

IBOLYA CZIBERE

*Women in Poverty During the Socialist Era in  
Hungary*

A typical feature of the early socialist sources demonstrating the pauperdom of the agrarian and industrial Hungarian society before 1945 is that though they proved to be really thorough and can be utilized well even today, most of them were written as a form of political propaganda highlighting the peculiarities of the capitalist suppression before 1945 while ignoring the survival of poverty into the times following 1945. Considering these sources it may seem that the political and economic transition after 1949 at once solved the uncertainties of social deprivation, however they suppressed the facts that the governments in the period following the World War II could not manage the excessive poverty developed between 1900 and 1945. Tabooing the characteristics and proportions of poverty prevented the era from facing the problem. According to Szalai (1998) the events following the World War II give dual explanation to the two foremost dilemmas of the social development preceding the war period. Through those events „the pre-war exhaustion of the capitalistic modernization” and „the desintegrational crisis” present in the „semi-feudal, semi-civil” milieu of the 1930s and the 1940s can be interpreted.

One of the factors is that the poor of the era were to a great extent related to estate relations. Their basis and replacement were not above all provided by the modern proletarian strata having settled in towns: „the once »fallen behind« were recruited from those excluded from civil developments and from the social groups at least partly clutched to the industrial world and subordinated to estate relations of the countryside. The mass base of poverty emerged from destitute agricultural proletarians, day labourers taking either industrial or agricultural jobs, manorial maids, dwarf holders neither able to live on agriculture nor able to find permanent urban jobs, and from millions of poor peasantry.” (Szalai 1998: 52.)

According to another factor they remained poor not only due to their low income or lack of wealth but

„...the institutions of modernisation were all closed before them. Therefore poverty in pre-war Hungary was not a matter of inequality which could have been resolved by taxes, income redistribution or modern social insurance [...]. The phenomenon itself was expected to undergo a modernization process: the fundamental question was to break the estate relations while establishing the homogenous, integrated blood flow of the society” (Szalai 1998:52.)

That is why Szalai points out that despite the social reforms and significant ideological transition the structural construction of the system occurred „parallel with preserving estate relations”. As a matter of fact, the socialist system did nothing but transformed the pre-war poverty.

„The former manorial maids turned into foot workers of state farms, the former agrarian proletarians into commuting unskilled workers, the poor peasants into semi skilled labourers of farmers’ cooperatives or industrial companies. However, their status and estate subordination never really altered, neither did the traditional rules of behaviour never recorded still »readily« practised by everybody towards them. The undiminished reproduction of poverty [...] persisted. Not low income was the foremost and the most dramatic feature of this situation but the exclusion from the use of the prevalent social institutions.” (Szalai 1998: 53.)

In accordance with it Lőcsei (2008) wrote that in that year of the 20th century (i.e. in 1949) when equality between men and women was registered into constitution, approximately two third of the Hungarian population lived in families of which hierarchy, economic structure, lifestyle and thoughts were determined by the traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Under such circumstances the situation of poor women proceeded in a specific way. Generally speaking the most significant change in their lives proved to be the secession from family-household ties that emerged gradually. During the first period, up until the beginning of the 1950s the process of secession manifested a kind of periodicity. The shift normally happened when the family was short of money so in the last resort mean women were forced to enter employment (Gyáni 1987). Only those young girls were exceptions to the rule who had already been involved in earning activities outside their families between the World Wars, paid as household maids, day-labourers or factory workers.

### **Women in the bottom strata of labour market – the working poor**

The most considerable alteration in the lives and labour division status of women arose when individual peasant farming was almost totally eliminated at the end of the 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s in Hungary. The change brought an overwhelming impact on family life, labour structure and value system which was manifested in the fast transformation of the structure of female employment. Following the organization of productive cooperative societies even the last bastions of the traditional peasant way of life were deteriorated, the fundamentally shaken former hereditary patriarchal ethos and the patriarchal gender relations slowly and gradually altered in the direction of equality between genders. The improving educational level of women due to the introduction of compulsory education contributed to the above changes to a great extent. However slow it was, the progress also resulted in the improving conditions of males and females in semi skilled or unskilled working status living on the poverty level of the age. Before the World War II the ratio of the population completing the eight years of elementary school was remarkably low, thus the difference was striking if compared to the contemporary statistical data showing the proportion reaching 40% in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

As a result specific and novel female disadvantages evolved. The drawbacks developed between genders within groups with different qualifications. Due to the technical development the number of skilled labourers and their proportion among workers was continuously growing which enhanced male status meanwhile generating the most strikingly disadvantageous female situation. Males could access to more honourable and well paid jobs whereas women mainly added to the circle of the most badly paid semi skilled labourers. In addition the increasing proportion of skilled workers among men led to a decrease in the number of male unskilled and semi skilled labourers. To illustrate the progress in 1959 only 45% of semi skilled labourers proved to be female, whilst 5 years later their proportion reached 51,6%. There is no doubt that during this period due to mechanization the demand for semi skilled labourers rose at a quick pace. Women not receiving industrial trainings were primarily admitted and employed in these jobs.

Other factors also played roles in the growing number of semi skilled female workers. According to Turgonyi and Ferge (1969) the female work surplus forced women to undertake even badly paid semi skilled jobs. At the same time the authors highlight the data according to which it was more difficult for women to acquire a qualification. One reason for this could be that male careers developed in a different

way: men could rather obtain a qualification even over the age of 25. It is a remark of great importance since after reaching the working age and completing the educational circle all males could enter the labour force market. For women the conditions were not so favourable, at that time they could only undertake jobs when they could not rely on their male breadwinners any more. The older was a woman, the higher was the chance for this situation to happen, that is over the age of 40 a female hardly had any other chance than to work as a semi skilled or mainly as a skilled labourer.

Moreover, from a female perspective a multilateral drawback concerning female education or their continuation of studies can also be detected. (1) As it was stated above a relatively small number of women participated in industrial vocational training. Not only this meant a disadvantage for them but the fact that female and male vocational trainings were not equivalent. During this period males received an education of three or even more years, while for women the duration of education was substantially shorter. (2) In course and training systems the majority of participants were males, they could join longer trainings providing wider knowledge, allowances for working hours and assignments, whereas women hardly had any prospects for such opportunities. Among the reasons it has been found that socialist firms were not willing to spend on further education of women, partly because they were afraid that they would be not able to meet the labour and wage demands adjusting to higher qualifications. But it was even more important that they did not find training females profitable since they would bear and bring up children so educational investments would be all lost. (3) Unilateral vocational training of women generated and maintained further drawbacks in the labour force market which was still dominated by traditional female jobs. As a result for textile and clothing trades exclusively females were trained. According to contemporary statistics (1966-67) over 21 % of female students in vocational schools were trained in these industrial fields (Turgonyi-Ferge 1969).

The vocational training system raised several problems in the above mentioned era, since vocational training of women proved to be neglected, so the traditional ways of employment were still followed. As a result on this level vocational training could not render it possible for females to be involved in the social division of labour equal to males as labour force, thus it reinforced the formerly existing inequality between genders. Another segment of inequality could be realised in the proportions of obtainable labour earnings. At that time among the employed industrial labourers in Hungary average earnings of females mounted up to the 65% of average wages earned by males. As a further problem the distribution of female-male wages was radically contrasting. On the one hand if compared to males there were more women with low incomes and less with better earnings, on the other hand

female earnings were much less differentiated which reduced the likelihood to a minimum for female workers to get over a certain wage level.

There are more explanations available why female average earnings could not catch up with male wages at that time. According to a report announced by KSH in 1962 an objective factor perceived was that women were not able to overcome the disadvantage loaded on them by the former educational system. In greater proportions they had only entered the labour force market in the previous 10-15 years so they did not possess enough routines. Moreover, due to their physiological nature they could not perform as well as men who could demonstrate more strength in blue collar jobs requiring physical power. In jobs demanding extreme strength employment of females was not at all allowed which of course meant that they were totally excluded from jobs offering the best earnings. Another factor could be realised in the traditions of female employment; as a part of the discrimination against females rooted in the past, working activities considered to be traditionally female (eg. trades in textile industry) were *ab ovo* matched with lower wages as compared to male trades which demanded alike efforts and qualifications. As a third factor a perspective mostly accepted by women can be mentioned. Since men are breadwinners, they are entitled to be paid higher wages than females. This sort of differentiation was deeply established in Hungarian society to such a great extent that as an irrefutable premise it was interpreted and acknowledged as one of the most natural elements of social practice.

### **Life and work conditions of female workers**

Regarding work conditions substantial factors are the degree of hardness, the conditions and circumstances related to the work place, but also the timetable and the number of shifts are of great significance. As lives of all blue collar workers, lives of women were also greatly affected by the technical development. The extent of mechanization was strikingly broadening, whereas the number of manual trades was simultaneously decreasing. Though the extent of physical strain was declining greatly easing the lives of blue collar labourers, the process paved the way for monotonous, repetitive, dreary working activities. As a result of the technical advancement, the work process was divided into its elements, so each labourer performed only one or two movements of the whole work procedure. Subsequently a great number of unskilled labourers and workers with minimum skills were employed which led not only to the above mentioned negative aspects but also to the dehumanization of work. Labourers working in subfunctions could not see their work fit in the production process. These facts are important to be underlined here since these types of

influences devaluating the context of labour were the characteristics of work places employing females (Szeben 1983). Even if methods based on Taylorism and its advancements proved to be exceptionally efficient and promoted productivity while utilizing unskilled labour force, it is an interesting fact that at that time the introduction of technology turned out to be apt mainly in areas and sectors employing primarily unqualified women.

The consequences led to inequality of wages. In Hungary before 1945 – with the background of highly open and hidden unemployment – wages paid in hard blue collar jobs and severe working conditions were mostly under the average. Under these circumstances the main focus of a defenceless labourer was not at all to pick the best alternative but primarily to find any job to make a living. In the years following the World War II the size of wages gradually came into the front when choosing a job or applying for work.

„The quick pace industrialization went hand in hand with the large scale establishment of work places providing full employment. The growing possibility for the selection of jobs happened to make employment providing better conditions along with better labour content more appealing. Thus a shortage of labour force arose in many jobs requiring physical strength and in jobs with unfavourable conditions. Not even higher wages can compensate for the negative circumstances. However »better wages« in many cases can overshadow individual demands related to content requirements of the work, but this tendency does not seem to be valid for jobs with hard work and harsh conditions...” (Szeben 1983: n.d.)

At that time less and less workers were ready to undertake hard, dirty jobs with more shifts because the need for normal work conditions was considerably growing. In this system aiming for full employment, employees could stand a chance of realising their needs when choosing trades or applying for jobs. The relative burden of jobs performed with hard work in difficult conditions was growing, so the relative status of these jobs was descending. However, Szeben (1983) pointed out that during that period the term used for describing blue collar work altered relatively fast. For instance, cleaning as a formerly underpaid typical female job all at once turned into a well-paid „dangerous” and „harmful” male trade including window cleaning, floor varnishing etc. Simultaneously, men would not have undertaken monotonous female blue collar jobs which required developed manual skills and had to be performed according to methods based on movement analysis, even if they had been paid by far higher wages than the contemporary average. It is worth mentioning that some companies in the countryside (eg. brick works) organised so called cross-shifts

between the afternoon and night shifts. Female workers who could work from 6 or 8 pm to 2 or 4 am welcome this opportunity because not only could they handle their household tasks, but they also arrived home in time to feed the animals and send their children to school. These details are leading us to the analysis and interpretation of the pressures of life circumstances. Life conditions of women in the second half of the 1960s was studied by Júlia Turgonyi and Zsuzsa Ferge. Their pioneer scientific work focused on two fundamental questions. They aimed at (1) revealing the double pressures that is how women could keep balance between work and household activities, and (2) uncovering the extra burdens of being a mother. According to their findings in Hungary at the end of the 1960s the division of labour in working class families followed entirely traditional patterns. Generally speaking, if compared to men women had extra strains, besides females from the working class were in an especially difficult situation because they had far more household commitments, more duties than of staff workers. Day by day after they had completed their underpaid monotonous, physically and mentally exhaustive factory work, housekeeping laid further assignments on them. According to the authors the phenomenon may be associated with the male patriarchal way of thinking which was represented by members of „the most defenceless layer of society”.

„This phenomenon can be easily combined with those [...] research data according to which blue collar workers were more against the employment status of their wives than white collar labourers. So the link is obvious, since the justification for female jobs was less accepted by men, they were not willing to relieve the consequences of the situation not desirable for them." (Turgonyi-Ferge 1969: 69.)

Among the possible but less distinctive explanatory causes it was found that labourers were opposed to their wives working status because factory work far more encumbered female life in contrast with that of white collar workers'. On the one hand female factory labourers did not have the potential for having the housekeeping completed by others, on the other hand they were much more exhausted after finishing work than white collar women. As a more representative factor, it has been concluded that the interests of male workers were directly endangered by female employment. However, the authors emphasize that the above reasons are not entirely illustrative of the scene, and they consider female drawbacks as not being deducible from contemporary objective circumstances. Among the reasons „traditional fixations”, old-established prejudices sanctified by society can also be detected.

Not even the equalizing socialist conception was able to resolve the dilemma of labour division that was especially disadvantageous for women, for which of course not only males' attitude was responsible.

„Instead of »protesting« against division of labour, the majority of women found it a kind of »natural« phenomenon, and they would have perceived it »unnatural« and humiliating if the husband as the head of the family had been engaged in cooking or washing. As a reflection of modern male attitudes with its roots deriving from the long ago fear of rivalry with female work force, the base of a similar approach is easy to be pinpointed: in a society in which the only rightful job of a woman is housekeeping, it is the only way how a female can justify her right to live. These prejudices have still been waiting to be overcome.” (Turgonyi-Ferge 1969: 69.)

The researchers' investigation carried out in the sphere of motherhood also supported the above ideas. In their critique they called attention to a negative effect of maternity benefit while not ignoring its beneficial aspects. Although it allows the right for a woman to be a mother for more years, but after a while „this right rather turns into a commitment: it becomes a requirement according to which the primary task of the woman, the mother is to serve the children and the family.” (74)

This idea was supplemented by Répássy (1983) who observed other deteriorating factors that at that time significantly hardened the lives of women from rural areas. As such an aggravating factor he recognized female participation in small-scale agricultural production implemented in household and subsidiary farms. Most women from families involved in agricultural production were also engaged in other forms of earning activities. Not only was housekeeping expected almost exclusively of them, but as a further load women had to complete a considerable part of farming work. That is the reason why contemporary analyses often spoke about „the three professions” of country women. In another approach Valuch (2002) highlighted that due to the rearrangement of rural population the status of women notably changed, prior to the year of 1949 almost all of them (as wives of self-employed farming men) were considered as dependants. Following collectivisation a great percentage of women became active wage earners. From that on, the situation of rural women in the labour force market was constantly argued, since collective farms, their subsectors and factories together were not able to resolve full employment of women, so the working status of most female labourers was consequently classified as self-employed. Valuch refers to an agrarian census accomplished in 1972 according to which rural female population over the age of 14, beyond compulsory education and without official employment usually worked three and a half hours in the household farm on average

and carried out household duties six hours a day. That is to say no matter if women were employed in a factory or not, in the structure of the extra-professional activities rural female free time was fully occupied by work, thus total self-exploitation of females was achieved.

According to Ferge (1983) due to the social researches carried out in the 1960s it became obvious and also expressed that much less developed in the field of female emancipation than it was suggested by the surface phenomena and

„the self-content official propaganda” spread in the first half of the 1950s. The progression experienced in female employment in the 1960s and 70s was clearly associated with underpaid un- or underqualified occupational groups. It also became evident that in the post-war period following the change of the political system prejudices against women survived in the Hungarian society, so under the same conditions female wages were far lagging behind male earnings. The involvement of „interests” in the course of discussion is considered both interesting and thought provoking. In Ferge’s words „despite all the central intentions and declared aims certain »male interests« turned out to be prevalent” (Ferge 1983: 231).

In her view it was so because the differentiation of interests on the basis of genders remained to be fully tabooed. Although female interests were mentioned once in a while, but the possibly opposing „male interests” were disguised as if they did not exist. Why was it so?

„Ignoring the diversity of interests can be only realized by the fact that there are no other social groups in so different situations, of which needs and interests would be so much interwoven in many fields of life. In certain cases we can talk about individually articulated but complementary, interdependant needs with the same objectives as e.g. in sexual life or reproduction. After founding a family, the fundamental goals and concerns are simply common,[...]. Shared goals can have such an importance that the separate needs of both parties and genders become automatically inferior to them. [...] It is more common that female individual concerns »automatically« emerge as subordinate due to a historically enforced natural reflex or if a woman willingly and voluntarily disregards her own individual needs.” (Ferge 1983: 243.)

„Woman questions” arose when the historical reflex imposed on women started to weaken and it has not been so natural any more that always and exclusively women have to give up their individual needs and ambitions in favour of the family or their

children. Zsuzsa Ferge's idea has delivered a message concerning the processes in social and public life. That is females and males should arrange socially common affairs together because it is the only way to avoid the prevalence of male interests in matters in which concerns of the two genders are not fully alike. Besides it is also very important since any female right or individual need can only be achieved if men and women can participate in the political-social authority as equal partners (244).

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