

Article

Hungarian Clergywomen's Careers in the Church

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Abstract: After half a century of formal equality regarding ministry in Protestant churches, female leaders have become increasingly common in Protestant churches in Western Europe and North America. However, in Hungary—and in East-Central Europe in general—women leaders are typically absent. Based on in-depth interviews with clergywomen, our study, which has focused on clergywomen's aspirations and choices, explores the reasons why women's church careers in Hungary will stop progressing at a certain point. We argue that by adapting to the traditional gender beliefs typical in Hungarian churches, clergywomen's choices contribute to the maintenance of the existing gender order rather than challenge it. Nevertheless, through their growing presence and the way in which they minister, Hungarian clergywomen have gradually expanded women's opportunities in the church, albeit mostly unintentionally, by following a special way of emancipation: 'norm-following emancipation'. This way of emancipation legitimizes women in the ministry but does not promote women in leadership roles.

Keywords: clergywomen; gender beliefs; career aspirations; female leadership; calling; pastoral role; gender inequality; discrimination



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1. Introduction

Our study focuses on women's careers in Hungarian Protestant churches. At the time of writing this study, there are no women in higher positions of leadership in the Reformed (Calvinist) Church of Hungary, which is by far the largest church that ordains women in Hungary: no women hold the positions of dean or bishop or are even among their deputies. In the second-largest denomination, the Lutheran Church, women occupy positions up to the level below a bishop, but their proportion is low compared to their presence in the clergy. Moreover, no women have ever reached the episcopate in any of the Protestant churches in Hungary. As we move upward in the hierarchy, from the believers, through the clergy, to church leaders, fewer and fewer women can be detected in the churches.

In our research, based on in-depth interviews with clergywomen, we explore the reasons why women's leadership careers stop progressing at a certain point. Therefore, we discuss the full range of clergy careers in the churches, including leadership positions above the congregational level. There is already an extensive corpus of literature on the topic of women's careers in Protestant churches, some of which also discuss women's possibilities for careers in higher leadership positions (e.g., [Rois et al. 2013](#); [Jost 2019](#); [Gatrell and Peyton 2019](#)). However, these typically deal with the churches of Western Europe and North America, while the special situation of East-Central European clergywomen has received less attention. The unique contribution of our study is that we explore this special situation from the perspective of clergywomen's aspirations and choices, a topic that is embedded in a social context that is more conservative in terms of gender order than in Western European societies. Our analysis contributes to the understanding of how women adapt to a conservative gender order under conditions of formal equality, how they themselves contribute to the maintenance of this order through their choices, and how, despite all this, they can expand their options and shape this order.

2. Theoretical Background

To delineate the theoretical framework for our topic, we first explore the inequalities in churches by identifying the different male and female careers, discussing horizontal and vertical segregation, and considering the impact of the Hungarian social context, which diverges from the Western context in some important areas regarding gender beliefs. We will then examine which theoretical approaches can be applied to explain how clergywomen conform to these inequalities in the churches, focusing on expectation states theory (Correll and Ridgeway 2006; Ridgeway and Bourg 2004). Finally, to understand women's career paths in the churches, it is important to explore clergywomen's perceptions of their calling, career, and pastoral role, which are intrinsically connected to their choices and strategies, thereby defining their professional careers.

2.1. Equality and Inequality in the Protestant Churches

For most of the two-thousand-year history of the Christian church, women have not only been denied the priesthood but have also played a subordinate role to men at all levels of participation in the church. However, in the early Christian communities and in the first centuries of the church, women were allowed to occupy leadership roles; it was only the changing perceptions of women apostles and prophetesses from the Middle Ages onward that erased them from church memory (Küng [2001] 2017). It is important to note, however, that although there were instances of women being ordained as priests in Christian communities before the 11th century, this never implied *equal* duties and responsibilities with men, nor did it imply leadership *over* men (Nesbitt 1997). The Reformation had a positive impact on the status of women, both by valuing women's activities connected to daily living, such as pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing, and also by opening up important opportunities for women to study, to work in the field of girls' education, and even to engage in theology. However, it was a long time before the idea of the *truly equal participation* of women in the church emerged in Protestant churches (Gause 2006; Küng [2001] 2017).

It was not until the mid-19th century that the first clergywoman was ordained, and it was not until the second half of the 20th century that this became an established practice. Following the ordination of the first female pastor in the United States in 1853, the practice spread relatively rapidly, with 3400 Protestant women ministers being ordained by the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Nesbitt 1997). However, this was followed by a 'backlash' in the early 20th century, with most churches tightening up their rules and practices and a consequently sharp decline in the number of women ministers. This trend was reversed by the Second World War, and, from the 1970s onward, the number of churches ordaining women, and, thus, the number of clergywomen, began to rise significantly (Chaves 1996; Nesbitt 1997). In Europe, women were allowed to pursue theological studies in most countries from the early 20th century, but it was only gradually and partially that they became involved in pastoral ministry. Although, from the 1940s onward, more and more churches decided to ordain women, it was only from the 1970s onward that the ordination of women became a widely accepted practice without any restrictions or distinctions, thus establishing full equality (LWF 2016; Mantei and Bergmann 2017). In Hungary, the timeframe for women's emancipation in the ministry was similar. The Lutheran Church ordained its first female pastor in 1972 (Sárkány 2022). In the Reformed Church, women were allowed to become assistant pastors from the 1960s, to serve the sacraments from 1981, and finally, after 1985, women were ordained without any restrictions (Karsay 1986; Orisek 1999).

The opening up of the clerical profession to women in Western societies was, of course, embedded in a process in which laws and practices that had previously excluded women were first being challenged and then abolished in more and more areas of social life (suffrage, education, careers, etc.). The Protestant churches, by opening up the ministry, have chosen to adapt to changing social circumstances by reinterpreting and reassessing their religious tradition in an egalitarian way (Sammet 2017), although this move has been

accompanied by serious controversies in all the churches concerned (Chaves 1996). These debates have not yet been completely resolved, and in some churches in East-Central Europe, measures have been taken once again to restrict women's participation (the Latvian Evangelical Church and the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia).

Although full *formal equality* has been achieved in most of the churches concerned, this does not mean full *participation on an equal footing* in these churches. Women are, according to all surveys, more religious than men and are more active in the church (Stark 2008; Klein et al. 2017). Their number has long been increasing among the ranks of theological students, and in some countries and denominations, they are now in the majority (especially in Northern and Western Europe, cf. LWF 2016). Accordingly, the proportion of women in the clergy is also increasing and is currently between 20 and 40 percent in most countries. In Hungary, more than a third of both Reformed and Lutheran clergy are women, in Germany, the proportion is similar, and in the Nordic countries, it is slightly higher (Niemelä 2013; LWF 2016; Mantei and Bergmann 2017). According to press reports, the Swedish Lutheran Church may be the first organization where the majority of pastors are women (Dellanna 2020). In the United States, on the other hand, the rate is slightly lower, with just over 20 percent of clergy being female (Schleifer and Miller 2017). According to more recent data, the presence of female leaders varies to a great extent across Protestant denominations: 30% of predominantly white mainline Protestant congregations, and 16% of Black Protestant congregations, but only 3% of the evangelical Protestant congregations had female pastors, while women in lower-level clergy positions are much more common: 35% of full-time and 46% of part-time secondary ministerial staff are female (Chaves et al. 2021). The increasing proportion of women has led to the recurring question of the 'feminization' of the pastoral profession in both ecclesial and academic discourse in recent decades. This discourse is not only about the increasing presence of women in church careers but also about the fact that, as in the case of other 'feminizing' professions, the greater participation of women is accompanied by a devaluation of the pastoral profession, with its relative position deteriorating in terms of material and symbolic rewards compared to other professions (Nesbitt 1997; Wagner-Rau 2010; Schleifer and Miller 2017).

A series of studies over the past few decades have confirmed that women's opportunities in churches are far from equal to those for men: women pastors find it more difficult to obtain suitable work or are given lower-status jobs, and there are disproportionately fewer women in leadership positions in churches (Finlay 1996; Charlton 1997; Sullins 2000; Chang 2005); moreover, they are invariably less likely than men to be in independent congregational leadership pastoral positions (Hoegeman 2017). The term 'stained-glass ceiling' has been used to describe this vertical segregation since the 1990s (Purvis 1995; Sullins 2000), emphasizing that it is a barrier that is less invisible and is harder to break through compared to the 'glass ceiling' identified in secular occupations (Adams 2007; De Gasquet 2010).

Yet, after roughly half a century of ordination being open to women and a steadily rising proportion of female clergy, more and more women are breaking through the stained-glass ceiling everywhere. The first female bishop was appointed in 1980 (Nesbitt 1997) and since then, many have followed her to high ecclesiastical offices. While the emergence of (top) women leaders is a clear sign of a shift toward equal participation, the presence of 'iconic' women leaders may also partly mask the discrimination and inequalities that still exist. In light of their success, the remaining gaps may appear to be the result of individual choices while, in fact, they are the result of systemic processes (Nesbitt 2013). This token position (Kanter 1977) perpetuates the perception of the just and meritocratic functioning of the system and thereby increases the acceptance of a hierarchy that disadvantages women (Vida and Kovács 2017). However, even these 'tokens' are largely absent in Hungarian churches: compared to Western Protestant churches, women leaders are much less present. In examining this finding, it should be taken into account that after the fall of communism, Hungarian churches tried to rely on the traditions of pre-communist times (Huszár 2011). As a result, at the level of everyday church functioning, more traditional ways of thinking

and practices regarding women's empowerment became prevalent compared to Western Protestant churches. Another important factor is that the attitude of the Hungarian churches toward gender roles is embedded in a more conservative social environment than that of Western European churches, since the attractiveness of traditional gender roles increased after the regime change in 1989–90 (Tóth 1995; Braun and Scott 2009). Although, in the 2000s, opinions on gender roles shifted somewhat toward egalitarianism (Pongrácz and S. Molnár 2011), in some respects, they remained rather traditionalist, even among the youngest age groups (Gregor 2016).

It was a general trend in secular occupations that as the barriers to women's entry were lowered, they were directed toward less important, lower-ranking, perhaps ad hoc, 'special' tasks within their profession, which also devalued women in the wider profession in terms of power relations. The processes of this marginalizing integration (Wetterer 1999) are also more difficult to identify as the hierarchical mechanisms of gendered exclusion, compared to the clear and explicit nature of exclusion from other occupations. This has also been played out in churches, creating strong horizontal segregation: female pastors are less likely to be assigned to congregations than their male counterparts, while they are more often to be found in specialized, non-congregational pastoral occupations, such as school chaplains or prison chaplains (Nesbitt 1997; Chang 2005; Fekete 2006; De Gasquet 2010). These institutional chaplaincy positions are considered lower-prestige jobs compared to congregational chaplaincy; thus, this division of labor also contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities in churches (Charlton 1997; Offenberger 2013). Adapting to the situation, women are more likely to prefer or accept these jobs, even at the planning level (Finlay 1996).

Previous research in the United States has shown that the career paths of women and men in congregations also differ markedly: while there was little difference between the initial placement of female and male pastors in congregations, at later stages of their careers, male pastors moved to more prestigious congregations and locations, while women continued to hold pastoral positions similar to their initial placement, usually in smaller, rural, and aging congregations with fewer financial resources (Carroll et al. 1983; Finlay 1996). In recent decades, several studies have confirmed the correlation that women pastors are invariably more likely to serve in smaller congregations in poorer financial circumstances and, thus, with lower prestige (Sullins 2000; McDuff 2001; Hoegeman 2017). Hungarian research also confirms that there is a typical pastoral career path in which the first assignment of a young female pastor is to peripheral areas and smaller settlements (Siba 2020; Török and Biró 2020, 2022).

It can, therefore, be said that, despite formal equality, women pastors' professional opportunities are still not equal to men's, and this inequality is reflected in both vertical and horizontal segregation. This inequality may be particularly significant in countries where gender attitudes are more conservative and church practices are more traditional, as is common in Hungary.

2.2. Theoretical Approaches of Understanding Gender-Based Inequalities

After having outlined the gender-based inequalities in Protestant churches, the question should be addressed as to why these inequalities persist after decades of formally having equal rights in ministry. In order to explore this, we can make use of theories that have been constructed to explain gender inequalities in the labor market.

Inequalities that disadvantage women in the labor market can be explained according to the consequences of the so-called 'second shift' (Hochschild 1989), in which the traditional family division of labor allocates the major part of care and household tasks to women, and this hinders effectively their labor market participation and career progression. The problem of the second shift may be even more decisive in the church than in secular professions, because religiosity shows a connection with traditionalist gender-role attitudes (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Seguino 2011); therefore, religious families often tend to distribute the

household tasks in an unequal way, with wives assuming the bulk of caring responsibilities and household work (Ellison and Bartkowski 2002; Török and Biró 2023).

In addition to this bias, cultural beliefs about gender that disadvantage women are crucial factors in the persistence of gender-based inequalities (Ridgeway and Bourg 2004; Ridgeway 2011). The expectation states theory emphasizes that gender is a diffuse status characteristic that gives rise to widely shared expectations about an individual's performance (Correll and Ridgeway 2006). These expectations attribute less competence and lower performance to women in task-oriented situations, while much is expected of them in caring and community roles (Carli and Eagly 2007). Expectations regarding motherhood are particularly strong (Ridgeway and Correll 2004), making it difficult for women to pursue their careers with the same intensity after having children as before they do so (Nagy 2016). These expectations also effectively push women toward 'feminine' work areas and positions at the organizational level (Nagy and Paksi 2014; Nagy 2016), reinforcing horizontal segregation. These gendered expectations shape—mostly implicitly and unintentionally—employers' decisions, creating discrimination, while, at the same time, they also shape female employees' strategies and career choices, constantly creating and maintaining the gendered structure and the accompanying unequal outcomes in employment (Ridgeway 2011). Again, this impact may be even more explicit in the ministry than in secular professions, due to the connection of religiosity with traditionalist gender-role attitudes and expectations (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Seguíno 2011). In accordance with this pattern, earlier research explained the differences between female and male pastoral careers, primarily in terms of discrimination and the awareness of women pastors of their limited options when making their choices (Carroll et al. 1983; Finlay 1996). Research in Hungary has also indicated that women pastors often experienced prejudice and discrimination (Orisek 1999) and that, typically, they already envisaged their future, when planning their careers, as members of a pastoral couple rather than as independent pastors (Huszár 2011).

As opposed to the expectation states theory, preference theory emphasizes the importance of women's own choices rather than external expectations (Hakim 2002, 2006). According to this theory, women in the Western world have the opportunity to make their own strategic choices, and, in order to understand their situation, it is necessary to explore their preferences in relation to work and family. On this basis, Hakim distinguished between three types: home-centered, adaptive, and work-centered women (Hakim 2002). Research on female ministry has also made attempts to analyze the diverging preferences of clergymen and clergywomen regarding their work. Finlay (1996) argues that the differences in pastoral career paths are at least partly due to women pastors' different preferences from men; for example, women prefer smaller congregations offering more personal interaction and personal support, which, in turn, impacts their careers. This would, therefore, imply that objective or material disadvantages (poorer promotion and material opportunities with smaller congregations) are offset by some subjective, non-material rewards for women. However, this claim was questioned by a US study (Mueller and McDuff 2002), which found that both material and non-material benefits were connected with larger and materially stronger congregations; therefore, jobs in different congregations did not offer different benefits, but simply offered better or worse conditions. There is evidence, however, that female pastors, despite experiencing poorer working conditions and income disadvantages, are more satisfied with their jobs than their male colleagues (McDuff 2001). One reason for this 'gender paradox' may be that female pastors judge their work from different perspectives, in which case, the spiritual and subjective factors of their work may be more pronounced, compared to men, for whom material and objective factors may weigh more heavily (McDuff 2001).

All three of these theoretical approaches can provide important clues in understanding the decisions and strategies that shape the careers of women pastors and, thus, can contribute to explaining why women are largely absent from leadership positions in Protestant churches in Hungary.

2.3. Differences in Male and Female Conceptions of Calling, Career, and Pastoral Role

Gendered perceptions and interpretations regarding their calling, promotion prospects, and pastoral roles play a crucial part in the different career paths of women and men in the church. Career decisions in ecclesial careers cannot be examined in the same way as in secular occupations because here, specific considerations—essentially those related to a religious ‘calling’—may override secular career considerations (Nesbitt 1997). It is precisely as a result of the Reformation that the concept of calling (in the form of ‘vocation’) has acquired a secular meaning (Weber 1982): it was then understood as a specific attitude to work in which those concerned are willing to set aside, to a considerable extent, those career-choice aspects that prioritize self-fulfillment and personal gain (Lovell 2022) and, instead, interpret their work primarily in terms of impersonal social utility and a sense of duty (Weber 1982). These considerations also play a defining role in the pastoral vocation, but here, the focus is on fulfilling the God-ordained calling. Although, for both men and women, the call of God is the main motivation for pastoral work (Christopherson 1994; Niemelä 2011), for women, a calling bears even more significance because it proves that despite their unequal position in the church and the difficulties that they face, they are qualified for ministerial work in the same way as men. This can reinforce their commitment in a context where their role as ministers is still questioned (Niemelä 2011). Perhaps this may also be an explanation for the fact that women reported more often than men that they were able to recall a specific event or moment in which they experienced their calling (Zikmund et al. 1998; Cody-Rydzewski 2006). Experiencing a call strengthens women pastors’ willingness to accept difficulties and it also enhances their ability to cope with them (Greene and Robbins 2015). Calling is, therefore, not a gender-neutral concept, either regarding the way it is experienced and pursued or in terms of career outcomes (Sturges 2019).

Likewise, the traditional career narrative that schematically describes a career in the ministry along the lines of other organizational careers—from leading smaller congregations or associate pastor positions, through leadership positions in larger congregations, to higher leadership positions in the church—is not gender-neutral either. In the case of male pastors, we are more likely to encounter attitudes that interpret a career path as a series of progressions to increasingly better positions, which is similar to the attitudes found in secular occupations (Nesbitt 1997), and which understands vocational success essentially in terms of leadership (Sturges 2019). Charlton (2000) argues that women pastors often refuse to interpret their pastoral careers in this framework, instead emphasizing the importance of faith, vocation, and work being done well as an alternative career narrative. This means that when we look at women’s position in the ministry from a ‘traditional’ career perspective, we are applying a career interpretation that is more typical of men in the church hierarchy. Thus, the traditional narrative of a successful career is not gender-neutral; the fact that women pastors encounter only this career interpretation in the public sphere is already a disadvantage for women who do not identify with this approach (Charlton 2000).

Gendered understandings of calling and career are linked to different understandings of the role of the pastor and their pastoral work. Gendered differences in attitudes to work also exist in secular careers, although they are not very significant: women have a slightly less instrumental attitude to their work compared to men, and social utility and helping others tend to be ranked higher in the order of work values for women (Török 2011, 2016). Research on managers has also shown that female managers’ social sensitivity, flexibility, resilience, and motivational levels are higher than those of the male managers (Garamvölgyi and Rudnák 2023). Research conducted on male and female ministers demonstrated systematic differences between women and men in the practice of the pastoral vocation, which corresponds with the differences in secular working attitudes. Women pastors of the first generations of female ministers articulated the difference between female and male role perceptions by emphasizing traditional feminine traits, for example, in the juxtaposition of *ministry* and *office*, thereby contrasting the helping-supportive elements of the pastoral vocation with the more hierarchical and formal aspects considered characteristic of men (Sammet 2010, 2013). Martha Long Ice, in her analysis based on in-depth interviews,

found that women have a distinctly more egalitarian, collaborative, personal, and flexible view of the pastoral role, which emphasizes responsibility and care, as opposed to a more hierarchical and competitive view, which is seen as masculine (Ice 1987). Quantitative studies conducted in the 1990s (Lehman 1993, 1997) confirmed that there are differences between men and women in the way in which they carry out the pastoral role, even though these differences are less salient and are much less pronounced than expected. Nevertheless, these dimensions fit in the framework developed by Ice: their exercise of authority over the congregation, rational and formal decision-making, and the legalistic approach to ethical issues were more characteristic of men, while the importance of empowerment in relation to the congregation was more characteristic of women (Lehman 1993, 1997). Subsequent research has shown that women pastors place greater emphasis on social activism, are more concerned with promoting minorities and equality issues, and cherish the facilitative aspects of pastoral work more than their male colleagues (Niemelä 2013; Tervo-Niemelä 2016). They also identify more vigorously with the supportive and relationship-building perceptions of the pastoral role (Sammet 2013). In contrast, male pastors are more likely to have a more passive or liturgically focused understanding of the pastoral role (Tervo-Niemelä 2016). The differences that can be detected in the way that women pastors practice their vocation and perceive their role in comparison to male pastors are, on the one hand, based on reinterpreting those qualities that are traditionally considered feminine (sensitive, helping, supportive) and, on the other hand, on moving towards a more open, active, and person-centered ministry. It is important to note that these traits are currently becoming more prevalent in church functioning *in general* (Tervo-Niemelä 2016) and, thus, may also affect male pastors. The image of a pastoral vocation and the role of the pastor is constantly transforming, and, as part of this change, the focus has shifted to the pastor's *personality*, i.e., how kind, loving, or friendly the pastor is, which—regardless of the gender of the pastor—has become more important in terms of the expectations of the congregation (Siba 2020). In summary, it can be stated that women's particularities in the pastoral profession and the changes in the churches are not independent processes but can only be understood in relation to each other. These interrelated processes shape—and are likely to continue to shape and change—the framework in which gender inequalities in the churches are understood.

Gender inequalities in the context of pastoral careers, as well as the gender-specific interpretations of calling, career progression, and the pastoral role, draw attention to the question of whether women pastors experience the problems and difficulties that they have faced in their pastoral careers as specifically *women's problems*, i.e., whether they perceive their pastoral role in connection with women's social position and the existing gender role system and, accordingly, interpret their pastoral role in terms of women's equality and women's equal participation in society. Research has demonstrated that women ministers often do not conceive their difficulties as women's problems, although male dominance and their own experiences of discrimination in their careers may make women pastors more sensitive to gender inequalities. The majority of women pastors interpret their roles in a non-emancipatory framework and are reserved or dismissive of feminism (Charlton 1997; Cody-Rydzewski 2006; Sammet 2013). The perceived tension between the emancipatory role, the experience of inequality, and the rejection of the feminist-emancipatory interpretative framework can be resolved using the concept of *norm-following emancipation* (Sárai Szabó 2014, 2017). Conservative women who took an active role in the social and ecclesiastical public spheres at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries did not interpret their role in terms of individual self-fulfillment and certainly not as a quest for equality, but primarily as a service to God (or to the homeland, the nation, or society). Through this role, however, they expanded their scope of opportunities, they advanced their self-fulfillment, and their role in society changed; ultimately, gender roles were redefined, to a certain extent. In other words, they achieved emancipation in their own lives *without* questioning the norms of their social environment, conforming to societal expectations without crossing boundaries that were considered important, and by fulfilling traditionally female roles (Sárai Szabó 2014, 2017). Gender attitudes in Hungary, which

are generally more conservative than in the West, may again bring into focus this way of resolving the tension between emancipatory professional roles and traditional gender expectations for today's women pastors.

The way that women pastors interpret their calling, work, and pastoral roles are intrinsically connected to their career choices. If these interpretations are based on traditional gender-based cultural beliefs (Ridgeway and Bourg 2004; Ridgeway 2011), this may make it difficult for women to aspire to and achieve leadership positions. This issue will be examined in detail on the basis of our research interviews in the following section.

There is no doubt that in recent decades, women pastors have broken many symbolic barriers in the ministry. In churches in both Europe and North America, women occupy positions in increasing numbers at higher levels of the church hierarchy, and their overall disadvantage compared to men is decreasing. However, it still holds true that women are disproportionately underrepresented in senior positions in churches and that neither horizontal nor vertical segregation has disappeared from church careers, which means that 'classical' inequalities persist. This holds even more true in East-Central Europe and in Hungary in particular, where, in general, a more traditional gender order and, in some respects, a more traditional way of functioning in the churches is prevalent, and where little gender-sensitive sociological analysis of churches has been conducted. It is, therefore, rather timely to investigate how women pastors adapt to this situation and what choices and strategies shape their pastoral careers.

3. Methods

We conducted 36 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Protestant women pastors who belong to the Reformed, Lutheran, or Unitarian denominations, which are the three major churches currently ordaining women in Hungary. We used a non-probability, purposive sampling technique, combined with snowball sampling. The use of the latter meant that if our interviewees recommended female pastors who fitted our sample, based on the sampling criteria, they were also contacted and interviewed. We sought to obtain a sample reflecting the diversity of the target group, based on the following sampling criteria: denominational affiliation, age, place of ministry (capital city, rural town, or small village), and status as a church pastor (church leader or associate pastor). In order to implement purposive sampling, searches were conducted in the church, records of the respective denominations that were available on the Internet were accessed. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted using a detailed interview guide, which was, however, used flexibly to adapt to the flow of the interview. The main topics of the interview guide were career choice, theological studies, the stages of the respective pastoral career and the associated tasks of pastoral work, goals in that pastoral career, the relationship with the congregation, work-life balance, women's characteristics, and facilitating and hindering factors in that pastoral career. The interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2023 (with a break of almost one and a half years due to the COVID-19 epidemic); the length of the interviews was between 60 and 120 min due to detailed discussion of the many different topics.

The research was conducted with the requisite ethical considerations in mind: the interviews were made with the informed consent of the pastors. Permission was also sought from the pastors to audio-record the interviews. Verbatim transcripts of these recordings were then made. The transcripts quoted here have been anonymized, among other methods, by deleting names and place names, and any information that might have made the interviewees recognizable has been deleted. We used an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed using the ATLAS.ti 9.1.7 qualitative data analysis software, which allowed for more efficient and faster processing of the large amount of text produced, in addition to a clear and systematic process (Friesen et al. 2018). Using ATLAS.ti, we created a basic project to which all interview transcripts were added so that they could be analyzed in one place, in addition to being able to group interviews according to different criteria (e.g., senior or associate

pastor status). We read through the transcripts several times and recorded our observations and ideas for coding and analysis, keeping in mind our research questions. We analyzed the interviews inductively, i.e., we created codes, based on our analysis of the interviews, and systematically coded the interviews based on these codes. Mostly, inductive coding was used, although our knowledge of the interview guide themes was inspirational in developing codes, sub-themes, and themes in specific places. The themes and sub-themes were coded, largely by starting with smaller topics and then grouping them into broader themes. We also looked at the interrelationships between different themes, for example, the perceived role of the church environment on the career aspirations of women pastors. In addition to the individual interviews, we also conducted two focus-group interviews, one with female, and the other one with male theological students. The focus-group guide contained some of the major topics from the individual interview guide. In the analysis, we also selected those quotes that best illustrated our research findings in the study. In order to preserve anonymity, the interviewees in the study have been identified only by serial numbers and their ages, as indicated after the quotes. We do not indicate their denominational affiliation, also in the interest of anonymity, especially regarding the anonymity of interviewees belonging to denominations that employ a low number of pastors.

4. Results

In the following section, we will show how the processes and phenomena discussed in the theoretical part of this study are reflected in the experiences of Hungarian women pastors, along with how they are influenced by the more conservative gender order and by the more traditional church practices in Hungary compared to Western societies. The research questions to be answered are the following, the first asks what strategies and decisions, as well as what patterns of adaptation to circumstances, play a role in the fact that women are not or are only rarely placed in leadership positions in Protestant churches in Hungary. The second asks what career aspirations and career interpretations characterize women pastors in these churches. In order to answer these questions, on the basis of the interviews, we examine the factors that influence women's career choices. Seven such factors have been identified: first, we examine women pastors' overall *perception of the position of women* in their churches, since their perceptions and interpretations of their positions clearly influenced their own career choices. We then describe those experiences of *discrimination* that significantly influenced their career decisions and the extent to which *household tasks and care responsibilities* enable or hinder women pastors to focus on their vocation and career. Following this, we turn to the *experiences and interpretations of calling* that may help them to cope with difficulties and disadvantages. We also examine their perceptions of their *pastoral role*, along with their interpretations of *success* and *career* and what impact these perceptions and interpretations have had on their career decisions.

4.1. Perceptions of the Status of Women in the Churches

Based on the interviews, here, we explore how the interviewed female pastors perceive the situation of women in the church in general. This is crucial from the standpoint of women's careers because these perceptions and interpretations significantly influence their own career plans and decisions.

Their responses paint a rather contradictory picture. We detected a perception among women pastors that the church remains a rather masculine career path and a masculine work environment, which places obstacles to the advancement of women, while, at the same time, we registered their concern about the "feminization" of the church. To put it in simple terms, the church is seen as both an organization that does not provide enough space for women and one in which women are given too much space.

"I don't think our church is mature for women leaders" (I2, 33), as one woman pastor put it. As we will present in more detail when we discuss the experiences of discrimination, unequal opportunities and gender-based disadvantages are clearly visible to women pas-

tors. A possible reaction to this could be to situate their own activities in an explicitly emancipatory or feminist context. However, this is less common, according to previous international research (Cody-Rydzewski 2006), and this was only occasionally the case among our interviewees. Nevertheless, we did meet a pastor who, at the beginning of her career, thought that gender equality in the church was “a completed run”, but it was precisely because of the patriarchal mindset with which she was confronted in church life and in theological thinking that she changed her position. “And so, when I realized that these good people think that—I was genuinely surprised because my little bubble hadn’t been burst until then—that there’s a neutral position, let’s say the patriarchal position, and everything is ideological in comparison to that, including feminism. And theirs is the neutral, theirs is the right position. I realized then that I had to be a feminist.” (I2, 33)

Concerns about the rise of women pastors are sometimes expressed by women pastors themselves: “I don’t think it’s good that there are more and more women pastors.” (I21, 43) There are two types of concerns expressed about this topic. The first is the fear that this profession is too difficult for women, as expressed by a woman who believes that there are only a few women who are suitable for the job (“for someone who is not a woman of strong character, it is too much of a challenge” I8, 36); in such a case, the women pastors expressing this concern tended to see themselves as an exception. The other type sees the pastoral profession itself and the life of the congregation as changing in negative ways with the greater presence of women, for example, by creating ‘feminine’ congregations led by women pastors that are less attractive to male believers: “It is such an emotional, intuitive, experiential congregation. And I think that doesn’t work for a lot of men. And that’s why a woman pastor tends to attract women to the church (. . .). The caretaker is also a woman. And they’re running out of men.” (I21, 43)

This perception accepts the subordinate role of women in the church—either because it considers only a minority of women competent for congregational leadership or because it considers the impact of women on congregations to be negative—and definitely influences women’s career decisions in the church. Through these decisions, this perception reinforces the status quo and reduces the chances of women becoming leaders in these churches.

4.2. Discrimination

The fact that discriminatory practices against women are still present in churches in Hungary, as well as the form taken by this discrimination, has a major impact on these women’s careers. Many of our interviewees stressed that, as women pastors, they are already fully accepted in the church: “The church has already overcome this problem” (I1, 50), as one of them put it. However, it is clear from the interviews that women pastors are still sometimes confronted with the fact that they are not all considered to be *truly* equal to men. This is more often a covert and, less often, an overt obstacle to their advancement in the church. It is indicative that, before applying for a pastoral position, women pastors feel that they have to find out “whether the congregation will accept a female pastor” (I31, 41), or if they have to reckon with the fact that during training, there are “congregations where it is not officially stated, but everyone knows that a female legate cannot go there” (I34, 52). Overt discrimination also sometimes appeared in the experiences of our interviewees. Rejection may come from the church leaders, as in this case: “Then when I had been serving here for a year and a half and I felt the urge to have my own congregation, I asked a dean if he could give me a congregation. And he told me in black and white, for you, never. And I asked why? And then he said, I don’t give congregations to women pastors.” (I18, 43) But there were also instances when a congregation rejected a woman pastor openly because she was a woman: “They said, no woman pastor will come here. It was a big slap in the face, I can tell you honestly.” (I34, 52) Although the open rejection of women pastors is a minority opinion in all the churches concerned, most women encounter this in their pastoral career or, often, even during their theology studies. Some of those who oppose the practice of ordaining women as ministers also consider it a sin for women to become ministers: “He [the pastor] said, what a pity that I

am now a theology student, because he cannot fellowship with me in ministry because I am living a sinful life.” (Female focus group).

Another form of rejection is seen when women’s competence is not altogether questioned, but it is argued that joining the ministry is incompatible with performing traditional ‘female’ tasks. Women pastors are often confronted with the argument that *“being [a pastor and] a mother of a family just doesn’t work” (female focus group)*. Consequently, female theological students already feel during their training that there is strong pressure not to plan their careers as independent pastors. This pressure typically comes from male fellow students: *“(. . .) he started to tease me there, saying oh, you’re going to have a baby, and then they’ll come to arrange the funeral, and then the baby will cry, and then what will you do, and your husband is at work.” (I11, 45)* Some of the women who are preparing for a career as a pastor also take these circumstances into account when planning their future, not as a single pastor but as a member of a pastoral couple or as a pastor in an institutional position. As one of our interviewees remarked: *“I felt that a lot of girls are already representing themselves in there and walking around as either a pastor’s wife, or a Bible teacher, or a pastoral care worker.” (I24, 35)*

It can be concluded, therefore, that in spite of the formal status of equality and widespread acceptance, women pastors in Hungarian Protestant churches also face various forms of overt or covert discrimination.

4.3. The Burden of Housework and Care Tasks

Based on our interviews, it can be established that the career decisions of women pastors are significantly influenced by the “second shift” (Hochschild 1989), i.e., domestic and caring responsibilities, especially childcare. Although the involvement of fathers in childcare has become less rare in Hungary in recent decades (Sztáray Kézdy and Drjenovszky 2021; Drjenovszky and Sztáray Kézdy 2023), the division of labor in the home still tends to be more in line with traditional gender roles (Gregor 2016; Takács and Szalma 2022). With the birth of children, even in otherwise egalitarian families, the division of labor in the home shifts toward the traditional pattern (Makay and Spéder 2018). Moreover, numerous studies show that religiosity is associated with conservative gender roles (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Seguino 2011) and traditional roles in the home (Ellison and Bartkowski 2002). In the families of the women pastors in our study, we often encountered an unequal division of domestic tasks in the interviews, which could be described as ‘traditional’: *“At home, I do most of the housework and the things to do with the kids. I go to the parents’ meetings and all the events involving parents.” (I16, 46)* It is, therefore, not surprising that for a significant number of women pastors, the household, especially childcare, is a self-evident obstacle to taking on more serious pastoral responsibilities: *“I had my children in this two-year cycle. . . 0, 2, 4, 6, the four kids. It really [exhausted] me. It was a lot of work, so besides the church work, the other activities, always cooking, always washing, always cleaning, it took all the energy out of me.” (I19, 53)*

In terms of the relationship between caring responsibilities and pastoral work, the situation is remarkably different for female pastors living as part of pastoral couples and for women pastors living with a husband in a secular occupation or living single. In particular, women who are living as members of a pastoral couple tend to withdraw from professional tasks to a lesser or greater extent after the birth of their children, reinforcing the already existing subordinate relationship between male and female members of the pastoral couple (Török and Biró 2023). Part of the reason for this withdrawal is that the caring tasks resulting from traditional gender roles hinder them in their professional work (*“I can’t prepare for a sermon with a child running in and then half an hour later, running in again” (I19, 53)*). In other cases, they have consciously chosen this way of reconciling their work and private life: *“Then I told my husband, first of all, that he should take it this time, he should get ready, he should go, because I’m tired, I have a sick child and I’m with him, so when it was like this, I always chose family.” (I6, 39)* In terms of the preference theory, clergywomen living as a clergy couple can be mostly classified as home-centered (Hakim 2002), or home-oriented adaptive, which means that their family is a higher priority than their work when their children are young

(Schleutker 2017). Living as a clergy couple makes such a choice possible without giving up their vocation. However, it could also be argued that the preference theory approach underestimates the relative importance of constraints: these clergywomen experience pressure to conform to traditional expectations, which results in a clear disadvantage in their ministerial careers compared to the male members of clergy couples (Török and Biró 2023).

Independent women pastors, of course, have no such choice. In their case, the special schedule dictated by the pastor's activities demands their husband's more intensive involvement in the home. In the interviews, this is often expressed as 'helping' (*"Wow, my husband helps a lot. So without that, I couldn't do it"* I4, 48), for which one should be 'grateful' (*"so he makes up for my not being there for the children and the household, so I can't be grateful enough for that"* I12, 41). This can occasionally cause tension in the family: *"And then he has to deal with the two kids, and the bathing, and the toddler, and the tantrums, and I don't know, the upheaval, and he has to do it all by himself, and it's a lot for him."* (I2, 33) It should also be borne in mind that pastoral salaries are relatively low, which makes it difficult to hire paid household help; voluntary assistance that is offered by the congregation is often refused, on the grounds of privacy: *"It's because they're already so privy to our family life that I don't really want them to be privy to it even more."* (I4, 48) Nevertheless, there is often no alternative but to seek paid or voluntary help when the work-life balance causes tensions: *"Since then, there have been no fights [about cleaning], since she comes to our house twice a week to help us keep it clean. So it is finally off our backs."* (I14, 44)

Women ministers can be categorized into two types, depending on the position of their spouse (minister or lay-person). It is a significant finding of our research that the position of the female ministers' husbands has a decisive influence on the female ministers' work-life strategies and, through this, on their careers and professional opportunities. For pastoral couples, traditional role-sharing often "solves" the problem of work-life balance, while Independent clergywomen often feel that they have less time for family and children than they would want to devote to them. For women working as part of a pastoral couple, caring responsibilities "naturally" overshadow pastoral work, but reconciling the two roles causes difficulties for both types. Second-shift responsibilities are certainly a factor that women pastors take into account when making career decisions and such responsibilities can make it considerably more difficult for these women to pursue a career in the traditional sense.

4.4. The Meaning of Calling for Women

Although a calling is a precondition and a starting point of pastoral vocation for both men and women (Christopherson 1994; Niemelä 2011), it is not a gender-neutral concept (Sturges 2019). Our interviews suggest that women pastors often adopt interpretations of their calling that tend to make them accept inequalities and, thus, perpetuate the current hierarchy. Before elaborating on this matter further, the idea of calling needs to be investigated.

Distinctive types can be distinguished in terms of how the call is experienced and how it is translated into a personal decision. Some of the women pastors feel that they have "always" been destined for this career: it was obvious to them from a very early age that this was their path. There are, however, others for whom earlier plans are overwritten by the revelation of a calling at a very opportune moment. Previous research has found that women are more likely than men to be able to recall a specific event or the moment in which they experienced a call (Zikmund et al. 1998; Cody-Rydzewski 2006). Among our interviewees, there was also a type whose calling was linked to a specific experience: *"There was a page in front of me, it was revelatory. It wasn't a dream. I was living it. I remember it to this day. I wrote what I wanted [...] and a big hand came and crossed it out like that. And he wrote: theology."* (I20, 45)

The call has a clear additional meaning for women: it is an affirmation, not only against difficulties in general but also, specifically, against the questioning of women's ministry and against the disadvantages they suffer as women. *"I think that despite the many, many difficulties or perhaps failures, it [the call] is what keeps you on track, so you have to see not*

only the difficulties but also the blessing, that if you are called to something, you have to go on that path.” (I13, 44) In addition, there is an interpretation of a calling as being called to practice one’s vocation in the *present circumstances*, accepting the more modest opportunities that women have. In this case, the call not only empowers the women pastors and helps them to cope with their situation (Greene and Robbins 2015) but is also a factor that encourages the women pastors to accept the difficulties and possible unfavorable circumstances, as if it was a calculation where this is the price that they have to pay for following their call. *“When I decided to become a pastor, I knew not only that I would be poor but that there were female pastors, but the boss was always male. That it was such a church and so on. To decide, being realistic, and to take up the church of God with this (. . .) If you have a certain consciousness of calling, it is very important.” (I22, 51)*

The interviews therefore suggest that the role of a calling is particularly important, not only in *helping* to endure difficulties but also in the *acceptance* of difficulties in general and of women’s disadvantages in particular. Their calling is a crucial support for women pastors in situations where they are confronted with difficulties or when their place in the ministry is questioned. However, such an interpretation of the call to ministry for women may contribute to the acceptance and perpetuation of inequality in churches.

4.5. Conceptions of Pastoral Vocation and Pastoral Role

Many of the women pastors, when commenting on their ministry, emphasized the role of emotions, listening, helping, bonding, and making it *personal*. The personal dimension was also raised several times in the context of what women pastors perceive as their distinctly different characteristics in comparison to their male colleagues. Women pastors tend to bring examples from their own lives to their sermons, emphasizing their similarities with members of the congregation and offering the possibility of a personal connection. *“My husband is more determined, a bit of an eye-opener, as they say. And me, I obviously take examples from my own life and people can find themselves in it.” (I7, 31)* The role of the community was repeatedly emphasized, and the importance of equal, reciprocal relationships within the community and the rejection of hierarchical relationships were expressed: *“I want to be part of this community, just the same way they are.” (I33, 64)* This is often manifested in the rejection of traditional forms of address, which one interviewee described as “*anachronistic*” in today’s world. It should be stressed that rejecting hierarchy and striving to become an equal part of the community properly conforms to the traditional roles of women, but such activities are less compatible with the role of leadership.

The significance of being emotionally available to church members and of building personal relationships was also highlighted in connection with the rebuilding of a congregation: *“I did what I like most in the world anyway, talking, and then I connected with people that way, who then started going to Bible study, worship, so it came step-by-step through building relationships”. (I2, 33)* For many pastors, closeness and personal presence is also the key to running a congregation: *“I’ve found that if anything works, then it’s being direct, understanding, and friendly. Being accessible. To be present.” (I30, 55)* This attitude, regardless of the gender of the pastor, is consistent with the recent changes made to the pastoral role and to church functioning (Tervo-Niemelä 2016).

Women pastors often expressed their preferences in the ministry in ways that were basically in line with traditional expectations regarding women, for example, through the emphasis on “*helping*”: *“I consider it my mission or my vocation to notice when there is a need for help somewhere.” (I33, 64)* The role of the ‘mother’ as a metaphor for the pastor was reiterated: *“This is the protective love, the motherly love, the welcoming love, this is what the pastor can offer, not only to her family, her children, her husband, but also to the community” (I34, 52).*

Our interviews support the findings of previous research, which emphasized being collaborative, egalitarian, supportive, and relationship-building as core features of women’s perceptions of the pastoral role (Ice 1987; Sammet 2010, 2013; Niemelä 2013; Tervo-Niemelä 2016). However, it is important to note that the characteristics that women pastors consider fundamental in their work (helping, bonding, community, personhood, etc.) are focused on

elements of the pastoral vocation that not only correspond with the traditional expectations of women but are, at the same time, also at odds with leadership. Thus, this understanding of the pastoral role may also contribute to the fact that women are less likely to assume leadership roles in churches.

4.6. Career Interpretations and Goals

The women pastors who were interviewed were almost unanimous in rejecting an interpretation of their careers within the framework of the traditional career narrative. The traditional career narrative is about continuous progression: in the case of the ministry, this can mean steps towards larger congregations and higher church positions. Among our interviewees, it was very rare that aspiration toward promotion or even a more prestigious congregational position was presented as a positive, stated goal. The following statement is immediately associated with the experience of a gender-based disadvantage: *"I would have considered myself suitable for a position in a larger congregation, but I was confronted with the fact that as a single woman, not only would I not be accepted by a larger congregation but the deacons would not even think of me as someone with potential. And then it was a time of crisis when I was faced with that."* (I18, 43) Contrary to the statement above, the women pastors were generally strongly averse to accepting higher leadership positions or even aspiring to them. There are typically two types of justification for this rejection. It is essential to note that this refers to the types of reasoning and not the types of persons; the two types of reasoning can occur in the same person. The first type of justification refers to personal preferences about the content and nature of the job, emphasizing that the pastors do not personally find the tasks of a higher position attractive. In some cases, these preferences conform to traditional gender beliefs about women remaining in the background: *"I don't want to be more than what I am. No, I don't want any extra responsibilities and tasks, that's enough (...) I don't want a career in the church."* (I12, 41) In other cases, the pastors stress that higher church positions do not match their personal preferences because that would limit their pastoral freedom: *"I don't like representative functions, and I think that above my position, the degree of freedom decreases and the representative functions increase."* (I2, 33) The second type of argument is based on the assumption that there are inherent differences in the constitution of men and women that make women less suited to leadership roles: *"I think it's good that there are men there [in leadership]. They can also think more rationally in many cases than women."* (I12, 41)

Whatever the justification may be, the refusal to strive for promotion in the hierarchy is such an abiding norm that those who do take a more senior position or office feel that they have to provide a reason for it and must somehow distance themselves from the decision. *"I decided to accept this after thinking about it for months, and I said no at first. And then the bishop approached me and said I shouldn't reject this, I should take it after all, so I had to be convinced."* (I3, 29) In the case of clergy couples, there was also a rational consideration behind the refusal of an invitation, which was based on assessing the gender stereotypes and their effects. In the case of a female member of a clergy couple, it is often considered self-evident and is widely accepted that the husband is in the leading position and that the wife should adapt to her husband's career (Török and Biró 2023), whereas a woman being in a dominant role in these relationships (which comprise both a marriage and a working relationship) will be in conflict with traditional gender norms. *"How do you think it would affect my marriage if I were the boss? [...] My husband would have a hard time dealing with that. Or he wouldn't know. Or it would damage our relationship."* (I22, 51) If the interviewees were positive about being in charge or about being promoted, they often formulated explanations that conformed to female gender stereotypes, such as helping or supporting others, where *"if I see that I can help you in this way, I will take it"* (I33, 64). The metaphor of the 'mother' was also raised in relation to women leaders having a complementary role alongside male leaders: *"Just as in the family you need a father and a mother, this is a big family, in the church you need a father and a mother mentality."* (I33, 64) Among the interviewees, it was rather exceptional for them to openly express positive personal feelings about being asked to lead: *"This also fanned my vanity a little, well, let me be completely honest. . ."* (I34, 52).

Overall, it seems that gendered cultural beliefs (Ridgeway and Bourg 2004; Ridgeway 2011) and the expectations that they create (Correll and Ridgeway 2006; Carli and Eagly 2007) are significant determining factors in women pastors' attitudes to their careers. Female pastors either internalize these expectations, which thereby shape their preferences, or they accept them as conditions and adapt to them. As a consequence, a rejection of the traditional career narrative and of career aspirations was remarkably prevalent among our interviewees.

4.7. Interpretations of Success

The rejection of career advancement as a frame of reference is matched by the fact that our female pastor interviewees were averse to the term "success" as a way of describing or interpreting their pastoral careers. There were two typical manifestations of this aversion: a rejection of the term—and, thus, the concept—or a reinterpretation of it. *"It's not a calling word for me"* (I2, 33), or *"I don't like the word that much"* (I11, 45): these were typical responses to the question of success. One of the reasons for this rejection is certainly the perceived secular connotation of the word (*"I don't feel that I want to be successful in this way, in a worldly way"* I4, 48). Instead of 'successful', women pastors suggested the terms 'blessed', 'effective', 'grateful', or 'satisfied', to frame their pastoral careers in positive terms. The suggested alternative terms clearly indicate that the problem with success, apart from its secular nature, is fundamentally its self-centered, individualistic character.

Those who were willing to use the term 'success' in the context of their ministry often stressed that they were not using it in the 'usual', 'negative' sense (*"in a good sense, I think I consider myself successful"* I30, 55). In such cases, they often interpreted success in terms of their community: *"If they say that they feel at home in the church and that it is important for them to be part of a community and to feel comfortable in this community and that this community can be open to others who are looking for them, then I say that I am successful"* (I4, 48). This harmonizes with a concept of vocation that relegates personal goals to the background and puts social utility first (Weber 1982; Lovell 2022). Those who are, nevertheless, willing to interpret success in personal terms typically emphasize that the women are 'in their place' and that their work makes them feel personally good: *"I'm doing the job and I'm in a place where I really feel good in every way."* (I7, 31) A particular interpretation of success is the avoidance of negative outcomes, which also appeared in the responses: *"There is no great anomaly in the system. So it can be hectic or exciting, but there is no upheaval or no bitterness. This is success."* (I11, 45) As a variant of this, several people mentioned that they perceived it as a success that they were able to balance their work and private life, and that their children were not negatively affected by their ministry. This interpretation would be almost unthinkable in the case of a man: *"If I can build a well-functioning community, then that's a success. And if I don't neglect my family, don't neglect my children meanwhile, that's success."* (I13, 44) Thus, the female pastor, while standing her ground in an emancipatory role, regards as a success the fact that she was also able to meet the traditional expectations of women.

Rather exceptionally, and also somewhat covertly, the explanation of success also includes an interpretation of a career as personal advancement: *"My life started from a very low social position (. . .) Now I have everything, and I do what I love."* (I12, 41) However, in general, success for women pastors rarely means personal advancement, but rather a well-functioning community. In personal terms, this means being in their proper place in that community. Success is also about being able to avoid negative outcomes and being leaders in their congregations while also meeting cultural expectations of gender, in terms of their caring tasks. Overall, women pastors do not view success in the context of the traditional career narrative; they do not see success in achieving higher positions. The interpretations of success that they present do not contribute to the advancement of women pastors in the church hierarchy.

5. Discussion

As we have seen, women entering the ministry in Hungarian Protestant churches are disadvantaged by a series of informal mechanisms, despite formal equality. Our research demonstrated that women pastors accept and adapt to this situation rather than challenge it. The way in which women pastors interpret their calling, career, and pastoral role is intrinsically connected to their career choices. In the case of Hungarian female pastors, these interpretations often reflect and preserve traditional gender-based cultural beliefs (Ridgeway and Bourg 2004; Ridgeway 2011) and, thus, make it difficult for women to aspire to and achieve leadership positions. Our analysis of their interviews has shown that these women pastors typically accept the existing gender order, accept the existing boundaries as a given, and interpret their calling as service *within* these boundaries. They share, or partially share, stereotypical beliefs that women in general are less suited to leadership—although they often indicate that there are exceptions. They are mostly cautious in their criticism of gender inequalities, often explicitly emphasizing that they themselves hold conservative views on this topic. They perceive their ministry as *serving*, emphasizing its role in helping others, building relationships, and supporting communities. Through their career choices and their adaptation to the status quo, women pastors maintain or even, to some extent, reinforce the existing gender hierarchy and inequalities in the church.

Interpersonal relations, immediacy, support, community, and the rejection of hierarchy—these principal ideas regarding pastoral vocation do not promote the rise of women pastors to leadership roles and advancement in the church hierarchy in the essentially conservative gender order of Hungarian churches, and most women pastors do not aspire to this advancement either. Yet these same traits could form the basis for a more modern, egalitarian, and personalized church since a tendency can be detected in Western churches that the church, as a whole, is gradually shifting toward this mode of operation. It is possible that this same tendency will also be detected in Hungarian churches in the long run. Thus, through their pastoral and leadership manifestations, or by their involvement in the public sphere of the church, women are also—partly unintentionally—shaping these churches and expanding their own and women's possibilities for action in the ministry.

Interpreting the results of our research is certainly subject to potential limitations. Due to the methodology chosen, our research results cannot be generalized, and we cannot give an account of how common the phenomena experienced by our interviewees are in the respective Protestant churches, but the validity of our research is high. The focus of the research was on the perceptions, decisions, and strategies of female pastors. Our logical next step would be to include Hungarian clergymen's views and compare them with the clergywomen's experiences in our further research, and it would also be useful to compare the Hungarian results with data from other East-Central European countries.

6. Conclusions

A key lesson from our analysis of these interviews is that the cultural beliefs that discriminate against women (Ridgeway 2011) play a crucial role in the decisions that influence clergywomen's career paths. These cultural beliefs determine social and ecclesiastical expectations toward women, and these expectations focus primarily on the caring and community role of women with respect to their immediate environment (family or congregation) as well as their general social environment (Carli and Eagly 2007). In addition to this, cultural beliefs also determine the decisions of women pastors themselves, in the form of internalized internal benchmarks or external circumstances that force their adaptation. The patterns observed in the interviews thus confirm that the expectation states theory (Correll and Ridgeway 2006) can explain, to a large extent, the subordinate position of women in Protestant churches in Hungary.

In conformity with gendered cultural beliefs, our interviewees adapted to the traditional conditions defining Hungarian churches, both in their career decisions and in relation to their profession, finding ways to make the emancipatory characteristic of being a female minister compatible with the traditional conception of the role of women and with the

traditional gender order. Thus, our research findings emphasize that the adaptive strategies and decisions of the majority of clergywomen perpetuate a situation in which women are less likely to gain leadership roles in Protestant churches in Hungary. In contrast to these findings, there are also many indications in our interviews that although women pastors typically do not interpret their role as being in an emancipatory framework, they do influence church functioning, and gradually expand women's possibilities for action in the church through their growing presence and through their activity as pastors. This contradiction is similar to the norm-following emancipation strategy detected by religious women in previous eras (Sárai Szabó 2014, 2017): they achieved emancipation (being equal to men in the role of the pastor) in their own lives without questioning the norms of their social environment, through conforming to the expectations that follow them, without crossing boundaries that were considered essential, and, typically, by also fulfilling traditional female roles. It seems that after half a century of formally equal rights, "norm-following emancipation" still seems to be the most viable path for clergywomen, considering the generally more conservative gender attitudes and more traditional church functioning in Hungary compared to the West. This can be an effective way for Hungarian women pastors to resolve the tension between emancipatory professional roles and traditional gender expectations, but it also explains why there are significantly fewer women leaders in Protestant churches in Hungary than in the West.

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