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**NEMEK KÖZÖTTI KERESETI KÜLÖNBSÉG ÉS CSALÁDPOLITIKAI
INTÉZKEDÉSEK: ÖSSZEHASONLÍTÓ ELEMZÉS A SZEGREGÁCIÓ
ÉS A GYERMEKVÁLLALÁS HATÁSÁRÓL A NEMEK KÖZÖTTI
FIZETÉSI KÜLÖNBSÉGEKRE A MAGYAR MUNKAERŐPIACI
KÖRNYEZETBEN**

**GENDER WAGE GAP AND FAMILY POLICIES: A COMPARATIVE
ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF SEGREGATION AND PARENTHOOD
ON THE GENDER PAY GAP AND ECONOMIC DISPARITIES IN THE
HUNGARIAN LABOR LANDSCAPE**

Csorba Melinda Lilla

Konzulens: Dr. Szántay Antal Péter

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1. Introduction

According to global indices of gender (in)equality, Hungary ranks relatively poorly, particularly when compared to other developed or, more specifically, EU nations. It stands at the 56th position on the Gender Inequality Index (UNDP Human Development Reports, 2024) and even lower at 99th on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2023). Within the European Union, its ranking is even more discouraging, at 26th place, only beating Romania, according to the Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023a). Despite this negative general landscape, its performance in economic indicators is comparatively better. Specifically, in the Economic Participation and Opportunity domain of the Global Gender Gap Index, Hungary holds the 62nd position globally (World Economic Forum, 2023) and ranks 11th within the European Union in the domain of work (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023a), depicting consistent and dedicated progress in recent years. However, despite these advancements, disparities persist. In 2022, women's average gross hourly earnings in Hungary were 17.5% lower than men's (Eurostat, 2024a). While entry-level young workers only face a smaller wage gap of 7%, this gap significantly widens as women enter childbearing age (Eurostat, 2024b), along with a corresponding increase in employment discrepancies (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023c).

1.1. Purpose and Significance of the Study

In this paper, within the framework of economic gender inequality, past decompositions of the unadjusted gender pay gap are considered in light of more recent statistics. Later, emphasis is placed on motherhood as a crucial contributing factor to the overall gender earnings gap. A comparative analysis of Hungarian, Swedish, Danish, Austrian, Czech, and Latvian data is conducted – with the purpose of reaching conclusions focused on Hungary – to establish the grounds to explore and assess mothers' experiences in the workforce through a qualitative lens. Hence, the study aims to contribute to scholarly discourse by not only integrating and synthesizing cross-country statistical data to reach valuable insights for Hungarian policymaking but also validating the conclusions by considering the highly diverse situations and suggestions of 75 Hungarian mothers.

While substantial research has been conducted on gender equality across Europe, aiming for sustainable development, social justice, and economic empowerment, there remains a notable gap for a comprehensive analysis and examination that delves into the evolution of the gender pay gap in Hungary. This exploration extends to its implications for both economic and social

development, alongside the reconsideration of family policies and available working arrangements, taking into account the plausible impact of motherhood on these metrics. This paper aims to bridge this gap by drawing insights from international literature and investigating findings in the Hungarian context, situated within the broader European landscape. As policymakers continue to endeavor to develop strategies that may potentially mitigate gender disparities on a global scale, contextualizing and analyzing these trends within diverse socioeconomic and cultural environments is essential. Thus, the limited availability of contemporary Hungarian literature warrants attention.

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

The research paper seeks to address the following issues and fulfill the outlined objectives.

RQ1: What are the primary factors contributing to the unadjusted gender pay gap – or the differences in hourly wages – in Hungary? This study aims to identify the key elements relating to the wage gap in Hungary by synthesizing previous decompositions carried out by Eurostat and more recent statistical data, primarily from 2022.

RQ2: Where does the impact of motherhood manifest itself in the broader disparities in economic activity and the gender pay gap in Hungary? To answer this question, the objective is to investigate where the impact of motherhood is most pronounced compared to selected countries, including Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Latvia, and Sweden.

RQ3: How does this impact the subjective personal experiences of working mothers? To find out, this study surveys working mothers in Hungary, particularly regarding their childcare responsibilities and reintegration into the workforce.

RQ4: What is the potential of family policies to help narrow down the gap and improve mothers' stance in the labor market? The aim is to assess the effectiveness of existing family policies, evaluate their alignment with international practices, and investigate the perceptions of mothers to finally explore potential areas for improvement to promote gender equality in Hungary. Here, deducting implications for policymakers and employers is essential.

1.3. Motivations and Limitations

In recent decades, Claudia Goldin's seminal work has shed light on the enduring issue of gender inequality in labor markets, particularly in the United States. Her research has underscored the significance of historical perspectives in understanding the roots and manifestations of the gender gap in education, employment, and economic outcomes. The topic of my choice was greatly influenced by her groundbreaking achievement of receiving the Nobel Prize in

Economics. By extending her major theoretical frameworks to the EU, this thesis seeks to assess the extent to which her findings hold true in a European context.

However, the restricted availability and accessibility of longitudinal administrative data and household panel data heavily modified the scope of this research paper, especially upon encountering difficulty in obtaining historical data. Furthermore, while decomposition methods are generally esteemed for identifying contributory relationships to the gender pay gap, the use of published statistical data may also be valuable to derive hypotheses – with limitations, warranting further research. Although the sample size of the primary research findings introduces additional limitations, the responses represent a diverse array of experiences, minimizing the risk of serious oversights and enhancing the generalizability of some findings.

1.4. Structural Outline

The sections of this paper are structured as follows. A thorough summary of the available literature is given in the following chapter, providing a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical background. It commences by establishing a broader context before narrowing the focus to the findings with close relevance to the specific focus of this dissertation. This high-level overview is pivotal as it underpins the findings. The deductive methodology of this study, consisting of a cross-national comparative statistical analysis of a selection of European countries and a qualitative narrative inquiry facilitated by the analysis of the 75 responses gathered through a semi-structured survey, is shown in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 present and discuss the findings and their implication for policymaking, while Section 6 concludes.

1.5. Conclusion and Thesis Statement

In a nutshell, through an examination of women's and mothers' situations in the Hungarian labor force, this research paper seeks to propose relevant implications for gender-based and family policymaking. By addressing where the impact of motherhood manifests itself in the gender pay gap, and – having acknowledged that – what the potential of family policies is to help narrow the gap down, this study aims to contribute suggestions to improve mothers' stance in the labor market. Ultimately, this paper contends that in the immediate term, alongside assessing current policies, it is essential to supplement them with the promotion of flexibility and a shift in employers' mindsets. Additionally, a long-term objective should entail greater involvement of men in caregiving responsibilities and unpaid labor. Until then, the responsibility should be lifted from mothers' shoulders through the provision of childcare services.

2. Literature Review

This section provides a thorough overview of relevant international literature, aiming to establish a well-informed background and context for the research aims and objectives.

2.1. Progress in Global Gender (In)equality

Much of the literature and scholarly work addressing gender inequality has been published over the past eight decades, although indications of its origins trace back as early as the Neolithic Age (Peña and Sanjuán, 2019). In modern terms, gender inequality is generally defined as the „[l]egal, social and cultural situation in which sex and/or gender determine different rights and dignity for women and men” (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024a). It is also referred to as „the departure from parity in the representation of women and men in key dimensions of social life” (Young, Fort and Danner, 1994, p. 55). The latter conceptualization reflects and underscores its multidimensional nature which manifests in various practical forms, as delineated in studies examining dimensions such as political representation, pay gaps and wage differentials, and disparities in free time, among others (Stefani and Prati, 2021; Walby, 2004).

In recent decades, there has been an increase in methodologies and measures aimed at quantifying this complex phenomenon by integrating data from various domains to achieve a comprehensive figure indicative of progress in combating this issue. For instance, the Gender Equality Index (GEI) developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) incorporates six fundamental domains: work, money, knowledge, time, power, and health (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024b), while the Gender Inequality Index (GII) fuses indicators of reproductive health, empowerment, and the labor market landscape into one metric (UNDP Human Development Reports, 2024). Another composite indicator, the Historical Gender Equality Index, evaluates gender parity through socioeconomic, health-related, household-related, and political spheres (Dilli, Carmichael and Rijpma, 2019). Very similarly, the Gender Gap Index (GGI) integrates metrics of economic engagement and opportunity, educational attainment, health outcomes, and political empowerment and is published in the annual Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum (Goldin, 2007; World Economic Forum, 2023). This proliferation and widespread adoption of metrics lead to heightened attention to addressing gender inequality, reflecting the need for concentrated effort across an array of aspects.

Especially since contemporary consensus among scholars suggests that gender inequality yields adverse effects and repercussions on all levels. The global gender gap in employment and labor

force participation not only diminishes women's quality of life but also signifies economic inefficiencies as failing to utilize the talents of half the population results in nations wasting valuable and scarce human capital resources (Goldin, 2007). Therefore, serious costs occur due to the underutilization of women in the talent pool (Jacobsen, 2013). Despite Barro and Lee (1994) implying that in education, gender inequality may essentially bolster economic growth, more recent literature widely acknowledges the contrary view. Gender inequality in both education and employment is now undeniably recognized as detrimental to economic progress, incurring large costs borne by the entire society (Abu-Ghaida and Klasen, 2004; Dollar and Gatti, 1999; Jayachandran, 2015; Klasen, 1999; Klasen and Lamanna, 2009; Silva and Klasen, 2021). On the other hand, equality was proven to have beneficial outcomes, especially for developing countries (Pervaiz et al., 2023). The McKinsey Global Institute went as far as to quantify it in 2015 – a "best in region" scenario could have contributed up to \$12 trillion, equivalent to 11 percent of the annual GDP by 2025, while in a "full potential" scenario, the possible addition could have reached as high as \$28 trillion or 26 percent (Woetzel et al., 2015).

Fortunately, due to consistent efforts, over the 20th century, noticeable progress and significant advancements were observed toward gender equality, particularly concerning education and workforce participation. In general, catalysts for this global progress include the expansion of the service sector, technological developments, and innovation in household appliances, as well as the invention and accessibility of the birth control pill (see Section 2.3.1). The resulting increased participation in the labor force was followed by increases in investments in girls and women, thereby creating a pathway for more opportunities (Carmichael, Dilli and Rijpma, 2014; Jayachandran, 2015; The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, 2023). This trend persisted into the positive developments of the 21st century as well through the increased presence of highly qualified women in academia and across various previously male-dominated industries (Rosa, Drew and Canavan, 2020).

Despite the notable accomplishments and the results of a positive trajectory in the realm of gender equality, contemporary discussion underscores reservations regarding ever realizing genuine parity. This skepticism is fueled particularly by newly emerging challenges, such as the use of modern communication media and the implementation of neoliberal frameworks reinforcing the role of market forces and competition (Evans, 2017). Furthermore, while the strides in female educational attainment vis-à-vis their male counterparts are supported by current literature, several authors have begun to examine the growing disparity in representation as women advance through the various stages of an academic career, often described by scholars

with the metaphor of the ‘leaky academic pipeline’. In this aspect, work-life imbalance emerges as a prominent obstacle to gender equality with a host of other challenges disproportionately affecting the female gender (Rosa, Drew and Canavan, 2020; Ysseldyk et al., 2019).

Despite lingering concerns, Europe stands out as one of the most advanced regions across numerous measures of gender equality, with promising prospects for the future (Dollar and Gatti, 1999). Gender mainstreaming is the primary tool for achieving the desired perspective of gender equality in all fields, stages, and levels through the promotion of a novel approach to gendered policy practice and a new gendered strategy (Council of Europe, 2024; Walby, 2005). It finds integration and discussion within numerous agendas and frameworks outlining future improvement, including the Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023 of the Council of Europe and initiatives aligned with UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 (*SDG5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*) like the EU Gender Action Plan within the broader EU Gender Equality Strategy (Council of Europe, 2018; European Commission, 2020a; European Commission, 2020b). The European Commission has established an extensive policy context aimed at ensuring equitable treatment, fair compensation, and equal advancement opportunities for women in academic fields and the workforce (Rosa, Drew and Canavan, 2020). However, within the EU landscape, Hungary recently still faced challenges in establishing the prerequisites necessary for implementing an effective gender mainstreaming strategy (Krizsan and Zenta, 2006).

2.2. Economic Inequality and the Gender Pay Gap

Economic inequality – the disparities in economic outcomes and opportunities between men and women encompassing areas such as employment, wages, wealth, and access to economic resources – stands as a central focus of all indices, regimes, and agendas, with a crucial gauge being the gender wage gap. This disparity persists as a crucial issue globally. From a historical perspective, female paid labor has always been undervalued, resulting in lower average wages, and despite past advancements, women continue to earn less than men for comparable work (Evans, 2017; Stojmenovska, Steinmetz and Völker, 2021; Weichselbaumer and Winter-Ebmer, 2005).

On the one hand, directly contributing factors are sectoral and occupational segregation leading to women being clustered in lower-paying fields and positions. Regarding the latter, women frequently lack presence in top-level roles, and their career progression tends to lag behind. Extensive evidence highlights the overrepresentation of men in positions and roles of workplace leadership, exceeding what can be explained by skills, qualifications, economic dynamics, and

market forces (Dämmrich and Blossfeld, 2016; Longarela, 2016; Smith, 2002). Rather, this phenomenon was suggested to be attributed to the perception of men as more deserving of and more suitable for high-status positions (Koenig et al., 2011; Ridgeway, 2011). There are many levels to the conscious or unconscious bias towards women in career development: they are less likely to be promoted, receive fewer opportunities, and are challenged less often, resulting in their under-representation at higher levels of the organization (Stamarski and Hing, 2015). This largely increases the gender pay gap, as noted by Stojmenovska, Steinmetz and Völker (2021), who highlighted that as the level of authority increases, the wage gap widens considerably, despite performing the same responsibilities and activities.

On the other hand, determining the precise impact of various factors on the gender wage gap, whether affecting it directly or indirectly, poses a challenge. Scholars have increasingly turned to decomposition methods as the primary approach, established by Oaxaca (1973) and Blinder (1973), dissecting the observed wage differential into various components, each assigned with an economic interpretation. Similar analytical investigations and findings have frequently been inconclusive when attempting to assess these contributory connections, with a significant portion of the wage gap remaining unexplained – meaning it was not found to directly stem from measurable components or observed differences like educational or occupational disparities, hours worked or years of experience (Böheim, Hofer and Zulehner, 2007; Ligocká, 2022; Matteazzi, Pailhé and Solaz, 2017). Instead, this unexplained gap could be attributed to many different factors – primarily unobserved differences – including, for example, discrimination or unconscious bias against women, risk aversion, attitude, or competitiveness (Antonczyk, Fitzenberger and Sommerfeld, 2010; Böheim, Hofer and Zulehner, 2007; Böheim et al., 2011).

The steady progress in narrowing the gender pay gap in the long run – over decades throughout the 20th century – is primarily accounted for by enhanced labor productivity due to improvements in observed differences, as evidenced by the meta-analysis of 63 countries by Weichselbaumer and Winter-Ebmer (2005). However, a more recent study spanning from 2002 to 2007 suggests that the relative advancements in unobserved characteristics among Austrian women are also beginning to contribute to their movement toward equity (Böheim *et al.*, 2012). The latest findings in the country underscore and reinforce substantial decreases in both the explained and unexplained components over the past decade, with observed and unobserved attributes improving simultaneously (Böheim, Fink and Zulehner, 2020).

When delving into the underlying causes of the gender pay gap beyond disparities in observed and unobserved factors, a plausible explanation could be the penalty that women (or mothers) experience due to having children. To date, several studies have investigated how exactly motherhood affects sectors within the broader context of gender inequality. As a result, it was found to hold major significance in the array of the wage penalty. Considering that the majority of women are mothers who primarily bear the responsibility for childcare, any repercussions or penalty related to motherhood impacts a substantial portion of women in the labor force and thereby largely contributes to broader gender differences such as the pay gap (Sissoko, 2007). Awareness of this issue is not recent; therefore, scholars have attempted to comprehensively investigate all facets of this phenomenon.

2.3. The Child Penalty: Is Fertility Causing the Gender Pay Gap?

2.3.1. The Work of Claudia Goldin

Claudia Goldin made significant contributions to the discussion by examining the situation of women, followed by married women and eventually mothers, in the United States labor market from a historical standpoint, laying the groundwork for further research in this field.

First, drawing from her earlier scholarly work, Goldin (1994; 2007) reveals that as nations progress and develop over time, the engagement of married women in the labor force undergoes a pattern characterized by an initial decline followed by an increase, forming a U-shaped curve. During the early stages of economic development, women play a crucial role in contributing to family income, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, light manufacturing, and household production. However, as industrialization advances, there is a decrease in female labor force participation due to the shift of economic activities from the household and family-owned enterprises to formal market settings largely dominated by male workers. Later, there is a resurgence in women's participation in the labor force.

Regarding this resurgence, Goldin (2006) separated the early stages of the evolutionary shift in the United States throughout the 20th century into three distinct phases. This transformation unfolds gradually from the midpoint of the U-shaped curve, where female workforce engagement reached its lowest point due to various legal and societal constraints. Marriage bars, prevalent until around the 1950s, prohibited the employment of married women. Typically marrying at a young age and having limited options for divorce meant that they had little opportunity to ever enter the workforce (Goldin, 1988). Additionally, stigmas and norms further hindered their participation during this period.

However, at the same time, new job opportunities started to emerge, including part-time roles, coinciding with advancements in technology and the rise of the service sector. This expansion in possibilities, coupled with increased aggregate demand, facilitated a notable increase in married women's participation in the labor force. As women in the United States obtained equal legal rights by around 1970 (Goldin, 2023) and they started to shift away from the traditional “wife” status enjoying the decrease in social stigma associated with women working, more opportunities on the job market also began to appear including positions in white-collar professions and other ‘nice jobs’ (Goldin, 2007). The introduction of the oral contraceptive pill enabled young women in the 1960s and 1970s to manage their fertility and strategize their careers accordingly (Goldin, 2007; Goldin and Katz, 2000; 2002). As they gained improved foresight regarding their future employment prospects, they started to pursue the aforementioned occupations and dedicate themselves to career advancement and education, thereby unknowingly initiating the quiet revolution (Goldin, 2006; 2007). As a result, there was an increase in female education levels and comparable rates of entry into professional programs were witnessed along with a reduction in gender disparities in workforce participation, but gender earnings gaps persist (The Committee for the Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, 2023).

Recently, Goldin (2014) illustrated that differences in education as well as occupational selection and choice have diminished in importance over time, even though they initially explained a significant portion of the earnings gap. Conversely, gender differences within occupations were seen to gain importance and scholars’ attention, especially as Bertrand, Goldin, and Katz (2010) further elaborated that these gaps mostly arise and escalate following childbirth due to extended breaks from employment or resuming work only on a part-time basis. These impacts of childbearing and parenthood have enduring effects on women's wage trajectories.

A noteworthy illustration of this phenomenon can be observed among professionals in the business and financial sectors. Despite male and female MBAs initially earning nearly identical salaries upon entering their careers, a divergence in earnings quickly emerges favoring males. This discrepancy is primarily attributed to the presence of children, which correlates with reduced accumulation of job experience, more frequent career interruptions, shorter working hours, and significant declines in earnings for females, while their male counterparts do not experience similar holdbacks. In a nutshell, career interruptions with all these consequences

result in substantial earnings losses, and the majority of career discontinuities are attributed to motherhood and caregiving responsibilities (Bertrand, Goldin, and Katz, 2010).

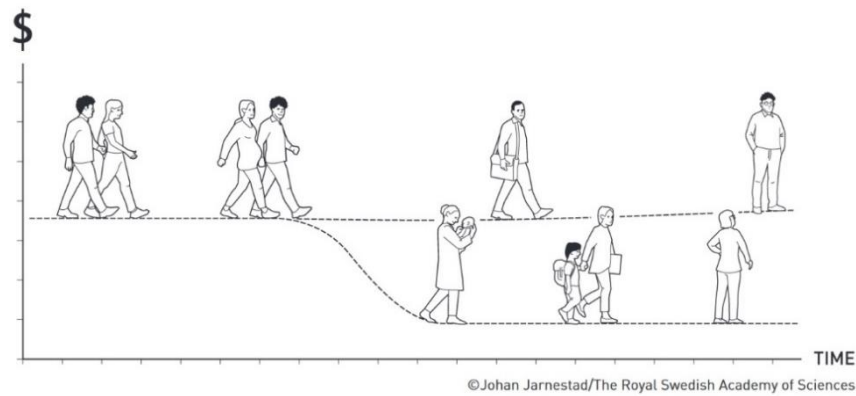
Moreover, Goldin and Katz (2011) and Goldin (2014) presented empirical findings indicating that the absence of workplace flexibility accepted by employers exacerbates the impact of parenthood. In their investigation, they observed a wage penalty associated with requiring flexibility to accommodate women and mothers as primary caregivers. Conversely, there is a wage premium for being available at all times, primarily benefiting men.

While “Claudia Goldin’s work is a *goldmine* for understanding the gender pay gap and women’s empowerment” (Casarico, 2023), its theories and overall findings and conclusions rely exclusively on data from the United States, driving scholars to explore the subject further. Considerable literature also exists for Europe, with key writings drawing inspiration from Claudia Goldin's research.

2.3.2. Child Penalty in Europe

It is widely recognized within European scholarly discourse as well that the life transition of young adults into parenthood significantly contributes to the disparity between genders and it negatively impacts the earned income of women (Sani, 2015). While both males and females from the entry level advance similarly up until the point of childbearing, upon becoming fathers, men tend to climb up the career ladder to higher-level positions with more authority and responsibility, whereas mothers face impediments to their professional progress (Bygren and Gähler, 2012). This phenomenon is illustrated in Figure 1 of Claudia Goldin's model, where the career paths of women and men follow a parallel trajectory until the arrival of their first child, sharply diverge following childbirth, and continue to remain hugely unequal thereafter (Kleven, Landais, and Sogaard, 2019; Kleven et al., 2019). This demonstrates the challenges women encounter in fully compensating for the brief interruption in their careers when they must redirect their time and energy toward childcare responsibilities instead of work.

Figure 1. The influence of childbearing on the divergent career paths of males and females



Source: The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences

As various aspects of inequality are gradually being addressed, especially in Scandinavian and other developed countries striving for equality, Kleven, Landais, and Søgaaard (2019) suggest that nearly all remaining gender disparities can be attributed to parenthood, with a significant portion of this stemming from the differing impacts of childbirth on men and women – usually with women taking on a lot more care responsibilities (Kleven et al., 2020). While most countries are distant from attaining the level of equality evident in Denmark, thus restricting the generalizability of these arguments, this literature remains highly valuable for examining the issue of parenthood as it helps mitigate the potential distortions arising from factors unaccounted for. It was argued by Chabanet (2021) that many other gender disparities in employment, such as part-time work and slower career advancement, are interconnected with broader inequalities, such as the unequal distribution of household and childcare responsibilities once again, which primarily fall on women so a lot can be traced back to the argument of the impact of parenthood. From this perspective, the study of Zajíčková and Zajíček (2021b) in the Czech Republic also attributed the gender pay gap mostly to parenthood.

However, considering all the effects on children, in this scenario, even in the case of equal pay for equal work, the analyses of the wage gap still reveal substantial gender inequality related to childcare responsibilities, as the practicalities of balancing work and childcare remain a significant challenge for women (Kleven, Landais, and Søgaaard, 2019). Therefore, existing literature extends beyond the concept of equal pay for equal work, which, from a legal standpoint, ought to be the standard in advanced societies. It delves into the broader context, highlighting how women's lifetime earnings are affected differently compared to their male counterparts. Accordingly, Kleven, Landais and Søgaaard (2019, p. 182) defined the child penalty as “*the percentage by which women fall behind men [in their career and work] due to children*”. In their study, the earnings gap is assumed to stem from three margins: labor force

participation, hours worked, and wage rates – all of which were found to be significantly impacted by the presence of children (Kleven, Landais and Søgaaard, 2019). According to Jerome, Dustmann and Stevens (2017), the monetary costs of fertility – as in the costs of having children – consist of a blend of changes in occupational choices, directly lost earnings, diminished investments in skills and development, the atrophy of unused and unpracticed skills during periods of non-employment and a reduction in work hours. However, if the observed effects result from women voluntarily modifying aspects of their work and career in response to motherhood, knowingly accepting lower wages or professional development opportunities in return for family-friendly amenities, then it may not be deemed a penalty (Kleven, Landais and Søgaaard, 2019). However, since such adjustments are often not captured in administrative and statistical data, analyzing these dynamics can pose challenges. Despite scholars' recognition of this phenomenon, several studies indicate their inability to fully account for it, or question whether they should, given the varying definitions of these penalties.

Despite the acknowledged limitations, the study of Kleven, Landais and Søgaaard (2019) presents a detailed decomposition of gender inequality in earnings, aiming to establish the proportion of child-related gender inequality, education-related, and residual gender inequality in Denmark. The proportion of disparities attributed to children relative to other contributing factors was found to have significantly risen over time, increasing from 40 to 80 percent over the span of 33 years. Additionally, the penalty associated with parenthood was observed to escalate with the number of children (Kleven, Landais, and Søgaaard, 2019). Kleven et al. (2019) broaden the geographical scope of their study and investigate a larger pool of countries expanding beyond the figures of Denmark. The results validate that substantial penalties related to parenthood are widespread and demonstrate consistency in general trends across a broader area. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the long-run impact of parenthood and children varies significantly among some countries and researchers also observed notable distinctions in the immediate effects of these penalties (Kleven et al., 2019).

2.3.3. Policy Context

One avenue of research into the disparities in child penalties across countries and regions focuses on governmental policies and regulatory frameworks, as suggested by Kleven et al. (2019). While family policies – such as parental leave and childcare provision – are assumed to hold significant potential in mitigating gender inequality stemming from parenthood (Kleven et al., 2020), the long-term effects of these policies and subsidies were found to be minimal or negligible (Kleven et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, short-term impacts of parental leave have been observed, wherein an extension of paid and job-protected leave led to negative effects like larger short-term child penalties in both earnings and employment (Kleven et al., 2019). Due to the short-term negative consequence on labor supply, these measures were suggested to have had a counterproductive influence, hence, despite the substantial expansion of family policies, their impact on gender parity has been found limited (Kleven et al., 2020). These findings resonate with concepts discussed by Goldin (2014), emphasizing that gender convergence is less contingent on governmental intervention than on inherent features of the labor market dynamics (Kleven et al., 2020). Similarly, Olivetti and Petrongolo (2017) concluded that extended parental leave rights show scant evidence of overall positive effects on female outcomes. Even though Sissoko (2007) found that parental leave and childcare policies may reduce the pay differential between non-mothers and mothers, they also emphasized how they could potentially widen the gap compared to male coworkers or fathers due to labor force withdrawals and the resultant loss of experience, skills, and opportunities. Instead, policies with stronger evidence of reducing gender disparities appear to be early childhood spending and in-work benefits or support, suggesting that facilitating the role of working mothers may hold more significance and more sustainable equality than the duration of leave or the financial support offered during parental leave (Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017). In line with this, Sani (2015) further discovered that in regions where parental income support is more substantial and mothers can rely on alternative sources of income outside of employment, a relative decline in earnings for mothers does not necessarily equate to a relative decline in overall income, at least in the short term. However, a more sustainable strategy appears in regions with lower parental income support, where the negative impact of childbirth on mothers' earnings is less pronounced since they prioritize remaining in the workforce following childbirth with reduced hours. This is particularly advantageous considering that taking full-time unpaid leave incurs greater wage penalties compared to taking part-time unpaid leave for the same duration (Dominguez-Folgueras, González, and Lapuerta, 2021).

2.3.4. Motherhood Penalty and Fatherhood Premium

In correlation with Claudia Goldin's exploration of the disparities associated with being an "on-call" parent versus an "on-call" employee, European literature also examines two distinct aspects of inequalities related to parenthood: the motherhood penalty and the fatherhood premium. The motherhood penalty, which plays a significant role in perpetuating the contemporary gender wage gap, refers to the systematic disadvantages and hurdles faced by

women after they become mothers, often resulting in lower earnings compared to their childless counterparts since their pay decreases as they become mothers (Davies and Pierre, 2005; Yu and Hara, 2021).

This aspect has been extensively discussed within the context of the child penalty, as the two concepts are deeply intertwined. However, beyond the impact of childcare responsibilities and temporary career interruptions, even when these factors are no longer applicable and women are prepared to re-engage in their careers, the status of motherhood is suggested to continue influencing their professional experiences on an ongoing basis through bias.

A segment of gender inequality manifests in discriminatory practices against women by Human Resources (HR) departments, particularly evident in the treatment of mothers, thus contributing to the motherhood penalty. Heilman and Okimoto (2008) note that mothers often face additional biases in selection and performance evaluation processes. Moreover, mothers and part-time workers, who are predominantly women and mothers as well, are perceived to have significantly lower chances of promotion, and the perception is reinforced by studies showing that women who are mothers are recommended for promotion less than women who are not mothers or men with or without children (Brüggemann, 2023; Heilman and Okimoto, 2008). Discrimination by HR and leadership also explains why the across-employer motherhood penalty is larger than the within-employer penalty – as conscious or unconscious biases tend to be more pronounced towards new recruits compared to women who become mothers while already employed, as the latter group may have built a level of trust with their employers while the others are perceived as mothers on the first impression (Yu and Hara, 2021).

The case of the motherhood penalty in the Czech Republic is a subject of discussion in pertinent literature. Several studies have noted that the implementation of the Antidiscrimination Act in 2009 led to a significant reduction in the motherhood penalty, with figures showing lower disparities in later years compared to before the legislation was enacted, which supports the discriminatory explanation of the penalty. Despite the improvements, numerous obstacles still hinder mothers from increasing their participation in the labor market, primarily wage penalties attributed to factors such as diminished work experience and intensity, relating to the career interruptions and child penalty sources (Zajíčková, Zajíček and Rašticová, 2020; Zajíčková and Zajíček, 2020).

As seen, the motherhood penalty largely overlaps with the child penalty, but the introduction of the fatherhood premium adds more complexity to the landscape. None of the findings and arguments in previously reviewed literature offer an explanation for why the wide gender pay

gap observed between mothers and fathers also encompasses a component where fathers earn more than men without children (Koslowski, 2010). However, data from several sources have identified fatherhood to be associated with a pay premium (Killewald, 2013; Yu and Hara, 2021). While women have been found to be undervalued on the job market when focusing more on childcare responsibilities, fathers who spend more time with their children earn more per hour and experience the most favorable labor market outcomes and treatment (Koslowski, 2010). Higher-educated fathers with college degrees can increase these relative advantages the most (Goldin, Kerr and Olivetti, 2022). Furthermore, the premium associated with fatherhood within a single company, where there is an established position and trust between the father and the employer, is significantly higher compared to the premium across different employers (Yu and Hara, 2021). This indicates that relationships are valued in this context, however, it remains unclear why this results in only a "lesser penalty" for women, whereas a "greater bonus" for men.

Returning to the example of the Czech Republic, the increase in the fatherhood premium became noticeable only in 2010 and subsequent years, coinciding with the implementation of the Antidiscrimination Act and the gradual disappearance of the motherhood penalty (Zajíčková and Zajíček, 2021a), but clear evidence has yet to establish whether this is a coincidence or not, so the key question of how the two findings are related remains unanswered.

2.4. Exploring the Hungarian Context

All that remains is to narrow the attention to Hungary's geographical context and situate this research paper within the existing scholarly work in this particular region. Extensive contemporary literature within Hungary delves into various aspects and milestones of income distribution and income inequalities, serving diverse research objectives (Egri and Tanczós, 2023; Svraka, 2021). Scholars have historically focused on comparing income dynamics post-communism across the different post-Soviet countries or they were preoccupied with the pre- or post-transition situation of these nations (Andorka, Ferge and Tóth, 1997; Éltető and Havasi, 1999; Flemming and Micklewright, 2000). However, despite occasional consideration of gender as a variable, research seldom prioritized investigating gender-based economic disparities or the wage gap between males and females in the labor force specifically. Hence, there remains a notable gap in the examination of the gender pay gap in Hungary, particularly considering its comparative lag within the European Union. Consequently, there is a pressing need for research and investigation to both justify and inform necessary policy-making initiatives.

To establish a relevant historical perspective, this section has gathered a modest body of the limited amount of research focusing on the gender pay gap or sex-based economic inequality in Hungary. As observed in the examination of all income disparities, scholars have again predominantly concentrated on exploring the ramifications of socialism and communism on these issues, fueling this review with valuable historical context in light of key events.

Fodor (2004) contributes to the discussion by assessing women's labor force participation and their representation on levels of higher authority and correspondingly higher pay¹ during the socialist era. Female participation in the labor market in Hungary surpassed that of capitalist Western Europe during the 1980s (Nagy, 2001). Hungary, operating under a 'limited inclusion' regime during socialist times (Fodor, 2004, p. 785), also exhibited a narrower net authority gap compared to Austria, and while the authority gap remained relatively stagnant in Austria, it continued to decline steadily in Hungary. After the collapse of the state, however, equality was no longer a priority in state views and the new political regime, signaling a potential shift in dynamics.

By the mid-1990s, cross-country disparities had significantly diminished, although surprisingly, this was not primarily attributed to changes within Hungary – where progress was still being made at a slower pace – instead, substantial improvements in Austria played a more pivotal role (Fodor, 2004). In parallel with these trends in authority, the gender-based earnings gap in Hungary also exhibited a positive trajectory. The average earnings of Hungarian women relative to those of men gradually rose in the period from 1972 to 1986, followed by more rapid growth until 1992. Subsequently, the ratio seemed to stabilize at approximately 80-85 percent (Ábrahám and Kézdi, 2000; Galasi, 2001).

It is important to note that during the socialist era, marriage, housework, and childcare responsibilities posed fewer drawbacks and challenges for women. This could be attributed to various factors: subsidized meals served at lunchtime, the provision of on-site kindergartens and nursery schools, as well as laundry services or paid maternity and sick leave. The evolving status of women in this period has been assumed to be linked to these provisions to some extent, as neither the level of industrialization nor any differences in the availability of managerial positions can fully account for the contrast in the magnitude of the authority gender gap between

¹ It is noteworthy that within socialist systems and associated ideologies, there was a concerted effort on minimizing income differentials. Therefore, higher earnings are only justified when greater authority is truly accompanied by an increased number of tasks and responsibilities.

Austria and Hungary (Fodor, 2004). These conclusions hold significant implications for policymaking.

Galasi (2001) extends the examination of gender pay gap dynamics initiated by previous research, specifically focusing on trends subsequent to the findings reported by Ábrahám and Kézdi (2000). While they observed a plateau in average earnings post-1992 (Ábrahám and Kézdi, 2000), Galasi (2001) finds that the observed gender earnings gap decreased, analyzing the TÁRKI household panel data on net real hourly earnings disparities between women and men during the period spanning from 1992 to 1996. This methodological approach, reliant on household panel data, is consistent with established practices in international literature. However, the analysis primarily concentrates on hourly wages and does not delve into discrepancies in working hours, hence its findings lack direct implications for workforce participation or the specific impacts of childcare responsibilities. Instead, the study identifies key contributing factors to the observed trends to be the enhanced representation of women in higher-paying positions and the overall increase in female wage levels. Notably, as these evolve, the observed stagnation in average earnings disparities post-1992 may be explained by the overlooked variations in working hours or general labor participation.

Nagy (2001), concentrating on these labor market dynamics, observes a significant decline in women's participation in the Hungarian labor market between 1992 and 1998, particularly among younger generations. Moreover, there was a notable increase in the gender gap in participation rates during this period. The reduction in female employment can partly be attributed to the effects of the transition shock, characterized by substantial cuts in public services (which were predominantly staffed by women) and gendered shifts in sectoral employment patterns (Pollert, 2003). Additionally, labor force participation experienced a marked decrease among women of childbearing age as well, as women with young children exhibited a significant reduction in their likelihood of engaging in economic activity (Nagy, 2001). To add to the discussion, Lakatos (2001) narrows the focus on these mothers and their return to the workforce after having children. In the nineties, reentering the workforce became increasingly daunting for many, leading to a growing share of young women becoming dependent following the child-care period. This trend stemmed from the perception that being a parent was viewed as a disadvantage in the eyes of employers.

Since the 1990s, the process of reentering the workforce after childbirth has seemingly become more accessible, yet ongoing extensive debates persist surrounding family policies and their implications. Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács (2011) undertake a comparative analysis of maternal

experiences in Hungary and Sweden within the framework of prevailing policy contexts and potential discriminatory practices.

Both Hungary and Sweden boast generous parental leave policies, with the duration being notably longer in Hungary. However, a key difference lies in Sweden's emphasis on encouraging fathers to take their paternity leave compared to the strong and dominant gender norms and assumptions hindering this approach in Hungary, alongside concentrated efforts to support mothers in their re-entry and reintegration into the workforce (Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács, 2011). This approach, as evidenced in international literature, appears valuable in Sweden's strides toward gender equality, as it fosters seamless transitions back into employment, while solely providing an extensive leave period may be counterproductive through promoting employment discontinuity among mothers and lacking any further support or flexibility (Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács, 2011; Kleven et al., 2020; Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017). Moreover, while longer parental leaves are more common among the less educated in both countries, Hungary's labor market exhibits greater challenges in this regard.

Work-life balance and flexibility are also important in shaping maternal experiences. Sweden prioritizes flexibility, evident not only in parental leave policies but also in the provision of reduced working hours, accessible to all. Conversely, in Hungary, the absence of statutory rights for parents to reduce working hours underscores the disparity, with part-time employment regarded more as a privilege than a standard practice (Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács, 2011).

Lastly, the prevalence of unfair or discriminatory treatment, though slightly more pronounced in Budapest, remains an unfortunate reality across both contexts to an extent (Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács, 2011).

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This section outlines the methodology employed to obtain and analyze data, leading to the findings, conclusions, and implications presented in the subsequent sections. The methodology of this study comprises two distinct approaches. Firstly, a cross-national comparative statistical analysis was conducted for a selection of European countries using data from large international databases. Additionally, primary data collected through semi-structured surveys was utilized to supplement the findings, allowing for further deeper insights to be derived.

Traditionally, analyzing a nation's gender gap involves relying on household panel data and longitudinal surveys from large-scale samples to conduct a decomposition, such as the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition, or complex multi-regression analysis to identify the main contributors. However, decompositions have already been carried out using the latest available data from 2014 and 2018 for all EU countries by Leythienne and Ronkowski (2018) and Leythienne and Pérez-Julián (2021). By leveraging projections and implications from these but investigating statistical data to explore past findings in a more current context, valuable insights were attained.

Thus, while the aforementioned methods are valuable and recommended for the Hungarian landscape once the results of the Structure of Earnings Survey are available for 2022, the scope and aim of this paper justified and warranted a different standpoint.

3.2. Research Design

The research methodology employed in this study was characterized by a mixed approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative analysis was utilized to map out the landscape and to challenge previous propositions, whereas qualitative views served to enhance the statistical findings, providing a deeper understanding beyond surface-level observations.

The research design of the quantitative aspect takes a comparative approach, involving the examination of 6-7 settings to identify similarities, differences, trends, or patterns of variation. The aim of the comprehensive cross-national statistical analysis of secondary data from international databases was to understand the factors influencing gender pay gap outcomes across different contexts and assess the situation in Hungary by evaluating its relative position compared to other countries, serving as benchmarks. By contrasting indicators of economic gender equality and factors influencing the gender wage gap in Hungary with the average metrics of European Union countries, along with the figures of Austria, Denmark, Sweden, the Czech Republic, and Latvia, variations in outcomes emerge among these nations due to differences in national policies within the shared EU regulatory framework. The countries were chosen to follow up on literature that represented different aspects of the topic at hand.

Austria was chosen to build upon the analysis and comparison conducted by Fodor (2004), particularly regarding metrics related to labor force participation. This also includes examining occupational segregation and the distribution of men and women in managerial roles. The research in this paper picks up where Fodor (2004) concluded, focusing on the period after the

post-regime change recovery. Additionally, Kleven et al. (2020) provided relevant insights into the effects of family policy expansions on the Austrian labor force, which directly relates to the research question at hand but in an Austrian setting.

Two Scandinavian nations – Sweden and Denmark – were selected primarily due to their exemplary records of gender equality within the European Union, making them valuable case studies. The childcare and family policy contexts of these countries are particularly noteworthy, especially in light of previous Swedish research. Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács (2011) conducted foundational comparative work on Sweden and Hungary, aligning with the qualitative methodology employed in this paper, which examines mothers' experiences. Denmark was also included because numerous prior European scholarly studies have utilized Danish data, such as research by Kleven, Landais, and Sogaard (2019), which examined the impact of parenthood on the gender pay gap.

The Czech Republic is highlighted to reflect on the phenomena of the motherhood penalty and fatherhood premium within the nation, as it was identified as a distinctive case in this regard in the literature provided (Zajíčková and Zajíček, 2020; 2021a; 2021b; Zajíčková, Zajíček and Rašticová, 2020).

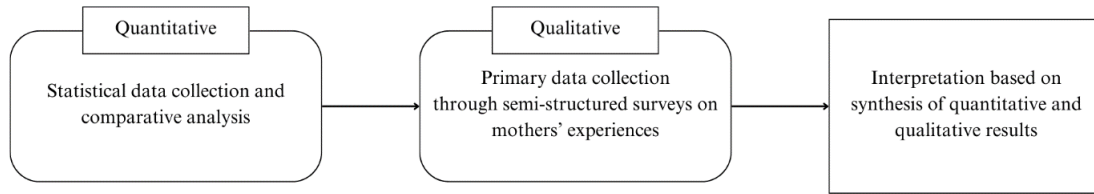
Ultimately, given the prevailing emphasis within Hungarian academic literature on Hungary's Soviet past and history when addressing related subjects, Latvia was incorporated into the study to facilitate a comparative analysis between Hungary and another post-Soviet nation.

In addition to examining geographical distinctions, analyzing the European Union's decomposition of the gender pay gap using microdata from the Structure of Earnings Survey (SES) in 2014 and 2018 offered a comparative outlook spanning over time as well.

On the other hand, in the qualitative approach, narrative inquiry was the chosen research design, entailing the collection and analysis of personal details and narratives to understand individuals' experiences in this given aspect. This method allows for a nuanced exploration of subjective perspectives, offering valuable insights into the intricacies of the phenomenon under study.

Figure 2 briefly summarizes the mixed research design at hand.

Figure 2. Research design



3.3. Data Collection

Firstly, secondary data was retrieved from national and international statistical databases. The systematic search strategy involved reviewing thematic collections of databases to extract relevant and valuable data related to the examined aspects of gender disparities. Given the EU focus of my research, the majority of my secondary data were sourced from Eurostat, with additional utilization of data from OECD and IMF. These organizations not only publish datasets but also frequently integrate them into reports, prompting me to seek access to particular ones. While these reports offer valuable data, they often provide limited discussion of findings, leaving room for interpretation and further investigation. Similarly, the two gender pay gap decompositions by Leythienne and Ronkowski (2018) and Leythienne and Pérez-Julián (2021) also exhibited considerable potential for deeper exploration.

Secondly, primary data was gathered via an online survey for the qualitative component of this study, supplemented by brief informal follow-up interviews in 15 instances to clarify responses and ensure a deeper understanding. The survey employed a semi-structured format, including a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions, meaning that some questions have predefined response options while others allow participants to provide additional comments, explanations, or elaborations. This structure offered flexibility for participants to express their thoughts and perspectives while still providing structured data for analysis, aligning precisely with the research requirements.

To provide further detail, a 5-10 minutes-long survey was designed to be filled out by Hungarian mothers exclusively. They were asked to select the answers most applicable to their situation when having their first child. The survey was distributed through various channels to reach and engage diverse audiences and capture a large variety of viewpoints, ensuring the inclusion of individuals with differing experiences. Prior to its public release, 10 acquaintances completed the survey as a trial, allowing for any constructive feedback to be incorporated into the design to facilitate smooth and seamless data collection.

The questionnaire comprised three distinct sections: the initial section collected fundamental demographic data for analysis, whereas the subsequent two sections delved into the primary

research objective, querying mothers about their childcare responsibilities and workforce experiences.

The second section – labeled ‘Unpaid caregiving responsibilities’ – encompassed the inquiries outlined in Table 1. The section description advised mothers to provide responses specifically regarding their first children.

Table 1. List of survey questions assessing unpaid caregiving responsibilities

• How much maternity leave was available to you?
• How much maternity leave did you take?
• How much paternity leave was available to the father?
• How much paternity leave did the father take?
• On average, how many hours per day did you spend on childcare-related activities during the first 6 months after the child's birth?
• Compared to you, how many hours per day did the child's father spend on childcare-related activities during the first 6 months after the child's birth?
• On average, how many hours per day did you spend on childcare-related activities between the child's ages of 6 and 12 months?
• Compared to you, how many hours per day did the child's father spend on childcare-related activities between the child's ages of 6 and 12 months?
• On average, how many hours per day did you spend on childcare-related activities between the child's ages of 1 and 2 years?
• Compared to you, how many hours per day did the child's father spend on childcare-related activities between the child's ages of 1 and 2 years?
• On average, how many hours per day did you spend on childcare-related activities between the child's ages of 3 and 6 years?
• Compared to you, how many hours per day did the child's father spend on childcare-related activities between the child's ages of 3 and 6 years?
• Did you reduce your working hours due to childcare responsibilities beyond parental leave?
• What was your employment status after the end of your parental leave?
• If you left your previous job due to childcare responsibilities, how long did it take you to return to the labor market?
• What childcare solutions/services did you use while you were working?
• Has the sector of your employment changed upon having your first child?

The subsequent third and final section aimed to evaluate mothers' personal experiences and subjective viewpoints. Participants were prompted to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each statement provided based on their own experiences. The four statements are detailed below in Table 2.

Table 2. List of survey questions assessing mothers' personal experiences

• I feel like my career has suffered because of having children.
• I feel like I have been discriminated against by my management/HR.
• I feel like I do/did NOT receive the same opportunities as my female colleagues without children.
• I feel like I do/did NOT receive the same opportunities as my male colleagues who are fathers.

Additionally, an optional open-ended question was included, asking, "Do you have any suggestions on how employers and policymakers could better support working mothers?" Here, impactful opinions were provided, with several ideas offered by each respondent who chose to reply. Lastly, a space was allocated for respondents to leave comments, encouraging them to share unique insights or experiences and support the research by suggesting ideas or other relevant aspects from their perspectives.

Upon concluding the survey, a total of 75 mothers from diverse backgrounds responded to these questions – with the exception of the final two optional questions, which received 32 and 13 responses respectively. Although the sample size is somewhat limited, efforts were made to ensure the representation of a wide range of experiences and the diversity of answers reflects successful efforts to encourage participation across various demographics.

In the sample, there were 3 mothers aged 21-30, 14 mothers aged 31-40, 41 mothers aged 41-50, 19 mothers aged 51-60, 5 mothers aged 61-70, and 2 mothers aged over 70, with the largest cohort being women between the ages of 41 and 50. Among these respondents, the average age at the birth of their first child was 27,4 years, ranging from 18 to 37 years old. Although this mean is lower than the national average of exactly 30 years for first-time mothers in Hungary, as seen, the sample includes individuals from diverse age groups, spanning back to the 1980s and 1990s when childbirth tended to happen at younger ages.

Regarding the number of children, 33 mothers, constituting 44% of respondents, reported having two children, while 28 mothers have only one child. Additionally, 12 mothers have three children, and only two respondents indicated having four children in the survey.

The highest level of education attained by respondents varied considerably: only one respondent finished their doctoral degree (e.g. PhD), but 28% completed higher education undergraduate programs (e.g. BA, BSc), 25,3% have a master's degree (e.g. MA, MSc), and 21,3% completed college or higher education vocational training. The remaining respondents include 11 mothers with vocational high school diplomas, 4 with general high school diplomas, and 3 who attended vocational school or completed vocational training alone. Prior to their pregnancies, 88% of these mothers were employed full-time, while only five were self-employed, two were unemployed, and another two were students.

Finally, the most represented industries and sectors the respondents were employed in before their pregnancies are trade and retail with 14 mothers, education and educational services with 10 mothers, public services with 9 mothers, as well as manufacturing and production, and information technology with 6 mothers each. Four mothers were employed in financial services and another four in healthcare and medical services, while the remaining fields were represented by one or two examples only, including employees from construction and architecture, agriculture and forestry management, law, telecommunications and media, politics, and beauty services.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was inductive, starting with raw data and then identifying patterns and deriving insights to develop new theories or hypotheses. The analysis process involved organizing and categorizing the data, identifying recurring themes or patterns, generating hypotheses, and uncovering new conclusions based on what had been observed.

Upon compiling and administering data from both primary and secondary sources, it was then subjected to cleaning and preparation for subsequent processing and analysis. For the comparative analytics portion, Microsoft Excel served as the primary tool for data visualization, facilitating the examination of patterns, the juxtaposition of countries, and the identification of notable differences. Conversely, the qualitative aspect of the primary data was thematically analyzed, entailing the identification of cohorts sharing similar experiences and the categorization of statements. The objective was to establish correlations between different variables within these groups.

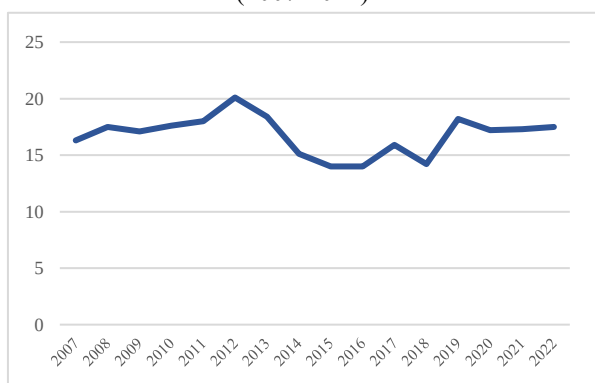
4. Results

This section presents the findings obtained from statistical databases and reports, as well as the survey results, while the relevant concepts and ideas are elaborated upon in subsequent Section 5.

4.1. The Unadjusted Gender Pay Gap

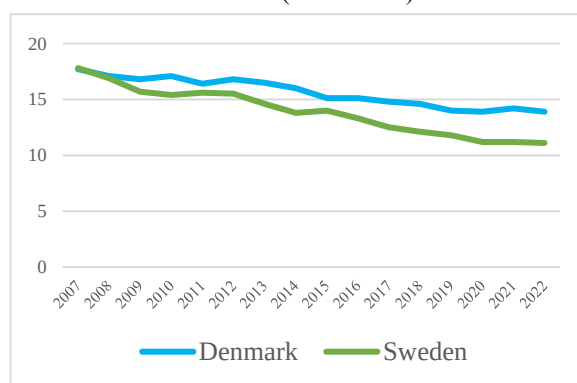
The unadjusted gender pay gap, which measures the difference between the average gross hourly earnings of men and women expressed as a percentage of men's earnings, exhibits a fluctuating pattern in Hungary from 2007 to 2022. Over the past 15 years, it has not shown a consistent trend, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions (see Figure 3). Conversely, Sweden and Denmark have seen a continuous decline in their gender pay gaps, with the most recent values of 11,1% and 13,9% respectively, marking them as having the lowest gaps out of the 6 examined countries (see Figure 4). Austria, on the other hand, has consistently had the highest gap, despite making similar steady progress, decreasing from 25,5% to 18,4% over the investigated decade. As Figure 5 illustrates, Czechia's values are comparable to Austria's but are characterized by more fluctuation. Lastly, what stands out in the figures below is Latvia's trajectory illustrated in Figure 6, experiencing a unique increasing pattern in its pay gap until 2020, followed by a notable decrease of 7,7 percentage points (Eurostat, 2024a).

Figure 3. Unadjusted gender pay gap in Hungary
(2007-2022)



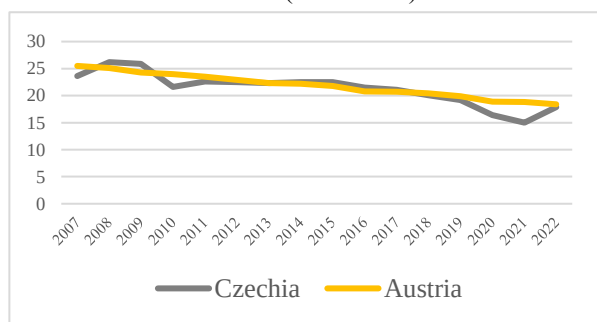
Source: Eurostat, 2024a

Figure 4. Unadjusted gender pay gap in Denmark and
Sweden (2007-2022)



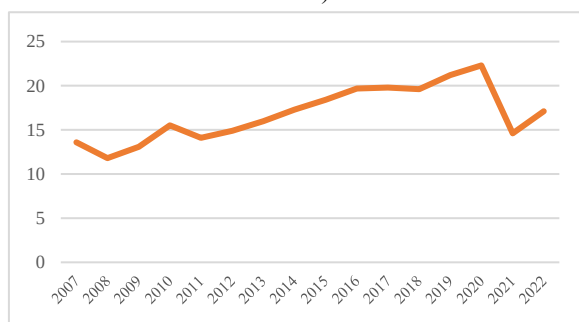
Source: Eurostat, 2024a

Figure 5. Unadjusted gender pay gap in Austria and Czechia (2007-2022)



Source: Eurostat, 2024a

Figure 6. Unadjusted gender pay gap in Latvia (2007-2022)



Source: Eurostat, 2024a

4.1.1. The Unadjusted Gender Pay Gap in a Historical Perspective

By utilizing estimated values spanning from 1997 to 2006, the previous graphs can be complemented, extending the coverage to a longer timeframe to enhance the understanding of possible trends. Analyzing Figure 7, which plots the Hungarian and the European Union average values on a diagram, reveals an observation that the EU average has been balanced near the 15% mark, only showing a noteworthy decrease in the last 4 years. On the contrary, Hungarian figures exhibit greater fluctuation as already seen, yet during the period of 1997-2006, a generally declining trend is evident. We can observe a similarity in the volatile trend between Latvia and Hungary, although Latvia's trend appears slightly delayed (see Figure 8). Austria and Czechia exhibit a distorted U-shaped curve for the preceding period, indicating that the previous graph (Figure 5) only portrays a steady decline from the peak observed in 2007-2008 (see Figure 9). Furthermore, between 1997 and 2010, Hungary's trajectory closely mirrors that of Czechia and Austria, with a collective decline until 2001. However, Hungary experiences a more pronounced subsequent decline compared to the other two, resulting in divergence. Nonetheless, the patterns remain similar as shown in Figure 10 below, with an increase in 2007 and a peak in 2008 (Eurostat, 2013).

Figure 7. Unadjusted gender pay gap in Hungary and the EU (1997-2022)

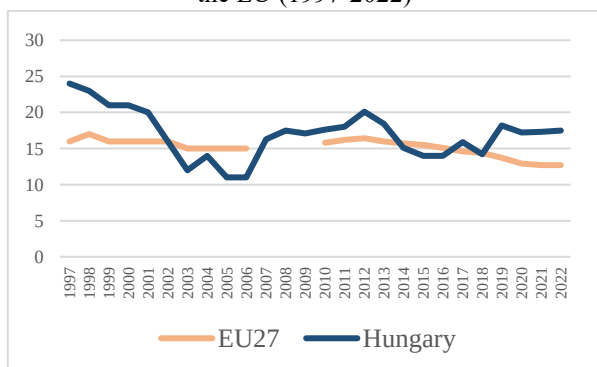
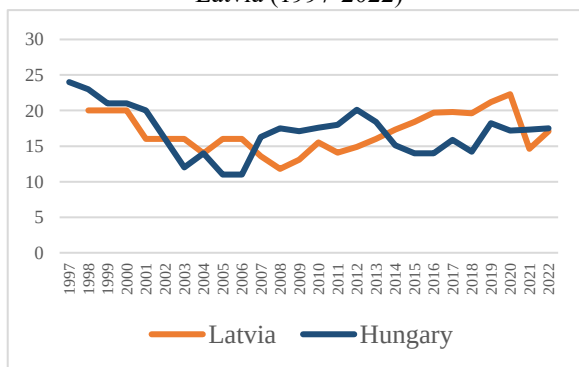
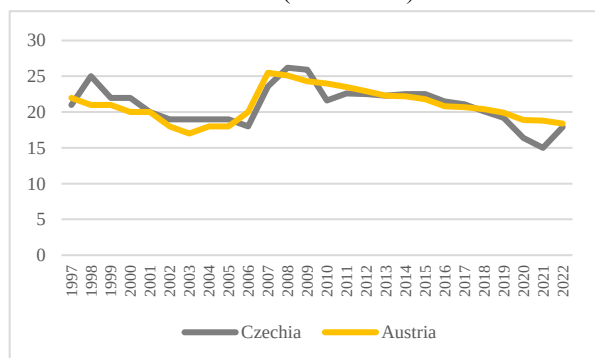


Figure 8. Unadjusted gender pay gap in Hungary and Latvia (1997-2022)



Source: Eurostat, 2013

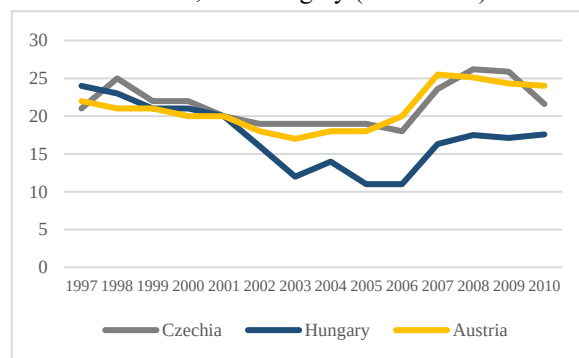
Figure 9. Unadjusted gender pay gap in Austria and Czechia (1997-2022)



Source: Eurostat, 2013

Source: Eurostat, 2013

Figure 10. Unadjusted gender pay gap in Czechia, Austria, and Hungary (1997-2010)

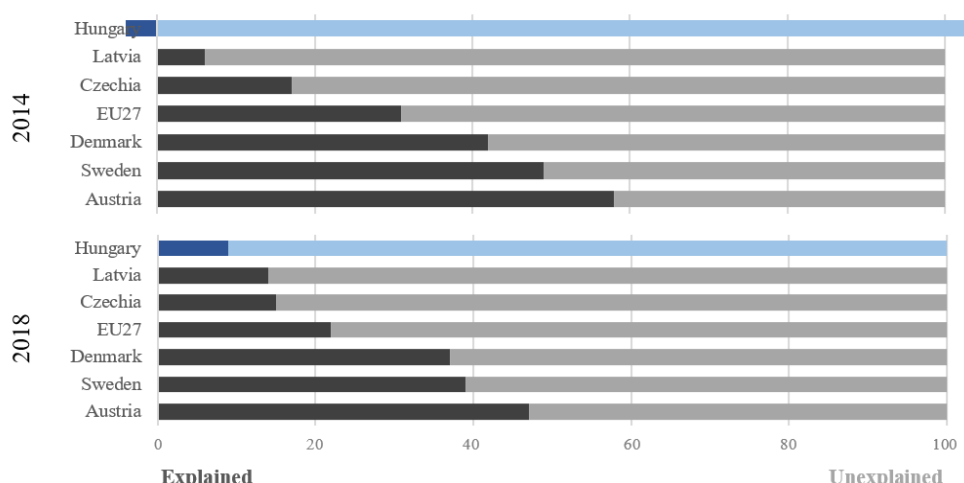


Source: Eurostat, 2013

4.1.2. Decomposition of the Unadjusted Gender Pay Gap

Focusing our attention back on the past decade, similarly to the patterns and values of the figure of the unadjusted gender pay gap, the proportions of its explained and unexplained components presented in Figure 11 below also vary significantly among the different countries in 2014 and 2018. While Denmark, Sweden, and Austria exhibit a significant portion of the gap being explained, the proportion is notably low for Latvia and Czechia, and even negative for Hungary in 2014. Changes from 2014 to 2018 are not significant, and except for Hungary and Latvia, the unexplained portion grew in percentage (Leythienne and Ronkowski, 2018; Leythienne and Pérez-Julián, 2021).

Figure 11. The decomposition of the unadjusted gender pay gap into the explained and unexplained portions



Source: Leythienne and Ronkowski, 2018; Leythienne and Pérez-Julián, 2021

The decomposition of the gap of European Union member states also reveals that the primary contributors to the explained portion of Hungary's unadjusted gender pay gap include *economic activity* and *enterprise control*. Economic activity was deemed significant not only in Hungary but also in Czechia, Latvia, Denmark, Austria, Sweden, and most other European countries, in both 2014 and 2018. Conversely, in 2014, enterprise control had a notable impact only in Sweden and Denmark, in addition to Hungary, while in 2018, it became more impactful in Latvia than in Sweden and it decreased in importance for Hungary. In Austria, working time was also a significant contributor in both years. Interestingly, education and occupation, however, predominantly favored women as negative explanatory factors (Leythienne and Ronkowski, 2018; Leythienne and Pérez-Julián, 2021).

4.1.2.1. *Economic activity and sectoral segregation*

Looking into the themes identified through the lenses of more recent data, however, the unadjusted gender pay gap by *economic activity* in 2022 shows that the pay gap varies significantly across the different sectors of the NACE Rev. 2 classification. Some sectors show a large positive pay gap – business economy, manufacturing, electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply, information and communication, financial and insurance activities as well as professional, scientific and technical activities – some sectors show a smaller positive pay gap or construction even shows a negative pay gap in Hungary. As Table 3 depicts, similar dynamics are seen in Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Latvia, and Sweden as well. The financial and insurance activities sector shows outstandingly high values everywhere, as well as information and communication (Eurostat, 2024b).

Table 3. The unadjusted gender pay gap by economic activity (%), 2022

Country	Business Economy	Manufacturing	Electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply	Water supply; sewerage, waste management, and remediation activities	Construction	Information and communication	Financial and insurance activities	Real estate activities	Professional, scientific and technical activities
Czechia	13,3	23,7	18	4,1	8,6	28,6	37,9	8,8	21,7
Denmark	13,4	8	14,5	1,9	7,7	15,8	15,2	11,7	16,7
Latvia	20,6	24,1	-6,1	7,2	10,1	34	28,9	11	28,3
Hungary	16,8	23,4	14,1	4,1	-4,4	26,3	34,8	7,6	21,2
Austria	20,1	19,9	12	7,3	7,1	19,2	27,1	26,2	25,2
Sweden	8,2	1,8	2,5	-5,3	-2,5	12,2	23,5	3,6	11,9

Source: Eurostat, 2024b

Tables 4 and 5 provide a detailed breakdown of the share of male and female employees in each of these economic branches, accompanied by the average gross monthly earnings within each sector. Male representation was found to be higher in sectors such as manufacturing; electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply; water supply, sewerage, waste management, and remediation activities; construction; and information and communication. The mean of the average gross monthly earnings in these sectors amounts to 576,210 HUF.

Table 4. Share of genders and average gross earnings in male-dominated economic branches (2022)

Economic branches (NACE Rev.2.)	Manufacturing	Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	Construction	Information and communication
Share of males employed (%)	60,9	73,1	78,1	92,7	72,6
Share of females employed (%)	39,1	26,9	21,9	7,3	27,4
Average gross monthly earnings (HUF)	523 338	735 650	445 553	379 852	796 655

Source: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal [Hungarian Central Statistical Office], 2024a; 2024b

Conversely, women are more prevalent in sectors such as financial and insurance activities; real estate activities; professional, scientific, and technical activities; education; as well as human health and social work activities compared to men. The mean of the average gross monthly earnings in these sectors is 558,792 HUF.

Table 5. Share of genders and average gross earnings in female-dominated economic branches (2022)

Economic branches (NACE Rev.2.)	Financial and insurance activities	Real estate activities	Professional, scientific and technical activities	Education	Human health and social work activities
Share of males employed (%)	37,0	48,8	46,6	21,6	19,1
Share of females employed (%)	63,0	51,2	53,4	78,4	80,9
Average gross monthly earnings (HUF)	830 036	406 637	642 409	459 930	454 949

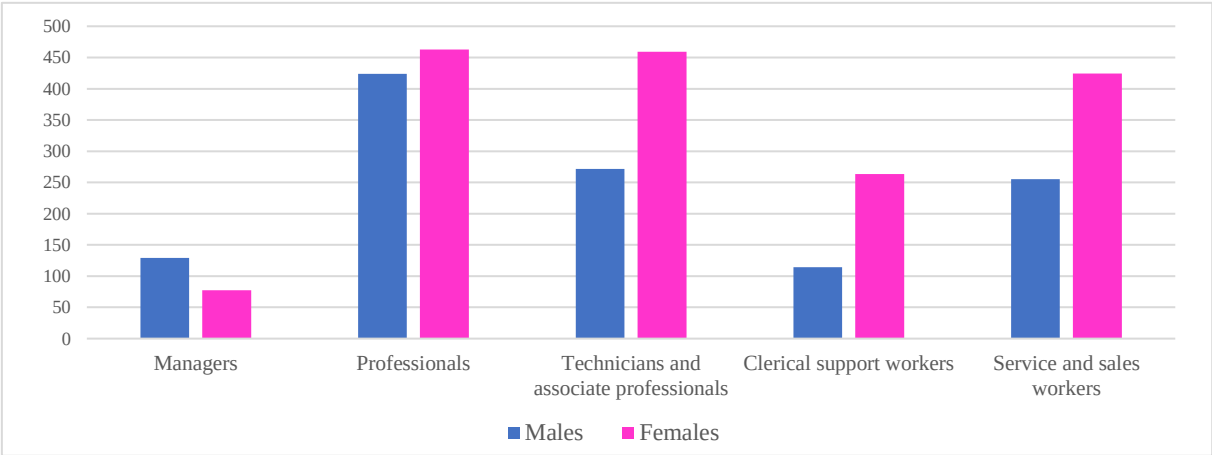
Source: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal [Hungarian Central Statistical Office], 2024a; 2024b

To present further calculations, by multiplying the number of women employed in each economic activity by the average gross monthly earnings for those sectors and subsequently dividing by the total number of women employed in those sectors, the average monthly earnings for women in Hungary amount to 500,725 HUF. Employing analogous methodologies, men earn 494,868 HUF on average. This trend of higher female income persists in both 2014 and 2018, with the average earnings consistently being slightly lower for males.

4.1.2.2. Occupational segregation

To analyze within-sector dynamics, occupations need to be taken into account. Figure 12 illustrates the distribution of males and females across various occupational categories of the International Standard Classification of Occupations structure, including managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals, clerical support workers, and service and sales workers. The data indicates that females outnumber males at all levels except for the managerial class (Eurostat, 2024i).

Figure 12. Genders in different occupations in Hungary, 2022



Source: Eurostat, 2024i

However, considering both sectors and occupations collectively, Table 6 demonstrates that females still earn notably less than men – except for female managers in the sectors of water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities, and information and communication, as well as female technicians and associate professionals and female service and sales workers in education.

Table 6. Average hourly wages for different occupations per sector, Hungary (2018)²

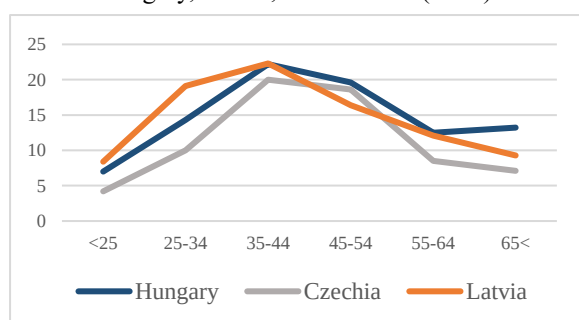
	Managers			Professionals			Technicians and associate professionals			Clerical support workers			Service and sales workers		
	M	F	Diff.	M	F	Diff.	M	F	Diff.	M	F	Diff.	M	F	Diff.
C	13,2	11,08	2,12	10,01	8,76	1,25	6,83	5,91	0,92	6,34	4,98	1,36	4,2	3,38	0,82
D	16,84	13,34	3,5	10,73	9,5	1,23	8,7	5,94	2,76	6,08	5,29	0,79	4,35	4,21	0,14
E	10,03	10,61	-0,58	6,99	6,03	0,96	5,64	4,89	0,75	5,56	4,32	1,24	3,89	3,72	0,17
F	7,94	7,47	0,47	8,04	6,35	1,69	5,66	4,55	1,11	5,05	4,03	1,02	3,77	3,55	0,22
J	13,88	17,01	-3,13	10,73	8,56	2,17	7,42	6,21	1,21	6,6	5,5	1,1	4,59	3,83	0,76
K	21,4	15,59	5,81	12,76	10,84	1,92	8,35	6,43	1,92	5,98	5,34	0,64	4,06	3,28	0,78
L	11,27	9,38	1,89	11,56	9	2,56	6,07	5,66	0,41	4,7	4,49	0,21	3,54	3,26	0,28
M	14,82	11,53	3,29	9,77	7,99	1,78	6,59	6,03	0,56	7,29	5,49	1,8	3,98	3,82	0,16
P	10,51	8,32	2,19	6,47	6,03	0,44	4,42	4,55	-0,13	3,8	3,72	0,08	3,56	3,7	-0,14
Q	11,28	7,59	3,69	8,55	6,25	2,3	4,86	4,61	0,25	4,05	3,97	0,08	3,67	3,6	0,07

Source: Eurostat, 2021

4.1.3. The Unadjusted Gender Pay Gap by Age

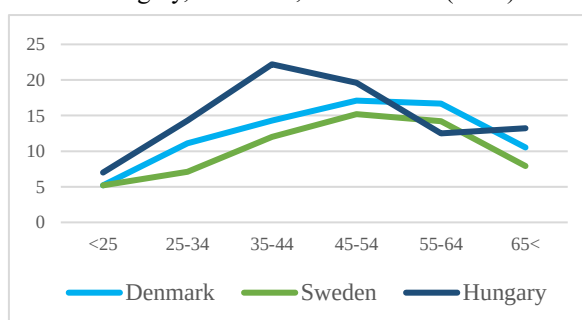
The analysis of the unadjusted gender pay gap across different age groups reveals intriguing dynamics. Among individuals under the age of 25 in Hungary, there is only a 7% gender wage gap, which is slightly above the average of 5.97% observed across the European Union for the same demographic group. However, as age increases, the gender pay gap widens as disparities emerge. Interestingly, two distinct patterns can be separated. Denmark and Sweden display less pronounced spikes, which intensify in older age brackets and persist in their ascent until later (see Figure 14), in contrast to Hungary's, Czechia's, and Latvia's trends depicted in Figure 13, where a prominent peak typically occurs between the ages of 35 to 44, followed by a decline (Eurostat, 2024d).

Figure 13. Unadjusted gender pay gap by age in Hungary, Latvia, and Czechia (2022)



Source: Eurostat, 2024d

Figure 14. Unadjusted gender pay gap by age in Hungary, Denmark, and Sweden (2022)



Source: Eurostat, 2024d

² The first column of Table 6 displays abbreviations corresponding to various economic sectors: C represents manufacturing, D denotes electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply, E signifies water supply, sewerage, waste management, and remediation activities, F stands for construction, J refers to information and communication, K represents financial and insurance activities, L denotes real estate activities, M covers professional, scientific, and technical activities, P pertains to education, and Q represents human health and social work activities.

4.2. The Gender Overall Earnings Gap

While the unadjusted gender pay gap only incorporates unequal pay for unequal work and sectoral, occupational, or other segregation as investigated, the overall gender segregation effects are experienced in the lower employment rate for women and the lower hours worked especially (Leythienne and Pérez-Julián, 2021).

Hence, the gender overall earnings gap was created, integrating the unadjusted gender pay gap, the gender hours gap, and the gender employment gap. As Table 7 suggests, this more comprehensive indicator of the gender wage gap in a broader sense reveals a considerably wider disparity between males and females (Eurostat, 2024e), yet the order of countries in the ranking remained the same.

Table 7. The gender overall earnings gap

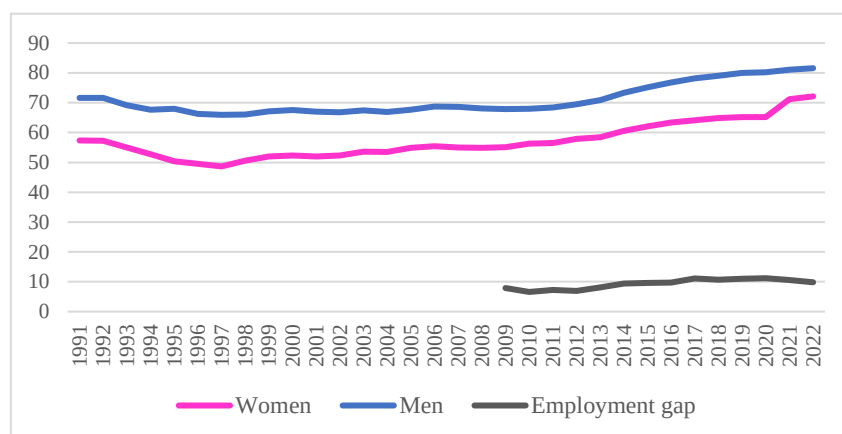
Year	2010	2014	2018
EU27	32,9	31,1	36,2
Czechia	41	40,4	36
Denmark	25,7	26,4	25,1
Latvia	16	22,7	25,7
Hungary	27,2	27,7	28,1
Austria	46,7	44,9	44,2
Sweden	30,6	26,5	23,8

Source: Eurostat, 2024e

4.2.1. The Gender Employment Gap

From the historical perspective shown in Figure 15, in Hungary, the total labor force participation rate stood at 64,3% in 1991, with 57% for women and 72% for men. After 1991, the overall Hungarian labor force participation rate declined, indicating lowered economic activity for the whole population. The decline was sharper for women, they experienced the instability of the economy at the time more heavily, but the male workforce was also affected. It reached its lowest point in 1997, with 66% for the male population and a remarkably low 49% for females. Since then, an upward trend has been witnessed (The World Bank Data, 2024). In contemporary days – based on data available from 2009 – the gender employment gap, which closely mirrors the trends of the labor force participation gap as well, had been minimally increasing until a recent shift occurred. Specifically, in 2020, there had been a noteworthy rise in women's labor force participation in Hungary, increasing from 65,2% to 71,2% (Eurostat, 2024f; 2024g).

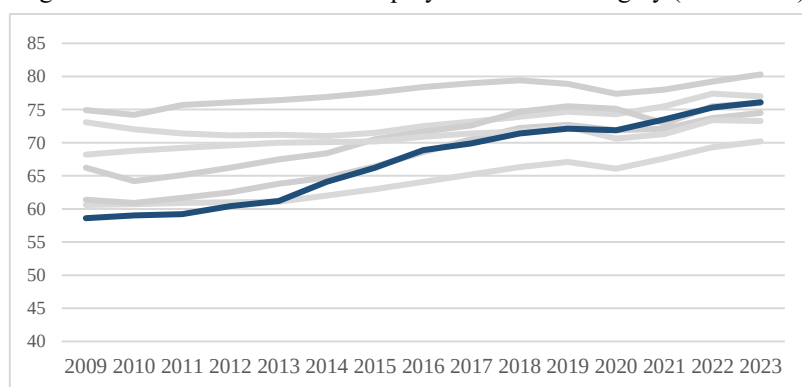
Figure 15. Labor force participation of men and women in Hungary (1991-2022)



Source: The World Bank Data, 2024; Eurostat, 2024f

Women's labor force participation has long been the highest for Sweden and Denmark – with 81,2% and 78% respectively, while Hungary and Czechia reported the lowest rates – at 72,1% and 70,3%. However, these ranks mostly hold for men's participation as well, except for Czech males because their labor force participation rate ranks among the highest out of the examined countries with 83,6%, thereby accentuating the disparity even further (The World Bank Data, 2024). Employment rates since 2009 have shown very similar dynamics, trends, and patterns of growth for both males and females. Remarkably, Hungary's progress stands out within the EU context, as it began with the lowest figures but swiftly achieved a more favorable position (see Figure 16).

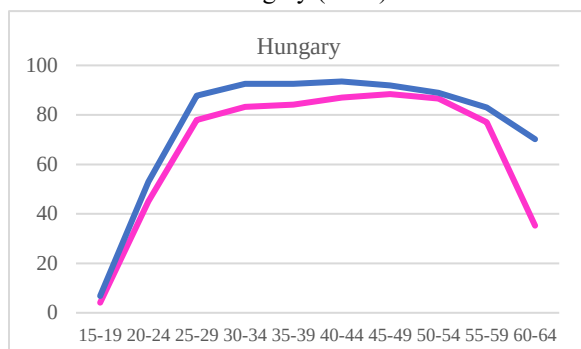
Figure 16. The rise of women's employment rate in Hungary (2009-2023)



Source: Eurostat, 2024g

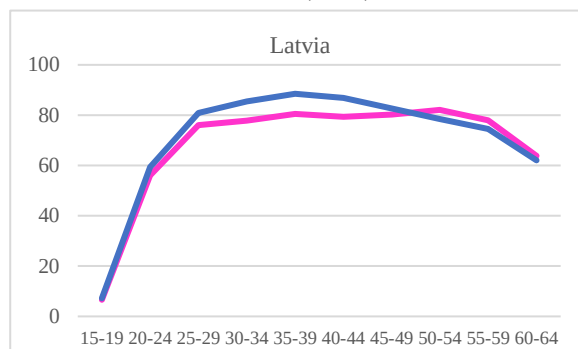
Crucially, analyzing the employment rate across gender and age reveals parallels to the breakdown of the unadjusted gender pay gap by age, highlighting significant disparities, particularly among individuals aged 30 to 39. This trend is most significantly pronounced in Czechia (see Figure 19).

Figure 17. Employment by age and gender in Hungary (2022)



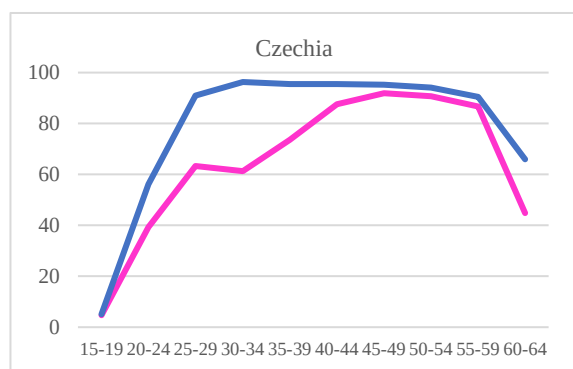
Source: EIGE, 2023c

Figure 18. Employment by age and gender in Latvia (2022)



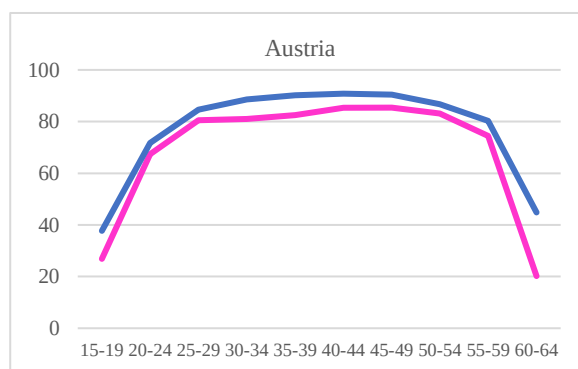
Source: EIGE, 2023c

Figure 19. Employment by age and gender in Czechia (2022)



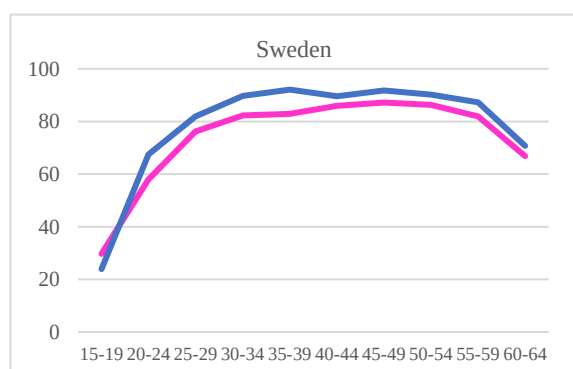
Source: EIGE, 2023c

Figure 20. Employment by age and gender in Austria (2022)



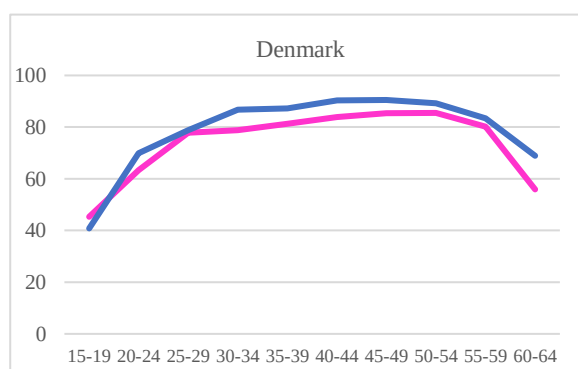
Source: EIGE, 2023c

Figure 21. Employment by age and gender in Sweden (2022)



Source: EIGE, 2023c

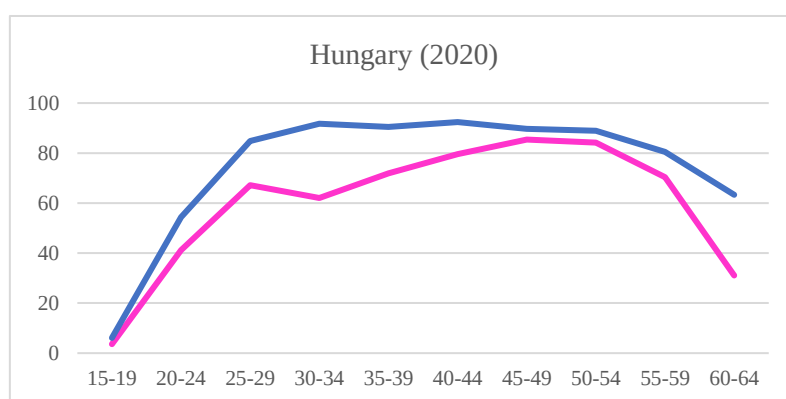
Figure 22. Employment by age and gender in Denmark (2022)



Source: EIGE, 2023c

However, as depicted in Figure 23, this trend was notably more pronounced in Hungary as well in 2020, mirroring the pattern observed in Czechia in 2022. Before 2021, a significant gap was evident for the age group 30-34, as the employment rate of Hungarian women of that age consistently remained around 65% but has now exceeded 80%, thus the gap shrank. Conversely, no significant changes in patterns over time were noted for the other countries.

Figure 23. Employment by age and gender in Hungary (2020)



Source: EIGE, 2023c

4.2.2. The Gender Hours Gap

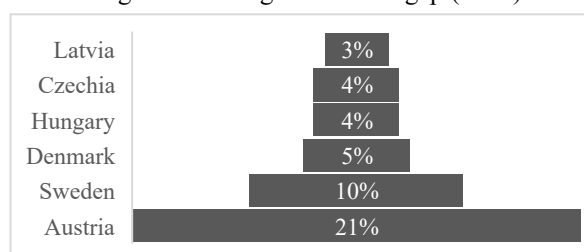
Turning now to the gender hours gap, Table 8 and Figure 24 illustrate its values in the countries under examination, clearly depicting its significance in Austria.

Table 8. The gender hours gap (2018)

Country	Gender hours gap
Latvia	3%
Czechia	4%
Hungary	4%
Denmark	5%
Sweden	10%
Austria	21%

Source: Leythienne and Pérez-Julián, 2021

Figure 24. The gender hours gap (2018)



Source: Leythienne and Pérez-Julián, 2021

Similarly, the gender gap in part-time employment is an outstanding 38,6%, 19%, and 15% for Austria, Denmark, and Sweden respectively, while significantly smaller for Czechia, Latvia, and Hungary – 8,2%, 4,3%, and 3,5% (Eurostat, 2024j). However, it was also discovered that the unadjusted gender pay gap is notably lower in part-time employment compared to full-time positions (Eurostat, 2024k).

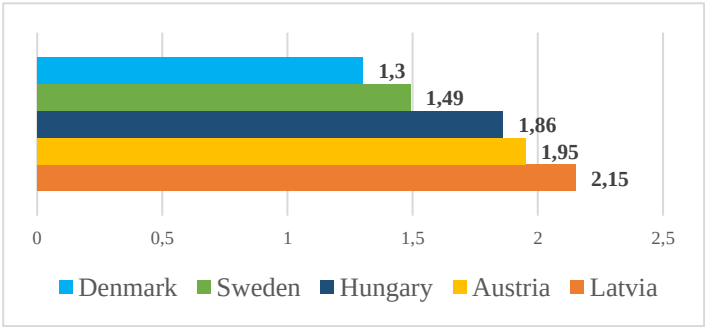
In relation, within the EU, a huge difference can be reported between the share of male and female part-time workers. Moreover, parenthood significantly influences this dynamic: more women with children tend to work part-time compared to women without children, while the opposite trend is observed for men. For instance, in Austria, nearly 70% of mothers are

employed part-time. However, this figure is less significant in Denmark, Sweden, and Czechia, and almost negligible in Latvia and Hungary (Eurostat, 2024h).

4.3. The “Childcare Gap”

Another significant disparity between genders lies in childcare responsibilities, as evidenced by the female-to-male ratio of time dedicated to unpaid care work in 2014 (see Figure 25). This contrast was most pronounced in Latvia and least pronounced in Denmark.

Figure 25. Female-to-male ratio of time spent on unpaid care, 2014

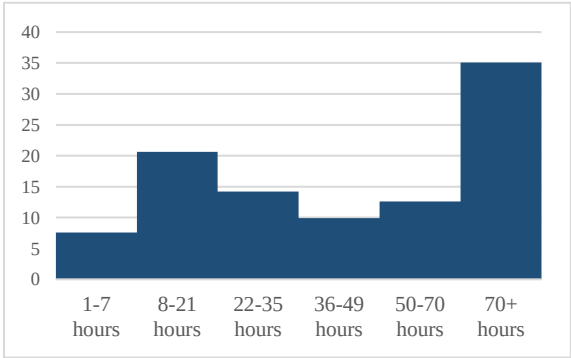


Source: OECD.Stat (2024a)

The Hungarian Central Statistical Office’s breakdown of the average daily time allocation of the population aged 15–74 by gender demonstrates a slightly larger ratio for 2010, with women spending 41 minutes and men spending 18 minutes on childcare activities (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal [Hungarian Central Statistical Office], 2021).

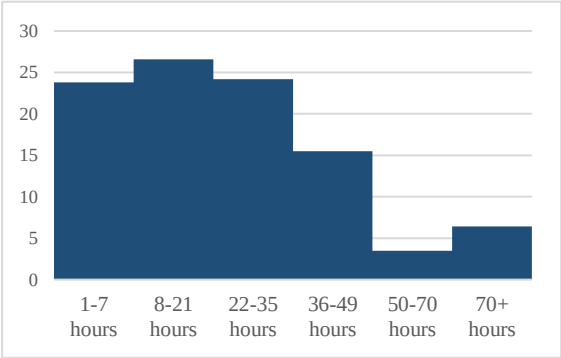
Based on the survey outcomes of the European Institute for Gender Equality (2023b), the distribution of the time invested in childcare responsibilities by mothers and fathers shows notable divergence. Men tend to report fewer hours, with their responses skewed towards the lower end (see Figures 27 and 29). On the other hand, nearly half of the women in Hungary state that they dedicate more than 50 hours per week to childcare, marking the highest proportion in this timeframe among the countries (see Figures 26 and 28). An intriguing observation is that fathers in Denmark contribute a significantly larger portion to childcare compared to fathers in the other countries (see Figures 30 and 31).

Figure 26. Hours spent on childcare for women in Hungary (2022)



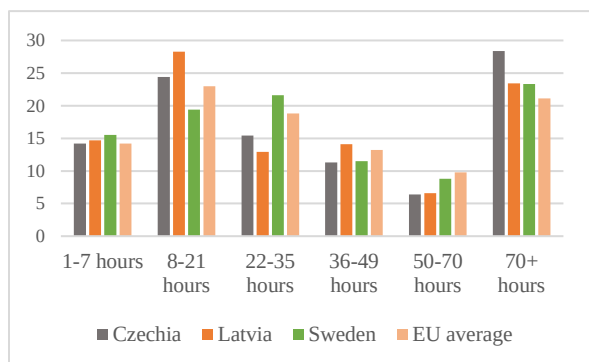
Source: EIGE, 2023b

Figure 27. Hours spent on childcare for men in Hungary (2022)



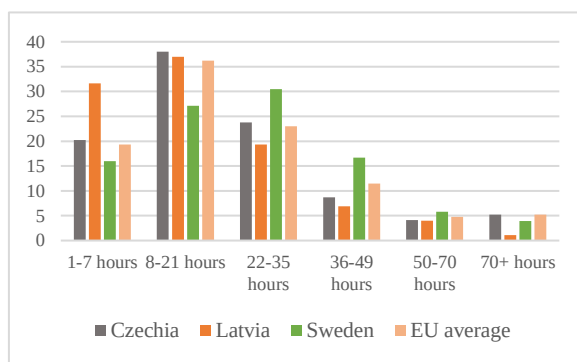
Source: EIGE, 2023b

Figure 28. Hours spent on childcare for women in Czechia, Latvia, Sweden and the EU average (2022)



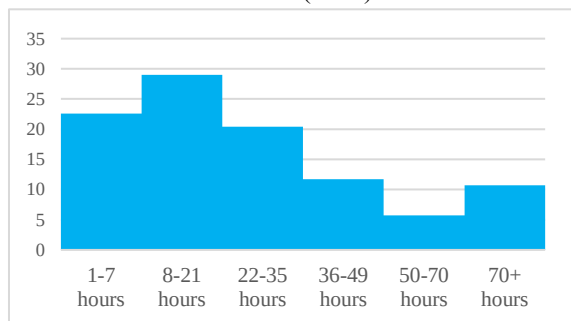
Source: EIGE, 2023b

Figure 29. Hours spent on childcare for men in Czechia, Latvia, Sweden and the EU average (2022)



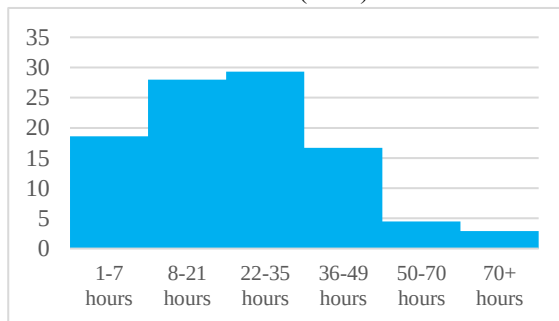
Source: EIGE, 2023b

Figure 30. Hours spent on childcare for women in Denmark (2022)



Source: EIGE, 2023b

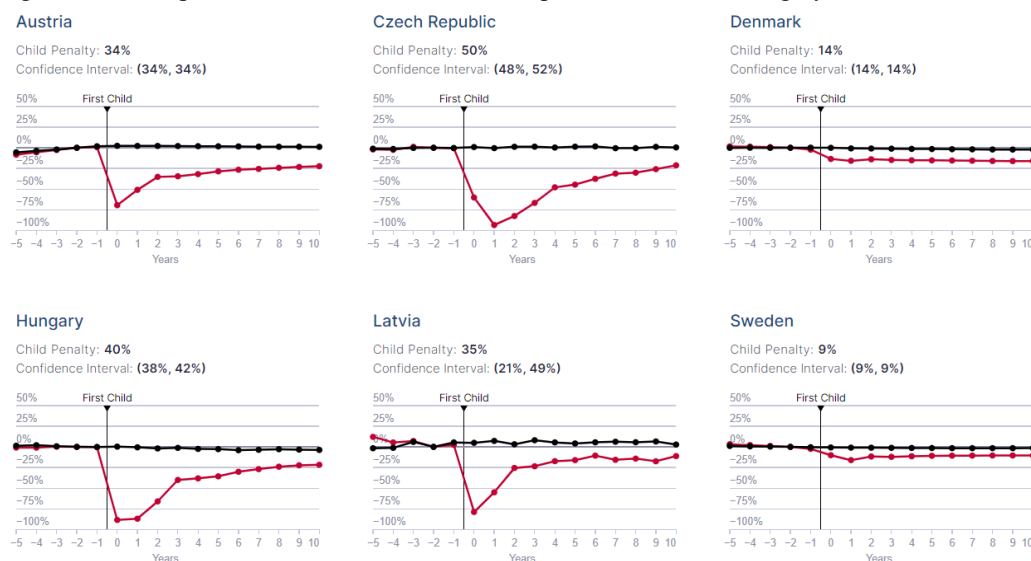
Figure 31. Hours spent on childcare for men in Denmark (2022)



Source: EIGE, 2023b

Regarding work and employment outcomes, as a result, 82% of individuals who have decreased their working hours to accommodate childcare responsibilities in Europe were women (Eurostat, 2019). These disparities also carry significant child penalties in most regions, especially in Czechia and Hungary, followed by Latvia and Austria (see Figure 32).

Figure 32. Child penalties in Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Latvia, and Sweden



Source: Child Penalty Atlas, 2024

4.3.1. Family Policies

EU regulations stipulate a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave provision, of which 2 weeks are obligatory, while paternal leave requires a minimum of two weeks. In addition to meeting these requirements, Table 9 illustrates the relatively generous allowances provided by each of the examined countries. Hungary stands out with its notably extensive total parental leave.

Table 9. Family policies in Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Hungary, Latvia, and Sweden

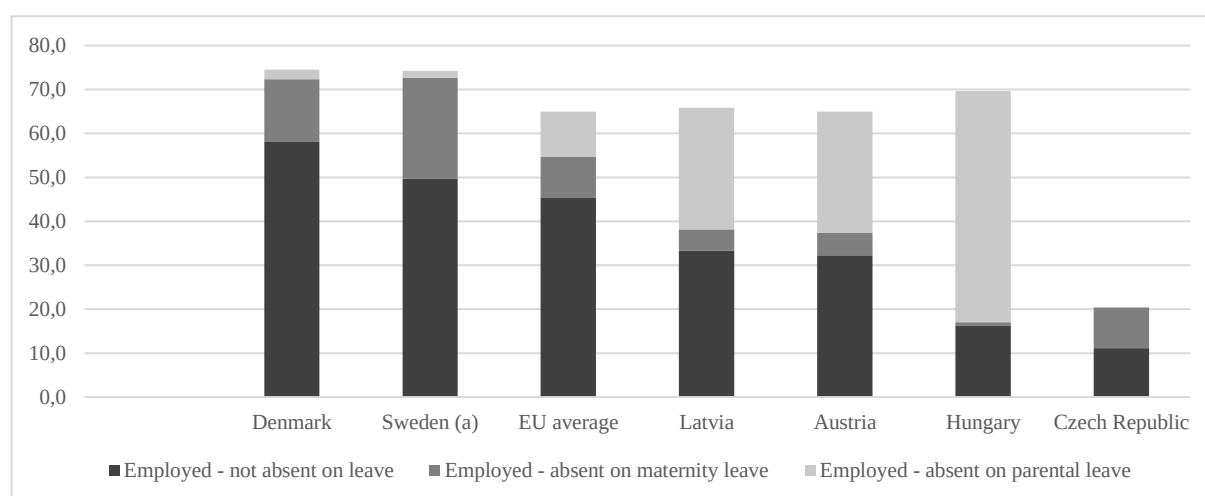
	Total length of paid leave	Length of maternity leave	Length of paid father-specific leave
Austria	60	16	13
Czechia	68,6	28	2
Denmark	50	18	2
Hungary	160	24	1
Latvia	94	16	1,4
Sweden	55,7	12,9	14,3

Source: OECD.Stat, 2024b

In the last ten years, Sweden implemented policy adjustments across various domains, increasing both maternity and paternity leave while marginally reducing the overall parental leave entitlements. Paternal leave was expanded in nearly all countries. In Czechia, the provision of total parental leave has exhibited considerable variability in the past, experiencing significant reductions in 2006 (from 214 to 162 weeks), 2008 (to 110 weeks), and 2018 (to 63.4 weeks), while Hungary demonstrated consistency in these allowances (OECD.Stat, 2024b).

As for the utilization of these provisions, Figure 33 demonstrates a breakdown of the employment status of working mothers with at least one infant, between the ages of 0 and 2. Parental leave is most widespread in Hungary.

Figure 33. Employment of mothers with at least one child aged 0-2 (2021)



Source: OECD, 2024

4.4. Respondents' Experiences

Since leave durations in Hungary are notably extensive, allowing for an extended period spent at home with children on state support, almost all respondents in the sample of my primary research took substantial maternity and overall parental leave. 49 mothers utilized the maximum available state support beyond maternity leave and remained at home with their children for three years; however, some of them noted that they returned to work earlier with their subsequent children. 14 respondents provided inconclusive answers regarding their leave utilization (they did not remember), and 10 returned to work while aid was still available. Additionally, there were 2 exceptional cases where individuals indicated extended absences from the workforce even before giving birth due to high-risk pregnancies.

Moreover, 24 mothers mentioned that they reduced their working hours upon rejoining the workforce due to further childcare responsibilities. Among them, 6 made minimal adjustments and continued as full-time workers, while 9 transitioned to part-time roles. 3 chose self-employment, and 6 became unemployed, with one of them referring to it as "being a full-time mother", demonstrating a positive view and perspective. In addition, it is noteworthy that 3 mothers indicated that they would have reduced their working hours if it had been possible. Overall, 53 mothers changed their workplaces upon returning to work, including nearly all – except one – of the respondents who switched to part-time employment arrangements. For 22 mothers, even their industry of employment changed.

These adjustments were assumed to be primarily aimed at enabling women to take on nearly all childcare responsibilities. To precisely gauge the time allocated to childcare and the gender disparities therein, mothers were requested to specify how much time they spent on childcare-related activities as their children were growing in age and to compare it with the contribution of their partners, the fathers of the children.

During the initial 6 months post-birth, 28 mothers indicated spending 13-15 hours on childcare, while 31 reported 16-18 hours, with some even remembering it being 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Hence, over 80% of them dedicated considerably more time to childcare than a typical full-time job would demand. Regarding their partners' contributions, 38 mothers mentioned the fathers assisting for 0-3 hours, 26 stated 4-6 hours, and 8 reported 7-9 hours.

Between 6 and 12 months of age, two mothers continued to take on childcare responsibilities "around the clock" (writing their own answer of 24 hours), while 28 reported 16-18 hours, and 19 indicated 13-15 hours. Twelve mothers reduced their involvement to 10-12 hours and 10

mothers to 7-9 hours. Conversely, fathers and partners during this phase contributed 0-3 hours for 58.7% of respondents and 4-6 hours for 32%.

As depicted in Figures 34 and 35, the level of involvement from both mothers and fathers gradually decreased over time, although fathers' involvement was minimal to begin with. In some instances, it was observed that upon the mother's return to the workforce, there was a slight uptick in paternal assistance in individual cases, facilitating the transition as women sought to achieve a work-life balance.

Figure 34. Respondents' dedication to childcare responsibilities (in hours)

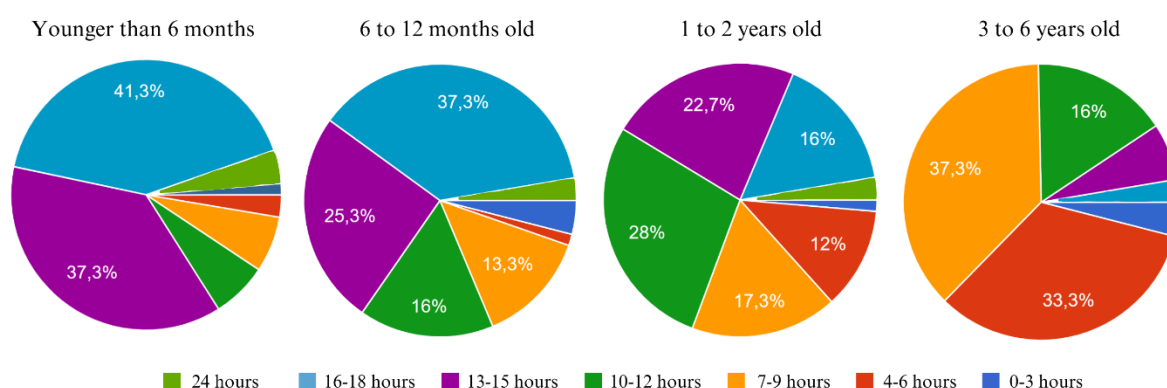
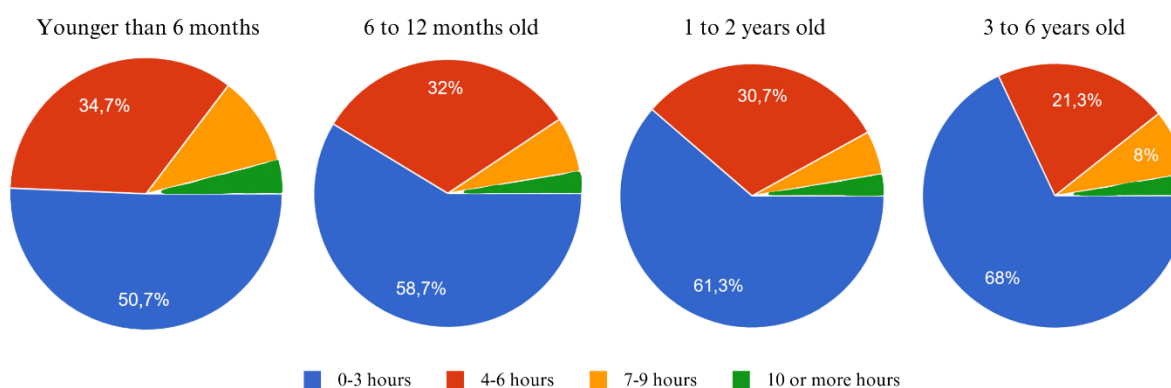


Figure 35. The commitment of respondents' partners to childcare responsibilities (in hours)

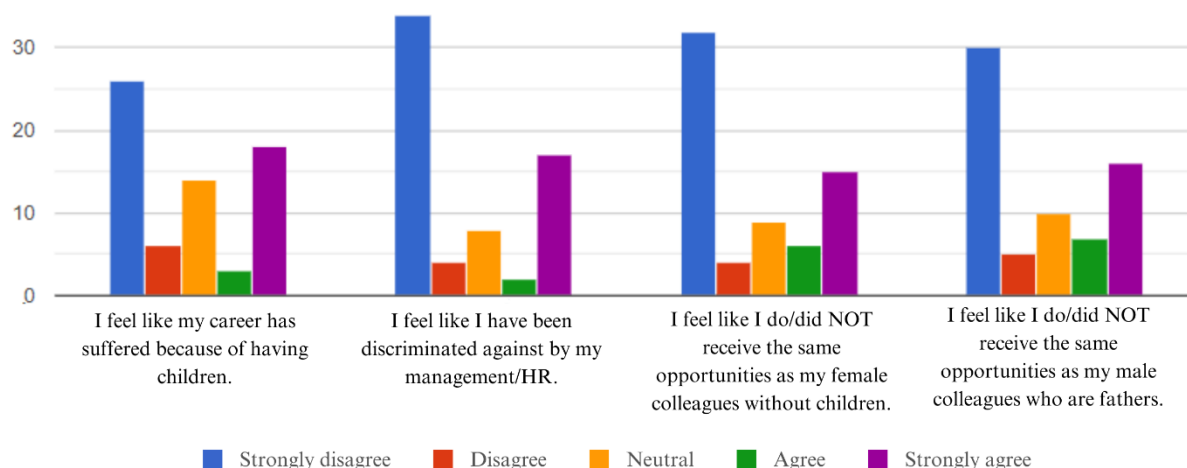


In addition to devoting significant time to caring for their children and receiving assistance from fathers, when possible, other childcare arrangements were also common. Around 61.3% of mothers sought occasional help from grandparents or friends, 48% utilized daycare services, and 21.3% utilized after-school childcare services. Additionally, 6% of respondents also relied on babysitters for assistance.

Upon considering the subjective experiences of mothers amidst the previously introduced highly diverse circumstances, it becomes evident that the statements provided evoked varied responses and controversy. Answers were polarized, surprisingly leaning towards the end where

a high percentage of women expressed strong disagreement regarding ever being mistreated, discriminated against, or held back by others or due to the additional responsibilities they undertook (see Figure 36). Nevertheless, the majority of respondents expressed strong sentiments, and the response choices in between were not favored.

Figure 36. Mothers' opinions on the provided statements



Interviews further highlighted this polarity, as some mothers reported no negative experiences and expressed satisfaction with their career advancement, while others voiced intense feelings about discrimination and impatience from employers.

However, a contradictory aspect worth noting is that even the mothers who completely disagreed with the statements addressing the challenges of being a working mother explained and cited significant issues in their responses to the open-ended questions. For instance, one participant strongly disagreed with the statements but also expressed disapproval of employers dismissing pregnant women or mothers of young children with false reasons.

On another interesting note, there were no observed correlations between the nature of mothers' personal experiences – whether they were positive or negative based on their responses to the statements – and any other variables. When examining the cohort of mothers who strongly agreed with the statements, women from different educational backgrounds and sectors were included; some had the opportunity to reduce their hours, while others did not; some took longer to find a new job after leaving their previous one during pregnancy, while others found one more quickly. These dynamics also held true for the group that disagreed.

When examining the analysis at an individual level, one might expect similar experiences for the two mothers who had high-risk pregnancies and had to leave the workforce early, however, there are significant disparities. While one of them faced challenges in returning to work and

expressed frustration, the other was able to smoothly reintegrate into her previous job and felt content. Another observed pattern was that mothers who transitioned from full-time to part-time or self-employment seemed more satisfied with the treatment of mothers in the Hungarian labor market based on their opinions regarding the statements, whereas those who became unemployed reported contrary negative experiences. This understandably holds for all cases of transitioning to unemployment, but there are exceptions in the other two cases, where individuals may have had different types of negative experiences.

When asked for their personal recommendations to employers or policymakers on how to improve their experience and minimize career sacrifices, the majority of mothers suggested adjustments to work arrangements, while some emphasized the importance of childcare provisions. To elaborate, six mothers advocated for increased flexibility, while eight emphasized the need for employers to demonstrate more patience and empathy, echoing sentiments shared in their narratives during interviews about dealing with unsympathetic and ignorant bosses. Other participants also mentioned issues related to the approach and attitude of managers. Additionally, ten respondents recommended implementing a home office setup, while another ten proposed options for part-time work or flexible working hours. Two respondents proposed offering extra leave days for parents for the instances when their children are sick. One of them expanded on this idea by recommending the option of working from home, particularly during such situations. This suggestion can be viewed as mutually beneficial, as it would alleviate the frequent absences of mothers from the workplace. Finally, five recommendations were put forward regarding on-site daycare, kindergarten, or other childcare facilities, while two individuals addressed the issue of equal pay, along with one mother proposing comprehensive policy changes, including the legal regulation of reinstatement if the return to work is expected within 2 years after childbirth.

5. Discussion

Upon providing an extensive review of the available literature and presenting numerous results spanning across various countries, the discussion chapter will seek to deepen comprehension by interpreting and explaining the findings along with their consequences in the context of previous scholarly work.

5.1. The Unadjusted Gender Pay Gap

The unadjusted gender pay gap as an indicator of disparities in hourly earnings was first assessed spanning over the period from 1997 to 2022, revealing notable fluctuations in

Hungary. The gap is influenced by structural factors, such as sectoral and occupational segregation, which may explain certain peaks and troughs. Still, there are also some cyclical elements, like variations in the broader economic landscape. For instance, economic recessions may worsen and exacerbate existing gender inequalities in the labor market, leading to further temporary increases in the gender pay gap. The observation of these during economic downturns suggests that negative external factors unequally impact genders during such periods – men typically experience job losses, which is not reflected in the unadjusted gender pay gap, while women are retained in the workforce by accepting lower wages (World Economic Forum, 2022). This could clarify why historical data on the unadjusted gender pay gap indicates an increase across most nations around the time of the Great Recession, particularly noticeable in Austria, Hungary, and Czechia. Sweden and Denmark, despite also being affected by the crisis, demonstrated greater resilience compared to other countries in general. Their economies were less vulnerable to risky financial behaviors, and they possessed stronger regulatory frameworks and financial institutions, allowing them to swiftly mitigate the crisis. This might elucidate why they did not experience an outstanding rise in the gap. Nonetheless, in cases of contingencies, policymakers of more volatile economies should monitor their progress in gender equality and ensure that it is not undermined by the repercussions of events. Conversely, comparable rises were not evident in the case of the latest economic crisis, namely, the COVID-19 pandemic. Those hardships introduced a highly complex landscape with additional factors at play. The deeper analysis of these dynamics falls outside the scope of the present research paper; however, the pandemic has been extensively explored in scholarly literature as a lens through which to analyze gender disparities in various fields.

Continuing forward, it was seen that Austria, Czechia, and Hungary previously exhibited relatively similar patterns between 1997 and 2001, followed by Hungary making notable advancements in 2002-2003 and maintaining its unadjusted gender pay gap below that of the other two countries ever since. However, its progress has become inconsistent over time, leading to its current position doing only slightly better than the other two nations in terms of wage disparities. Implementing targeted gender policies centered on gender mainstreaming is crucial to stabilize progress and foster development in this domain, as exemplified by countries like Denmark and Sweden, which have shown consistent progress and hold leading positions in gender equality. From a legislative perspective, Sweden boasts a comprehensive equality program that extends beyond a governmental body to include 54 governmental agencies along with 33 higher education institutions. Consequently, Sweden has been excelling notably in

indicators related to the commitment to employing methods and tools for gender mainstreaming, showcasing a proactive approach to implementing action plans in practice (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024c).

However, aside from the general policy framework, the cultural landscape of Scandinavian nations also lends itself more favorably to gender equality, with a cultural emphasis on egalitarianism evident in workplace practices. In contrast, in countries like Hungary, although dual-earner roles are common, traditional gender norms and stereotypes, where fathers are expected to work and mothers are expected to stay at home, still hold sway (Makay, 2018). Moreover, the labor markets in Sweden and Denmark also may offer greater flexibility for employees, encompassing features such as flexible working arrangements, remote work opportunities, and initiatives promoting work-life balance. Therefore, their commendable progress and exceptional performance are grounded in multiple facets, extending beyond solely gender mainstreaming policymaking, necessitating further exploration.

Nonetheless, the fluctuations in Hungary – not all to be explained by the impact of external elements – warrant attention, depicting a lack of genuine progress achieved through concentrated effort. The highly variable landscape also posed challenges for analysis.

5.1.1. Decomposition of the Gender Pay Gap

Considering the decomposition of the gender pay gap, when differentiating Denmark and Sweden from the other countries, it is notable that they not only exhibit smaller gender gaps with consistent progress but also have decompositions where a significant portion can be attributed to observed characteristics. This implies that factors such as educational attainment, occupational preferences, work experience, and other quantifiable variables largely account for wage disparities between genders. It implies that there might be fewer instances of discriminatory practices or systemic biases directly influencing gender-based wage gaps, with women's disadvantaged position being attributable to tangible factors instead. In contrast, in some other countries, especially Hungary, a substantial portion of the unadjusted gender pay gap remains unexplained, raising the possibility of discrimination playing a partial role. However, interpretation should be approached with caution, as the subsequently analyzed factor, the influence of childcare responsibilities, is evident not only in potential unobserved discrimination but also significantly in diminished experience or restricted career options for women.

Commencing with the examination of the portion that is explained, despite the findings of Leythienne and Ronkowski (2018) and Leythienne and Pérez-Julián (2021), differences in economic activity and enterprise control do not appear to play the most substantial role in the gender pay gap. Instead, occupational disparities may hold greater significance. In the context of Hungary, while enterprise control declined in importance from 2014 to 2018, economic activity retained its significance, indicating that sectoral segregation and the overrepresentation of women in lower-paid sectors contribute to the relatively large unadjusted gender pay gap, as the positive explanatory value attributed to economic activity in the decomposition suggests that men, on average, tend to work in better-paid economic sectors. This viewpoint is possibly underscored by the fact that, in 2022, the mean of average gross monthly earnings in male-dominated sectors like manufacturing, construction, and information communication slightly exceeds that of female-dominated sectors such as financial and insurance activities, real estate activities, and human health and social work activities. However, a more detailed analysis reveals that when considering the exact number of men and women employed in each sector, including those not highlighted, the average monthly earnings of women based on their economic branches are slightly higher than those of male employees. Therefore, based on their participation in various economic activities, women's wages should not be observed to be lower than those of men, at least not to the extent seen in the decompositions of 2014 and 2018 data, especially as this trend of calculating slightly higher female income persists in those years as well.

Furthermore, breaking down the unadjusted gender pay gap to sectors based on the NACE Rev. 2 classification of the industries, substantial disparities within sectors are still apparent in most instances. Nevertheless, it's noteworthy that gender gaps were reported to be negative, indicating favorable conditions for women, in construction in Hungary and Sweden, in water supply, sewerage, waste management, and remediation activities in Sweden, and in electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply in Latvia. This suggests that predominantly male-dominated sectors may, in some cases, value the inclusion of women. However, beyond these examples, significant wage disparities persist between male and female employees within the same economic branch.

Some of these within-sector gaps may stem from occupational segregation, implying that women tend to be concentrated in lower-paying roles. This is evidenced by the higher prevalence of male managers compared to female managers, while women are more represented in lower occupational levels. As the hierarchy descends, the share of men is also on a declining

trend, indicating limited occupational segregation. Therefore, in contrast to the implications of the findings in 2014 and 2018, occupation does not seem to serve as a negative explanatory factor in the analysis of the unadjusted gender pay gap in 2022. Conversely, occupational segregation is indeed prevalent in statistical data and these dynamics are very similar for 2014 and 2018 as well, even though women were expected to earn 3,9% more than men due to their participation in higher-paying occupations according to the decomposition.

Furthermore, while the proportion of female managers in Hungary was last recorded to be around 40%, showing that women are beginning to be quite well-represented in the highest-paying levels of the economy (with the percentage being higher than for Austria, Czechia or Denmark, but lower than for Latvia and Sweden), accounting for segregation, the average hourly wage disparities by occupation still show huge differences in almost all sectors between male and female employees, with the difference generally increasing for higher-paying positions, thus showing the biggest disparity for these managerial roles. Thus, statistics suggest that this occupation aspect of the gender pay gap can be further decomposed into two components: on the one hand, men usually work in better-paid jobs and, on the other, even in the same occupation, men get higher wages. There are several possible explanations for the second outcome, including work experience, negotiation skills, or work-life balance preferences, but the possibility of implicit or conscious bias is beginning to be important to take into account, as it becomes increasingly challenging to explain why women employed in full-time work with equivalent status and roles demanding similar performance earn less than men (Becker, 1971).

5.2. The Overall Gender Earnings Gap

Upon acquainting ourselves with a fundamental metric of economic gender parity, namely the unadjusted gender pay gap, our purview will expand to encompass the wider overall gender earnings gap, incorporating additional differentials in economic engagement beyond discrepancies in hourly wages among employed individuals. This entails disparities in labor force participation and employment rates, as well as variations in the volume of hours worked.

Goldin's (1994) U-shaped curve of women's labor force participation was slightly delayed and distorted in Hungary due to the regime change and political transformation. As the focus of much of the scholarly work done on Hungarian women's labor force participation situation suggests, it is clearly influenced mostly by the historical happenings of the 1980s and 1990s. As established by Fodor (2004), during the socialist times, women were largely employed and economically active with relatively good policies in place to compensate them for the additional

responsibilities of motherhood, domestic work, and other unpaid work. Socialist governments actively promoted women's participation in the workforce as part of their ideology of gender equality. In many socialist countries, including Hungary, there were labor shortages in certain sectors of the economy, particularly in industries such as manufacturing and agriculture. As a result, women were actively recruited to fill these labor gaps. However, the economic crisis brought about by the transformation reduced overall employment rates, affecting women substantially, since the previous provisions were also taken away, forcing them to adapt to a new, more challenging landscape of balancing all responsibilities alongside work, while privatization substantially favored the male workforce. By the time the economy started to expand again after 1997, women also started to fill positions again, slowly bringing their labor force participation back up and beyond previous figures. After various government economic stabilization measures, the Hungarian economy finally embarked on a sustainable growth path, which closely mirrors the trajectory of women's labor force participation rate and employment rate curve as well. Contributing factors included a large increase in the economic activity of the older age cohorts, as well as the more positive landscape for working mothers to return to the labor force.

Given the adverse impact of women's underrepresentation in the labor force, as corroborated by existing literature, policymakers are particularly attentive to this employment domain of gender inequalities. They recognize the inefficiency stemming from the underutilization of a substantial portion of the potential labor force and strive to address this issue to unlock the advantageous outcomes that gender equality in employment may yield. On the other hand, during times of crisis, companies are often inclined to replace male employees with women who are willing to accept lower wages. This could explain why the financial crisis and Great Recession do not significantly affect female participation while showing a slight decrease for males. However, as noted earlier, these economic downturns do indeed reflect in the unadjusted gender pay gap instead, as men in lower-level positions are substituted by women for even lower wages, while men in higher-paying roles remain relatively unaffected.

The gender hours gap, which constitutes the remaining component of the gender overall earnings gap, will be explored in the following chapter concerning the effects of motherhood, as it does not offer significant insights on its own.

5.2.1. The Impacts of Motherhood

As observed in the employment rates among men and women across different age groups, the disparity is most pronounced during the childbearing and caregiving years for women, typically between the ages of 25 and 40, with the most significant discrepancy occurring around the 30-34 age bracket. In Hungary, this gap notably decreased from 2020 to 2021, partly attributable to the emergence of novel work arrangements and remote work opportunities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced a degree of flexibility into the workforce.

A parallel can be drawn between this breakdown of employment rates across different age groups and the breakdown of the unadjusted gender pay gap by age. In the latter, distinct patterns emerge between Central European and Scandinavian countries. While countries like Czechia, Latvia, and Hungary exhibit an immediate and pronounced effect of childbirth on the pay gap, in Sweden and Denmark, the impact seems mitigated, with smaller penalties for women's careers in the short term. This is achieved through policies that promote equal participation of fathers in childcare and facilitate the smooth reintegration of women into the workforce through part-time work, remote work, or flexible hours, as Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács (2011) already highlighted. However, over time, there is a sustained and prolonged impact, indicating that mothers bear a considerable cost for needing such adjustments, as implied by Goldin and Katz (2011) and Goldin (2014). Therefore, while flexibility may provide short-term benefits for mothers, they could still face repercussions in the long term, the effects are only delayed and modified compared to the other examples.

From the explanation provided, one might conclude that the outstanding disparities in childbearing age are largely attributed to the childcare gap between mothers and fathers – the variation in time allocated to childcare-related duties. Women often take on a larger share of childcare responsibilities than men – statistical data and survey responses both illustrated comparable outcomes regarding the distribution of childcare between mothers and fathers. This observation is often suggested to hinder women's career progression, while men are traditionally viewed as the primary earners, hence focusing on work and career development to support their families. For a considerable period, gender roles have shaped workforce dynamics worldwide, although Scandinavian countries have notably deviated from this trend, as noted before. Their unique emphasis on egalitarian principles is evident in practice, where childcare responsibilities, while predominantly assumed by women, are more equitably shared compared to regions where traditional gender norms are more pronounced.

This move towards a more equitable distribution of childcare responsibilities appears to have had a positive impact on reducing the child penalty in Denmark and Sweden, but it still showed adverse effects in other countries. However, the impact of childbirth on women's labor market participation and career prospects varies over time and across different countries due to various other factors as well. These differences are often linked to shifts in family policies, societal attitudes, and the opportunities available to women.

Establishing a direct correlation between variations in childcare responsibilities and the pay gap and quantifying its influence is a challenging objective. This is primarily because such impacts are predominantly observed in the unexplained portion of the unadjusted gender pay gap. However, it also indirectly manifests itself in other economic disparities, which subsequently have a direct impact on the overall gender earnings gap.

In Czechia, it primarily surfaces in the employment gap. Rather than reducing their working hours, due to their inability to do so, a significant portion of Czech mothers opt to exit the workforce temporarily, only to encounter challenges re-entering later, often leading to unemployment beyond their maternity and parental leave periods. Although the motherhood penalty appears to diminish in terms of the unadjusted gender pay gap as per the methodology outlined by Zajíčková and Zajíček (2020), childbirth remains a substantial barrier to women's economic participation. Consequently, the nation continues to struggle with significant disparities and child penalties within the broader concept under discussion. Conversely, in Austria, it is common for women to choose part-time employment while caring for children, making the gender hours gap a notable factor in that context while also hindering career development. These differing circumstances necessitate tailored policy interventions.

In Hungary, although the unadjusted gender pay gap is notably high and predominantly unexplained, the employment and hours gaps are not particularly pronounced. Given the scarcity of part-time opportunities in the country – in the sample I studied, mothers desiring a shift to part-time positions had to switch employers as well – there is no evident trend of women transitioning to such roles, as observed in Austria. Moreover, the extensive parental leave policies mitigate the risk of unemployment among mothers upon career interruptions as seen in Czechia, although instances of involuntary job loss due to employer decisions still occur.

Regarding the unadjusted gender pay gap, which concerns hourly earnings, childcare responsibilities may only be indirectly factored in through considerations such as job experience or skills. This is because time spent away from work for childcare could result in a loss of valuable experience and training, potentially putting individuals at a disadvantage upon their

return to the workforce. However, studies by Leythienne and Ronkowski (2018) and Leythienne and Pérez-Julián (2021) suggest that in Hungary and other examined countries (excluding Austria), this contribution is deemed negligible, since women are expected to earn more than men if looking solely at their average experience level. This finding contradicts common theoretical assumptions and widely held beliefs, prompting further investigation. Current research findings support the general theory: in Hungary, survey results indicate that older mothers reentering the workforce often struggle to keep up with technological advancements and feel somewhat out of touch with current workplace practices. This diminished productivity is expected to lead to reduced wages. However, contemporary observations of younger mothers suggest that some of them, especially those taking extended leaves, use their time away from work to engage in self-development and stay updated on industry trends. For instance, one mother pursued certification as a makeup artist during her leave, while another actively sought information from colleagues about significant company updates. They made efforts to mitigate skill loss and remain competitive in the job market upon their return. Furthermore, younger mothers also express concerns about job security and fear potential termination if they take extended leave. This highlights a recent trend where mothers feel compelled to maintain their skills and relevance in the workforce to avoid potential discriminatory actions in the workplace.

On a different aspect, it's noteworthy that the mother who maintained the shortest break from labor force participation was the one with a PhD, potentially indicating a phenomenon often discussed in the literature: highly educated mothers are inclined to sustain their careers, while those with lower levels of education may rely on state assistance until they must re-enter the workforce. However, within my sample, this is the only instance supporting such a pattern, as no consistent correlation is evident. Many mothers with BA/BSc or MA/MSc degrees opted for extended maternity and parental leave breaks, while some less educated mothers, particularly in agriculture, had shorter interruptions and did not fully utilize available leave provisions. In interviews, they explained that the seasonal nature of their work and its continuity prevented them from extended absences. Although all respondents with shorter breaks reported smooth reintegration experiences, they also expressed feelings of guilt for not spending more time with their children. While mothers who spent more time at home were satisfied with the increased time spent with their children, their return-to-work experiences were generally less positive. Thus, due to the inherent trade-offs between career and family priorities, achieving a completely positive outcome remains elusive.

Furthermore, when comparing trends among older and younger mothers, it becomes evident that older mothers tended to prolong their absence from the workforce, whereas younger mothers in recent years expressed a stronger desire to resume their careers promptly. This shift is accompanied by an increased preference for childcare services, both in terms of current utilization and recommendations for others. The eagerness of younger mothers to re-enter the workforce signals a changing attitude toward gender roles from women's perspective, suggesting a departure from conventional norms. However, at present, women continue to shoulder the responsibility of returning to work while also fulfilling caregiving duties, while fathers have yet to fully embrace childcare responsibilities to engage in similar dual roles.

5.3. Implications for Policy and Beyond

The policy landscape in Hungary regarding gender equality and work-life balance for mothers is complex, with various factors influencing the efficacy of different approaches. The debate over the length of parental leave in Hungary is nuanced. While extensive literature suggests that long parental leaves may have counterproductive effects, such as diminishing skills and experience, reducing leave duration may not be desirable due to potential consequences for maternal unemployment.

Mothers in Hungary often advocate for part-time work and flexible work arrangements instead to facilitate their early reintegration into the workforce while balancing childcare responsibilities. However, experiences from other countries, such as Austria, highlight the potential for these arrangements to exacerbate gender inequalities through the hours gap domain. Therefore, policy interventions should carefully consider the implications of flexible work arrangements but, as seen in Denmark and Sweden, they have great potential to contribute to positive outcomes. The provision of affordable and quality childcare services also seems crucial for supporting maternal employment by partially alleviating the burden of unpaid care work on women.

Addressing discrimination based on maternity and family responsibilities requires not only policy changes but also shifts in employer attitudes and workplace culture, as highlighted by multiple respondents. In their views, workplaces should strive to become more family-friendly, accommodating the needs of working parents and promoting a culture of inclusivity.

Lastly, even concentrated efforts to promote work-life balance and eliminate discrimination may not significantly reduce gender inequality if entrenched traditional gender norms remain unchallenged, especially concerning the distribution of childcare responsibilities. It is necessary

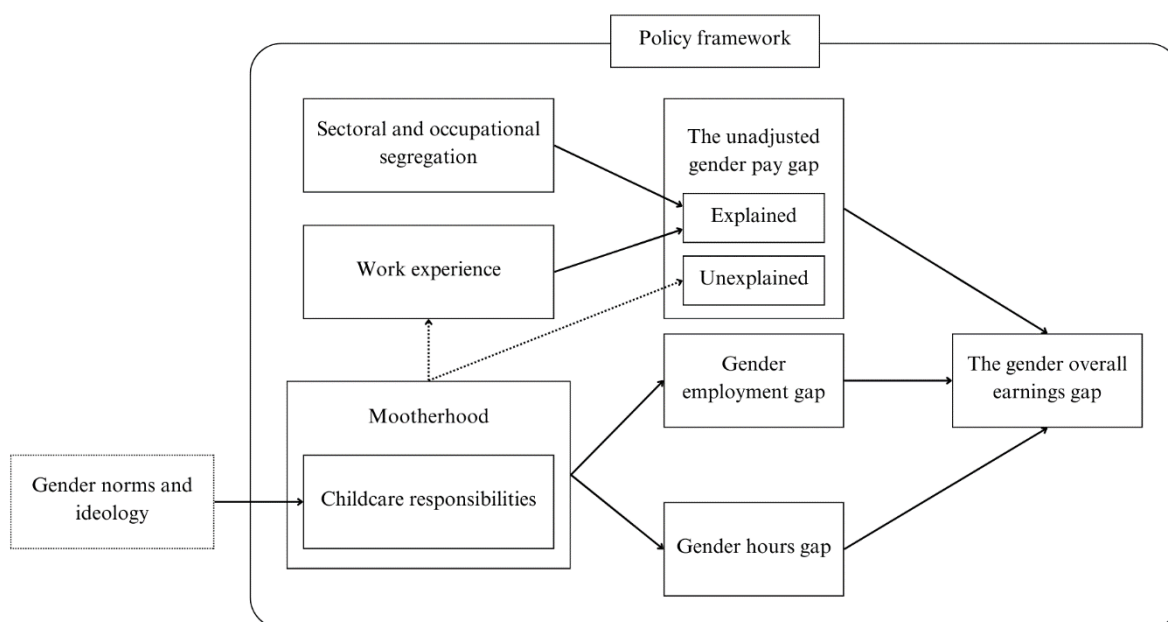
for policies to actively challenge these traditional roles by encouraging shared parental duties and incentivizing fathers to take paternity leave. Currently, policy frameworks underscore unequal gender roles by offering mothers substantially longer parental leave periods compared to fathers, reinforcing the notion that fathers should prioritize work while mothers should assume primary caregiving responsibilities at home. Over the long haul, there is a pressing need for a shift in these perspectives.

In conclusion, policy interventions in Hungary should prioritize strategies that support maternal employment by enhancing work-life balance and challenging traditional gender norms.

6. Conclusion

Through an examination of the unadjusted gender pay gap and economic inequalities, this research paper aimed to propose relevant implications for gender and family policymaking. By addressing where the impact of motherhood manifests itself in the gender pay gap in Hungary, the conclusions of this paper contribute suggestions to improve mothers' stance in the labor market. Figure 37 illustrates the conceptual framework guiding the research process in addressing the research questions, aiding in understanding connections.

Figure 37. Conceptual framework



Firstly, the most important explained factor contributing to the unadjusted gender pay gap in Hungary was found to be occupational segregation. Although previous analyses pointed towards economic activity as a major determinant, recent statistical data indicates that

occupational segregation plays a more prominent role and exerts a greater influence on the wage gap than sectoral segregation. However, a significant portion of the gap persists without a clear explanation, particularly when contrasted with the situations in other investigated countries like Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Latvia, and Sweden. This suggests the presence of unobserved contributors that may contribute to the gap, potentially including discriminatory practices.

The impact of motherhood extends into this unexplained territory besides indirectly contributing to women's work experience, occupation, or skills through career discontinuity. Expanding the perspective to encompass the gender overall earnings gap, its impact was found increasingly significant. In contrast to certain countries like Austria, where the impact is evident in the gender hours gap due to a push for mothers to shift to part-time roles, or in the employment gap as seen in Czechia, Hungary's situation sees a substitution of these disruptions with robust maternity and parental leave benefits. While this circumstance might seem beneficial in comparison, the reintegration experiences of mothers into the workforce vary significantly. Some seamlessly transition back, achieving work-life balance, while others encounter discrimination, face challenges in returning to their previous roles, experience demotions, struggle to advance their careers, or encounter difficulties arranging childcare. Nevertheless, all face a common issue of encountering a lack of flexibility and patience in Hungarian workplaces toward mothers. Therefore, a crucial aspect of enhancement lies in altering the mindset of employers and fostering a workplace environment conducive to family needs.

Furthermore, while policymakers tend to keep their focus on parental leave, both literature and mothers recognize the value of other family policies. Instead of deterring mothers from workforce participation, their seamless reintegration should be facilitated through flexible arrangements and the availability of high-quality childcare services.

In the grand scheme, a long-term objective should entail greater involvement of men in caregiving responsibilities and unpaid work. This can be achieved by expanding paternal leave policies and providing incentives for fathers to engage in child-rearing duties. As Claudia Goldin stated, "We are never going to have gender equality, or narrow the pay gap, until we have couple's equity" (Smith, 2023).

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