

The process of transition will be a long one for Gypsy women. We have to break out of a double bind, first by struggling against restrictive traditions in the community and then by proving ourselves as women in society. The key question here is whether Gypsy women have equal opportunities to make free choices in the future. A lot of tolerance is needed for us to define our needs, to learn to take our own lives into our own hands.

## The Making of a Women's Movement in Hungary After 1989

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In Hungary, as well as in the rest of the region, political and economic transitions show a marked tendency to wipe out the legacy of the previous, communist regime. A poignant example of this retrogression is the situation of women in Hungary, where the gains of the previous regime (for example, full employment, education, participation in political and public life, and family protection) are continually in danger of being revoked and/or restricted. Although it is true that the inclusion of women in political and economic life was the result of coercion by a quota system initiated from above (and therefore not the product of a grassroots women's movement in any sense), Hungarian women found themselves in an advantageous position in that they could try their hand at political life and also win economic independence by joining the labor market. Despite the fact that today we know that the rhetoric behind the "emancipation" of women was in reality meant to serve the goals of industrialization and development of society, today women still find themselves in advantageous positions in the sense that they do not have to fight from absolute zero to gain their economic and political rights. This situation is already quite natural and irreplaceable. The many decades of women's movements in the West have still not been able to achieve these gains completely.

Therefore, without the momentum of a real women's movement, the cornerstone of women's equality was successfully laid in the previous regime in Hungary. Unfortunately, however, the movement for women's equality is almost completely nullified by its association with the communist past, which forced women (but not men!) to become equal. In this sense, the movement is a relic of the communist era. Thus, there is no acceptable ideological approach to the women's movement; we cannot speak of emancipation, the economic and reproductive rights of women, or the legal equality of women (this liberal approach has already been achieved.)

Nevertheless, it is quite obvious that after the transition we find women in Hungary in a disadvantaged position. Even though they are protected by

the law, they do not enjoy societal equality: Compared to men they are underpaid, they do not occupy a fraction of the positions of economic and political leadership, family leave and maternity leave (until now the most favorable in all of Europe) are in danger of being reduced drastically, and conservative leaders are promoting a return of women to the traditional homemaker/mother role. Today we can observe the retrogression of women's status, whereas women won considerable leverage under the rhetoric of emancipation during the previous regime. Currently, women try without the aid of infrastructure and ideology to preserve what they have gained and further develop their positions. It is indeed difficult to react politically to small steps taken backward; it is difficult to rally around seemingly insignificant negative changes (first slight restrictions in reproductive rights, a chipping away of the family leave subsidies, changes in educational policy that preserve the traditional status of women in certain professions, etc.). For this reason, every step of the political and economic transition must be accompanied by a comprehensive feminist analysis. But because at this point "gender politics" is not officially embraced (and barely embraced on a grassroots level, where there are only thoughts about a possible women's lobby), it is possible that ten years from now, Hungarian women will find themselves starting a movement from a much more disadvantaged position than they were ever in.

### The Hungarian Women's Foundation

MONA, established in November 1992, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit foundation that has taken on the ambitious goals of redefining and improving the role of women in Hungarian society. Many decisions have been made, in both the public and private sectors, without input from over half of the population and without study of the impact these decisions would have on women. Channels of communication must be opened with those persons whose policies and decisions affect women, and women must learn to effectively advocate their own needs.

The main goal of the foundation is to promote a more active participation by women in both political life and the civil sphere. MONA seeks to educate women on empowerment strategies for participation in a wide variety of public roles. More concretely, MONA is currently at work on developing its main project, Women in Civil Society, which extends from April 1993 to April 1994. This project is a series of meetings designed to serve as a catalyst for the cooperation of existing women's groups and for the possible integration of new interest groups into Hungary's women's movement. The first of these "meetings" was the National Women's Roundtable.

MONA's future plans include the remainder of the Women in Civil Society project; the third meeting will be the Conference of Women Mayors, to be held on September 30–October 1.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the conference is to provide a forum for women mayors to network, to relate experiences, and to participate in specialized training at the municipal level. Recently, the director of MONA and a project coordinator traveled nearly two thousand kilometers throughout Hungary to personally speak with women mayors interested in attending the conference as well as compiling a synopsis of regional problems. The preliminary program of the conference includes one day of networking, presentation of regional reports, and discussions by experts on the situation of the local governments. The second day will consist of a "training" session for women mayors. The mayors will divide into four groups and simulate the functions of a municipality. Experts from the Interior Ministry will facilitate these groups as well as provide constructive criticism of the performance of the mayors.

Topics remaining within the Women in Civil Society Project include:

- Women in advertisement
- The women parliamentarians of Hungary
- Women's studies in Hungary
- Women's legal status in postcommunist Hungary
- Women's employment, unemployment, and retraining
- Hungary's role in the Women's World Congress of 1995
- The role of women in party platforms
- Women in leadership, politics, and business
- The National Women's Roundtable II

### The National Women's Roundtable

On April 24, 1993, MONA convened the National Women's Roundtable; this was the first meeting of women's organizations since the transition of 1989 and possibly in the history of the women's movement in Hungary. In attendance were 150 women representing twenty-four women's groups that spanned the wide spectrum of Hungarian civil society.<sup>2</sup> Despite the rhetorical title of the roundtable—"Why is there no women's movement in Hungary?"—many women's groups emphasized that the number of participants and general success of the roundtable did indeed point to the existence of some type of women's movement in Hungary today. The spirit underlying the roundtable was best summarized by Maria Nemenyi, who gave the opening discussion for the afternoon debate:

We believe that the rhetorical nature of the title of the first roundtable of women's organizations in Hungary simultaneously touches upon a profound

problem, which the existing women's groups themselves have already recognized. It is well known that the parties, movements, and organizations, developed along the lines of divergent ideological, economic, political, ethnic, or even personal human values, which have mushroomed since the transition of 1989, have only occasionally included the unique issues that women, making up over half of society, represent. In both public life and politics, women undertake even fewer roles than previously. Most recent legislative proposals and measures which are directly related to women's lives have hardly shaken those affected from their passivity.

Presumably this phenomenon is related to the unique development of Hungarian society since World War II, and the distinctness of the societal role of Hungarian women. Possibly because of these specific societal factors, "feminism," the female perspective, has a negative connotation in Hungary, and not only in male circles.

We think that it would be educational for the existing organizations to try together to find an answer to the question posed, albeit in a poignant fashion, in the title of this roundtable.

Of the many civic groups (grassroots organizations and other special interest groups) at the roundtable, five stand out as likely to play a determinant role in the future of the Hungarian women's movement. Following is a detailed description of these five groups.

### *The Gypsy Mothers' Association*

The Gypsy Mothers' Association was formed in 1991 by its current president, Iona Zambo. She began by describing the Roma organization as the most disadvantaged of all because Roma women must fight discrimination not only as women (with traditionally difficult conditions within the family) but also as an ethnic minority living within Hungary. Furthermore, the name of the association is meant not to reinforce the traditional family-centric role of women as mothers and wives, but to address conditions specific to the Roma community, where it is common for a woman to marry and have children as early as age fourteen. Therefore, the concept of Roma Mothers is all-encompassing and addresses a broad range of women. The main goals of the Gypsy Mothers' Association are education and representation of the legal rights of Gypsy mothers.

Furthermore, the association seeks the healthy integration of Roma mothers and their communities into society by focusing attention on folklore, education, and successful survival strategies. The association's activities include organizing open debates on issues such as the welfare law, which, instead of alleviating the difficulties of Roma mothers, is making their lives more difficult.<sup>3</sup> The Gypsy mothers organize training in technical skills and work with local governments to provide secure workplaces, as the vast majority of the Roma population is made up of unskilled, unem-

ployed labor. They have formed a wide information network that extends to all smaller communities throughout the country, which generally receive very little information about the possibilities for social mobility.

As one of the main concerns of the organization is the education of Roma youth, the Roma mothers have developed a plan for a restructuring of the educational system. Because Hungarian law assures a normative compensation for national/ethnic minorities,<sup>4</sup> each municipal government receives a fixed sum for each Roma child. This financial support, however, is oftentimes not used for the advancement of these children but instead serves to alienate them further from their schoolmates, as a "different." The Roma mothers' educational program would include a type of schooling in which the children participate in special training for elementary school and high school. This program would include all necessary training that the current system does not provide for Gypsies. Furthermore, the Roma mothers have organized summer camps (called lifestyle camps) and established a foundation, For a Better Future, to provide Gypsy high school students with a brighter future (the dropout rate among women especially is very high). For this new system to work, however, the association stresses that it needs the help of local governments. Finally, the work of the organization includes plans for a regional information base that will provide cultural, social, pedagogical, and institutional support for Gypsies, mothers in particular.

### *The Feminist Network*

Nilda Bullain spoke mainly about the background and current activities of the network, and Judit Ascady addressed the reasons for adopting the name and goals of feminism. The leaflet that the members of the network passed out at the roundtable included a comprehensive description of the network, as well as the meaning of feminism, stated briefly as "the establishment of equal opportunities for women in all sectors of society, the fight against all forms of discrimination against women, the encouragement of the participation of women in political life and the civil sphere, the representation of women's issues in legislation, and the raising of consciousness with respect to women's unique problems and needs within Hungarian society."

The Feminist Network is an officially registered voluntary association. It was founded in June 1990 and now has an active membership of around fifty people from a wide range of social backgrounds, with a pool of around one hundred additional volunteers for specific campaigns. During the pro-choice campaign (from April to December 1992), there was one full-time campaign coordinator, funded by a grant from the Global Fund for Women; all other work was carried out by members on a voluntary basis.

The network has a record of two and a half years of grassroots activity, mainly concerned with raising awareness of women's perspectives in culture and politics. Its most important work has been the campaign for free

choice. The seed money for the pro-choice group has allowed the network to introduce campaign methods new to Hungary, including

- Planning and completing a mass mailing of postcards to lobby individual members of parliament
- Working with political parties in the Hungarian parliament (e.g., the Alliance of Young Democrats, the Alliance of Free Democrats, and the Hungarian Socialist Party) to formulate modifications of the restrictive law on abortion proposed by the government in fall 1992
- Producing and disseminating position statements by the campaign group to all members of parliament
- Holding three press conferences to inform the media and public about the status of the abortion legislation in Hungary, thereby raising public awareness of legal procedures and parliamentary process
- Meeting with Gyorgy Szabad, the president of the Hungarian parliament, to hand over thirteen thousand signatures (thus passing the ten thousand-signature minimum for parliamentary and media release, collected by the campaign from pro-choice supporters)
- Using activist techniques to create publicity on the parliamentary abortion debate
- Releasing two half-page political ads in a prominent Hungarian daily newspaper, the *Magyar Hirlap*, to focus public attention on the issue and encourage greater citizen participation

The most innovative aspect of the campaign was the door-to-door distribution of sixty thousand lobbying postcards that included a form that could be returned to respective representatives of parliament. Furthermore, through a Feminist Network initiative, the European Network for Women's Rights for Abortion and Contraception sent an open letter to the Hungarian parliament to demonstrate international solidarity with Hungarian women.

Future plans of the Network include creating a public law center in Hungary to provide political training for women; cooperating with other grassroots movements in Hungary on issues of interest to women (e.g., promoting the Feminist Network in Nyiregyhaza); establishing a public education outreach program to involve citizens in the legislative process and media; and setting up a telephone hotline for women victims of violence (training of those who will be staffing the hotline will be conducted by women from similar hotlines in Croatia and Serbia).

### *The Association of Hungarian Women*

The Association of Hungarian Women was developed in July 1989 as a nonpartisan and independent citizens' group. The association is actually

the successor to the Women's Council, which was the official women's organization during state socialism.<sup>5</sup> The fundamental goals of the organization are the realization of women's human rights and the achievement of actual equality and actual equal opportunity within society. The association places great emphasis on ending and preventing all forms of discrimination against women. The group has seven hundred registered members and thirty-five to forty-two member organizations, which claim to support up to ten thousand members. One of the largest member organizations is the women's section of the steelworkers' union, which includes members from other unions as well.

The association emphasizes pragmatic activities. It formulates opinions on the impact of all major pieces of legislation on women. All of the information gathered and written by the association may be utilized by any member of parliament, committee of parliament, or government ministry. The association organizes forums on such topics as women's identity and self-esteem, the electoral participation of women, the analysis of party programs with respect to women, the problems women face in employment, sex education in the schools, and the situation of women in agriculture. With support from an Austrian foundation, the association organized a training seminar for women working within local governments. The association also fosters international relations, especially with the United Nations, thereby promoting the advancement of Hungarian women toward European norms.<sup>6</sup> The association performs charity functions by visiting the elderly, the homeless, women in refugee camps, and women who live below the poverty line. The association has a free "mental hygiene" service, which includes consultation with a lawyer, a psychologist, a sociologist, and a family-protection worker, free of charge. Finally, the association offers scholarships to young women entering higher education who wish to write their thesis on the situation of women in Hungary. The association publishes various pamphlets and short books on issues that concern women in Hungary today (e.g., women's unemployment).

### *The Ombudswoman Program*

The Ombudswoman Program is a nonprofit, nongovernmental, service organization envisioned by and for women in Hungary. Adamik Maria, the creator and director of the project, stated that the overall goals of the program are to address and implement hands-on solutions to specific social, economic, and political problems facing women in Hungary as it enters the international community.

More specifically, the Ombudswoman Program is a conglomeration of three parts: a women's center that will treat the actual needs of women on a day-to-day basis, a nonprofit women's research center and library that will

house all data and research based on the activities of the women's center, and an academic germanium that, fed by the research center and library, in the long run will elaborate the field of gender studies in Hungary. The overall purpose of this conglomeration is to fuse the theoretical with the practical, to have an academic base and a practical source from which a strong women's movement may emerge.

The first phase of the program, the Women's Center, is already under way. This will be the first women's center in Hungary; no other broad-ranging service-oriented institution exists for women. The center will include direct social services, an information referral center (although many of the institutions that women may need, such as a battered women's center, family counseling, employment retraining centers for women, and alcohol and drug treatment centers for women, rarely exist, if at all), and a public meeting place where women's groups and other actors within the public sphere may meet and debate issues concerning women.

### *The Women's Club of Sopron*

The idea to form a women's club in Sopron (a midsized city on the Austrian border), as Beata Devenyi, the leader of the club explained, was initiated by a U.S. Peace Corps Volunteer, Nancy Picard, in 1991. An English teacher for the Peace Corps, Picard picked up on the feeling of unrest among some of her women students and suggested that they meet a few times a month. Thus, the club was founded and served as a forum for women in Sopron to discuss their roles as wives, mothers, and, possibly, independent women.

Through Picard's contacts with U.S. funding agencies, the club raised enough money to plan and organize a women's conference in May 1992. The club invited prominent politicians, other women's groups (at that time there were only a few), and some government representatives from the United States to address the conference. This was the first such grassroots "women's conference" since the transition of 1989, and according to both the press it received and the participants, it was a success.

### **Why Is There No Women's Movement in Hungary?**

Maria Nemenyi mentioned that many of the women's organizations were present at the roundtable because of "outside need"—that is, women's groups and researchers from the West have prompted a type of women's movement, a type of women's perspective in Hungary that would otherwise be missing.<sup>7</sup> Nemenyi outlined three possible reasons for this missing perspective. First, there is no women's movement because there is no need for

one; women achieved both legal and social equality under state socialism. Furthermore, if women suffered from societal hardships, those were not considered to be related to their gender (that type of discrimination was eliminated for them by the state), but instead had to do with larger class issues that were not gender-related. Second, no women's movement developed, just as no other civil movement could develop, since the authoritarian nature of the state undermined all such initiatives. Third, women may not have felt an internal need to define their problems in relation to their existence as women; that is, women have accepted their status as something predetermined and natural, and they have no desire to change this, not that they could.<sup>8</sup> It is this third possibility that Nemenyi focused much of her later discussion upon—the sociohistorical and sociopsychological aspects of the Hungarian women's movement.

Nemenyi went on to disprove the aforementioned reasons for the lack of a women's movement in Hungary by explaining that (1) despite the fact that women enjoy almost full equality before the law, they are still at a disadvantage in leadership and management positions with respect to pay and social recognition; (2) there were quite a few civil groups during the 1980s in Hungary—for example, the various Roma organizations, environmental groups, and alternative groups—that did receive public recognition; and (3) although women may not feel that they are disadvantaged by the sheer fact that they are women, this perspective may have deep roots in the type of gender socialization within Hungarian society.

This third point was a very important one, and Nemenyi underpinned it by briefly addressing why the word *feminism* has such a negative connotation in Hungary today (many of the women's groups at the roundtable stated that they were not feminist in nature; the only group that took on this label was the Feminist Network). She explained that there were at least three types of feminism that should be mentioned—liberal, Marxist, and radical feminist—and that if we would look more carefully at the definition of these, not a few of the groups present would agree with the underlying concepts. Unfortunately, this term is still pejorative here, and therefore she suggested that it may be wise to just use the term *women's movement* instead.

The reason for this negative reaction toward feminism may be lodged in the reality of socialization itself; that is, the socially determined role of women in Hungary does not mesh with the ideals of feminism and emancipation. The images of women in the mass media, in the schools, in churches, and in the family define the roles women will take on in their lives. The traditional role of women in Hungary, it may be said, is socialized from a very early age to take on the dual burden of motherhood and paid labor.

Nemenyi went on to explain that the reasons for this socialization of the family and its members may be found in the history of rapid industrializa-