

The Distinct Routes of Public Work

The role of Public Work in Womens' Employment-
Trajectories in Rural Hungary

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Abstract

This thesis examines the roles public work played in the employment-trajectories of the former female participants. Throughout analyzing the biographical interviews which I have conducted in a Hungarian village, in Somogy-county, I reveal the functions of public work in womens' lives in the context of their trajectories which led into the local public work program and their distinct ways of re-entering the labour market.

I present the importance of labour market discrimination (in this case, age and gender, including the so-called “motherhood penalty”), and the tension between productive and reproductive work which had crucial roles in getting employed in the local public work program for women. I argue that while these structural conditions which determined the trajectories of former participants into the program were relatively similar, the role public work played in their lives were diverse based on the resources women could mobilize in order to rejoin the labour market. For women with higher education and more advantageous social relations and who became employed in the program due to their caring responsibilities which were hard to reconcile with wage-work, public work was rather a safety net by providing informal help such as being a flexible workplace which contributed to fulfill care work until they could find jobs in the labour market which they were satisfied with. However, for lower-educated, elderly people, with less advantageous social relations, public work could contribute to the maintenance of precarious employment or it could be a means of downward mobility.

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Introduction

Public employment programs have a long history in Hungary, which have been a constantly present as an employment-policy tool after the transition (Gerő and Vigvári, 2019). The widespread application of the distinct public employment programs have been started in 2009 when social assistance of long-term unemployed was bound to public work, paying statutory minimum wage to participants (Szikra, 2014: 493; Szőke, 2015). Furthermore, public employment became the most important employment-policy program after 2010 (Gerő and Vigvári, 2019). Since 2011, the integrated system of public employment has been implemented, aimed at the unionization of the previous, crumbled systems of public work (Bördös, 2015). Since then, Public Work Programs (PWP) provide public employment relationship instead of employment relationship, which means that certain elements of public employment have been regulated separately within the Labour Code to general employment. Therefore, public workers are not entitled to minimum wage, only to a lower amount of money for example.¹ The newly established, integrated PWP gain particular importance in employment-policy after 2012, when its volume started to increase significantly (Gerő and Vigvári, 2019). From the 2000s onwards (Szőke, 2015), hundreds of thousands of jobless people were employed in PWP in Hungary. As Keller, Kovács, Rácz, Swain and Váradi argued, PWP are workfare schemes which became “*dominant policy tools aimed at eliminating the economic and social consequences of low durable absorption capacities of labour markets* (Keller et al., 2016: 6)” by providing

¹ Since PWP provide public employment relationship instead of employment relationships, public workers are not entitled to statutory minimum wage. Furthermore, the wage of public employment has not been following the rate of inflation. The proportion of public employment wage has been decreasing constantly compared to the minimum wage as well. Thus, in 2011, the net wage of public workers was 47025 HUF, which was the 77,6% of the statutory minimum wage. This wage has increased to 54217HUF by 2019, however, it remained only 50,7% of the minimum wage by this year (BM – Közfoglalkoztatási Portál, 2019).

employment opportunities “*organised by local states, and sponsored by the central state within which virtually jobless people were addressed* (Keller et al., 2016: 6)”. Thus, public work is a tool of reducing unemployment, mainly, long-term unemployment (Szőke, 2015), and it is appointed to facilitate the (re)integration of the participants to the labour market.

Particularly after the creation of the integrated system of PWP in Hungary, this form of workfare attracted widespread debate both in public life and within the academic community. Among others, it has been criticized based on its “lock-in-effect” the failure of public work in the integration the long-term unemployed into the labour market, keeping the target-group of these programs within the bounds of poverty (Szőke, 2015; Koltai, 2018). The stigmatizing aspect of public work has also been discussed by several authors, that it makes participants dependent on local, hierarchical social relations² (Szőke, 2015; Kovai, 2016; Rorke, 2019). In general, public workers have to work within hard conditions. Public work mainly means physical work, for example the cleaning and repair of public spaces within settlements, even during winters.

It were these critiques which formed my ideas about public employment before my research about employment-trajectories of female former public workers, which I have conducted in a village of 560 inhabitants, in Somogy-county. Perhaps this is why I was surprised when during our conversation with Dóra, who at the time of our interview, worked at a state institution, trained in different professions, and had several other working experiences regarding public work as a really positive experience, and she said it was the PWP where she got to know that there are workplaces where people did not have to go with “*stomach scramps*”. Dóra was not the only former participant of the local public work program in the village, who felt about it positively. In contrast, for others, such as for Linda who has two university degrees, public work meant the “*edge of undermining self-respect*”. What these two examples point out

² Mainly, the authorities of the mayors of settlements.

is that public work can mean highly different things for different people and it can have distinct functions in someone's life. Unlike in other Hungarian settlements in more disadvantaged regions of Hungary economically, where public work still stayed a central mean of subsistence after the enhanced labour-demand, and –shortage, after 2015 (Molnár and Lakner, 2019), in this village which is close to an economic center, the volume of the public work program decreased by 2019 when I conducted my research, and all of the women who I interviewed have found jobs on the labour market, except the few of them who became pensioners. For this reason, the analysis of life-trajectory interviews which I have conducted in the village with former female participants made me possible to examine the distinct roles of public work in womens' lives in the context of their employment trajectories before and after their participation in the public work program as well.

This research is aimed to reveal the roles public work played in the employment-trajectories of former public workers. I will present the structural factors which affected the involvement of former participants in the public work program, and also, how public work itself defined peoples' employment-trajectories. In the following, I will discuss, the structural conditions on the global (nation-wide) labour market, on the local (settlement-level) labour market and within the households (such as the division of reproductive work) which affected the trajectories of the former participants into the program, their experiences of public work and their pathways leading back into the labour market. This includes the examination of the strategies of former public workers in the context of structural changes, I will investigate the ways people cope with social change (Mrozowicki, 2011: 68). To examine these aspects, I formulated the following research questions:

Which were the most important structural factors that affected former participants to become employed in the public work program?

What public work meant for women while they were employed there? How did they experience public work? What role public work played in the lives of women while they were employed in there? What were the structural conditions which affected the function of public work in womens' lives and how are these connected to the experience of public employment?

How did former public workers get out of the program? What strategies they used in order to get back to the labour market? What resources women mobilized while they were seeking employment? How the mobilization of these resources affected, to what extent women were able to find employment which they were satisfied with? What role public work played in employment-trajectories of former participants in terms of social mobility?

I argue that the main structural conditions which determined the trajectories of former participants into the program were relatively similar, - labour market discrimination (age and gender), and the tension between productive and reproductive work can be named as these conditions - the role public work played in their trajectories was distinct based on the resources women could mobilize in order to rejoin the labour market. For women with higher education and more advantageous social relations, and who became employed in the program due to their caring responsibilities which were hard to reconcile with wage-work, public work was rather a safety net by providing informal help such as being a flexible workplace which helped to fulfill caring responsibilities until they could find jobs in the labour market which they were satisfied with. However, for lower-educated, elderly people, with less advantageous social relations, public work could contribute to the maintenance of precarious employment or it could be a means of downward mobility. Thus, the trajectories of the former participants shows that public work reproduces and deepens social inequalities in a sense that it can be rather a safety-net for people with more resources who can achieve at least their previous social status after public

employment. However, in the trajectories of women with less resources public work contributes to lower-status positions than their previous employment or to a series of precarious forms of employment.

In light of the above, I build on MacLeavy's concept of neoliberal welfare policy (2010). As MacLeavy argues, instead of functioning as a clear safety net, in neoliberalism, welfare policy shifts into workfare, which serves as a "trampoline" aimed to drive people from benefits into labour market, and it facilitates the flexible labour market and precarious employment by *"ensuring a minimum level of income to those switching between welfare and work in line with fluctuations in the economy and changing personal circumstances"* (MacLeavy, 2010: 140). Workfare underpins the flexible labour market in neoliberal economy. However, compared to MacLeavy, I claim that in the context of the village, public work as a form of workfare could function both as a safety net and a "trampoline" for former public workers (MacLeavy, 2010), and the emphasis between these two was different among women based on the resources they could mobilize on the labour market.

To theorize the resources women mobilized, I build on Sen's well-known capabilities approach to analyze the distinct "capability sets" of people, thus one's freedom to achieve well-being (Sen, 1992:53). Furthermore, in my analysis, I largely build on Hobson's, Fahlén's and Takács's research who based on Sen's capabilities approach, conceptualized distinct forms of resources, to examine the agencies of women to achieve work-life balance (Hobson et. al, 2011).

As it is indicated above, this research also engages with the literature which examine different aspects of the enhancing precarity on the global labour market in the era of neoliberal capitalism (Mollona, 2005; Smith et. al., 2008; Standing, 2011; Breman and van der Linden, 2014). According to these authors, restructuring of global capitalism after the 1970s resulted in growing insecurity and flexibility on the labour market, transferring risks onto workers

endangering social reproduction (Smith et. al., 2008; Standing, 2011; Breman and van der Linden, 2014). These changes also disrupted the earlier dichotomy between the working people and the poor since insecurity, low wages and the disappearance of social transfers produced the „working poor”, people whose livelihood is not ensured even by doing different types of formal and informal work (Smith et. al., 2008). Thus, by precarious employment, I mean jobs with low wages, cruel working conditions and short-term contracts which result in the insecurity of the subsistence of the employees (Ehrenreich, 2011).

To theorize structural factors which affect womens' employment in the public work program, as I have also mentioned, I show the importance of labour market discrimination and the tension between productive and reproductive work in today's Hungary which had crucial importance for women getting involved in the local public work program. Therefore, this thesis aimed to contribute to the theoretical tradition which use the terms social reproduction and reproductive work to conceptualize the process through which capitalist production appropriates and transforms the reproduction of life to its own function (Csányi et. al., 2018: 6). Reproductive work means the activity which is necessary for the reproduction of life, workforce and nature within the structure of capitalism (Csányi et. al., 2018). In order to be able to provide a precise analysis, I separate and highlight one part of reproductive work, namely, care work which is the most important aspect of reproductive work for my perspective. My empirical findings provide particularly strong evidence for the argument that with little or no institutional support to care work in micro-regions of small settlements, for mothers with young children, public employment can remain the only realistic employment opportunity in reconciling wage-work with caring responsibilities. Therefore, in rural areas public work can function as a crisis-management tool for the deficit of means of subsistence and care. The reason of this is the locality of public work, regular working hours and the potential tolerance and flexibility of local authorities towards individual needs such as the responsibilities of care,

argued by other authors as well (Koltai, 2018; Fekete, 2019), which I conceptualize as the informal aspect of public work. This research also intervenes with the literature which discusses the importance of informality in the current era of neoliberal capitalism, thus the burden of social reproduction is increasingly pushed into the informal sphere of local communities and households (Fraser, 2016; Csányi et. al., 2018; Csányi, 2019).

This thesis contributes to the literature of public work in Hungary by analyzing the role of public employment with respect to employment trajectories of former public workers. I will do this as follows:

At first, in the *Literature Review*, I will present how this research builds on the already-existing literature on the Hungarian PWP.

In the *Methodology* part of my thesis, I will discuss what is the methodology of my research, how it is designed. I will also summarize how I gain access to the field and I will discuss my positionality, and the limitations of the method of this research.

In *Chapter 1 - The Structure of the local Labour Market*, I will present the structural and economic situation which contextualize the employment history of my interviewees. I will summarize the changes of the broader Hungarian economic context and its changes since 2011. I will describe the site of my research, the village in terms of location, demography and infrastructure and I will present the main characteristics of the local labour market.³ Finally, I will discuss the characteristic of public work in the village and its participants.

In *Chapter 2 - The Pathways Towards Public Work*, I will present the main factors which structured the involvement of former participants in the public work program, looking at aspects of discrimination of women and the elderly on the labour market, and the difficulties of mothers in reconciling wage work with care work.

³ I base my description of the local labour market mainly on the interviews which I have conducted with the employers in the village, the family counselor and the mayor, and I will include the experiences of the former public workers.

Chapter 3 - The Stage of Public Work in Womens' Lives is on the three different aspects of being employed in the public work program which defined how women experienced public work, thus, I will present the importance of strategic decisions, the role of compulsion in engaging in public work, and the importance of informality in relation to inclusive characteristics of public work as a workplace.

Finally, *Chapter 4 - The Distinct Ways out of the Public Work Program* is about how former participants found employment on the labour market and what resources they mobilized to get these jobs. Furthermore, I will analyze, what role public work played in their trajectories of employment regarding social mobility.

Then, in the *Conclusion*, I summarize the main arguments of my thesis.

Literature Review

Public work can be considered as a well-researched form of employment-policy in Hungary. Substantial work has been carried out on the effect and applications of PWP in certain local social-economic contexts (Váradi, 2005; Váradi, 2010; Váradi, 2013; Feischmidt, 2013; Vidra and Vidra, 2015; Keller et. al, 2016; Gerő and Vigvári, 2019), and how public-work is mediated with other strategies of livelihood (Váradi, 2005; Feischmidt, 2013). For example, in the previous years there have been several researches regarding the issue of the short and long-term effects of PWP on the chances of its participants in finding jobs on the labour market (Vidra and Vidra, 2015; Keller et. al. 2016; Koltai et. al., 2018). However, most of these researches were conducted in economically disadvantaged rural areas, and draw the conclusion that in contrast with the official governmental aim, PWP does not facilitate the integration of its participants into the labour market, which was mainly conceptualized as the “lock-in-effect” of public work. In part, the reason of this is that the majority of the qualitative analysis on the possibilities of re-entering the labour market have been conducted before the number of the participants of the PWP have started to decrease. As we could see, due to the enhancing labour demand and the close proximity of an economic center, almost all of the public workers in the village have been (re)integrated into the labour market in the past few years. This is connected to the fact that the village is placed close to an urban center Kaposvár (Szirmai, 2015; Nagy et. al. 2015). Therefore, this research also intervenes with the literature of Marxist geography which looked at the PWP in Hungary from the perspective of uneven development in relation to capital accumulation (Czirfusz, 2015; Czirfusz, 2018). Hence, Czirfusz has examined the role of public work in reproducing spatial inequalities. He argued that unlike in areas which are directly integrated into the global economy by foreign direct investment, peripheral regions are integrated into capitalism throughout public employment, since this is one of the most important

employment opportunities in the economically disadvantaged regions. He also points out the uneven chances of reintegration of public workers to the labour market based on the level of economic development of distinct settlements in Hungary (Czirfusz, 2018). My thesis contributes to the literature of public work by examining the role of public employment in the economic context of a settlement which is relatively integrated in the global chain of capital due to its proximity to the city. Furthermore, my work is connected to the above-mentioned literature throughout examining the individual life courses in relation to economic changes.

This latter aspect has further importance, since the decrease of the number of participants in the PWP in relation to the emerging labour shortage in Hungary has been a widely-debated topic in public life (Molnár and Lakner, 2019). Furthermore, a recent highly comprehensive research also examined the main reasons of being employed in the public work program after the economic boom (Koltai, 2018). However, there is an absence of qualitative work on the individual mechanisms and strategies of re-entering the labour market in the context of the enhanced labour demand in the country.

This thesis also contributes to the gendered analysis of public work, which is a less investigated aspect of public employment, especially the role of public work in mother's lives. My research builds mainly on this aspect of public employment. One of these is the above-mentioned research which was led by Koltai, and which emphasized that mothers largely stay employed in public work due to its "inclusive" characteristic as a workplace. Public employment provides more flexibility and tolerance towards caring responsibilities of mothers than other workplaces on the labour market (2018). In her CEU MA thesis in 2019, Fekete had a similar argument. She claimed that women chose to be employed in public work since it provides relative flexibility and predictable working hours, compared to the rigid work arrangements and long working hours on the labour market, therefore, it allows women to combine domestic and caring responsibilities with paid work. Fekete draws the conclusion that

women use public employment strategically to achieve work-life balance. My findings correspond with Fekete's in a sense that my interviews with the former public workers also showed that this work provides some advantages in reconciling wage-work with care. However, compared to Fekete, I regard public work less as tool of achieving work-life balance (Fekete, 2019), since this kind of equilibrium is difficult to access within the limits of public employment which does not provide sufficient wage for livelihood, rather a tool of managing the serious deficit of subsistence of care within critical individual life-situations.

In sum, the topic of my research has relevance since in Hungary, while the application of PWP within the distinct local contexts and the experiences of employment of people in these programs – especially, in settlements which are relatively disadvantaged economically - are well-researched issues, less research has been conducted on how public work is gendered. Furthermore, there is an absence of qualitative work on the distinct life trajectories of people leading into PWP, and particularly on how people could rejoin the labour market after public work.

Methodology

i. Research Design and Method

I conducted my research in the village between August and September 2019. During this time, I did fourteen semi-structured interviews, thirteen in the village and one in Kaposvár. My interviewees were former public workers, local employers (in Kaposvár and in the village) and state employees. Ten of my interviews are biographical, and are conducted with women who participated in the local public work program.

I also conducted interviews with employers and state employees who had knowledge about the employment situation in the village in the neighbouring area in order to be able to contextualize the trajectories of employment of the former public workers. Therefore, in the village, I also interviewed the mayor, the local family counselor who has been working in this and four other neighbouring villages and one of the leaders of a small manufacturing facility in the village. I conducted an interview with the HR department head of one of the biggest factories in Kaposvár.

The interviews took place mostly at the homes of my interviewees and a few of them in my grandmother's house. I also went to the local municipality and the premises of the employers in order to conduct the interviews.

ii. Access to the Field and Positionality

The fieldwork which I conducted for this thesis provided a very interesting and instructive experience for me as a researcher regarding how to simultaneously be an outsider and belong to the field in a very personal way. The reason for this is that this is the village where my

grandmother has lived since 2000. I visit her every summer, therefore, I could gain insight into the economic situation of the village throughout these years. Being the granddaughter of one of the habitants of the village put me in a peculiar, twofold position in a sense that I belonged to the village through my family, but at the same time, I was also an outsider. The interviewees knew about my relation to the village, since I told all of them that my grandmother lives there. It is also important that I did not know any of my informants before my research, thus I got acquainted with all of them during the fieldwork. However, I am aware that my familial relation might have affected the narratives people decided to share with me.

My grandmother was a great help for me during the fieldwork. She was the entry point to the field and to a few of my informants. She introduced me to some of the interviewees and she helped me to collect the names and phone numbers of the former participants of the local public work program. For finding participants, I used the relationships of my grandmother in the village and to a lesser extent, I also relied on the help of the mayor. I used snowball sampling and asked the former participants whether they knew other people who worked in the program and who they thought would be willing to do an interview.

The most striking impact of my gendered position was that male participants were less willing to give me interviews. Former male participants, I asked said no or backed out.

iii. *Limitations*

Besides my familial relations in the village and my gender, another factor had impact on the information which I could collect. My plan to conduct interviews with a representative of the Labor Office of Kaposvár and to request for official data about the employment in Somogy county was miscarried due to the curfew and the travel restrictions in Hungary which were implemented due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 1 - The Structure of the (Local) Labour Market

4.1 *The Hungarian Economy after 2008: Crisis and Recovery*

Due to the global economic crisis of 2008, the volume of production and consumption has decreased dramatically in Europe. The GDP decrease caused by the crisis has been the largest in Hungary among the members of the Visegrád Group (Cseres-Gergely and Sharle, 2009). These tendencies entailed a serious increase in unemployment as well. The unemployment rate peaked in 2010 when it was 11,9% and it has not decreased under 10,5% for two and a half years. In 2012, due to the second wave of crisis-caused recession, the unemployment rate reached 11,8%. This high rate started to decrease again in parallel to the rise of the volume of public employment in the country in 2013 which became more than four times higher between the beginning and the end of the year 2013⁴ (Bakó, 2014). The economic resession and stagnation endured until 2014 when the Hungarian GDP started to increase which generated new employment positions as well (Bakó and Lakatos, 2015).

The increase of the labour demand on the labour market which entailed the further reduction of unemployment continued after 2014 as well. The conjuncture of the Hungarian labor market which comprehended the contiguous growth of labour demand (Bakó and Lakatos,

⁴ The PWP employed 48 387 participants in january 2013 which increased to 215 638 participants by december 2013 (BM – Közfoglalkoztatási Portál). This also shows that introduction and regulation of the PWP by the state has been driven by the changing absorption capacities of the labour market. The provisions implemented before 2015 showed the intention of the government to handle unemployment by involving registered job-seekers into the PWP regardless of age, education-level, etc. For example, in 2013 unemployment allowance was made dependent on participation in public work (Bördös, 2015). The number of the participants peaked in 2016 at over 22 000 participants (BM – Közfoglalkoztatási Portál). From 2016 onwards, the number of the participants has been declining continuously due to the increasing possibilities of employment. Furthermore, with the appearance of labour shortage in the country, since 2015, there has been an explicit intention of the government for speeding up the integration of the participants of PWP in the labour market, both by eliminating these programs administratively and by other incentives, such as increasing (further) the minimum wage compared to the wage provided by public work (Bakó and Lakatos, 2018: 30). The 2017 restrictions of public employment also show clear motion to facilitate the employment of groups who are supposed to be in demand in the emerging labour shortage in the labour market: young and skilled people.

2018: 27), persisted until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As Bakó and Lakatos noted, the enhanced labour demand partly implied the (re)integration of the „labor reserve” into the labor market including public workers from 2016 onwards (2018). In relation to these changes, in the beginning of the year 2015, labour shortage was a new symptom emerged in the Hungarian discourse, and it became a widely-debated issue by 2016, meaning the discourse about difficulties of enterprises in recruiting labour which appeared in several sectors of the Hungarian economy after 2015 (Tóth and Nyíró, 2017). In my thesis, I will analyze the employment-trajectories of the former public workers in the context of the above-mentioned changes of the Hungarian economy, since these structural tendencies took effect not only on the macro level of society, but on everyday lives of people as well, as I will present in the followings.

4.2 The Village: Location, Demography, Infrastructure

The site of my research is a village of 561 (KSH, 2019), located in Somogy county, on the South-Western part of Hungary. The village is very close to the county seat of Somogy, Kaposvár: it is situated 4 kilometers from the administrative borders of the city. Therefore, the village is in a relatively advantageous position due to its proximity to an economic hub (Váradi, 2005; Nagy et. al., 2015).

Regarding public transportation, the village is only accessible by bus. There are ten routes operating on a workdays, the timetables of which are structured by school hours and regular, eight hour work-shifts. On weekends, only seven routes operate. The number of routes are also reduced during summer. The scarcity of transport was mentioned in most of my interviews as a determining factor of (un)employment. The structure of timetables were particularly important in case of women who worked or attempted to work in shifts. Bus routes do not conform to afternoon – and night shifts. The scarcity of inter-locality public transportation and

the consequent lack of access to urban labour markets are key determinants of ending up employed in the public work program in rural Hungary, especially in the most economically disadvantaged regions (Koltai, 2018; Molnár and Lakner, 2019). The limits of public transport also entail inequality among people who do and do not have cars, since the lack of personal transportation is a more vulnerable position and higher dependence upon the local transport infrastructure. Transport infrastructure has a great impact on regional and social inequalities (Köllő, 2017).

Schools and kindergartens are not available locally. Kids in the village go to school in the next village which is administratively a part of Kaposvár. The lack of local childcare puts parents into difficult situations who can hardly take their kids to the kindergarten or school themselves. Therefore, the local municipality of the village provides a service called “kindergarten bus”, which takes children to the city in the morning and brings them back in the evening. This is a great help for some parents, which I will also discuss later.

All factors considered, the village is characterized by the lack of locally available services and it is dependent on Kaposvár infrastructurally.

4.3 The limits of settlement-level employment opportunities

Local employment opportunities appeared to be highly limited in the village. Possibilities of livelihood in the village fit into a more general pattern in rural Hungary, in a sense that as the mayor mentioned, after the transition, the elimination of the local collective agriculture have reduced local employment opportunities significantly (Ladányi and Szelényi, 2005; Keller et. al, 2016; Kovai, 2016). Nowadays, the mayor could count a handful of people who live only by agriculture in the village.

Regarding workplaces, the village is characterized by the lack of local service sector. The only business left is a pub in the middle of the village and three small manufacturing facilities

for feed and chemicals processing, as well as for feed desiccating. According to the mayor, 30% of the workforce employed by these manufactures is made up by local residents, which means unskilled jobs for around 15 members of the village. Thus, the absorption capacity of settlement-level labour market is very limited and local employment opportunities are marginal (Váradi, 2005). It is no exaggeration to state that the residents of the village are almost completely dependent on of Kaposvár (see Nagy et. al., 2015). Employment on the local labour market is simply not a realistic option for the former female public workers, as I will discuss in the following section.

4.4 Public work in the village

Since in Hungary, importance and application of the PWP is uneven geographically, based on spatial inequalities (Czirfusz, 2018), due to the closeness of the city, public work in the village has never had such high significance as in the more disadvantaged parts of rural Hungary. As the family counselor of the village noted, the proximity of Kaposvár puts the village into a relatively good position in terms of employment opportunities, which means great advantage for the habitants of the village compared to other villages in the area. Therefore, unemployment and the volume of the public work program has never been as high as in other villages a few kilometers further to the city. The number of places in the program changed each year since 2013⁵, and it peaked in 2016, at 17 public workers in the village. The number of public workers started to decrease significantly each year after 2016, in parallel to the emergence of labor shortage in the country and the restriction of the participation in the program. However, according to the mayor, the number of the places each year, which is specified by the Department of Interior was insufficient. Since in those years, unemployment

⁵ Unfortunately, there is no data publicly available about the period before 2011.

benefit was dependent on participating in the program, the village could not employ participants for the maximum period of one year rather, they switched at halftime to provide work for everybody in need. On the other hand, the mayor said that in 2019, the opposite happened. The 3 places in the program turned to be more than the applicants. Collectedly, the public work program in the village was characterized to provide social assistance for everybody in need, rather than achieving local development by building on efficient organization of labour. These characteristics of public work in the village correspond with Gerő's and Vigvári's concept of the "social model" of public work (2019). The authors distinguished between models of the local application of PWP, described the "social model", as a form of application of PWP, where public work is regarded as a substitute of social assistance, therefore, the main purpose is to provide employment for as many people in need, as possible, unlike in rural areas where public work becomes as a tool of settlement-level economic development. In the case of the social model, the nature of the work in the program is also centered around tasks which do not require high level effectiveness and organization, the main responsibility of these workers are the maintenance of public places and infrastructure (Koltai, 2018; Gerő and Vigvári, 2019: 21). The narratives of the former participants and the mayor reflected this idea of public work as a "social model" in the village - both in terms of the employment of the participants and -, regarding their tasks. The intention to involve everybody in the program in need was striking during my interview with the mayor, and the interviewees also strengthened this image. It also defined public work in the village and what role it played in the participants' lives.

Regarding the nature of the work, participants of the local public work program worked in public places and they were in charge of maintenance, repair, reconditioning of public places and infrastructure. They did tasks like felling trees, building and painting fences, cleaning streets, etc.

According to the mayor when the program started in the village, most of the public workers were labour force who had difficulties in (re)joining the labour market. For example, single mothers who worked in the program were in a particularly hard position to find employment. In general, more women than men have been working in the local program. With the enhancement of labour demand and the reduction of the number of public workers in the past few years, the characteristic of the labour force in the program has also changed. Based on my interview with the family counselor, the few people who are still working in the program are not able to establish themselves in the labour market due to health reasons (Koltai, 2018). The women who I conducted interviews with were employed in the local public work program between 2011 and 2019. In the following I will present, what were the main factors which affected who were employed in the program, (Chapter 2), what role the application of the public work program in this specific context played in women's lives (Chapter 3), and how women got out of the public work program (Chapter 4).

Chapter 2 - Pathways Towards Public work: The Effects of Economic Recession, Discrimination and the Gendered Labour Market

In order to understand what public work has meant in the employment-trajectories of participants, first, I will present the various circumstances which led my informants towards being employed in the program. As I have mentioned above, Hungarian PWP fit into the neoliberal scheme of activation policies (Szikra, 2014; Szikra, 2018; MacLeavy, 2010), since it is aimed at the reintegration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market (Cseres-Gergely, 2015). As Gerő and Vigvári argues, globally, the function of public work schemes can be twofold. In the centres of growth, the importance of these programs are bound to economic cycles and PWPs are aimed at the reduction of the harms caused by recessions. At the same time, on the global periphery and semi-periphery, public work schemes also have a more permanent form, which is not strictly connected to economic recession. It serves as a tool for managing stable, long-term social problems. In the Hungarian context, both of these patterns are present but their presence is uneven geographically (Gerő and Vigvári, 2019). In general, the Programs are mainly targeting the unskilled labour force and are built on the elimination of social consequences of poverty and long-term unemployment in the rural context (Gerő and Vigvári, 2019; Keller et. al., 2016). In the village, both of the above-mentioned aspects of public work have been present. However, due to the proximity of an economic centre, the public work program has been functioning mainly as a temporary solution (longer or shorter) for the low-absorption capacity of the labour market during economic recession (Gerő and Vigvári, 2019; Keller et. al., 2016). This means most of my informants were skilled workforce, and they mainly had stable, long term jobs before public employment which they lost due to the complex sequences of downsizings during economic shocks and certain life situations. They mainly

worked in the program temporarily until they found employment again on the labour market. In this chapter, I will discuss the trajectories of employment which characterized the lives of the former public workers before public work, the distinct life-, and labour market, -situations which structured these gendered trajectories towards public work. As I will show, there are key factors structuring women's pathways towards public work, and they are part of the broader landscape that connects the Hungarian labour market and vulnerabilities one can encounter in her personal life.

The low absorption capacity of the labour market is one of the most important and most evident factors which affected the employment opportunities of my informants during the years, when they got in the public work program. Most importantly, followed by the 2008 economic crisis, the effects of the economic recession was strident in the life trajectories the interviewees and manifested in downsizings and the lack of labour market opportunities. As Nagy, G rig and Kir ly noted, in the beginning of the crisis, the employment of women was relatively defended due to the gendered segregation of the labour market, however, during the recession and restrictions followed by the crisis, they lost their relatively protected position (2017: 18), which meant that jobs typically occupied by women were not affected by the economic downturn immediately. However, this situation turned during the ongoing recession (Nagy et. al., 2017). The employment trajectories of the interviewees fit into this pattern as most of them became employed in the public work program between 2011 and 2013. As one of my informants, Mari said *“when I was a public worker, there were a lot of public workers. So I was not the only one, but somehow the situation was like nobody had a job”*. The recession affected the trajectories of some of my informants throughout the downsizings following the crisis and the subsequent stagnation, as it led to a lack of employment opportunities. In sum, during the years when they worked in the public work program, the former participants characterized the labour market by low absorption capacity, especially in terms of skilled jobs (KSH, 2010), enhanced competition,

high expectations of the employers and low bargaining power of the workers. During these years, besides the general lack of employment opportunities, former public workers' employment trajectories were mainly structured by factors like age and gender discrimination.

In the following section, I will introduce the factors which structured the involvement of former participants into the public work program besides the role of economic recession and the low absorption capacities of the labour market. I will discuss the aspects of discrimination of women and the elderly in the labour market (Lovász and Simnovits, 2018), and the difficulties of mothers in reconciling wage work with care work.

5.1 Discrimination on the Labour Market

Besides the lack of employment opportunities during the years when my informants started to work in the program, several former public workers mentioned that their job-seeking processes were made more difficult due to discrimination based on their age and gender. It appeared to me during the interviews that some women became employed in the public work program since employers selected among labour force with discriminating practices during recruitment- and downsizing processes.

The best example for this is Nóra's case, who has been working in one of the biggest factories of Kaposvár for 35 years as a quality inspector, and later, as a purveyor. She has lost her job during layoffs in 2009.

Nóra: After that (she was fired), they hired someone instead of me. A few months later. So it was not that it (the factory) did not work well, but they fired the old ones. They said, they did not need old people, they rejuvenated.

Dorina: And they admitted it?

Nóra: They said it to some people.

As this quote shows, age discrimination played a crucial role in Nóra's employment trajectory. When she lost her job at age 53, she could not find any stable employment anymore. After being on unemployment benefit for one year, she engaged in to do seasonal office work in one of the other big factories in the city. Nóra's case shows that the difficulty finding a job during the years of recession in the country could be deepened by discriminating practices of the employers in terms of hiring and firing. All of my informants above or around 50 mentioned that they were put into a disadvantaged position on the labour market by employers due to age, which intervenes with the findings with the - mainly quantitative - researches arguing the importance of age in being employed in public employment (Cseres-Gergely, 2015).

Linda's trajectory was also structured by discrimination, but in a different sense. Linda had a university degree in agronomy and another one in agronomy-teaching. She had stable jobs until she had children, however, she could not find employment in her profession where working times are often hardly compatible with caring responsibilities. She started to work in the public work program after her job was terminated in another big factory of Kaposvár during layoffs in 2011. She also felt that she was chosen to be fired because of her gender.

I worked in x factory as a transport inspector. We both worked in the same position with my husband. There were downsizings and I said to my husband, you will see that I will be the one fired, since it is always the woman who is fired. And it was so. (...) So I become a public worker.

Linda's narrative reflects on the experience of discrimination against women on the labour market, which made Linda feel that generally, she was in a more vulnerable position than her male colleagues. Her experiences confirmed this notion. Besides the circumstances of her termination which lead her to the public work program, Linda also talked about discrimination on the labour market against women with young children several times.

Linda: I do my job, so I take jobs which I am able to do. That is why I am always surprised on job interviews, that as the number of my children was growing, the situation was getting worse and worse.

Dorina: You mean while seeking employment?

Linda: The first thing they do is that they ask about this. It is an illusion that they cannot ask. It is the very first question to a women, that whether she has (children) or when she wants to have, and when it turns out that there is 3 of them... “Oh my God there are 3 children? Then you will be always at home!” Then I don’t understand. That was not my intention when I applied. I would have stayed at home then.

Linda’s words point at the unpleasantness of her biased evaluation by employers due to her presumed caring responsibilities as a mother. Linda’s story corresponded with other former participant mothers about their experiences of being disadvantaged on the labour market, especially in terms of recruitment. It also intervenes with the literature on the crucial importance of the “motherhood penalty” in mothers’ life trajectories, and it shows that motherhood can be a clear barrier in labour market participation (Fekete, 2019; Glass and Fodor, 2011; Koplányi, 2018). Viola’s narrative who is also a mother of three children strengthens this. She pointed at the discrimination of mothers is the main reason which inhibited her to find other employment instead of public work for four years. These contradictions caused frustration, which was strident in her narrative while she was talking about job-seeking.

It has happened that I started to fight with the administrator and I yelled at her, I cursed, that I can not believe that because I am a mother, I have children, nobody wants to hire me. It did not matter that I wanted to work.

Viola’s story at the Labour Office of Kaposvár is very symbolic. The desperation and frustration caused by discrimination due to motherhood has manifested in anger against a worker of a public institution, a representative of the state. Furthermore, Viola’s case shows that “motherhood penalty” is not only a source of disadvantage on the labour market which makes job-seeking harder and longer, but it can contribute to dropping out of the labour market

on the long-term as other authors also noted (Gregor, 2013), and staying employed in the public work program (Fekete, 2019).

The frustration of the interviewees due to their biased evaluation on the labour market was present in most of my interviews, whether it was embodied in direct anger or in compassion. In the years of downsizings, discriminatory practices of the employers could serve as a base of the termination of someone's employment. When the labour market was characterized by the lack of employment opportunities, certain characteristics like age, gender and motherhood status made it harder to (re)enter the labour market. Therefore, age discrimination and "motherhood penalty" served as a barrier of labour market participation for several interviewees and led them towards more precarious forms of employment as in the public work program.

5.2 The Difficulties in Reconciling Wage-Work with Care-Work

Probably the most important factor which contributed in the employment trajectories of the interviewees towards public work was the difficulty of women in reconciling wage work with care work within the limits of the Hungarian neoliberal gender regime (Fekete, 2019; Gregor and Kováts, 2019). I base my argument on Gregor and Kováts, who building on Fraser's concept of „crisis of care”, which is the actual form of the inherent contradiction of social reproduction and capitalist accumulation, is manifested in the lack of preconditions of care in the current organization of the Hungarian labor market and state-market-family relations. In the following, I will show that the little or no support to care work in micro-regions of small settlements in today's Hungary with the lack of accessible social services (Gregor and Kováts, 2019), combined with the low absorption capacity of the labour market affected the employment trajectories of most of the former public workers.

In neoliberal gender regimes, where the burdens of social reproduction are increasingly pushed into the private sphere, women are more and more expected to participate in the productive sphere, however, social reproduction remains their distinguished role in the households (Fraser, 2016; Gregor and Kováts, 2019: 96). Therefore, contributing to the livelihood of the households with productive work and bareing most of the responsibilities of reproductive work, women have a key role in the current stage of capitalism (Fraser, 2016; Gregor and Kováts, 2019: 96). While analyzing the narratives of former participants, I will show that the burdens of care, housework, and wage-earning responsibilities which the model of two-earner households imposed on these women has created contradictions in their everyday lives which sometimes proved to be hardly sustainable, especially if households have lack of material and human resources (Fraser, 2016; Gregor and Kováts, 2019). In some cases, participating in the public work program could be regarded as a tool for resolving this contradiction. Most of the women who had small children when they worked as public workers in the village chose public work strategically as a source of living, because the labour market did not provide other realistic possibilities of employment where they could have reconciled their caring responsibilities with wage work (see also Fekete, 2019). In other cases, public work “came along” in womens’ lives when as a result of a change in their life-situations, they became the only wage-earner in their families, or their workplace has been restructured, and the working hours of their jobs turned out to be burdens in reconciliating productive work with caring responsibilities, so they had to quit these jobs. The case of former public worker women in the village also strengthens Gregor’s and Kováts’s argument that in the Hungarian context, in lack of state-provided services which would reduce the care-deficit, the tension between productive work and care work is deeper in the lives of women, who have less financial and social resources to solve this contradiction, and who have to work in shifts (Gregor and Kováts, 2018; Gregor and Kováts, 2019). In general, in the interviews with mothers who had small children,

the issue - which Acker theorized as the gendered work organizations - was present (Acker, 1990; see also Fekete, 2019). As Acker notes, in the organizational logic of capitalism, the ideal worker does not have caring responsibilities (Acker, 1990). The gendered structure of working organizations was mainly manifested in frustration with relation to inflexible working hours and the inhumanity of workplaces which are blind to the duties of care. The above-mentioned tensions were particularly harsh in the lives of women who had become single parents and have to bare the responsibilities of reproductive work and almost all the wage-earning responsibilities within the households (see also Gregor and Kováts, 2018; Gregor and Kováts, 2019).

Viola, who was a single mother with three children at the time did public work. She had to do public work after her life-situation changed and she was not able anymore, to reconcile caring responsibilities with the working hours of double shifts. Viola had a stable job at the university in Kaposvár as a receptionist. While working there, she was also getting a university degree in family-and child protection, however, she has never worked in her profession, since as she said, employment opportunities in this sphere are very limited. However, she had to give up this job:

I quit my job in 2011, since we got divorced with my partner. He went to Sopron, and I could not take my little boy anywhere who was 3 years old at that time, so I could not work in 12 hour day and night shifts anymore, from 6 am to 6 pm and 6 pm to 6 am. So I quit my job at the university, and after that, I did public work.

Thus, caring responsibilities became a barrier for Viola in labour market participation after her life situation changed and she became the only wage-earner in the household and also the only adult in charge for reproductive work. In the labour market, she did not find any realistic option which would have allowed her to provide livelihood for her family and care for her children at the same time. She became unemployed and she had to work in the public work

program for four years. Finding a job with regular working hours became one of the highest priorities in job seeking.

In any case, [looking for] something which allowed me to look after my children so something between 8 AM to 4 PM. So I think that today's world is not a child-friendly world and workplaces are really not child-friendly workplaces. My priority was to spend enough time with my children.

This issue of difficulties of single mothers on the labour market due to irregular working hours came up in my interview with Dalma as well. Dalma was a career entrant at the time when she got employed in the public work program in 2013. After she finished her studies as a pastry-cook, she attempted to work in a bakery, however, she could not find a job in her profession due to her lack of working experience. For Dalma, the impossibility to find a skilled job at the time of reduced labour market opportunities could be only solved by engaging in more precarious work, starting with seasonal job and continuing with public work. Public work also remained the only option for her around 2017, after her child was borne and she got divorced from her husband, she could not solve the problem of providing livelihood and fulfilling her duties as a mother otherwise. She was looking for a job locally in those years.

Yeah, and the problem is that in [the village], there is nothing besides public work, and if in Kaposvár you say you have children and you work from 8 hours to 4, they say, good bye. You work from 6 AM -2 PM or 2 PM -10 pm. But how can I solve this? My parents are working. It is very hard this way. That's how public work came along.

Dalma's story also shows the impossibility to combine working in double shifts and doing almost all the care work for single mothers, since these working hours are not compatible with the schedules of nursery, kindergartens and schools. Because of childcare facility schedules, Dalma, like other mothers, considered to work in the village, in the local manufacturing facilities when her child was at a young age. The locality of these jobs could have made the

reconciliation of wage-work and care easier. Since these facilities only provide unskilled jobs, this option was mainly mentioned by lower-educated women. However, the lack of available workplaces foiled these preferences (see also Váradi, 2005). Settlement-level employment could only serve as second-jobs for women. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they did or used to do cleaning work in these facilities to gain supplementary income. Therefore, due to these reasons, public work served as a substitute of the highly limited local labour market. This case also shows that the conflict between wage work and care is deepened in the rural context by the geographical distance between the location of productive work, which is mostly in economic hubs, and the sphere of social reproduction which is in the village (Váradi, 2005). As I have discussed above, without the privilege of having a car, commuting between the two is limited. Therefore, solving the contradiction for mothers between care and inflexible working hours was made even harder in the village by the schedule of public transportation. Since public work was available locally, women could choose to dedicate the time they would have spent on commuting for reproductive work (see also Váradi, 2005 and Fekete, 2019). As one of the mothers, Anna noted:

Well, if somebody has a child like me, she was obliged to stay here because going to work in the city in two shifts, with a little child when he just started to go to the kindergarten is not too good. So as we were figuring things out with my former partner, public work was good for me. So it was not so bad this way.

Thus, due to inflexible working hours, especially in shiftwork, and the difficulties of commuting in the Hungarian rural context, public work remained the only realistic option for a lot of mothers. In Anna's narrative, public work is even perceived to be a "good" option in relation to other possibilities, just like in Mari's. Both of these women became public workers after maternity leave (GYES), which served as a reentry point on the (formal) labour market (see also Fekete, 2019). For Mari, who has been on maternity leave for 9 years with her 3

children, finding sufficient employment on the labour market was made even more difficult by the fact that her qualifications became obsolete during the time, she was on GYES. Mari was a shorthand typist before she gave birth to her first child, however due to the technological development, there remained no demand on the labour market for her skills. Furthermore, since Mari completed primary education, she could not find any white-collar jobs anymore after the transition.

Well [after GYES], as I said there was no way to find this type of office work, so I was excluded from that, that ten years brought a lot of developments, mobile phones have spread, teletext has vanished, thus after the developments of these ten years, I would have not been accepted to these kind of places. I could have been working in factories, because in Kaposvár there are many factories like the electrical factory, the Videoton, - assembly work. But the truth is, my eyes are not so good, so I could not do assembly work. And then I thought I would be in the village (...) and this would be good temporarily. And it was. It was good until there were no other options.

For Mari, whose skills have been devalued on the labour market after the changes enhanced by technological development, the option instead of public work would have been harder and more precarious jobs than her previous employment. Her situation was hampered further by her deteriorated health. In this context, for Mari, such as for Anna, public work also appeared as a “good” option. Furthermore, it is important to note, that while in several interviews, public work was described as a “good” employment, this work always gets value in relation to the possibilities provided by the labour market (see also Hann, 2016; Kovai, 2016; Koltai, 2018).

Mari’s story - just like Anna’s and Dalma’s - illustrate that public work can function in mothers’ lives as a temporary solution to combine wage-work with care work when their children are small. These cases strengthen the notion that public work serves as a possibility for women being employed after maternity leave legally, instead of low-paid, informal, irregular and even more precarious employment which would be their only other option (see also Fekete,

2019). Public employment fits into the characteristic of the Hungarian gender regime in a sense that lengthy parental leave combined with the discriminatory practices of employers and the rigid structures of working organizations push mothers into underpaid, informal and insecure employment (Fodor and Kispéter, 2014; Gregor and Kováts, 2019: 96). My interviews with these mothers with young children strengthened the argument of Fekete that public work fits into the line of precarious forms of employment, and at the same time, it serves as an alternative to these insecure and underpaid works as a formal, but still precarious job option (2019).

I argued, that after all, the “crisis of care” which, in neoliberal capitalism, is a manifestation of the inherent contradiction between the productive and reproductive sphere arised in the individual level of these women in the necessity for working in the precarious conditions of public work. I emphasize the term “crisis”, because I believe, that most times, capable mothers had to engage in the punitive system of workfare in order to be able fulfill their “duties” as mothers - to be able to raise their children which reveals the deficit in the social assistance of care in Hungary (Gregor and Kováts, 2018; Gregor and Kováts, 2019). As I have presented above, lower-educated women were in the worse positions in this regard because of the blindness of working organizations to caring responsibilities and the hours of double shifts (see also Gregor and Kováts, 2018; Gregor and Kováts, 2019; Fekete, 2019). However, as we could see throughout the examples of single mothers, even among higher-educated women, a critical change in life-situation, such as a divorce which put women into the position of being the only wage-earner and carer at the same time could shatter the delicate balance within women’s life between productive work and care and result in unemployment and the necessity of doing public work. In the following chapter, I will show what public work provided in mothers’ lives is less a tool of creating a balance between wage-work and care-work (Fekete, 2019), since this kind of equilibrium is hardly achievable within the limits of public

employment which does not provide sufficient wage for livelihood, but rather a crisis-management tool for the deficit of the means of subsistence and care.

Chapter 3 - The Stage of Public Work in Womens' Lives: Strategy, Compulsion and the Role of Informality

In this chapter, I will discuss what public work meant for former participants. As I will show, while the work itself was the same for everybody who was employed in the program, the roles what public work played in the course of employment of former public workers were distinct based on the specific life-situations, levels of education, employment histories and material and human resources women had. Below, I will present the distinct experiences of public work, and how women made a living during the program which is a question of crucial importance, as the wage provided by public work is hardly enough for subsistence for families (see also Váradi, 2010).

On one hand, throughout analyzing the different functions that public work served in the lives of former participants, I will present the complex interplay of agency and compulsion in getting involved in the public work program which I grasp by two aspects: the role of strategical decisions and compulsion in getting employed in the program, since the narratives of people were distinct based on these factors. Furthermore, I will discuss the importance of informality within the local public work program and within the employment of the former public workers - as I will present in the following -, informality played an important role in defining what public work meant for its participants in their trajectories of employment, and in most of the cases, there were informal social relations in the local context which could give value to public work in the eyes of these women (see also Kovai, 2016).

The factors of being employed in the public work program which defined the experience, are the importance of strategic decisions (Fekete, 2019), the role of compulsion in engaging in public work, and the importance of informality which is in relation to the inclusive characteristic of public work as a workplace (see also Keller et. al., 2018).

6.1 *Working in the Public Work Program as a Result of Strategy or Compulsion*

While strategic decisions had important roles, especially in mothers' employment in the program who had small children, during the years when my informants got into the program, being employed as public workers mainly could not be regarded as completely strategic decisions. Compulsion played a rather determining role in becoming employed in public work. In addition to providing basic financial needs, the effect of a constraining administrative act of government, starting in 2013, unemployment allowance was made dependent on participation in public employment (Bördös, 2015). I divide the experience of public work by the aspects of strategical decisions and compulsion, since the narratives of people were distinctly based on who felt to have agency in making the decision to work in the program or felt to gain advantages from public work, and who were engaging in public work due compulsion.

As Kovai argued, it is the sense of possible upward mobility from public employment which is the base of not to experience public work as only a disciplining form workfare, bound to the local sphere of constraints (2016). In the narratives of women who were transferred to work as public workers by the Employment Centre in order to keep their status and subsidy as registered unemployed, it was the role of compulsion which was rather dominant. The length of participating in the program affected how it was experienced by women, especially if they kept trying to find other opportunities on the labour market unsuccessfully. While the program could also provide advantages in reconciling wage-work with care-work, they rather emphasized the role of constraint in relation to being employed in the public work program. It can be said that women who did not feel to have agency to decide about their involvement in the program public work was experienced more negatively and the aspects of low wage, hardworking conditions and the stigmatized characteristic of this work dominated. Compared to these women, some of the former participants applied to the program voluntarily, although

financial needs were important in their pathways as well. The reasons behind these decisions were mainly twofold. On the one hand, mothers with young children decided to work in the public work program voluntarily, after ending their maternity leave (see also Fekete, 2011). On the other hand, women in their 50s and older used public work as a “trampoline” between precarious jobs, who had to engage in this form of employment after they lost their previous employment.

In Dalma’s case, after maternity leave, working in the public work program could be clearly regarded as a strategic decision in order to reconcile wage-work with care work, which was not easy for her as a single mother.

Yes. They were really flexible here as well. Because, we went to public work like I took the little kid to the kindergarten bus, since we worked from half past 7 am to 4 pm. And since Anna [with the kindergarten bus] comes back ten minutes before 4 pm, so I was not at the summer school until 4 pm since we always ended work there but I could come home 10 minutes earlier. This was a great help. And in several workplaces, they do not let things like this. And in some places they do not understand if you have a kid and he is sick. I work somewhere for 2-3 months, the kid gets sick and I get fired. They do not care whether you have a kid or not. And I do not know why they cannot understand things like this. This is something which would have to be changed.

Dalma’s example demonstrates that in the deficit in providing sufficient, state-level support in caring responsibilities for single mothers, it is the sphere of the local settlement-level community which can contribute to the reconciliation of wage-work and care (Gregor and Kováts, 2018). For Dalma, to the requisition of the local service of the kindergarten bus which made it possible for her to do wage work besides her caring responsibilities, it was necessary to do be employed in the settlement-level sphere. This also shows that the settlement-level infrastructure and available services firmly structures and limits the options for women in combining productive and reproductive work in the rural context (Koltai, 2018), especially if families are in lack of material resources such as car. Furthermore, due to the help and tolerance

guaranteed by the mayor, which I will discuss below, public work served as a flexible workplace in Dalma's employment trajectory which is not wide-spread otherwise in the Hungarian labour market (Koltai, 2018; Nagy et. al, 2018).

The fact that public work was a local program was also the reason why Anna also chose this job strategically after her child was born. She had several professions, and she worked in a lot of places before public work. She was a waitress, beekeeper and she also worked at a petrol station. However, these kind of jobs were not optimal options after she gave birth to her child. She tried to go back to the labour market after maternity leave, she went back to her previous job at a large-scale kitchen, however, her formal employer wanted to employ her illegally, so it did not worth it anymore for her to commute to the city. After all, Anna started to work flexible hours in one of the local pubs for a really low wage, which is also an interesting example of how women have to involve in precarious, informal and underpaid employment after maternity leave. She became a public worker at the request of the mayor, who asked her to participate and to be a team-leader in the program in 2013.⁶ Anna decided to take the job, because it paid more than her position at the pub, and it enabled her to care about her child. She got out of the program after one year, since she applied to be the janitor of the village. This job provides her the same advantages for her as public work:

It is not that I only do this work as a janitor, because I am here at the village, but also because I like it, but it is really good, and I would not change, I would not go anywhere else, because I am at home by the time my children get home, I am home if he has any problem, I can go and pick him up, so it is very good for me this way.

⁶ This aspect points at the mayor's role in the recruitment process to the public work program. It turned out during the interviews that the mayor had an interest in employing capable people as team leaders in order to be able to coordinate the group of public workers effectively. Actually, this fits into a quite general issue in the application of public work balancing between social aims and efficient working (Keller, et. atl, 2018). As I have already mentioned, in the village, the social model of the program which was implemented which entailed the emphasis on the inclusive aspect of the public work program (Keller et. al., 2018; Gerő-Vigvári, 2019). However, it became clear that the mayor maintained the balance between inclusion and efficiency by involving educated, unemployed people in the program to fill the posts of team-leaders, such as Anna.

Anna even explicitly reflected on that it is her caring responsibility as a mother which structured her decision to work in the village and in the public work program. Reproductive work also determined her employment after public work, even though she liked her job as the janitor.

Besides the function of public work as a sphere of reconciliation of productive and reproductive work for mothers, it could also play a strategic role in the employment trajectory of the elderly. For women over 50, who were terminated from their previous, secure positions and working in the program became a transition state between two precarious positions.

This was also the case for Nóra, after losing her job at the factory where she was working for 35 years, and being employed for one year, decided to do seasonal work in another factory in Kaposvár, where she got a white-collar seasonal job with temporary contract. However, she was only employed for five-month intervals in the factory every year, and she wanted to complete the requirement of 40 years-employment necessary for retirement as soon as possible. As she said, while there was no official guarantee for being recalled to the seasonal job in each year, she counted on being employed periodically in the factory, which she liked so she was looking for a supplementary job besides this seasonal job. Finally, she applied to the local public work program in 2011, when it was implemented. She asked the mayor to employ her, and she always worked there between two seasons in the factory. After the public work program started, she did not even search for other opportunities anymore. As she said, “And after there was public work, I did not care anymore. I was eager to complete the 40 year employment, and that’s all.” However, public work itself created a certain insecurity in Nóra’s employment due to the limited number of places in the program at the time of high unemployment. While Nóra could count on being employed in the factory, she could never be sure, whether there would be a place for her in the public work program or not. For Nóra, public work can be regarded as an insecure employment which served as a strategic tool to supplement another precarious job on

the labour market. It was also a strategic decision for her to await retirement. Working in the program contributed to Nora's effort to complete the forty-year-employment, and partly, served as a "trampoline" between two seasons in the factory, helping her to maintain the precarious safety provided by the seasonal job.

Compared to Nóra who choose public work strategically, for Helga, Linda's mother, it was rather the result of administrative and material constraint that she returned to the public work program from time to time. Helga's trajectory of employment was similar to Nóra's regarding the cases when she worked in the public work program during transition states among distinct precarious forms of employment - while she was awaiting retirement. Helga had long-term stable jobs in the first part of her history of employment. She has been working in a facility of the local socialist cooperative which was sold after the transition, and the employees were fired. Furthermore, in the 90s, she has been working as a newsagent for a long time. However, after her employment was terminated, she could not find any stable positions anymore. She was moving back and forth among countless different jobs, with mostly short term contracts, in precarious conditions.

Helga: [Before public work] *I was a newsagent in a pavilion. After the transition, it became fashionable to sell newspapers in every shop, so nobody went to the pavilion anymore. So it ended this way.*

Dorina: *And after that, did you go to the public work program?*

Helga: (...) *No, after that I could get a job at x factory.*

Dorina: *And what did you do there?*

Helga: *I had to do assembly work. I was there for ... I don't know, a year, then they fired me, then I came to the public work program. Then I went to the ice-cream factory which was in Kaposvár as well. But only during summers. During the fall, I went back to x factory. I went back and forth three times. Finally, I succeed to work there for five years, and if somebody works there for five years, she has to be admitted to work there with permanent contract. When my short-term contract expired, I was fired.*

Dorina: *To not to employ you with permanent contract [by the factory]?*

Helga: *Yes. Because they said, I am too old, I ought to be in the cemetery. They admitted that old people had no place there. And then I really started to go in and out of the public work program, and courses [organized by the Labour Office].*

As Helga's narrative reveals, after she was terminated from stable employment, she did seasonal jobs and unskilled jobs with short-term contracts. She had a role as "labor reserve army" of the factory, and x factory was also interested in keeping her in this position, so they were eager not to hire her permanently. The factory employed her when production was expanded and fired during decreases, similarly to the ice-cream factory where her employment was bound by seasonal characteristics of production. Public work was a "trampoline" for her between precarious jobs where she could "fall back" in case of termination and from where she could return to the labour market repeatedly (MacLeavy, 2010). Her pathways to the public work program were mainly not structured by strategical decisions, rather by the constraints of the labour market and the administrative efforts of the Labour Office to find her stable employment.

In general, being employed in the public work program was distinct based on who felt to have agency to decide about their employment in the program. Participating in the public work program could be described as result of deliberate decisions in certain life-situations. However, in the lack of possible upward mobility from the public work program, and without the agency to achieve well-being temporarily or in the long run, it was rather the experience of compulsion which dominated in relation to public work, regardless whether public work provided informal advantages in reconciling wage-work with care-work or not.

6.2 *Informality and the (Local) State*

In almost all of my interviews public work was criticised. Former public workers mentioned disadvantages of low wages, harsh conditions, physical demands, working on the street in the cold, uncertainty resulted by short-term contracts, etc. However, as I have also indicated above, for the interviewees who had small children at the time of public work was at least antinomic or even a positive experience. Not only because public work is an eight-hour

job and it does not require commuting. It was also the result of the informal contribution of the mayor. By overlooking the regulation of public work such as work time, paid leaves, etc., he made public work more flexible in order to help people reconcile productive work with their caring responsibilities and informal work which granted them livelihood besides the really low salary which is not enough for living. As Viola put it, the wage of public workers “*is not enough for subsistence, but it is too much to die of hunger*”.⁷ The contribution of the mayor in doing these works actually corresponds with the findings with other researches, which reveal that these informal supplementary works, in a lot of cases are supported by local authorities (Váradi, 2010). Women did complementary works such as cutting grass for money, paper delivery in the village and the next village, doing garage sales by selling furniture cleaned out and imported from Germany, giving horse-riding lessons for children, etc. The informal supporting practices of the mayor were evaluated positively by a lot of interviewees and this aspect gave value to this work in several cases. However, corresponding with Kovai’s argument, the advantage of the supporting aspect of the local hierarchies could only become dominant in the narratives of women whose employment trajectory was characterized by upward mobility, reintegration to the labour market after public work (2016). The local, supportive informal hierarchical relations contributed to the inclusive aspect of the public work program. As Keller et. al. argue, on cases of certain social groups who can be characterized by specific life-situations as in the cases of single mothers, it is beneficial to regard public work as an “inclusive workplace”, a form of employment which is tolerant towards situations which the labour market is not. In the village, it were mainly the informal social relations which shaped the local public work program to be an “inclusive workplace” for some (Keller et. al. 2018). This also contributed to the fact that for several women, public work served as a haven from the cruel conditions of the

⁷ Livelihood would not have been possible for former participants at the time of their public employment without second jobs and the involvement of other family resources, such as the wages of their (ex)husbands, their parents etc. Cultivating gardens was also an important form of informal work which contributed to the subsistence of households during these times.

labour market as several authors also revealed (Hann, 2016; Kovai, 2016; Koltai, 2018). As Dóra said, “ (...) *this was my first workplace where I was not insulted as a women, and in any other sense and there were no impossible tasks. The mayor, the notary and the janitor treated us like human beings.*” The inclusive aspect of public work made this positive experience.

In general, throughout the informal help of the mayor, the local state contributed to the mitigation of the contradiction between productive and reproductive work, formal wage-work and informal work. It was the agency of the mayor, and his willingness to overlook the rules implemented by the central state that provided help for the structural problem of care. This aspect highlights the importance of informality in resolving the crisis of care in current, neoliberal capitalism (Fraser, 2016). As several Hungarian authors argued in the past years, in the Hungarian context, where the state places the burdens of social reproduction increasingly on families, informal work is getting a substantial role in providing livelihood, since formal wages are not covering the costs of living (Csányi et. Al, 2018; Csányi, 2019). As Csányi, Gagyí and Kerékgyártó notes, on the semi-periphery, as well as in Eastern Europe, semi-proletarian household has a particular popularity, where formal and informal work are combined in a way that the informal parts of the duties of work go beyond housework and it involves productive tasks as well that provide the material conditions of survival and reproduction (Csányi et. al., 2018: 25). Informal work is necessary for living, and this is especially true in case of public work which pays under the minimum wage. The division of these enhanced informal duties are divided within the household unequally and are placed rather on women (Csányi, 2019). What public work could provide these women, particularly for mothers, and what gave value to this work in their eyes was the help in matching productive work with reproductive work (Fekete, 2019), but it did this by involving informality. First of all, the small, informal contributions of the mayor helped to reconcile worktime of productive work with reproductive work, but for achieving this compromise, women had to engage in

more informal work as public work as productive work did not provide a living (Csányi et. al., 2018). In the end, former public worker women had to work more than they should have worked on the labour market, but this informal work was also more flexible so it could match with their caring responsibilities. This shows that the mitigation of the conflict between reproductive and productive work was pushed to the (local) sphere of informality by the (central) state.

Chapter 4 - The Distinct Ways out of the Public Work Programs

By the time I conducted my research all of my informants got out from the public work program. Nóra and Helga became pensioners. Others found employment on the labour market, most of them by 2016. Actually, public work peaked in 2016 both in the village and in the rest of the country. After this year a significant decrease occurred in the number of the participants. As I have mentioned above, this change was related to the enhanced labour demand, and the emergence of labor shortage in the country which started in 2015, and the restriction of the participation in PWP by the Hungarian state which was aimed at speeding up the integration to the labour market (Bakó and Lakatos, 2018).

The impact of the nation-wide enhanced labour demand was present in several employment-trajectories whether implicitly, or explicitly. Some former participants, especially lower-skilled women, clearly connected to this tendency their ability to find jobs instead of public work. The increase of employment opportunities was present in my interview with of Mari:

Interestingly, in the year when I found employment, everybody found employment, and I think, now, there are only two public workers. Yes. Back then, there were a lot of opportunities, it was possible to go to work everywhere. So then, thank God, everybody found employment. The mayor was also happy about that.

Mari attributed the reduction of the number of public workers in the village to the increased labour demand. She also connected her ability to find a job as a cleaner to this tendency. In her narrative, the situation in the year of 2016 on the labour market was in deep contrast to the time-period when she got employed in the program which she described by difficult circumstances and the lack of employment opportunities.

Whatever were the reasons of getting employed in the public work program, public workers were able to find jobs again, when labour came to be in short supply. However, I found, that the re-entrance of the labour market was different for women, based on to what extent they were able to find employment positions that they were satisfied with. The level of satisfaction with employment after public work depended on the different resources women were able to mobilize during job-seeking. In this chapter, I will sketch, the major pathways through which the former public workers found employment. Relying on Sen's capability concept (Sen, 1992), I will discuss, to what extent they had the capabilities to achieve an occupation they valued, what resources the former participants were able to mobilize (Hobson et. al., 2011; Váradi, 2018). The advantage of the capabilities approach for my research is that it offers an agency-centered framework (Hobson et. al., 2011) which helps to evaluate the trajectories of the former participants based not only on the characteristics of the jobs they occupied or the distinct status-groups they reached but also the extent of their agency to achieve well-being (Sen, 1992). Within the context of this research, I understand the capability to achieve well-being of the former public workers as the agency of these women to find a job on the labour market which they valued. This aspect of well-being has an importance, since even in cases of women who occupied the same profession virtually, such as being a cleaning-lady for example, the evaluation of these jobs could be very different. Being employed in very similar jobs could be liked and valued by one women and experienced as a compulsion by another. The capabilities approach helps me to interpret the subjective evaluation of certain positions and to what extent someone has the possibility, determined by distinct structural conditions, to achieve an occupation which she finds satisfying (Sen, 1992).⁸ I will also discuss,

⁸ I am aware of how a particular job is experienced by someone is not only determined by the position itself, but also, the status of a job, its social context, the specific life-situations of the workers, and employment histories. I have a very limited picture about the contexts of their experiences, such as their life-situations, I will not able to discuss the well-being of the interviewees in its whole complexity. I will have to limit myself to present the employment positions my informants achieved, based on how positively they valued their jobs.

what role public work played in the trajectories of former participants regarding social mobility, to understand how possibilities are different for people with distinct resources.

In my analysis, I will focus on one aspect of the “capability sets”, namely the individual factors which they could convert into an increased power of decision on the labour market (Sen, 1992; Hobson et al., 2011: 171). Based on Hobson’s, Fahlén’s and Takács’s conceptualization of the individual factors which shapes agency, I identify these individual factors as human capital, situated agency (gender and age), the resources of the family (the partner’s and parent’s) (Hobson et. al., 2011: 171). Furthermore, building on Kmetty and Koltai who argued that social relations have crucial roles in social mobility in Hungary, I also identify the resource “advantageous social relations (2018)” besides the concept of “network (family and friends)” which Hobson Fahlén and Takács applied (Hobson et. al., 2011: 171). “Advantageous social relations” help me to describe more precisely the specific social relations of women which contributed to reach positions they desired. I argue that the distinct resources people could mobilize also made an impact on the advantages public work could provide in the struggle over achieving well-being. For people who were in the possession of certain individual resources, such as higher education level and advantageous social relations, public work functioned rather as a temporary solution, a safety-net between valued working positions, and they could turn more of the informal advantages of working in the public work program into an asset. These resources also structured womens’ agency in reconciliating wage-work with care work (see also Hobson et. al.). Since for mothers, caring responsibilities largely structured the possible choices of employment, women who could mobilize human capital and advantageous social relations could find jobs easier on the labour market which allowed them to combine productive work with caring responsibilities during the years, their children were young. Otherwise, mothers had to wait more time to find jobs where working hours were compatible with caring responsibilities. Sometimes, they had to wait until their children grew

up therefore possibilities of employment were less affected by caring responsibilities. In the following, I will underpin this argument by analyzing the distinct trajectories of public workers leading out of the public work program. I will discuss the strategies former public workers applied in order to find employment and the role public work had in their employment trajectories in terms of social mobility.

The importance of human capital and advantageous social relations was striking especially within the employment trajectories of women who were employed in the public work program for the shortest time. Henrietta was the one among the former public workers who participated in the program for the shortest period, 3 months. She is a mother of two, were 8-and 9 year-olds, when she worked in the program. She used to work in a factory in Kaposvár as a dressmaker, however, the factory moved to another city in Somogy-county, Dombóvár in 2011. The enhanced time of commuting combined with the high level of expectations of employers and caring responsibilities was hardly possible to fulfill, consequently Henrietta quit in 2013. With the help of her husband, she got a job at his workplace as a cleaning-lady. Henrietta was completely satisfied with her position. She said she really liked her job and she hoped, she could stay there long term. In her case, it were the advantageous social relations of her husband at his workplace, the social network of a member of her family which contributed to finding a workplace, she was satisfied with and which made the combination of wage-work with care-work possible.

Unlike Henrietta, in case of Dóra who was also employed in the program for a relatively short period, it was her level of education (human capital) and her young age (situated agency) which served as a base for finding an eight-hour employment instead of public work, which made it possible to fulfill her caring responsibilities as a single mother. Dóra has knowledge of English and German language, and is trained in several professions: she is a tourist guide, a florist, etc. She had to give up her position at a floral shop after her divorce, due to financial

reasons, and the irregular shifts of this work which did not allow her to spend time with her children. She became a secretary of a lawyer, after being a florist. After she had to quit this job as well, she became employed in the public work program in 2011. Public work served as a transitional state between her secretary-job and her employment in a state institution, since the admission process to the state institution was very long and complex. She liked her job at this institution and she meant it to be a “retirement gig”. Her employment in the public work program was a result of her difficulties in finding employment which allowed her to combine wage-work with care work as a single mother, and financial need of subsistence and paying her bank-loan. Due to the “inclusive” characteristic of public work as a workplace, participating in the program was a highly positive experience for Dóra, and it served as a safety-net for her between distinct white-collar jobs.

Like in Henriatta’s and Dóra’s case, Dalma’s story also shows how hard it was for single mothers to combine wage work with care when the latter could not be divided within the household sufficiently. Dalma had to move to her parents’ house after her divorce, however, caring responsibilities could not be solved completely even with the help of her parents. She started to work in the public work program after maternity leave around 2017, and she was a public worker until 2019, at the time when employment opportunities increased in general. She could re-enter the labour market with the help of her future mother in law, who gave her a job at the company where she worked. At the time of the interview, Dalma was employed at this flyer-delivering company as an office manager. Her boss was her mother in law who guaranteed for her the flexibility at this workplace which was necessary to be able to work on the labour market besides her caring responsibilities. In case of Dalma, it was the social network within her (future) family which helped her to resolve the conflict between wage-work and care.

On the other hand, for women who were above 50 or lower-educated with less advantageous social relations, public work rather served as a long term constraint, and usually, it did not end with finding employment which they really desired for. For example, as I have mentioned, Mari's profession had become obsolete during the technological development which happened during her maternity leave. She had to engage in public work for four years which made it easier for her to combine wage-work with care work due to regular working hours and its locality. It was the enhanced labour demand after 2016 which provided a chance for her to re-enter the labour market. Since her three kids grew up, it was possible to engage in shiftwork. In 2017, she went to work in one of the factories in Kaposvár to do unskilled work (packing) in two shifts. However, due to the hard physical requirements and the exhausting characteristic of night-shifts, she gave up this job after two months, and she decided to look after cleaning jobs, which pay less but were better suited. She mentioned while she was talking about public-employment wage that it was not enough for trainings:

So unfortunately, that is why I stayed in this status so to speak, and since then ... well, not that I developed, but at least I could get a cleaning-job. Well, it has a little bit higher status, it is not public work. I'm not saying it is a good job, but in today's world it is better. It is better than to do assembly work I think, in any case.

Cleaning work was described as a higher status position than public work and assembly work in Mari's narrative. The cleaning-job had relative value in her eyes compared to public work and assembly work, however, she did not like it completely due to high demands of employers and low wage. Due to her low education-level, after re-entering the labour market, Mari was able to achieve a lower-status position than before her child was born. Mari reflected on this explicitly. The dissatisfaction with her current position was manifested in her narrative as a nostalgia to the times when she was working as a shorthand typist and she also mentioned that she was planning to migrate abroad, to continue to do cleaning work but for a higher wage.

As she said “*It is not negligible whether you work for 100 000 Ft as a cleaning lady or for 400 000 Ft*”. While she considered her job as a cleaning lady an achievement of a higher status compared to public work, her wage was still not enough to make any savings, since she earned 30 000 Ft more as a cleaning lady than a public worker⁹, so she considered to migrate to Austria. Mari’s case corresponds with several Hungarian authors’ argument that the enhanced labour demand and the labour shortage in the country which emerged between 2015 and 2020, partly meant the increase in the number of low-paid jobs (Gerőcs, 2019). Therefore, the costs of social reproduction are increasingly burdened on households (Csányi et. al, 2018; Csányi, 2019; Gagy, 2019; Gerőcs, 2019). As Helga said “*the thing is that now, they [the employers] do not want to pay people. No matter that there is labour shortage. These really think that it is still okay to chase people for 100 000 Ft a day in 12 hours*”. Enhanced opportunities of employment did not necessarily mean much better subsistence, especially for women who had less advantageous social relations and human capital. Re-entering the labour market in several cases resulted in occupying working positions which hardly covered the costs of livelihood, particularly extra expenses like renovating a house, mentioned by Mari.

The necessity to continue to do informal work after re-entering the labour market was present in case of Ilona as well who had to do second job besides the cleaning job at a factory which she got after public work. Before public work, Ilona, worked as an accountant at a socialist cooperative until it was abolished after the transition. After she also lost her job at the local municipality in 2013, she could not find any office positions. She attributed this to her age. She was assigned to work in the program by the Employment Centre in 2013. She was working in there for three years in 2013 and from 2015 to 2016. In 2014, she attended a course in word processing, which was organized and paid by the Labour Office, but as she said, the

⁹ She did newspaper delivery as a complementary job besides public work, which she finished when she started to work as a cleaning-lady.

training was not efficient and it was not useful for her in finding employment.¹⁰ Therefore, Ilona also had to apply to working positions which were not matching with her preferences to be able to re-enter the labour market. First, she became a kitchen helper at a restaurant, but the business collapsed, so she got a job at one of the biggest factories as a cleaning lady. She was working in a buffet during public work and she continued it after she left the program as well: *“I am a bartender and I also cook. They pawned also the cleaning on me. But I like to do it. With cleaning, I am getting by. I do not really like to clean”*. These words reflect on that after the public work program, Ilona did not find employment which she would have been completely satisfied with. Age discrimination made her situation difficult on the labour market, in spite of her skills, level of education.

In general, I had the impression that women who could mobilize human capital and/or advantageous social relations could find employment on the labour market which they were satisfied with on the long run (Hobson et. al., 2011; Kmetty, 2018), as we could see in case of Hentrietta, Dóra and Dalma. Besides their trajectories, Viola, Anna and Linda also found employment which they considered mostly acceptable. As I have mentioned, Anna became the janitor of the village which she liked very much. Linda was employed in distinct precarious jobs for four more years, after her third child. It was difficult for her to find employment in her gendered profession, however, she has never given up trying. Finally, in 2016, as a result of her endeavor, she succeeded in finding a job in her profession as an agronomy teacher, which she highly valued. In case of Linda, it was her educational qualifications which made her upward mobility possible after the long years of precarious employment. Eventually, after five years of public work, in 2016, Viola got a white-collar job at a post office with the help of one of her acquaintances. Viola also could find employment which she found acceptable, by relying on her social relations and human capital (Hobson et. al., 2011).

¹⁰ Actually, this is a quite common critique of these state-funded trainings in Hungary which are aimed to facilitate the reintegration of public workers to the labour market (Keller. et. al., 2018).

For women with more social and human capital, public work functioned as a transition state from where they could achieve stable employment. The level of education and the importance of advantageous social relations structured the possibilities of employment after the public work program in a sense that these resources were necessary to find employment which they were satisfied with, and where the combination of wage-work and care work was possible (see also Hobson et. al., 2011; Bakó and Lakatos, 2018; Tóth and Szelényi, 2018; Kmetty, 2018). Otherwise, mothers had to wait until the increase in job opportunities entailed by the enhanced labour demand, or until their children grew up.

As I have also mentioned, the public work program could provide mothers an asset in managing the contradiction between wage-work with care by involving informality, thus the informal help of the representatives of the local state. However, since the wage provided by public work could not cover the costs of social reproduction, in most of the cases, the reconciliation of the contradiction between productive and care work happened by doing more (informal work, at the cost of more self-exploitation of mothers. In cases of women who had more social, human, and financial capital, doing these informal jobs became less necessary after finding higher paid employment. Most of the interviewees gave up their informal, supplementary jobs after the public work program, which reflects on the dynamic change in the role of informal work within households. Women who occupied lower-paid working positions, had to continue these informal works after re-entering the labour market, since their wages covered less of the expenses of livelihood (see also Csányi, 2018; Csányi, 2019; Gagy, 2019). Furthermore, women who had less advantageous social relations, human capital or higher age gave up to seek for white-collar working positions which they had before and they became employed in lower status working positions, with low wages and sometimes with short-term contracts. In these cases public work can be regarded as a stage in their trajectory of employment which maintained the lower-paid employment of these people.

Counclusion

In my thesis, I presented that during the recession following the economic crisis of 2008 in Hungary, when the unemployment rate was the highest in the country, there were factors which made the situation of women harder on the labour market, and led to the increased possibility of being unemployed on the long term. I showed the importance of labour market discrimination (in this case, age and gender, including the so-called “motherhood penalty”), and the tension between productive and reproductive work which had crucial importance for women in getting employed in the local public work program. Since there is little or no institutional support to care work in micro-regions of small settlements, the tension between wage-work can be particularly harsh for mothers with small children, especially, for single mothers. This issue can be deepened in rural areas by the geographical distance between the location of wage-work and the sphere of reproductive work, the households, which can not be overcome easily due to the lack of sufficient public transportation. Therefore, for mothers, public employment could remain the only realistic employment opportunity in combining wage-work with caring responsibilities, especially during the economic recession when unemployment was high in the country. Partly, public work could contribute to the reconciliation of the tension between productive work and care work throughout supportive hierarchical social relations in the village. However, since public employment-wage hardly covers the costs of living, participants had to work in second jobs which were mainly informal, low-paid and precarious. In the end, women had to work more than they should have worked on the labour market, but these informal works were also more flexible so they could match it with their caring responsibilities. It can be claimed that the conflict between reproductive and productive work in times of cruel conditions on the labour market and in difficult life-situations could be reconciled in the local sphere of public work due to the informal help of the local state,

and by doing informal supplementary jobs. These informal second jobs mainly disappeared from the lives of former participants after they re-entered the labour market, except in cases of women whose new low-paid jobs has not provided sufficient subsistence. While the main structural conditions which determined the trajectories of former participants into the program were relatively similar, the role public work played in their employment-trajectories was distinct based on the resources women could mobilize in order to rejoin the labour market. For women with higher education and more advantageous social relations, who mainly became employed in the program due to caring responsibilities, public work was rather a safety net by providing informal help in the duty of care until they could find jobs in the labour market which they were satisfied with. However, for lower-educated, elderly people and who could less mobilize advantageous social relations, public work could contribute to the maintenance of precarious employment or it could be a means of downward mobility. Compared to MacLeavy who argues that instead of functioning as a clear safety net, neoliberal workfare serves as a “trampoline” for people moving constantly between welfare and work (MacLeavy, 2010: 140), I claim that in the context of this village which is in a relatively developed region where the volume of public work programs are bound to economic cycles (Gerő and Vigvári, 2019), public work as a form of workfare could function both as a safety net and a “trampoline” for former public workers and the emphasis between these two was different among women based on the resources they could mobilize on the labour market.

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