

## EXAMINATION OF THE KEY COMPETENCES OF MOTHERS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN IN ALIGNMENT WITH LABOUR MARKET NEEDS

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In the traditional family model, reconciling work and family life for women is a common challenge. National literature often identifies women as a disadvantaged group in the labour market, especially mothers with young children. Based on various psychological studies, mothers play a key role in ensuring the conditions for their children's healthy development during the childcare period. In addition, there is often financial pressure to return to work as soon as possible. In the public perception and also in the minds of mothers who look after their children at home, there is a perception of a decline in their abilities and a corresponding decline in their self-esteem. Our research aimed to highlight the repertoire of everyday activities that mothers perform in their daily lives, based on competences that can be transformed into labour-market skills. Our goal is to identify mothers' skills and explore how they view their own skills. We hope that our results will increase the self-esteem of the target group and change the attitudes of labour market actors towards them.*

Keywords: disadvantage, key competences, female worker with young children, lack of self-confidence

JEL code: J24

### **INTRODUCTION**

For several years, our research group has been monitoring the situation of mothers with young children from various perspectives. In this paper, we seek to answer the question of what mothers think about their own skills and how gaining insight into this can help employees with young children in their individual career paths.

In the first part of the study, we review the literature that we consider particularly important. One can learn about the disadvantaged position of women in the labour market and the concept of key competencies.

In the second part, within the framework of our own study, we examined how mothers' key competences change (skill development and atrophy) while staying at home with their babies. We present a type of interview called “motivational interview,” which has two benefits. On the one hand, exploring mothers' skills is useful for employers, and on the other hand, this interview method also develops mothers' positive self-image. Our goal is to identify mothers' skills and explore how

they view their own skills.–The article is based on document synthesis conducted according to predetermined criteria.

## **THEORY**

### **Literature review**

*Women's equality and women's employment ... are often, often voiced as a social and economic issue in the EU, but in the developed world the achievements are mostly a cause for concern' (Ternovszky, 2013, p. 36–44)*

Europe was clearly defined by traditional female roles until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to which unpaid domestic work, such as family responsibilities, routine housework, and caretaking, was the responsibility of mothers. At the same time, fathers are responsible for the family's financial stability (Kómiives *et al.*, 2023). In addition to the once-dominant breadwinner father role, the egalitarian model is becoming increasingly prominent today (Drjenovszky & Kézdy, 2023). The emergence of industrial society can be marked as a turning point in the employment of women. The social expansion of work and the major changes (feminisation, regime change, unemployment and globalisation later) have all had an impact on the position of women in the labour market, where they are disadvantaged according to most classifications (Horváth, 2012; Cserné *et al.* 2006; Halmos, 2005; Farikas *et al.*, 2007; Koncz, 2016). Kenderfi (2012) clearly states that disadvantaged persons are those whose social career opportunities are less secure than others' due to their living conditions and circumstances.

Nowadays, women still face significant disadvantages in the labour market (Horváth, 2012). Discrimination often occurs even in the job application process (Mészáros, 2006), as having children or the expected biological age to give birth can influence hiring decisions. Later in their career, women face several disadvantages related to horizontal and vertical segregation (Glass & Fodor, 2011; Mészáros, 2006). In the Hungarian financial sector, Glass and Fodor noted that motherhood has negative consequences (the “motherhood penalty”) that disadvantage women. In their survey, they identified three employer strategies: first, mothers are not considered suitable for work in a competitive financial environment; second, employers screen out mothers with young children and women planning to have children, steering them toward a career path promising fewer responsibilities and lower pay (the “mommy track”); finally, management views mothers of young children as lacking leadership ability, so these women are pushed out of the organization early on, resulting in stunted career advancement and wages, and the creation of a wage gap (Glass & Fodor, 2011).

A recent study analysed 52 articles published between 2010 and 2022 from 10 databases. On the one hand, it highlights the disadvantages of motherhood in the labour market. Despite women's progress in the workplace, mothers continually face systemic barriers that prevent them from advancing in their careers. On the other hand, it also identifies the positive aspects of the relationship between motherhood and career aspirations, which is consistent with our research findings, which generally

focused on the development of mothers' interpersonal and time management skills, as well as problem-solving skills (Calegari et al., 2024).

Discrimination is a complex phenomenon that manifests in subtle and often hidden ways. Therefore, it cannot be explained by a few causes or easily identified. Kertesi defines discriminatory employer behaviour as 'differential treatment of workers with the same productivity' (Kertesi, 2001, as cited in Bencsik & Machová, 2014). However, some employers rarely consider mothers with young children to be valuable employees, instead viewing them as problematic (Primecz, 2015; Bencsik & Machová, 2014).

It is clear that women's participation in the labour market differs from men's in terms of economic participation, social differences, and traditions (Mészáros, 2006).

In Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Hungary, Poland, Romania), childcare and education services have a long tradition and are generally available free of charge. Policies reflect traditional family roles and modern concepts of work-life balance (Agócs et al., 2024).

They can stay at home with their baby for three years and receive extensive maternity benefits, or they can even return to the labour market, aided by a network of state nurseries and numerous financial incentives (Fűrész & Molnár, 2021). According to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, the labour market participation of mothers with young children increased between 2012 and 2022, thereby creating demand for daytime childcare services. There is widespread support for the state's role in childcare (Medgyesi & Kopasz, 2024). The family support systems of neighbouring countries are similar to Hungary's in many respects (Michalski, 2024). The system of maternity leave related to childbirth and childcare, along with the associated cash benefits, in Hungary is extensive and quite complex, even by international standards (Gábos & Makay, 2023; Tomka & Gábos, 2024), particularly for employed women. It is encouraging that, compared to 2010, Hungary has seen the most significant increase in the desire to have children in the EU by 2021. The trend of having at least two children has been broken since 2022; hopefully, this is temporary, and the trend observed over the past decade, which has a positive effect on children's socialisation, will continue (Pári, 2024).

The majority of mothers with young children return to the labour market after their child turns 3 (Varga, 2019). Bálint and Köllő (2008) state that the average time from leaving the workplace to leaving the child support system is 4.7 years (Bálint & Köllő, 2008 in Bencsik & Jubász, 2014), which may be even longer for families with several children. The introduction of GYES (childcare benefit) in 1967 and GYED (childcare allowance) in 1986 was a significant milestone in post-childbirth benefits, enabling women to work while caring for their children. The success of the reintegration of mothers with young children depends to a large extent on the conditions under which this process takes place.

### **Key competences**

Our key skills have a significant impact on our ability to manage in the labour market and to perform our activities effectively. Over the last half-century, a variety of definitions of non-occupational skills have been developed, such as skill cover and

non-occupational skills. In the 1950s, key competences were linked to personality characteristics as a condition for successful performance (*Super & Bohm, 1970*). Here, we would like to note that, in our study, we assign almost the same meaning to the concepts of competence, ability, and key competences, and consider them to be essentially necessary conditions for high-level performance. According to the most common approach, competence, knowledge, and attitude are interrelated. The word 'competence' has several meanings in the vernacular: competence, entitlement, expertise, and competency. It is most often understood as a unit of knowledge, skills and attitudes in the professional community. In this paper, we treat (key) competence and (key) ability as synonyms, although we recognise that no equivalence can be drawn between the two concepts. It is a fact that they facilitate filling in all jobs (*Bajusz, 2008*). The concept of key competences itself was introduced in the 1970s by a German work educator, *Mertens (1974)*. According to the EU recommendation, it is the ability of an individual to apply their knowledge, skills and qualifications in both standard and changing occupational contexts. According to *Szilágyi (2007)*, on the one hand, key competences are the foundation for successful performance (the ability to cooperate, build relationships, communicate, solve problems, and take responsibility). On the other hand, the Mertensian concept of key competences is a set of general, non-professional, mobilisable, and transferable skills, the existence of which is increasingly valued by employers.

The definition that we have adopted can be found in the glossary of the Career Counselling journal, where the following definition is given for key competences: The set of competences that, in addition to professional knowledge, fundamentally determine the employee's integration, motivation, manageability and creativity. It includes the human, social and emotional characteristics which, in addition to professional and intellectual ability, determine how an individual manages in a community and in a workplace (*Szilágyi, 2007*). In the world of work, autonomy and teamwork are mostly associated with modern work processes, which are interlinked and can be called 'system competences'. Alongside all this, there is also a socially based approach to key competences, which is the key to our survival. In this context, the ability to adapt is considered a 'constructive competency' for the development of society (*Szilágyi, 2007*). Taking into account the above theoretical framework, Hungarian researchers include the group of competences marked 3C, such as communication, conflict resolution and cooperation, in the scope of key competences. The majority of authors agree that problem-solving skills and the autonomy of thought and action are important determinants of success in the world of work. Another division of transversal skills or key competences, found on a professional portal (*Taninfo.hu, n.d.*), can be organised into three main categories: interdisciplinary, methodological, and personality traits. The importance of key competences extends beyond professions, but they are also well known in professions and overlap in many respects. Mobilising pre-existing occupational skills (e.g., drawing, welding practice, good manual dexterity) predicts success in employment (learning a new occupation) (*Szilágyi, 2007*). Key competences appear in job advertisements, and their prevalence has been studied by *Mertens (1974)*, *Siegrist (1993)* and, in Hungary, *Bajusz (2008)*, among others.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research questions in this study seek to determine what mothers think of their own skills and how this understanding can help working parents of young children; however, we also consider it important to present the results of our other studies, which cover competencies deemed important from a labour-market perspective. We recently collected, studied, and analysed surveys and forecasts from leading scientists in the field to gain an in-depth understanding of the areas of expertise that have been and will continue to be the focus of employer demand and near-term forecasts. The data used for the study comes from various reliable journals and articles. We critically studied and reviewed the data obtained. The result was produced by analysing secondary data, literature sources, and Hungarian and international databases.

In our research, the questionnaire and interview surveys were conducted with workers with children under 6 years old, employers, and mothers with young children still at home in some form of childcare (n=1510). The objective of the survey was to identify the basic characteristics of mothers with young children that could help them manage in the labour market, on the one hand, and to understand employers' attitudes, on the other hand. Mothers with a young child or children (under 6 years) and HR staff and relevant senior employees involved in the reintegration process were approached by HR staff and employers through the involvement of students of the master's programme in Human Resource Counselling at the Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences (former Szent István University). We prepared the students for these studies in advance, then compiled their results and experiences during a systematic analysis of their theses.

Our total sample size over the years was 1,510 individuals, which cannot be considered representative (e.g., it varied from year to year) and also exhibits heterogeneity in its parameters (e.g., age, education level, geographic location). However, the research target population consisted of mothers with young children who were working or wanted to work at the time of the study. The HR professionals, meanwhile, were specialists working in HR departments at various companies who were involved in their reintegration from the employer's side.

Data extraction and synthesis were performed, and relevant information was collected. Finally, the evidence was evaluated, and our results were described in this study after systematic grouping and weighting. We sought to determine employers' and employees' expectations and opportunities regarding young children during the reintegration process.

## **ANALYSIS**

Our analysis summarises the experience of four studies:

- *Siegrist* (1996) analysed nearly seven hundred job advertisements and ranked them by frequency.
- *Komor* (2001), at the request of the Ministry of Education, carried out a survey of employee competences, of which the final study was prepared with the

involvement of the former Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences of Szent István University.

- *Kucsák* (2019) collected the skills required by domestic employers.
- Within the Framework for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning, the *Battelle for Kids* (BfK), 2019 document has organised the skills needed for successful graduates into 4K models.

In *Table 1*, in addition to the four surveys above, forecasts are also displayed. In 2016, *Zahidi & Till*, referring to the *World Economic Forum* (WEF), 2016 report (*The Future of Jobs*), published the 10 most important skills for work in 2015 and predicted them for 2020. In 2015, 2020, and 2025, the WEF produced projections of the 10 skills that employers will expect in the future.

**Table 1: Areas most frequently found in the research analysed**

Type of Survey	Employer needs assessments				World Economic Forum forecasts			Occurrence (items)
	1996 Siegrist	2001 Komor	2019 Kucsák	2019 BfK	2015	2020	2025	
problem solving	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
communication	x	x		x	x	x	x	6
cooperation	x	x	x	x	x	x		6
taking responsibility	x			x	x	x	x	5
creativity			x	x	x	x	x	5
flexibility			x	x		x	x	4
critical thinking				x	x	x	x	4
learning	x	x					x	3
technological skills			x	x			x	3
emotional intelligence			x			x		2
service orientation					x	x		2

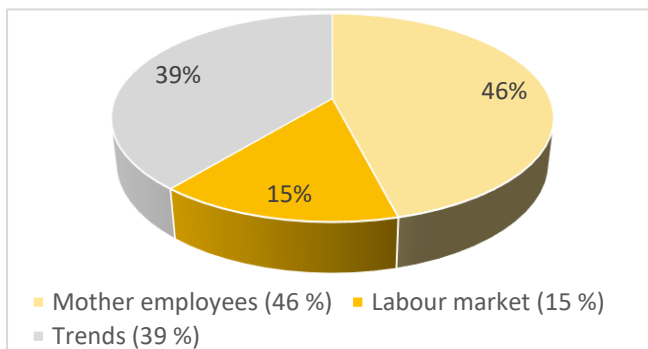
The table gives details of the competences to be highlighted in the different professional documents, in order of frequency. After summarising the results, it can be concluded that the employer needs assessments and forecasts that align with the perception of the skills required. In all cases, the ability to solve problems, communicate and collaborate is seen as a key competency requirement.

Key competences will increasingly define the world of work. Workers need to know their own skills and continuously develop them. It is beyond the scope of our research. Still, it is an exciting area to explore the skills and attitudes to motivation of the future generation of workers that will be needed in the workplace of the future, with challenges that are difficult to foresee from both the employer and the employee side (e.g. the emergence of new professions and new ways of working). Overall, employers expect 39% of workers' basic skills to change by 2030, which is a major challenge for all concerned (*World Economic Forum, 2025*).

In the remainder of the study, our university research group (MATE, the department responsible for the Master's programme in Human Resource Consulting, Institute of Rural Development and Sustainable Economy, Department of Humanities and Vocational Education, and its predecessors) assessed and identified women-focused theses and dissertations through a systematic document review, which were ultimately grouped by topic. The next step was to screen the studies and apply the inclusion criteria for the detailed analysis phase. Data were extracted and synthesised, and relevant information was compiled. Finally, the evidence was evaluated, and our results were described in this study following systematic grouping and weighting.

The Department of Humanities and Vocational Training at the MATE Institute for Rural Development and Sustainable Economy, known in the literature as the "Gödöllő School," produced 2,743 theses between 2002 and 2025. Of these, 115 theses were written on women-focused topics, which corresponds to 4.1925% of the total number of theses. We narrowed the sample down to students enrolled in the master's program in human resources, resulting in 72 theses grouped by topic (*Figure 1*).

**Figure 1: Topic groups focused on women employees (n=72) between 2002 and 2025**



The deeper analysis time interval of the sample was narrowed down to 2019-2024 for two reasons. One of them was that the results for the previous period had already been published in an earlier study. The other was that, given the year-on-year increase in the number of papers on this topic (altogether 30, 11.41% between 2020 and 2025), we were interested in a more in-depth analysis of recent years. We arrived at the findings in *Table 2* using content analysis.

Out of the 30 papers, we selected those that, based on our criteria, were suitable for inclusion in the next phase of the study. During the detailed and systematic analysis of the papers, we analysed and synthesised 10 papers from the perspective of key competence assessment. In this part of the research, we compared data from 1,510 mothers, most of whom had children under 6, between 2019 and 2024. During the exploration, we synthesised the research questions and hypotheses of the papers, as well as the details of the interviews and questionnaire surveys. We analysed a wide methodological repertoire (individual and group motivational interviewing, involving document analysis (mood barometer, CV analysis), questionnaire surveys and

structured interviews). In the motivational interviews, 98 people were interviewed individually and in groups, and 1,412 people participated in the questionnaire surveys.

**Table 2: Number of theses written in Human Resources Consultancy, MA programme between 2020 and 2025**

Number of semesters analysed	Semester	Total theses (items)	These focused on women (items)
1	20/21 autumn	0	0
2	20/21 spring	0	0
3	21/22 autumn	21	2
4	21/22 spring	47	4
5	22/23 autumn	21	5
6	22/23 spring	45	3
7	23/24 autumn	19	1
8	23/24 spring	40	5
9	24/25 autumn	7	2
10	24/25 spring	50	7
11	25/26 autumn	13	1
		263	30

During interviews with mothers of young children, the lack of self-confidence, which shapes the basic mood of everyday life, was often mentioned in the early stages of the interviews, during the mood-setting phase. To increase participants' self-esteem, our motivational interviewing (interviewing pregnant women) method, Our Mothers' Motivational Interview (MMI), received a special award in the best practice category at this year's HR+ Online Contest (<https://www.hrplusacademy.eu/best-practices/>) was developed and used in both individual and group interviews. During the sessions, both individual and group discussions were conducted. The steps of this process are described below, followed by a summary of the experience gained.

- Assessing the basic mood regarding the return to the labour market using a 10-point scale, followed by a more detailed verbal explanation.
- Writing a CV, with particular attention to its skills content. Here, mothers who have spent time in childcare list the skills they have that can be used in their reintegration into the labour market.
- Recording the activities they do with their child during their time at home, in everyday life.
- Assigning skills to the listed activities.
- Highlighting the elements of the newly identified skills that are relevant for employment and transferring them to the CV.
- Repeated recording of the basic mood on the mood barometer.

Firstly, perhaps the most important impact of motivational interviewing on mothers is the difference in mood scores between the beginning and end of the

interviews. Regarding the return to the labour market, we interpret the clear mood lift and positive emotional surplus as outcomes of the interviews. The feedback indicated a marked increase in self-esteem as a result of identifying the skills underpinning childcare and care activities, and recognising that most of these skills met employers' expectations and the needs outlined in job advertisements. Respondents were satisfied with the curriculum vitae, which was complemented by accepted skills (e.g., responsibility, problem-solving, flexibility) that could be easily supported by real-world examples.

The analyses were carried out using SPSS and Excel. We sought to understand employers' and workers' expectations and opportunities regarding young children during the reintegration process.

In the introductory phase of motivational interviewing, the complex situation of mothers on the labour market (their problems and opportunities) was revealed. According to the interviewees, it is difficult for mothers to return to the labour market. Still, for most, it is necessary for financial reasons, even though mothers can stay home with their children for up to 3 years. They tend to return when their children are 2-3 years old and see the biggest problems as managing change, loss of confidence, and childcare. Half of mothers return to the same job after having a child. The development of key competences during the home stay shows a different picture. The answers to the research questions show that mothers with young children possess many key skills important for the labour market, but also reveal gaps in their skills. We compared the content of the mothers' sentences with employers' expectations (Table 3).

**Table 3: Development of key competences of mothers in the light of the competences employers consider necessary.**

<b>Key Skill Development while staying at home</b>	<b>Not Improved</b>	<b>Improved</b>	<b>Improved Significantly</b>
mothers' answers (employees' aspect)	technological skills, foreign language competences	dexterity	flexibility, emotional intelligence, service orientation, empathy
HR workers (employers' opinions)	flexibility, professionalism	stress tolerance, empathy	
development level and key skill type according to both parties (employees' and employers' aspects)	confidence	critical thinking, communication, collaboration, learning	creativity, responsibility, problem solving, shared attention

On the positive side, most of the key competences assessed have improved or improved significantly according to both parties. Based on the responses given, mothers feel that most of their skills have improved or improved significantly. They

do not think that their technological skills and foreign language competences have improved during the stay at home. Employers also evaluated the mothers similarly, with the difference that their confidence and resilience did not seem to have improved during the period of child rearing.

According to the mothers interviewed, the benefits of employing mothers with young children are that, during their time at home, they have also developed key skills such as keen attention, time management, a sense of duty, a holistic vision, and logistical thinking. HR staff did not list any reasons why their reintegration was not cost-effective. Other benefits perceived by both stakeholders include the ability to use existing knowledge, so less learning time; they know the company and culture, they have a positive role in building the company's reputation, they are reliable, motivated, grateful, loyal, long-term planning; returning mothers motivate current and new employees; their employment means tax benefits for companies; their reintegration costs less than hiring a new employee. During the time spent at home, the activities preferred by mothers differ from those preferred by employers. Mums prefer baby-mum clubs, attending training courses, reading professional literature, attending events and helping out programmes, and professional forums the least. However, during the time spent at home, the employer would prefer the following activities (in order of importance): reading professional literature, attending company events, helping out programmes, baby-mum club, training, and professional forums. The family-friendly measures preferred by both parties would be (in order of importance): atypical employment, events, maternity welcome package, counselling, more days off, nursery at work, crèche, breast milk cooler, and pram storage. Nursery, crèche and summer camp run by the company would be less preferred measures by employers, while mothers would welcome them. In many cases, mothers feel that the HR department's staff are not handling their return properly. At the moment, our experience shows that the situation in companies is very varied when it comes to equality issues. Some companies address the specific situation of employees with young children for various reasons (e.g., social responsibility, code of ethics, their own values and company culture, or compliance with a standard point). Still, most do not have a well-established, comprehensive scheme to address this altered situation.

To sum up, the responses to the questionnaires and interviews show several positive things, including that mothers are keen to educate themselves while staying at home, they want to be role models for their children, fathers are also often involved in domestic work, especially if the mother is in a managerial position, and women have more opportunities to work in a managerial position. In general, however, the division of labour between women and men within the family is unequal, which affects their careers. The Hungarian economy counts on mothers with young children, and some companies are happy to employ them. In terms of key competences, time spent at home can also bring about positive changes in mothers, which can greatly help them later in the workplace. Key skills include responsibility, empathy, and problem-solving. Fortunately, some employers also recognise these and see them as valuable for mothers with young children. Looking at the sample as a whole, similarities can be seen in all areas, which can be further elaborated to explore the problem in more depth.

## CONCLUSIONS

Family is the key to sustainability, and we all have a common responsibility to protect it. Today, women face many disadvantages in the labour market during their careers. Employers have a key role to play in ensuring that workers with young children can keep their jobs. In this study, we sought to determine what mothers think about their own skills and how identifying these skills can help working parents of young children succeed in the labour market. In addition to numerous systemic obstacles, some mothers also struggle with the fact that they lose confidence during their stay at home after childbirth. This lack of confidence is largely fed by feedback from the environment (Görgőy, 2011; Calegari et al., 2024). Overall, our examination found that new mothers have all the key competences that the labour market prefers. Generally speaking, they are trying to get back into the labour market, which is not easy for them for several reasons. Mothers consider it ideal to return to work when their children are 2 or 3 years old, most often returning earlier for financial reasons, which the vast majority later regret. The problems described in the literature analysis of the past decades have also emerged in our research, and our results show that, although there is a shift towards progress, these problems remain prevalent and need to be addressed. The perpetual mothering insecurity is present in most of them, and they generally feel challenged by the multiple roles of being good mothers, good employees, and even developing. In today's ever-changing, incredibly fast-paced labour market, understanding the concepts of change and renewal is becoming essential for all its players, and our well-being depends on the speed and depth of our adaptation. Being professionally prepared and fit is very important in the world of work, and understanding that change is a natural part of life (Kast, 2012). Family is a value to be defended in our values, which gives us strength in the face of everyday challenges. Childbearing is a changing life context, in which the successful reintegration of mothers with young children requires the effective cooperation of all parties involved, and our programme will hopefully provide a solid basis for this.

In the following study, we will identify HR tools that can support the reintegration process. We will show a good practice in attitude formation that we have been involved in for several years, and how key skills of mothers with young children can be developed in practice through career counselling, using individual counselling and structured group sessions with the help of HR counsellors. The aim will be to develop a practical support system in the near future that provides a reassuring vision for both workers with young children and employers.

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