

Unexpressionism?

Challenges to the Formation of Women's

by *Katalin Fabian*

L'auteure examine plus précisément la participation des femmes à la vie publique en s'arrêtant sur la naissance des groupes de femmes depuis 1989.

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After the socialist regime established the conditions for women's emancipation according to its practical needs and ideological expectations, societal backlash and serious personal consequences followed. Today, the socialist state-sponsored emancipation of women has been largely discredited. With the transition from a centralized to a market-based economy, both the possibilities and the difficulties for women have taken new shape. First, this article will look at some of the ways in which liberal democracy impacts upon the emergence of women's consciousness and the formation of their groups. Next, it will consider some of the facts that contribute to keeping the mobilizational ability of women's groups in Hungary so abysmally small.

The positive impacts of democratization on women's consciousness

Freedom to associate proved to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for women to express their interests. Liberal democracy allows for women to organize, but if they fail to mobilize, liberal democratic regimes follow their embedded bias to credit only the stronger and more ably articulated pressures (Akselberg). The approximately 30 women's groups which have sprung up in Hungary since 1989 certainly indicate that there is a willingness to articulate various aspects of women's interests.¹ However, given Hungary's widespread economic problems, activity in these groups tends to be confined to women in (an at least relatively) privileged position. This is manifested by the fact that they live in urban centres (mostly in the capital), where they not only find each other much more readily but they also feel freer to delineate their own spaces. But, first and foremost, these women have much easier access to various sources of information. Here especially

contact with foreigners plays a significant role. The free flow of information also prompts women to see that their problems may not be merely individual headaches or unusual idiosyncrasies. In the past few years the number of articles dedicated to women and their situation in the Hungarian media has increased exponentially.²

The women's groups thoroughly understand the conflict of liberal democracy which lies between universal demands for equality and a demand for protection for a socially disadvantaged group. In reaction to the undemocratic past and its (en)forced egalitarianism women shun affirmative action and engage in politics only if "perfect" equality between the sexes is assured. It was such a situation that contributed to the failed sexual harassment legislation in the Hungarian Parliament in 1992. The Hungarian Women's Association opted for supporting a bill on sexual harassment on the basis of gender equality but requested that men also be protected. The original drafters of the bill argued that many more women were exposed to sexual harassment and, as such, women especially needed this piece of legislation. The two sides could not agree and, as a result, they did not exert enough pressure in concert for Parliament to seriously consider the issue. The question still lingers as to whether the commitment to gender symmetry is as important as the value of legislative action.

Obstacles to women's self-organization in Hungary

The most popular history books in Hungary do not mention the suffrage movement and the struggles for rights in women's education and paid work. The date when women achieved the right to vote, the groups formed, and the names of their leaders are lost from common knowledge. Lack of interest and of general historical awareness and the shallow development of literature about women renders the emergence of a genuine women's movement even more difficult. But, there are a number of other interlocking factors that hinder the development of women's self-consciousness and self-organization in Hungary. The ambivalent relation to socialism, the physical and emotional exhaustion of women, the decrease in living standards, the shift in the traditional image of women, and the prevalence of anti-feminism all constitute significant obstacles to women's political participation and contribute to a phenomena that I call women's "unexpressionism" in public life.

Ambivalent relation to socialism

The socialist model of modernization obliged women

Groups in Hungary

to enter into the paid labour force, and encouraged their political and educational participation at the cost of individual expression and market relations. Liberal democracy in Hungary allows for individual self-expression and market relations, but has not maintained even the pre-

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tence of an ideological commitment to gender equality.

From 1948 onward, women's easier access to education, employment, and social services reflected the commitment to gender equality of the communist elite. There was more than an element of utilitarianism in this commitment. Women provided the reserve labour force for rapid industrialization, and their mass entry into higher education and wage labour served as much economic as ideological aims (Bysiewicz and Shelly).

There is no doubt that Marxist ideology contained some emancipatory elements concerning women. The classic Marxist strategy for the liberation of women focused on three issues: socialize the means of production, get women into the work-force, and get some of the responsibilities out of the household (Ferguson). But traditional Marxism also claimed that women's oppression was essentially a consequence of the class relations. In this view, women's inequality results from the structure of private property and will cease by the advent of socialism (Gottlieb). There are studies influenced by classical Marxist tradition which saw all women workers as organizable as men, depending on their ability to develop "class consciousness" (see Banks). According to these tenets, both elite intent and capacity were more favourable to production-oriented version of gender equality in socialist countries than in today's newly liberal capitalist ones.

Until 1989, one single national institution in Hungary was in charge of women's interests. The National Women's Council usually had one non-voting representative in the central decision making body (the Central Committee) of the socialist countries. Its activities were limited to symbolic representation in international affairs, and keeping limited contact with women by centrally funded and regulated periodicals. The association acted as the "little sister" of the Communist Party, without voice, without

action on her own. The National Women's Council became an easy, risk-free target of ridicule much before "Big Brother."

Notwithstanding the good intentions of women activists, women's associations left a grim heritage. First and foremost, the monopolistic structure of representation carries a dangerous precedent by creating the illusion that women can be represented in one block. Under communist leadership, the national organization's existence allowed for camouflaging the need for alternative women's organizations. The monopoly of the organization discouraged the formation of new groups and suppressed them in the name of ideological superiority while also enforcing a hierarchy of social goals. Second, women became quite distrustful. They rejected women's token appointments, political action, organizations, and all government policy matters ensuring their participation, (i.e., quotas). As a reaction to communist emancipatory propaganda, voicing a claim for gender equality in politics and employment is now dismissed as a legacy of a communist past.

Women's share in decision-making has significantly and symbolically decreased since the regime transition. During the communist era, women's participation oscillated between 17 and 20 per cent in the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Hungary and women's participation in the Parliament varied between 20 and 33 per cent. As a result of the first democratic election in 1990, the ratio of female legislators slid to seven per cent, similar to the decrease of women's participation in legislatures observed in all other post-communist countries. In 1994 more women were elected to Parliament, mostly as a result, however, of the Socialist Party putting more women on their list.³

Exhaustion

Physical and mental exhaustion also contribute to female invisibility in public life. Women in Hungary have kept the responsibility of traditional roles and taken on an equal share in paid work. According to calculations, 40 per cent of work done by women is not in any manner honoured, either as paid labour or as a moral contribution (Koncz). In a 1986 survey, the most frequent problem women mentioned was the burdensome coordination of the different roles they had to play. The division of labour within the family is sharply displayed by the amount of time spent on daily household chores: 271 minutes by women, 97 minutes by men (Szalai 1991a).

The lack of flexible working hours, the absence of conditions to harmonize household work and employment, and cultural traditions concerning the division of

labour among the sexes all block active community engagement of women. Most women have no time, no energy, and no incentive to enter into a world that they feel is very alien and distant from them. To survive in an increasingly difficult economic environment, women's more immediate responsibilities make them concentrate on their own personal surroundings. As Susi Koltai writes:

Hungarian women appear unresponsive to the awesome challenges to their rights, dignity and self-respect. Why? Probably because of sheer physical exhaustion and deeply ingrained sense of guilt, and the lack of information about, or of positive examples of different ways of thinking on life. To the majority of Hungarian women today, a being 'told' seems to hold out the promise of the longed-for dream, to be provided for forever by men, in the heaven of the Holy Family, and no longer feel strain or guilt. Always the underdogs in the rat-race of trades and professions, fed up with unsatisfying, low-paid jobs, repelled by an aggressive political climate, and frightened by the thought of being branded as feminists (which means anti-men, anti-children, anti-family, lesbian, repulsive) the majority of Hungarian women are not fighting back. They will be happy just to survive. (5)

Decrease in the standard of living

Since the regime transition the decline in the standard of living has intensified in Hungary. The real wage index declined from 1989 to 1992 by about 20 per cent and per capita consumption declined by about eleven to 12 per cent (Andorka).⁴ The extensive transformation of economic and political structures fuels the increasing economic polarization and the resurfacing of class relations. In the 1980s about one million people (10 per cent of the population) had an income lower than the subsistence minimum. By 1992 this number had increased to about two to two-and-a-half million (20-25 per cent). Unemployment, previously hidden under socialism, had increased to about 14 per cent by the spring of 1993, and remained beyond the 10 per cent ratio ever since (Andorka).

The recession following the economic restructuring programs of the 1990s has already undermined the livelihood of many dual-earner families. Women increasingly try to find wage work which they can pursue at home while receiving maternity allowance. Although women are legally entitled to their jobs upon returning from maternity leave, the period when the employer cannot fire them has been reduced from 90 days to 60 first, and then to 30 days. The various female sections of different trade unions have been fighting the bill before the Parliament to reduce this period even further to 15 days.

When women try to get back to their workplaces, they often find that daycare centres and nurseries have been closed. In Hungary there are 124 children competing for

every 100 places in daycare centres, and children whose mothers are at home with another younger siblings are not allowed to request daycare space (Makara). Thus, more burden falls on the family, with decreasing financial compensation from the state.

In Hungary, women are as dependent on wage labour as men are, but they routinely receive one-third less salary for the same work, and have much less chance of being promoted to leadership positions than men do. However, in Hungary, unlike in other post-communist countries, unemployment does not hit women harder than men (Frey).⁵ The reason for this is job-segregation. The previously well-paid jobs in heavy industries, which are currently being scaled back, lay off nearly exclusively men (Szalai, 1991b). Although women are less likely to be laid off because they are much cheaper and constitute a less demanding workforce than men, opportunities are open only for the young and attractive.

In the short term, both shrinking social services and fear of unemployment are causing women to stay home, or to accept low prestige or part-time jobs (Frey). Conservative and nationalist groups support women staying at home because they understand it as a choice in contrast to the uniform labour obligation under communism. They also claim that women will be more inclined to be engaged in social activities, especially charity, when paid labour activities will be lifted from the double burden of women.

In contrast to increased media support for women's traditional role in the home, women's involvement in the workforce has increased to 92 per cent, which is among the highest internationally (Frey).⁶ However, the assessment of women's paid labour has drastically changed. In 1988 an international comparative study measured views about women's paid employment. At that time, Hungarian women expressed a supportive attitude concerning paid labour, while men showed a much more conservative standpoint by expressing their much higher preference of having women (with children) remain at home. By 1994 men's views stayed at the same level, but women eventually became much more conservative in their views concerning employment than men were in 1988 (Toth).

Traditional image of women

As men nearly singularly occupy the positions of power and expert opinion in the Hungarian media, women are becoming invisible in the coverage of public life. Judging from national television programs, women are excluded from expressing opinions even in those fields where they constitute a majority, such as nursing or teaching. While women do not appear in 90 per cent of the news items, when they do manage to get on the screen they do not speak in 83 per cent of these cases (Nyilvánosság Klub).

The symbolic elimination of women in the media is accentuated by nullifying their problems. In nearly half of the articles which appear in women's weeklies no problems surface (Nyilvánosság Klub). The kinds of stories the

television programs and the three major women's weeklies carry focus on family life almost exclusively and women's role as mother and housewife. The "home is your place" message not so subtly suggests that the primacy of values belong to family life and emotional support. The resurgence of religious beliefs may also lend some support for sentiments idolizing women who sacrifice for the family, and commit themselves to raising children (Salecl; Arpad and Marinovich).

Anti-feminism

The loss of the legitimacy of the socialist regime contributes considerably to many women in Central and Eastern Europe interpreting their socialist emancipation as direct indoctrination. Alongside their disregard for socialist doctrines, most women also became desensitized to gender questions. While collecting materials on women's groups in Hungary, I often encountered women who are firm in their belief that they never experienced discrimination. They are also certain that feminism is nonsense. My observations indicate that Hungarian women often see feminism as narcissistic and selfish.

Feminism is an oddly tainted word. Free from any direct association to the state-socialist past it is still considered something "psychologically unhealthy" in Hungary. Feminism, as most women understand it, conflicts with their socialization. As a result, both the current and the preceding social transformation have hindered the development of feminist consciousness. First, during the communist era, propaganda downplayed feminism as a form of bourgeois degeneration. After the 1989 revolutions, neophyte advocates of liberal democracies depicted affirmative action as contrary to the basic tenets of democracy, and not as a possible counterbalance to social inequalities. At least, according to common phraseology, democracy is "the only game in town," so women had better not ask for favouritism. Being a feminist is an easy target of ridicule and neither individuals nor groups want to create that perception now that they have unconditionally embraced a new uniform: western ideology at its worst.

Lack of political support

In the past years the process of political articulation has been moving toward a fragmented model, which although far from pluralism, has drastically shifted from the monopolistic pattern of centrally allocated socialist bargaining of interests. Women's groups have slowly created an arena where some of the particular cultural and political issues that are important to women can be formulated. These women's groups include professional organizations, civic organizations, issue groups and women's sections of traditional political institutions, such as parties and trade unions. During the 1990 elections in Hungary only the Social Democratic Party had a program to address women's concerns. By 1994, a roundtable organ-

ized by a liberal women's foundation (MONA) demonstrated that while some of the major parties established an agenda on women's issues, this has often been only a façade to please western political partners, and was rarely a serious undertaking.

In the face of new political institutions and political as well as economic changes of great scale, voters' party preferences changed quickly and considerably (Chung). Half of those who declared a party preference in 1992 changed their preference within one year (Andorka).

Given the high volatility combined with rapid reallocation of resources, political elites are inclined to focus on "more important" aims than women's involvement in public life. This pragmatism often precludes any discussion of the problems of feminism and its place and contribution to social life to Eastern Europe. As Rita Klímová, the Czech Ambassador to the United States viewed it: "Feminism is a flower on democracy" (Wolchik 1994, 18). There is an illusion in Central and Eastern Europe that feminism can develop only when economic and social stability have been established. It is also ironic that these dictums are spelled out in the jargon of Marxist revolutionary discourse against which most of the new elites were fighting.

Conclusion

The post-communist governments do not intend to rectify existing imbalances and the conservative revival has added a cultural aspect by reinforcing religious and nationalist traditions. Among Central and Eastern Europeans nobody originally thought that the answer to "who would lose?" after the transition from communism would include anyone but the ruling communist elite. The myth was quite persistent that liberal democracy will change everything for the better and "[M]any women saw a clear advantage in a rapid assimilation to the West" (Dölling 4).

Today, the rigid equality-interpretation of the new democracies does not allow patronage for those who cannot defend themselves in the majority-dominated democracy. Although the post-communist governments would have a chance to lessen this tension and use their legitimacy to promote gender equality in the home and in employment, they are more concerned with creating economic survival packages than even contemplating such a move long-term. The women's groups may be able to disrupt this practice on the new ground of democratic politics, but at the moment their mobilizational abilities are still severely limited.

Katalin Fabian is a native of Hungary, currently working on her doctorate in Political Science at Syracuse University.

¹In the course of the past few months I have been participating in a wide range of activities organized by various women's groups and interviewed several of their members and main organizers in an attempt to gather

information on which interests these groups (re)present.
²The Hungarian comprehensive data collection of media coverage (compiled by the Department of Information of the Parliament) indicates that the number of articles published in the daily press on women and women's lives has increased from around 30 to 40 in 1989 to approximately 350 articles in 1993.

³Higher numbers of women in decision-making positions is an extensively debated vehicle to induce more favourable treatment of women. Most authors, such as Judith Butler, would consider an increase highly desirable, but would also treat it as a necessary, but not sufficient condition toward women's empowerment. An example to support this claim would be the participation of women in communist legislation.

⁴It is worthwhile to note that most available data are preliminary. They are also less reliable because they fail to capture much of the private sector and all of the black market activities (as high as 30 per cent of the GDP).

⁵It is yet unclear what are the specific reasons for this idiosyncratic characteristic occurring in Hungary.

⁶In the early 1900s in Hungary the economic activity of women age 16-55 reached 92.6 per cent, which is only a few tenths of one per cent behind that of men (Frey). However, this data includes all women on unemployment benefits and the three year maternity leave as well. Also it is close to the relevant data of the Scandinavian countries, although there the ratio of part-time employees is much higher than in Hungary.

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