

The Social Construction of Women's Roles in Hungary¹

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INTRODUCTION: THE ABSENCE OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN HUNGARY

Researchers and politicians in the West, as well as representatives of various feminist trends often propose the question to their East and Central European colleagues: What has happened to the women in post-socialist societies? In what way did the political change on this side of Europe influence their situation?² This question is not only an inquiry into the conditions, strategies, and positions of women, who

represent more than the half of the population in these societies. It also includes a covert hypothesis, namely that the situation of the women in the socialist countries was radically different from the situation of their associates living in the West. In other words, the socialist way of emancipation supported women by means of ideology, economy, and politics. Even if not through internal, autonomous movements, with the participation of those involved, but by the centralised methods of an authoritarian power, it nevertheless achieved formally equal social status for women and men. The most obvious indicators of the equality of women – equal opportunities in the labor market and in education; extensive and accessible family- and child-care institutions; women's encouraged and active participation in the political and public spheres – seemed to support these hypotheses in all of the socialist countries.

However, the radical changes in Europe taking place in 1989 and 1990 clearly showed that the emancipation of women during socialism lacked constancy and content, for it was everywhere the women who became the real losers of the political change. Political participation of women and their position in the labor market drastically changed in all the countries of the region, and many other developments were also characteristic of all post-socialist countries – such as the reduced number and accessibility of child-care institutions, the shrinking or the devaluation of the family-protecting social political arrangements, or the attempts to reestablish traditional roles of women within the family.

Meanwhile the (mostly Western) observers – researchers, politicians, and activists of feminist movements – are obviously disappointed at seeing the social changes that are

¹ This article is partly based on the background paper written for CIVICUS (World Alliance for Citizen Participation), USA, in 1995.

² See for example Funk and Mueller (1993), Matynia (1995), Rueschemeyer (1994).

happening in this region. Their disappointment is related mainly to the fact that even though state socialism can no longer suppress the manifestations of personal and group interests, submitting them to collective objectives formulated by the authoritarian power, the new situation has not yet brought about a boom in the civil activities of formerly repressed groups. Thus, women's movements are also not flourishing in the countries of the region either, and feminist movements as active as their western counterparts have not been organized. Consequently, without the institutional help of these movements, it has not been possible to maintain the formally equal social status for women, let alone to achieve real equality.

It soon turned out that there were misunderstandings and misconceptions between the East and the West in judging the changes: the development of seemingly identical institutions in East and Central European countries did not correspond to identical values, attitudes, norms, and forms of behaviour attached to these institutions. Moreover, what is seen as "normal" in the West, is not always considered "normal" in the East. In other words, it is not necessarily the institutions that are different on the two sides of the World, but the related emotions, reactions, and opinions. And the attitudes, values and opinions, inscribed into the individual lives and histories through the socialization processes extending over many generations, are deeply embedded in the history of the societies (Drakulic 1995, Wallace 1995).

Concerning the weakness of women's movements and the absence of women's perspectives in social scientific disciplines in Hungary, two simplified arguments can be formulated: one claiming that state socialism brought about not only formal but also real equality between men and women, the other emphasizing that during socialism it was impossible to organize around autonomous group interests. According to the first argument, there have been no women's movements formed in Hungary and there has been no need for a separate study of women's role in the society, since the socialist system of the past four decades declared in its constitution, and ensured with its institutions, that women and men have equal rights and equal social status. Thus, whenever women, or certain groups of women suffered any discrimination in the previous system, those injustices were not based on gender difference, but on different political and economic relations of various social strata to the state socialist power.

The other argument asserts that there has been no women's or any other movements in Hungary because the omnipotent, bureaucratic party-state repressed any social initiative of civil society. Except for family relationships it did not allow any community organizations to form, freedom of speech had been withdrawn, and every form of public discourse had been controlled, preventing the formation of autonomous groups representing different interests. At the same time, in a cynical and demonstrative way, it "ensured" the representation of specific groups of Hungarian society by creating organizations from above – such as centralized trade unions, minority and ethnic alliances, and the National Council of Hungarian Women.

Although both standpoints contain elements of truth, neither one of them provides a sufficient explanation. The weakness of women's movements has to be analyzed in a socio-historical context, a context of continuities and discontinuities in the social perception of the role of women. On the one hand, we have a forced but almost overall structural emancipation during state socialism, controlled by a central power, but lacking the efforts and activities of women themselves. On the other hand, we see the collapse of the

equality of women after the end of the centralised arrangements that used to guarantee their emancipation, while the rights to hold public meetings and to create civil self-organization are now present. This is the paradox researchers of the changes in the lives of the East and Central European women are trying to investigate.

FORCED MODERNIZATION AND "THE EQUALITY OF WOMEN" DURING STATE SOCIALISM

After the Second World War, the socio-historical development of Hungary was defined by a Soviet type system, coerced by an outer force and legitimated by a socialist ideology. State socialist ideology obviously targeted not only the religious, local, and cultural communities that formed social and individual identity, but also families. The socialist worldview, which placed the value of the collective above everything else, considered families as vestiges of a bourgeois past – like religiosity, individualism, and private property. Therefore the role of the family was defined according to the needs of forced socialist transformation: it had to fulfil the demand of extensive industrialization for cheap labor. Similarly, women's emancipation was also considered in terms of their contribution to socialist industrialization: their "equal rights" meant that, like men, they had to have a job. The masses of women who entered employment in the 1950's provided a cheap, unskilled labor for a long time.

The ideological attack against private property and the bourgeois family, together with the socialist type of industrialization and modernization, destroyed the traditional families, making wage-earning occupations the only alternative for survival. The new family model of two wage-earners spread quickly – partly because of the low level of wages and partly due to external pressures to be employed in the state sector. The extent of women's employment in socialist production precisely reflected the degree of demand for an unskilled labor in each socialist country. Women's employment gradually became an internalized objective, a conscious decision of women, as the initial high-sounding promises and spectacular illusory successes of socialist emancipation did offer real opportunities for a large number of women: through further education, the possibility of choosing their profession and partner, and freedom of mobility (Lócsei 1985).

The four decades of socialism, however, must not be seen as a homogenous period in the East and Central European region. The first twenty years – which can also be called the period of "state feminism" as far as its impact upon the social position of women is concerned – was soon followed by a conservative turn. While the 1950's and the 1960's were characterized by a particular concern with the position of women in the labor market, the end of extensive industrialization and the appearance of surplus labor in after the 1970's promoted a new ideological trend. This new trend favored conservative ideas about women, most of the time implicitly, but in certain instances explicitly. The image of the working woman of the 1950's, who was able to fulfil her commitments even in the range of activities shared with men, was gradually displaced by another one: that of the woman who, accepting the traditional family values, was ready to fulfil a double function as an employee and a mother at the same time (Haney 1994).

Although the party-state attempted to maintain continuity with its earlier policies, it nevertheless introduced certain social benefits indicating the conservative turn that aimed

at the protection of the family. First, the government introduced a child-care allowance in 1967, then a child-care "fee" in 1985.³ The first was already utilized in the year of its introduction by nearly 70% of the women entitled. The latter type of financial support also became popular among Hungarian mothers, although it failed to meet some of the original intentions: for example, it did not encourage highly qualified women, in the middle of their career, to have more children. At the same time, sociologists and journalists soon realized that these measures contributed to reestablishing traditional roles within the family. Young generations of women, who wanted to have a career of their own and to share their domestic duties with their husbands, were unprepared for taking a dependent position, and had difficulties doing the housework and raising their children without any help or a model to follow (Buda 1986).

THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE ROLE OF WOMEN DURING STATE SOCIALISM AND AFTER THE POLITICAL CHANGES

The forced modernization and formal emancipation provoked ambivalent responses by the male and female members of families. At first, the families, and the especially affected women, were not able to develop effective defensive strategies against these wide ranging state policies. Therefore they mainly submitted themselves to the conditions determined by the socialist type of economic modernization and labor policy.

Nevertheless, their defensive attempts can be demonstrated in two fields. The first led to a widespread transformation of the family. This process is characterized, on one hand, by radical decline in the number of children families undertook, and on the other hand, by the appearance of the new model of the nuclear family: two wage-earners; living in housing estates, mostly in urban areas; having children soon after marriage, if possible; and placing their children under the care of the part-time child-welfare institutions of the state. This type of family, however, proved to be unstable. The break with traditional family life was marked by frequent divorces, remarriages, and the multiplication of the number of families with a single parent.

The other type of defense is more difficult to demonstrate through statistical data. However, the various scientific, literary, and journalistic representations published during this period suggest that despite the emancipatory efforts of socialism, there was a longing for a traditional form of the family.⁴ This kind of nostalgia was only imagined, however, in the case of many families, since it emphasized the values and norms of the bourgeois family which they had never experienced. In Hungary for instance, the major-

³ This "fee" is, of course, another benefit for women; its name is coined to distinguish it from the "allowance." The system of *child-care allowance* introduced on January 1, 1967, at the time of its introduction consisted of a stipend at about 40 percent of the average monthly earnings of women. Later the amount paid rose and increased for each additional child. Women were entitled to this benefit until the age of three of the youngest child. The *child-care fee* was introduced in March 1985. Its value was equal to 75 percent of the mother's or father's average monthly pay, and it was received after the expiration of the five-month maternity leave. Initially the allowance was to be paid until the first birthday of the child, later it has been extended to the age of two. See more detailed information in Neményi (1993).

⁴ Which became explicit in all of the countries of the region after the collapse of the socialist regime.

ity of families had never lived according to this model, a fact which became a source of remorse and ambivalence. The working woman who put her child under the care of child-welfare institutions was considered a "bad" mother, and one who tried to fulfil her "duties" within the family, including looking after her children, was often considered a second-rate labor force. Therefore she became frustrated both as a worker and as a mother, and had a negative opinion of her own performance, all of which resulted in confused self-esteem (Neményi 1992).

An investigation from 1988 reveals this ambivalence. At that time 46% of the labor force, approximately the same percentage as represented by men, was constituted by women. However, only 70% of the people asked said that beneficial employment was important for women, and even fewer said that it was necessary for anything beyond economic subsistence of the family. Work was seen, according to the survey, not as a means to achieve economic independence from men, or for personal identification with one's job, but, instead, as an activity providing the opportunity to meet other people – other women – thus extending one's social environment (see Haney 1994).

This ambivalence about the "proper" role of women has subsisted – although in a modified form – even after the political change in 1989-90. The socialist model of the woman, although introduced by coercion, had become the only model based on experience for members of society, women and men alike. Even if the doubts, negative opinions, and frustrations surrounding this model continuously undermined its positive myth during socialism, it was and has remained heavily present in role conceptions assumed by young generations facing an already different world during the period of political change. After the political change it was precisely the revitalization of the traditional family model that maintained the ambivalence about the proper role of women. This traditional family model involved a wage-earner husband and a dependent wife, where the father as the head of the family had an instrumental function, while the dominant role of the mother was to sustain the private sphere, and to raise and nurse children. The revitalization of this model was supported less by conservative, mainly Catholic, ideology reinforced after the collapse of the socialist regime, than by the emergence of unemployment.

The collapse of dysfunctional, large socialist enterprises producing only deficit, the privatization process, and the possibility to start new forms of small enterprises influenced various social strata, distinct age groups, and male and female members of the society in different ways. The people most apt to start enterprises and assume personal initiatives consisted everywhere of young people who had convertible professional skills, thus forming the most mobile group of the society. However, the women, working primarily in the state sector or in public services, whose professional qualifications were low or not convertible, who had lower level positions relative to men, and who had recourse to the allocations related to governmental employment in a great measure, had weaker chances to compete than the more mobile men who had successfully adapted themselves to the modified situation.

It is only in Slovenia and Hungary, among the countries of the region, that the rate of the unemployment of women is lower than that of men. But even in these countries the proportion of women employees has considerably decreased. Moreover, the fact that fewer women are registered as unemployed does not mean that they have identical or perhaps better chances for getting a job than men. The frequency of early retirement and collection of disability pension among Hungarian women, their formally active but actu-

ally inactive status provided by child-care fee and allowance, their assumption of an auxiliary position within the family – all mean that women who cannot find a job in the labor market become dependent family members, even if this is not revealed by statistics (Frey 1993).

In a social environment threatening with unemployment, families and couples reevaluate their strategies for getting jobs. Even those women who earn salaries become quasi-dependent, second-rate bread-winners, subordinate to their husbands: they assume most of the responsibilities of housekeeping, child raising, and nursing. Thus it is only men for whom losing a job entails a severe devaluation of their function and a humiliating reduction of their position within the family. In the case of women it does not matter as much, as far as their previous performance is concerned, that their already accepted dependent position becomes unambiguous. Therefore, whether or not female unemployment appears in the statistics, the decreasing number and proportion of female employees might be seen as the explicit reestablishment of the traditional role of the woman.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

So what happened to women during the transition? What happened to them in a region where their employment was primarily due to the demand for labour following the introduction of the socialist type of economy; where male and female participation in the labour market had never been really identical because of the gender-related differentiation concerning promotion, salary and prestige; where those entitled to get state subsidies were actually the women and not the families in general; where it was still the women who were responsible for keeping the house and looking after the children, while they did not even challenge this situation; and where the authoritarian states prevented their citizens from influencing the workings of the system?

Since the political changes, the idea of the traditional family and the traditional role of the woman has been reinforced. This has less to do with factors such as ignorance surrounding gender roles, excessive emphasis on biological determination, or an essentialist view about the role of women, than with other, more significant ones related to social processes. The politics of state socialism is also to be blamed for resurrecting old-fashioned thinking, since it was detrimental and humiliating for both men and women. As a result, it seemed that striving for human rights was more important than attaining formal or even substantive equality between men and women.

During state socialism, the principal division in society separated the state and the people. The citizen's movements in Western societies – such as feminism – are mostly based on the opposition between the individual and the social system, and the target of the attack is the patriarchal character of the society that preserves gender inequality. However, the two poles of opposition in the socialist countries were the people and the state. There was no way for this kind of opposition to be articulated as a political force – one could not question the legitimacy of the existing public order outside of the private sphere (Marody 1993). Thus, these societies were characterized by a kind of escapism into private life, resulting in the feminization of the society. The norms and goals of both men and women were of the kind usually defined as feminine: a happy family life, the maintenance of intimate relationships as more important than a high position or political

and social activities. Although income, position and level of education also contributed to the political status of people, social prestige was more determined by personal and moral qualities. The education of children was also not so much competitive and success-oriented, instead it promoted corporate behaviour and adaptability. Thus men and women put themselves into the same social categories, opposing not one another but the authoritarian power and the leadership of the party, inaccessible for the majority of the people. They were more like partners than competitors – having, as they thought, identical interests.

There is an important factor I could not discuss in the present analysis, namely the negative attitude of people towards feminism and the movements of women in general. A further analysis could deal with those universal tendencies, present in this region too, which also contribute to the marginalization of the problems related to women, by attributing them a low rank among social problems. My intention in the present paper was to find an explanation for the indifference surrounding the problem of women. I have mentioned such factors as the peculiar, contradictory situation of women; the immanent ambivalence towards their responsibilities; and the disappointment and frustration produced by this ambivalence. I have referred to the historical differences between Hungary and the western societies which are also determining factors as far as the range of activity of men and women, behaviour patterns, and individual lives are concerned.

So why have women not discovered their social discrimination after the collapse of communism? Why are the movements of women in the region so weak, so isolated, and almost unknown for the general public? There is still no answer to these questions.

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