

Ibolya Czibere

Women in urban poverty in Hungary

Maids and women workers in the labour market before 1945

The economic and social transition caused by the industrial revolution at the end of the 19th century has brought about several changes in Hungary. The development of infrastructure and transportation enabled women to access new job opportunities, to abandon traditional communities and to try new ways of living.

The status of maids

In Hungary, keeping maids continued to be a social custom and even between the two world wars affected a large number of people. According to Gyáni (2003), working as a maid was a distinctly urban job. This was a characteristic phenomenon in Hungary, especially in the capital. During the process in which an increasing proportion of society became bourgeois, more and more middle-class officers, learned people, industrialists and merchants started to keep maids. *“[For] the evolving bourgeoisie having maids had become a status symbol, they were treated in a condescending, definite and loud manner to make social dominance felt; ladies pretending to be noble expected hand-kissing, title, to be addressed politely, while maids were addressed by their first names and might had been subjects of discipline in extreme cases. Maids did not have advocacy organizations, [but] after a time, insurance and patient assistance companies tried to help them. Only few maids utilized the services of employment agencies, the majority of them accepted verbal [labor] contracts; they were so isolated that they had been more vulnerable than any other groups of society”* (Paládi Kovács–Sárkány–Szilágyi 2000). Maids were almost entirely women. This type of service was the easiest accessible job for women in urban areas and especially in Budapest. A significant proportion of women were working as a maid. This phenomenon also strongly induced immigration. In Budapest (and other cities as well), maid girls were almost exclusively immigrants. According to Gyáni, *“we can state it in general that in Budapest, during the bourgeois era, the position of maids and servants was the most general employment opportunity for women”* (Gyáni 1987: 26). This type of job was temporary in most cases. Women started to work as maids around the age of 15-20 and continued to work until they got married. As a result, married maids were very rare. The majority of them were coming from poor peasant, craftsmen or agricultural proletarian families with a high number of children. It was generally poverty that forced them to undertake this type of employment. There were also others for whom going to cities was the only way to escape from the physically more demanding peasant life (Paládi Kovács–Sárkány–Szilágyi 2000). According to the social rules of that era maids were seen as being dependent on their master: *“maids, from the very beginning of their service, fell under the rules of domestic disciplinary law, their employers controlled their every single manifestation of life. According to domestic disciplinary law, physical punishment was an accepted tool of sanctioning. Maids, under the duration of employment, were personally subordinated to their masters to the extent that they*

were not even considered to be separate legal entities, their status was similar to that of someone placed under guardianship” (Gyáni 2003: 339).

The majority of domestic maids had been working under continuous and direct control. Neither their working time, nor their job titles were defined specifically (Paládi Kovács–Sárkány–Szilágyi 2000). The majority of them worked from early morning until late night as a do-all servant. Maid women’s vulnerability made feminists to fight for women’s rights. Feminist protested against their treatment, against their master’s unlimited power over them, against their slavery and fought for their human dignity. The contemporary press made a local ruling of 1907 from Kaposvár popular. Feminists, however objected to that decision of the court by claiming that it was even more severe than the 12rd enactment of 1876 on the general rules for domestic servants. The most criticized points of this ruling were those that, from primarily moral considerations, limited women’s rights to be free.

These restrictions stipulated that masters could not tolerate their maids’ “immoral” conduct and were compelled to report that to the authorities or were also subjected to punishment. This regulation fostered masters to keep a keen eye on their maids. They tended to employ a harsh judgment on their activities. Another rule prohibited female maids to walk on the streets after 9pm. Women ignoring that regulation risked of being called to be a roaming maid. Roaming maids – according to the enactment – were to be collected by police and examined by a doctor. A house for maids was also ordered to be established. The police continuously monitored it. Female maids without a place to sleep were forced to stay there. They were allowed to leave it only with permission, only in daytime and only for short intervals. Using the press to let their voices heard feminist made fun of the city-leading men who treated their female maids with superiority and indifference: *“you wise aldermen [...] accepted this proposal in full extent. Unanimously. Without [conducting] a single debate. After discussing the amount of duty on car lubricants to be set to 2 or 3 filler for hours. They did not have a word about the maid regulation, nor a comment or the smallest amendment” (A nő és a társadalom /The woman and society/ 1907: 38).* Feminist regarded this right to be brutal, incompatible with human dignity and honor, and made breakthrough suggestions. They suggested abolishing the concept “maid” and, similarly to other industrial workers allowing these women be free employees. *“The concept of “maid” should be erased from the legal code, those that are called today maids should be free workers similarly to others and the relationship between employers and employees – independent of the nature of work – should be characterized by regulations based on equality before the law. If the work around the house and family requires special actions to be taken, these should not be considered different from those that are based on service or job contracts. Accepting domestic disciplinary law or unpunished libels is not appropriate or justified against maids or anybody else that undertook duties of service but not honor, human dignity, physical integrity or self-esteem” (100).*

In our view this special group of women experienced the merging of their working and private life. They had to undertake their duties by working in other families than their own in the environment dominated by patriarchal values. As a result, in an emerging bourgeois society they were forced to live in the least bourgeois living conditions.

The status of impoverished industrial worker women

The other segment of urban feminine poverty involved industrial women workers in Hungary. For decades, their proportion among workers has only slowly increased and for a long period it has remained minimal. In the first phase of the industrial revolution in Hungary, the proportion of industrial women workers among the workers has continued to remain small. According to the 1880 census, the ratio of women among industrial wagedworkers was only 10%. At that time, only tobacco and sugar, brick and tile factories employed women in significant numbers (Lackó quoted by Paládi Kovács–Sárkány–Szilágyi 2000). As the authors describe it, work started at 4-5 am in brick factories. Women and girls dressed in dirty and torn clothes carried mud and found some rest lying on straw or in dirty dens. In these days, the majority type of women workers were not working with machines but were female day-toilers in tobacco, sugar and brick factories. According to statistics, female family members, i.e., wives and daughters of industrial workers were forced to undertake jobs to a larger extent than other female members of other social groups. This was more common in factories of Budapest and cities of the Small Hungarian Plain (especially at textile, sugar and can industries) than it was in the northern industrial region. Several factors played a part in forcing worker families into type of employment. Among these factors the poverty of single mothers has remained and it is well known even today. This phenomenon was nothing special in that era either. At that time women got into that condition primarily by the death, immigration or disability of the householder and as a result, they had to undertake jobs at whatever cost. According to Braun (1909), even metallurgies were trying to offer jobs for such women workers. In these worker families, children were often left unattended by parents. However, it was typical that elder siblings or nice neighbors took care of younger children. This provided huge support for these families which were, by this way were able to secure their living. In 1908 a report was published¹ in which Freund, describing the status of women workers at tobacco factories noted: *“this type of poverty figures should really be considered twice as high, as this include women workers who are employed by the state. I wanted to point out to this unjust, uncontrolled economic repression and exploitation of women”* (Freund 1908: 97).

What does this picture look like? Depending on when they could complete the daily required labour standards these poor, unskilled women workers worked 9, 10 or 11 hours a day. Working conditions included places where windows were not opened for weeks, and, as a result, the air was stuffy, muggy and filled with utmost filth. There were no inspectors at factories, and as a result, these women were working in inhumane conditions. Men were employed only in positions that required very demanding work. Apart from these jobs, almost the entire production process was performed by women. Supervisors took advantage of women’s vulnerability at almost all levels, that included a daily routine of employing insulting language and applying physical abuse (for example, flogging). Women who quit their jobs because of the intolerable conditions, unbearable health conditions and low wages called factories “gopher catchers” and according to Freund, “they were ready to starve rather than to continue working there”. Their sexual and moral vulnerability was high, their poverty

¹ The woman and society, 1908, vol. 2. No. 6.

made them tolerate continuous harassment and bullying, and the intimidation of woman workers prevented such scandalous conducts to become public.

A similar situation was described by Samuel Gompers in 1909² when he portrayed mortar carrier women in Budapest: *“There is, for example the mortar carrier woman in Budapest. The spectacles she offers while doing her job is similar to a draft horse. On bare feet, she is walking on ladders or climbing up boards to the top floors of new buildings. This spectacle definitely cannot be perpetuated on photos, nor is it possible to find her a place among the photo series categorizing industrial workers. Her wide legs end in crusty feet that resembles to pigskin, something that covers our traveling packs, her toenails are black and dingy from rubbing them to bricks and girders. Her legs are bare up to her knees; she is lifting them like a mule, she is taking careful but definite steps as she walks up that single board or girder. Her waist is hunchbacked; her head is covered with a not very clean but bright-colored kerchief. Her facial features do not show anything special except for her undeveloped brain; her moves are not powerful, which seems natural to the observer if you take her sex – and indeed, this is a woman! – and the probable quality of her nutrition into consideration”* (Gompers 1974: 123).

We have not written about those women who tried to overcome their poverty by selling their bodies, who were walking on the streets day and night, sometimes in groups. In the shiny cafes that were loud of gipsy music, these women were considered to be – according to Gompers – “accessories like white table cloth or the waiter wearing tail coats”. It is not by accident that for a long time, up until 1907, women were not allowed to work as waitresses in cafes as this job could have easily been associated with the provision of sexual service (Nagy 1996). Gompers estimated the number of women that “one-day, made a determined choice between being an honest rag of a mortar carrier or a shiny accessory, or pariah”. However, he also noted that the life of poor women is still miserable either way.

During World War I, the number of women employed in gun factories grew most rapidly; they were working with machines (primarily with lathes) at that time working in extremely demanding jobs (Bresztovszky 1974). At that time (the 1910s), some activities became feminized, women outnumbered men in numerous fields of the labour market. However, registries from that time indicated significant inequality in terms of wages of women stepping into men’s positions. Women earned only a fraction of the salaries of their men predecessors: *“Women completely superseded men in can factories producing canisters. The number of men excluded from can factories in Budapest was over 400. The number of women who were undertaking tasks that had previously been performed by men was around 600-650. Women’s wages for 50-60%, or in many cases 75% less than working men’s. Women did not even have a word when they earned 3.5 Hungarian koronas in a job that paid previously 10 Hungarian koronas for the same work. Perhaps the saddest cases in this respect are the ammunition factory in Csepel, the can factory and the lamp factory in Kőbánya. Since women employed in*

² He visited Budapest in 1909b as the president of the American Federation of Labour and summed up his experiences in a section of his book entitled *Labour in Europe and America*.

these factories mostly came from a social background in which the concept of self-organization was not rooted self-organizing movements were only slowly grew there. Employers knew this and obviously took advantage of this” (Bresztovszky 1974: 2). In other words, we can see that when, switching to military production in the economy increased the demand for labour, more and more women could go to cities and got employed as unskilled workers. That situation granted immediate financial profit for factory owners. They made use of the opportunities the new situation offered for them and automatically employed women in much less favorable conditions than men previously. According to national statistics, women’s employment in the Horthy era started to grow steadily, and by 1941, it reached 23% (Gyáni 2003). This meant that masses of women at that time were not employed exclusively as maids in urban areas, which was the case before the World War, but were employed as unskilled labour women workers in the industry, too. By this time it had become obvious that the salary of the breadwinner is not sufficient or covering the needs of worker families. According to a report from that era, many thought that the increasing number of women workers was only the result of the war, which was supposed to decrease when the war will be over. Instead of this however, their number continually grew and at a faster pace than men’s. According to journalists this phenomenon in Hungary was due to special causes³: primarily, to the evolution of the textile industry, to the improvement of the spinning and weaving industry, which employed masses of skilled women and day-toilers. The increasing number of female skilled laborers was only characteristic to the textile industry and the number of female day-toilers was rising only in the spinning and weaving industry in this period. The emergence of this phenomenon has further brought about by the fact that *“capitalists employed unskilled, uneducated, thus unorganized workforce to fill vacancies. It was easy to find unorganized day-toilers and female workers. The agricultural crisis forced workers to find urban work to a greater degree than ever before. This is how agricultural crisis, industrialization, rationalization, the low wages of breadwinners, the development of the spinning and weaving industry was interweaving with the organizational, political and tactical issues of the working class”* (Litván 1974: 245).

Gyula Rézler carried out some research on textile factories in 1942, and he depicts the situation of poor women workers inside the factory and the inequalities between men and women. To understand the causes of inequalities, we need to examine the special social group of textile factory workers. The structure of their group was defined by the different skills and expertise of the workers⁴. At the top of the hierarchy, he found skilled workers. He called them textile masters since they were the middle managers of production and their proportion among workers was about 9%. The middle stratum of the hierarchy was made up by semi-skilled laborers, being the most populated group, giving about 70% of the workers. The bottom strata included daytalers (unskilled workers) who performed activities not requiring expertise or training but only physical strength.

³ The calendar of the New March magazine, 1929

⁴ Rézler mentions the factory as Kammer factory.

A different type of structure could also be set up on the base of distribution of labour by gender differences. In the factory examined, twice as much woman worked than men (800 women and 400 men), that is, two-third of workers were females. It was not that, but rather the opposite was a characteristic feature of industrial factories, i.e. only one-third of workers were women. Rézler thought that this is not a special situation as work at textile factories suits best women's skills (not to mention "the psychological associations of the textile industry to the female gender"), thus this reversed ratio was not a surprising one. Of the three training-based job categories, the one involving semi-skilled labour was believed to be the most suitable for women. This was perfectly implemented at the textile factory as 87% of women workers were employed in this category. According to Rézler this was a relevant situation as "the tasks of semi-skilled workers [...] do not require special training or expertise, which would be achievable among women workers in a more difficult way because of their sex and social relationships. It is not insignificant however that this job category does not require physical strength. [...] What is more, this job needs precision, meticulous attention, soft touch, handcraft and these are all feminine characteristics rather than masculine ones" (Rézler 1974: 386). Gender disadvantages and stereotypes may be found in other contexts as well – out of the 800 women workers, 700 were employed as semi-skilled workers and the remaining 100 worked as unskilled workers. However, we cannot find women among skilled laborers, at the top of the hierarchy, in the elite of the working class. On the contrary, the distribution of male workers at the factory was a more balanced, proportional one, having almost one-third in each category.

Rézler mentioned another type of disadvantage of female workers suffered in comparison to male workers: the wages of the latter's been much higher than that of the former's. Regardless of headcount dominance, men's wages were higher both among semi-skilled workers and daytakers. Rézler thinks this is justified among daytakers and argues that although we can find more women among daytakers but men perform the most challenging physical tasks, and ultimately that was rewarded by higher wages. In contrast, female unskilled laborers were assigned cleaning or other similar tasks. He also rejects the idea of that gender differences among semi-skilled laborers were in reality due to age differences. In other words Rézler claims that there were no differences between men and women at this level since they both performed the same tasks but there were significant variance in their wages. In his view, this occurred quite independently from the official wage regulations which did not make a distinction between the wages of male and female semi-skilled laborers. However, female and male semi-skilled workers were remunerated differently while doing the same jobs. The lower wage categories were the same for both sexes (1100 Hungarian pengő annually) but the upper wage limit showed men's advantage (3100 for men and 2800 for women). Nevertheless, most inequalities were to be found during the examination of wage categories, as the annual income for the majority of women was 1100-1800 Hungarian pengő, while this was 1350-2600 for men. *"As a result we can state that women and men doing the same quality of work are employed under seemingly equal income conditions but female workforce is generally less recognized as opposed to male workforce"* (Rézler 1974: 387).

Domestic household statistics covered the results of increasing crisis in production and consumption by analyzing the most affected layers of society, and established that not all social classes are affected to the same degree. As a result, investigations started to examine income distribution and consumption in each employment group, which included the analysis of living conditions and families' economic situation. The household examination of working class families⁵, which was a pioneer work at the beginning of the 1930s, involved 50 families. The degree of each family's expenditure depended on the number and age of family members as the consumption of family members highly influenced the degree of the family's expenditure. They also emphasized that the consumption of women, men and children of various ages was extremely different, which made comparison and assessment very difficult (Zentay 1974). Their results implied that in many cases, the income of working class families did not cover the monthly expenditures, thus they were forced to take loans, aids and gifts, and what is more, many of them made use of the services of pawnshops as well. They ate unhealthy food, consumed only a very little amount of milk and meat (well-being at that time was measured by the amount of meat consumed). These families consumed potatoes instead of bread and meat. It is striking how much of their income was spent on food. According to the data this was higher than 50% of their income! According to researchers, this proves that *"the price of grocery in agricultural Hungary was too high as compared to the income of the working class; on the other hand, meeting other primary and essential needs cost so much that their satisfaction were only possible with consuming a reduced amount and quality of food"* (Zentay 1974: 255).

The results of a research of brick factory workers and their working conditions from the 1930s are also very relevant here. The special status of brick factory workers originated from the fact that these laborers came from the poorest families and started to work very early, usually at the ages of 11-15. The number of these workers was not high; previously they had been working as maids, servants, daytakers, farm hands, carters or blacksmiths in villages (Jordáky 1974). Regardless of their age, the number of illiterate was extremely high among them. According to the study, the managers of the brick factory did not care about the education or training of their workers, thus it is not surprising that in apartments and families associated with the factory, children were usually illiterate, while those coming from villages or urban areas outside the factory finished 1-3 elementary grades. *"The majority is primitive, do not know anything about the events of the world or the country, not even about local news. Their lives are shrunk around the factory. Their knowledge about life: politics, legal rules and regulations, health, useful and useless things are all based on distorted rumors. The interviewer was shocked by their ignorance many times. They do not know who to blame for and how to label these phenomena. They consider magazines, journals and books useless [...]"*

⁵ There had been no similar data collection in Hungary before. The Hungarian Central Statistical Office did not try to collect household statistics at that time. The first such examination was performed by Dr. Lajos I. Ilyefalvi, who had conducted other pioneer research previously, for example, he organized a significant social data collection as the Director of the Budapest Statistical Office to examine the living conditions in Budapest. When collecting household data, he was the first to conduct such analyses, and he published his results in his work entitled *A munkások szociális és gazdasági viszonyai Budapesten* (The social and economic conditions of the working class in Budapest) (Zentay 1974).

the majority of them had never been to cinemas or theatres. They are amazed by the radio and think it's the evil's invention" (Jordáky 1974: 340).

Their deep poverty and closed world could be perceived through the gender roles inside their families, transferring all domestic work both at the weekdays and the only rest day to women: *"the majority spend their free time at home (only on Sundays, otherwise they work 10-15 hours a day), men are having a rest while women are cooking, washing and sewing clothes"* (Jordáky 1974: 340). Their housing and catering conditions are true reflections of their income levels. Researchers mentioned "dens names apartments" and "rickety buildings", which served as homes for these families. The houses of the factory were similar to these: small rooms with no air, electricity and accommodating usually 4-8 persons. There were rooms that served two families but it was not unusual that 7-8 strangers, the mixture of women and men lived together in one tiny little room. Their catering conditions were similar, their everyday meal included "haricot bean, potato or cumin soup". One group of them never ate meat, a little bit larger group ate meat once in a month but the majority of them tried to eat meat every Sunday (Jordáky 1974). The number of children among brick factory families was significantly high (in contrast to the average working class families), each family had 4-7 children. Describing the situation of brick factory women, they claim, *"It seems that the lives of these women simply consists of working and giving birth. They earn wages that cover only the apartment rent and basic food. They cannot be ill, that would be a luxury, which they cannot afford. They go to their tombs from the kitchen; there is no special transition from life to death. As they have no sick-leave, they go to work even if they are ill to prevent starving to death due to the lack of income"* (Jordáky 1974: 342).

In sum we can state that, despite the fact that there was nothing in the legal framework that would have fostered the discrimination of women, still, in contrast to men, they suffered from disadvantages in many areas of their lives. This could be a result of power distribution by gender. Higher power was associated with roles that were usually performed by men in everyday life, and that forced women to accommodate to male decisions and to protect this structure despite of their own "ill-being". It is striking that in Hungary the lives of poor peasant women can only be depicted by describing the life of their families. This is not surprising however, if we consider that at that time family structure was determined by work. However, the poverty of industrialized women workers could be better perceived if one focuses on the examination of those segments of their lives that they lived outside of their families. The reason of that is that industrialization and urbanization placed productive activities outside the immediate life of the family; it made processes and norms associated with them at factories visible; spectacular and also, it made family life private and closed. The lives of poor women workers in urban areas remained under double pressure: on the one hand under the capitalist exploitation of factories and the patriarchal repression in their families on the other. Industrialization and industrial capitalism expanded the cycle of commodity production and turnover and thus ultimately induced social changes. The previously widespread practice of families relying primarily on self-supply has become more and more uncommon, the practice of renting and purchasing has become more and more common, and

all that first increased the importance of having financial income and then made that indispensable among the families of bourgeois society (Somlai 1986). All of these resulted in a significant change, namely that new concepts and categories emerged in relation to the earnings and the distribution of household incomes: the categories of dependents and earners appeared. According to Somlai, this distinction is new since these categories were unknown in traditional households: farm masters were not called as earners and their family members were not called dependents and indeed they were not. We can state that the concept of householder as an earner is the result of the emergence of bourgeois society, which brought a new hierarchy for women and men, with those being at the top who contributed most to the family's livelihood. Among poor workers, these persons were almost exclusively men. We could see that women were placed in a significantly disadvantaged position in terms of income and career by the labour market discrimination of the emerging capitalist industry.

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