

The Construction of Women's Case

Turn-of-the-Century Hungarian Feminism

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Feminism or the situation of women in general is not among the leading concerns of Hungarian society. For more than one hundred years now, since women began to organize, they have never been able to prevent public opinion from making the assumption that women's interests mean interests against those of the family or society at large. This is one of the many reasons that women's emancipation and feminism are dirty words and largely misunderstood, if not completely neglected. Women today do not like the idea that their activities, ambitions, and organizations are interpreted as selfish, destructive, and even unnatural. So if they want to be accepted as women, they will not combine the struggles of everyday life with the general notion of women's struggle. They hope to manage as individuals whose problems have nothing to do with the structural inequalities and oppressive features of a patriarchal society.

Another reason feminists have such difficulties making their point understood is that people's minds have been successfully brainwashed by the promises of previous ideologies. As a result, Hungarians are used to thinking that every social criticism provides a wholesale set of guarantees that follow the people's suggested lines and value systems, that the ideal society is close at hand. In this way people expect every political thought to have universal claims of truth as well as solutions to every problem of social, economical, or political life. Obviously, feminism does not meet, much less want to meet, these demands. On the one hand, people expect feminism to present itself as an ideology, but on the other hand, they also fear the power of ideologies and get hostile toward any mode of thought that presents itself as an ideology or that they perceive as one.

Rather than list the reasons feminism has not made a significant impact in Hungary, as well as in other Eastern-Central European countries,¹ I want to point out a factor that could be easily changed: the lack of contemporary feminist thought, activism, and history of feminism and the formulation of

women's demands. Very little research has been done on the emergence of feminism in Hungary, even though one can find in national archives a rich collection of publications, letters, and other documents of feminist activists and the public debate around women's demands. The official history written in the state-socialist era did not make an effort to include feminist initiatives in the history of movements. The main focus was always on workers' class struggles, and the rôle of communist approaches was constantly overemphasized. It was in this context, and only in this context, that women were mentioned.

On the basis of writings by Agnes Horvath, Katalin N. Szegvari, and Anna Fabri,² and upon my own research and observations concerning material not yet known to the public at large, I wish to preview the history of women's emancipation in Hungary. The first event to be documented about women's awakening and their growing interest in public life is a petition to parliament in 1790, just two years before the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This petition was written "in the name of Hungarian mothers" by, in fact, a man, Peter Barany,³ and contained much more modest demands than Wollstonecraft initiated. It addressed the most respected gentlemen of parliament with the request that they let women (the women of the noble class) participate in parliamentary sessions as spectators. The reasoning supporting this request is remarkable, especially because it became one of the basic arguments for women's emancipatory endeavors for education or for their participation in public, political, or cultural life in the nineteenth century: namely, that by listening to the debates, women would be better informed and more open-minded. More important, better-informed and more open-minded women would be better equipped to educate their sons in a patriotic manner. In fact, by giving this right to women, parliament would be acting in the "interest of the nation."

For a very long time this kind of justification was needed when women's demands were formulated. To be given a certain right, women had to prove that they would be given it not solely for their own sakes but always for the interests of others, preferably the family or the nation. In fact, the interests of the family were always seen as synonymous with a woman's own interests. If the interest of the family is met, then the interest of the woman is also satisfied. Unlike men, women in these traditional approaches did not have an independent existence; they were assumed to exist as bound to the family. There were very few alternative contexts within which women were mentioned other than the context of motherhood.

The earliest reported women's organization, the Women's Charity Organization, was founded in 1817 in Pest. It was followed by a large number of similar groups. The women who participated were generally upper-middle-class ladies who felt solidarity with the poor or found amusement in having

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a company of lady friends involved in activities other than "empty-minded chats to pass the time." The general public and men's societies welcomed these charity groups. In addition to the charity groups, different clubs and literary circles run by women appeared. These early women's organizations did not challenge any of the good-old norms and values, nor did they question power relations. In fact, this was the only form of acceptable activism for proper, upper-class, urban women.

In the provincial countryside there were women of nobility who were in a different situation and had responsibilities in running estates. Some historians interpret this fact as women enjoying equal rights, as in the cases where women inherited land and became feudal landowners themselves. If the family did not have any more male heirs, it was possible for a woman to own an estate because the family fortune and its maintenance were of more importance than preventing a woman from owning property.

Hungarian historical writing does mention a few famous women from the past centuries, respected for their patriotic deeds or for their position as mothers of famous kings or heroes of wars and battles. These women became symbolic figures of women's glory.

Women writers of the 1820s who wanted their own voices in public life were not respected in the same way. Instead, they became the focus of a huge public debate. The mid-nineteenth century saw the emergence of women's literature in Western Europe (for example, Jane Austen, Mary Godwin, and Mme. de Stael). The first article ever published by a woman in a "scientific" magazine in Hungary, in 1822,⁴ was met with grave disapproval. The debate continued for decades as to whether women could take part in cultural and scientific life at all, if it is or is not against nature and God's will for women to write, if women should be allowed to do intellectual work, and if they should be educated at all.

Education itself was the next important milestone in the history of the construction of women's case. When the idea to open schools for women became accepted, there was no consensus on what should be taught. The defenders of traditional values wanted to limit the range of subjects for girls to household skills, childrearing, and perhaps languages and art. An important event in the struggle for women's emancipation in education occurred in 1885 when a bill was passed to let women into universities. But only ten years later, under pressure from conservative deans and university professors, the number of female students was strictly limited. These restrictions were among the many reasons that feminists of the period decided that the time had arrived for organization.

The first feminist organization in Hungary, called the Association of Feminists, was founded in 1904 as a part of a larger organization, the International Women's Suffrage Alliance. The membership of the association grew from three hundred at its founding to more than one thousand a

decade later. The association had local chapters in twenty-eight towns throughout the country. The association published the monthly *Women and Society* (later *A Woman*), which was distributed widely. The members of the association were from different strata of society, with varied professional backgrounds: white-collar workers, teachers, intellectuals, urban upper-class housewives, and factory workers. Their most active period was in the years before World War I. Later they joined social movements opposing the war. After the war, the right-wing, conservative government associated their activities with leftist organizations and made the continuation of their work impossible. The most important personalities of the association left the country, including Rozsa Bedy-Schwimmer, who worked later as a peace activist and died in New York. In 1946 the association was founded again and existed for three years until the authorities banned it together with hundreds of other civil society organizations.

The central aim of the association at the turn of the century was to represent the cause of women's suffrage in Hungary. Association members wanted women's "liberation as individuals," "equality before the law," and "votes for all individuals." These were the most important claims that connected Hungarian feminists to international conferences such as were held in Copenhagen (1906) and London (1909), where they gave reports about their own activities.⁵ In 1913 the Seventh Conference of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance was held in Budapest. Many of the leading liberal and radical intellectuals and politicians of the time participated.

Feminists in Hungary organized big campaigns, including demonstrations, public forums, discussions, and publications, for the reform of the right to vote in the years 1905, 1908, and 1912, when (partly as a result of their pressure) parliament put the reform bill on the agenda. Thanks to a strong conservative line, this bill was not passed then,⁶ despite support for feminists in political and public life from such groups as the Men's League for Women's Suffrage, formed in 1910.

In addition to political aims, the Association of Feminists was very sensitive to different social, educational, and occupational issues. One of its first activities in 1904 was to set up a consultation service to help women choose professions. The office provided the most recent information about jobs and educational opportunities, including universities or vocational schools already accepting women. The office also gave personal encouragement and advice and in its first five years helped more than two thousand women. The city helped the office financially.⁷ That the City Council of Budapest had good relations with the feminists always engendered hostility and little support and understanding. This cooperation enabled the initiatives of the women to be realized. Another prime example of common effort is the story of the first day care centers, set up with the active contribution of the feminists as experts and volunteers.⁸

Publications by feminist authors, aside from their monthly periodical, contributed to the rise of public awareness and understanding of women's demands in changing social frameworks. Feminists would get the most important books by Western feminist thinkers translated (for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* was translated by Rosie Schwimmer).⁹ Hungarian women authors published works analyzing the socialization of individuals, marriage, and women's work (see the works of Szidonia Willhelm, Sarolta Geocze, and their male colleagues Andor Maday and Geza Kenedi).

Feminism, this hidden thread in Hungarian women's history, is still to be discovered. Its impact can be understood only after the historical documents are brought to light. If attention is not drawn to this historical background of Hungarian feminism, all the efforts of those who once devoted their energies to this cause will be wasted, and modern-day feminism will be seen as alien and unconnected.

Notes

1. For a complete list of reasons, see Ann Snitow, "Feminist Futures in the Former Eastern Bloc," *Peace and Democracy News* (Summer 1993).
2. Agnes Horvath, "A nok elso politikai mozgalmal" (Women's first political movement in Hungary) (unpublished manuscript); Katalin Szegvari, *Numerous clauses intezkedesek* (Numerous clauses between the two wars) (Budapest: 1988); and Anna Fabri, "Az elso magyar ujsagirono" (The first Hungarian woman journalist), *Az irodalom maganelete*.
3. Peter Barany. *A magyar anyaknak ...* (Request of Hungarian mothers ...) (1790).
4. Eva Takats, "Egy ket szo ..." (A few words on women and marriage), in the Tudomanyos Gyujtemeny archive (1822).
5. Women's Archive of Amsterdam (Vrouwenarchive).
6. The reform bill to grant women the vote was introduced by the revolutionary Karolyi government in 1918.
7. The correspondence between the Association of Feminists and the City Council can be found in the Budapest Archive, IV.
8. See the letter from Vilma Glucklich to the City Council in 1905, Budapest Archive, IV.
9. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *A no gazdasagi helyzete* (Budapest: 1908).



The Feminist Network

A History

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Antecedents—the Need for New Organizations

In Hungary before the change of the political system, there was one sole organization, the Magyar Noi Orszagos Tarsasag (Hungarian Women's National Council, or MNOT) working under the administration of the Magyar Szocialista Munkas Part (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party), that was supposed to represent women and stand for their rights. This organization, entirely dependent on a male-dominated party, did not try to mobilize women; it refused to accept a conspicuous state of affairs as far as women's social position was concerned, which could have influenced its politics. The fact is that Hungarian women were (and still are) experiencing a crisis concerning their roles.

This "confusion of identity" was the outcome of the "forced emancipation" of women by the socialist regime. This process started after World War II when Hungary, seriously damaged and demolished, badly needed cheap labor to rebuild the country and launch heavy industry, nonexistent and incongruous in a traditionally agricultural society but strongly recommended in a budding communist system. Consequently, women have found themselves ever since trapped in the double role of mother-wife and new worker doing paid work in the public sphere. The MNOT did not fight adequately against a social discrimination that was manifold in many spheres and could very clearly be demonstrated. For instance, the principles of "equal pay for equal work" and "equal opportunities in politics" remained only in theory and were never realized in practice. As a consequence, during the political changes of 1989, even though the MNOT endeavored to renew itself, it manifested neither awareness of the need to reconsider its political stands nor an intention to adopt a wider feminist perspective. On the whole, until now there has been little alteration in its overall mentality.

Despite the traditional views of the MNSZ (the Hungarian Women's Association, the new name of MNOT), about twenty women organized a "tea party" for women on the premises of MNSZ in autumn 1989. The main