

# **Life Course, Work, and Labour in Global History**



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# The Changing Politics of Women’s Work and the Making of Extended Childcare Leave in State-Socialist Hungary, Europe, and Internationally: Shifting the Scene

On October 4, 1966, the politburo of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (*Politikai Bizottság* of the *Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt* MSZMP) made a landmark decision that was to substantively alter the labour and life course regime in this Eastern European state-socialist country. Working mothers of children born starting from January 1, 1967 could, after the expiration of mandatory maternity leave, choose to stay home until the child turned two and a half (soon it would be three) and receive a substantial childcare leave benefit during this prolonged period (“MSZMP PB October 1966.” esp. 5–6). With the introduction of extended childcare leave under the name Childcare Benefit (*gyermekgondozási segély*), soon widely known as *gyes* (expressions such as “she’s on *gyes*” have been ever present in the everyday life of the country since the introduction of the benefit), Hungary became a trendsetter for an altered life course regime among many countries in both state-socialist and capitalist Europe. At the time, Austria alone had a regulation, introduced in 1960, that allowed qualifying mothers to choose to stay home until the first birthday of the child and receive, depending on other family income, a benefit covered by funds from the unemployment benefit scheme (Bundesgesetzblatt 1960, Laws 240, 242; Manetsgruber 2016: 4–6).<sup>1</sup>

Extended childcare leave was a policy instrument that touched upon but also departed from an inherited policy vision and practice that addressed maternity and women’s responsibility for the care of infants and small children. Adjacent instruments included: maternity protection and benefits before and after childbirth

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1 As a rule, single mothers could receive the full benefit equaling the unemployment benefit, whereas mothers in partnerships tended to receive 50 percent less.

typically granted for (certain groups of) working women and also envisioned as a measure inclusive of all women; “mothers’ pensions,” often imagined as a benefit enabling single mothers of infants and small children to stay home; and family allowances aimed at supporting child rearing. Like the newly emerging politics of extended childcare leave, all these policies addressed the principal tension between women’s paid and unpaid work. Yet extended childcare leave was also, as we shall see, a historically new response to a historical change in the world of paid work, namely women’s growing involvement in and, in particular, the changing forms of their involvement in paid work. Extended childcare leave, while reifying and redescribing women’s responsibility for the care of infants and small children, was aimed at enabling women’s more consistent and sustained involvement in more regular forms of employment.

In the decades after 1945, European state-socialist countries made progress in terms of bringing about a refashioning of women’s paid work in international comparison, and from the late 1960s/early 1970s onwards, state-socialist Europe led the way in bringing about policy changes which, in the end, produced a new politics of extended childcare leave. The coupling of these two developments happened against a particular socio-economic background. Beginning in the 1940s, the countries now belonging to the Soviet sphere of influence pursued a large-scale program of state-led catch-up development characterised by rapid economic growth and industrialisation, an expanding service sector, a steadily expanding labour market, and rapid social transformation. Work, including women’s emancipation through paid work, was at the core of the societal vision to which state socialism aspired. Unsurprisingly, then, in the scholarship, the “Eastern bloc” has been described as a society of full-time workers, implying a more-or-less uniform labour and life course regime imposed on both women and men, barely changing over time, and characterised by long-term and full-time involvement in the world of paid work.

In this chapter, against the backdrop of developments in other state-socialist as well as Western European countries, I discuss the emergence and expansion of extended childcare leave for working mothers in Hungary and parallel innovations in the international policy-making of the International Labour Organization (ILO). I argue that such a focus on the history of gender, work, and the life course helps us move beyond the amorphous vision of state socialism as a society of full-time workers and allows us to place the history of gender and labour in state-socialist Europe in a broader framework, thereby overcoming the implicit Western European bias in European labour history. The history of state-socialist Europe as a trendsetter for a changing international and European labour and life course regime brings to the fore an array of motivations and trajectories of – in the end – converging social policy reform in East and West as well as internationally which

evolved around issues of work and labour. “Thinking together” Western European, Eastern European, and international arguments and actions that informed the introduction of extended childcare leave and related measures makes visible both differences and similarities. The integrative perspective suggested in this chapter points to the limited representation, both on the international stage at the time and in scholarship up to the present day, of Eastern European developments and actors, among them state-socialist trade unions and women trade unionists who, in their own way, aimed to present and represent women workers’ experiences and viewpoints.

## **Working Women with Small Children in Europe after 1945: Actors and Interests in East and West, and Internationally**

The introduction of extended paid childcare leave in Hungary in 1967 and analogous schemes in other countries was a response to a particular historical conjuncture. From the 1960s onwards, policy-makers within countries and internationally began to address an overarching, shared policy challenge. This challenge resulted from dissimilar trajectories of women’s involvement in the labour markets of European state-socialist and capitalist countries and the common tension between paid and unpaid work faced by working women with small children.

When European countries west and east of the “Iron Curtain” entered an era of labour-intensive economic growth after the post-1945 reconstruction years, the strategies employed to meet the growing demand for labour differed markedly. Not least based in the doctrine of women’s emancipation through paid work, state-socialist countries pursued a politics of involving ever larger segments of the female population, including women with small children, in full-time, paid employment. This politics was facilitated by the payment of low (though highly unequal) wages to both women and men, and it left intact traditionalist ideas and practices of women’s responsibility for childcare and family work. The politics of labour under state socialism in this sense can be characterised as a dual-earner/one-wage/one-caregiver economy (Zimmermann 2010). By contrast, from the later 1950s onwards, many Western European countries embarked on a politics of meeting the growing demand for labour by importing migrant labour from the southern European periphery and beyond, as well as from (formerly) colonised territories. By 1970, the proportion of the foreign population in leading industrial countries such as France and the Federal Republic of Germany reached approxi-

mately 5 percent, and it would increase further (Tomka 2013: 40–41).<sup>2</sup> Women's labour force participation ratios in general remained visibly behind the figures produced by state socialism, and many more women with small children stayed home. The resulting differences in terms of women's overall involvement in paid work are summarised in Table 1, while Table 2 shows that in Eastern Europe, indeed, many more women of the age groups in which family responsibilities tended to peak stayed in the workforce as compared to women in Western Europe.

**Table 1:** Involvement of women in paid work, around 1960.

Region	Economically active women, % of total female population	Women workers, % of total economically active population
Eastern Europe (incl. YU, without SU)	40	42
Soviet Union	41	48
Western Europe	29	33
Southern Europe (ES, PT, EL, IT)	20	25

Source: ILO Estimate based on ILO Statistics, given in International Labour Office 1963:25.

Because of the growing need for workers, by the 1960s, policy-makers in the Western industrial countries and internationally felt the need for reforms and regulations that would enable and entice women to stay in or return (faster) to the labour market once they had given birth to one or more children. Such measures could also help make young women conceive of paid employment as a long-term prospect and contribute to the emergence of a reliable, dedicated, and productive female labour force.

State-socialist Eastern Europe had begun to push young women onto the labour market earlier with the goal of turning them into lifelong full-time workers. In Hungary, women's share in the active workforce rose from 29 percent in 1949 to 36 percent in 1960, and it would reach 41 percent in 1970. In the industrial sector, women's share was even higher, reaching 33 percent in 1960 and 42 percent in 1970. Women's labour-force participation ratio (i.e. the number of active working women in the female population of working age) rose dynamically from 35 percent in 1949 to 50 percent in 1960. By 1970, the ratio would be 64 percent, to which, at this point, another 6 percent of inactive female earners had been added; the latter

<sup>2</sup> The state-socialist countries imported very few foreign workers in comparison.

figure had risen sharply after the introduction of *gyes* in 1967, from less than 1 percent in 1960 (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal 1977: Tables 1.1., 1.3.). Table 2 demonstrates that these developments were driven in particular by the increase of the percentage of economically active women between twenty-four- and forty-four years old.

**Table 2:** Percentage of economically active women by age group.

Country	15–19 years	20–24 years	25–34 years	35–44 years	45–54 years	55–64 years	65 and over
Bulgaria (1956)	48	69	71	77	69	49	23
Poland (1950)	57	68	61	64	62	51	29
Austria (1951)	73	74	50	46	44	31	13
France (1954)	43	57	41	42	47	39	13
Sweden (1950)	54	57	32	27	30	23	8
Hungary (1950)	56	45	<i>age 25–29</i> 36 <i>age 30–34</i> 33	<i>age 35–39</i> 30 <i>age 40–44</i> 29	<i>age 45–49</i> 28 <i>age 50–54</i> 27	<i>age 55–59</i> 29 <i>age 60–64</i> 27	20
Hungary (1960)	54	55	<i>age 25–29</i> 49 <i>age 30–34</i> 49	<i>age 35–39</i> 51 <i>age 40–44</i> 52	<i>age 45–49</i> 50 <i>age 50–54</i> 46	<i>age 55–59</i> 31 <i>age 60–64</i> 26	20

Source: International Labour Office 1963: 33 (all data except Hungary); International Labour Office 2000:83 (Hungary).

Throughout the 1960s, Hungarian policy-makers were confronted with mounting societal and economic tension related to the presence of ever more women in the labour force. Among other things, the “unreliability” of working women with small children who failed to juggle the demands of paid labour and unpaid family work caused problems for the economy at large, and the industrial sector in particular. Women’s problems were exacerbated by the fact – as a report submitted to the politburo as late as 1973 put it – that “[t]he division of labour in the family is ossified and mirrors the impact of conservative views” (“MSZMP PB February 1973:” report on population matters, esp. 15). In the policy reform process that eventually would lead up to the introduction of *gyes*, high-ranking women

trade unionists responsible for women's affairs within the National Federation of Trade Unions (*Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége*, SZOT) played, as we shall see, an important role; they did so with reference to ongoing and expected developments on the international plane, and within the ILO in particular. SZOT was one of the key actors involved in the preparations for any relevant decision-making involving the labour force. In August 1965, Erzsébet Déri,<sup>3</sup> the SZOT officer responsible for women's issues, reported to her superior on the preparations for *gyes*. Déri in her "strictly confidential" internal memo put her finger on the tensions surrounding the employment *en masse* of women with small children. The memo captured both working mothers' escapism from and the intrusion of the consequences of the burden of unpaid care work on the world of paid work in general and demanding factory work in particular in an exemplary manner:

There is no sufficient supply of nurseries for working women with children. The establishment of nurseries is expensive . . . 70 percent [of the existing nurseries] are not up-to-date and adequate . . . At present, we speak about the general overburdening of women, in particular where there is a small child. The households are not adequately equipped with machinery, and existing apparatuses are expensive . . . Another factor impacting the [potential childcare] benefit is the fact that in our day, one could count on grandmothers as child educators within the family only to a very limited extent. Elderly women today receive a retirement benefit and, indeed, do not depend on their children's support . . . [They] want to live autonomously, independently. Another issue is that the elderly women are not suited to bring up children, especially if we think of grandmothers from villages in relation to urban youngsters (religiosity, anachronistic diet, and so on) . . . A woman who has an infant cannot meet her workplace's expectations because she must care for the family and the infant, or, more precisely, she is not a full-value member of the workforce. Until the child reaches the age of one . . . they miss 160 out of 290 working days. Their irregular absences negatively influence production . . . In factories with two and three shifts, twenty-five percent of the mothers of infants leave their jobs for good, using childrearing [as justification] . . . The present state is an impediment from the perspective of the mother and the infant, too. ("Déri, *Feljegyzés gyés javaslat 1965*")

Erzsébet Déri crafted her memo in response to a meeting with a representative of the Ministry of Labour who had informed her about plans related to *gyes*. A few days later, Déri – in a separate memo ("Déri, *Feljegyzés beszélgetés 1965*") – recounted conversations she pursued at that earlier meeting with seven women workers at one of the sites of the Hungarian Cloth Factory (*Magyar Posztógyár*) located in the outskirts of Budapest. Déri proactively sought to convey the voices

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<sup>3</sup> In Hungarian, her name would invariably be given as Mrs. Ernő Déri since the name of married women at the time was given as "Mrs." and then the given and family names of their husband. Many women officials and other women in everyday parlance used to give their husband's family name and their own given name. Whenever I know the given name of a woman, I use this version.

of those “who are the most competent (*a legilletékesebbek*)” – i.e. the women concerned – to the trade union leadership as a point of reference for SZOT’s decision-making. Déri recounted what the workers had said “as close to their original words as possible (*lehetőség szerint szó szerint*)” in her memo.<sup>4</sup> She had asked her interviewees about their views, concerns, reflections, and suggestions as working women with small children. The narratives generated shed light on the real-life conditions under which women with small children, working in a three-shift factory, struggled to combine paid and unpaid work to ensure a livelihood for their families. After giving birth, women workers had the opportunity to bundle together various benefits and legal and de facto avenues to acquire a few months of paid leave from factory work. After this period was over, some women took additional unpaid leave; others placed their child in the factory or neighbourhood nursery, or they hired a private nanny for around 500 forints per month. In terms of reconciling conflicting time commitments, the women faced two key problems: what to do with the child if it had to be withdrawn from the nursery because of illness or an outbreak of an infectious disease – a constant occurrence, according to the interviews; and how to juggle three-shift work and childcare? The latter issue directly combined with the material question: some women were offered the option to switch to permanent morning shifts, but this would come with a considerable loss of earnings (e.g., “300–400 Forint”). The complete loss of earnings was, of course, the key driving force to return to the factory for women who had taken unpaid leave. As to their standing in the factory, the women testified to solidarity and assistance, including offers to switch to one-shift work, as well as conflicts. One woman explained: “My main shift foreman is a woman, and she still doesn’t understand my trouble. She criticises me a lot, telling me she can’t count on me because I am absent a lot; but it’s not my fault, it hurts me the most when my child is sick, and on top of that, I don’t make any money. I do understand her as well, because for her, the [production] plan, and not my personal problems, is the most important.”

Déri recorded that she had avoided telling the women the reasons for her inquiries. Still, several interviewees declared that if they just received monthly support of 600 or 800 forint they would be willing to stay at home, some happily so; *gyes*, which was only disbursed after the expiration of the generously funded regular maternity leave, would be set at 600 forints, which at the time was approximately half the wages earned by the women interviewed by Déri, or around 40 percent of a women’s average income [Haney 2002: 104; Góndör 2012: 71]. The

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4 The report does not give the names of the women and notes what the women said in the first person singular.



women came up with other options too, all of which were intended to ease the tension between paid and unpaid work, including part-time labour and housework.

Hungary embarked on preparations for *gyes* during a period when the politics of women's work had attracted renewed attention in the international arena. The question of wage-earning mothers in industrial and rapidly industrialising countries constituted one focal point of the related activities. In the ILO, the initiatives that eventually culminated in the adoption of Recommendation 123 on "Employment (Women with Family Responsibilities)" in 1965 reached back into the 1950s (International Labour Office 1964: 71–72).<sup>5</sup> In the early period, the subject to be addressed was often phrased using terms such as "married women" or "working mothers" engaged in regular, non-home-based employment rather than talking about working women "with family responsibilities," terminology that was introduced somewhat later. There was consensus early on that additional social measures "were needed in order to enable" this growing group of women engaged in employment "to be good mothers and to combine home and work responsibilities harmoniously" (ILO Governing Body June 1962: 46).

In October 1959, the newly installed tripartite ILO Panel of Consultants on the Problems of Women Workers (replacing the earlier Correspondence Committee on Women's Work) discussed the problems of women with family responsibilities at its first meeting. The Soviet government was represented by Antonina Vistavkina, the Senior Inspector of the State Labour and Wages Committee, and Ines Cerlesi was present as an observer on behalf of the communist-leaning World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) ("ILO Meeting Panel of Consultants 1959"; ILO Governing Body March 1959: 24–26, 100–101; ILO Governing Body May/June 1959: 46). For panel members, it "was evident that concepts influencing the employment and governing the approaches to the problems of married women of all categories varied considerably according to the country, its philosophy, its economic position and its experience and needs as it developed as a nation" ("ILO Meeting Panel of Consultants 1959," Appendix: 14). The panel deliberated on various support options targeting married women at work, including part-time work, "measures for the lightening of household tasks," institutional childcare, and the option for mothers to stay at home with their children. Already at this point, the idea of employment guarantees for mothers who wished to remain home beyond the regular period of maternity leave was advocated for by one panel member.<sup>6</sup> This measure was also dis-

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<sup>5</sup> The 1955 session of the ILC had adopted Resolutions on part-time employment and in relation to the employment of women with dependent young children, expressing the hope that future sessions and the ILO Regional Conferences would come back to the question.

<sup>6</sup> Neither the report summarising the discussion and recommendations of the meeting laid before the Governing Body of the ILO nor the related archival material identify the panel member.

cussed as a possible option in the extensive preparatory report the International Labour Office laid before the Panel of Consultants. The report highlighted the difficulties working women faced trying “to make the ends of time meet” as they combined their work and home lives. Describing this problem as possibly “the crux of the next phase of social policy relating to women workers,” the report discussed various solutions, problems, and contradictions at length and pointed to the open-endedness of developments to come (“ILO Working Paper 1959”).

The Panel of Consultants also recognised the urgency of the problem of the “employment of married women,” advising the ILO to expand and intensify its activities in this policy area, among others. Yet, for the time being, the Panel’s sole recommendation was the collection of various data including information on the existing “arrangements for . . . part-time employment,” and it summarised:

It was apparent . . . that national concepts regarding [childcare] . . . were extremely varied. They ranged from a belief in the total responsibility of the parent alone to advocacy of a full-fledged system of state care for children. The latter system was advocated by one consultant [i. e. Panel member, SZ], while others stressed . . . the need for flexibility in plans and measures for the care of children. There was complete agreement on the need to prevent children of all ages from suffering neglect or harm as a result of the mother’s absence from the home. . . . General emphasis was placed on the desirability of implementing social policies which would enable married women with young children to stay at home if they so wished. . . . [O]ther suggestions made by individual consultants . . . included . . . that . . . the period of authorized maternity leave without forfeiture of job rights should be studied. (“First Meeting” 1960, incl. all preceding quotes)

A few years later, employment guarantees during a prolonged period of absence from work after the expiration of maternity leave would form the core of ILO Recommendation 123 adopted in 1965, and these guarantees formed one of the two pillars of the Hungarian *gyes* scheme introduced in 1967. The other pillar of *gyes* was a material benefit attached to leave, a key provision that was *not* part of Recommendation 123. When in early 1964 Hungarian women trade unionists and manpower planners developed and promoted the vision of *gyes* with the second pillar included, they did so with a focus on both the tensions around women’s work in Hungary and international developments, including the upcoming first discussion of a “Recommendation concerning the employment of women with family responsibilities” by the ILO’s International Labour Conference in June and July 1964. In spring 1963, the International Labour Office received detailed material from Hungary. A. Béguin, an officer in the Manpower Planning and Organisation Section, considered the report from Hungary on “*Women in Employment and at Home* . . . very useful in our work, particularly in conjunction with preparations for the 1964” session of the International Labour Conference (ILC). János Timár, head of the Department for Manpower Planning of the Hungarian National Planning Office (*Országos Terv-*

*hivatal*), told Béguin “about the work going on in Hungary on questions relating to the employment of women,” and Béguin had informed him “of our special interest in the question” (“Letter Béguin to Bényi April 1963”). In February 1964, Timár, who in Hungary would soon play a key role in realising the plans for *gyes*,<sup>7</sup> publicised the vision for *gyes* in the *International Labour Review*, the ILO’s globally esteemed flagship publication. He explained:

For economic reasons also, we have set ourselves the aim of further increasing as far as possible the number (and consequently the ratio) of active women in the economy. This will raise the level of employment of the population and, together with the increase in productivity, will result in a rising standard of living . . . [A]n estimate can be made of the ratio and the number of women in employment in 1980. But before this figure can be adopted for planning purposes, the question of household work must also be considered. When a significantly increasing number of women have been drawn into organised social labour they must . . . be relieved of a major part of the work connected with raising children and with the household . . . [I]nfant care is best undertaken, both from the medical and the educational points of view, by mothers. In the long-term plan, therefore, we reckon that the capacity of infant nurseries need not be very greatly enlarged but that *the present fully paid maternity leave of five months for working women must gradually be raised to one year*. For children over one year of age we intend to develop a broad system of kindergartens and day nurseries to enable working mothers to place their children in them, if they wish to, for the whole time they are working. (Timár 1964a: 109–110, emphasis added)

In a detailed analysis published in Hungary – which went to press in May 1964 – Timár discussed the varieties of such a future scheme of extended childcare leave. The description carries the traits of the as yet unknown, a measure whose contours were still in the making; but the goal was clear: “In the longer term, and precisely in view of the much higher employment of women than at present, it will be advisable to further increase maternity leave or to enable working mothers to stay at home at least until the baby is one year old through other means, for example by providing a special family allowance of a higher amount” (Timár 1964b: 48). SZOT’s committee in charge of issues related to the “special situation of working women” in March 1964 translated the idea into a concrete demand for a scheme closely resembling what would become *gyes* only a few years later. Referring to the imminent decision-making of “several world organisations,” including the ILO and the WFTU, on how to enable working women “to fulfil their duties as family mothers,” the committee advocated that children be raised at home until their first birthday; “working mothers” should be enabled to do so via the introduction

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7 Sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge remembers János Timár and Ervin Frigyes of the National Planning Office as the “inventors (*találták ki*)” of *gyes*. Author’s email correspondence with Zsuzsa Ferge, March 3, 2017. Ingot, Szikra, and Rat 2011: 28, similarly talk about Timár as the “father” of *gyes*.

of a new benefit, a “special family allowance” to be paid out for seven months after the expiration of maternity leave (Jelentés a dolgozó nők helyzetéről 1964a). The committee called on SZOT to “study, and then draw up” the relevant scheme (Jelentés a dolgozó nők helyzetéről 1964b),<sup>8</sup> and the leadership of SZOT followed the decision-making proposal of the committee (A SZOT Elnökségének állásfoglalása 1964).

These events in Hungary formed part of multiple international developments and exchanges that responded to challenges related to the increased employment of women of child-bearing age. After careful preparation within and by the International Labour Office, the Governing Body of the ILO decided in two meetings in June and November 1962 that the 1964 session of the ILC would deliberate on the question of “women workers in a changing world.” Among the three components singled out for discussion under this overarching heading, the only question suggested for deliberation with a view to its adoption as an ILO-Instrument was “the employment of women with family responsibilities” (ILO Governing Body June 1962: 14–19, 72–73). This meant that in all likelihood, this topic would come up for a vote at the 1965 session of the ILC.

Women from both sides of the “Iron Curtain” played a vital role in exerting pressure on the ILO decision-making process in 1962. In April, ILO Director-General David A. Morse received a delegation of WFTU leaders that included WFTU Secretary Elena Teodorescu, who was head of the federation’s department of economic and social affairs and, as such, was responsible for women’s issues (“Record of interview April 1962”<sup>9</sup>). Teodorescu emphasised that the ILO’s Equal Pay Convention C100, and the issue of women’s salaries more generally, were “important, but there were other questions of greater importance. The social problems of women were manifold, and they were of the opinion that now was the time to take the initiative in order to treat this subject on an international basis”. In response, the ILO’s Director-General reassured the WFTU delegation of the importance he ascribed to the subject – yet, he added that “he was unable to indicate as to when he would be able to deal with the matter as it raised the difficult problem of preparation . . . He also had in mind other problems which were of very great significance, so for him, it was a question of priorities. He assured Mme Teodorescu, however, that he had definitely made up his mind to present a report on this subject at some future date.” Upon receiving such a response, WFTU General

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<sup>8</sup> The initial version of the Report by the SZOT committee, likely by mistake, referred to the second and the third Five Year Plans (1961–1970) as period within which to introduce (what would become) gyes. The second version, which alone included the demand quoted here, talked about the third and the fourth Five Year Plan.

<sup>9</sup> The following quotes come from this same source; typo corrected.

Secretary Louis Saillant pointed to the upcoming WFTU women's conference, highlighting that the WFTU wished to deal with the problem of women workers, which was "an over-all question . . . on the basis of greater collaboration" with the ILO. "They did not want to do this through the back door but wanted to come through the main entrance."

The meeting between the WFTU leadership and David A. Morse was preceded by a personal conversation between Elizabeth Johnstone, the responsible officer in the International Labour Office for the women's, young workers,' and older workers' question, and Elena Teodorescu. Johnstone's report on the meeting demonstrates her willingness to collaborate with the WFTU women<sup>10</sup> on common concerns:

Mrs. Teodorescu explained their preoccupations and plans and told about the Conference on Women Workers' Problems which the [WFTU] plans to hold next year – a Conference which promises to be of some importance, since they plan to build it around some broad but outstanding needs and problems of working women. . . Mrs. Teodorescu said that she hoped that the Director-General would . . . consider including the question of the employment of women in the agenda of an early session of the [ILC]. In this connection, please see my report on the last (16th) session of the [UN] Commission on the Status of Women, in which I mentioned a similar plea from the [USSR] delegate . . . I told her what we are doing on women workers' problems: the follow-up on equal pay and discrimination in employment; the study on the vocational preparation of girls and women for work life; the study on part-time employment; the study on maternity protection; . . . and the hopes that the Panel of Consultants of Women Workers might meet in 1964 after an interval of five years; etc. . . . It seems to me the [WFTU] has no basic preoccupations with women's and youth questions which we do not share . . . and that there are no controversial points as regards programme content and emphasis in these fields, though naturally approaches and solutions differ. ("Note Johnstone April 1962")

Historian Dorothy Sue Cobble has shown that in the months between October 1961 and September 1962, Esther Peterson, Director of the United States' Women's Bureau similarly aimed to push the ILO, in "a lonely campaign," towards a "revival of a woman's program," likewise advocating for a focus on employment. Both Peterson and Teodorescu had participated in the 1961 session of the ILC; in a letter dated October 1961, Peterson remarked that "delegates from other countries, including from newly-developed countries, brought home to me the urgency" of the situation (Cobble 2021: 354–359).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Indeed, she would participate in the WFTU Bucharest conference in 1964.

<sup>11</sup> "Lonely campaign" is Cobble's wording, the other two quotes are Peterson's. The US government representative George Weaver, to whom Peterson had turned, indeed urged the Governing Body to include the item on the conference agenda (ILO Governing Body November 1962, 16).

Soon after the Governing Body of the ILO finally made the decision in November 1962 to indeed put the question of women's employment on the agenda of the 1964 session of the ILC, Elena Teodorescu, participating in another meeting between the WFTU leadership and the ILO Director-General, noted "that she was very happy to learn of the decision . . . which corresponded exactly to their wishes" ("Record of interview November 1962").

On the large public stage of the ILC, representatives of the state-socialist world repeatedly emphasised the "absolute equality of rights" women enjoyed in their countries. There, women's increasing involvement in the "industrial process" did *not* generate the un-"fortuitous situation" characteristic in "Western countries," where women were "torn between their work and their family." This had been implied, claimed the Bulgarian government delegate at the 1961 session of the ILC, in the ILO Director-General's response to the findings of the Panel of Consultants on the Problems of Women Workers<sup>12</sup> (*ILC Proceedings 1961*: 71, 134). Speaking from their own international platforms, communist-leaning trade unionists similarly tended to foreground the pressure on working women with small children in Western countries alone. At its 5th World Congress in December 1961, when the WFTU decided to convene its second World Conference of Women Workers, WFTU General Secretary Louis Saillant once again pointed to the "great difficulty" working women faced in capitalist countries alone when they needed to place their children in kindergartens and creches (*Weltgewerkschaftsbund [1961]*: 73–74, 1011). In June 1962, the WFTU Executive decided that the women's conference should take place in Bucharest in 1963. At the ILO in November 1962, the observer representing the WFTU at the Governing Body supported the inclusion of the item "women workers in a changing world" in the agenda of the ILC that would convene in 1964<sup>13</sup> (ILO Governing Body November 1962).

At the same time, women trade unionists from state-socialist countries began to address more openly in their international networks those problems faced by so many women workers in state-socialist countries which were somewhat similar to the problems of women in Western industrial countries. We have seen that back in Hungary, Erzsébet Déri, early on and with reference to her personal encounters with women workers, worked hard to convey to her superiors the urgency and seriousness of women workers' problem of combining full-time employment and care for small children and families. At the International Trade Union Conference on the Problems of Working Women organised by the WFTU in Bucharest held just

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<sup>12</sup> Mr. Tonchev noted that the Report tended "to reduce the role of women in labour."

<sup>13</sup> The representative of the government of the Soviet Union on the Governing Body, while supporting the workers' groups' desire to see this item discussed in 1964 had not included it in his own, primary proposal.

before the 1964 session of the ILC, the Hungarian delegation brought this openness to the international platform of the trade union women. The speech given by the leader of the delegation, which was characterised by its “realist tone” and did not shy away from addressing “our problems as well, . . . met with great success.” Mrs. Oszkár Barinkai pointed to, among other things, the fact that women often had difficulties “reconciling their work with their calling as a mother (*anyai hivatás*)” (*Békés Megyei Népiújság* July 16, 1964<sup>14</sup>). The Bucharest conference adopted a foundational “Charter on the Economic and Social Rights of Working Women” and a “Preliminary Memorandum to the Director General of the ILO.” The memorandum urged the ILO to “step up its activities in favour of working women”; approved of the proposal for a new instrument concerning the employment of women with family obligations before the ILC; and pressed for the establishment “of a representative tripartite commission [on women’s work, SZ] made up of delegates of countries from all the regions of the world and with different economic and social systems – a commission on which the International Trade Union Organisations should be represented with full rights”<sup>15</sup> (*WFTU Women’s Conference 1964*: 99, 105–115).

At the ILO, the process leading up to the adoption of ILO Recommendation 123 on the employment of women with family responsibilities exposed how, in the Cold War context, the state-socialist politics of women’s work were simultaneously influential and severely marginalised on the international stage.

In connection with some of the issues discussed, the advanced or innovative character of some elements of the politics of women’s work in the state-socialist world became highly visible and were seriously considered. This was the case regarding the vision, advocated by the International Labour Office, that centralised policy agencies responsible for the ever more important and complex “special problems of women workers” should be set up in all countries. The ILO considered such agencies a key instrument for designing and coordinating the politics of women’s work. It suggested the adoption of an ILO Resolution regarding “the desirability (a) of establishing a central administrative office or unit for co-ordinating re-

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14 The local daily paraphrased a report on the Conference given by Júlia Turgonyi, a member of the Hungarian delegation; see below for more on Turgonyi.

15 The documents did refer to discrimination against married working women but not to child-care leave after compulsory maternity leave. The Memorandum to the ILO also reminded the ILO of a past initiative of the WFTU, referring to 1956, when “a WFTU delegation submitted a first Memorandum to the ILO together with the documents adopted by the First Conference of Working Women” calling for a general debate on working women’s issues at the ILO. The Report of the 1964 Conference also mentions the WFTU’s 1947 initiative “set[ting] in motion procedure which . . . resulted” in the adoption of the ILO’s Equal Pay Convention C100.

search, planning, programming and action on women workers' opportunities, needs and problems, and (b) of developing systematic arrangements for consulting the organisations primarily concerned, including in the first instance the employers' and workers' organisations." The Office acknowledged the pre-existing, advanced institutional arrangements in the state-socialist world as well as the special role trade unions played in this regard, and it placed the relevant institutions in the Soviet Union on par with developments on the other side of the "Iron Curtain." In "the U.S.S.R. and the other socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the trade unions have a special responsibility for promoting the welfare and advancement of women workers." The central USSR trade union federation operated a commission that brought together "leaders in production, science, education, government service and the trade union movement" for this express purpose, and it was complemented by similar commissions at the lower levels of the organisation. Acknowledging the wide variety of possible institutional arrangements facilitating the central coordination of the politics of women's work, the Office also noted that "[s]uch arrangements are particularly prevalent" in Latin America, and it did not waste the opportunity to introduce the United States' well-known Women's Bureau<sup>16</sup> (International Labour Office 1963: 115–119).

Regarding the issue of working women with small children – the sole question singled out for regulation through an ILO-instrument – the position, policy needs, and initiatives of the state-socialist countries were, by contrast, marginalised in ILO discourse and decision-making in 1964 and 1965, even though information on measures already in place in Eastern Europe was made available. The initial report circulated by the International Labour Office in preparation for the 1964 session of the ILC highlighted the following as part of, but also accentuating, a global trend: "[i]n the U.S.S.R. and the Eastern European countries the participation rate [in employment] of married women with dependent children is very high." The "substantial increase in the employment of younger married women, very many of whom may be presumed to have dependent children" in many parts of the world demanded the development of childcare facilities, the reduction of household tasks, special arrangements concerning working hours, the guarantee of labour and social rights in part-time employment,<sup>17</sup> and measures to facilitate and guarantee "re-entry into employment." Measures to achieve the latter were framed as a new invention justified by foundational historical reasoning. They included "maintaining [women's] employment rights in their previous jobs or in a

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<sup>16</sup> The ILC 1964 indeed adopted a resolution addressing this subject. *ILC Proceedings 1964*, 820–821.

<sup>17</sup> Part-time employment was described as a feature characteristic for several highly developed Western countries and Japan alone.



comparable job for a stipulated period of absence on prolonged maternity leave, in much the same manner as men's rights are guaranteed to them during periods of absence on compulsory military service." The Office suggested a period of up to one year for such guarantees (International Labour Office 1963: 14–18, 71–103, 125). The initial report contained a questionnaire asking governments to contribute to the preparation of the planned ILO-instrument on women workers with family responsibilities. The answers provided by the governments and subsequently summarised by the International Labour Office in its second report published in preparation for the 1964 session of the ILC brought to light that state-socialist countries, including the Soviet Union as the leading power, in an effort to address the problems that resulted from the large-scale involvement of women with small children in the labour force, had already instituted employment guarantees for working mothers during periods of prolonged absence, prefiguring Recommendation 123. In Albania, unpaid leave could be granted for one year or more based on agreements negotiated between employers and trade unions, and in Hungary, a provision allowed for (but did not grant an unqualified right to) unpaid leave until the child reached the age of three. Ukraine and the USSR reported somewhat similar but more limited regulations. State-socialist Eastern European countries expressed strong support for inscribing related measures into the planned international instrument. This enthusiasm contrasted with the hesitation and (initial) rejection that characterised the responses of other governments in Western and "developing" countries, and later contributions to this discussion made by some employers' and governments' representatives from these world regions in Geneva. The statements by these actors were characterised by cautiousness, in particular with regard to concerns about granting women workers both excessive rights to return to work, and far-reaching employment rights for women workers with young children given the right to choose prolonged childcare leave (International Labour Office 1964). Neither Eastern European procedures guaranteeing mothers' employment rights, nor the regulations found here and there in less important Western countries with a "conservative" gender regime would be invoked, as we shall see, as the inspiration for Recommendation 123 on the broader international stage at Geneva.

In addition to the question of employment guarantees, the International Labour Office invited governments to also consider whether the proposed international instrument should refer to "fiscal and social policies" enabling women "with young children, to stay home if they so choose," i.e., a material benefit attached to the right to prolonged childcare leave. The information obtained from governments regarding this question revealed a complex political constellation between East and West. The Eastern European governments tended to emphasise, not unexpectedly, the classical "old left" dogma of women's emancipation through

paid employment, emphasising that the right to work for all women had been universally implemented in the state-socialist world and advocating measures beyond financial support for the prolonged leave of young mothers, e.g., the expansion of childcare services to enable these women to reduce the “double burden.” However, against the background of women’s fully realised right to work, Poland as well as Hungary declared themselves in favour of both fiscal and social measures which formed – as Hungary put it – “a suitable starting point” for “ensuring freedom of choice.” They considered, in other words, the material benefit attached to the stay-at-home option for mothers as key for ensuring that women would have a real choice. Poland wanted to see women of older disabled children included in such a scheme. By contrast, representatives of highly developed Western countries stressed their reservations about benefits attached to the stay-at-home option for mothers. The US government was most explicit in rejecting stay-at-home benefits, invoking the “inequities that still exist in many countries” with regard to married women’s freedom of employment. In keeping with its particular mandate concerning “labour and manpower functions,” the ILO was advised to focus on helping women who chose employment over extended childcare leave; promoting part-time work was one of the options advocated in this context.<sup>18</sup> Among European countries, only those known for their “conservative” gender regimes such as Spain and Austria made a case for financial supports for a prolonged period of parental leave. Israel alone explicitly referred to pronatalist aims as an important justification for such benefits (International Labour Office 1964). There was, thus, a de-facto coalition of governments nurturing “conservative” family values and two state-socialist governments that promoted material benefits for working mothers of young children with the goal of temporarily easing the “double burden” experienced by the large and constantly growing numbers of working mothers. Recommendation 123 would not include references to material benefits attached to prolonged childcare leave.

Building on these preliminary discussions, the ILO embarked on negotiations for what would become Recommendation 123 during the 1964 and 1965 sessions of the ILC. That some Eastern European countries (and Austria and Spain) already had legal arrangements that guaranteed employment rights during childcare leave and for leaves of absence longer than one year did not come into play and

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<sup>18</sup> In parallel, among the state-socialist countries, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Yugoslavia, and the USSR advocated for the international regulation of part-time work, while Yugoslavia alone mentioned women’s and men’s shared responsibility for family work. Cobble (2021: 359–364) provides an excellent analysis of the debate over part-time work and Esther Peterson’s advocacy of this tool to be included in the Recommendation. Peterson was present as Advisor to the US government’s representative.

would not have any effect on the framing of debates and decision-making during the conference sessions. In 1965, when the adoption of Recommendation 123 was on the agenda, the delegates from state-socialist Europe did, in fact, address what they experienced as their marginalisation in terms of reduced representation. In the Conference Committee on women's work, which constituted the key intra-ILC body responsible for negotiating all relevant interests and preparing for final decision making, the members from Hungary, Poland, and the Soviet Union abstained from voting when committee officers were elected. From their point of view, "there had not been adequate regard to the principle of equitable geographical distribution" (*ILC Proceedings 1965*: 638).

The ILC's discussion of the agenda item "women workers in a changing world" in both 1964 and 1965 was characterised by a spirit that effectively masked the realities of (women's) working lives and the politics of women's work in state-socialist Europe in the contributions of many speakers. First, emphasis was placed on the need to bring "outmoded thinking" about women's mass employment "into line with real life" – such thinking that continued to shape the perception of women's work, and married women's work in particular, in many countries in the West and the Global South. Second, the focus was "the mobilisation of our human resources" as opposed to the present "underemployment of women workers." This state of affairs was to be remedied by "making it possible for women with family responsibilities to become or to remain integrated in the labour force as well as to re-enter the labour force." This argumentation strategy was repeatedly connected to the insistence that women with family responsibilities should be able to freely choose between employment and family work rather than being forced into employment by economic necessity. As such, this discourse was fully oblivious to the realities of the world of work in state-socialist countries. By contrast, delegates from state-socialist countries, represented by the Hungarian government delegate Mrs. Konrád for example, asked to enshrine women's "full" right to work in the ILO instrument in progress<sup>19</sup> and stressed "the need to coordinate women's employment policy with economic and social policy as a whole" (*ILC Proceedings 1964*: 457–474, 739–746 and *1965*: 372–388, 638–649).

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<sup>19</sup> The right to work was not questioned in the debate. Opponents of insertion pointed to the fact that the ILO's position on this was unequivocal anyway. To the delight of the Polish Government Advisor Mrs. Jakubowicz, a related reference was indeed included in the section on the General Principles of Recommendation 123 after "long discussion"; this was primarily in reference to the continuing legal restrictions on married women's right to work in some "countries in Europe." For Jakubowicz's statement, see *ILC Proceedings 1965*: 378; for the initial wording of the recommendation suggested by the International Labour Office, which did not contain such a reference, see International Labour Office 1964: 18.

In short, special employment guarantees for women with family responsibilities were construed in Geneva as a means of enticing women into and keeping them in the labour force rather than as a solution for the problems of mothers of small children regularly employed *en masse* in state-socialist countries. As was so vividly illustrated in Erzsébet Déri's memos to her trade union superiors quoted above, these women inevitably found themselves fully engaged in the labour market and thus needed to juggle the "double burden" as full-time workers; exiting the labour force for good was not a genuine option.

## Working Women with Small Children in Hungary: The Creation and Development of *gyes* in Context

By the time the ILO voted for Recommendation 123 on the employment of women with family responsibilities in June 1965, Hungarian policy-makers had, as highlighted above, "already worked on the plan for the introduction of the childcare benefit" *gyes* (Horváth 1986: 109). The interactions within SZOT in 1964 and Erzsébet Déri's description of the tensions mounting in Hungary around the issue of mothers of small children regularly employed *en masse*, which she laid before her trade union superiors in August 1965, reflected women trade unionists' proactive role in the ongoing preparations for *gyes*. As these preparations reached the implementation stage in late summer 1965, SZOT was approached by a representative of the Ministry of Labour, and Déri's first memo produced on the occasion summarised and discussed information received from this official regarding these practicalities.<sup>20</sup> Besides the Ministry of Labour and SZOT, the National Planning Office – here János Timár took the lead – and the Ministry of Finance were involved in the process ("Déri, Feljegyzés *gyes* javaslat 1965").

Among the broader Hungarian public and expert circles at the time, and in scholarship up to the present day, the introduction of extended childcare leave – initially discussed as a temporary measure ("Déri, Feljegyzés *gyes* javaslat 1965") – came to be considered a policy response to multiple concerns. In one non-public expert discussion in 1968, the rationale for introducing *gyes* was summarised as "kill[ing] three birds with one stone," namely: demographic decline, i.e., counteracting the low birth rate; labour-market planning, or, in concrete terms, managing a short-term over supply in the labour market predicted as a result of a peak number of youths entering the labour market; and as a response to the extreme scar-

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<sup>20</sup> The exact origins of the range of statements and arguments contained in Déri's memo cannot be determined.

city of institutional pre-kindergarten infant care, with reference to the fact that the cost of institutional care for one infant was much higher than the planned benefit for mothers staying at home with their child (“A dolgozó nők helyzetével foglalkozó tanulmány 1968”).

In terms of immediate causes, first and foremost, *gyes* came into being as a “labour force-management instrument” (Bódy 2016: 282). It was introduced one year before the New Economic Mechanism (*Új gazdasági mechanizmus* or *Új gazdaságirányítás*, NEM) came into effect in 1968. NEM was a major attempt at economic reform aimed at, among other things, more effective economic performance through the increased autonomy of enterprises. At a time when high-birth-rate age groups born in the early 1950s were set to enter the labour market, the reform was expected to reduce the need for unskilled workers, among whom women were represented in large numbers. *Gyes* could counterbalance the anticipated labour market tensions (Bódy 2016: 282–283; Inglot, Szikra, and Rat 2011: 27<sup>21</sup>).

It would soon turn out that NEM did not bring about the hoped-for better, i. e., greater “economical manpower-management.” The 1970s were characterised by the constant demand for additional labour (Horváth 1986: 47–48),<sup>22</sup> a fact that made the tensions caused by the large-scale presence of women of child-bearing age or women with small children in regular employment a constant concern of policy-makers and trade unionists throughout the decade. Furthermore, within this context, the connection between women’s “double burden” on the one hand, and anxieties about the low birth rate and pronatalist rhetoric and practices on the other – which were present both well before the advent of *gyes* and in the policy process leading up to its introduction – remained a constant feature of the Hungarian politics of women’s work.

From the very start, top-level policy-makers considered the low birth rate, among other things, to be a consequence of the unresolved tensions around child-care, as masses of young women took up paid employment. As early as 1962, the politburo discussed a report on the “demographic situation” or, more precisely, the declining birth rate, proposing countermeasures that focused on improving the material circumstances of families with children and easing the “double burden” experienced by working women with small children (“MSZMP PB June 1962:”

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21 Bódy discusses primary material documenting high-level decision makers’ pondering over the pros and cons of introducing either *gyes* or a short-term benefit aimed at redirecting the dismissed surplus workforce into employment; Inglot, Szikra, and Rat refer to their interview with András Klinger.

22 NEM was curtailed early in the 1970s. Horváth also points to the lower birth-rate age groups entering the labour market in the 1970s as an explanation for the steady hunger for additional labourers in the workforce.

esp. 4, 23–25, and attached report; see also Bódy 2016: 271–272). Alongside the expansion of the creche system and increasing family allowances, the report promoted measures to help keep women out of factories and offices after childbirth. This included the extension of paid maternity leave to six months; the option that might allow mothers to remain on paid sick leave until the first birthday of the child; and the opportunity for the mother to take “unpaid leave” until the third birthday of the child, whereby she would retain “all the rights connected to the employment relationship” with the exception of the entitlement to sick leave benefits. Only a few months later, János Kádár, General Secretary of the MSZMP, announced the introduction of the last measure – extended unpaid leave – as well as the forthcoming extension of paid maternity leave in a speech at the 1962 MSZMP Congress (Inglot, Szikra, and Rat 2011: 25). During the discussion of the report submitted to the politburo, Kádár pointed to a possible connection between the low birth rate and the liberal abortion regulation dating from summer 1956 which de facto granted abortion on demand (though one had to receive permission from a committee). Bringing into play a possible complementary and repressive line of pronatalist policies, Kádár thus made sure to stress that “not for anything in the world should we resort to state measures in this matter.”

In hindsight, with this interjection into policy discussions, Kádár laid the foundation for the bifurcation of pronatalist policies based on social policy incentives as opposed to repressive measures. This bifurcation would remain in place, numerous challenges notwithstanding, until well into the 1970s. In the run-up to the introduction of *gyes* in the 1960s, the planned reform was repeatedly discussed as a pronatalist measure and connected to the abortion question. In the spring of 1966, *Népszabadság*, the most important nationwide daily, published the records of a roundtable discussion on “population growth and abortion.” It was within this framework that the idea of *gyes* – as potentially financed by a new tax for childless individuals and combined with abortion restrictions – was introduced to the larger public<sup>23</sup> (March 13, 1966 and April 30, 1966).

In 1966, the politburo, by contrast, again shied away from linking *gyes* as a pronatalist incentive to the introduction of abortion restrictions. When it decided on the introduction of *gyes* at its meeting on October 4, 1966, the politburo also discussed at length a new report on the “demographic situation.” The latter issue had been hived off from the list of other measures in the area of social welfare

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<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the men participating in the discussion, the General Secretary of MNOT Zsuzsa Ortutay advocated for a shorter period of extended childcare leave; for the “pill” to be made universally available in due course; and for systematic family planning counselling. MNOT at this point explicitly rejected changes to abortion regulations, as mentioned in “MSZMP PB October 1966” but not in the information about the Roundtable published in *Népszabadság*.

and standard-of-living politics of which it had been part in the original preparations for the October 1966 meeting. Discussing the “demographic situation,” speakers rejected the idea of introducing part-time work for mothers, considering it a measure “nearly impossible to carry out in practice”; instead, they favoured the option that mothers would be able to stay home “for two years or four years,” which was considered a practicable idea. Discussing abortion, the question Kádár considered to be the “key issue” at stake, many politburo members, including at this point Kádár himself, tended towards restriction. While Imre Párdi, the primary person responsible for economic politics in the MSZMP Central Committee, considered it not advisable “for political reasons in the first place” to “now” introduce abortion restrictions, Deputy Prime Minister Jenő Fock and others advocated the abolition of abortion for those who could afford children (i. e., those who lived in an appropriate flat, earned an appropriate income, and did not have children yet). Kádár considered the existing abortion regulations dating from June 1956 as “not right” and right-wing liberal. He felt that abortion should not be possible whenever a woman who did not yet have children became pregnant. Yet again, the politburo took no action. Rather, the propositions contained in the report and the remarks made during the discussion would form the basis for “further work” on the population question to be carried out by the party and the Minister of Health. The report supporting the introduction of *gyes* discussed by the politburo at the same meeting, in turn, stated that *gyes* “in all likelihood would have an advantageous impact on population growth.” Additionally, it referred to the high cost of operating a large system of creches, the low performance of mothers with small children at work, the advantages of family over creche care, and the work opportunities *gyes* would generate for housewives and “girls” who could not be employed without the opening of jobs that would result from the introduction of *gyes* (“MSZMP PB October 1966:” report on living standard etc., esp. 2–3).

The larger policy process and public debate surrounding the introduction of *gyes*, thus, clearly framed the new benefit as a measure enabling motherhood for women employed in full-time jobs. The pronatalist thrust inscribed into *gyes* was a differentiated one. From the start, the new benefit de facto prioritised regular, low-income workers. For women with higher incomes, the lump-sum assistance was less attractive. Women not engaged in employment or only irregularly involved in paid labour, among them many Romnja, were not entitled to the benefit (Varsa 2005: 213–215); over time, however, additional groups qualified.

Once operational, *gyes* was instantly fully embraced by the population concerned. Many more women went “on *gyes*” than policy-makers had expected. Among working women who gave birth, a far higher percentage of those with low or medium levels of education made use of the benefit as compared to women with higher education and/or university degrees. In 1979, nearly 120,000

working women, 83 percent of working women who gave birth, claimed the benefit; altogether, more than 260,000 women were “on *gyes*” at the end of this year, equalling 10.2 percent of all women in Hungary between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine. Of those women “on *gyes*,” 12 percent were recorded as giving birth to another child before the extended childcare period expired, while 43 percent returned to work before the benefit expired. Of the latter group, more than half of these women did so out of material need; the real value of the lump-sum benefit decreased over the years and reached no more than a quarter to a third of women’s average wages at the time. All in all, *gyes* tempered but did not resolve the pressure experienced by working women with small children. The creche system expanded in parallel with the introduction of *gyes*, with the percentage of creche-aged children enrolled increasing from 9.5 percent in 1970 to 14.8 percent in 1980; over-enrolment also rose, reaching 127 percent in 1979. In the 1980s, the activity rate of women of working age was more than 80 percent if those “on *gyes*” are included, only a few percentage points behind the male activity rate. Starting in 1982, fathers could also claim the benefit once the child reached its first birthday, but the numbers of those who actually did remained extremely low. In 1985, a second tier was added to the system with a wage-related benefit available that was restricted to the period before the child reached two years old. The percentage of working women among all women who gave birth rose steeply, from 51 percent in 1965 to nearly 90 percent in the 1980s. This suggests that in effect, *gyes* worked not only to ease the “double burden” of working mothers with small children but also might have generated a pull-effect in terms of enticing women to enter the labour force in the first place and give birth afterward (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal 1981: 9, 19, 27; Horváth 1986: 34–37, 47, 66–67; Adamik 1991: 122–123; Göndör 2012: 77). *Gyes*, in other words, might likewise have fulfilled the main function the ILO and important Western industrial nations ascribed to the ILO’s 1965 Recommendation 123 on women with family responsibilities, namely, to bring additional women into the labour market. Overall, *gyes* constituted an important gendered change of the life course regime in Hungary.

In 1973, the Hungarian government finally combined a social policy reform designed to ease women’s “double burden” and serve as a pronatalist incentive with abortion restrictions, which constituted a key instrument of repressive pronatalist policy. Politburo decision making in February 1973 triggered both the restrictions and the additional incentives. An increase of the lump-sum available in the *gyes* scheme for the first child, as well as a higher sum attached to a second child and a still higher but stable lump-sum for a third and all additional children served as one of these incentives. Other improvements including additional material support for raising children and the accelerated development of institutional childcare were added. Both the SZOT Secretariat and the National Council of Hun-



garian Women (*Magyar Nők Országos Szövetsége*, MNOT) opposed the “tightening” of abortion regulations facilitated through the instalment of a committee with real decision-making power and bound by strict guidelines for decision making (“MSZMP PB February 1973”; *MK* 1973; “MNOT Tájékoztató 1973”; Göndör 2012: 72). Initially, SZOT declared in no uncertain terms that “it must remain a women’s exclusive right to decide: does she or doesn’t she want to give birth (*kíván-e gyermeket a világra hozni vagy sem*)?” After the decision to enact abortion restrictions was made, SZOT tried hard to water them down and postpone their enforcement (“[SZOT], Feljegyzés 1973”; “A SZOT Titkárságának véleménye 1972”). SZOT’s central Women’s Committee, installed in 1970, claimed to have been instrumental in bringing about SZOT’s suggestion that both *gyes* and the family allowance should be raised in a “differentiated” manner, which was subsequently “accepted” by the government (*Népszava* December 24, 1973).

## Extended Childcare Leave in Perspective

Against the background of extensive economic growth and expanding labour markets, the employment of women with young children became a fact and political desire in Europe and internationally in the 1960s. Yet, the employment of these women remained a political issue fraught with tension. When during the 1964 session of the International Labour Conference, the committee discussing the larger theme of “women workers in a changing world” endorsed the plan that the ILO prepare an international instrument on the employment of women with family responsibilities, it chose “the most controversial topic” among the various subjects considered (Cobble 2021: 359–364).<sup>24</sup> Diverse as they were, at their core, the tensions were centred on issues related to women’s infamous “double burden,” which resulted from the combination of unpaid family work, performed predominantly by women alone, and employment. The problems generated by the “double burden” included both the lack of reliability and the reduced performance of women with small children at the workplace and the difficulty of enticing women into the labour market and keeping them there. The former problem worried policy-makers in the state-socialist countries more than the second, whereas for the time being, their peers in developed industrial countries were more preoccupied with the latter. Behind both concerns lurked anxiety over the “stability of the family” or, to put it more bluntly, the defence of the inherited, “ossified” domes-

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<sup>24</sup> Cobble provides an eloquent discussion of the conflict surrounding the issue of part-time work in particular.

tic non/division of labour that freed men from most of the burdens of family work and the desire to ensure the quality of childcare and family work. Policy-makers in both the East and West were united in their related concerns, notwithstanding the fact that in the East, the desired “help” of fathers with family work and praise of the younger generation of men for their increasing involvement in this sphere of life formed an inevitable element of party and public discourse.

Policy-makers in East and West as well as at the ILO incessantly emphasised the primary or even exclusive responsibility of mothers as opposed to fathers to care for infants and small children. Institutional care for the youngest age group, i.e., the creche system, as one policy response aimed at easing working women's “double burden,” was more widely accepted and more advanced in the East versus the West. Hesitancy to expand the creche system was nourished by two factors. First, the high financial cost of the creche system, conceived of as a partial alternative to extended childcare leave, was a major problem in both East and West. This was, in fact, one of the factors triggering the introduction of *gyes* in Hungary. Second, the anxieties around the preservation of the family and the male prerogative in the domestic sphere and the high-quality care delivered by mothers themselves played an important role. While in official party communications in Hungary the second set of issues was barely addressed directly, the motherly vocation of women became a hotly discussed topic in public discourse facilitated by or involving high-ranking dailies, journals, intellectuals, and professionals. Women politicians tried hard to keep the related “retrograde” tendencies in check. Women trade unionists in particular never failed to emphasise that they endorsed *gyes* “only” if it was linked to the accelerated expansion of the capacity of creches (“[SZOT], Feljegyzés 1973”), the latter constituting the second vital pillar of the doctrine of real choice they had voiced at the ILO when demanding that a material benefit be attached to any stay-at-home option for mothers. Reference to men's role and responsibility in sharing the burden of unpaid care work was also present in the women trade unionists' discourse, but much less widespread. It was exceptional when in 1973 – the period when the debate was at its height and abortion restrictions were coming into effect – trade unionist researcher and employee of the Social Science Institute of the Central Committee of the MSZMP (MSZMP KB *Társadalomtudományi Intézete*, TTI) Júlia Turgonyi voiced a radical critique of male insolence rather than focusing on the lack of creches as root-cause of women's unbearable “double burden.” She argued that the “parasitic” attitude of husbands, who often made their wives into their “servers, or should I say ‘lawful servants,’” must cease to exist:

[Today], equal rights still means substantially more rights for men, or, if you like, they constitute a “right” which can be asserted via damaging the other sex, given the fact that in

most families, the woman, in addition to her job, takes care of the children and the husband . . . [W]omen are increasingly less inclined to reconcile themselves to this situation. It becomes clearer and clearer that in order to validate women's equal rights, *male prerogatives* must be *curtailed*, and finally abolished. . . . [W]omen and men alike have a double vocation." (Turkonyi 1973: esp. 28–30, 35–36, emphasis in the original).<sup>25</sup>

Male and mainstream policy-makers in East and West thoroughly failed to pay attention to this dimension of the problem. At the same time, while they advocated for extended childcare leave for women as a cheaper alternative to creches, they implicitly acknowledged the hidden and yet very real material value of care work. The question of to what extent the hidden value of care would be transformed into a visible (financial) cost constituted an even more urgent problem, though one that was somewhat less convoluted, and in any case more evident in the East than the West. This was the case for a number of reasons: more young women with children were employed; there was a pressing need to address the problem of care due to the overall context of material scarcity and fewer private funds that could be used to fund childcare; and the high general macroeconomic cost of transforming unpaid labour into paid care work could be directly addressed, as did János Timár in his 1964 article published in the *International Labour Review*:

A specific problem of economic efficiency arises in connection with the increasing employment of women – namely whether the organisation by society of the care of children and of a large part of household work will not involve a greater labour input or social cost than the rise in the national income to be expected from that increased employment. It is therefore necessary to examine how much labour can be saved by socially organising the care of children and household work and what is the relation between the national income generated by the women to be drawn into the labour force and the costs of establishing (and maintaining) the institutions that must be provided before they can be employed – costs which come out of national income. (Timár 1964b: 113)

As a result, and because extended childcare leave was prioritised over the more expensive creche system in the larger context of state-socialist welfare expansion set in motion starting in the 1960s, Eastern European countries took the lead in the all-European turn towards extended childcare leave. The ILO, when taking stock of the position of women workers around the world in the run-up to the United Nations' International Women's Year (1975), duly documented this state of affairs:

One of the more interesting recent developments . . . has been the extension of the period of authorized maternity leave beyond the normal statutory or prescribed period, without loss of

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25 The best scholarly analysis of the debates mentioned here is contained in Mária Adamik's unpublished dissertation. For a glimpse into her perspective, see Adamik 2001.

employment rights, as recommended by [R 123]. This extension of leave is now common practice in the Socialist countries in Eastern Europe. . . . Certain other European countries have also introduced somewhat similar arrangements. (International Labour Office 1973: 6–7, 38)

In fact, the regulations in place in Eastern Europe at the time, and their further expansion in the years to come, went well beyond the propositions contained in Recommendation 123. Within a few years after the introduction of *gyes* in Hungary, state-socialist Europe experienced a wave of childcare leave innovations. The schemes introduced in Poland in 1968, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union in 1970, and Bulgaria in 1973 granted childcare leave well beyond a child's first birthday, and sooner or later (Bulgaria and the USSR, respectively), extended the leave option for even longer periods. In most cases, the schemes came with a degree of material compensation (in Poland and the USSR only beginning in the early 1980s). With the exception of Czechoslovakia, they were conditional on an existing or previous employment relationship. In some cases, such reforms were combined with extensions of the often fully paid compulsory maternity leave and the enhancement of other maternity-related fringe benefits, such as paid leave to care for an ill child. In the German Democratic Republic, a "baby year" with some compensation was introduced in 1976. In Yugoslavia starting in 1981, women could work part time until the first birthday of the child, receiving full compensation for the loss of income from the health care fund. Some of the schemes providing for extended childcare leave were designed as such in a visibly pronatalist manner, e.g., adding extra time or money for additional children (Hungary starting in 1973, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia, where migrant workers from Vietnam were severely discriminated against in terms of motherhood-related benefits), and in some countries, these schemes were combined with restrictive abortion regulations as in Hungary starting in 1974 (International Labour Office 1973: 38–39; Bodrova and Anker 1985 [contributions by Anker, Pavlik, Holzer/Halina Wasilewska-Trenkner]; Horváth 1986: 109–121; Alamgir 2014: 141–146; Zajkowska 2020: 124).

In Western Europe, compensated leave beyond the child's first birthday would be granted only starting in the middle of the 1980s onward, and only in a few countries, among them Belgium in 1984 and Austria in 1990. Leave and compensation up to the first birthday was available earlier in Austria (1960) and Italy (1981), whereas France and Spain granted a longer period of unpaid leave already in the 1970s<sup>26</sup> (International Labour Office 1973: 39; Horváth 1986: 112–113, 119; Morgan and Zippel 2003). A European Union directive on parental leave was first proposed in 1983; the vision at this point was to grant leave up to the third birthday of

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<sup>26</sup> I have not been able to determine whether leave in Spain had already been offered earlier.

the child. A much more flexible European Council Directive was finally enacted in 1996 (Council Directive 1996).

By that time, the vision of extended childcare leave promoted and placed into policy directives by the ILO and many Eastern and Western European countries beginning in the 1960s was in decline. With a bird's-eye view, this leave can be described as a key element of a dual-earner/one-paid-caregiver economy. Complementing the Western European one-earner/one-carer economy (in place for some strata of the population) and the Eastern European dual-earner/one-wage/one-unpaid-caregiver economy, the new policy instrument became relevant for a considerable portion of the population only during the comparatively affluent decades following the post-1945 reconstruction period and preceding the period commonly referred to as neoliberalism which swept across Western Europe starting in the 1980s and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. In this altered context, the transformation of this policy measure into a gender-neutral benefit available to both women and men in many places came with or was followed by the erosion of its material value, limited eligibility, and other problems.

Although designed and showcased internationally in a top-down manner as a labour force planning instrument, the invention of *gyes* in Hungary in the 1960s involved dedicated women trade unionists, functionaries, and researchers as key actors. These women seized the opportunity to direct the attention of Hungarian policy-makers to the plight of working women, pressuring them towards the introduction of *gyes*. The women trade union functionaries and their allies did so, of course, within the confines of their own positioning within the stratified Hungarian state. This included both the fact that their position in relation to other Hungarian policy-makers was one of negotiation and soft power at best, and their own dedication to the state-socialist project. Within the latter historical setting, cheap women's labour was put to use *en masse* for the project of economic development under materially constrained conditions. Women trade unionists, as they interviewed women workers in many factories, sought not simply to legitimise ongoing policy changes but to generate space within the political process and the wider public for both their own vision of women's emancipation and that of women workers themselves, insofar as it was shared or conveyed by the interviewers.

The Hungarian developments formed part of an international conjuncture focused on the ILO in Geneva, which involved trade unions, women's networks dedicated to improving the lot of working women, and other international actors from both sides of the "Iron Curtain." In the early 1960s, women trade unionists and other responsible actors steering the course of development of the state-socialist world of work were pivotal for the consideration of innovative social policy instruments that could ease the tension between women's full-time employment and childcare duties. This was because women with small children working full-time

were a mass phenomenon in state-socialist countries, and their importance within the labour force was expected to expand even further. The introduction of extended childcare leave was a means to simultaneously keep these women in (and, just as in many Western countries, entice more of them into) the labour force and ease the related economic and social tensions generated as a result. The realities of state socialism and the related international engagement of Eastern European actors unmistakably left their imprint on the ILO's Recommendation 123 on "Employment (Women with Family Responsibilities)" in 1965 as it foregrounded extended childcare leave over the many alternatives discussed in Geneva since the late 1950s. At the same time, while employment guarantees alone formed the core of Recommendation 123, many Eastern European countries additionally attached a substantial material benefit to the employment guarantees, accentuating a specificity of the state-socialist politics of women's work. Both this expanding and ongoing specificity and the role of Eastern Europe in the making of Recommendation 123 were and remained relegated to the margins of dominant international social policy discourse for a long time to come.

In Hungary, less than a year after the introduction of *gyes* in 1967, another round of interviews with 260 workers was conducted in six factories as part of a large-scale research project on the "work and life circumstances of female industrial workers" carried out by the TTI under the leadership of Júlia Turgonyi. These workers, or rather their voices as conveyed by Turgonyi, explained with striking clarity what extended childcare leave meant to them and how measures such as *gyes*, which sought to ease the "double burden," might improve the position of women. One skilled spinner employed in a textile factory in the southern outskirts of Buda in Budapest for fourteen years declared that in her opinion, *gyes* "is the most human measure of the past decade" ("[Turgonyi], Feljegyzés Textilkombinát 1967"). Similarly, an unskilled worker from a pharmaceutical factory in the eastern Hungarian city of Debrecen explained: "A woman's ability to rest to overcome exhaustion would be a very important precondition for women's emancipation" ("[Turgonyi], Feljegyzés BIOGAL 1967").

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