



DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM RELATED TO WOMEN AND FAMILIES SINCE 2010 IN HUNGARY

Deepening cleavages and new strategies

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The increasingly populist and nationalist governing forces have become hostile against actors upholding feminist values. Meanwhile the state has embraced civil society movements and organizations that share conservative agendas.



There was a major restructuring of government funding. The most secure and largest funding is received by organizations engaged in *strategic partnership* with the government.



The governmental intervention had a huge impact on the possibilities of cooperation between civil society actors.

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INTRODUCTION

Two parallel processes related to gender and civil society are present in Hungary and in other countries in central and eastern Europe, such as Poland, Serbia, Bulgaria and Russia. On the one hand, the increasingly authoritarian and populist regimes have become hostile towards actors upholding feminist values.¹ These governments accuse civil activists for promoting what they call »gender ideology«, which they claim is detrimental to the family and the nation. On the other hand, the state has embraced civil society movements and organizations that share conservative agendas, such as the promotion of traditional family values, heterosexual marriage, large families and a related ethno-nationalist demographic discourse that identifies women's maternal role with preserving the nation-state.

Since around 2010, the transformation of civil society in Hungary has taken place in the context of democratic backsliding, a deep economic crisis after 2009 and upheaval from 2014, and, finally, the COVID-19 pandemic since spring 2020. Under such economic and social circumstances, policy changes and government discourses related to women and families, gender equality and civil society have shaped the activities, networks and available resources of women's civil society activism. The promotion of families has been central to the government's agenda, and since 2018 prime minister Viktor Orbán has pursued so-called »demographic governance« (for details

see **Box 1** in the *Appendix*). Meanwhile, gender equality institutions have been substantially weakened. Universities, researchers and civil society actors have been attacked for addressing gender equality issues and LGBTQ rights (see **Box 2**). Overall, legislation and state funding related to civil society have been significantly transformed by the Fidesz government. Since 2015 feminist civil society actors, just like human rights activists – including those supporting refugees – and environmentalists have been under systematic siege by the state (see **Box 3**).

The aim of this research was to map the changing landscape of civil society organizations and movements related to women, families and gender in Hungary over the past ten years. Our focus is the relationship between the state and civil society movements/organizations within the framework of democratic decline. More specifically, we seek to understand the positions of organizations in relation to various levels of state institutions (local and national) and supra-national entities (such as the EU and the UN); the ways in which they are related to the state's policies and discursive agendas; and whether and how they are able to influence these agendas. We ask furthermore how the changing relations between organizations and the state influence their strategies, activities and funding, as well as their connections to each other and to outside actors, including private ones.

LISTENING TO WOMEN'S VOICES: OUR METHODOLOGY

The findings of this research are based on a qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with 20 civil society actors, ethnographic observation of their events, and the database of the Hungarian national court, comprising registered civil society organizations' annual reports. Our **selection** of research subjects was based on an inclusive understanding of civil society, incorporating a wide spec-

trum of ideological orientations: We interviewed young left-wing feminist groups, more established, moderate conservative and left-leaning organizations, as well as new movements on the far right. The sample included non-formalized movements, registered NGOs and even so-called »GONGOS« (government-organized non-governmental organizations).

¹ By »feminism« we mean the political pursuit of equality between men and women. By »feminist« civil organizations/movements we refer to those that identify themselves with this understanding of

feminism, while we call »traditionalist« or »conservative« those organizations/movements that wish to embrace the traditional division and allocation of men's and women's roles in society.

THE MOTHER, THE WORKER AND THE FEMALE BODY: THREE PARADIGMS OF FEMALE EXISTENCE

The civil society organizations under examination here are linked, through their origins and activities, to distinct aspects of women's lives. They are either traditionally considered to be part of femininity and/or related to certain roles women are expected to adopt in modern societies. The aspects in question are maternity and the family; female employment; and the integrity of the female body. While most organizations in our study engage with at least two of the three of these aspects we were able to determine the dominant dimension in each case and categorize them accordingly into one of the three groups.

WOMEN AS MOTHERS

Five of the organizations in our sample focus on women as mothers. Over recent decades, responses to concerns regarding Hungary's demographic situation and efforts to halt the fall in population and to promote childbirth were accompanied by heated discussions, confronting traditional values framed by nationalist ideology with the individualistic values of female emancipation. One of the oldest civil society organizations in our sample, with an extensive membership and network, is an important bastion of this kind of traditionalism. At the same time, many other organizations have been set up in connection with the government's family-orientation. Some of these organizations are explicitly government-friendly, while others, proposing a more extreme traditionalist agenda – for example, opposing maternal employment – remain independent of the Orbán government.

WOMEN AT WORK

Eight of the organizations studied here are concerned with women at work. Such associations usually sympathize with leftist and liberal views and share the emancipating values of equal opportunities needed for individual self-fulfilment as well as social justice. We also interviewed some conservative organizations that promote employment of mothers, especially in the countryside. Some of the organizations (typically the left-leaning ones) in this category were established already before the regime change or in the early 1990s, while others emerged in response to Hungary's EU accession process. In accordance with changing government cycles – either as sup-

porters or as critics of the government agenda – they have used funds made available within the framework of gender mainstreaming to actively support various target groups, especially in connection with employment: female entrepreneurs, mothers reintegrating in the labour market after parental leave, and disadvantaged women, including Roma.

THE FEMALE BODY AS A »BATTLEGROUND«²

The integrity of the female body and body politics represent the third analytically distinguished aspect of women's social roles. The seven organizations in our sample concerned with such issues reject any homogenizing descriptions in terms of ideology. Some of them stand for liberal values related to women's autonomy, others are representatives of positive birth movements promoting traditional and/or postmodern values, while still others are concerned with the problem of violence, fighting against domestic violence or all forms of violence against women in general, including prostitution, or address the question of abortion. We interviewed (eco)feminists, and activists of anti-exploitation and anti-capitalist movements sharing leftist values, as well as members of extreme right pro-life movements. What connects these formations, despite all their differences in terms of social embedding and ideology, is a reflexive view of the female identity as rooted in the female body.

² Reference to the poster 'Your body is a battleground' (1989) created by feminist artist Barbara Kruger.

THE CHANGING STRATEGIES OF WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS IN LIGHT OF THE HOSTILE OR THE BENIGN STATE

Organizations concerned with women and families need to react to the actions of the increasingly authoritarian state, which is narrowing civic space and individual freedoms. Our study shows, however, that civil society actors are not only passive victims of these changes, but are actively forming civic and political space. In the meantime, their relations to the market and international actors, including donors, are also changing, and their connections to each other are being transformed.

Based on Krizsán and Roggeband (2019) we focused on five central dimensions of civil society change under democratic decline: policy influence, capacities and funding, strategies, coalitions and networks, and demands and framing.

POLICY INFLUENCE: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS VS SILENCING AND APPROPRIATION

When analysing policy impact we focused on the ways in which civil society actors make use of formal and informal connections to the state and exert influence in direct or indirect ways on policies related to women and families. In terms of **formal connection** to the state, many of our interviewees named the Women's Rights Thematic Group within the Ministry of Justice, chaired by the State Secretary of Family and Youth Affairs of the Ministry of Human Capacities as their only official connection to the government. We found that this forum, held twice a year, serves more as an occasion for one-way communication by the State Secretary to civil actors than a genuine institution of democratic discussion and reconciliation. While some of the government-friendly actors are welcome to present their views, others have very little or no opportunity to do so.

Some privileged organizations have entered into **strategic partnerships** with the state, meaning they may obtain up-to-date information about policy proposals, are invited to consultations and government events, and have their publications distributed in the ministry. These organizations are in a position to exert influence on the policy agenda, by which they also confer **legitimacy** on government programmes. Meanwhile, their activities are legiti-

mized by high-ranking government officials appearing at their events.

The close civil society circle around the State Secretariat for Family Affairs includes only moderate conservative family- and work-oriented civil society actors. Organizations that hold more radically traditionalist ideas related to body politics or motherly duties are not involved in official consultations with the government or in the implementation of programmes. These organizations, even though very positive about government agendas, have remained **unofficial promoters**. Meanwhile, feminist actors only very rarely approach Fidesz politicians directly with their demands. The government rejects any connection with them, and since 2016 they have been increasingly subjected to politically motivated attacks by the state.

It may thus sound surprising that, despite their nearly complete lack of access to government circles or funds, most feminist actors reported that some of their important ideas and programmes had been taken up by the Fidesz government. We term this kind of impact on policy-making **»intellectual appropriation«**, referring to programmes or ideas elaborated by civil society actors being implemented by the government without giving them credit or involving them in the planning or implementation of related government programmes.

FUNDING: GENEROUS FUNDING VS CONSTRAINED RESOURCES; »GONGO-IZATION« AND MARKETIZATION

Our data shows a major restructuring of government funding. The most secure and substantial funding is received by organizations engaged in **strategic partnership** with the government. In one case this even involves a dedicated line in the state budget. Another major source of funding, far more significant than what can be obtained through public tenders, is distributed to government-friendly NGOs by the **Ministry of Human Capacities**. Again, the more moderate traditionalist organizations receive substantial funding.

The official publicly available financial resource for civil society organizations, the **Fund for National Co-operation**,³ only deals with a small proportion of state funds. Feminist organizations are nearly completely excluded from funding here, too. Some of our interviewees (typically the least radical old feminist organizations) have tried several times to apply to the fund, while others, seeing the writing on the wall from 2011, have never even applied. We only found one exception to this rule: one old-time LGBT organization has received regular funding, allowing them to maintain an office and pay a few employees.

Strategic partnerships and ongoing funding from the ministry have given rise to a phenomenon we term **»GONGO-ization«** (»GONGO« standing for »government-organized NGO«). We found that these organizations were not entirely new or lacking a social basis. What is significant, however, is that certain civil actors that previously had diverse funding portfolios had their needs almost completely covered by the government after 2010. These actors openly promote the government's family policy programmes and refrain from any criticism of them. »GONGO-ization« is thus a process through which an NGO becomes gradually involved in promoting state agendas, losing its financial independence and critical voice. These actors, while going through the process of »GONGO-ization« often continue their original activities, maintaining close connections to their local membership, while their leaders assert a strong and proud civil identity.

While public funding became selectively available to civil society actors, the two most important **international donor organizations** named by our interviewees – the Open Society Foundation (OSF) and the Norway Grant Mechanism (NGM, also known as Norway Grants) came to be openly attacked by the government and ceased their activities in Hungary. Organizations have reacted differently to the narrowing of funding opportunities. Some, mainly active in the field of body politics, have managed to find new international donors to safeguard their activities for the forthcoming years. Others, typically those related to reconciliation issues, have often turned away from big donors and sought new local and international private sponsors to fund some of their activities. Starting their own businesses or having local private donors often seem to be more feasible strategies, providing more security than seeking funding from the state or the EU. Overall we see some signs of **marketization** among feminist actors, as well as some more radical traditionalists as a new strategy of survival in difficult times.

COALITIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS: WIDENING GAPS AND NEW SOLIDARITIES

In terms of coalitions and partnerships, we noticed a **widening division** between traditionalist and feminist civil society actors. This has happened despite the rhetoric of many familialist, government-friendly organizations that often claim to be operating in the middle ground and keeping a distance from both the left and the right, or even to be **mediating** between ideological worlds. Our interviews show that they in fact maintain very few, if any connections to feminist organizations. In the meantime feminist organizations that used to have some links to conservative actors now openly differentiate themselves from traditionalist, pro-government groups. Thus there is now hardly any interaction between the two sides. This shows that government intervention has had a huge impact on the possibilities for cooperation between civil society actors. When we asked about their **opponents**, moderate conservatives often named feminists, typically mentioning conflicts related to abortion, LGBTQ activism and sex education. A common feature here is control over one's body. Thus major ideational divisions arise in relation to body politics, which suggests that the female body has become a real battleground. There are also **tensions** within the feminist movement, often generated by the government attacks: organizations reported a sense of isolation when previous allies turned away from them.

Nevertheless, we also found signs of **solidarity** and mutual help among feminist actors, partly in response to state hostility. For example, we observed increasing solidarity towards Roma women among some left-wing organizations, and Roma women themselves also show solidarity with the poorest. Civil actors attacked by the government have organized joint actions and started to coordinate their reactions. Moderate feminists saw more positive sides to the joint solidarity actions, while more radical ones were highly critical of them. Many feminists expressed their impression that women's organizations and groups would like to develop linkages. These organizations have also established some novel connections to non-feminist civil society actors, as well as to private, profit-oriented ones who came to support their cause by way of a kind of **»protest mainstreaming«**. By this we mean that some private and civil society actors realized the importance of gender equality due to the continuous government attacks against feminists. These formerly neutral actors launched projects related to gender equality and actively show solidarity with feminist actors.

³ Nemzeti Együttműködési Alap (NEA) in Hungarian. This fund has undergone major restructuring since 2011, shifting from a self-governing donor organization to one openly promoting government agendas.

STRATEGIES: ENHANCED OPPORTUNITIES AND PROFESSIONALISM VS ABEYANCE AND GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM

Changing relations to the state and related funding possibilities have affected the strategies of civil society organizations substantially. The family-oriented organizations that perfectly fit the government agenda of promoting middle-class families have been the clear **winners** of the new situation, which allows them to extend their programmes and activities. They often achieve high positions in **international and EU-level civil activism**. In fact, we found that the most successful organizations on both sides of the ideological spectrum engage in international activism and initiate EU-level actions, while also pursuing local activism.

Other organizations focusing on the family, but remaining more independent and critical of the government on issues related to, for example, employment of mothers, often concentrate on **smaller-scale workshops** and publications instead of running costly programmes that they cannot afford. These actors find further legitimacy and influence through intellectual elites and **mingle with academic circles**. Some of them have managed to reach wide academic fora, publish in academic journals and hold their conferences in venues related to academia or universities.

The older left-wing work-oriented organizations that formerly based their strategies almost exclusively on public funding seem to be on the edge of **extinction**, having no means, resources or even willingness to seek new opportunities. Somewhat younger organizations, founded around the time of Hungary's EU accession, pursue a strategy of **abeyance**. In such situations civil actors turn away from political activism and move towards academia or workshops on specific issues. They try to maintain themselves based on small reserves and a drastically shrinking staff that often includes only one or two persons.

Other organizations that have suffered from state attacks seek new areas and turn to **grassroots activism**, as opposed to the earlier, government- and EU-promoted, more bureaucratic gender mainstreaming projects. Joint local actions with other organizations that had not been engaged with gender equality previously, seem to be a way out for some feminist actors. Being increasingly active locally and pursuing more **disruptive and grassroots strategies** is most frequent in the case of organizations and movements active in the field of body politics. Here, even the movements that are ideologically close to the government but critical from a traditionalist perspective on issues related to, for example, abortion or sex education, decided to take their distance from it, not asking for funds and insisting on their **independence**.

Civil actors concerned with body politics are especially inclined to engage in **social action**. Feminists in this field have further strengthened their grassroots activism

in recent years, paying increased attention to the most vulnerable groups, including Roma women. Radical right movements also offer services for women in need, for instance, in the field of adoption.

CLAIMS AND FRAMING: SERVING THE GOVERNMENT VS RADICALIZATION

Our initial assumption was that civil society actors concerned with women's and family issues have probably adjusted their claims and framing to the ideologically loaded family-centered and demography-oriented agenda adopted by the government. This, however, did not happen in all the three groups. Family-oriented organizations, which have similar priorities to the Orbán government, were **strengthened** and secured the resources to pursue their aims via newly established homepages and continuous online activities. The way in which traditionalist organizations promote the white, middle-class, heterosexual family with at least two children is increasingly **professional and market-oriented**. Their framing, in line with that of the government, is the image of the »healthy family« without major problems or deficiencies, reflecting the **sunny side of family life**, in which both parents are employed and earn above the average and, with the help of government policies, can afford new cars, cosy houses and longer holidays. In this world, patriarchal and capitalist relations are not only taken for granted, but also praised rhetorically and in visual terms.

Meanwhile, we discovered increasing **structural criticism** among feminist organizations in relation not only to the government agenda, but also to neoliberal market mechanisms. Most of them also condemn international donors for their expectations related to the market-oriented operations of civil society organizations. And while a number of feminist organizations and movements are moving away from middle class, Budapest-based circles opening up towards more vulnerable groups, they also frame their claims more radically. The earlier focus on individual women's grievances seems gradually to be feeding a pronounced anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal structural criticism.

More radical traditionalist movements share feminists' critical thinking in relation to capitalism. While feminists link their anti-capitalism to an anti-patriarchal stance, radical right movements connect it with their anti-gender-equality ideas. Both claims typically centre around identity and body politics. In radical traditionalist activists' eyes mothers' labour market participation, as well as men's care work are strongly unwelcome, and, in contrast to the anti-patriarchal narrative, they call for the protection of men and masculinity.

Finally, we see a general shift towards body politics. Not only are more organizations and movements engaged in body politics, but they also frame their claims more rad-

ically. Various trends have contributed to this change, including donor organizations' priorities; the polarization of gender-related debates in Hungary that draw attention to core issues such as violence, childbirth, abortion and sexual identity; and a generational shift in which »old« female employment-focused actors, socialized under state socialism and EU accession, are succeeded by young ones who are more interested in identity politics. For example, Roma women's organizations, who were earlier engaged mainly with reconciliation and gender mainstreaming issues, are shifting their activities and are coming to assert more radical claims related to the **bodily dignity** of Roma women.

Overall, our study shows that feminist organizations embody a peculiar counter-reaction to the illiberal state, and do not intend to move towards a more traditionalist, softer or government-friendly framing of women's problems. Despite (or because of) coping with severe hardships, feminists and women's groups criticizing the government from the perspective of social inclusion are increasingly aware that they are dealing with power relations, and insist on remaining political when engaging with »real politics« as opposed to party politics. As one of them said: »[W]e are dealing with tough issues here, and we are not necessarily cute in everybody's eyes, and this is okay the way it is.«

CONCLUSION: WOMEN, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND THE "ILLIBERAL" STATE

In Hungary, the past decade has been marked by a dual political strategy on the part of the government concerning civil society. On the one hand, the ruling party launched a series of attacks against civil society founded on liberal and democratic values. On the other hand, by picking, according to its needs, organizations interested in family policies and stuffing them with money, it created its own controllable and manageable alternative to civil society. The government's civil society policies, applying the stick of harsh punishments and the carrot of generous funding, have made some organizations utterly weak and rendered them either inactive or struggling for survival, while others, including some brand new ones, are thriving and absolutely dominate (hollowed-out) policy fora.

Both overfunding and deprivation seem to breed novel survival strategies. What we term »GONGO-ization« and »marketization« mark processes that entail the complete or partial loss of autonomy by civil society organizations and different kinds and degrees of helplessness. Our research provides evidence that abeyance and radicalization are the two most prominent survival strategies.

In sum: civil society related to family and women's issues has been greatly transformed in the past ten years. Government-friendly organizations have become more

dependent, financially and existentially, on the government, and the rest are coping with increased difficulties, both materially and in terms of fulfilling their aims. The position of organizations relative to the government, however, does not exactly match their influence on current policies, as the ideas and programmes of some excluded and oppressed organizations have actually been taken up, even if in distorted and reduced forms. Intensifying divisions and fragmentation is certainly due to state influence, which, ironically, also engenders new forms of grassroots activism, solidarity and cooperation. Thus, pro-government organizations are thriving and have real accomplishments, as well as mobilizing potential, while disfavoured and oppositional groups are discovering new forms of alliances and activities, also reaching out to the business sphere. In the shadow of government policies seeking to subjugate women to the service of the family, we have observed a general shift towards a more comprehensive understanding of social problems related to gender, manifested in attempts to safeguard the dignity of the human body. Women's movements are thus not simply suppressed and annihilated, but have developed a variety of ways to adapt to changed conditions. Civil society critical of the government, although sometimes wrecked, exhausted and disfigured, is still able to maintain solidarity and protect democratic values.

APPENDIX

Box 1**Family policy reforms since 2010**

- 2010** Restoring the length of universal parental leave (GYES – cut by previous Socialist government)
- 2011** New family tax allowance system benefitting especially 3+ families
- 2013** Women 40 Programme allowing early retirement for women with full pensions
- 2014** Making earnings-related parental leave (GYED) flexible (allowing full-time work)
- 2015** Large grants and loans for working parents to buy and build new houses (CSOK)
- 2016** Nursery development programme launched
- 2017** Family-Friendly Hungary (*Családbarát Ország*) programme launched, including Family and Career Centres (*CSAK pontok*) and the Family-Friendly Birth Programme
- 2018 January:** Maternity grant available to Hungarian mothers outside national borders
- 2018 April:** launching »demographic governance«
- 2019** Family Protection Action Plan: grants and loans for newlywed couples, grants for 3+ families to buy cars, tax exemptions for 4+ mothers, parental leave for grandparents etc.
- 2020** Maternity leave amount increased from 70 to 100 per cent of previous salary

Box 2**Policies on gender equality since 2010**

- 2010** Downsizing gender equality institutions and dismantling the gender equality machinery
Articles on gender-sensitive education were removed from the act on Kindergarten Education as they allegedly »spread gender ideology«
- 2011** Incorporating the traditionalist definition of the family and the protection of life from the moment of conception into the new Constitution of 2011
- 2012** Removing the previous guarantee from the Labour Code that employees with children under three cannot be dismissed from work
Part-time work can be requested by mothers of small children
Gender equality has not been included in the National Core Curriculum; preparation for relationships and family life is highlighted
Criminalizing domestic violence in the new Labour Code, labelled partnership violence
- 2014** Government signed the Istanbul Convention in 2014. Ratification was postponed
- 2017** Government communications against the Istanbul Convention start
Reference to »gender« and »gender theory« removed from the National Framework Curriculum
- 2018** The accreditation license of the MA in Gender Studies withdrawn
- 2020 May:** Refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention
Banning the legal recognition of transgender persons by changing the »sex« category in official documents to »sex at birth«

Box 3**Policies related to civil society and women's movements since 2010**

- 2010** Stopping the Council for Gender Equality, the main consultative forum bringing together the government and women's organizations
- 2011** Act CLXXV on Civil Society imposed changes in the legislative framework for the operation of NGOs. Stricter criteria for obtaining public benefit status
- 2012** The Working Group and Roundtable on Human Rights established with 11 thematic groups, including one on Women's Rights chaired by the State Secretary of Family and Youth Affairs within the Ministry of Human Capacities
- 2014–15** Blocking Norway Grants
- 2017** Act LXXVI on the Transparency of Organizations requires special registration for NGOs that receive foreign funding above HUF 7.2 million (approximately 23,000 EUR) .
- 2018** Act VI, also known as the »Stop Soros« legislative package: criminalization of civil society actors providing services for refugees and migrants
- 2020** Consultative forum convened by the Ministry of Justice on the issue of partnership violence with the presence of feminist organizations

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM RELATED TO WOMEN AND FAMILIES SINCE 2010 IN HUNGARY

Deepening cleavages and new strategies



The family-oriented organizations that fit the government agenda of promoting middle-class families have been the clear winners of the new situation, which allows them to extend their programmes and activities. The feminist organizations embody a peculiar counter-reaction to the illiberal state, and do not intend to move towards a more traditionalist, softer or government-friendly framing of women's problems.



Intensifying divisions and fragmentation is certainly due to state influence, which, ironically, also engenders new forms of grassroots activism, solidarity and cooperation.



While a number of feminist organizations and movements are moving away from middle class, Budapest-based circles opening up towards more vulnerable groups, they also frame their claims more radically. The earlier focus on individual women's grievances seems gradually to be feeding a pronounced anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal structural criticism.

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