

Bridges across the Public-Private Divide: The Welfare-Rated Activism of Hungarian Women after 1989

Katalin Fábián

Women's activism worldwide, including a number of women's groups in countries of post-communist East and Central Europe, has historically involved welfare-related issues. In the triple transformation of the economic, political, and psychological spheres, many previous patterns of exchange shook and some shattered. As a result of massive privatization and market reorientation after 1989, the *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP) of each post-communist country contracted for many years. Welfare ceased to be a universal entitlement, and rampant unemployment fundamentally decreased people's economic safety.¹ These themes provided ample reason for emerging social movements, among them women's groups to call attention to the retrenchment of welfare and its particularly damaging effects on women.

With the onset of democratization, the significant decrease of state control over political activities allowed the post-communist populations' relationship to the state to change from being a monopoly to a (sometimes limited) space sharing with civil society.² The emergence of civil society created an environment of growing self-reliance that assisted the trend of slowly moving away, although not entirely cutting off from a politics that had nearly exclusively focused on the state. Freedom of association and freedom of speech allowed parties, social movements, and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to form. The emerging women's groups such as a women's party, caucuses in parties, and NGOs are significant representations of the process of democratization.

While democratization greatly expanded the means of citizens to articulate grievances through the ballot box in East and Central Europe, it could not immediately establish

1 See Branko Milanovic, *Income, Inequality, and Poverty during the Transition from Planned to Market Economy*, Washington DC 1998.

2 See Mikko Lagerspetz, From "Parallel Polis" to "The Times of the Tribes": Post-Socialism, Social Self-Organization and Post-Modernity, in: *Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 17, 2 (2001), 1–18; Linda J. Cook et al. eds., *Left Parties and Social Policy in Postcommunist Europe*, Boulder 1999.

meaningful opportunities for collective action via non-electoral modes. Communism left in its wake societies bereft of robust, independent civil associations, meso-level institutions that, as idealized descriptions of mature Western democracies, perform the functions of buffering social demands and mediating between grass-roots agents and political parties.

Despite their widespread rejection of gender-related identification and tactics used in Western democracies, a minority of East and Central European women began to mobilize and lobby mostly around a series of welfare issues. Analysis of government reactions to their welfare-related activism reveals the limited scope which the political system allows for women's claims. The welfare state had been typically conceptualized as a state committed to modifying the play of social and market forces in order to achieve greater equity.³ I use the term social welfare in a broader sense to include not only state social provisions aimed at income maintenance programs but also a state regulatory apparatus (deployed, for instance, around reproduction and workplace equality) and public services (e.g., day care). It is in this broader sense that welfare incited women's groups to lobby various state institutions.

Hungarian women's activism can be seen as a representative case study of the transformation experience of European post-communist countries. The activities of Hungarian women's groups do not only confirm the importance of welfare-related political activism that could be observed in other (mostly West European) contexts. In addition to showing that welfare is a pre-eminent way to enter politics in a post-communist scenario, this study shows that under rare conditions women's groups were successful in raising their voice in the newly democratic Hungary. A puzzling question remains: Why has democracy brought few such successes in women's organizing?

In post-communist Hungary, women's activism in welfare was stimulated by a precipitous economic decline between 1990 and 1995. With poverty increasing, welfare needs also grew, providing the push factor for establishing organizations. Simultaneously, the new democratic rights to association and free speech allowed a pull factor to develop. In this sense, welfare-issues provided women's groups in Hungary with a clear direction toward which they would orient their activities. In effect, the politicization of women's welfare rights evolved with the development of women's groups because of the reduced state provision of welfare. However, choosing welfare as the main target of activity limited the development of a broader spectrum of women's activism. When welfare issues waned from the transition agenda after 1995, political opportunities to influence decision-makers largely decreased also. Women's groups started to stagnate in number and by 2002 their impact had become less pronounced than in the beginning years of democratization. This downward trend is only partially offset by the pressure created by Hungary's candidacy to enter the *European Union* (EU) in 2004.

The Hungarian case of women's activism teaches the lesson that a weak civil society has long-term debilitating effects and cannot lead to meaningful democratization. At the same time the experiences of Hungarian women's groups also confirm that effective change can be accomplished by women's active political engagement. Comparative re-

³ See Mary Ruggie, *The State and Working Women. A Comparative Study of Britain and Sweden*, Princeton/New Jersey 1984, 11.

search points out that during the transition to democracy, women's traditional roles of motherhood and care-taking are often the most accessible vehicles to provide targets for their activities.⁴ The post-communist Hungarian case provokes a change in understanding gender, welfare, and political activism by showing that when traditional gender-specific issues appear on the public agenda, they have a potential to creatively re-draw conventional boundaries and alliances of politics. Women's groups in Hungary were able to mobilize for their aims, and at best, such as in the retirement case, could avoid becoming captive to the state's interests and apparatus. These groups used traditional social roles, such as motherhood, as carriers to assert their claims regarding retirement. While motherhood normally is a traditional space that implies severe limitations for women's political action, in this special case it was used to promote women's engagement in politics. This traditional space for establishing organizations provided untraditional means for women's voices to be heard and allowed for the emergence of a new type of gender-sensitive awareness (i.e., proto-feminism).

Since 1989, women's activism has drastically changed in number and in content in post-communist Hungary. In this article, I place contemporary Hungary on the political map of democratization and paint the historical sequence of the stages in the development of women's groups. First, I shall provide a synopsis of the main actors engaged in the struggle to maintain and, in some cases, to expand welfare. In the section on *The Significance of Gender and Welfare*, I shall focus on the gendered nature of welfare, using the relevant literature specifically for a case study of Hungary. Then I shall explain the emergence of themes in women's welfare-related activism in Hungary. In the concluding section, I bring together the lessons from Hungarian women who organized political activities and from women's struggles worldwide and attempt to fit these lessons into the complex patterns of the relationship between the state and women's activism.

I use data from various sources to compile a comprehensive picture of the activities of women's groups in Hungary. First, I conducted participant observations of a large number of activities of women's groups in 1995 and 2002. Second, I interviewed the group's principal member or president (many groups did not have formal leadership or presidency) and asked about the activities and the structure of the group. I asked the interviewees about which other groups they cooperated with or encountered in conferences and meetings. Third, I interviewed politicians and analysed Hungarian newspapers and international scholarly journals to trace the effects of the activities of women's groups between 1989 and 2003.

The Location and its Main Questions

Hungary is located in East Central Europe and is traditionally regarded as one of the meeting points between Western and Eastern cultures. Shortly after World War II, Hungary

4 See Amy B. Caiazza, *Mothers and Soldiers: Gender, Citizenship, and Civil Society in Contemporary Russia*, London/New York 2002; Jane S. Jaquette and Sharon L. Wolchik eds., *Women and Democracy: Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe*, Baltimore 1998.

became a socialist country under the influence of the Soviet Union. In 1989, a peaceful transition to a multi-party democracy took place and directed the country on its way to a market economy and to the *European Union* of which it wanted to become a member. In the first years of the transition, economic reforms aimed at establishing a market economy and at satisfying structural adjustment programs; a parallel political reform focused on how to become “an independent and democratic constitutional state” based on the rule of law.⁵ Since the mid-1990s, most political discussions and activism have centred on the desire to join the EU and on legislative changes to harmonize Hungary’s system with EU norms. In post-communist Hungary, while democratization was the buzzword, it did not go deep enough. The engagement of women’s groups in welfare-related issues presents us with the quandary why it was so difficult for their claims to be heard and answered.

The communist example, with its seemingly liberating prescriptions for women (e.g., full-time employment, enforced participation in politics, and even extended welfare services) proves that in a non-democratic setting even the most emancipatory roles do not manifest themselves as liberation. However, such policies had still some undeniably positive impact on gender roles. Only post-communist countries showed a pattern similar to the Scandinavian industrialized welfare democracies where the UNDP-generated *gender-sensitive development index* (GDI) up until 1995 had been significantly higher than each respective country’s *human development index* (HDI).⁶ Based on this fact, one could assume that gender equality in post-communist Europe is higher than elsewhere, but the difficulties experienced by women’s groups lead us the opposite way.

Social policy in Hungary is now shaped by the institutional structures of post-communist politics and policy legacies of the communist era. The policy process remains highly centralized, with basic decisions made by the government which also is the primary initiator of legislation. Leaders of a few non-profit organizations can, on occasion, participate as experts for Parliament and ministries in the allocation of funds.⁷ Realizing the continuing trend of centralized power-relations, the non-profits increasingly moved from working with the legislature to cooperating with the executive branch. Only when fully fit-

5 The Constitution of the Republic of Hungary, Art. 2 (1). The Constitution has always acknowledged the representative system, though such a system did not function under state socialism.

6 The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) tracks human development and gender-related development worldwide. The Human Development Index (HDI) measures a country’s achievements in three aspects of human development: longevity, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. Longevity is measured by life expectancy at birth; knowledge is measured by a combination of the adult literacy rate and the combined gross primary, secondary, and tertiary enrollment ratio; and the standard of living is measured by GDP per capita (PPP US\$). The GDI measures the same variables as the HDI except that the GDI adjusts for gender inequalities in the three aspects of human development. The difference is that the GDI adjusts the average achievement of each country in life expectancy, literacy, gross enrolment, and income in accordance with the disparity in achievement between men and women. For a comparison of how HDI changed vis-à-vis GDI in the post-communist transition, see Charlotte Bretherton, *Women and Governance in CEEC: Challenging the EU Women’s Policy?*, in: Mike Mannin ed., *Pushing Back the Boundaries: The European Union and Central and East Europe*, Manchester 1999, 132–154.

7 See Robert Jenkins, *The Role of the Hungarian Nonprofit Sector in Postcommunist Social Policy*, in: Cook, *Parties*, see note 2, 175–206.

ting into and supporting the respective government agendas, representatives of NGOs and among them, on occasion, women's groups were invited to participate.

The rupture in associations during communism from 1948 to 1989 created a nearly blank slate in women's organizing. The re-emergence of civic groups was one of the most fundamental developments in post-communist societies in the past ten years, and women's organizing was part of this significant force. The number of women's groups has increased from 1 (the officially sanctioned, quasi "lame-duck" *Hungarian Women's Federation* in 1988) to approximately 40 (by 2002). Very few of the new women's organizations in contemporary Hungary draw from women's organizing traditions that go back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries when women formed different organizations ranging from clearly feminist groups to conservative, often church-related or philanthropic women's associations.⁸ There are more informal women's groups, but those who want to be involved in public affairs will register with the authorities because becoming an NGO carries some significant financial incentives. Only through the official registration process can a group give or get funds and apply for tax reductions. When and what kind of conditions propelled women's groups to register? Four waves of organizing provide the answer.⁹

The first wave of women's organizing took place in 1989 and consisted of two sub-currents: (1) new grass-roots organizations and (2) "phoenix" organizations that built on the "ashes" of previous, socialist-era associations. The new grass-roots organizations, such as the *Feminist Network* and *NaNE!*,¹⁰ created themselves "from scratch", without an immediate institutional past. Although lacking institutional structure and infrastructure, they started to gain the attention of national politics in a Cinderella-like experience. The members of these grass-roots groups did not carry cards or pay membership fees and the groups themselves were mostly informal and focused on creating women's own (although usually small) space.

The "phoenix" (or survivor) organizations from the previous regime emerging in 1989 included, for example, the *Women's Electorate of the National Alliance of the Hungarian Trade Unions* and the *Association of Hungarian Women*.¹¹ They mainly focused on a more traditional political involvement, such as lobbying. These resurrected groups built themselves from the ashes of their socialist-era existence and carried (sometimes nothing

8 See Judit Acsády, *Femminizmus és szociológia: A nőkérdés konstukciója a századelőn* (Feminism and Sociology: The Constuction of the Women's Question in the Beginning of the 20th Century), M.A. Thesis, Budapest 1994.

9 Nadezhda Azhgikhina proposed a similar historical periodization regarding the emergence of Russian women's groups; Nadezhda Azhgikhina, *Empowering Russia's Women*, in: Heyward Isham ed., *Russia's Fate Through Russian Eyes*, Boulder 2000, 10.

10 The names of organizations will appear in English except for a few exceptions, such as *NaNE!*. The translation of the latter would reduce its message and may lower its recognizability for readers of English. The name of this group is a play on words. While "nane" means "don't you/cannot you" in Hungarian slang, it also represents an acronym of the organization's name in Hungarian: *Nők a nőkért az erőszak ellen*, which means: women with women against violence.

11 The Association of Hungarian Women re-created itself on the organizational and institutional basis of the Hungarian Women's Federation. It maintained its headquarters in the capital and tried to keep its previous network, but changed its logo; the old leadership was eventually replaced but institutional mecha-

more than) an image of political clout. They also revived their previous, even if badly damaged and fractured, organizational framework and some political networking capabilities.

The second wave of organizing groups took place a few years later, in the early 1990s. Political parties established their own women's groups in the form of party caucuses. The first party to consider women's issues actively was the *Social Democratic Party* (which eventually broke into factions in 1993). Over time, all Hungarian political parties created either an informal women's caucus (e.g., the liberal *Free Democrats*) or a separate intra-party division for female party members and sympathizers (e.g., the *Hungarian Socialist Party*, the communist-successor *Workers' Party*, and the since-fragmented, but not yet defunct nationalist-conservative *Hungarian Democratic Forum*). Even some seemingly long-forgotten pre-communist traditions of women's organizing were resuscitated, such as happened within the ranks of the conservative, right wing *Independent Smallholders' Party*.

Between 1995 and 1997, dozens of small groups decided to go through the formalization process by registering with the government (e.g., *Women for Lake Balaton*). Since 1995, most of the new groups have been forming outside the capital (e.g., in medium-sized cities like *Kecskemét*, *Veszprém* and *Balatonfüred*), with a focus on charity and social work. Their activities, though not focused on the traditional political process per se, have the potential to develop women's own voices and to become a springboard for increased, but not exclusively, "political" activities.

The fourth "wave" presented a counter-current of stagnation and decline which began in 1997. Many of the early grass-roots women's groups ceased to exist because they lacked the necessary infrastructure. By 2002, phoenix organizations such as the *Women's Alliance* and the *Women's Electorate of the National Alliance of the Hungarian Trade Unions* had lost much of their structures and connections to the effect that the whole left-wing women's organizing capacity severely decreased. In spite of considerable ideological support and financial assistance from two centre-right governments between 1990 and 1994 and between 1998 and 2002, the conservative women's groups could not develop a strong common platform. After an initially hopeful start, women's groups inside the political parties failed to take root. Many previously registered groups stopped functioning and only a few new ones have emerged. By 2002, the impact of women's groups had become less pronounced than in the beginning years of democratization. Joining the *European Union* may once more reverse this trend, as with EU membership gender and human rights issues will become better known and institutionalized. With this mixed experience of democratic development in the past twelve years, I shall now explore why women's activism has until now often focused on welfare and why it has been channelled through both novel and more traditional forms of self-expression to meaningfully express women's interests in an otherwise discouragingly difficult political environment.

nisms often remained the same. The trade unions have been fighting to survive over the past decade, but their women's sections have remained relatively strong and vocal.

The Significance of Gender in Welfare

Women's growing presence in politics does not necessarily change the power relations between women and men, but it is a precondition for such a change. For politics to be less male-dominated and male-focused, women need to be present in decision-making bodies where they have to be able to represent themselves and to provide a forum for a more woman-friendly (but still not essentialist) engagement of politics. Such an inclusion of women's voices necessitates action by at least a significant number of players in governance: men and women, local and state levels, linguistic and cultural practices and norms, etc. As Peterson and Runyan argue, "Gender hierarchy is not separate from but intersects with and sustains multiple other hierarchies each of which exacerbates injustice and sustains multiple other hierarchies."¹²

To present long-submerged issues, such as attention to welfare, women are raising their voices, both through formal government mechanisms and through alternative means outside the gates of "high" (electoral) politics. While acknowledging that these women's voices are far from unison, we need to investigate into who established welfare institutions; how were they maintained; why were they eliminated (under which conditions and by whose initiative); and who acquiesced to or fought against welfare reductions. Ironically, early feminist writers who clarified the patriarchal character of the welfare state have also often assumed women's role in the construction, maintenance, and destruction of welfare institutions to be marginal.¹³ Recent historical and comparative studies have, however, discovered the importance of women's agency in social policy and the direction that welfare institutions take.¹⁴ These authors argue that the welfare state under capitalism has been a product of forces as much from below as from above, pointing out that new social movements have been undervalued for their role in the origins and development of social policy. In particular, they maintain that feminist movements have been at the forefront in pressuring the state to provide opportunities for women to reduce their economic dependence on men.

12 V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan, *Global Gender Issues*, Boulder 1999, 62.

13 See Harriet Holter ed., *Patriarchy in a Welfare Society*, Oslo et al. 1984; Gillian Pascall, *Social Policy: A Feminist Analysis*, London et al. 1986; Elizabeth Wilson, *Women and the Welfare State*, London 1977.

14 E.g., Suzanne Mettler, *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Feminism in New Deal Public Policy*, Ithaca et al. 1998 and Suzanne Mettler, *States' Rights, Women's Obligations: Contemporary Welfare Reform in Historical Perspective*, in: *Women and Politics*, 21, 1 (2000), 1–28; Julia S. O'Connor et al., *States, Markets, Families: Gender, Liberalism, and Social Policy in Australia, Canada, Great Britain and the United States*, New York 1999; Faye Ginsburg, *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community*, Berkeley 1989; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers. The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, Cambridge, MA 1992; Jane Jenson, *Gender and Reproduction: Or, Babies and the State*, in: *Studies in Political Economy*, 20 (1986), 9–45; Jane Jenson, *Who Cares? Gender and Welfare Regimes*, in: *Social Politics*, 4, 4 (1997), 182–187; Desley Deacon, *Managing Gender: The State, the New Middle Class and Women Workers 1890–1930*, Melbourne et al. 1989; Katherine Kish Sklar, *The Historical Foundations of Women's Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State, 1830–1930*, in: Seth Koven and Sonya Michel eds., *Mothers of a New World. Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, New York et al. 1993, 43–93.

For women struggling to gain a voice in the public arena, the question of gender equality based on the principle of either “sameness” or “fairness” (difference) is especially relevant and troublesome. In the field of the distribution of funds (and power) this issue most often becomes readily apparent and poses a difficult challenge regarding gender equality. The attitude of the state toward the welfare needs of women has been ambivalent, fluctuating between the reluctance to introduce gender-specific measures and the recognition that women may require specific allocations and services. The fundamental issue is the extent to which policy either ensures (and thus further entrenches) the difference between the needs of men and those of women or attempts to equilibrate them seeing that a balance between the two would be optimal.¹⁵

The state, at the junction of administrative and broader political processes, has been important in translating women’s demands. Over the course of a century, many states have led markets in promoting an agenda for gender equity, even if employers’ demands for women workers have been a key source of this social change.¹⁶ The feminist approach to the welfare state is both critical of its patriarchal elements and supportive as far as the state can become an ally of gender equality. Most of the early feminist work

15 The issue of gender-related aspects of welfare has arisen acutely in post-communist Hungary. For example, homelessness increased dramatically with the regime transition. The number of homeless men usually surpasses the number of homeless women, mostly because a woman in need of shelter is more likely to arrange for at least a short-term stay at a friend’s or relative’s domicile in exchange for domestic services (Joanne Passaro, *The Unequal Homeless: Men on the Streets, Women in Their Place*, New York et al. 1996). Until the Supreme Court stressed non-discrimination in Directive no. 17 (On Guidelines on Child Custody), in Hungarian divorce procedures the mothers were routinely awarded the custody of the children and, consequently, the family home (mostly an apartment). She often faces serious financial problems to maintain the residence, but the father can become homeless if he does not have some form of tax-sheltered, lucrative additional income while child support is deducted from his wages (Hilda Scott, *Does Socialism Liberate Women? Experiences from Eastern Europe*, Boston 1974, 202). Under socialism, enterprises in constant need of labour (János Kornai, *The Economics of Shortage*, Amsterdam 1980) managed numerous temporary shelters for workers (munkás szálló), but nearly all of them had disappeared by 1990. As housing shortages and privatization steadily raise rents, many more men than women are living on the streets. But does this mean that there should be more homeless shelters for men, and if so, will women be able to find shelter if the need arises? To insist on equal facilities for both sexes when the demand is different makes little sense. Instead of one or the other solution, I would suggest a modified regime, which, ideally, would recognize gender differences and other social mobility factors as it tries to achieve a level playing field. In addition to equal opportunity, this version of liberal neutrality would also be sensitive to race, class, culture, and personal histories, thereby re-mediating the alleged misdeeds of positive discrimination. The rules then may be less uniform and more sensitive to individual needs.

16 Feminists unmoved by the Marxist and post-Marxist projects have not given the state theoretical or practical attention, because this approach has appeared too functional, general, and rigid to explain the nature of late-twentieth century power relations. Pringle and Watson quote Judith Allen “that not only feminists don’t need a theory of the state but that the retention of that concept actually obscures many of the connections they want to make” (Rosemary Pringle and Sophie Watson, “Women’s Interests” and the Post-Structuralist State, in: Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips eds., *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Stanford 1991, 53–73, 55). From a very different perspective, but similarly against a focus on the state, Michel Foucault and many of his followers also argue that local discursive, disciplinary, or cultural manifestations of power represent a better alternative (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, New York 1980). Here, however, I work with the premise that local power is linked with centralized power and the state, and that gender relations cannot be understood apart from the state, while the capillary

criticized the welfare state because it contributed to the reproduction of inequality. This critical angle remains relevant today insofar as it underlines the symbiosis between the gendered division of reproduction work within the family and gendered aspects of the welfare state. The concept of women as dependent on men and as responsible for nurturing and rearing the children has been widely reproduced by social policies. Since the 1980s, with the crisis of the welfare state, the debate on the gendered nature of welfare has moved to analyse the ways in which state institutions discriminate against women.¹⁷ Lately, a more positive sense of welfare seems to be emerging which could, intentionally or not, ameliorate social and gender inequality.

Feminist social analysis has made it clear that the welfare state is not neutral: it is shaped by and is shaping gender and class relations. On the question of whether welfare states can have emancipatory effects, Yvonne Hirdman, for example, suggests that the development of welfare represents a "modernization of the gender system" that has served to reproduce segregation between men and women in a new form.¹⁸ Quite the contrary, says Helga Maria Hernes, who argues that the Scandinavian welfare states are on their way to becoming "women-friendly".¹⁹ The state, however, does not become women-friendly on its own. Democratic struggle, as Birte Siim calls this process referring to Denmark, may force it to incorporate women's demands.²⁰

Women most often participate in political activism in gendered ways, focusing on such issues as child-rearing, caring for the sick, reproductive freedom, domestic violence, abuse, and the constitution of sexual identities, and their engagement can either fit or subvert gender expectations. Competing discourses of harmonizing with or undermining gender expectations lie at the heart of debates about the role of women in society. To clarify the direction and success of women's groups in Hungary, in the next section I describe their actions related to raising the retirement age. I argue that restructuring welfare has become a rallying cry for women's activities because it represents an active junction of citizenship rights (past and present) and the private and public spheres.

mechanisms can undermine or strengthen its hold. Contemporary challenges and contestations (social movements) overwhelmingly direct their attention to the state (see Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, New York 1994).

17 See Linda Gordon, *Women, the State and Welfare*, Madison 1990; Miri Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policies from Colonial Times to the Present*, Boston 1988; Ilona Kickbusch and Barbara Riedmüller eds., *Die armen Frauen: Frauen und Sozialpolitik*, Frankfurt a. M. 1984; Wilson, *Women*, see note 13.

18 See Yvonne Hirdman, *The Swedish Welfare State and the Gender System: A Theoretical-Empirical Sketch*, Uppsala 1987.

19 Helga Maria Hernes, *Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism*, Oslo 1987.

20 See Birte Siim, *Gender and Citizenship: Politics and Agency in France, Britain and Denmark*, New York 2000, 111.

Themes of Welfare Activism in Hungary

My analysis of the activities of Hungarian women's groups reveals that welfare is one of the common themes of women placing their issues on the political agenda in a new democracy.²¹ Within the field of governmental policies, raising the retirement age has particularly incited women in Hungary to act and project their activities as a mode of alternative political appearance. I use this case to highlight the elements that helped women articulate their political interests in Hungary. I argue that group efforts focused on these issues redefine the divide between the public and private spheres, and consequently affect democracy. When gender-specific issues appear on the public agenda, they have a potential to resist the boundaries, conventions, and alliances of the usual politics. The issues and efforts to change them reflect a new conception of the relations between political (citizenship and partisanship), economic (labour market), domestic (family), and personal spheres. Women's groups ultimately may assist in and give voice to altering the gendered division of labour and power. The foci of women's groups on social welfare strengthen the links between democratic governance and civil society.²²

The gender impact of the retirement reform should be analysed with reference to the labour market in which it occurred, since this larger context both creates pressures for change and influences the impact of these changes. The political and economic transformation led to the labour market losing 1.1 million jobs, representing a fall of 21.4 % in total employment between 1989 and 1992. The decline continued with an additional

21 Numerous excellent case studies exist on the impact of capitalism and democratization on women in East and Central Europe. See, for example, Susan Gal and Gail Kligman eds., *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics and Everyday Life after Socialism*, Princeton/New Jersey 2000; Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative Historical Essay*, Princeton/New Jersey 2000; Marilyn Rueschemeyer ed., *Women in the Politics of Postcommunist Eastern Europe*, New York 1998; Nahid Aslanbegui ed., *Women in the Age of Economic Transformation: Gender Impact of Reforms in Post-Socialist and Developing Countries*, New York 1994; Valentine M. Moghadam ed., *Democratic Reform and the Position of Women in Transitional Economies*, New York 1993; Chris Corrin, *Gender and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe*, Portland 1999; Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market*, New York 1993; Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller eds., *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, New York 1993. Much attention has also been given to the changes of welfare policies; see, for instance, Zsuzsa Ferge, *Social Policy Challenges and Dilemmas in Ex-Socialist Systems*, in: Joan M. Nelson et al. eds., *Transforming Post-Communist Political Economies*, Washington D.C. 1998; Cook, Parties, see note 2. However, these two streams have hardly crossed paths, although there is a significant body of evidence to link them cross-nationally and historically.

22 Welfare state policies importantly shape the stratification that prevails in capitalist societies (Douglas E. Ashford, *The Emergence of the Welfare States*, Oxford et al. 1986; Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge 1990; Peter Flora and Arnold J. Heidenheimer eds., *The Development of Welfare States in Europe and America*, New Brunswick/New Jersey 1981; Wolfgang Mommsen, *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany. 1850–1950*, London 1981). Public opinion and, even more explicitly, political action and interest representation in turn shape state policies (James Kluegel and Masaru Miyano, *Justice Beliefs and Support for Welfare States in Advanced Capitalism*, in: James L. Kluegel et al. eds., *Social Justice and Political Change: Public Opinions in Capitalist and Post-Communist States*, New York 1995, 81–108).

5 % between 1993–96, and did not become stable before 1997. Since then, employment has started to grow by one per cent a year and has been maintained on that level.²³ In addition to this major reconfiguration of available jobs, people's attitude to women's employment has radically changed as well. Both the policies and public opinion supporting women's full-time employment reversed courses. According to a 1988 survey of the *Central Statistical Office*, over 81% of the working-age women agreed with the idea that women should pursue paid activities. Repeating the survey in 1995, there was a 10 % decrease in this support of paid work with 30% of the women disapproving female labour participation.²⁴ In 1999, a differently designed survey reconfirmed the increasing disapproval of women's labour market activity.²⁵ Given the precipitous decline of jobs, women's negative attitude to paid work is only partially their own choice. While over 70 % of women aged 15–64 were employed full time during the later years of socialism, by 2000, this rate had dropped below 50 %.²⁶ The mass withdrawal of women from the labour force may have contributed to a slight decrease of the gender wage gap which slid from 27.2 % in 1989 to 21.2 % in 2000.²⁷ However, the fact that women's salaries are by more than 20 % lower than those of the men doing the same job in a market economy does make a difference and is, as such, a sign of discriminatory practice. Facing unaddressed and consistent gender discrimination in remuneration, job losses, increasingly disapproving public opinion, many women opted to resist these trends and they organized a trade union-led campaign, focusing on the legislation regarding women's retirement.

Retirement: Laundry-Baskets to the Rescue

In 1993, the Hungarian Parliament enacted a law to increase the retirement age to 62 (originally 55 for women and 60 for men). To halt the implementation of the law, women's groups called on the government to follow its own mandated rules requiring detailed impact studies before implementation, sent petitions to the Prime Minister, appealed to the Supreme Court, and lobbied the government and legislature.

Raising the retirement age had been on the political agenda in Hungary since the mid-1980s. At that time, the issue was not only politically unpopular but also highly controversial in a country where the general life expectancy was decreasing. In addition, by the early 1990s, unemployment grew rampantly, making it even more difficult to justify raising

23 See Erika Lukács and Mária Frey: The Gender Dimensions of Social Security Reform in Hungary, in: Elaine Fultz et al. eds., *The Gender Dimensions of Social Security Reform in Central and Eastern Europe: Case Studies of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland*, Budapest: ILO Subregional Office of Central and Eastern Europe 2003, 43–108.

24 See Mária Frey, A nők munkaerőpiaci esélyegyenlőségéről (On the Inequality of Women's Labour Market Access), in: *Közgazdasági Szemle (Journal of Economics)*, 5 (September 1996), 55–61. Also at: <http://www.tarki.hu/adatbank-h/nok/szerepvalt/frey97.html>.

25 See Lukács/Frey, Gender, see note 23, 51.

26 See Lukács/Frey, Gender, see note 23, 44.

27 See Lukács/Frey, Gender, see note 23, 49.

the retirement age. The social security budget increasingly faced insolvency, and the *International Monetary Fund* (IMF) and World Bank auditors demanded a reform of the social welfare system. In 1991, the issue of raising the retirement age became part of the Antall government's agenda. In 1993, however, when Parliament voted to raise the retirement age, the impact studies still had not been prepared.

One of the major players in the retirement debate among women's groups was the *Women's Electorate of the National Alliance of the Hungarian Trade Unions*. This organization became the central moving force behind the women's protests. The *Women's Electorate* created an alliance with partner trade unions and eventually included the *Women's Section of the Hungarian Socialist Party* and the *Association of Hungarian Women*. One of the trade union participants recounted the difficult work of building up coalitions:

We really needed cooperation. We had regular meetings with the other women's sections of trade unions, which was a big thing at that time, given that we were mutually engaged in turf-wars.²⁸

The *Women's Electorate* and its allies fought for a more staggered implementation of the retirement law, pointing at women's double burden (full-time work and nearly exclusive responsibility for the children and the household). Allowing women to retire earlier than men may look like preferential treatment only if they had an equal position to start out with. However, women's time-allocation demonstrate that they spend significantly more time working than men.²⁹ In addition to time-allocation data reflecting contemporary divisions of labour, there is a second, historical reason why the *Women's Electorate* fought to slow down the implementation of the law regarding the retirement age of women. The generations retiring in the 1990s worked full-time in a nearly compulsory manner.³⁰ Women in Central and East Europe had over four decades participated in the paid labour force in the largest numbers of all the countries in the developed world. In addition, socialist emancipation did not eliminate women's full responsibility for the household.

The allied women's groups around the *Women's Electorate* started to lobby members of Parliament by sending each of them letters and policy statements formulated at meetings of the various women's sections. Its policy suggestions did not question the need to raise the retirement age for both sexes, but found the sudden seven year increase for women unduly harmful. The *Women's Electorate* (supported by some policy specialists)³¹ emphasized the need for a longer, more staggered implementation of the bill and also wanted such factors as the number of children and shift work to be included in the cal-

28 Interview, April 1995, Women's Section of the Ironworkers' Trade Union.

29 See Endre Sik and Katalin Szép, *A háztartási terelés pénzértéke* (The Monetary Value of Domestic Work), Budapest 2000.

30 To be without an official workplace was an illegal activity, but women were even less likely than men to be criminally prosecuted in this regard. The socialist regime created, however, many pressing economic and ideological reasons to coerce the population to join the labour force.

31 See Márta Kiss and János Schwertner, *Eletre szóló ötletek: Elhalasztott nyugdíjkorhatár-emelés* (Ideas for Life: The Postponed Raising of the Retirement Age), in: *Héti Világgazdaság* (Weekly World Economic Year), (November 28th, 1992), 77–79.

culations determining retirement age and retirement benefits. In 1994, the *Women's Electorate* with her allies initiated the first national campaign collecting signatures to force Parliament to vote again on raising the retirement age. Their most notorious act was to bring the signatures in laundry baskets to the confirmation committee:

We collected and handed over 300,000 signatures [to the officials in charge]. According to the law on popular initiatives, Parliament cannot decide independently whether to discuss an issue or not, if they get more than 50,000 signatures. They saw the women carry the lists with signatures in laundry baskets to Parliament; they started to discuss the law, ostensibly by an MP's (Member of Parliament) initiative.³²

The collection of signatures under the auspices of the *Women's Electorate* and its allies gained national attention, and this method of protest has become a standard tactic for other social movements in Hungary.

In spite of the innovative use of democratic procedures and the subsequent obstruction of the implementation of the bill, the *Women's Electorate* and her allies did not succeed in getting its policy demands included in the law on retirement. Between 1992 and 1996, the actions of women's groups did, however, stop the immediate implementation of raising the retirement age, and the 4-year delay allowed 60–70,000 women to retire under the previous laws.

[Our action] forced Parliament to re-negotiate the issue. The interim solution offered by the previous Parliament was that until 1995 women can retire at the age of 55, which affected 60–70,000 women.³³

In addition, women were less abruptly required to remain in the labour force for an additional seven years in order to receive retirement benefits, which reduced the disruption of women's lives. Women's sections of trade unions were among the main driving forces behind mobilizations related to the retirement issue. They called on a failing but time-tested mechanism of interest aggregation and articulation.

One could reasonably be puzzled at Hungarian women's groups to support preferential (and by definition, unequal) treatment in the legislation, even though comparative historical studies abound with similar cases. I argue that, in this context, favouritism is the only way to approximate equality, following the "sameness" interpretation of equality. From the perspective of Hungarian women's groups fighting against a law that would abruptly increase the retirement age, if they wanted to achieve equality they had first to get others to recognize women's vastly different political and social lot.

Beside the triangle of government, legislature, and allied women's groups, there were a few other actors who eventually entered the debate about raising the retirement age in Hungary. When Parliament passed a bill in 1993, stating the same retirement age for both sexes, the debate continued pulling into orbit a large set of actors. First, the international

32 Interview, April 1995, Women's Section of the Ironworkers' Trade Union.

33 Interview, February 1995, Women's Electorate of the National Alliance of the Hungarian Trade Unions.

context also influenced the strategy chosen by women's groups and the eventual outcome. Even if the Hungarian government had wanted to, it could not have held against the pressure of international financial institutions demanding tangible changes in the welfare system. Second, the Constitutional Court stepped in to settle the differences. Responding to one of the petitions of the *Women's Electorate*, the Constitutional Court ruled with regard to early retirement that women had to be 57, and men 60 years old. According to this 32/1997 decision, raising a child is in itself a basis for early retirement, but the decision also stated that men and women enjoy equal rights and have identical responsibilities with respect to raising children.³⁴ In recognizing at least the possibility of an earlier retirement age for women, and at the same time declaring that both sexes are equally responsible for child-rearing, the Court tried to balance, although it was not able to solve, the question of difference and sameness regarding gender equality.

Making an Impact: Hungarian Women's Groups in the Politics of Welfare

Women's groups in Hungary after 1989 have attempted to influence social policy during a time of rapid ideological change, reallocation of resources, and a decrease in the state's social welfare apparatus. They mounted national campaigns for collecting signatures to protest against the planned changes and went as far as the Supreme Court to demand a referendum. They lobbied through trade unions and parties, and worked until they were in a direct dialogue with the government. A few new social welfare policies and some practices favourable to women emerged as the result of broadened interaction between the women's groups and political institutions. Hungarian women's group made their impact in the form of social movement activism and non-electoral lobbying, which altogether amounted to an alternative public appearance.

Given the massive socio-economic changes and the welfare cutbacks in Hungary since 1989, women's groups have found opportune targets in welfare issues. They have been vital within this situation emerging participatory democracy, with all its attendant contradictions, problems, and promises. The situation provides excellent opportunities to analyse incentives and disincentives for the interaction of organized women and a state on its way to democracy, and for the relationship of new welfare structures and women's activism. The evident variations of the levels and fields of activism demonstrate the women's ability to overcome obstacles and form groups to represent their interests in the democratic arena, using, for example, protest actions, lobbying, and collecting signatures.

I found that most of the active 40 Hungarian women's groups have attempted to influence one or another area of welfare-related public policy. Only larger, better organized groups that could count on trusted cadres and knowledge of the political system, such as a broad alliance of the *Women's Electorate of the Hungarian Trade Unions*, were able to establish a complex and lengthy campaign such as the retirement age debate. With the larger, "phoenix" organizations falling on hard times since the late 1990s, no other women's group was able to fill their place and engage in multiple and complex policy

³⁴ Constitutional Watch: Hungary, in: *East Europe Constitutional Review*, 6, 2&3 (1997), 20–22.

issues. An emerging strategy became even stronger: to focus resources and emphasize common interests within the groups by becoming more single issue-oriented.

Political opportunity most often presents itself as part of a larger political restructuring of reform or revolution. Then the new window of opportunity has to be used by groups to pursue their aims and to produce change. Change is about agency. Women's prospects of being accepted and of speaking up at various levels of politics differ in each system depending on the political culture and structure, and the (non-)existence of avenues to promote equality.³⁵ Strangely enough, women's agency has been stronger in the beginning years of democratization in Hungary compared with the later ones. Women's groups found more opportunities to raise their voices in the early years because the constellation of parties was not developed yet and the state was embroiled in an identity crisis. As political parties and state institutions became stronger, they made alliance formation among women's groups even more difficult and thwarted their attempts to fight for their own interests.

After the 1989 revolutions, the new democracies opened up the central apparatus and became sensitive to the needs and interests of its constituency. Under rare circumstances, this openness could be translated into meaningful opportunities for women. In a decade of activism, only the retirement age issue, through the unrelenting and creative mass campaign by the *Women's Electorate*, created enough political impetus for women's groups to manage to directly influence government policy.

In contrast to most modern Western welfare states,³⁶ in communist East and Central Europe, the entitlement of women as full-time workers has overshadowed their claims as mothers and wives.³⁷ This legacy became a liability regarding women's organizing after communism. East and Central European women during the communist era were the (even if reluctant) beneficiaries of strong welfare support, but became its circumstantial victims when the political system changed. There are three main reasons why women's organizing was adversely affected. One major obstacle is the discredited communist past which had extensively provided for mothers in the labour force even if this provision was mainly to satisfy the state's needs in a rapidly growing industrialization. The backlash to women's socialist emancipation is still, even a decade after the regime's collapse, very strong and prohibits raising policy issues for women's sake alone; instead, the issues

35 See Karen Beckwith, *Comparative Research and Electoral Systems: Lessons from France and Italy*, in: *Women and Politics*, 12 (1992), 1–33; Mary Fainsod Katzenstein and Carol McClurg Mueller, *The Women's Movements of the United States and Western Europe – Consciousness, Political Opportunity, and Public Policy*, Philadelphia 1987; Mim Kelber ed., *Women and Government: New Ways to Political Power*, Westport/Connecticut 1994; Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris, *Gender and Party Politics*, London 1993; Thomas Volgy and John E. Schwartz, *Female Representation and the Quest for Resources: Feminist Activism and Electoral Success*, in: *Social Science Quarterly*, 67 (1986), 156–168.

36 See Jane Lewis, *Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes*, in: *Journal of European Social Policy*, 2 (1992), 159–171.

37 By concentrating social policies on children and working mothers, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), for example, was blamed for creating a "fatherless society"; Ilona Ostner, *Slow Motion: Women, Work and Family in Germany*, in: Jane Lewis ed., *Women and Social Policies in Europe: Work, Family and the State*, Brookfield 1993, 92–115, 99.

have to be wrapped in a nationalist and family-centred phraseology which many feminist or left-wing women's groups are reluctant to follow. The second major obstacle to women's organizing in Hungary is an almost exclusive reliance on the state whose bureaucratic apparatus has deeply permeated society. Third, the concrete gains in social service provisions had been granted by the communist state according to its own economic and political needs which did not allow women to develop a higher degree of political and bureaucratic expertise, self-reliance, and solidarity. Consequently, they still have trouble gaining footholds in the political process. For women's groups to get the attention of the political decision-makers, as in the case of the retirement age issue, an entire series of factors have to be present. Such factors are obviously rather rare. In addition, since "democracy's" triumph, women's claims have to fit the liberal framework and must not be seen as favouritism. These compound challenges have impeded even those Hungarian women's welfare-related movements that could gather momentum.

The post-communist Hungarian case joins the global phenomenon of women's activism arising in response to (re)structuring the welfare state because of women's structural location in the family and as care-takers. When women start to question the powerful and dominant separation between the private and public spheres, their degree of active involvement in each, and especially their transgressing the separation line, they can radicalize the practice (and eventually, the theory) of political participation and politics. Activities of women's groups can be compared to a Trojan horse: seemingly innocuous (especially when using traditional roles, such as maternity as a message carrier) they nevertheless contain important agents of change. Economic threats to the self and the family may be the basis for women's activism, but only when such economic concern transforms gender consciousness, can these activities be sustained and can eventually move in a progressive and feminist direction. The difficulties of Hungarian women's welfare-related activism demonstrate, however, that it is not the extensive welfare state that usurps women's activism. Much broader factors are at play here which point at the long-standing paternalist and state-centred political culture. While women in post-communist Hungary can question topics that hardly anyone else is aware of, such as their role in production, reproduction, and welfare, they cannot yet effectively represent themselves and their specific interests in the democratic arena.