



CHAPTER 3

Fostering in a Carefare Regime

Abstract This chapter is about foster parents and their work. Recent changes in the regulation of foster care illustrate the formation and operation of a carefare regime: the transformation of state policies and services and the integration of foster parents into the “deserving” female working and caring underclass. Relying on two years of participant observations and interviews with foster parents, experts, guardians, social workers and foster parent agency personnel, I describe the highly skilled care work most foster parents provide in demanding circumstances for a practically endless number of work hours. I explain how their status has been transformed from being volunteers to being contracted employees who work in increasingly precarious circumstances for extremely low wages. I argue that sentimentalization of care work is used by policy makers to discipline foster mothers into accepting the new terms of their relationship and by foster parents too to rationalize their compliance.

Keywords Carefare • Foster care • Welfare state • Child protection • Gender inequality • Professionalization • Labor control

In Chap. 2, I argued that since 2010 the Hungarian government has created a carefare regime, that is, introduced a set of policies, political practice and discourse which exacerbate the exploitation of women through their care work and in the paid labor market. In turn, the government utilizes this process to legitimate and maintain an anti-liberal rule.

This chapter is about foster parents, their work, their skills, their wages and work conditions. A recent change in the regulation of fostering provides a classic example of the emergence of principles of carefare, it is thus worth studying the process in depth. Until 2014, most Hungarian foster parents worked as volunteers but were then reclassified as gendered carefare workers with employment contracts, wages, social security benefits and increasingly difficult work conditions. They have become part of the predominantly female “deserving” underclass-in-formation that the previous chapter foreshadowed.

Hungary’s carefare regime did not simply withdraw state funding from child protection. Instead the government has “creatively” (Bátory 2016) recycled it for future political gain. The meager national child protection budget has been put to use in a way that strengthens the political power of the regime and feeds its loyalists more than it feeds abandoned children. The state budget for child protection and foster care is co-utilized to reproduce political power. After a brief look at the history of child protection in Hungary this chapter describes the turn toward carefare, both within the state organization of fostering, and in the everyday world of foster parents.

FOSTERING IN HUNGARY: A QUICK LOOK TO THE PAST

Hungarian children grow up reading the story of “Árvácska” [Little Orphan] a literary classic of Zsigmond Móricz, which describes the long list of abuses suffered by a poor orphan girl at the hands of foster parents in the 1930s. Hungary’s first child protection legislation was passed in 1901, three decades before her story and the new law institutionalized state responsibilities for abandoned children (Demény 2015; Herczog 1998; Mészáros-Tóth 2014; Veczkó 2000). A central state-run orphanage was established in Budapest and the state recruited foster parents or “tápszülők”, literally “feeding parents”, who received payment for taking in children. Over 80% of abandoned children were raised in foster families in the first decades of the twentieth century. Life in these foster homes, as evidenced by the story of Árvácska, was notorious for its hardships, heavy workload and vile treatment. Hungarian orphanages were also vastly underfunded, even compared to similar institutions within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (Varsa 2020).

After World War II, state socialist policy makers reconceptualized the needs of abandoned children altogether: the communist regime wanted to

put an immediate end to individual fostering and emphasized its association with child labor in politically objectionable “kulak” (rich peasant) families in the countryside. As a result and following famous Soviet author and pedagogue Makarenko’s ideas described in his widely popular *Pedagogical Poem*, state authorities saw a chance in abandoned children to realize their dream of communal upbringing in the service of producing the new communist men (later women as well). Replacing foster care, children who were removed from their homes for a variety of reasons, including material hardship, health and moral abandonment, were sent to newly built state-run institutions (Varsa 2020). This new “scientific pedagogical” model was understood to be the most modern way to raise children, and institutional care was considered politically more trustworthy than individual families. In addition, the supply of women at home who would have time to devote to raising children dwindled as state socialist policies pushed everyone to take on paid work. To meet children’s needs so defined, state authorities nationalized several large mansions that had belonged to the upper bourgeoisie and turned them into children’s homes. This move was to serve a double purpose: to strip upper class Hungarian families of their private property, and to demonstrate the regime’s commitment to the most vulnerable. What could serve as better demonstration of the ideological direction of the new political regime than stories about previously starving and disheveled children playing happily in gorgeous playgrounds and parks of the kind they could never imagine even approaching before. To this day, a number of state homes for abandoned children can be found in these now decrepit villas surrounded by beautiful parks with century-old trees, some in the most sought after locations in and around Budapest. As a model solution, in 1957 Hungarian state authorities opened “Children’s City” 20 kilometers north of Budapest in what used to be a castle of the Károlyi family and its surrounding 140 ha park. In its heyday the complex housed some 800 children along with 200 social workers and teachers and had its own schools, infirmary, lake and park with rare and protected trees, movie theater, sport courts and other services on its premises. Like many infrastructural establishments, children’s newly appropriated homes in the early 1950s may have been considered “modern” at the time they were built or renovated for use but were henceforth vastly underfunded and gradually deteriorated. News of abuse and deprivation was silenced and critiques of the conditions in state-run children’s homes only resurfaced after the 1990s (Varsa 2020). During the state socialist era, only about 20% of abandoned children grew up with

foster parents (Herczog 1998), a steep decline from the 80% a few decades earlier. Children were only placed in individual homes if and when places in institutions were not available. (See state regulation 2111/1954 (VIII. 25) MT.)

However, in the 1980s a slow change started in how the needs of abandoned children were understood. By this time it became obvious that the political agenda of educating children as model communist citizens had failed. Psychological research started to gain prominence in the early 1970s, and studies showed a high rate of criminal behavior and addictions among children who grew up in childcare centers (Demény 2015). The more progressive psychologists argued, based on local experience as well as increasing contact with Western European experts, that children do better if they are raised in families or at least in more intimate settings (Veczkó 2000). In addition, the mansions of the 1950s started to crumble and their maintenance proved to be an insurmountable cost. As a result, attempts started to resurrect elements of the foster care system and larger state institutions were broken down into smaller, “family like” units.

The fall of the communist regime in 1989 accelerated the pursuit of these ideas already familiar to more progressive groups among child protection experts. In 1991 Hungary ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Hungarian experts and social work professionals looked to Western European models, primarily in Anglo-Saxon areas, to overhaul the Hungarian child protection system (author’s interview with Mária Herczog, 2015). After a period of intense debate, a new Child Protection Law was passed in 1997 which set the tone for further developments. Following the lead of the UN Convention and the existing international wisdom on children’s needs, this legislation strengthened the rights of birth families and established a basic framework of social support for families in need to prevent the removal of children by providing basic services once children were identified as in danger. The new law prohibited taking children away from their birth families for financial reasons, and state agencies were tasked to meet the financial needs and basic services required by troubled families. Social services were decentralized, local providers were to offer services and local agencies determined and met needs. This legislation was one of the first of its kind in the Central and East European region, and one most similar to existing Western principles. Then in 2014 the Orbán government passed a new law which radically transformed the Hungarian foster care system again; this will be the subject of discussion in this chapter. First, in line with EU and UN

recommendations, the law stipulated that children below 12 years of age should grow up in foster (or, in ideal situations, adoptive) families rather than in state institutions. Second, the work of fostering was reclassified from a volunteer unpaid activity into the category of a special paid employment relationship outside of the remit of the Hungarian Labor Code. A number of related regulatory mechanisms were further introduced to change the working lives of foster parents as well as of the agencies overseeing their work.

There are about 20,000 children registered in child protection in Hungary in 2020 and 14,000 of them are growing up in approximately 5500 foster homes. The number of children has been increasing, while the number of foster parents remained stable in the decade of the 2010s (KSH 2019a). Child protection and within that fostering is a small segment of the state apparatus but one that vividly demonstrates the real-life functioning of a carefare regime. In the next section I describe changes in the role of the state in regulating child protection. Then in the following part of this chapter I examine how the lives of foster parents have been transformed.

CENTRALIZING AND RE-ENGINEERING STATE SERVICES

Austerity has been one of the guiding principles of all state institutions in the past 25 years in Hungary, child welfare being no exception. A key reason why the institutional shift in fostering was initiated and successfully pursued in 2014 was the fact that it was considered cheaper in the long run than financing large state-owned institutions, with their crumbling walls and decrepit furniture. In the state socialist era, the villas appropriated for children in the 1950s were barely maintained and now required major renovation. Or, alternatively, they offered an opportunity, since instead of restoration they could be sold on the prime real estate market. Soon enough, even the largest institution, the one described above in the city of Fót, was sold to cronies of the government, with children moved to smaller institutions and foster care. “The costs of care with foster parents is about 1 million HUF per year, while in a children’s home, small or large, it amounts to 2.8 to 4 million HUF per year per child” (Author’s interview with a high-level state executive in the Ministry of Human Resources, June 2016).¹ Others, however, claimed that good quality fostering was

¹The quotations in this chapter are from interviews conducted during my research on fostering. See more information on the methodology in Chap. 1.

just as expensive as care in state institutions, but this quality was not reached in Hungary exactly because of the scarcity of funding available. Indeed, all agencies complained about the low level of staffing, where those supporting foster parents (advisors, guardians) typically look after many more children than is mandated by the state legislation, and where funding is not available for each agency to have its own psychologist, even though all children removed from their birth homes would need one. To explain why she is about to quit her job and look for employment in a different sector, a social worker in a large foster parent network agency told me: “I know what each and every family would need to survive, I usually know it very well. But those services don’t exist, so I more often than not can’t help them. That’s what’s really frustrating” (Marina, foster parent advisor, Budapest).

How much did the state spend on child protection after the transformations in 2014? That is difficult to tell. Unlike neoliberal efficiency-oriented work organizations with their audits, benchmarks and indicators (Shore 2008), transparent data collection and presentation is not of high importance for anti-liberal rulers. In principle, state spending on child protection is public information in Hungary. But getting reliable and systematic data requires a very long wait, personal connections and favors. I managed to obtain some, but only some of the required information from the Hungarian Treasury for the years of 2010–2017 and a selection of the relevant line items is included in Table 3.1.

The data are difficult to interpret because, as experts at the Treasury warned me, the rules and principles of data collection regarding child protection services changed twice during this seven-year period. In 2013, the data collection on government spending was revamped and activities were reclassified in a way that made comparison with later years impossible (hence the gray shades in Table 3.1). In 2014 the child protection system was completely transformed based partly on the argument that foster care was cheaper than institutional care. Yet at least for the years 2014 and 2015 it is impossible to separate the amounts spent on fostering and on institutional care—they are grouped together as per the regulation of 2013. The rules changed again in 2016 and spending data are again available in detail. Whether or not the categories cover the same expenses is altogether unclear and information on this was simply not accessible. The meaning of a category “Programs supporting the life quality of children and youth”, which had no allocation in 2016 but amounts to over 10% of

Table 3.1 State expenditure on child protection and foster care (million HUF)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Specialized protection for vulnerable children	38,021.6	35,266.4	33,441.5	38,617.6	44,014.4	47,788.7	42,830.3	49,032.6
Spending on child care institution	22,475.6	20,831.7	20,081.1	25,136.6	36,876.7*	38,454.4*	28,307.5	32,386.6
Spending on service to children in foster care	9550.8	8300.49	7559.16	7553.7	n/d	n/d	6521.3	7971.7
State support to non-state providers in the field of child protection	5251.4	7465.4	11,095.8	9879.7	11,507.4	14,772.1	18,162.3	19,885.0
Child protection altogether	78,783	78,031	76,584	85,261	107,291	89,808	129,342	185,628

Note: *Includes both institutional and foster care

Source: National budget accounts (Hungarian State Treasury)

the overall child protection budget in 2017, is impossible to penetrate. And the classification rules changed again in 2020.

With these caveats in mind, what do we learn about possible changes in the amount of state spending on child protection over the years? Shall we describe this as a period of grave austerity? To the extent that this is discernible, given the lack of transparency in the data collection and presentation, there is no sign of state retrenchment for the child protection sector as a whole. Instead, we see fluctuation—possibly due to classification changes or to actual cost-cutting—and some overall growth toward the end of the period. Between 2010 and 2013 the data show stagnation and decline in spending for the first three years then an 8% growth in the fourth, in 2013. The overall four-year change is smaller than the cumulative inflation rate over this period, which means that the real value of spending stagnated at best, most likely declined. After the first major change in the classification system in 2014 note the sizeable fluctuation over the years and a sudden increase in 2017. Some of this increase has to do with the rising cost of nursery schools, which is also included in this rubric, but there seems to be a general tendency toward increased spending on vulnerable children in every category of the table. There is one exception as the third line in the table attests: foster care. While the number of children in foster care increased by over 25% between 2010 and 2017, spending on fostering recorded in the central budget remains unchanged. This, given the rate of inflation, means a significant, roughly 30% decline in real value. However, there is another budget line, “state support to non-state providers”, which is the source of additional funding for some foster care agencies. I explain these below.

Contrary to the deregulation tendencies of neoliberal states, the Hungarian government has centralized the management and financial control of child protection: in 2012 it wrestled responsibilities and power away from county seats and local governments and established a new institution of the Ministry of Human Resources, which is tasked with the oversight of child and family protection services. Yet simultaneously, another type of deregulation was initiated. Neoliberal states encourage commodification with the assumption that market-based distribution and provisions are the most efficient, or at least the cheapest (Wacquant 2012). In a process counter to this logic, the Hungarian state has “churchified” child protection: it allocated significant resources toward the establishment and financing of Church organizations based providers. The penultimate line in Table 3.1 demonstrates that funding to such providers almost

quadrupled over the seven-year period and has increased further since. The impact is clearly noticeable too: in 2010 about 7% of children grew up in church-affiliated foster parent networks, but by 2018, almost half, 47% of them did (KSH 2019b). Practically all large established churches operate foster parent agencies in 2020: I counted 17 different church-based and 3 civil or international networks in addition to the state's agency.

It is not merely out of a calling to help the down-trodden that churches have so successfully got involved in the business of child protection. Hungary's anti-liberal government pays a quota for each child in the child protection system to the state provider, yet pays an additional 70% of this amount as extra for each child who belongs to a church-affiliated agency. This is the sum in the line "state support for non-state providers" in Table 3.1. Ninety-seven percent of the money allocated in this rubric goes to religious organizations. The basic head quota must be allocated toward the designated service, in this case, child protection or fostering, even if it is managed by a church-affiliated provider. But churches do not have to give account of how they spend the additional funding: it may or may not go toward the care of children. Foster parent network directors, whose organizations came to be affiliated with churches as a survival strategy after this legislative change, told me that their organization received between 10% and 20% less than the full state allocation—this is the amount that the church keeps for its own budget of what is technically allocated for "child protection services".

In addition, a legislation was passed in early 2021, which gives church organizations running social services, including child protection, property rights over the real estate in which they are currently operating. In the first round in 2021, 29 real estate properties were passed on to various churches by the Hungarian state. This also means that the churches are now eligible to apply for and receive funding from the European Union to renovate the buildings, some of which have exceptional value. This increases the wealth and political role of churches that are hegemonically loyal to the government. It also allows the state to channel EU funding to organizations over which it has significant control.

As I noted above church organizations use most but not all of the allocated state funding to support their foster parent networks. Their insistence on the religious education of children varies from a tolerance of positions to a clearly stated expectation of participation in religious services. My field notes from a conversation with social workers in a recently church-affiliated agency describe the position of the agency's leader:

We switched affiliations in 2012 and since then [the Church] is our main-tainer. Every week a representative from the Church visits to discuss everyday issues. Practicing the religion is not compulsory but they did insist that children follow their religious practices in the summer camps. At the same time, they are not forcing us to change our professional work because of their faith. (Director of foster parent network, Budapest, Nov 3, 2016)

Other churches are significantly more demanding. I talked to the extremely professional and compassionate manager of a then relatively small foster parent agency run by the Catholic Church. She was quite insistent on practicing the faith because she considered it a better way of living.

It is not compulsory for foster parents to be familiar with the teachings of the Catholic Church. We cannot hold them responsible for that ... but we would like them to be aware. I mean aware of Jesus' mission, the basic values of the Church, we teach those. This is not proselytizing ... we obviously don't do that. But there is a softer version of evangelization, for example, that we celebrate religious holidays and include the children and the foster parents and we celebrate together. Or we have these obligatory foster parent trainings. The next one will be taught by [a well known Catholic priest], so there is certainly an influence, not forceful, but it is important to pass on our values. (Head of foster parent agency, Budapest, 2016)

The Protestant Church's foster parent network is based not only on faith but requires belonging to, or at least being familiar with, local church organizations. The head of the agency explained:

You can only become a foster parent if you have a recommendation letter from your local minister. This is a guarantee that the person is not doing it for the money. And it is important for the children to join the church community, because those who belong there are more likely to lead a Christian life, a solid, stable, organized, harmonious life. (Head of foster parent agency, 2017)

The principle of the separation of the state and church is clearly not of high importance here. The political gains are obvious. First, FIDESZ governs in coalition with the remnants of the Hungarian Christian Democratic Party, and even though the latter has little independence in most matters political, they tend to contribute to the discourse on family, children,

gender, morality and so on. Also, surveys have shown that the governing parties are significantly more popular among those who claim that they are religious, so measures promoting religious organizations is a form of catering to the demands of the electorate, indeed, creating these demands in the hope of reaping electoral benefits later (Policy Solutions 2015). In addition, media accounts describe numerous instances when “recommendations” on voting were shared from pulpits before elections—making the support of churches an eminently sensible political investment.

In summary, it is difficult to interpret data on the volume of state funding for child protection. It is clear that we cannot talk about major cuts in funding, but neither is there any sign of additional support from a supposedly family friendly state to a growing number of needy children and those who take care of them. What is absolutely clear, however, is that in recent years a significant chunk of child protection services along with their funding have been outsourced to loyal church organizations. The everyday control of these institutions is variable but the potential for comprehensive oversight is there. The churches receive additional funding and bonus real estate from the state to encourage their participation. Then they can use the opportunity to expand their networks, their follower base and evangelize, if desired. The state, on the other hand, spends additional taxpayer money on offering religion-bound services and buying political loyalty from and via church organizations.

CAREFARE: THE WORK OF FOSTERING

Along with this faith-oriented re-engineering of state functions, the position of foster parents vis-à-vis said state has also changed. Before 2014 with the exception of a handful who qualified as paid social workers, the vast majority of foster parents worked as volunteers and provided a service to the state out of kindness and dedication. This changed abruptly when a new piece of legislation eliminated the volunteer foster parent category and transformed foster parent contracts into paid employment relationships. As of January 2014, foster parents have become “professionals”. They are working for wages at a designated foster parent agency, receive a set salary and occasional bonuses as well as social security coverage, including old age pension benefits.

This may sound like a turn for the better for the kind volunteers. But below I argue that using the pretext of “professionalization”, foster parents have in fact been hired to work on the principle of carefare: they have

become part of the working female underclass. Relying on two years of participant observations and about 80 interviews with foster parents, experts, guardians, social workers and foster parent agency personnel, this chapter will demonstrate that foster parents provide highly skilled care work in extremely demanding circumstances for a practically endless number of work hours, often for wages amounting to less than the national minimum. Having been classified as “workers” means an increase in control and surveillance on the part of their employers, less independence and more supervision for the foster parents themselves. This process of integration into carefare was described as “professionalization”.

Professionalization

In the Parliamentary debate on the legislative changes involving the status of foster parents, Mrs. Ronaszeki, who introduced the bill and was an MP for the government and member of the Committee on Youth, Social, Family, and Housing Affairs, pointed out that “It [was] important for foster parents to turn their relationship to the state into one of employment in order to ‘professionalize’ the activity and increase its social prestige” (Mrs Ronaszeki, 2013 in the Hungarian Parliament).

She was not alone. Child protection experts had long argued that the social context of fostering had changed and required more skills, expertise and energy on the part of the carers.

The children are more vulnerable, it used to be much easier. We don’t do well at the early stages of the [child protection] process, when they are registered in the system, there’s not enough help. So the children arrive in the system really worn out ... even 3–4 year old kids need therapy. (Foster parent advisor at a Budapest agency)

In sociological parlance, professionalization is the process of creating distinctions amongst those who belong to a specific occupational group and those who do not, between “professionals” and “amateurs”. Since the Middle Ages occupational groups have been fighting to establish themselves as professions, a position, which typically brings distinct privileges, such as higher earnings, the possibility to claim monopoly over access to clients, as well as respectability and status (MacDonald 1995; Wilensky 1964). The establishment of a profession is often a contentious process as was, for example, the case for midwives (Bourgeault 2006), or librarians

(Abbott 1988). What makes a professional is widely contested: some acknowledge their expert knowledge, established practice of the trade and self-regulating professional associations (Parsons 1968), while others refer to their position in the social hierarchy which allows them to exclude others and construct themselves as members of an exclusive, elite group (Abbott 1988; Larson 2012).

An altogether different process of professionalization has taken place in the case of Hungarian foster parents: it has been initiated and enforced by the state. Foster parents did not claim to be professionals, quite the opposite, many of them actively resisted the term. Yet state policies, new legal regulations and institutions have decided to construct them as such, and they have allocated some dubious distinctions while simultaneously imposing a new set of expectations and obligations. Historically, there have been other instances of professionalization that involved more than just grass-roots actors. McClelland (1991), for example, describes “professionalization from above” in nineteenth-century Germany, where the state had an important role in the regulation of entry into professions, such as medicine and law, even engineering and chemistry, as distinct from what he calls the more autonomous “professionalization from within” process of the Anglo-Saxon model. Our current case of the professionalization of the child protection system in Hungary is an extreme version of professionalization from above, where those proclaimed to be professionals had little input into a process shaped instead by politicians, policy makers, as well as local and international experts.

Professionalization targets foster parents who are expected to transform themselves from warm-hearted women raising children in need, to professional paid carers with expertise and lengthy training. They must adjust their work schedules to satisfy these criteria, enroll in specialized training programs and write lengthy dissertations and reconfigure the way they raise children to fit the principles of childcare considered suitable for the “modern” world by experts on child development. They must also meet new institutional expectations as professional carers and subject themselves to even more supervision and surveillance than before, while simultaneously losing further degrees of control over their work process to the requirements of professionalized processes.

In administrative terms, foster parents must enter a formal employment relationship with a network agency; for better or worse they become part of the formal labor market. In fact, professionalization from above can be understood as a new form of labor control exercised by various state

authorities over foster parents who are employees working in a context where typical methods of supervision are not easily applicable. Researchers have described different mechanisms of increased supervision and coercion, such as scripting or digital automation (Wharton et al. 2008), emerging in the post-Fordist economy. But there are limits to the possibility of despotic control in a setting where clients and customers also feature in and complicate the labor process (Leidner 1993; Sallaz 2015; Sherman 2007). In such contexts other mechanisms such as “permanent pedagogy” (Sallaz 2015) or “relational work” (Mears 2015) function as substitutes. How to regulate the work of people who do it in their own homes, however? Fournier (1999: 281) argues that flexible work practices create a “discretionary gap” which “needs to be regulated through new softwares of control. Professionalism is one of the strategies deployed to control the increasing margin of indeterminacy or flexibility in work.”

Professionalization from above is thus not a politically innocent strategy. “It is through their ‘professionalization’, through their inscription into systems of expert knowledge, that individuals become targets of liberal government” (Fournier 1999: 284; also Burchell et al. 2014) as well as targets of anti-liberal government, we must add. Professionalization from above, I argue, is the way in which foster parents get more tightly integrated into the lowest rungs of the carefare regime, often against their explicit will, occasionally with their informed, or uninformed consent.

Beyond Parenting

It is easy to assume that fostering is nothing but the kind of regular parenting that millions of people do, most of them in addition to their paid jobs. But a closer look at the daily activities of an even mildly conscientious foster parent quickly proves this statement wrong. As one foster parent, a mother of three biological children, succinctly put it: “You’d think you know what you’re doing until you get a foster child. Then really basic issues come up that you had never encountered before, stuff you’d never even dreamt of” (Ibolya, birth parent of three, adoptive parent of one, foster parent of two). Foster parenting is extremely taxing work. For one, it requires being on call 24 hours of the day on every day of the week and it opens up one’s home to ongoing scrutiny from others. More importantly, fostering requires a number of special skills. Below I describe three sets of these relying on the accounts of the practitioners themselves: (1) a working understanding of child psychology and the management of

emotions—their own and those of others, (2) advocacy skills to be exercised in adverse conditions, and (3) an exceptional level of understanding and daily practice of logistics and administration. We all need and rely on these skills in our everyday lives. But the stories below demonstrate Ibolya's claim: none of us are expected to use these with the intensity and within the specific conditions that foster parents do.

Child Psychology and Emotional Work

Children arrive in foster homes from a variety of domestic or institutional circumstances and in varied mental and physical conditions, and the encounter is rarely simple. The child is typically traumatized not only from her past experiences but also from having been removed from her previous surroundings, landing in a rather different setting often all alone, and having to adjust to yet another set of rules and constraints. The foster parent and her family, much as they may be expecting the child, have to make adjustments and many recognize the process as difficult. The first task of the foster parent is to help the child adjust to his or her new circumstances, which in the case of deeply traumatized children is not a simple task. Edina, a foster parent with a great deal of practice described the arrival of her three-year-old daughter:

She had a rather hectic background at birth, poor baby, and we were up all night for, I am not exaggerating, at least 6 months. She screamed through the night, no matter what we did. It was horrible. That was the worst. (Edina, three foster children)

Foster Parent Network Agencies do not exactly expect parents to treat children with psychological needs, “merely” to handle them with tact, kindness and understanding. They should be able to recognize problems, seek help and then follow the treatment suggested by the experts. But the hands-on support the agencies can afford to provide is rather limited. Even the largest foster parent agencies have a single in-house psychologist in their employment and some do not have any at all. Even when there is a psychologist working for the agency, they have a variety of tasks related to institutional needs. They must, for example, participate in the evaluation and screening of foster parent applicants. Their time to work with children and their carers is thus limited. One psychologist who had spent several years at one of the large agencies told me that her job required total

devotion, daily traveling of several hundred kilometers as well as endless work hours. “You can only do this if you are a saint and I am no saint”, she said explaining why she quit the job she loved after a few years.

Given the limitation in resources available through formal channels, foster parents often use their own practical experience and knowhow to deal with at least the easier problems, and these are numerous. The example below comes from a very experienced, loving foster parent:

They [her two fostered children, who are siblings] are different in many ways. ... But they both come with a big baggage. Viki, for example, has a number of unexplainable fears of things. And bedwetting. Tomi was six years old when he got out of diapers and Viki is well past six yet she wets her bed nightly so I put a diaper on her to sleep. (Eszter, Pest county, foster parent of two)

I heard countless accounts of acts of destruction from spreading feces on the wall with regularity to throwing heavy objects at television sets. The foster parent is expected to calm the child, quietly clean up and try to deal with the cause of the problem. No damages can be claimed and this behavior is not considered out of the ordinary or as needing external support.

Older children express their anxieties in different ways and foster parents must work not only with their own families but also with their broader environment to make adjustments. This can be especially difficult in smaller settlements where families know each other. This was the case of one foster parent who lives in a village some 60 kilometers east of Budapest when his foster children, a pair of siblings, arrived about five years ago. He is still embarrassed about being the “talk of the town” even though the problem was in fact resolved.

At the beginning Dani [his fostered son] stole other kids’ snacks and this came up at a meeting of parents at school. I told them [about the background of the child]. So the parents then understood and I am sure, well, I hope that they explained it to their own children and then this stopped. (Gabor, fostering two school age children and parenting biological twins who attend the same school a few years ahead of the fostered siblings)

This foster parent had to find the right way to discuss the issue within the community, make sure the child and his own family are not excluded from the village for their unruly behavior and negotiate the child’s needs

which resulted in his stealing snacks. He only had perfunctory help from the foster parent agency to tackle the problem and mostly had to rely on his own skills as a negotiator, mediator and child psychologist. Another foster parent describes the way she “tamed” her son, Alex, who came with serious mental and psychological difficulties.

I have managed to get him to the point where he doesn’t bite or kick, where tools and other objects are not flying around ... so you see, this is a first step. Now he only screams. Which is better than when he threw half a brick at me. (Nikolett, foster mom to 2 children, with a great deal of fostering experience)

Alex’s rage was successfully controlled by this foster parent without the help of an expert psychologist. She relied on her research online, the advice of her social worker, as well as her experience with previous children, to get to the point where the child was no longer destructive, a feat previous carers in institutions or private homes had not been able to accomplish.

Some people foster children with known disabilities, for example, Edit, who decided to do this work for the purpose of helping sick children. Both of her fostered toddlers have Down syndrome yet she received no training in how to raise children with Down.

I looked it up at the Down Foundation in Budapest. The first step was that we went to a clinic for children with Down syndrome. That’s in Budapest. There they told me in detail what medical tests need to be done. No one had explained that to me within the [foster parent network] agency. If I had had to wait for them, we still wouldn’t have gotten anything done. Because I think they themselves don’t know what this [raising children with severe Down syndrome] really means. (Edit, fostering two children, in a small town in Pest county, about 80 kilometers from Budapest)

Her case may be one of the extremes, but for all, ongoing attention, tolerance and intense emotional and physical work are required. A small fraction of foster parents can afford to pay for psychologists out of their own pockets, others may lobby networks to help them cover the extra costs. Many said that they read books on childrearing and popular psychology, and browse internet websites in search of possible solutions to behavioral/psychological problems. They may also consult with the social worker in their children’s school as well as with the agency’s foster parent advisor, who visits regularly and advises foster parents on all issues related

to caring for their wards. They participate in supervision and small group training workshops in at least some of the foster network agencies and discuss problems with other foster parents. Altogether, foster parents accrue a great deal of practical knowledge in child development and psychology and are expected to utilize these skills in their everyday work of raising children, who typically have grave social and psychological disadvantages which must be tolerated, handled and in the best scenario, treated successfully.

Never is the need for skillful emotional work more acute or evident than before, during and after the regular visitation meetings between birth parents and their children. These visits are required by law and happen at regular intervals, typically bi-monthly, or monthly as per the agreement between the courts and the birth family. In Hungary the management of these visits is the responsibility of the foster parent, although about half of the time the actual encounter happens in a location designated by the agency with some professional personnel and supervision present.

Some birth parents only show up irregularly and sometimes skip visitations without advance notice. This makes for wasted trips and even worse, bitterly disappointed children. One foster parent talked about how he took his children outside so they can yell their feelings into the air—a technique she gleaned from a book on child psychology. Foster parents often develop elaborate strategies to avoid these disappointments, from not telling the child in advance about the meeting, to planning fun events to be done near the meeting place in case the birth parents do not show up.

One time we set off with the two kids [for Budapest to meet birth parents] and when we were [entering Budapest] they called to say they couldn't make it because they got sick. So imagine this child, who had carefully prepared a drawing [for her birth mom], who hadn't seen her parents in 6 weeks or so and then we finally leave and we are almost in Budapest. At every village she asked "is this Budapest already?" And then they tell us not to bother going. We turned back and we simply couldn't comfort Barbie, the older child. It was really hard on her. That and the next few days, those are always hard. The kids somehow can sense it that the four weeks are up, even though we try not to talk about [the upcoming meeting with the birth parents], just in case [it gets cancelled]. They can sense that it's time for the meeting and they behave accordingly. (Gabor, foster parent of two, who takes the children for visits once a month and lives in a small village about 40 kilometers from Budapest)

When the meeting does happen, the adjustment back to the reality of life in the foster home must be managed carefully. Birth parents may, sometimes in the best of faith, sometimes out of negligence, make promises they cannot keep, and this leads to confusion, anger and anxiety that foster parents must somehow manage.

You see, the birth father takes out this child. When they meet, he promises the skies to her and then he disappears for two months. So we try to digest this. Of course then I know why the kid is going crazy, why she is throwing things around or why she bites her classmates so badly that they bleed. (Kata, foster mother to four, Budapest)

Other times children may have memories of trauma in their birth homes and find the meetings stressful. The quote below describes this, probably coupled with the foster parent's animosity toward and fear of the birth parents because of their alcoholism, unruly behavior and anger toward her and the Foster Parent Agency. Even if the latter is taken into account it is a good example of the psychological stress produced by and to be managed at meetings (or missed meetings) with birth parents. Says Viktoria, foster mother of a baby:

This child, Csilla, whom I fostered, she was terrified of her parents. Imagine an eight-month-old child desperately hanging on to my clothes when she saw her parents. It took 2–3 days after each visit for her to calm down. When the parents were forbidden to see her for a few months she became so happy and relaxed just because she didn't have to meet with them. And no matter what I tell a psychologist, they can't do anything about it. There is a serious problem here with the legal regulation. (Viktoria, currently fostering one child)

The legislation she refers to is the Child Protection Law which gives birth parents extensive rights over their birth children, which foster parents often see as unwarranted and undeserved. Indeed, most birth parents are not especially well equipped to spend two meaningful hours with their children whom they had not seen for at least two weeks. The situation in which the meeting takes place does not help matters either. The visitations are typically arranged in a large room of the foster network agency, where several other foster-birth family couples are also present. Sometimes the encounter is monitored by the foster parent herself and one or more supervisors of the foster agency. These are tumultuous affairs. I spent

several months helping out at visitation hours at two different Foster Parent Network Agencies, observing and occasionally helping with these rather awkward get-togethers. Parents arrived, unpacked soft drinks and sweets, had snacks with the children but then had trouble expressing their love and devotion to their child in this heavily supervised context and in the way it was expected of them. The meeting rooms are packed with toys, so children could run amok, but birth parents rarely had the skills, the patience or the mood to play along or to simply engage with children, apart from watching and embracing them and feeding them snacks.

There is no parent–child relationship between them. She'd say, come here and then embraces him but that's all, nothing more. She hands him her phone and tells him to go ahead and play. So these visits are not exactly meaningful in that way. (Mrs Csicsó, long-time foster parent, currently of three children)

Truly excellent foster parents take it upon themselves to manage the situation in a way that it becomes comfortable for everyone. This is difficult because birth parents' needs must be taken into account as well, as well as the limitations in their ability or desire to parent. Here is how one foster parent of many years described what her role is during the visitations.

When Moni and her parents don't know what to do with each other I try to ease the situation because it's so embarrassing to just sit there and look at each other. And of course Moni would come to me as she does on every other day of the week. And then I would tell her, come on, let's show Mummy what has happened. And I tell the mother what happened to Moni that week but I try to get her involved and get her to say something and Laci [her younger child] too, so he would say something as well about what happened. And I ask the parents about their lives because of course they also have lots of problems. (Erika, foster mom of two in Budapest)

This is the exception, rather than the rule, as cultural, class and ethnic differences—not to mention the built-in animosity on the part of the birth parent toward the Agency and its representatives for interfering in their lives—often make even simple communication between birth and foster parents difficult. Many foster parents had no patience for dealing with birth parents whom they often blamed—directly or indirectly—for the problems the children faced. But the most successful ones took on the task

of bridging the class/ethnic gap and specifically “teaching” birth parents how to parent. This required a great deal of personal dedication and skill.

Szandi’s mom comes the second Saturday of every month and then we try to do something together. Because she [the mother] is a pretty neglected person, we take her to the Zoo as well, or to swim in lake Velence or Balaton. We kind of adopted her as part of the family and on that day she is also our child. So we go together. (Andrea, foster mother of two children)

Exercising Professional Technologies of Self

Professional foster parents are expected to relate to their children in a professional manner and exercise what is called “smart love” in their work activities. Broadly speaking this means loving the child without a sense of ownership and full commitment. Foster parents are taught to love their children but love them with reservations; to handle them as members of the family yet view them as temporary additions, and as people whose ultimate fate is not in their hands. Most experts agree that this is a tall order: “Foster parents must have a split personality: they are expected to tell the children that they belong there, they are members of their family, yet must also encourage them to return to their own birth parents” (Foster parent advisor, explaining why he could never do this job). Indeed, this is a difficult balance and most foster parents are somewhat unsure about what “smart love” means or whether or not they should strive to provide it. The best explanation I heard highlights the vast amount of emotional work that goes into “smart love”, well beyond a simple love for children.

Well, you have to do everything the same as with your own child. That kid needs lots of love in their first three years, so they can be self-confident later. You must love them the same, only you have to be strong when it is time to let them go. Because it is a lot worse for them if they see that I am reluctant to let them go, then he will feel guilty. (Bori, an experienced foster parent, who has raised a number of very small children who were later adopted, as well as a few who grew up in her household.)

Indeed, “losing” a child to adoption or return to their birth families is often rather traumatic to foster parents many of whom grow to genuinely love their children. This requires so much emotional work that some agencies offer psychological counseling on the otherwise rare occasion when a child leaves.

Knowledge of child psychology, complicated emotional work and tolerance of psychological distress are all practiced by good foster parents on a daily basis. While the work itself is often acknowledged by agency personnel, the skills that go into managing the foster child–foster parent–birth parent triad is rarely noted (for an exception see Demény 2015).

Advocacy Within Boundaries

While foster agencies do not expect foster parents to be able to solve all the child's psychological and learning problems, they do expect them to advocate for the child in various contexts. This is harder than expected because foster children are often surrounded by discrimination and distrust, both because of their status as protected children and because many of them belong to Hungary's largest minority, the Roma. Hungarians in general express a great deal of animosity toward minorities of all stripes. Anti-Roma sentiments are especially strong and have increased over the past decade. In recent surveys 73% of the population said that they would not consent to a member of the Roma minority moving into their neighborhood, and news and academic reports describe increasing violence against the Roma (FXB 2014). Terms, such as "Roma criminality" abound in the media and the supposedly problematic "lifestyle" of Roma groups is routinely pathologized by Hungarian politicians. In this context, advocating or simply standing up for the rights of Roma foster children requires exceptional courage and determination. Advocacy is especially hard as foster parents have limited rights over the child: the final decision maker is the child's guardian. In addition, foster mothers—who have typically graduated from a technical high school with a certificate in a specific trade—have significantly less cultural capital than the teachers and doctors they must negotiate with.

It is no surprise then that the ability to advocate for their child was one of the key requirements listed by agencies when recruiting foster parents. In fact, this is one task agencies typically claim is "work"-like. As Sára, a foster parent advisor told me:

For this [foster] child to be able to persuade people that she is valuable, not a waste, she must be at least beautiful. But if she is naughty, and ugly and god forbid, Roma and maybe even steals occasionally, poor thing, then the parents in the school will collect signatures against her ... so the [foster par-

ent] will have to lobby hard for her ... she will have to represent the child's interests. (Sára, foster parent advisor, large network in Budapest)

At the same time foster parents must act with a great degree of decorum and be careful to behave in a manner considered "civilized" by the mostly middle-class and middle-aged experts of the foster agency. They are expected to represent the child, but true "tiger moms" are frowned upon too. Ildiko, a middle-aged seamstress in a rural town fostering a small boy who was mistreated in kindergarten was told off by her advisor when she made a scene at the childcare center.

Then [the foster parent advisor] told me on the phone that I was too loud and I didn't behave appropriately and this behavior is not suitable for a foster parent. So I said, yes? I would have been curious to see what you would have done if they had treated your child like this, what would you have done? Of course foster parents must stand up for their children, how could I not? Stop kidding me, should I just laugh when they mistreat him? Come on ... I said that was out of the question, don't even say such things to me. (Ildiko, foster mom of one, her two biological children have already left home)

Worse than frowned upon, in fact, this woman was threatened with the removal of her child when she raised hell for what she perceived as unfair treatment bordering on violence. Foster parents are expected to represent the child's interest vehemently, but within what is a typically moving target of "professional boundaries", something that is not necessarily part of the vocabulary of lower middle-class blue—or white-collar families. Here's another example from a woman who talks about the same problem though formulated in different terms:

You as a foster parent cannot act as a "tiger mom". Because in the end I have no rights at all, all I can do is shut up and raise the child. If I don't do something perfectly, the child may get taken away, in fact even my own kids may be taken. (Viktoria, foster mother of infants, birth mother of two, living in a rural town)

The foster parent above may be expressing more anxiety than is probably warranted, but her point is on target: foster parents must navigate between the Scylla of middle-class civility and the Charybdis of vehement advocacy in difficult situations. This requires an understanding of how

institutions work, refined interpersonal skills, self-control and perseverance.

Dealing with authorities when children have health problems or run-ins with the police are similarly difficult. Says Erika, who raises six children in a small rural town and teaches religion in kindergartens part-time:

[There was a period of time in the life of her fostered daughter when] I spent more of the nights at the police station than in my own bed. But what really broke the camel's back was when she started using drugs. So I told her to stop, everyone else did too, the whole foster parent network came to talk to her.

Erika was barely equipped to deal with police issues, not to mention problems related to drugs and alcohol use. She had received no training which may have taught her how to manage these issues. Neither did she get sufficient help from her advisor and agency, even though she had alerted them to the problem. They came to talk to the child, but in the end it was always Erika who had to bail her out from difficult situations.

Anita fosters a girl who just turned six when I talked to her, but she had started noticing problems when she had enrolled her in kindergarten there years earlier. She spent about 20 minutes of the interview describing her trials and tribulations during the process of getting the child some help, of which this is a short excerpt:

So I took her to lots of doctors. I told this local doctor that something was wrong. He saw that too so sent us to all sorts of places, from the Child Development Service to speech therapy, I took her everywhere. [She needed permission for each expert visit, as well as financial support from the agency. Neither of these could be attained without lengthy petitions, numerous phone calls, explanations and occasional surprise visits to the relevant official's office.] In the end, she received some developmental training and speech therapy, we did this for 2–3 years ... we went to a whole list of therapy classes. (Anita, foster mother of 2)

While birth parents often have to go through the same process, the incidence of developmental lags is much higher in the case of fostered children. In addition, foster parents must ask for permission from the child's guardian and the foster parent agency for every move they make, they must rely on guardians to manage the paperwork, which often takes

months, and they face discrimination at every step of the way from authorities, including schools and health care providers.

Foster parents must thus advocate for children in a society where discrimination against the Roma and indeed against children growing up in untraditional families of any sort are rampant and where their own relationship to the child must be negotiated among the different actors, including the child, in an ongoing manner. This is a skill acquired through the process of fostering and is developed in everyday practice. Foster parents themselves talk about learning the ropes through their own mistakes and doing better on subsequent occasions. Yet, neither the skills, the effort nor the hours are acknowledged when fostering is categorized as an unskilled job and when its wages are set.

Managing a Foster Family

Managing a family requires a great deal of invisible work: women's mental load has been described at length in both academic literature and the media (Daminger 2019). However, managing a foster family is an enterprise on an altogether different scale. Let us review some of the administrative and management duties unfamiliar to most of us.

In addition to their own wages, foster parents receive an allowance to cover the living expenses of their child. The full sum must be devoted to the needs of the child and, in many although not in all agencies, the money must be placed in a separate account. Whether or not foster parents must collect receipts of everyday or only larger purchases for their wards (such as clothes or books or food) varies. In some agencies, this is the norm, and receipts are checked randomly. At other agencies, only certain items must be accounted for.

Oh and the clothes money. We have a certain sum we must spend on clothes each year. We are very lucky in this regard because we don't need a separate bank account and simple receipts will do. So I have a separate folder where I keep the receipts [for each child] from clothing purchases. (Erzsébet, currently fostering four children)

All foster children receive pocket money, which needs to be accounted for. In fact, each child starting at the age of three must sign a form each month to acknowledge that they have been given this amount. The foster parent advisor, during her bi-weekly or monthly visit, regularly asks

children what they do with their pocket money as a way to check on whether or not they have received it. Foster parents, as a result, develop a variety of techniques to make sure the child understands that his or her money is spent on the toy or food item he chooses and they try to imprint this on the child's memory.

During my interviews at a foster parent agency, I was shown the dossier of a foster parent, which contained a long list of days with signatures. This was required because two of the children raised in this family studied at a live-in high school in a different town. This meant that the foster parents only got a part of their salary, proportionate to the actual time the child spent in their homes rather than in the dorm. These days had to be documented on a separate sheet, every month, and filed with the foster agency.

Finally, foster parents must keep a diary of the life of their foster child in view of the fact that they may be able to go back to their birth homes or may get adopted.

Here's the diary, let me show you. It is about the children, exactly because they are here temporarily—so to say. If they move on to anywhere, are adopted or able to move back to their birth parents, I must be able to show what happened to the children while they lived with me, how did he get to where he is now. This is his life ... it is part of our contract, one of our tasks, to have this life history diary. We must do it. Now, we can decide how we do it. This one (she is showing me the book) I wrote in this every day at first, later only once a month. And then he made drawings. This was written to them by their parents, I insert these as well, all sorts of experiences. Now I am starting to add photographs as well. I just thought it's much more practical from my point of view to write down if something happened immediately that evening, rather than go back to it in a month. (Ilona, foster mother of three)

Not all foster parents are as conscientious as Ilona, and some simply keep pictures of the child's life in a folder on a computer or smart phone. I've seen many variations of life diaries as foster parents are typically proud of their children and celebrate their achievements with enthusiasm. The documentation varies in depth and quantity and it must be made available at the request of the foster parent advisor. This is in addition to the bi-annual reports that are filed by the child's guardian, but are in fact typically compiled at least in part by the foster parent herself. While birth parents may be somewhat careless with the personal documents of their children, foster parents must have all personal and legal documents as well

as the history of the child's life organized and potentially accessible at any time.

Administrative work is a hidden aspect of all parenting, but the lives of fostered children need extensive and in-depth documentation, which must be made available for scrutiny at a moment's notice. Indeed, foster parents are now trained in the legal and administrative aspects of their jobs in the preparatory fostering courses they are required to take. The newly introduced employment contract brings further administrative burdens for the parent as an employee, and this requires regular revisions, because wages fluctuate with the number of children in the home and other minor changes.

In summary, fostering is extremely difficult work, which requires the kinds of skills typically associated with women and especially mothers: emotional work, caring and advocating for others, negotiating, administering, organizing and managing people's lives. As women's work it is often seen as being a "natural skill". But as the foster parents themselves have described above, the contexts in which they do their work, and their overall work burden are hardly simple extensions of women's feminine selves: they are examples of highly skilled labor, exhausting the body and the soul. It is thus especially appalling to understand the wages and work conditions of foster parents, which I argue place them squarely into the category of the carefare underclass.

Wages

Over 90% of active foster parents are women, and while several men are also certified as part of a foster family, only exceptionally can men without female spouses house fostered children. Single men in fact face a great deal of suspicion and discrimination when they aspire to the job, and foster parent advisors have asserted several times that fostering is really for women. This is relevant because female-typed care occupations (such as teaching, childcare or nursing) are especially devalued in Hungary, as indeed they are internationally (England 2005). As one foster parent said and this was not at all meant as a joke: "This is women's work, because men can't bear to work this much".

Formal educational requirements are fairly low. Foster parents are expected to have completed elementary education only, but then they have to take a special skills training course of 500–600 hours and pass an examination at the end. Experience in successful childrearing is important

in the selection process. Some agencies explicitly require that applicants will have raised a child of their own. They consider this important to demonstrate that the foster parent applicants are aware of the job of parenting, they have a track record of having raised children and also so they are less likely to think of foster children as their own.

While everyone involved agrees that fostering is extremely difficult and complex work, most foster parents earn less than the national minimum wage. Their salaries are set by state regulations and foster parents working for all agencies and with different levels of experience get the same amount, although some agencies may be more or less generous with covering special costs for children or distributing an occasional bonus payment. All foster parents earn 30% of the national minimum wage, and another 20% of the national minimum is added for each child they foster. This means that a foster parent makes only 90% of the national minimum wage if they foster three children, which is the typical number in Hungary.² In addition, women who foster children under age 2 may also receive parental leave benefits on top of their wages. Interestingly, while this benefit is set at 70% of the minimum wage for other women who do not have a higher income of their own (e.g., university students), foster parents only receive 50%.

Note that there are two types of minimum wage settings in Hungary: one for everyone, and another for skilled workers whose skill is required on the job. Many foster parents have secondary school qualifications and in any case they are expected to graduate from a year-long training course which endows them with a diverse number of specialized skills—as the syllabus of the program attests. As we have seen above, they employ all those skills and more in their everyday work. Yet the minimum wage that applies to them is the generic national minimum, not the specialized one, which would be 30% higher. Importantly, no distinction is made among foster parents by their educational level or experience, as is customary in other segments of the labor market. The only addition is an extra 5% of the minimum wage if a foster parent raises a child with special needs. This amounts to about 8000 HUF per month or 22 EUR, which is roughly the price of ten Big Macs, to use this index of purchasing power parity.

²The minimum wage in Hungary is the second lowest among EU members states after Bulgaria. A foster parent who raises three children gets paid 144,900 HUF (gross, taxes are payable), which is 400 EUR per month in wages in 2020.

The handful of professional foster parents already fostering before 2014 in Hungary earned more than this amount, regardless of the number of children who were placed in their households. However, fewer than 10% of all foster parents worked as professionals, the remaining 90% received an honorarium of 15,000 HUF a month per child, which was seen as a symbolic gesture of thanks, rather than a wage. This means that now the majority of foster parents receive more remuneration than they had before they were “professionalized”. They are now covered by the social security system, and the years spent fostering count toward their old age pensions. Yet the fact that they are getting wages below the national minimum for extremely taxing work that takes up every second of their lives is not missed by foster parents. As one of them succinctly put it: “If you insist on calling this paid work, you might as well call it slave work” (Ilona, foster mother of a small boy in a rural town).

In addition to the salary, each child receives an allowance from the state. This sum must be solely dedicated to his or her living costs, and, as I have already noted, foster parents must document the spending in detail. The size of the allowance is tied to the minimum old age pension payment (it amounts to roughly 150% of it). As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the level of the national minimum old age pension has not changed since 2008 and thus has been devalued by about 30% since 2010. Most foster parents and social workers agree that the cost of raising children is higher than the allowance, especially for older children or children with special needs. Some agencies allocate extra funds for foster parents for specific costs (such as glasses or dental work) but these are unpredictable and vary across agencies. Similarly, foster parent network agencies occasionally distribute treats on special occasions, such as vouchers to buy gifts at Christmas or Easter—the spending of which has to be carefully documented. Nevertheless, several foster parents claimed that they supplement the cost of food and basic necessities from their own salaries or that they couldn’t afford to foster if their husbands had not been making a decent salary.

Increased Work Volume

Many child protection experts agree that the job of fostering is getting harder and harder. As I pointed out earlier this argument was used to justify the need for disciplining, regulating, “professionalizing” foster parents. Here is another very experienced foster parent advisor describing the situation:

Children come from increasingly difficult life conditions. Their problems are often more complex and difficult to deal with. So practically every single child would need a learning therapist, a psychologist, psychiatrist, a developmental therapist, a physician. What I mean is that life had been harder on these kids than for those who we had years ago, and to help them and treat this is no small task. (Foster parent advisor, social worker, Budapest agency)

This is especially so because foster parents raise a growing number of children. The number of children in need has been increasing, yet national campaigns to recruit foster parents have not been particularly successful, so their numbers have been stagnating. In 2000, 25% of foster parents raised three children or more, in 2010 almost 40% did, and in 2020 the figure stood at over 50%. Until 2000 more than half of all foster parents raised only one child. Now there are fewer than 20% working in this category (KSH 2019a). More children, especially more children with major psychological or developmental issues, means significantly more work per parent. This process started earlier, but the incentive structure set up by the 2014 regulation has reinforced it. It is making increasingly more sense to consider fostering as one's only paid job rather than as something to do in addition to working elsewhere. In this context, more children are needed to make a livable, even if meager, income.

Heightened Expectations, Surveillance and Control

As foster parents' relationship to the state turns into one of employment, expectations on the part of the employers increase as well. The administrative burden has grown with the employment relationship. As a policy expert in the Child Protection Service explained to me: "We expect them to be more disciplined, more cooperative. This is in fact the goal of changing the relationship into a professional one. That and that they should be required to participate in trainings." Both the agencies and foster parents agreed with this claim. To illustrate I selected the words of a foster parent who compared the heightened expectations to the ridiculously low compensations she receives:

Especially now that they [the state] put them [the legal guardians] on my shoulders too ... sure I get some money in return. Now I get all of 30,000 HUF. And this should make me feel really good because I now have a salary and this will allow them to tell me what to do. (Viola, foster mother of two children)

As already suggested in the above quote, in addition to an increased workload, heightened expectations and low wages, the process of professionalization is also accompanied by an intensification of surveillance over foster parents' work.

I'd like to help children live in a happy, safe, well-balanced, normal family. But instead, I assign them [the foster parents] an external guardian, send a foster parent advisor on them, maybe more than one guardian because each child could have a different one. And I turn the home of foster parents into a zoo ... who, by the way, I force to take the child to visitation meetings with birth parents every weekend. (Director of a foster parent network agency, Budapest)

At least two supervisors visit families on a regular basis: the foster parent advisor is the most important and is the parent's primary contact to the agency. In addition, as of 2014 each child has a legal guardian, who is a representative of the state, and who makes all final decisions for the child. He or she also visits regularly and, as the quote suggests, guardians are assigned to children, not families, so a family may have several such officials involved in their lives now. In addition, representatives from the agency may also stop by for a variety of reasons. Some of these visits are unannounced, but most are arranged in advance, depending on the schedules of the parties involved. Most foster parents had only a vague idea of how often exactly the visits are supposed to happen, but they did sense that they must accommodate someone almost weekly. This coupled with the bi-annual weekend trainings they must attend, network-wide holiday gatherings, as well as the bi-weekly or monthly birth parent visitation sessions, which also often happen at the agency's premises with supervision from the agency, all taken together provide a great deal of opportunities for contact.

Typically, foster parents try to build a good relationship with their advisors as they see them not only as their direct supervisors but also as their contact to the agency. Advisors also serve as a source of practical advice or emotional support. During their monthly visits, the foster parent advisor talks to the child and the foster parent, but also has the right to open refrigerators, wardrobes and toy storage boxes to make sure the child has all that is prescribed by law and deemed necessary by the agency. They also assess the cleanliness of the home in general, and comment on it should they find it not up to their standards.

I am being continuously monitored. When Adam came to live with us, they [representatives of the foster parent network agency] visited me twice a week. I cleaned more than ever, because I was worried that they would find something amiss. Then, after a while I got used to the visits and gave up on the extra cleaning. (Natalia, foster mother to newborns, living in a small town)

Natalia is a relatively recent foster parent who specializes in looking after newborns until they get adopted. She has a college degree, but gave up her job as a marketing manager a few years ago, and now lives with her husband, three school-age birth children, and a varying number of fostered babies in a small town about 60 minutes east of Budapest. She is perhaps the most vocal about the ongoing surveillance, but several foster parents told me horror stories they had heard of especially brutal advisors, for example the one who stopped by randomly during the weekend lunch period and looked into pots to see what the children were being fed. The stories may not be true, but they do reflect foster parents' understanding of their vulnerability to the gaze of their advisors, which penetrates even the walls of their bedrooms.

Their lack of control over their work lives manifests most often when they are assigned children or when children leave their homes. Several accounts describe how foster parents are increasingly unable to influence these two vital processes. One foster parent, for example, was asked to take in three children with exactly two days' notice. She had space for two children, but had no control over either the number or the timing of their arrival.

Once they identify a child they ask you to host, they call you on the phone. In principle you would have time to discuss this with your family and give an answer in a few days. Yeah, dream on. I'll tell you how these three children landed here and you'll see. When we were just receiving an honorarium we could say no. Then we had this training and they told us that we'd better agree to accepting the children they send us. (Anikó, foster parent of four children, rural town)

Foster parents are especially prohibited to reject children on the basis of ethnicity. This is an important issue, since—according to estimates—between 30% and 50% of the children in the system are of Roma ethnicity and, as I explained above, discrimination against the Roma are widespread. Foster parents are not immune to racism either, even though they are

trained explicitly to avoid it. Some express fear of how the child will be accepted in their local communities, others are concerned about meetings with the birth parents. Yet others simply feel animosity toward a child who looks “different”. Thus some of the prohibition against picking and choosing of children has to do with the agency’s fully justifiable desire to avoid racial discrimination. But the point here is that foster parents noted a change in attitude toward them since the start of their employment relationship and argued that they became more vulnerable as a result of the new form of dependency.

For their part, foster parent advisors are well aware of their role in the system.

I try to stay friendly with them [the foster parents] so they wouldn’t see the supervisor in me but the helper. But obviously my main role is to follow up on whether or not their work serves the interests of the child. But I am usually friendly with them and I do the checking up part while we are chatting and I help a great deal if needed. (Emese, foster parent advisor, rural town)

Until 2014 most foster parents had legal guardianship rights over their children, but in 2014 each child was assigned a separate guardian, and foster parents could not take on this role any more. This was experienced as a logistical hurdle, but also an expression of lack of trust and loss of control.

One [problem with the new situation] is that they don’t trust us [to make the right decisions for the child]. The other is that we have another person who we are accountable to. (Marika, long-time foster parent, now raising four children)

Or as another experienced foster parent explained why she found it offensive that legal guardians now have the final word on major life decisions about the child:

You know, it is really strange [to have a guardian overseeing her work]. I am raising this child. I know what he needs. I am responsible for him too. Yet, I don’t make the decision, I am sometimes not even asked. (Paula, foster parent to two children)

Gendered Altruism as a Form of Resistance

Consistent with the logic of carefare, work conditions have worsened and wages are appallingly low. Why do foster parents agree to these employment conditions? One possible answer is that they simply have no alternatives: the “whip of hunger” forces them to accept even these conditions. But this is inconsistent with what I heard from my interviewees. Most foster mothers I talked to could list several job alternatives, or positions they gave up for fostering. Granted, some of those jobs required long traveling, shift work or working very long hours, but they did not necessarily mean more overall effort than the work they were doing now. Several of my respondents said that they chose fostering because they wanted to help children, and associated caring for others with their true feminine identity. In other words, they evoked altruism and the importance of a meaningful, caring life as a form of highly gendered moral rationality (Duncan and Edwards 1999), that is, as a rational choice, which was not based on economic gain but on a specific orientation to life and a system of values sharply at odds with the mainstream expectations. A good example is Zsuzsa, an engineer, one of the few foster mothers I interviewed who had a professional, full-time job in addition to raising two fostered and two biological children (with a stay-at-home husband). She told me that her friends and family do not quite understand why she and her husband chose to foster on top of all her other work. But, she said, “We wanted to do something meaningful, something that we can later explain to our children” (Zsuzsa, fostering two children, biological mom to two in Budapest). Blanka, who used to work as a nurse in a nearby hospital before she resigned to raise foster children explained to me laughing: “I know this sound silly but I don’t like to be working for money” (Blanka, foster mom to 2 toddlers, small rural town).

As a corollary, foster parents often claimed that what they did was not work but part of the natural flow of their lives, part of who they were. One example of this position comes from Tanya, a long-time foster parent who lives in a village outside of Budapest. She acknowledges that fostering requires energy, but makes a sharp distinction between work and family. The term “work” has no place in the “natural” setting of a family:

I don’t think of this as work. Because I think this is a natural thing. We have children, we come home, just like raising my own kids, this is not work either. I mean there’s a lot of work with this, yes, and I get really tired by the evening ... but this is not a job for me. It is family. (Tanya, foster mother of three)

Other women claim that what they do does not require special skills, only their womanly instincts. Kata, a foster mother of two with two biological children of her own said this:

I am not trained as a nurse, I cannot offer anything extra. I am just a mommy who is simply capable of raising healthy children.

She is seconded by another foster parent who, when I asked her if she considered what she did as work, replied: "I ... I don't really know. To me this is really routine, not a big deal at all. No, this is not work" (Juli, long-time foster mother, currently raising three children).

An important correlate of altruism is that love seems incongruent with financial compensation: both foster parents and their agencies subscribe to the "hostile worlds" argument (Zelitzer 1997). This was one of the reasons why I heard repeatedly that fostering should not be thought of as paid work. Instead, foster parents and their advisors used a variety of different words to describe what they were doing including "love", "calling", a "hobby", a "lifestyle", a "way of life", a "service": fostering was thought of as outside the realm of paid work as something opposite to the world of work and financial compensation.

If I were a child, I wouldn't want my foster mother to get paid so she would love me and keep me in her family. I don't think that would be good, not even for the self-respect of foster parents. With this move [the 2014 legislation] they took away the only important thing, that they can do charitable activity, that they can help kids. Now we say this is their job, like for a teacher or child care worker. (Diana, experienced foster parent advisor in Budapest)

Or as another policy expert put it:

This is all about children, we cannot treat this as work. A foster parent must be a lot more than that. It is not enough just to satisfy the daily needs of the child, to offer clean clothes, room and warm food. An institution can offer all that. A foster parent needs to give more: her soul and her love. (Social worker, policy expert)

Soul and love cannot be bought and, it seems, need not be compensated for either.

CONCLUSION

This chapter illustrated an important yet well-hidden aspect of Hungary's carefare regime: the construction of primarily female, paid—but barely so—care workers through the process of professionalization from above. A new piece of legislation, fully in line with expert recommendations, transformed the relationship of foster parents to the state into that of employment. As employment contracts go, this one is quite unfavorable to foster parents: it increases their work volume, the expectations placed on them and the length of training required for the work, it exacerbates the surveillance foster families are subjected to by state actors, and wrests from them even more control over the work process. In exchange for work done in these extremely precarious conditions, foster parents get paid less than the minimum wage. They also became part of the social insurance scheme and now expect to draw pension benefits—proportionate to these wages. Foster parents thus joined the underclass of female care workers whose exploitation forms one of the foundations of the anti-liberal regime. The transformation in this area of child protection also highlights the re-engineering of the state in an anti-liberal political direction: the channeling of public funds into the coffers of politically loyal religious organizations.

Both the discursive justification of the changes in state policies, and foster parents' resistance to these, are based on the assumption that caring is women's natural skill and the ultimate meaning of their lives. State agencies can afford to pay precious little for the vast amount of work foster parents do, and foster parents can justify their acceptance of these extremely precarious work conditions by relying on a gendered hostile world argument: love for children and proper financial compensations do not mingle, and women's ultimate expression of femininity is in the work of caring selflessly for others. As long as foster parents, especially foster mothers, agree to conceptualizing their employment relationship as one of motherly altruism, and feminine meaning making, carefare will thrive.

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