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Pető, Andrea

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## *A History of the Hungarian Women's Movement and Feminism*

**Andrea Petö**

*Jeann Monnet Fellow*

*European University Institute*

*Robert Schumann Center for Advanced Studies*

*Via dei Roccettini 9 I-50016 San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy*

*E-mail: Andrea.Peto@iue.it*

### THE ORIGINS OF THE HUNGARIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Women were completely excluded from party politics in Hungary until the acceptance of partial suffrage in 1918; until general, universal suffrage in 1945, it would be illusory to talk of any type of direct parliamentary political pressure [1, 153–161]. Before the pre-suffrage period women exercised political power through their male partners, fathers or husbands [2, 10].

The first women's organisation in Hungary precedes the reform age in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was connected to the upper strata of aristocratic women. The charitable organisations or women's clubs started by them acted as an example for the lower strata of society. The aims of the charitable societies were drafted in the "maternal frame", stressing women's maternal, family preserving role. At the same time, they connected these aims with the social welfare of the nation and interpreted the nation as a great family. The connection of the maternal frame with the national frame ensured that women's societies found favourable reception in the strata of society that had a social voice and was accepted. Religious women's organisations were formed and their aim was also constructed within the "maternal frame", with the additional component of religious missionary activity.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, participation in women's organisations became prestigious in the upper strata of Hungarian society. This change brought the so-called revolutionary type of women's organisation: trade unions, that is, social democrats who accepted female members within their masculine organisations but within an "equality frame". With the organisation of Female Civil Servants (Nőtisztviselők) and then the Feminist Association (Feminista Egyesület), intellectual, middle class women's groups were established which, until World War I, expressed their demands alongside the Hungarian progression [3, 169–174; 171–205]. Their aim was the elimination of laws discriminating against women whose main focus was the struggle for female suffrage. With the feminisation of certain professions, demands

for "equality for difference" were made, and the female representatives of the various professions formed women's organisations.

The history of female suffrage in Hungary after World War I is itself an example of how the demand within the "equality frame" manifests itself in part in the "national frame". The period following World War I brought changes on many fronts within women's organizations. Due to the establishment of female suffrage, though restricted, female MPs entered politics and the parliament. Due to the general demand for the redrawing of the borders of Hungary as drafted in the castle of Trianon in France in 1920, the "national frame" became the only acceptable framework at the public level; the "maternal frame" could only try to realise its programme within it. After World War I, women's organisations could also formulate their aims within the "national frame." Following liberal progression, the women's question was discovered by national conservatism because some selected women were given the right to vote. National adherence and the revisionist struggle brought about the first women's mass movement the "maternal frame" which made it popular within the national frame.

At the same time, the "revolutionary" organisations survived although their membership decreased, and they became invisible in the public discourse. These "submerged networks" were typical of the activities of both communist and feminist organisations after 1919 and the two revolutions in Hungary. Many former great and significantly influential organisations became small and unimportant. At the same time, their members were but a chosen few and this went hand in hand with the centralised organisational structure necessary for their survival. The activities of the "submerged network" primarily narrowed down to cultural events, which allowed the most dedicated members to maintain their jointly formed identity.

By 1914, the majority of the population of Hungary had been influenced by the women's movements. Besides trade unions, charity, professional, educational, religious associations became an integral part of the civil society. By the 1930's more than 14,000 associations had 3 million members, out of which one third were women's associations. Women's special interests were represented on the level of "great politics" with the fight for suffrage.

The "pre-suffrage" women's movement (before 1918) was characterized by a negligence towards political aims. These associations (charity, alumni, artistic, cultural, and scientific) were formed with small memberships, based on a common regional origin with the aim of encouraging well-to-do families to support an individual charity. The "post-suffrage" women's associations were different from the previous ones as far as their political aims and their mass membership were concerned. After 1919 and the fall of the Hungarian Bolshevik Revolution, the "pre-suffrage" associations continued their activities but the new type of associations changed the social space in which their activities took place. The "post-suffrage" associations built up a strong

relationship with the state, and they acted, in some cases, as a "transmission belt" between the policy makers.

Yet another change after WW I was the appearance of the "party frame," as seen in the renewal of the experiment of the National Unity Party (Nemzeti Egység Pártja) and Christian Women's Camp (Keresztény Női Tábor) which mobilized women [4, 279–290]. Due to the great economic crisis, the role of the state increased in the sphere of social welfare politics and, with it, the organisation of civil and religious charitable societies decreased but were not rendered completely superfluous. Fascist women's organizations never became powerful in Hungary due to the strong women's movement organized in the maternal-national frame that resisted fascism from a conservative-religious standpoint.

During World War II, women's organisations polarised according to how much they identified with the "national frame". The Social Democrats joined the "submerged network" organisations after the German invasion of Hungary in 1944, as did religious and other civil organisations. The members of the "submerged network" cooperated in saving or protecting the Jews in Hungary.

The scene after 1945 seems simple at first sight [5, 892–914]: the Second World War had eradicated the earlier existing women's organizational network and with the MNDSZ a mass movement was established, which mobilised women in the interest of communist aims [6, 132–146]. 1945 was a year of new beginnings and rebuilding and the golden age of the "submerged network". The communist women's movement did a lot; in strengthening Western emigration, it immediately issued a programme and established an organisation. The initially hard driven "revolutionary-equality frame" was transformed after the 1945 elections and certain elements of the "maternal frame" appeared, particularly in the prisoner of war projects. In Hungary, women's political weight was ensured by women's general suffrage which was achieved in 1945 and which proved to be more important in changing the situation for women than any other single factor.

In the case of the feminists, the tactics of the "submerged network", which had worked so well between the wars, did not produce any results afterwards. The general democratization of the country and the gaining of the general right to suffrage for women in 1945 meant that the feminists lost ground. Generational conflicts and the class struggle made it difficult for the Feminist Association and the MNDSZ to cooperate, as the age of the feminists' membership was much higher than that of the MNDSZ, and the leadership and membership came from different social backgrounds. The mission of the submerged networks had been to keep the ideas alive and to strike while the time was again right. But the fight was not now theirs. No one needed the feminists' experience, but because of its centralized structure, its identification as an

accepted submerged network, and the cultural values it upheld, the association survived for a while.

Women's associations organised within the "maternal-national" frame were banned in the wake of the armistice of 1945. The activities of the "maternal frame" organisations were reduced because the membership neither had the time nor the means for charitable works. The social prestige of ameliorative work was reduced to a minimum as the MNDSZ, supported by the Hungarian Communist Party (MKP), now determined this field. With nationalization the middle and upper middle classes and any institutional networks that so far were somehow independent of the state, ranging from schools to hospitals and public libraries, ceased to exist.

In order to mobilize women, an atmosphere of passivity was first necessary, as was to establish control over the activities of Hungary's women's organisations; these were carried out by the MNDSZ. The latter tried to co-opt them into the MNDSZ and then disband them. On the basis of data from 1946, excluding the big national women's movements, there were, according to my calculations, several women's organisations with more than 1600 members that applied to re-start operations once more. Decree I 1946 recognised the indisputable right of citizens to assemble; at the same time, another law placed the responsibility of all organisations into the hands of the minister of internal affairs controlled by the Communist Party, which used this power along with an increasingly influential police force to steadily ban, step by step, the organisations. With the MNDSZ an organisation emerged that mobilized and brought women out onto the streets in the interest of political aims; for example, on December 6, 1946, there was a famous protest by housewives against rising prices.

Women's emancipation in Hungary took place without the active participation of either women's organisations or female politicians. There is no evidence in the documents of the women's secretariats of the various parties that they exercised any political pressure for female politicians in the Parliament. At the time of the elections in 1947, there were 22 MPs and in 1949 there were 71, which is only 17 % of all MPs. In 1953 only 52 (which was 17 % of the total) women were elected to Parliament, but they were completely powerless [7, 57].

Hungarian juridical process between 1945 and 1947 decreed in unparalleled measure the very laws and regulations which the liberal feminist and social democratic women's movements had demanded in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The opening of the university gates to women without restriction, family law reform, pension reform, the regulation of child care benefits, and the abolition of sex discrimination in various professions were all demands of earlier women's movements. The legal provisions created new opportunities for women [8]. But the elimination of civil societies and the increasing Sovietization of Hungary redefined these opportunities.

**1951–1989**

Women's history of this period has not been written. There were some attempts to get beyond the image of the Stakhanovite worker as a symbol of "state feminism" in Hungary, and new oral history projects have been conducted to recover the hidden part of history of Hungarian communism. During political, economic, and social upheavals women are used as co-soldiers and helpers, and when the changes are over, the women are pushed back to their "traditional place" as happened in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, leaving women as invisible partners [9, 19–31].

In the following I would like to illustrate the issues raised by women, using two parallel life stories.

Júlia Rajk was born as Júlia Földes in 1914 to a lower working class family with strong communist traditions, and she died in 1981. Between 1945 and 1949, as a wife of the famous communist minister of the interior, Lászlóné Rajk (Mrs. László Rajk), she was one of the leaders of the mass communist women's organization MNDSZ. In 1949, after the execution of her husband, she was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for supporting her husband's so-called "subversive policy". After her sentence, she was released from prison as Lászlóné Györk (Mrs László Györk). Her name, and also her son's name, was changed without any consultation to doom the name of her husband into oblivion. Her appeals to the leaders of the communist party for official rehabilitation were signed by both names, Rajk and Györk. She used her moral power as a widow of an innocently executed hero of the Hungarian communist movement to force the communist party leadership to start and complete the rehabilitation of political prisoners, and her husband was buried with all possible official honours on 6 October 1956. The photo of the widow and her son taken at the funeral became famous through the world as a symbol of victims of Stalinism. After the reburial of her husband, Laszlo Rajk, she regained her name as Lászlóné Rajk and as did her son as László Rajk Jr. On 4 November when the Soviet Army occupied Hungary, she, together with Imre Nagy, asked for political refugee status from the Embassy of Yugoslavia, and the members of his cabinet. Ms. Rajk was also kidnapped and taken to Romania together with Imre Nagy by the Soviets, and she spent there two years until she was given a permit to return to Hungary as Julia Rajk. After 1958 she became THE Júlia, a real institution who always protected the weak against those who were abusing their power; she negotiated with the party leadership to protect the anti-communist intellectuals. She organized the first NGO in Hungary after the ban on associations in 1951: a dogshelter. She also organized a petition in support of Charta 77 and campaigned against strengthening the abortion law in 1975 as her first civic actions against communism. She offered the compensation that she received for the loss of her husband for a fund supporting talented university students when supporting an individual charity was not an accepted value [10].

Anna Kéthly (1889–1976), The Great Lady of the Hungarian and the International Social Democratic Women's Movement was born in a poor family of workers in Budapest. She studied as a poor student with scholarships. It turned out at age of 15 that her body was unfit for the work, so she studied to become a bookkeeper and a typist. She started work at the editorial office of TOLNAI VILAGLAPJA, joined National Association of Private and Commercial Clerks (Köz és Magántisztviselők Nemzeti Szövetsége), joined the Social Democratic Party and was elected the head of the women's Section of Association of Private Clerks. After 1919, the Hungarian Social Democratic movement was disbanded and there was a need for new cadres. She was the head of the women's section of the SDP and in 1922, at age of 33, was elected to Parliament. She was a good speaker who served in Parliament until 1944 and supported social legislation and voted against the Anti Jewish Law. In 1945, as a member of Parliament and as a leader of the party, she opposed the merger of the communists that happened in 1948. She used her excellent international connections to secure her presence in the international social democratic scene as well. Anna Kéthly was arrested in 1950 and was kept in prison without a trial for three and half years. During her rehabilitation trial in 1954, she refused to collaborate with the communists. In 1956 she re-founded the Social democratic party and was sent on a diplomatic mission to the UN in New York when the Soviet Army occupied Hungary on 4 November 1956. She served as a representative of the other Hungary in the UN and settled in Brussels which served as a centre for the emigrant social democratic opposition. She edited the NÉPSZAVA, 1957–1963, and until 1970's, SZOCIALDEMOKRATA SZEMLE. She remained active in the international socialist movement until her death and died in exile [11, 239–251].

Neither of these women were active in the women's movement, but their life stories introduce the similarities and differences in women's struggles for dignity in Hungary in comparison with other countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

### *AFTER 1989*

In 1989, the structure of Hungarian women's organizations followed the same route as in 1947. Prior to 1989, women's discrimination was related to state socialism and not to gender discrimination. After 1989, the rebirth of feminism in East Central Europe is generally characterised by the fragmentation of women's organisations. After the first years of freedom, only those women's organisations that somehow related to political parties remained alive, so they mirrored the old-new political division of society after the collapse of communism.

Out of 65,000 non-profit organizations listed in the registry of the Central Statistical Office, 60 of them were labelled as women's organization in 1997 [12]. The non-profit

sector of Hungary is powerful, and these associations possess more than 30,000,000,000 HUF. State subsidized income within non-profit organizations is steadily growing but still very low in a comparative perspective. Support from local governments, however, doubled in the past ten years for the purpose of executing special tasks which shows that those organizations that are serving certain community needs are able to generate local funding. In the non-governmental sector 50,000 people were employed full time and 28,000 part-time, but actually only 20 % of the NGOs can afford to have paid employees [13, 4].

The list of Hungarian women's NGOs in 1999 was characterised by the following dichotomous profiles: civil or religious, local or national, welfare-service or professional. The membership numbers are not made public because of the continuous struggle for outside funding. Each and every organisation has a vital interest in keeping its membership figures secret. The structure, however, very much resembles the historical structure of women's mobilisation in Hungary. The main division line is still between those semi-civil organizations that are strongly affiliated to political parties, and which keep their NGO status to up in order to be open to other sources for funding. However, there are few new issues that seem to mobilise Hungarian women. Issues such as the abortion debate in 1991–1992 and again in 1999–2000, reform in the pension system (increasing retirement benefits for women), and the regulation of prostitution in 1999–2000 might have helped women's organizations to formulate agenda of their own.

### *FEMINISM AS A MOBILISATION FORCE*

The feminist movement, banned in 1951 and then re-established in Hungary after 1989, claims that gender equality is tied to the wishes of middle class women. Yet, "at the same time, a group of highly educated, self respecting, well-to-do women with a lot of leisure time, which is the basis of the Scandinavian and American upper middle class feminism, is missing in Hungary" [14, 211]. This may be true; after 1989 there were no influential interest groups outside party politics. Therefore, women's interests have been subordinated to a dominant parliamentary political discourse with middle class women satisfied with their political representation in the existing political system.

At present, the Hungarian feminist movement is confined to a very narrow social spectrum. It is mostly made up of women intellectuals (sociologists, economists, journalists, and a few historians in their mid-30s-40s) based in university centres. After 1989, pioneering women researchers took up fundamental issues such as housing, employment, economic and sexual rights, (self)perception of women, body image, sexuality, and media presentation from a gendered point of view. Since generations of women grew up without experiencing any real chance for political activity and



matched their lives to the demands and expectations of state socialism, the political activism of women during the first decades of the twenty-first century must be cautious and tolerant but persistent.

Hence, after 1989, when feminists brought up the lack of women's consciousness, they encountered deep antipathy among other women in the region. Just as in the West, most of the women who were involved in women's studies were members of the intelligentsia. The difference lies in the strength of the civil society in the West and the presence of a network of associations and organisations extending throughout society; this network may be used by female scholars and academics both as a defensive power-base and as a tool with which to impose pressure. In Eastern Europe, the abolition of women's associations and the "*Gleichschaltung*" of women's movements not only eliminated any chance for institutional pressure but also led to a death of female politicians capable of representing women's interest in other fields. Women's political socialisation took place in the victorious communist women's mass-organisations, on the grounds of psychological reflexes that were formed by male politicians in order to secure and maintain their political power.

In the long run, the development of Hungarian women's NGO's should progress in two directions: first, to replace and to create a service sector which has a vital importance improving women's position in the political and economic market; second, to increase the feeling of cooperation between different branches of women's NGO's, crossing political and agenda lines, which would force political entities to address women as citizens with formidable issues for mobilisation.

Increasing racism in the Hungarian society is making the Roma population even more vulnerable. The majority Hungarian society ignores the most important social and cultural problem of the present day Hungary: the continuous discrimination against Roma. Roma women suffer double discrimination, but it is true to an even further extent than in the case of other women; without a powerful pressure group and without strong social alliances, they are vulnerable. In the case of the Roma women, because of the lack of strong Roma intellectuals, they remain powerless.

Women's representation remains largely outside the conventional political framework. Influential pressure groups and some NGO's have not been able to overcome the gap between the "big policy makers" and the voters. The election of 1998 ended with the illusion that professional politicians might be forced to look for wider support, and they were forced to address specific women's issues. Since Hungarian electoral preferences are not settled (25 % of the voters are "undecided"), democratic elections may boost interest in women's issues, again from "above". The political consensus among Hungarian politicians to join to the European Union might still open up space for the international community to promote and organize women's issues in Hungary. Grassroots organizations are missing, but the social needs are there.

Hungarian society faces the task of building a new political system, one that acknowledges inequalities and develops a new body of social knowledge that recognises gender distinctions as a part of human dignity and freedom.

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### Moterų judėjimas Vengrijoje ir feminizmas

*Andrea Pető*

Santrauka

Straipsnyje atskleidžiama XX a. Vengrijos moterų judėjimo istorija, aptariamas moterų judėjimo ryšys su šalies politiniais įvykiais, Pirmuoju ir Antruoju pasauliniu karu, komunistiniu režimu. Iki penktojo dešimtmečio moterų veikla neturėjo įtakos Vengrijos socialiniam ir politiniam gyvenimui. Tik liberalių ir socialdemokratių iniciatyva pradėjus teismo procesus, universitetai panaikino apribojimus moterims, buvo peržiūrėti šeimos teisės, vaikų priežiūros įstatymai, atlikta pensijų reforma, uždrausta lytinė diskriminacija. Šeštojo–devintojo dešimtmečių Vengrijos moterų judėjimo istorija dar neparašyta. Nuo 1989 m. sustiprėja feministinis judėjimas; jis remiasi skandinavų ir amerikiečių feminisčių patirtimi. Feminisčių judėjimą palaiko vengrės intelektualės. Autorė pažymi, kad nevyriausybinių moterų organizacijos turėtų skatinti Vengrijos moteris aktyviau dalyvauti šalies ekonominiame ir politiniame gyvenime, kad moterų problemos neliktų vien rinkimų kampanijų šūkiais.