Fashioning Women’s Citizenship: Contemporary Paradoxes

Review essay by Katalin Fábián

After more than a century of women’s movement activism and abundant debate, we can finally celebrate the acceptance of gender analysis in academia and its emergence as a required aspect of policy making among the European Union (EU) member states. While we applaud these major achievements, we need to recognise that there is still no general consensus on the exact conceptualisation of gender inequality and, thus, EU requirements remain elusive on how to reach a more level playing field between the sexes. In addition to conceptualisation, there is much work to be done on the various gender equality policies and their implementations. For example, while the EU requires that its members maintain functioning democracies and aim to eliminate discrimination, EU institutions only offer recommendations regarding many aspects of
the member states’ public policies, such as social policies or reproductive rights, that have profound consequences on gender equality. As a consequence of these uncertainties on what gender equality means in a given social context and the numerous political negotiations surrounding gender equality and related policies, European public policies tend to follow the path of least resistance and evolve towards gender neutrality, most often resulting in a shallow interpretation of non-discrimination and equal opportunity. The themes of gender, gender inequality and equal opportunity remain subject to many debates especially if we compare them historically and across cultures. Demonstrating the central importance and the dynamic nature of gender and gender inequality, the five books reviewed here exquisitely reflect the many feminist scholarly, policy and advocacy achievements and they keenly point towards the improvements that are still necessary in the field of gender analysis in the European context.

These five books offer an outstanding, and until now unparalleled, collective effort to provide a comparative, policy-specific and up-to-date interdisciplinary analysis of the many complex and crucial aspects of women’s lives across Europe. Striking a balanced and feminist stance, the authors manage to meaningfully integrate the achievements with the various remaining challenges that European women face in the political, reproductive and social realms. Each book offers an independent summary of the definitional, philosophical, moral, and broader political implications on either one particular policy issue or a specific geographical area. In addition, the novelty and added value in these books is that they indeed strive to portray a more unified European continent, in contrast to the traditional Western European focus that, for example, the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS) has produced. Collectively these five new books provide an interdisciplinary, intellectually dense and richly contextualised picture on the many debated aspects of political and reproductive rights, social and welfare entitlements, the persistent problem of trafficking, and various associated forms of gender inequality. The authors strive to find concrete answers to the complexities of profound changes – for example, globalisation, regional integration, war and political regime change – that deeply affect women, while coexisting with old and only partially transformed gender roles and inequalities. The lesson from these five books is painfully obvious: from Finland to Bulgaria and beyond, gender equality is as out of reach as ever. Old misogynist myths and dramatically new technologies alike deliver the same important message of how much is still needed to reach substantive gender equality.

Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe, edited by Jasmina Lukić, Joanna Regulska and Darja Zavirsek, offers an extensive analysis of women’s active citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe. The book demonstrates the wide diversity of approaches to citizenship and women’s activism in this region since the end of the 1990s. In contrast to the regional focus of Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe, the other four books included in this review each have a specific policy focus but include essays on both Eastern and Western Europe. These four books are the results of a three-year research project of the Network for European Women’s Rights (NEWWR), funded by the European Commission, and published as a series by Palgrave. Although the general titles of the series imply worldwide focus, each book in the series is decidedly European. This conflation may have been unintended because the
authors are keenly aware of the postcolonial, and Central and Eastern European women’s criticism that objects strongly to the universalising tendencies of Western feminism. According to these ‘peripheries’, the construct of global sisterhood conceals very differential and unequal access to resources and, if nothing else, to symbolic power.

Picking up the central notion of equality between the sexes, *Women’s Citizenship and Political Rights*, edited by Sirkku Hellsten, Anne Maria Holli and Krassimira Daskalova, compares how the concept of gender equality is understood across Europe today. This book outlines the role of citizenship in Europe in relation to the protection of women’s rights and touches on some controversial tools, such as quotas and NGOs (non-governmental organisations), that allegedly increase women’s political participation.

*Women’s Social Rights and Entitlements*, edited by Audrey Guichon, Christien van den Anker and Irina Novikova, brings together authors from academia, policy making and NGOs. The essays discuss the traditionally most important welfare themes, such as the feminisation of poverty (Morag Gillespie) and the still weak social policies on combining work and family (Inge Bleijenberg). In addition to these long-standing issues, the contributors also analyse the newly emerging controversies over welfare, such as globalisation (Osnat Lubrani and Elizabeth Villagómez) and the minimal effects (thus far) of the EU’s equal opportunity policy on national laws and their implementation (Nicky Le Feuvre).

*Women’s Reproductive Rights*, edited by Heather Widdows, Itziar Alkorta Idiakez and Aitziber Emaldi Cirión, continues the Palgrave series by posing the most fundamental and crucial questions on the changing nature of reproductive rights in twenty-first-century Europe. The essays in this volume ask and answer with a resounding ‘yes’ whether denying women access to contraception and abortion contradicts women’s basic human rights. By including discussions on the many new/artificial reproductive technologies, the contributors evaluate how concepts of reproduction and motherhood have changed in recent decades. Most importantly, the authors investigate the recurring question: can there be a universal standard of basic reproductive rights, or are these rights dependent on culture, economy, politics or international factors? The answer *Women’s Reproductive Rights* suggests to this long-puzzling question is not a collective stance on either the universal or the culture-specific definition of reproductive rights, but an informed balance between the two.

Similar fundamental questions emerge as the main themes of the discussion in *Trafficking and Women’s Rights*, edited by Christien van den Anker and Jeroen Doomer-nik. The contributors in this book endeavour to provide an accurate and appropriate definition to trafficking as it affects women and to distinguish the possible gender implications of smuggling, trafficking, and trafficking for sexual exploitation or other purposes. While globalisation and continued gender discrimination fuel trafficking, it is very difficult to come to any agreement on the hard-to-measure trends of an illegal activity. With some countries within Europe legalising prostitution and others standing staunchly against it, the national differences make it harder to produce a European common policy in response to the plight of trafficked women.

While all five books carry the same message about the continued existence of the universality of gender-based discrimination, they represent a very perceptive collection of the most recent scholarship on the state of gender equality in Europe. In gen-
eral, the authors do not shy away from controversial and potentially explosive issues. Donna Dickenson, for example, points out the many legal dangers and philosophical inconsistencies in the property-rights conceptualisation of women's right to their own bodies. In light of the new/artificial reproductive technologies and the ever-increasing commercialisation of women's bodies, Dickenson argues that we should not conflate reproductive rights and the implausible notion of property in the body. Similarly, the contributors' approach to trafficking in humans builds on and enhances the most outstanding scholarship in this field because they all view trafficking as part of a much larger issue of gender inequality and global inequality.

Despite the common focus on crucial aspects of women's lives, these five books also demonstrate two very different approaches to analysing how women's situation has changed in the recent past. In addition, with their distinct conceptualisations and corresponding methodologies, the books differ significantly in how they envision and structure their subject matter. *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe* focuses on one geographical region and then explores the multitude of policy changes affecting women in various situations; the other four volumes all concentrate on a major policy issue as it affects women and then analyse their theme in various geographical settings. Cross-examination of these two equally valid conceptualisations offers the reader a current and often rather disturbing overview of women's situation.

*Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe* provides the reader with many excellent insights, but unfortunately, neither the editors nor the contributors define this geographically ambiguous region along historical or political lines. But why should we even bother with such a definition? A clear delineation of the case study materials matters because the framing of the field of observations influences the conclusions and thus also the intended message. Quite possibly, the authors may have considered the term and the reason for focusing on Central and Eastern Europe self-explanatory. Indeed, we are treated to very informative and current analyses that include nearly every post-communist European country, with the exception of Russia, Belarus and the smaller countries of both the Caucasus and the Southern Balkans. While it may not be controversial to omit these countries from what we consider as Central and Eastern Europe, Bulgaria merits only a few passing references and the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Lithuania are also left out of the mostly country-specific analysis. Had the authors clearly demarcated the scope of their study, these omissions would not be an issue.

Studying women's lot country by country in *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe* follows the very traditional structure of ‘methodological nationalism’. The state can indeed be the most useful unit for analysis. But, for example, the insights offered by Ann Graham and Joanna Regulska in describing the contrast between the Polish and Ukrainian women's NGOs show a much fuller picture than a study explicitly delineated by state borders would. Graham and Regulska insightfully demonstrate how the Ukrainians focused systematically more on electoral politics while the Polish NGOs concentrated on service provision. This comparative perspective keenly highlights each country's political milieu.

Nuances of personal involvement with activism (such as Marina Blagejović's reflections on the 1996–1997 Belgrade protests against Milošević) contribute to many
outstanding observations and compelling prose in *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*. One such common lesson appearing in these essays is an emerging sense of commonality with Third World/postcolonial feminist thinking. These emerging solidarities between South and East do not spring from some knee-jerk opposition to Western dominance because in many ways they both follow the earlier, mostly Western, feminist footsteps. But very insightfully, both postcolonial and post-communist literatures are increasingly remarking on their difference from the Western experience. For example, many postcolonial and Eastern European feminists note that their private spheres are constructed differently from the liberal Western tradition. They also tend to view the family circle more as a haven and a site of solidarity – not because of some romanticised ideal but as a result of the explicitly oppressive nature of their earlier political systems. In this volume, feminist writers from Central and Eastern Europe affirm that the public and private spheres do not separate neatly, but leave a space in between.

The main message of *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe* is that women’s experience with citizenship is dramatically diverse in this ‘new’ part of Europe. All the essays presented in this volume speak of the mostly negative consequences of regime change – but not necessarily because communism was itself kind to women. In these subtle essays, the authors consider many previously hidden gender-related inequalities, while revealing the immense number of people directly and indirectly discriminated against both then and now. For instance, while reading Darja Zavirsek’s essay on disabled women and their plight in Slovenia, one cannot help but notice how essential it is that not only feminists but all politicians, as well as the rest of us, embrace disabled women and truly incorporate difference into the fold of citizenship.

In addition to such important considerations of meaningful inclusion, the volume could have brought an even stronger argument than just emphatically displaying a wide diversity in women’s citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe. The book touches on, but chooses not to answer, a perplexing and complex question on Central and Eastern Europe’s social transformation: how could the political, social, economic and cultural changes be essentially gendered (group/women-specific) and quite strongly differentiated (individualised) at the same time? Readers may be comfortable accepting the collection’s fascinating kaleidoscope of images, but interpreting the picture is also left to the readers’ own tastes.

Similar to the dialectics of change and continuity appearing in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, a double-sided nature also characterises citizenship, because it is a right that only members can claim and, by definition, it also excludes those who are not part of that state. Feminists and their allies have long been fighting for women’s full inclusion in the state-centric realm. This long-standing feminist aim has only been partially met (considering, for example, the low representation of women in politics in Central and Eastern Europe), while many other issues have joined it that are less focused – or not focused at all – on the state and its institutions, such as the plight of migrant and minority women. In a more globally interconnected political environment, and especially in ‘fortress’ Europe, which is one of the most frequented migration targets, we need to be aware of how much the concept of citizenship continues to be exclusionary, especially for doubly disadvantaged minority or migrant
women. International human rights norms and the EU’s new supranational definition of citizenship have started to challenge the exclusive jurisdiction of states over their citizens. With feminists and their organisations developing a more globally interconnected network, *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe* could have opted to include an even more inclusive, less state-centric, globally interconnected and critical analysis on citizenship as well.

With citizenship playing a central role in *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*, it would have been useful for the reader to be acquainted with the contributors’ explicit and shared definition of citizenship. Such a common framework of citizenship would have further increased coherence across the essays to explicitly respond to why it is imperative that we learn of and from women’s perspectives. Jasmina Lukić’s terms of ‘cultural’ and ‘sexual’ citizenship could have very strongly resonated across many other essays in the volume. There was a similar opportunity with Jacqueline Heinen’s applications of T.H. Marshall’s definitions and Hannah Arendt’s relevant works on citizenship. While these intellectual giants’ effects are considerably removed from the contemporary construction of Central and Eastern European citizenship, the links between the Western, Central and Eastern European political traditions could have been made more explicit, especially because Nane Če Funk is also among the notable contributors. She wrote a superb essay in this volume on the radical, or what she calls ‘imperialist’, criticism of Central and Eastern European women’s NGOs. Her expertise on the region’s own liberal tradition could have offered another exquisite aid for both the authors and their readers in the interpretation of women’s citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe.¹

Important nuances about defining citizenship receive plenty of attention in the introductory essays by Shirin Rai and Ute Gerhard in the thematically focused *Women’s Citizenship and Political Rights*. In addition to quotas, another possibly less obvious target of these authors’ criticism is the NGO-isation of women’s activism, especially regarding Central and Eastern Europe. Both Sirkku Hellsten and Barbara Einhorn consider NGOs as traps that divert women’s attention from structural and political involvement, and entice them to move towards service provision instead. Hellsten’s and Einhorn’s arguments appear to be in contrast with Anne Maria Holli’s analysis in the same book. They would also conflict with other writings both in this four-volume series and elsewhere, such as Valentine Moghadam’s,² Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp’s,³ as well as Janet Johnson and Laura Brunell’s,⁴ findings that women’s NGOs, especially if they cooperate internationally, are crucial in making an impact on domestic policy. NGO activists often use women’s citizenship as a springboard to enter national debates and then fight for further extending citizenship claims. Holli uses the method developed by the Research Network on Gender, Politics and the State (RNGS) for post-industrial democracies to measure the impact of the women’s movement on Finnish policy. With Holli noting the high success rate of women’s policy influence in Finland, Johanna Kantola also shows how and why Finland’s image of being in the forefront of gender equality halted the acknowledgement of the gendered nature of domestic violence. According to Hege Skjeie, the self-image of advanced gender equality can be an obstacle to recognising problems in other Scandinavian countries as well. The EU exerts an increasing influence over its members – in gender equality
as well as other areas – and Finland, for example, bowed to the EU’s (and other international) pressures and in the early 1990s swiftly enhanced its policies regarding domestic violence. Most notably, the EU’s gender mainstreaming appears as a potentially powerful tool to increase gender equality – but its implementation is still patchy and its effects are problematic, according to Petra Meier. This complex picture of women’s citizenship rights establishes a fertile (no pun intended) ground to study women’s reproductive rights in Europe.

Women’s Reproductive Rights in the Palgrave series has produced an up-to-date, careful and deeply insightful analysis of not only what we may customarily call reproductive rights (such as freedom to choose whether to give birth, protect oneself against conception or terminate a pregnancy), but the expansive technological advances that redefine reproduction. Social movement activism and state-level policies are skilfully interwoven with both chronological analysis and thematic focus on some of the most controversial and significant topics. This book does not shy away from addressing problematic and diverse sets of data. The collection includes discussions as varied as the plight of migrant populations and the controversies surrounding female genital mutilation. These cases constitute some of the most illustrative examples of both the symbolic and the real battlegrounds among European governments, indigenous publics and the minorities’ or the migrants’ home communities. One such revealing example is the forced sterilisation of the Roma that was halted in Northern Europe only in the mid-1980s, and proceeded to provoke international outrage against the Central and Eastern European countries pursuing such practices in the late 1990s and beyond.

Crucially, this book not only amply demonstrates that reproductive rights are in a very precarious situation in both the Western and Eastern parts of Europe, but it also backs up this claim in an interconnected, un-alarmist and carefully documented way. The well-integrated manner in which the essays are interlinked in this volume eminently demonstrates that the discussions between the authors, NGO activists and politicians were frequent, earnest and extremely beneficial, not just for the actual participants but also for the readers of this volume. Perhaps even more important, the workshops, where the authors debated their findings, lived up to their full potential in allowing the individual voices to emerge while also responding to each other’s arguments. The smoothly convincing logic of this book is even more notable because reproductive rights are a notoriously divisive subject that has continued to escape a firm definition exactly because of various cultural, historical and even foreign policy considerations. Fully accepting this ambiguity, and even cherishing it because this fact further illustrates how much of a varied and difficult issue we are facing, the authors do not hide their conviction that reproductive rights are a fundamental aspect of human dignity.

Many crucial issues in a society are affected by the direct or indirect influence of women’s freedom to choose if and when to become pregnant, adopt, abort, or use some of the new artificial reproductive technologies. Women’s political rights are woefully incomplete if their reproductive rights are violated, and reproductive choices also directly and immediately connect to social and welfare rights. Ruth Lister very convincingly argues in Women’s Social Rights and Entitlements that social rights and entitlements should be understood as a due recognition of care work. The contribu-
tors to this volume grapple mightily with providing adequate recognition for women’s care work without essentialising and locking women further into a structurally inferior position of power. The chapters provide a fascinating and detailed account of many decades of feminist analysis of welfare systems in Western Europe. The focus on Western Europe is understandable given the rich record of studying the gendered effects of the different types of welfare systems, but the near total omission of Central and Eastern Europe from this analysis is deeply lamentable because these welfare systems have undergone a deep structural change with plenty of unequivocally gendered implications.

The last volume in the Palgrave series, *Trafficking and Women’s Rights*, integrates the problems of the post-communist region much better, partly because this region is one of the major sources of women who are trafficked for sex to Western Europe in addition to millions of workers streaming in legally, illegally and all ways in between to the more prosperous parts of Europe. Human trafficking, especially trafficking for sexual exploitation, has emerged as a topic that politicians, women’s activists, law enforcement and the general public all agree should be eliminated, or at least minimised, as much as possible. What they cannot agree upon is how to eliminate the high demand for illegal border crossings. Should we try to decrease the supply side of the migrants looking for a better life? Or should we try to cut back on the Western European demand for cheap labour and exoticised sexual services? Between The Netherlands and Germany legalising prostitution and Sweden prosecuting the clients instead of fining or incarcerating the person selling sex, European countries have created mutually exclusive policies that not only contradict one another but also make a common approach towards trafficking of humans for sexual exploitation impossible.

The compromises needed to make the five books not overwhelmingly prescriptive resulted in four interrelated and problematic areas that should be of concern for those who wish to learn from these writings. First, further strengthening the interdisciplinary analysis would have added to explanations of what is considered as political and citizenship rights, social entitlements or reproductive rights in these five books. Adding perspectives from cultural anthropology or linguistic analysis could have provided analytical edginess to highlight the historical and contested development of these rights and policy conceptualisations. While certainly challenging, and maybe even initially uncomfortable, recognising the conceptual diversity would no doubt have enhanced the analysis presented. Conceptual innovations regarding women’s rights and social entitlements may have emerged from such ‘internal critique’, further strengthening what Amy Mazur termed as ‘feminist public policy analysis’.

Second, incorporating more personal stories could also have invited additional voices, for example, about the images of women in the media, lesbian/transgender identities, or any of the peculiar intersections of old and new roles for women in less visible, but often deeply gendered, spaces. At the same time, the authors of these five volumes generally steered away from the mainstream quantitative analysis of aggregate political, economic and social trends. Quantitative analysis can be hard to decipher, but a general and broad political and economic overview of the rather different regions or the particular policies under consideration (say, by the editors of each volume?) could have proven helpful for the less initiated.
Third, it would have been desirable for such a rich series of scholarly analysis to take more calculated risks by challenging, and then expanding on, the already well-established, and thus somewhat constraining, categorisations of ‘rights’. Women’s rights have remained one of the persistent areas where it has been difficult to bridge the nature of rights as founded on individual (difference) bases or on some common group characteristics (sameness). These two points of view are still largely oppositional not only because of the powerful logic of their respective arguments, but because their rationales draw heavily on differently lived histories and cultures, with the dominance of the Western, individual-centred, liberal framework appearing increasingly pronounced.

Fourth, moving systematically beyond and above national settings would have been very welcome because countries are increasingly engaged with the norms and organisations of the international environment. While the EU is justifiably present and often provides a textbook case on the influence of the supranational environment, other organisations, such as women’s NGOs that maintain a transnational network of affiliates, could have provided an alternative but equally credible source for these insightful studies.

In light of the sensitivities between the Eastern and Western parts of now-united Europe, it is curious that so few Central and Eastern European authors were invited to contribute to the research project the Network for European Women’s Rights organised. There are no Central and Eastern European authors featured in the volume on trafficking, and they account for only one of the ten authors in the volume on citizenship, three of the nineteen authors in the volume on social rights, and one of the thirteen authors in the book on reproductive rights. It is mostly Western and North European experts who elaborate on the difficulties of Central and Eastern Europe’s entry to the various Western networks, organisations and feminist alliances. Perhaps the desire of some of the authors to appear truly authentic encouraged them to side with some of the harshest ‘imperialist critiques’ of Western feminist influence. Instead of self-flagellation, there are better gestures that could be made towards earnest cooperation, thereby avoiding misspelled names and increasing the sparse use of non-English language references that could have better complemented the splendid English academic prose. Differences in the participation of East and West in this four-volume project may be less than obvious, but upon reflection, the divide seems quite tangibly more than ‘a wall in our heads’, as Barbara Einhorn so aptly (although disapprovingly) quotes Bärbel Bohley, a leading member of the opposition movement in pre-1989 East Germany. However, with these few concerns in mind, the five books provide an unparalleled, systematic and insightful overview of some of the most pressing issues facing European women today.

About the Author

A native of Hungary, Katalin Fábián (Ph.D., Political Science, Syracuse University) is Assistant Professor of Government and Law at Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. She has published extensively on gender equality and women’s political activism in Central and Eastern Europe. Recently Fábián edited Globalization: Perspectives.
from Central and Eastern Europe and a special issue of Canadian-American Slavic Studies that focused on the changing international relations of Central and Eastern Europe. Her book Contemporary Women’s Movements in Hungary: Globalization, Democracy, and Gender Equality is forthcoming by the Woodrow Wilson Center Press in 2009. E-mail address: fabiank@lafayette.edu

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