostalgia for traditional gender roles. The ideological messages of conservative social forces, including political and religious groups, have been trying, in particular, to strengthen the view that after so many years of state-socialist repression women can and should resume their 'natural', that is traditional roles as mothers and housewives, being clearly separated from paid work-related roles (Kovács and Váradi, 2000).

Notwithstanding the possible impact on fertility of a retraditionalisation of women's gender role at least in the public discourse, the absolute and relative deterioration of the financial situation of families with children has also played an important role in the decline of fertility in Hungary (Medgyesi et al., 2000; Havasi, 2008). Between 1991 and 2001, the proportion of people living in poverty increased at a faster pace among households with children, than in the general population, and having three or more children has been associated with high risk of poverty; indeed, seen as a poverty trap (Gábos and Szivós, 2002, 2008). All the more surprising is, then, that in the Hungarian population policy and research agenda, fertility issues tend to appear mostly in the context of some sort of crisis management induced by a static family concept, notwithstanding the fact that family life is in transformation. While the central question of family-policy measures in most EU countries is how to help child-raising working parents to reconcile paid work and family lives, in Hungary, political messages and policies that target women are based on a traditional concept of 'home building instead of paid work', although apparently less successful in increasing fertility.

As indicated by demographic developments, women (as well as men) in Hungary want both work and family – but many of them first want work and then a family, and later perhaps work again, if possible.

### 3. Theoretical framework

In the context of value shifts towards increasing individualisation, associated with the second demographic transition (Van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe, 1986) and linked to that, a greater level of risk awareness (Beck, 1992), having children might appear not only as a way to achieve self-fulfilment but also as a risky avenue, given persistent labour market uncertainties with relatively high unemployment rates and a high or growing prevalence of fixed-term employment contracts, especially among people in early phases of their family careers, in most Eastern European countries, including Hungary. At the same time, material and non-material aspirations have increased within and across societies, and new possibilities to fulfil such demands compete with choices of starting a family, having further children or even to build an enduring relationship (Cliquet, 2003). The perception of family formation not being compatible with other goals one may have in life has been reinforced by a delayed and, compared with the Western part of Europe, more intensified post-socialist version of late modern commodification, characterised by an increasing urge to possess as much as possible. While citizens of the late 20th-century (post-)welfare societies in North-western Europe started the still ongoing process of reinterpreting what well-being can mean beyond an often taken-for-granted standard of living in the context of post-materialist value orientation (Inglehart, 1997), people in post-socialist countries have so far focused on the new economic capabilities brought along by capitalist modernisation, with imaginary promises about a smooth conversion of being (relatively) poor into being (relatively) rich (Sen, 1999).

Replacing the state-socialist regime with a market economy influenced the context of childbearing decisions also in other ways. Features of the state-socialist past, such as job security, free education, free health-care, relatively well-functioning and broadly available childcare facilities along with limited career opportunities and leisure activities were replaced by conditions more restraining for childbearing. The transition brought along employment insecurity, an increasing pressure to acquire more education, less generous social provisions, decreasing availability of non-family childcare and a boom in career and consumption opportunities (Frejka, 2008). The new conditions have strengthened

the importance of individuals' labour market position and, related to that, a normative imperative to try to reduce uncertainty and the risk of economic hardship before having a (or another) child (McDonald, 2006). In addition, although such expectations are mainly directed towards men at the level of rhetoric idealising traditional gender roles in most East-European societies, also in Hungary (Gal and Kligman, 2000), women too are supposed to support themselves and their family if the circumstances require it (e.g. as indicated by the Hungarian Family Act granting spousal alimony only upon special conditions in case of divorce). This, in turn, strengthens the impact of incoherence between gender-equal educational and employment opportunities and the unequal division of family tasks, hardly mitigated by the inadequate provision of care services, forcing women to consider the number of children they will have, if any, very carefully (McDonald, 2000; Hobson and Oláh, 2006).

The very low fertility rate in Hungary, that is below 1.5 births per woman from the mid-1990s onwards, projects a demographically unsustainable population (McDonald, 2006, 2008). Such a low level of fertility seems to be a reflection of constrained individual agency and weak capabilities for having and caring for children, linked to economic uncertainties and incoherence of public versus private sphere gender equity. How such capability and agency deficiency has been articulated at the level of fertility desires can also shed more light on limitations not only at the level of the subjective states of efficacy, but also, as we will see, at the level of (impractical) policies and (infeasible) social expectations. As discussed in the introduction to this section, desired and realised fertility as well as perceived obstacles to achieve them are interpreted as quality-of-life issues to be assessed according to Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (1985, 1992, 1993). Patterns of institutional barriers and personal constraints inhibiting the socially desired changes in fertility practices, as perceived by our respondents, are explored to identify different approaches to fertility-related well-being and agency achievements reflected by personal accounts of working parents of young children in Budapest.

#### 4. Data and methods

The empirical basis of this chapter is the fertility-related Hungarian part of the *Tensions between Rising Expectations of Parenthood and Capabilities to Achieve a Work Family Balance* survey, which was conducted in Budapest in 2008 with 100 respondents aged between 25 and 50. This was a

*RECOWOE*<sup>3</sup> *Pilot Survey* originally developed and conducted by a team at Stockholm University, led by Professor Barbara Hobson. However, the original survey, carried out in Stockholm, had a slightly different design, that is it did not include any questions on fertility desires, unlike the Budapest study.

There were three main participant selection criteria to be included in the survey: one had to be a parent of at least one child below age six, living as a couple, and having regular work activity (Hobson et al., 2009). According to Central Statistical Office data for Budapest, regarding educational attainment the sample was relatively representative of the population, though the least educated were somewhat under-represented (27.8 per cent in total in Budapest compared with 25 per cent in the Budapest sample), and there was a slight over-representation of the highly educated (47.4 per cent in total in Budapest compared with 50 per cent in the sample). The sample was also stratified by firm-level and firm-sector characteristics. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents worked in the private sector and 27 per cent in the public sector, compared with 61 per cent working in the private sector in total in Budapest, and 29 per cent in the public sector. Firms were divided into three categories: small (1–19 employees), medium (20–249 employees) and large (250 or more employees). In the Budapest sample, the majority of respondents (52 per cent) worked in small firms, while 20 per cent worked in medium-size companies and 28 per cent in large companies (compared with 44 per cent working in small firms, 16 per cent working in medium-size organisations and 37 per cent in large companies in total in Budapest).

The survey questionnaire was a semi-structured interview schedule divided into five parts focusing on: (i) the household (including questions on childcare, the division of time on household and care work); (ii) employment and working time (including questions on employment situation, working shifts and work flexibility); (iii) the division of parental leave between the couple; (iv) work environment and workplace culture (including questions on competitiveness, support from workmates and colleagues, and on norms about work commitment and work–life balance policies, that is, whether the workplace is family-friendly or penalises those with parenting commitments). The fifth part was a country-specific module: a short section with questions on country-specific policy issues connected to work–life balance. In Hungary, this module included questions about the ideal number of children, the desired versus the actual number of children and on the perceived obstacles that inhibit people from attaining their desired

family size. The following questions were asked of each respondent: 'In your view what is the ideal number of children in a family?' 'How many children do you (did you) want to have?' 'To what extent has this desire been realised, and why/why not?'

When asking about the ideal number of children, one should be aware of the collective nature of this concept, that is reflecting normative expectations of a society as a collective (Hagewen and Morgan, 2005). Thus, it must be taken into consideration that respondents intentionally or unintentionally might voice some sort of *vox populi*, influenced by, for example, popular media and/or political discourses when answering. In an attempt to handle this problem, 'the general' and 'the personal' ideal numbers of children can be differentiated, as in the Eurobarometer in 2006, by asking two separate questions, such as 'Generally speaking, what do you think is the ideal number of children for a family?' and 'And for you personally, what would be the ideal number of children you would like to have or would have liked to have had?' (Testa, 2006, pp. 152–153). According to the findings, the mean general ideal number of children tends to be higher everywhere than the mean personal ideal number of children. In Hungary, this was true for each of the examined age groups for both genders (Testa, 2006). Although the difference between the mean values of the general and personal ideals is quite limited (Table 6.2), the general ideal being consistently higher than personal ones indicates the normative content of the former concept.

Each semi-structured interview was conducted in Hungarian. Each interviewee chose a pseudo name, which together with an indication

Table 6.2 Mean general and personal ideal number of children in Hungary (2006)

Mean general ideal number of children (HU)					
	15–24	25–39	40–54	55+	All
Men	2.20	2.03	2.14	2.29	2.17
Women	2.19	2.23	2.21	2.27	2.23
Mean personal ideal number of children (HU)					
	15–24	25–39	40–54	55+	All
Men	2.13	2.00	2.11	2.09	2.08
Women	1.99	2.16	2.20	2.25	2.17

Source: Testa (2006).

of their age at the time of conducting the interview, we used for their identification in the study. The interviews were tape-recorded with the agreement that all audio material will be destroyed after transcribing. The coding was done in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) format. Although SPSS is most often used for work with quantitative data, it has a feature that allowed handling the qualitative material obtained from the semi-structured interviews. For example, the question 'In your view what is the ideal number of children in a family?' had a numeric as well as a linking string variable that elaborated the interviewee's response to the question, and thus allowed for more detailed contextual analysis. This section is based on the contextualisation of fertility-related issues raised by the Budapest respondents, and, in particular, on the qualitative analysis of the coded contents of the specific fertility-related string variables in the collected data set.

## 5. Results

The 100 working parents of young children in our Budapest sample were first asked a rather general question: 'In your view what is the ideal number of children in a family?' Without further specification to the question, whether the scope of the answers regarded personal or general ideals had to be inferred from further explanations, provided by the respondents spontaneously, that is without being encouraged specifically to do so. Some respondents emphasised that it does not make much sense to speak about ideals in general terms as there is 'no such thing as an ideal number of children [for everyone]: as the cap fits, depending on how things turn out' (43-year-old engineer, father of one); or as a 36-year-old beautician, mother of one stated: 'I think three [children would be ideal], but not for everybody. We probably won't have any more.' Others referred to the historically changing character of these ideals: 'In the old days, my grandmother's family had eight or ten members, which is a lot today. Three [children] would be needed [in a family] if we look demographically but that doesn't concern me... if there would have been another child... that wouldn't have been good in my situation' (41-year-old father of one, working as a janitor). It was often made clear by respondents that they feel they are witnessing the coexistence of different norms in society but they can also see the difference between the collective norm of 'should' as opposed to their own reality of 'is', that is between normative expectations and their own everyday life. For example, a 40-year-old film trader, father of one, stated that, 'For us even one child is a big challenge, but otherwise there should

be at least three in a family'; and in the view of a 30-year-old dressmaker, mother of one, 'Others imagine three [as the ideal number], but they rarely have the three. Two seems attractive to me'.

Numerically, 2.6 was the mean value (and two the median) specified as the ideal number of children in a family; on average women scored slightly higher (2.66) than men (2.54). Most respondents (49 per cent of women and 46 per cent of men) said that having two children would be ideal, while more than a third (36 per cent of women and 39 per cent of men) referred to three as the ideal number. Having only one child was seen to be ideal by none of the female but almost 7 per cent of the male respondents, while having at least four children was referred to as ideal by 15 per cent of women and 8 per cent of men. The highest ideal number of children was five, mentioned by two men, both fathers of two: one being a 35-year-old bicycle-courier and the other a 46-year-old journalist editor. Comparing the ideal numbers of children with the numbers of children already born, these latter seem to be lagging behind (Table 6.3), which can be explained, at least partly, by the fact that most of the respondents presumably had not yet completed their reproductive careers. In each age category, people thought that the ideal number of children in a family should be higher than the number of children they had, at the very least there should be more than one child. A slight decrease in ideal family size across generations appeared though, as the ideal number of children for most respondents over age 40 was three or more, while for younger people it was two or more children. Dividing the younger age group further, we find that for 50 per cent of those younger than 31 and 53 per cent of those aged 31–40, two children represented the ideal family size; while it was three children for 46 per cent of those younger than 31 and 27 per cent of those aged 31–40.

Table 6.3 Ideal and real(ised) number of children by gender: Hungary

Ideal and real(ised) number of children	Women		Men		All	
	Ideal	Real	Ideal	Real	N = 93 Ideal	N = 100 Real
1	0%	50%	6.5%	52%	3.2%	51%
2	49%	28%	46%	34%	47.3%	31%
3	36%	20%	39%	14%	37.6%	17%
At least 4	15%	2%	8%	0%	11.9%	1%

Source: *Tensions between Rising Expectations of Parenthood and Capabilities to Achieve a Work–Family Balance* RECWOWE Survey, 2008 – Hungarian data. Own calculations.

*Table 6.4* Ideal and real(ised) number of children by educational level: Hungary

Level of education	Ideal number of children (Mean)	Real(ised) number of children (Mean)
Low (Primary)	2.67	1.96
Medium (Secondary)	2.62	1.58
Higher (Tertiary)	2.50	1.60
Total	2.60	1.68

*Source: Tensions between Rising Expectations of Parenthood and Capabilities to Achieve a Work Family Balance RECOWOWE Survey, 2008 – Hungarian data. Own calculations.*

According to the educational level of respondents, as a general tendency, the highest mean values for both the ideal and the actual number of children were seen for those with the least schooling (Table 6.4). However, regarding the ideal number of children within educational groups, gender-specific differences could be detected at the lower and the higher ends of the educational scale: while there seems to be a general consensus about two children per family being ideal, most female respondents with tertiary education and male respondents with lower-secondary or primary education regarded three as the ideal number. The lowest mean value of children born was observed in the group of respondents with medium-level education, followed by those with higher education, while respondents with primary schooling had the highest mean value of the actual number of children. These results are in line with the post-transitional demographic trends emerging since the last decade of the 20th century, also documented by Hungarian demographers (Spéder, 2003, 2006; Spéder and Kamarás, 2008), according to which fertility can vary to a great extent by women's educational level with the least-qualified group having the highest fertility rates, and those with medium-level qualifications the lowest. The gap between desired and achieved fertility suggests that many people are unable to realise their fertility ideals – ideals that are hardly separable from those of their social environment. However, on the basis of our interview material, roots of preferences have been harder to identify than elements of constraints. Socially desirable fertility ideals were more often presented with a taken-for-granted character, while a number of respondents interpreted their inability to realise their own fertility ideals as a failure that needed to be explained.

When answering the questions about the extent to which their fertility ideals were or were not realised and the reasons behind that,



most respondents referred to the uncertain outcome of their calculations about the future and the direct costs of maintaining their families. For example, a 33-year-old waitress with two children emphasised that, 'I could have imagined four, but perhaps I will not give birth any more. Not because of my comfort, but because I wouldn't be able to provide what today's world demands materially.' Also a 35-year-old carpenter, father of two pointed out that, 'If we look at ourselves, then [having] these two [children], that is very good. We wouldn't really be able to cope with a third one, not materially, nor in terms of time... mainly materially. If the financial circumstances were better, then it would be easier to arrange things.' Inability to live up to one's ideals was perceived by most respondents as a saddening subjective consequence of externally determined, mainly material constraints: 'Ideally [one should have] as many [children] as can grow up without stress in one family, who can be raised with a roof over their heads and food on the table and without fear. I would have liked three, but now I would be happy with just one more [making two], but financially I feel the next little one is impossible... [and] it breaks my heart' (25-year-old mother of one, freelancer with medium-level education). For these parents, economic hardship and the fear of it form capability constraints, inhibiting the realisation of their fertility desires and limiting the level of well-being they hoped to achieve in their family life.

Indeed, the reflections of our respondents seem to be in line with previous Hungarian findings, according to which fears of declining living standards, the accelerating costs of having children and worries about the future of the children can be seen as significant constraints when parents decide about having more children or not – even if they do not yet have as many children as they want to have (Kapitány, 2002). Acceptance of material sacrifice and financial responsibility due to bringing up children that puts off the satisfaction of the parents' personal needs was also shown to be more widespread among the older generations than the younger ones (Neményi and Takács, 2006). At the same time, for an increasing number of people, especially among the younger generations, the thought of accepting a lower living standard as a result of having children seems to be not only non-appealing but even threatening, reflecting the increasing material aspirations strengthened by the transition to the market economy.

Similar lines of reasoning were seen in our data. When asked to choose the three most important priorities for achieving a better work-life balance (WLB) from a list, including items such as length of work days, flexibility of working hours, shorter distance to work, more relief

from housework or childcare, better access to childcare, flexible opening hours in childcare facilities, better economy and more time for themselves,<sup>4</sup> more than three-quarters of the Budapest respondents said that a 'better economy' would be necessary for them to reach a better work–life balance. As a comparison, in Stockholm less than 10 per cent of respondents shared the same view. For them, time seemed to be the main issue: almost every second Swedish parent (47 per cent) noted that shorter working days would lead to a better work–life balance (Hobson et al., 2009). Desire for more time was important also for the Hungarian sample,<sup>5</sup> with men more often prioritising shorter work days, while women mostly wanted more relief from housework, the latter pointing to their increasing awareness of incoherence of public versus private sphere gender inequity. However, 'better economy' was equally important for both genders and seemed to be the dominant concern of parents in the Budapest sample. These results, in addition to the answers concerning the realisation of family size ideals, suggest that economic issues are seen as a main constraint inhibiting people both from being able to achieve an ideal balance between work and family and to realise their fertility desires.

Although work–life balance has received much attention in the EU, individual agency to achieve this increasingly recognised aspect of well-being is rather constrained in Hungary, mainly because of the tensions generated by competing norms of working versus stay-at-home parents (especially mothers) and numerous tasks to be completed simultaneously. As a 25-year-old mother of one (part-time student, working part-time in the private sector) explained: 'I have to have achievements in too many fields at the same time, and mainly by myself: housework, care work, paid work, and studying.' References to 'individual limits' of childrearing capacity emphasised not only the limited material conditions but also that parenting cannot be equated simply with just having children. In this context, parenthood is not associated simply with a role one automatically acquires but rather as an achievement: as one respondent pointed out parents are expected to 'take good care' of their children. Thus, the individual 'level of energy', in addition to material circumstances, defines the number of children one 'would be able to take on with good heart' (a 39-year-old mother of two children, project coordinator).

In Hungary, as in other Eastern European countries, economic and socio-political changes have brought about tendencies that I call the *gender yo-yo effect* to describe the contradictory normative expectations about women's roles in post-socialist societies, and the way they move

nervously around the strings of norms dragging them between work and home: typically, feeling bad at work because really they should have been a full-time homemaker and stay-at-home mother (like their grandmother most probably was, before the Second World War), and also feeling bad at home because really they should be at work and earn money (like their mother most probably did, after the Second World War). Nevertheless, after the collapse of state socialism, Hungarian women were not forced to participate in paid work and in the maintenance of the dual-earner nuclear-family model in the same way as previously. As a consequence of this, at the beginning of the 21st century, women in general, and more educated women in particular, are more likely to interpret their work not only as a functional necessity to earn money but also as an opportunity for personal development through professional career building. The rising share of professional ambitions and educational achievement among women has become a determining factor in broadening female career opportunities (Nagy, 2001; Koncz, 2005). While the proportion of women employees in the labour market decreased compared with the state-socialist era, economically active Hungarian women are getting ever better qualified, resulting in a growing number of women in leading positions whose earnings are catching up with those of men (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2009).<sup>6</sup>

Although it seems to be a relatively new phenomenon in Hungary, the need to consider women's careers along with that of men in family decisions was expressed by several respondents in our Budapest sample. For example, a 43-year-old physician, father of two, emphasised that '[having] the present two [children] is good, but we might want one more. It depends on the intentions of my wife regarding her career building and self-realisation.' For a 39-year-old mother of two, the wish to have a third child was put in the context of a trade-off with a PhD degree: 'If I finish my PhD now and something really takes off, then it is possible that I won't have another child.' A 39-year-old tobacconist, the mother of three, on the other hand, presented herself as perhaps being slightly more attached to her job than to the idea of having another child: 'we are now thinking about a fourth child, as my partner would really like that, but... for me it is another set-back: no work, [and another] three years of my life tied down'. Some parents, like this 40-year-old father of one (a financial director), interpret the ideal number of children issue in the context of quality-of-life concerns, where finding the right work-life balance is a concern for both parents, implying the re-evaluation of priorities:

Two [children are ideal] for us...if there were to be three, then it would probably take too much of a toll on my wife. You cannot have three children without some kind of permanent help...My wife has interests outside the family as well, which is a perfectly natural thing and we have to provide the opportunity for that. This means that time is of the essence – if there are three children then there is only time if there is help, otherwise the three children will fill your whole day. When they finish high school it'll be different, but that is quite a way yet. We cannot and do not want to do this, because we want to be involved with the children: so it's not that we want five children because we have the money, the babysitter looks after them and they stand there like so many organ pipes and very nice that they are there, but we didn't have any time for them. So we think that if you want to be involved with your children and would also like to do other things, then in the case of more than two children you won't have time for anything. Perhaps this is a selfish standpoint, but not in the sense that we really want to be involved with them.

These accounts also indicate that increased female education and employment opportunities can bring about greater awareness concerning the indirect costs of having children for women, both financially, in the form of foregone earnings and financial independence, and psychologically, in the form of abandoned career prospects, reinforced by the incoherence of public versus private sphere gender equity. Notably, neither the mothers nor fathers interviewed mentioned that such costs could be mitigated by the father increasing his input in family tasks, for example, by taking half the parental leave with a next child, so the mother can pursue her non-family goals. In addition, becoming and being a parent was seen by many of the female and not so many of the male respondents as being interwoven with work–life balance issues – especially in the context of quality parenting. As was pointed out already, when referring to the ideal number of children, some of the Budapest parents stated that their goal was not just simply being a parent but they wanted to become a good parent or, using Bettelheim's term (1987), a *good enough parent*. The element of raising quality concerns about parenting in the context of work–life balance can be interpreted as an indicator of individual agency, when achieving well-being would most probably entail a conscious rethinking of priorities with a focus on allocating enough (quality) time for children and other family members. Such a reprioritising process would mainly involve time-management issues and consequently the practical

rearrangement of a whole network of relationships, including interpersonal and in some cases even intra-personal, as well as institutional and work-related ones. Thus, when Hungarian demographers interpret the maintenance of respect for individual autonomy within a couple's partnership or pursuing not-so-traditional gender roles by couples already having children as factors potentially limiting childbearing (Spéder and Kapitány, 2007), they risk overlooking the possibility that at least some of these parents' and would-be parents' fertility desires are constrained by their awareness of the subjectively experienced limits of capabilities to become good enough parents. In short: one's not fully realised fertility as a functioning can very well correspond with quality parenting being part of the same person's capability set.

All in all, on the basis of the personal accounts of parents in the Budapest sample, the combination of uncertainty concerning the future and certainty concerning substantial child-raising costs, in addition to increasing awareness of incoherence between public sphere gender equity but inequity in the family, have been identified as part of the main constraints limiting fertility desires in Hungary. The parents' growing awareness of risks and aspirations to reduce economic uncertainties, and of women having aspirations beyond family life, provide us with a better understanding of the tendency of ever increasing numbers of *families that do not reproduce themselves*, to use a phrase by Nathan Keyfitz (1986). This is a trend to be taken seriously and addressed properly if to avoid far-reaching consequences. As pointed out in the demographic literature, the actual childbearing behaviour of societies can serve as a norm-forming reference point for future generations: the small family size ideals becoming the norm can lead to a 'low fertility trap' (Lutz et al., 2006), resulting in even fewer families that reproduce themselves.

## 6. Conclusions and discussion

This chapter addressed the issues of weak capabilities of having and caring for children in Hungary, considered a representative of the Transition Post-Socialist policy configuration type (Hobson and Oláh, 2006), as reflected in the views of 100 working parents on their fertility desires and sought to interpret different approaches to fertility related well-being and agency achievements emerging in the personal accounts of working parents of young children in Budapest. According to our findings, many people seem to be unable to realise their own fertility ideals. Most respondents desired to have two children at least, while many of them acknowledged that having more than two children would be the

ideal from a broader perspective, taking into consideration the expectations and interests of society. Socially desirable fertility ideals were presented with a taken-for-granted character, while a number of respondents felt they needed to explain why they have smaller family size ideals for themselves. Respondents seemed to ponder much less on how many children one might or should have in an optimal situation than on the real and sometimes the imagined factors inhibiting their own fertility desires. Positive motivations for why they wish to have a certain number of children have, thus, been harder to identify than limiting factors, which seemed to dominate the examined qualitative material. In our Budapest sample, parents' fertility-related capabilities were shown to be constrained in many ways: the combination of uncertainty concerning the future and certainty of high child-raising costs, as well as incoherence between putting public gender-equity principles into private family practice being the most important.

Indeed, both the reality and the fear of economic hardship were clearly shown to limit the level of well-being parents hoped to achieve in their family life by having as many children as they would have wished for in ideal circumstances. Economic issues were also seen to inhibit people from being able to achieve an ideal balance between work and family life: most respondents reported on how the necessity to earn enough can hinder them spending time with their family. Such time constraints also inhibit the parents' capabilities with respect to their parenting aspirations beyond having a certain number of children. The interviews revealed that parenting is interpreted by many parents (and probably also would-be parents) in present-day Hungary as not just having children, but as quality parenting, that is to be a *good enough parent*, which involves conscious time and skill (re)arrangements to allocate sufficient 'quality time' for the family and specifically for the children. Worries about the ability as to whether one can take good enough care of their (present and future) children showed as important elements in determining fertility desires.

Additionally, in Hungary, similarly to other post-socialist societies, women are influenced by a historically determined *gender yo-yo effect*, subjecting them to contradictory normative expectations about their 'natural' roles, while dragging them back and forth between work and home. Competing norms of working versus stay-at-home parenting (especially mothering) and numerous demands to be met in parallel generate tensions that can endanger the achievement of an optimal work-life balance, being recognised as an increasingly important segment of family well-being. At the beginning of the 21st century, women

in general, and more educated women in particular, are more likely to have aspirations beyond family life and interpret their work not only as a functional necessity to earn money but also as a way for personal development through professional career building. The examined data also indicated that increased female education and employment opportunities can bring about greater awareness of the importance of women's career options to be taken into account in fertility decisions by both members of a couple. This also implies careful consideration of the indirect costs of having another child for women, both financially, that is in the form of lost earnings and reduced financial independence, and psychologically, in the form of abandoned career prospects. The latter aspect is especially important in the Hungarian context, where the opportunity cost of motherhood (Schneider, 2009) is considerably higher than that of fatherhood.

Thus, fertility desires in early 21st-century Hungary seem to be reduced due to a combination of: (i) the high level of risk awareness along with strong aspirations to diminish economic uncertainties for one's family; (ii) the related time constraints increasing the doubts about one's possibilities to meet (partly self-imposed) demands of good enough parenting; and (iii) the incoherence of rising awareness about women having aspirations beyond the family sphere given more gender equal opportunities there but little changes in the gendered division of home responsibilities. Indeed, the presented findings indicate that fertility desires in Hungary are constrained by the content of people's own fertility-related capability sets. However, the negative impact of capability constraints may be mitigated by policies addressing these issues in a broader context, reducing gender inequity within the family by, for example, introducing parental leave schemes approximating (not further distancing) the opportunity costs of motherhood and fatherhood in Hungary. There is space for improvement in other policy fields, too, including possibilities for a higher level of parent-friendly flexibility in the Hungarian labour market and tackling some labour market-related aspects of parental time squeeze. The scope of this section does not allow an exhaustive list, but readers are encouraged to think ahead in various directions, which can be helpful to convince potential future parents that parenting constitutes a form of (quality) life worth living.

## Notes

1. It is a reference to a period named after Minister of Welfare (1949–50) and Minister of Health (1950–53) Anna Ratkó, when abortion was strictly prohibited and a special tax was introduced for childless people.



2. Source: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal [Hungarian Central Statistical Office] (2011) Labour Market Data 2000–10, [http://portal.ksh.hu/pls/ksh/docs/hun/thm/2/indi2\\_3\\_1.html](http://portal.ksh.hu/pls/ksh/docs/hun/thm/2/indi2_3_1.html) (accessed 2 July 2011).
3. RECOWOE ([www.recwowe.eu](http://www.recwowe.eu)) is a Network of Excellence of the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6) on 'Reconciling Work and Welfare in Europe'.
4. For more details on the items of this list, see the RECOWOE deliverable report (Hobson et al., 2009).
5. Desire for shorter workdays was first priority for 24 per cent of respondents, second for 22 per cent and third for 8 per cent, while 'more time for myself' was chosen as a first priority by 12 per cent of respondents, 16 per cent as a second priority and 34 per cent as a third priority.
6. Nevertheless, the average income of women is still only 85–88 per cent of that of men in Hungary.

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