

Hungary

Judit Takács

Mia and Miki, a well-educated, cohabiting couple, live in Budapest with their daughter, five-year-old, Anna. Mia is 37 and works as a financial controller at a multinational company. Miki is 49, a self-employed graphic designer, working partly in a computer graphics studio and partly from home. At the moment, they live in a small, one-bedroom apartment in a central, but not well-off neighborhood of Budapest. However, next year they plan to move into a new spacious three-bedroom house in the suburbs, which they are renovating. Miki believes the move will improve their quality of life, “Now, we will have our family house, which is a wider and freer space because it has a garden...We will be able to spend more time with each other so that it will be even better for the child.” Their daughter’s kindergarten is close by. Miki spends every Sunday at the new house. According to Mia, “He tries to get out there by dawn and then do all kinds of work on the house, like polishing the ceramic flooring tiles, which will be the floor later, and burning off the paint on the old doors and windows.” They both feel great that the work of their own hands contributes to building their new home.

“We Complement Each Other.”

Mia depicts their typical daily morning routine:

Miki gets up first...six o’clock at the latest. He is quickly done with showering himself, and since our child and I are of the types who wake up with more difficulty, it is he who makes the tea for her and my coffee...Once that is ready he wakes us...I like it that my little girl comes to me, gets into bed with me; we wake up together, then we talk about how we slept, how we awoke, then quickly a story...everyone’s day starts well in that we got out of bed so gently...After that we go into the shower...and then we start getting ready,

getting dressed...as Anna is not always prepared to get dressed, however, we try to arrange it that it doesn't end in tears, but that she keeps her good humor. After that...it is bag-packing. I usually pre-cook something the previous day, so Miki puts our lunch into boxes...we pack: hat, shawl, coat, shoes, and then we are finally on our way. Together, the three of us, yes, with the car, and...as my workplace is on the way, I get out first, kiss, kiss, goodbyes, and then they go on to the kindergarten.

So on weekdays Anna arrives at the kindergarten with her father at 8:15 a.m., and he picks her up at 5:00 p.m. After they get home, Miki says, "My partner makes supper, but then I set the table. Then we blow on the soup and the pasta together to cool them so that Anna will eat."

Mia grumbles a bit about their different styles when they arrive home at the end of the day:

I quickly get changed and get on with it: I switch on the hot water, start cooking the food, and while I do these he is leisurely getting changed...While he is comfortably slowly changing, he is talking with the child so it isn't really lost time...I am more of a let's go, move move move type who runs round the place like a tornado.

After dinner, Miki is usually responsible for bathing, while Mia is tidying up. He says:

After bath time, it's teeth brushing, pyjama, then 'I still want to eat something'...so this is a kind of evening game, after which she gets put into bed, tucked in snug, 'good night,' then Mother comes who also says 'good night' with a good night kiss. Then they still talk a bit.

Even during his peak work seasons, in the evenings, Miki fits paid work around childcare. Mia acknowledges that he does not let his job demands interfere in their family life:

When there is such a peak period, we come home; we are together; he takes the child out, patiently bathes her without a bad word. We put her to bed, story, good night kiss...by nine or half past he can finally sit down to work and then works till two or three in the morning and still gets up at six. That is like that for one or two days; that is very, very harsh. Well, then it takes weeks for him to catch up, or there is an evening when he falls asleep because he can keep up no longer.

One day a week students come to Mia for private language tutorials. During these afternoons Miki takes care of the child. Miki reports, "On such occasions...we have a different program so that we don't get home till after half past six... because the apartment is tiny, so we can't get out of each other's way."

Mia explains that although they don't always do the same things, overall, their division of labor evens out:

The preparation of food, finding out what to have for supper, making it and warming it up and serving it, that's me, but bathing, and going swimming, morning dressing is very often Father's. So somehow these things are of a different character, but I think, in terms of time and energy that it is divided more or less equally...we complement each other.

Miki adds:

Her clothes are sometimes put out by me; sometimes by my partner, dressing, undressing, hair washing, combing...I do the hair washing, my partner the combing. We always try to keep it so that there is no task for anyone that is not desirable, but simply to share...a significant part of cooking and washing is done by my partner, cleaning we do together, that is really 50/50, and I mainly do the shopping ... We try to share the things so the other one can have time.

Mia describes the flexibility they also give each other, “If he is working late, then I know I won’t expect him to do everything... I take certain things off his shoulders so that they won’t burden him extra. If I am snowed under with work, then he helps with those things that make everything go more smoothly.”

Miki spends more time with Anna during weekdays, but mother and daughter are together on Sundays when he spends all day working at the new house. Complementing each other extends to the emotional life of the family, as well. Miki says, “The beautiful thing is that when I am impatient my partner is patient... The thing works by us compensating and complementing each other. So that ‘Father, calm now, I’ll take over,’ or ‘Take it easy Mother, and you go over there.’” Although Mia thinks there is something special about the mother-child bond, and that she might have “a better feeling of what the child wants, or what she needs,” she acknowledges, “the child loves both of us just as much, is attached to each of us just as much, feels just as secure with Miki as she does with me, embraces, cuddles and kisses both of us just as much.” Miki thinks that Mia might have a bit more empathy because they are both girls, but asserts that there is no difference in closeness, “There are days when it is ‘Daddy, Daddy, Daddy,’ and there are days when it is ‘Mommy, Mommy.’”

Except for the kindergarten, Mia and Miki do all of the childcare themselves. Miki generally provides sick care, which he explains “I am more mobile; I can work from home.” Mia adds, “If I were home with her that would either cost me a day’s worth of holiday, or it would mean less money, because I would have to be on sick leave on account of the child.” They cannot rely on extended family help because Mia has no living parents and Miki’s parents are too old and live in the countryside.

Mia is the manager, although Mia does not have to nag him to do things. Miki explains, “She is the one who looks ahead...the one who does things with a far view, while I give my energy and knowledge towards realizing them. She is more the mover in the family; I

am more the one who carries things out.” She also brings up issues in parenting, although he is fully engaged.

“I Washed, Cooked and Cleaned for Myself and This was the Starting Point”

Mia and Miki shared housework equally from the start. Miki points out:

I washed, cooked and cleaned for myself and this was the starting point... So it wasn't a strange thing for me that the apartment had to be cleaned, that the wash had to be done ... I used to do these things for myself as well, so I know what it is like to do them and I know how much time they will take.

Mia was sent for a job assignment in the Netherlands when she was in the first month of her pregnancy. After a few months of (mostly Miki), traveling back and forth to see each other, Miki joined her. He arranged to do paid work remotely from abroad, sending his work back to Hungary online. While there he took on most of the housework:

Most of the cleaning and washing was left to me, because after all, I was at home. So that can be done in between things while working, and with her stomach, how? She couldn't bend down easily by then. So here again the practical point of view is that I do what is needed. And she brought food and cooked, which she can do very well.

Miki wanted to be there while the child was growing in Mia, “This is that feeling that must not be missed, that I put my hand there and felt that she [the daughter] was frolicking and then relaxed from my hand... I was there and she heard my voice.” Mia welcomed that father-daughter bond, “It was an awesome feeling and sight, once my little girl was born and heard her father's voice and immediately turned to him because she recognized his voice.”

Even before Anna was born, Miki reports that the two of them would find information about parenting on the internet and send each other links, although Mia took the lead,

according to Miki, because she was on leave, “She would say, ‘Read this and what is your opinion?’ and then we discussed these things.”

After returning from the Netherlands, when Anna was born, Mia stayed at home for two years on the childcare leave. The parents agreed it would be the best for the mother to stay at home with the baby and breastfeed her, and Mia’s higher income also meant the leave was better compensated. Miki’s flexible work schedule allowed him to be available without taking official leave.

Mia had originally intended to take a one-year leave, but then opted for a second year. She explains:

In Hungary it is quite attractive that mothers can stay at home for a long time ... those two years we had were ideal ... I cannot imagine that I would really have had to go back to work after six months, because after all, there are countries where the time is so horribly short.

Most days while Mia was home with Anna, Miki came home from his job around 3:00 p.m., and the family went out for an afternoon walk. The parents took the baby to the regular medical check-ups together. Mia points out that although officially she was on childcare leave, Miki was involved too, “It was Miki’s task to take the baby to the baby-swimming classes every week, as was the evening bath...he also shared changing diapers.” Mia did the cooking and daily cleaning, but on weekends she and Miki regularly cleaned together. He also usually did the dishwashing and took out the trash.

After Anna’s second birthday, Mia went back to full-time employment. They agreed that for a third year, the money would have been too little, and the child would have become “bored” staying at home. Mia felt lucky because her workplace tolerated her absence for two years. She has heard about mothers who were threatened with losing their jobs if they did not return to them a few months after childbirth. When Mia returned to her job, Anna went to a

crèche where Miki took her by bike every morning, and collected her in the afternoon. At four years old, she started going to her present kindergarten.

“She Would Be the Main Breadwinner”

Both Mia and Miki have had atypical career paths. Miki studied engineering but after receiving his degree he got a job in a movement theatre. He explains, “I was a complete career-leaver.” For ten years he worked as a dance and movement actor but he couldn’t make a living. He recounts:

So something had to be done to get money. I was doing occasional work...One of these odd jobs was with this graphic designer, manual work... at first I glued texts in a shop window, after that I went to the cutting room and I was told what had to be cut, and after that I was sitting at the computer and I did the cutting that had to be done. Now we are at the stage where they say that they want a catalogue, and I design it and make it.

He is currently employed at a computer graphics studio and does designing, typesetting, layout execution, all the way to print-ready character work.

Mia also had an unexpected career change, from librarian to a financial controller. She had studied languages, and had been employed at the library of the language department during her university years. However, because of her knowledge of languages, eight years ago, she found a job at a multinational company where she has been working ever since. Despite her liberal arts degree, she now does financial work, “Obviously after one or two diplomas, one is able to learn things, and this is work that can be learned.” She adds, “I like my work...I was in several different positions with various kinds of work, and all of them I liked.”

Both of them appear to be very competent at their jobs. Mia notes:

Whichever field I got into, sooner or later I always managed to build up the knowledge, practice and insight of a specialist...all that expertise. So I can quite quickly start working in that role where I have to help others, or give advice when there are questions. This has happened in just about all my positions.

Mia acknowledges the link between her work life and Miki's. His flexibility gives her the freedom to work as much as she wants. Mia's career clearly has priority in the family; it carries more prestige and money. However, she admires that Miki's work is creative: "I wouldn't even think that my level would be higher because it is a thing that can be learned, while he creates things."

Mia has more opportunities than Miki for advancement, but both of them assert that they put the family first. More money would be nice, but Miki does not want to take on more work "to the detriment of my family." Mia explains that she gave up some of her ambitions and even some employment opportunities once she became a mother:

My value system changed completely. Work was no longer the first thing, or career, or anything else, but Anna was and the family...which doesn't mean that one doesn't perform well at work and doesn't do all that can be done, but it's no longer my aim that I should get into a higher position. My aim is that I can be with my child. ... I used to do lot more overtime, before the child came. At that time a foreign placement was a goal, but not anymore. So just now they offered that I should go abroad to work, in America and Europe, but no... I wouldn't like to go in for that any more.

However, Miki can imagine that if Mia got a career opportunity, the family would move to another country and he would be a "househusband":

We spoke about the possibility, that if in Hungary things are not the way we

would like... then it could happen that she would take on foreign work ... She does have a much better chance than me. ... I am of the age already that even here [in Hungary] it's getting harder for me to find work, let alone abroad ... We would have to move as a family and then she would be the main breadwinner, while I would do other things and take care of the child.

“We Work as a Family.”

Two inter-connected factors facilitate Miki and Mia's equal sharing: the structure of their work lives, and their joint commitment to be responsible for family life. In gendered terms, their careers are structured unconventionally: hers is the more important job. He has fewer opportunities for advancement. He has more flexibility, which allows him to be more available for childcare during the week. Miki explains that Mia's job requires face time, whereas his work just requires productivity, “I have to hand in ready work, while she has to spend a certain minimum time at her workplace.”

Mia explains their shared commitment, “For many people commitment is that they marry and say “I do.” We thought that taking on having a child is an even bigger commitment....that given “yes” word is perhaps more easily abandoned these days than that with their own child. Miki adds:

The basic principle is that we have a child to whom we owe responsibility and whom we have to raise. We aren't together because the child binds us tightly together and it is compulsory, but because we feel good together and we have a beautiful child for whom it is worth it to live and work together.

In fact, he says that they didn't have an explicit agreement to share 50/50 but that it grew out of their desire to make their relationship work well.

Mia acknowledges her partner's commitment, but she also expresses a sense of entitlement to share the work, “We are equal partners in the family, and maybe it could

literally be stated that I work as much as you do. So I don't necessarily have to do everything at home as a third or fourth shift." She recounts her outrage at witnessing a friend's husband playing on the computer rather than caring for his child, something she would not tolerate, "I didn't have a child and a family so that my partner can play for hours on the computer." Mia reiterates his principle that both parents are equally responsible for the child who is not only her mother's child but her father's as well.

Interestingly, her long parental leave did not create the long term traditional gender gap in parenting that it often does in other families. Perhaps his sense of responsibility coupled with her sense of entitlement kept him involved and enabled them to share equally once she was back at her job.

Their own family backgrounds may have also facilitated their equal sharing. She says that her parents did try to share, and despite their own gendered roles, her father did teach her some "manly" tasks, like repairing the radio. Both of her parents were employed full time, and although they divided household labor in stereotypical ways, she implies that her father's household work, around and outside the house, such as picking fruit from their trees, was equivalent to her mother's work inside, but notes that that division wouldn't be fair today, since most of household labor now is "inside" work.

What Miki learned from his family was a work ethic. Both parents worked hard, in somewhat traditional roles, but crossed over when need be. His father certainly did not expect to be waited on nor did he sit around while his mother was working hard. Miki describes the lessons he learned from his parents:

Most of the housework and cooking were done by my mother, but I know that my father could also cook all kinds of things; I learned a lot from him... that wasn't the typical male-female division of labor...both my mother and my father were hardworking... Mother washed; Father didn't wash. Mother

cooked, but the work they did, in a nutshell, around the house was equivalent...both of them worked until they dropped.

Both Mia and Miki reject stereotypical notions of separate men's and women's work. Miki emphasizes that practicality is what drives them, not gender, "There is no restriction that I am not going to do that because that is the kind of housework men don't do. ... I wash up precisely because that will be helpful." When asked if men were as capable as women of taking care of children, Mia responds with a cautionary tale of a woman who didn't think her husband was capable and ruined their relationship. She criticizes mothers who act as gatekeepers, "A lot of people spoil the situation by saying that fathers are unable to do certain things like changing nappies, and instead of letting them learn to try they just let them not do these things... Women have their role in this, too!"

Mia is adamant, "the only differences are pregnancy and the extra bond of giving birth to the child...both the father and the mother are capable of doing the same thing." Miki also thinks that men are as capable apart from nursing. Despite the ways in which they undo gender, however, they still hold on to some essentialist ideas about men and women. For example, Miki reports that prior to becoming a mother Mia didn't want children and didn't like them, a decidedly non-stereotypical behavior for a woman, but then he asserts that ultimately all women want children because of biology. Likewise, Mia invokes the biological bond she has with the child because of pregnancy; however, she does add, "What is already basically there with the mother, that has to be established with the father, though that wasn't very hard, because during the pregnancy he always stroked the tummy." She claims, nonetheless, that it is better for the mother to take care of a sick child when the baby is small. Additionally, at one point Mia alluded to a traditional role when friends come over and she acts as "the lady of the house," which is a reference to her serving them.

Another startling aspect of their gendered ideas is the ambivalence with which they

approached their different earnings. Both of them agree that Mia earns more, her job is more secure, and is the main source of their family income. Nevertheless, she maintains that in psychological terms, he is the main breadwinner:

Because my pay is saved entirely, and that is money for our house, we live off Father's income as main breadwinner...I think that it is possible that psychologically this is a better version, because my pay [is used for] savings for the house, for the child, for the future... For men, it can be an important point of view that they support the family, are the breadwinners, and since we use his for living, for everything, therefore, psychologically that feeling remains.

Although Mia seems to worry about threats to Miki's masculinity, Miki didn't express any such worries. He concurs that Mia earns more and they live off his income, but he states matter of factly, "My partner is the main breadwinner." Despite Mia's concerns, she asserts that if Miki became a househusband that could be "an absolutely workable thing," as long as the work both inside and outside the house were equally valued, "The earnings of the one are in money, those of the other in terms of family and time."

To make sense of these contradictory gendered behaviors and ideas, we should consider the changes affecting women in Hungary, similar to the rapidly changing gender regimes of other post-socialist countries. During the state-socialist era (before 1989-1990), when women's emancipation meant equal rights with men to be gainfully employed, the state provided solutions to the problems of working mothers, partly by free and widely available childcare. After the collapse of state socialism, Hungarian women were no longer forced to participate in paid work nor to maintain the dual-earning nuclear family model. The generous government support for childcare and housing was either abolished or diminished in effectiveness. Renewed nostalgia for traditional gendered roles emerged. Conservative social

forces, including political and religious groups, have promoted the view that women can and should resume their “natural” (i.e., traditional), roles as mothers and housewives. Nonetheless, in the 21st century women, in general, and more educated women in particular, are more likely to interpret their job not only as a necessity to earn money but also as an opportunity for personal development. Increasingly women’s careers as well as men’s are considered in family decisions (Takács, 2013).

In Hungary, similarly to other Central and Eastern European countries, these changes have brought about, “the gender yo-yo effect” to describe the contradictory normative expectations about women’s roles in post-socialist societies. Women typically feel bad at work because really they should already have children, and if they do, they should have stayed at home with their small children, like their grandmother possibly did before the Second World War; and they also feel bad at home (once they have small children) because really they should have had a full time paid job, too – like their mother most probably had after the Second World War (Takács, 2013).

In present day Hungary, Miki and Mia are exceptional. Although they do not seem to be getting criticized for the degendered ways they have organized their lives, they do not seem to have a great deal of social support for the unconventional lives they are living either. Miki reported that the traditional model is still dominant, “At the kindergarten I see that ... where the father is the breadwinner, works a lot, and when he’s at home then he’s resting and tired... and where it’s the mother who takes the child and responsible for raising the child.” The teachers were surprised by his role, “To start with they thought it odd. Why is it always Father who brings the child? And it is the father who gets the child used to the place.”

The genuine pleasure they derive from family life promotes their equally sharing. Miki poignantly talks about wanting to watch his daughter at kindergarten, “My problem is that she spends a lot of her time in an institution and I have no idea what she does, I only have indirect

information...I don't see her. Sometimes I would love to sit in and watch what she does." He also talks about the joy of family life that results from the family labor he does: "I am the one who carries things out, bringing me joy, and with that we go forward." They both seem to love spending time together as a family. Mia describes how they use time in the car together to share their emotional lives, "On the way home we talk all the time about what happened to whom on that day. So we arrive home having already talked about the day's events, hurts, joys, learned things.

Conclusion

Mia and Miki do family in exceptional ways. Their coordinated and harmonious efforts to manage family time avoids the time poverty often experienced by Hungarian families, who suffer from a perception that they lack enough hours in the day to fulfill job demands and care responsibilities. Miki and Mia consciously rearrange their priorities to allocate enough quality time for the family. From the very beginning, when Miki moved to the Netherlands to join his pregnant partner, they have been equal sharers. His willingness to adapt his employment to family priorities reflects his commitment.

Responsibility and commitment are conscious, rational motives, but those motives can promote the feeling that keeps equal sharing on track. Miki's involvement in family life leads to a kind of relationship with his partner and child that creates joy, "I look at my child and I am filled with happiness. Beautiful, clever, and my child... I cannot believe it."

Mia recommends equal sharing as a path to happiness:

It wouldn't be a bad thing if this came up with more families. Then perhaps one wouldn't see quite so many mothers... who don't look too happy and who are running around in circles. Perhaps a completely new kind of father... If more people could apply this model, it's possible that more people would be happier.

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[[Hungary has an estimated population of 9,655,361 (World Population Review, 2019).

According to 2011 census data, less than five percent of the population identifies as ethnically non-Hungarian, with Roma as the largest group, followed by German, Slovak, Croatian, Romanian (Population census, n.d.b). Fifty-four percent of the population identifies with a religious denomination: 68% of them belong to the Roman Catholic Church and 21% are Calvinists. The remaining 11% are divided among multiple religious groups. (Population

census, n.d.c). Married or cohabiting couples with children represent 30% of the households in Hungary, 13% are single parent households, and 20% are couples without children (Population census, n.d.a).

Discrimination against women in the workplace is forbidden by law, but as of 2016, there was still a 9.4% gender wage gap (OECD, 2019b). Sixty-one percent of women are employed as compared to 75% of men (OECD, n.d.a).

Hungarian national policy allows for an exceptionally long childcare leave with a maximum of three years. Benefits depend on previous employment. The parental care benefit (GYED) is an insured income-related benefit, available until the second birthday of a child, which can be taken by either parent after the 24-week period designated for the mother. There is also a low flat rate benefit (GYES) for parents who were not in the labor force for at least one year before the birth. Moreover, insured parents can extend their leave an additional year at the flat rate. There is also a five-day paternity leave (Gábos, 2018). Practically, the generous leave policy discourages the continuous participation of women in the labor market (Plantenga, Remery, & Takács, 2012). In fact, for mothers of children under two years old, the maternal employment rate (< 20%) is the lowest of all OECD countries (OECD, 2016a).

As of 2014, in approximately half of families with children aged 0-14 both parents work full-time (OECD, n.d.b). Structural features of the Hungarian labor market, such as insecure employment, long work hours, limited opportunities for part-time work, and low wages, which force people to take extra jobs, contribute to an increasingly intense time squeeze for parents, most often mothers because they do the majority of domestic work (Hobson, Fahlén, & Takács, 2014). Hungarian women spend more time on unpaid labor than men, with an average of 4:28 versus 2:07 hours per day (OECD, 2019a).

In theory working parents have an entitlement to early education and care starting at the child's birth, but there are insufficient places available before age three (Gábos, 2018).

Enrolment of children under three in formal care is only 16%. At age three, the enrolment for preschool education is 79%, rising to 94% for four year olds, and 96% for five year olds (OECD, 2016b).]]

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