

3 Attitudes, preferences and barriers to employment for mothers of young children in Hungary

This chapter starts with an analysis of the gender role attitudes concerning the division of unpaid work and childcare within the household as well as towards women's employment in Hungary. It also provides an overview of the overall family policy package in Hungary and of recent reforms aimed at making it easier for mothers with very young children to return to work. It then analyses some of the causes of the low levels of paid work among mothers with very young children in Hungary – including extended breaks for care reasons, family preferences, limited availability of childcare services and limited part-time and flexible working opportunities.

3.1. Attitudes towards gender roles are among the most traditional in the OECD

Gender role attitudes concerning the division of unpaid work and childcare within the household appear to be fairly traditional in Hungary (Blaskó, 2005^[1]; Gregor, 2016^[2]; Szabó-Morvai, 2019^[3]). Eurobarometer data from 2017 show that, on average across EU member states, 43% of men and 44% of women believe that *“the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family”* (European Commission, 2017^[4]), whereas in Hungary, 78% of people agreed with this statement – the second highest rate in the EU, after Bulgaria. Only 22% of Hungarian women take a distinctly emancipated view on whether women’s main role is “home-making”, while the corresponding share for men is only 18%.

Traditional attitudes towards women’s employment help explain the low at-work rates among Hungarian mothers. The share of the Hungarian population who does not agree that it is perfectly acceptable for a woman in their family to have a paid job outside of home stood at 10% compared to an OECD average of 4.6%, with higher shares only in Israel, Mexico, the Slovak Republic and the Republic of Türkiye (OECD, 2019^[5]). Maternal employment in particular is considered undesirable when children are young regardless of the level of education (Steiber, Berghammer and Haas, 2016^[6]). Many state that it would cause harm to children if mothers work before their third birthday. The share of the population agreeing that children suffer when mother works for pay is among the highest in the OECD (50.9%, compared to an OECD average of 35%) (OECD, 2019^[5]).

Otherwise, Hungarians generally seem to support a two-earner model in which both fathers and mothers contribute to the household income (KINCS, 2019^[7]). Follow-up consultations showed that increasing labour market participation by women with young children is generally accepted as a legitimate policy goal (OECD, 2021^[8]). While some stakeholders are in favour of “promoting choice” for mothers either to stay at home or go back to work, others warn about the double burden of paid and unpaid work responsibilities. Overall, there seems to be general awareness that public policy is influenced by demographic concerns.

3.2. The overall family policy package in Hungary

Public spending on families has grown almost everywhere in the OECD over recent decades, reflecting shifting priorities and the greater emphasis many countries now place on childhood. On average, public spending per head on family cash benefits and services has more than doubled since the early 1990s, rising from USD 417 in 1990 to USD 844 in 2015 (*OECD Social Expenditure Database*). In some countries, including Chile, Japan, Korea, Mexico and Spain, it increased by more than four times over the same period (*OECD Social Expenditure Database*).

Family policies can change the way families function. Depending on the specific policies in place, they can help encourage or discourage behaviours ranging from fertility to parental employment (Thévenon, 2011^[9]; Luci-Greulich and Thévenon, 2013^[10]; Thévenon, 2013^[11]). Generally, it is the overall package of family supports that matters most for family outcomes, rather than the individual policies. For instance, participation in ECEC by children under three appears more effective at boosting women’s employment when tax and leave policies are also supportive (Thévenon, 2016^[12]). The Nordic countries provide some of the clearest examples: governments provide parents with a (nearly) universally accessible continuum of public supports from birth until their children reach their teenage years, all aimed at supporting dual earning and full-time employment for both parents (OECD, 2011^[13]). Not by coincidence, the Nordic countries have higher (full-time) parental employment rates than many OECD countries with more fragmented and disjointed family supports.

Box 3.1. Nordic policy: A “continuum” of support to parents and children

Mindful that gender gaps often emerge in full around the time of parenthood, Nordic policy aims to provide a continuum of support to all parents and children, including single parents, and promote a “dual earner-dual carer” family model for couple households.

Parents can access generous paid leave when children are very young, followed by a place in subsidised ECEC and out-of-school-hours (OSH) services once they enter full-time education. Tax systems encourage paid work by second earners, while paid parental leave systems often supports fathers and mothers to share care responsibilities through individualised “use it or lose it” paid leave entitlements (OECD, 2018^[14]).

For instance, in Denmark there is a period of paid maternity leave, paid paternity leave, and paid parental leave around childbirth. There is an entitlement to a formal place in childcare from when the child is six months old, and the majority of Danish children under age three attend formal childcare. Pre-school runs from age three onwards, and upon entering primary school, out-of-school-hours services are widely available. To support families in caring for elderly and disabled relatives, Denmark also has one of the highest public expenditures (as share of GDP) on long-term care. This universe of care services has helped to lessen the unpaid workload on families (OECD, 2020^[15]).

In Hungary, policy strongly encourages one parent – typically the mother – to care for children when they are very young. Hungary’s paid parental leave is one of the longest in the OECD. At the same time, options for non-parental care for very young children are still limited, but under development: while fees for day care services for children under age three are strongly regulated and affordable (for instance, data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office show that, in 2021, 70% of children enrolled in institutional-type nursery care did not pay a fee for care, and 63% of them ate free of charge in the same place), shortages in supply mean that accessing a place can be difficult in certain settlements. As a general rule, only children of working parents may be admitted to the public nurseries in order to contribute to the employment possibilities of parents raising young children. Policy is much more supportive of mothers’ (full-time) employment once children turn three, at which point parental leave ends and children enter compulsory pre-primary education for at least four hours a day (Gábos and Makay, 2021^[16]).

In recent years, Hungary has introduced several reforms aimed at making it easier for mothers with very young children to return to work, should they wish (see Box 3.2). However, as yet, these policies have had very limited impact on the share of mothers with young children in paid work.

Box 3.2. Summary of important recent changes in family policy in Hungary

- 2011: Introduction of the family tax base allowance – a per-child non-refundable tax allowance deductible from base taxable income.
- 2013: Introduction of reductions in employers’ social contribution tax payments when employing workers from disadvantaged groups, including workers who have recently returned from leave.
- 2014: Introduction of GYED Extra, allowing parents in receipt of parental leave benefits to work unlimited hours once the child turns 12 months old with no loss of benefit, until the child’s second birthday. In 2016, the age limit was lowered to six months old.
- 2015: Lowering of the age of compulsory attendance in pre-primary education from five to three years of age, for at least four hours per day. Home schooling is granted upon request.

- 2015: Introduction of the right to part-time work for all parents with children under age three. By default, this means four hours per day, but other arrangements are possible by mutual agreement. For parents with three or more children, the possibility is available until the youngest child turns six years old.
- 2017: Introduction of the obligation for all local authorities to provide day care services for very young children if at least 40 children under age three live in the area and/or if at least five families request access. The system of nursery care is divided into institutional and service-type forms of care.
- 2018: Release of substantial domestic development funds by the central government to local authorities, earmarked for the creation of new day care places (such actions were started in 2015 with EU funds support).
- 2020: Mothers of four or more children enjoy an exemption of paying personal income tax throughout their careers.
- 2020: Introduction of a grandparents' GYED, whereby grandparents who have not yet retired can become eligible for GYED if they agree to take care of their grandchild while the parent is working. In this case, the grandparent is entitled to the GYED instead of the parent.
- 2021: Increase of the rate of the Infant Care Fee (ICF) from 70% to 100% of the previous income of the mother resulting in a higher income for six months than previously, as taxation of the ICF is more favourable.

3.3. Long leave contributes to the low at-work rate for mothers with very young children

As covered in Chapter 4, Hungary's parental leave system allows mothers to take paid leave until the child's third birthday, with take-up being close to universal in the first two years. The overwhelming majority of leaves users in Hungary are mothers (Eurostat, 2020^[17]).

The stakeholders' consultation conducted as part of this study confirms reluctance towards a return to full-time work before the child is 1.5 years old (OECD, 2021^[8]). It revealed general agreement among respondents that a return to full-time work before the child is a half-year old is inappropriate, and limited support for a return over the following year. Stakeholders stressed that while municipal nurseries must have facilities for children aged below one, a mother with a child that age rarely returns to work then as it would be frowned upon by nursery professionals, peers and society in general.

Returning to work when a child is aged two (when the GYED subsidy ends and the lower-paid GYES begins), rather than three, is considered more socially acceptable and feasible if full-time childcare is provided. Many low-income mothers choose a return to work at this stage, but employers and others warned that mothers who return to work this early may face a double burden in terms of responsibilities and stigmatisation (especially in small towns in the countryside). Some survey respondents view a return to full-time work as only acceptable when the child reaches age three, while only a small minority see four as the preferred age (OECD, 2021^[8]).

Stakeholders are divided regarding the Hungarian Government's provision of support for family-friendly employment of mothers with young children. Yet, they seem to agree that more policy effort is needed in this field, even though they tend to consider GYED Extra as a successful intervention (OECD, 2021^[8]).

3.3.1. The impact of extended breaks for care reasons on women and labour supply

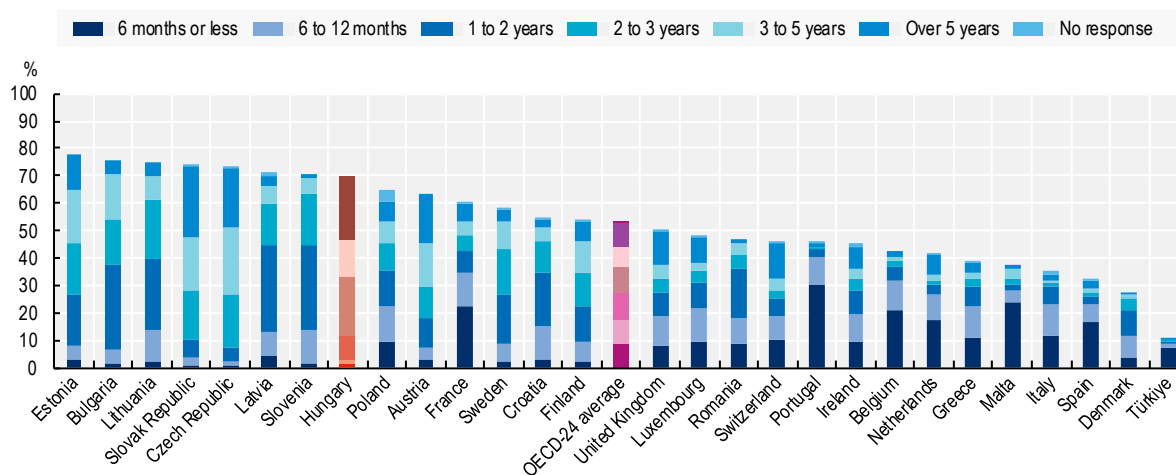
The career breaks and interruptions that women make for family reasons add up. Multiple extended leaves following childbirth have large cumulative effects on women's employment histories, disrupting careers and reducing the total amount of time spent in paid work across the working life. Men usually make far fewer breaks for family reasons, if any. The aggregate effect is that, on average across OECD countries, women's careers are one-third shorter than men's (OECD, 2017_[18]).

Being it so common in Hungary for mothers to take a prolonged period out of work when children are young, the impact of children on women's employment histories is stronger than in many other OECD countries. Data from the EU Labour Force Survey's 2018 ad hoc module show that, in 2018, as many as 23% of women (25- to 64-year-olds) in Hungary reported having taken at least five years out of work for childcare reasons across their working lives (Figure 3.1). This was the second highest share in Europe, behind the Slovak Republic (26%), and well above the average across European OECD countries (8.4%). The share of women in Hungary who reported having taken at least three years out for childcare reasons is even higher (37%), behind only the Slovak Republic (45%) and the Czech Republic (47%).

Most immediately, these lengthy breaks affect women's abilities to build their careers: all else equal, less time spent at work means more missed opportunities and less time to make career progression. Much of the gap in earnings progression is generated before age 40, as women miss many important labour market opportunities during the early stages of their careers (OECD, 2017_[18]). In many OECD countries, though less so in Hungary thanks to the Women 40 programme, it also means less time to accumulate the employment record needed for entitlement to a full state pension (OECD, 2017_[18]).

Figure 3.1. Women in Hungary often take several years out of work for childcare reasons

Share of women (25- to 64-year-olds) who report having ever taken a career break for childcare reasons, by total lifetime length of career breaks for childcare, 2018



Note: Respondents were asked "For the following questions we would like you to look back at your employment life from its beginning until now. In that time, did you not work for at least one continuous month to take care of your children? This can also mean that you had maternity, parental leave, an interruption agreed with your employer, quit your job, shut down your business or did not start work right after you completed your education." Respondents responding positively were then asked "Taking together all those times when you did not work, how long was that, approximately? Please include maternity/paternity and parental leave." Proportions among valid cases only. Countries with large shares of missing responses (greater than 10%) are not shown.

Source: OECD calculations based on the EU Labour Force Survey Ad-hoc Module 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labour-force-survey>.

Lengthy breaks for childcare reasons also carry larger economic costs (OECD, 2012^[19]; OECD, 2018^[14]). Today's economies need all available talent to ensure a sustainable and prosperous future. Having large numbers of women spend years outside of the labour force not only reduces labour supply, but also in many cases represents a less efficient use of skills, talents and human capital investments, since lengthy breaks can have effects on women's careers and job opportunities long after they have returned to work (OECD, 2012^[19]). These concerns are particularly relevant in countries like Hungary, where highly educated mothers are only little less likely than their less educated counterparts to spend a prolonged period outside of paid work when children are very young. Reducing the length of time that women spend outside of work after having children could make a large contribution to closing Hungary's overall gender employment gap and help boost the size of the Hungarian labour force.

3.4. In Hungary, family preferences and limited childcare services help explain many mothers' withdrawal from paid work when children are very young

Parents have different reasons for adjusting their paid work once children arrive. In many instances, the reduction in paid work by mothers may reflect choice and a preference for spending more time with their infants (see Section 3.1 above).

Other factors can influence women's withdrawal from paid work. In some countries, finding a suitable alternative to home care is a challenge, particularly when children are very young, and especially for families with low incomes. Without public support, childcare can be very expensive (OECD, 2020^[20]). Even where public support is available, supply shortages and/or inconvenient locations or opening times can make access difficult. Concerns around quality and the potential impact on child development can also cause reluctance among parents towards the use of childcare services.

Accessing childcare services is challenging for (some) mothers with very young children in Hungary (Figure 3.2). In 2020, 31.2% of mothers with a youngest child aged 0 to 2 said they were not employed and economically inactive because "*suitable care services for children are not available or affordable*". This was by far the highest share among European OECD countries – the next highest, in Ireland, was 20.4% – and well above the European OECD average (6.5%). Importantly, these numbers do not capture the number of mothers who participate in paid work *despite* a lack of suitable care services; in many OECD countries, large numbers of parents make extensive use of informal care services by grandparents or other friends or relatives (OECD, 2020^[21]). Nonetheless, they continue to point towards a lack of suitable childcare services being a substantial barrier to paid work for mothers with very young children in Hungary.

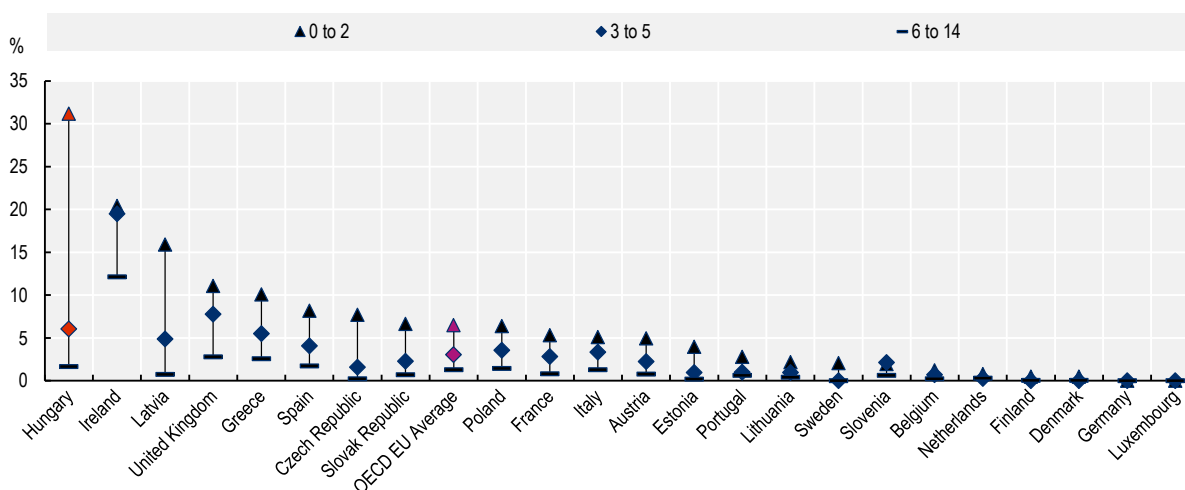
The results from the stakeholders' consultation conducted as part of this study show positive assessments of the efforts to increase public investment in public day care facilities – namely to expand municipal nurseries over the past decade (OECD, 2021^[8]). Local government representatives claimed newly established nurseries seem to be filling up, and mayors of towns with a recently opened nursery mentioned that they might consider further expansion. Interviewees highlighted that the decision to operate a centre depends on political leadership, demographic concerns, labour demand, co-operation between towns/settlements and local government finances. Hungarian officials stressed that the amount of state aid to support the sustainability of childcare facilities and services has increased over the years in Hungary.

The "childcare guarantee" for children below three years of age is *de facto* not completely in place in Hungary for all children, especially in small rural communities. Moreover, while municipal nurseries are required to have the facilities to take in children under one year of age, the option is hardly used. Nursery groups, including visiting nurses – particularly successful at reaching vulnerable and underserved populations (Riding et al., 2021^[22]) – added that low-income families are under-represented as general admittance requires parents' employment despite the fact that the law also provides for the possibility of access to nursery care for disadvantaged children. Taking advantage of this legal possibility, admission often happens on recommendation of visiting nurses and social workers. It is nonetheless important to

note that the Sure Start Children’s Houses, which operate outside the ECEC system, provide complex development for children aged 0-3 living in extreme poverty and have now become a statutory service – also free of charge – funded by national and EU funds, as part of the child protection system. In addition, stakeholder stressed that the lack of trust in state institutions among Roma families contributes to their limited participation in childcare services (OECD, 2021^[8]). Employing Roma workers, and increasing outreach efforts, may further help to address these issues. Different stakeholders stressed that private, smaller, flexible, non-family-provided services, including family nurseries, are an option mainly utilised by higher income households. Co-operation and co-ordination between the municipality and local actors was described as limited (OECD, 2021^[8]).

Figure 3.2. In Hungary, a third of mothers with very young children say they are not looking for work because they cannot access suitable care services

Proportion of women (25- to 54-year-olds) with at least one child (0 to 14) who are inactive because suitable care services for children are not available or affordable, by age of youngest child, 2020



Note: Individuals are classified as “inactive because suitable care services for children are not available or affordable” if they are i) economically inactive and report that they are not seeking or available for work ii) report that they are not seeking working because they are “looking after children or incapacitated adults” and iii) report that they are inactive, not seeking work and looking after children or incapacitated adults because either “suitable care services for children are not available or affordable” or “suitable care services for both children and ill, disabled and elderly are not available or affordable”. Proportions among valid cases only. Data for the United Kingdom refer to 2019.

Source: OECD estimates based on the EU Labour Force Survey, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labour-force-survey>.

3.5. Limited part-time and flexible working opportunities may be another reason for low levels of paid work among mothers with very young children

In many OECD countries, large numbers of parents use flexible working arrangements (e.g. part-time work, flexible start and finishing times, teleworking, etc.) to help reconcile their work and family responsibilities. These arrangements are particularly valuable when other family supports, such as childcare, are inaccessible or underdeveloped (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011^[23]). However, many parents also use flexible working in *combination* with other supports. Flexible arrangements can help parents work around childcare opening hours, for example, or the availability of care by partners or other relatives.

Part-time work can be useful for parents looking to re-integrate themselves back into the labour force after a period of leave, as well as for parents who wish to maintain employment continuity while still spending time at home with their children. Where there are concerns about the impact of long non-parent care on child development, it can also help parents combine paid work with at-home parent care. In Hungary, part-time work is very uncommon (Figure 2.12), for both men and women, including mothers.

All mothers with very young children have the option of working part-time hours, should they wish: since 2015, employers have been obliged to offer parents of children under three years of age part-time hours (equivalent to half of the standard full-time working day) if requested, with no option of refusal (for parents with at least three children, the possibility is available until the youngest child turns five). From 2020, this has been extended to under the age of four, in case of at least three children, until the youngest child turns six. By restricting the entitlement only to parents, the measure could potentially discourage firms from hiring young women or lead to women employees being channelled into different and lower (“mommy track”) career paths (OECD, 2019^[24]). Recent tax reforms may also reduce its effectiveness further: since January 2019, employers have been required to pay the same social contribution tax for both part-time and full-time workers; previously, in the case of part-time workers, employer’s contributions were proportional to the hours worked (OECD, 2020^[25]). Yet, data from 2018 show that just 1.5% of all mothers with a youngest child aged 0 to 2 were at work in a part-time job – the lowest share among OECD countries with available data. Such a low rate suggests either that few mothers are aware of the right to part-time work, that few are interested in part-time work, and/or that few feel able to request the option from their employer.

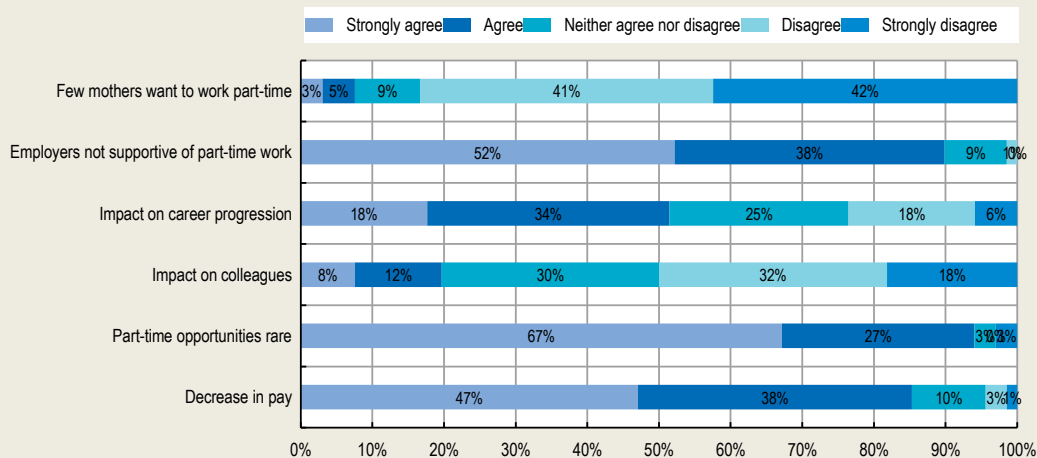
Other forms of flexible working are also uncommon among parents in Hungary (OECD, 2016^[26]), although telework has become more common following the onset of COVID-19 (see Chapter 6). The stakeholders’ consultation conducted as part of this study corroborated the above evidence (OECD, 2021^[8]) (Box 3.3).

Box 3.3. Stakeholders views on part-time and flexible work

The stakeholders’ consultation conducted as part of this study revealed that the opportunities and support for part-time work are perceived as rare (Figure 3.3). While only a minority of survey respondents think that only few mothers would be willing to work part-time, most respondents identify scarce available opportunities, a lack of support from employers, and disincentives related to reduced pay as key obstacles to mothers’ participation in part-time work. Part-time employment is not considered an option for low-income families. Various stakeholders indicated that, despite the support provided by the GYED Extra, especially for low-income families it may not make economic sense (for the mother) to work part-time given the high costs of e.g. hiring a baby-sitter.

Figure 3.3. Opportunities and support for part-time work are rare and it does not pay enough

Distribution of survey responses regarding reasons for low part-time employment of mothers with dependent children



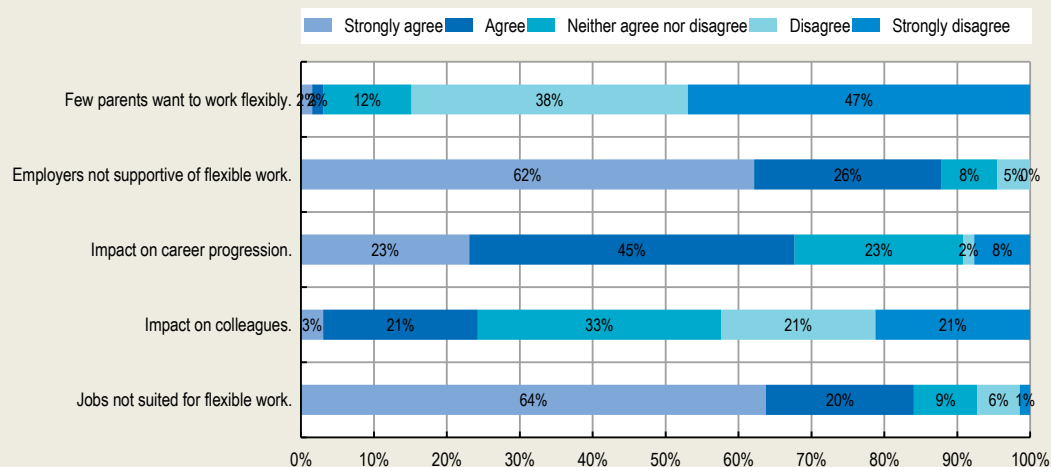
Source: OECD (2021^[8]), “Technical Support to Reduce the Gender Employment Gap in the Hungarian Labour Market – Summary report on stakeholders’ views and beliefs”.

Most survey respondents disagree that only few parents want flexible work arrangements, but many agree that most jobs are unsuited for flexible arrangements and that employers seem unsupportive of flexible work (Figure 3.4).

For both part-time and flexible work, concerns about career progression might also play a role, while there is only limited concern regarding the impact on colleagues. Exchanges in experiences between human resource (HR) managers of local employers was mentioned as a good practice that could help workplaces to become more supportive and innovative through flexible work arrangements and accommodating employees’ childcare needs.

Figure 3.4. Many jobs are not considered suited for flexible work and employers are generally not supportive

Distribution of survey responses regarding reasons for low flexible employment of parents with dependent children

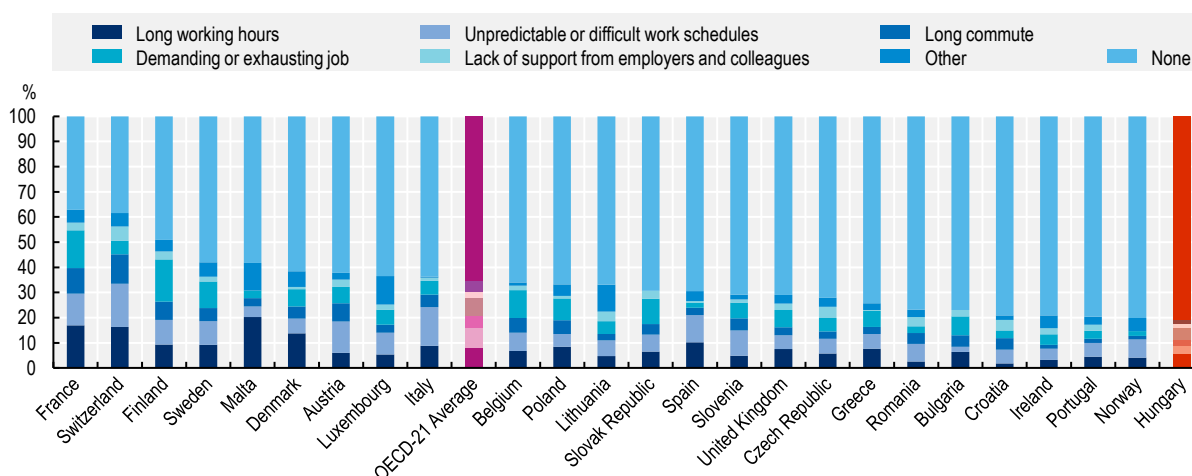


Source: OECD (2021^[8]), “Technical Support to Reduce the Gender Employment Gap in the Hungarian Labour Market – Summary report on stakeholders’ views and beliefs”.

Despite the lack of part-time and flexible working opportunities, self-reported levels of work-life conflict are no higher among women and mothers in Hungary than in other OECD countries. For example, according to data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) 2015, almost three-quarters (72.5%) of employed women in Hungary report that their job “never” or “hardly ever” interferes with their family life (ISSP, 2018^[27]). This is the second *highest* rate among covered OECD countries, after Estonia (72.7%). Similarly, data from the EU Labour Force Survey show that employed women with caring responsibilities (for either children or adult relatives) in Hungary are more likely than their counterparts in all other EU member states to report *no* special difficulties in reconciling their job with their care responsibilities (Figure 3.5). This might reflect the responses from a limited population (given that most mothers of young children are not at work) but also preferences, choices and/or self-perception biases related to the traditional values around gender roles and childcare for very young children in Hungary (see Section 3.1).

Figure 3.5. In Hungary, relatively few employed women with care responsibilities report conflicts between work and family life

Distribution of employed women (18- to 64-year-olds) with caring responsibilities, by main job-related barrier to work-family reconciliation, if any, 2018



Note: Women with caring responsibilities are those that report caring regularly for own or partner’s children (< 15 years) or for incapacitated relatives (15 years and older). Respondents were asked “Is there something about your main job that makes it especially difficult to reconcile it with your care responsibilities? Please indicate the main difficulty”. They could answer “No” or “No special difficulty”. Proportions among valid cases only. Countries with large shares of missing responses (greater than 10%) are not shown.

Source: OECD calculations based on the EU Labour Force Survey Ad-hoc Module 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labour-force-survey>.

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