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Original research article

Labour market opportunities of women with young children after childbirth

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ABSTRACT

A survey of 427 women which focussed on attitudes and factors affecting decisions concerning childcare leave (and a return to the workforce) was conducted in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, Hungary in 2014. Previous studies have shown that Hungarian women raising children are less employed (40%) compared to the EU28 average of 63%. In this empirical study of Hungarian women with young children, two sub-groups were identified: those who had returned to work following childcare leave, and those still on childcare leave. Both groups preferred to be exclusively a mother for the first 3 years of the child's life. Those still on childcare leave plan to return to work 6 months later than those who have returned, and those with more children under the age of 5 plan to stay at home longer before returning to work. Divorced or single mothers returned to the labour force earlier than those who are married. The length of time spent on maternity was not related to having a civil or public job, but was related to the level of qualifications (as mothers with lower qualifications returned to work earlier). A “partner bonus” effect was noticed only for those who returned to work earlier, which indicates that they could return to work because there was a caregiver for the child at home. All mothers wanted to (and did) invest in the “social capital of their child”.

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Introduction

The research focused on the labour market activity of women with young children and their (re)integration into the labour market. One of the main aims was to determine those factors and variables that effect how the mothers' judge their own situation and their chances in the market as well as their subsequent plans and decisions on whether and when to return to the labour market following childcare leave.

Although the employment situation in Hungary seems to be more favourable than in the past, research shows that a poor labour market situation for women is still a common phenomenon. Employment disadvantages between males and females are not unique to Hungary, and similar situations can be found in several EU countries. In 2014, the average difference between the employment of men and that of women was 12.5% when calculated within the same community. In Hungary there has been a 10% average difference between the employment of men and women in recent years [1].

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Before the change of the system, the employment rate for women was one of the highest in Europe, mainly due to the complete employment. However, this rate has fallen and is below the average of the European Union State Members [2]. The reasons for the unfavourable indices for men can be explained by labour market causes, and the high number of men who get a pension-like benefit, or are inactive due to other causes. For women, mainly mothers with young children contribute to the low activity rate [3].

Today, the greatest challenge for women is to decide between children and work. Experts agree that instead of forcing women to decide, they should instead be allowed to make individual decisions or rely on their inner drive. Priorities in their career should be set by themselves; they should decide between work and family, or to try to find a balance between them. The dual-salary family pattern has changed the attitude of women: they are less likely to be satisfied with only the roles of a mother and a wife, however, the exclusive role of a working woman is unacceptable for many of them. The most common career is the so-called “double career”, due to either financial pressure or the desire for self-realization, however, they both influence the final decision [4,5].

The increasing employment of women has special importance both in Hungary and the European Union. Women's employment raises another question, namely, how to balance children, family duties and work, and how to have children and be in the labour market at the same time.

One of the most important aspects of the EU's employment strategy is to harmonize the multiple roles of women. Overburden due to conflicts between work and family life, as well as little free time, might also withhold women with young children from participating in training courses and creating new contacts. Although the conditions of how to achieve balance between work and private life are still not appropriate, more and more efforts are being taken to solve this problem [6]. Successful or unsuccessful reintegration into the labour market after childbirth determines the well-being of the person. Work and the income derived from it contribute to the quality of life of the individuals and the families, and can help to form their self-rated subjective health state [1,7]. Based upon observations, women's work experience curve is flatter and its growth is lower than that of men. This may be explained by the fact that women, due to the division of housework and their role in raising children, are less bound to the labour market [8].

This is confirmed by the research results of Fényes [9], who studied the labour market disadvantages of women and the disadvantages of men that appear in the field of education. Engler [10] investigates the labour market returns, and studies women with young children (what do they do while they are at home with their children).

They are not present in the labour market, their earnings and activities (primarily during childbearing and child care) are interrupted several times, and thus they cannot accumulate as much work experience as their male and childless female counterparts. In this sense, having children can be seen as a labour market disadvantage. In other words, having a child keeps women away from work, which can lead to exclusion depending on the duration of the time spent away

from the labour market. However, having children is useful on both individual and social levels. Exclusion from the labour market happens involuntarily, thus it is the obligation of society to create the possibility of integration for the involuntarily excluded [1,4].

Materials and methods

Sampling was performed in several stages with the help of the health care service. First, settlement types were determined from 11 sub-regions of the county, which included 25 towns and 204 small towns. From these, 21 representative municipalities were selected to represent all settlement types. From these 21 municipalities a list of all families with children younger than 7 was compiled. Then a representative proportion was selected at random in meetings with the health visitors to form the final sample of 427 mothers to be interviewed. The final sample consisted of 427 mothers, 212 were working mothers and 215 were on childcare leave [7,11].

Statistical analysis was completed using the SPSS 15. Analyses included the following: Fisher's exact test as well as the χ^2 to determine more accurately the significance not attributable to sample size; factor analysis; ANOVA; Kruskal-Wallis One Way Analysis of Ranks; and the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney U test.

Theory

In recent years, scientific interests have been focusing on research studies analyzing and explaining the labour market behaviour of women raising young children. It is due to labour market and demographic factors. According to the representatives of the sociological approach, although it is beyond rational consideration following norms also plays an important role in the individual's economic actions. The decision situation must be interpreted in a broader context, and this point of view goes beyond the individual level. As opposed to the economic approach, sociology puts stress on the individual and the family environment. Sociologists point out that individual preferences have great importance when making decisions about employment and child bearing. In addition, the motivation of female labour is strongly determined by the possibility of achieving balance between work and family life. All these facts outline that it is not only the individual motives that influence the form of decisions, but the family environment and the institutional influences also have a great impact on them [12].

According to the economic approach, the decision on child bearing is based on the rational decision theory; the calculation of costs and benefits as a result of having a child. In this case the child appears as goods that has both costs and benefits. Thus having children means long-term expenditures, as their existence continuously burdens the family budget [13]. According to the economic approach, income does not uniformly affect women with young children. Human capital theories claim that the composition of the supply side varies, it consists of people with different school education level and this difference also appears in their work wages or salaries. In the case of staying away from the labour market due to child

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