

Hungarian Melodies of Feminism:

**Interpretations and Consequences for Political Action among Hungarian
Women's Groups**

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Abstract:

Feminism controversially, but fundamentally, influences why and how women's groups become implicated in politics. The debates around the meaning of feminism and the practice of feminist activism have established a discourse and created common melodies as well as some dissonance among women's groups in Hungary. In this article I first discuss different interpretations of women's status that affect how Hungarian feminism has developed in what I see, contrary to a common view, as an East-West continuum. I analyze how women's groups in Hungary create affiliations and relate to the West, both ideologically and materially. I unfold the many different forms of Hungarian women's groups according to different "layers" of feminist consciousness. A vital element in forming these layers has been anti-feminism and how it has sometimes hindered consciousness or perhaps made some "differently sensitive." Subsequently, the article uses a feminist reinterpretation of politics—women's interpretations of what belongs to the private and public spheres—without which, I claim, we cannot understand or even see contemporary women's activism in Hungary. I argue that the interlocking forms of political actions among women's groups (as part of civil society) shape the post-communist arena, although this shaping may be less immediately visible to the casual observer.

Feminist theory and practice encourage women to engage in political activity, and they fundamentally influence why and how women's groups become involved in politics. In the first part of this article I discuss the different interpretations of women's status that affect what feminism means along the East-West continuum. I analyze how women's groups in Hungary create affiliations and relate to the West on the bases of both similarity and difference. In the second part, I discuss the obstacles anti-feminism raises regarding women's activities in the public sphere. In the third part I point out how women's interpretations of what belongs to the private and public spheres direct their activism. Engagement in various sorts of activism can demonstrate that women have moved toward and into politics, with the eventual result of women changing the political agenda and altering the definition of politics.

I argue that the interlocking forms of political actions among women's groups (as part of civil society) shape the post-communist arena, although this shaping may be less immediately visible to the casual observer. Due to the activities of women's groups, many of the stereotypes of women's roles in society are becoming more exposed, and as they become issues of debate and emerge as politically explosive themes, they point to a new, different era of gender relations. It is important to recognize both from a theoretical and a practical perspective that the strength and mobilizing force of women's groups in Hungary center on their capacity to combine different sorts of beliefs and actions. Most of these uniting and combining of

energies is so far largely unconscious, because activists lack agreement and do not press for a common platform on women's role in society.¹

Feminist Debates: Across East and West

Western feminist scholarship, arising from women's critique of Western liberal experience, has been admonished for overextending itself to other cultural and historical contexts (Basu 1995; Chow 1991; Gilliam 1991; Mohanty 1991). While patriarchy is a shared target of non-Western and Western feminisms alike, it takes many forms and exhibits – even if only superficially – different characteristics. Consequently, the foci of Western European and US feminism on the gendered distribution of power, the bifurcation between public and private spheres, the concentration on sex, the body and sexed embodiedness often miss the mark or do not reflect the (perceived) women's lives elsewhere.

With some more recent successful attempts to relate to non-Western women, Western feminists and their theories again face a challenge in Eastern and Central Europe. Incorporation of post-communist contexts adds to the evolving transnational exchanges of social science theories, including the theories describing the emergence of women's movements. As Ellen Berry says: "The importance of assuming a mutually interrogative stance as a means of constructing more complete and nuanced accounts of the effects of location and differences is nowhere more evident than in the encounter between first and second worlds" (1995: 3).

The disappearance of the “second world” has left a gap between first-world and post-colonialist feminist scholarly literatures. Although there is much written about the events leading to and the consequences of the end of the Cold War, theory building has been more scant. The lack of a fitting theoretical framework to incorporate and explain the changes has been keenly felt in East European women’s circles, because accepting the existing feminist literature as accurate and appropriate has been akin to the discomfort of wearing other people’s too tight or overly loose clothes. This theoretical lacunae was first began to be filled by various, dispersed accounts from both sides of the Atlantic (e.g., Aslanbegui 1994; Corrin 1999; Rueschemeyer 1998). The lessons learned from these reviews formed the basis of Susan Gal and Gail Kligman’s broadly collaborative research project on how gender is reproduced in politics and everyday life in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Their *Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative Historical Essay* (2000) provides further proof to the divergence of ideas on gender equality based on the difference of lived reality.

The borders defining the roles of the individual, the family and the state are not the same in post-communist East and Central Europe as they are in the continuously capitalist Western democracies. The discrepancy between Western and Eastern European evaluations of their own personal and national pasts often extends to their (mis)-understanding of each other’s plight. Hungarian activists, for example, complained that “our Western partners do not understand the Hungarian woman dreaming about staying at home” (Interview, March 1995,

The Women's Section of the Hungarian Democratic Forum). There are multiple impediments to Western and Eastern women understanding each other, because these are “two very different contexts of assumptions, agendas and expression” (Holmgren 1995: 17). The convergence of the contexts (and translations of feminist texts) began mainly after the “cultural and civilizational break” of the regime change (Sztompka 1996) had started to take root.

The transition processes from communism to capitalism conjured typical responses from two types of Western observers; namely, from capitalist missionaries and from those who idealize the East. The first group draws upon a long-standing Orientalist discourse in which Eastern and East and Central Europe were the first colonies of the West (cf. “second serfdom” in Berend 1982; Stavrianos 1981) that intended, with all-pervasive renewed Petrine drive, to “catch up” with the West. In this framework, East and Central Europe is considered and treated as the poor and backward relative of the West. The Orientalism of many well-meaning Western scholars created a suspicious atmosphere around the agenda of Western feminism as well. Women in East and Central Europe are thought of (in the West) as predominantly worse off in many respects than their male counterparts, which also implies that they are much worse off than women in liberal-democratic capitalist environments. The other group of Western writers idealizes the East. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, “[I]n Eastern Europe, the West seeks for its lost origins, its lost original experience of 'democratic invention.' In other words, Eastern Europe functions for the West as its Ego-Ideal (Ich-Ideal): the point from which the West sees itself in a

likable, idealized form, as worthy of love" (1993: 200). Stereotypes by this group include the portrayal of Eastern and East Central European women as liberated females, stronger and more conscious in their femininity than their Western counterparts (cf. Völgyes 1977), and who "have profited from the welfare policies in many ways that Western women have not" (Davidson, Steinmann and Wegener 1995: 300; see also Holland 1985: 23).

Debates between Eastern and Western women about their relationships to family, work and the state often strengthen the idea that circumstances are different for women in the East and West. To answer the question of whether women are economically deprived, socially marginalized or "disoriented" in contemporary East and Central Europe, we need to examine the complex intersection of historical patterns of influence (and domination) from Western Europe as well as class and gender relations. This complexity, it seems to me, is accurately reflected in the affiliations between Hungarian and West European/North American women's groups. Their interactions have performed two contradictory functions: they have entrenched and strengthened the sense of distance and hierarchy between East and West on some occasions, and have ameliorated the differences between these regions in many others cases, for example, when Hungarian and West European women's groups found undeniably common elements of oppressive and constraining elements of patriarchy in their respective societies.

The relationship between organizations within a movement is an important component of the political opportunity structure (McAdam 1982; Zald and

McCarthy 1980). Networks and ties, the relationship to countermovements and alliance and conflict systems all exert influence on the political opportunities of organizations. In recent decades, global social contexts have changed to expand the possibilities for transnational information exchange and mobilization (Keck and Sikkink 1998). In a period exhibiting an increased strength of feminism as a global movement, many Hungarian women's groups connect to and reflect the trends taking place internationally (Bulbeck 1988; Leatherman, Pugnaccio and Smith 1994; Morgan 1984; Smith 1999).

The increased international contacts of Hungarian women's groups testify to the intense globalization of politics and growing cooperation among groups of civil society (O'Brien et al 2000). Nearly all the groups studied have extensive international contacts or are well on the way to establishing them. These contacts were especially influential in the case of party and trade union caucuses, making the traffic in feminism more obvious. Western European expectations about the creation of women's caucuses and incentives from the European Union often influenced the Hungarian party (parent) organizations to allow for a women's caucus. As one leader of a conservative women's group explained, the initial reasons to establish the group included the likelihood that her party would more likely be seen as a European party:

Many women were tired of being represented by the old comrades and of the [Association of Hungarian Women] explaining abroad what was important or

not in the changes [during the transition]. We thought that it would be important to establish a group that would represent *us* abroad. This was our aim especially in 1988. ... There were two Austrian women's groups that could not imagine that we did not have any women's groups. ... They asked W [a male party leader] if we have a women's group. So I told him that from now on to hold tight, and now we have it! I saw that our party would not be considered as belonging to Europe if we had no women's caucus. Internal need did not bring it into being, but rather the pressure from abroad (Interview, Women's Section of the Hungarian Democratic Forum).

International affiliations raise the issue of foreign assistance. Crucial in many respects, international financial assistance especially demonstrates the difficulty of total self-reliance for Hungarian women's groups. If this foreign assistance goes beyond mere support for the creation and maintenance of any given group, the resulting organization's autonomy may be questioned. When two well-known Hungarian female politicians were asked about the dangers of dependency on foreign aid, they responded that "Hungarian women proved to be independent; they organized themselves as women and expressed their opinions succinctly during the campaigns on abortion rights and the retirement age" (Lendvai and Büky 1994). Independent grassroots groups have received financial assistance from both US private and (limited) USAID sources; for example, Feminist Network and NaNE! received seed money from both for various information dissemination projects.

Most trade union women's sections have accepted training and financial support from Holland, Sweden, Germany, and Austria. The conservative groups have mainly turned to their counterparts in Germany and Austria. Even though there may be nonalignment criteria established, foreign application procedures and administrative requirements are often so burdensome on these small and less administratively advanced groups that they can rarely take advantage of funding possibilities.

The activities of women's groups that depend on foreign foundations may be perceived as "tainted" in the eyes of some critics. Foreign foundations, an alternative to local connections, have become a major route for financial support for projects, but have potential to result in dependency, a concern to women's groups. For example, accusations that the campaign under the name of *Szabad Döntés Jogáért* [For the Right of Free Choice], a women's initiative against more restrictive abortion policies in 1992 was instigated and directed from abroad questioned the authenticity, and consequently, the effectiveness of this campaign in Hungary.²

Women activists often spoke of the disruption and paralysis caused by funding (either its dearth or its availability and subsequent dependency). Some connect this disruption to colonization: "We came to hear about a funding opportunity through Z, as usual, in a totally informal manner. She has a lot of connections in Anglo circles. I feel by accepting their money, I collaborate with the colonizers" (Interview, May 1995, Feminist Network). Charges of colonialization of Hungarian women toward the West can turn the interaction bitter.

There are other sensitive concerning international cooperation in women's activism. Most of the Hungarian women's groups are quite happy to belong to both national and international networks of women, which they see as providing a sense of importance and security, both financially and, more importantly, morally. However, there are also many negative or uneasy feelings toward each other, often involving issues of exclusion, misunderstanding and exploitation. My interviews with Hungarian women carry the voice of only one side of the story. Although I cannot pinpoint why the situation described in the following quote went so awry, it is a fearsome scenario in any international exchange:

A few times we met US feminists. They [the US-based Global Fund for Women] raised money so that they could come here and make us more feminist. It was a double-sided [*visszás*] event – and a lot of people experienced it as such. They gave us the money, which included their [US feminists'] travel support. They [US feminists] assisted in creating an American-style campaign in the big Hungarian reality. We could have figured all these things out. We were translating foreign materials. They came for a visit – but did not treat us as if we belonged to them as well! They organized a training session on conflict reduction. It lasted for two days. They really think that what they do is good, and they are good-willed. But they rarely have the sensitivity to see the differences between Hungarian and US women's situation – not just between mentalities. They wrote such

astonishing articles – that they disliked [*fanyalog*] how much Hungarian women were family-centered and that our thinking was not democratic enough. It totally puts us down [*lekezelö*]! They [US feminists] had a pretty bad opinion of our group as well (Interview, July 1995, Feminist Network).

In addition, many Hungarian activists have become hurt, angry, and eventually alienated because their groups have received few or no invitations to foreign-sponsored women's gatherings. There has also been the issue of language translation: when foreign foundations have tried to spread the word about women's solidarity but have not routinely provided translation for non-English speakers, their intentions have been seen as less than genuine.

Recognizing interactions between women from the East and the West as an exchange and acknowledging the difficulties in an honest manner help to see past and present relationships in a more useful way. I see the dichotomization of East and West as a fallacy and the task of balancing relativism and essentialism between different styles of living as a positive challenge rather than as a trap. Instead of a simple, polarized relationship (West bringing light/East emerging out of the dark) we have a much more complex situation, one that includes women connecting with each other in ways other than shared victimhood.

The issue of feminism brings the complexities between East and West closer to the surface. The differences in the interpretations of feminism that I observed among Hungarian women's groups reflect ideological differences

prevalent in their Western counterparts. The layers of “anti-feminist,” “shy” (quasi-liberal) and “outspoken” (radical and postmodern ideologies) feminisms demonstrate a related, but differently sensitive understanding of women’s plight in Hungary.

Stop Sign in Traffic: Differences in Feminism

I define feminist organizations as those that work with women for women by embracing collective decision-making, empowerment of members, and a political agenda to end women’s oppression. Most often, feminist organizations question authority and dominant social values, produce new elites, claim resources on behalf of women and provide space and resources for women (Ferree and Martin 1995: 5). An increased awareness of feminist perspectives has changed some of the perceptions of the world Hungarian women live in. Eastern European women have struggled with establishing their own version of feminism. Hindering this process is lack of history and a consequent inability to build on any previous stage of unproblematic female solidarity or “shared feminism.” Feminism in Hungary has taken many shapes and forms, and although it has remained targeted against the oppression of women, it has been divided by class and political ideologies.

People react according to class and ideological affiliations in their evaluations of women’s past socialist “emancipation” and their present “freedom.” To some, women are better off now. To others, women are worse off now than they were in

the socialist past. One extreme emphasizes the achievements of the socialist/communist era in women's mobilization and entry into the labor force: the support for them to be legally and economically independent; the existence of broad and affordable child-care institutions and affirmative quotas; the facilitation of women's increased participation in education and politics; and the country's more critical stand toward the West and its own development. The alternative interpretation stresses that socialist society was more rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal than capitalist society. The laws of the communist establishment denied the right of assembly and the right of expression, thereby prohibiting the exercising of basic human rights. The proponents of this view emphasize that women's emancipation mainly served the state's economic aims, resulting in many shortcomings. Women saw political participation as an unwelcome addition to the work they were assigned to do. Women who did participate in the authoritarian-oppressive regime wore the stigma of being elected on the basis of quotas and the majority of the population viewed them as tokens in politics. Although a sizable number of Hungarian women and their groups now position themselves with one or the other extreme, many feel that opinions about the past regime do not have to be so dichotomous, because one can find (to varying degrees) arguments that support either side.

Ideological differences among women run just as deep as in any other segment of the population. With regard to their own role in society, however, the activists further differ according to their relationship to essentialist/traditional and

non-essentialist/critical (feminist) perceptions of gender roles and relations. This cleavage strongly influence how women think about politics and political action. The emergence of groups like NaNE!, a domestic abuse hotline, and Labrisz, a lesbian women's group, are indicative of how declaratively feminist women's groups are able to move away from the until then purely reactive pattern of political activism to a pro-active and innovative one. In the next segment, I focus on the many stances related to feminism among women's groups in Hungary.

I observe various "layers" of groups with feminist consciousness, which can be loosely affiliated with established branches of feminist thought. Among what I call the non-feminist groups, one cannot find direct support for feminism. The latter have been the most numerous and maintained the broadest appeal. Hungarian women's groups may adopt any number of approaches to transform existing political or social institutions; most of them, however, are not working within a self-proclaimed or explicit feminist framework. Most leading participants in these women's groups did not believe feminism had an impact on their groups. A narrower, but still large number of groups developed a first layer of a feminist awareness, but they do not represent themselves as such. Although the individual protagonists are often rather far from the "shy" description that I use to delineate this layer, in their actions the groups refrain from calling themselves feminists and they censor feminism. The "shy" layer of feminist-leaning groups, such as MONA and the Ombudswoman Program, have not publicly expressed their support for feminism but have acted on implicitly feminist agendas.

The second layer is that of explicit feminist identity and self-representation. The Hungarian women's groups that openly espouse feminism are the Feminist Network, NaNE! and Labrisz. Oddly enough, as a result of the vilification of feminism, these groups have attained media attention more easily than many other groups.

Depending on leadership and perceived political opportunities, even the groups of explicit feminist consciousness migrate across more or less outspoken feminist stances as time passes. One such examples in NaNE!, whose activists considered in 1995 that the term feminism "scares people away," and it was not just out of calculation to attract more public support, but real trepidation that she did not want to espouse the idea. At that time, one NaNE! activist I spoke with stressed that every woman she knew had a negative experience with sexual discrimination, and that they did not want to face the consequences of addressing the issue (Interview, July 1995, NaNE!). By 2001, NaNE! members had much less, if any, reservations about using and applying feminist terms and also call themselves feminists (Interviews, June-July 2001, NaNE!). The outspokenness emerged as result of two, somewhat contradictory trends. On the one hand, NaNE! became more confident, being able to look back 10 years of institutional existence. International contacts provided a profound sense of external validation and righteousness. On the other hand, they became more jaded in the unrelenting anti-feminist domestic environment. NaNE!'s activists realized that even carefully navigating around the term feminism did not allow them to enter the political mainstream.

The problems of associating with feminism are evident even for the only group with an explicitly feminist name in Hungary. When the Feminist Network decided to go through the government registration process, the choice of a feminist name posed a challenge. Although nobody admitted to having left the group because of its name, many of the founding members had quit by the third year, and the attrition was viewed by those remaining partially as a result of wearing the feminist logo (Interview, April 1995, Feminist Network).

Why feminist groups do not like to unveil their conviction has a lot to do with a general anti-feminist disposition in Hungarian society. The anti-feminist heritage from communist times did not have any trouble surviving the many otherwise profound changes since 1989. In the next section, I elaborate on why the general public, including women, continues to carry many anti-feminist sentiments.

Road Block in Traffic: Anti-Feminism

Women in East and Central Europe often reject feminist ideology as much as they reject socialist women's politics. As Busheikin observes: "After forty years of resisting communist social engineering and Soviet control, Eastern Europeans certainly aren't going to let anyone tell them what to think, let alone what to do. Rather, there is a tradition of refusal that is already part of the Eastern European psyche – refusal of propaganda, ideology, political messianism, big liberatory ideas" (1997: 14).

Anti-feminism in various fields of social and political life has been endemic in Hungary, that has been proved convincingly by content analysis of party documents by Goven (1994), and of government policy by Fodor (1997), by media analysis by Argejo (1995) and by discourse-analysis by Adamik (2000). Recent reflections by Hungarian sociologists and historians have started examining the reasons why feminism was an isolated thought and movement for most of the past century, with the notable exception of the early 1900s (Acsády 1999; Petö 1997: 159).

It is not enough to state that East and Central European inhabitants, or, for that matter, any other region's residents, are not too friendly toward feminism; one needs to search for the reasons of why and how we become socialized to reject it. Even among women who could be more interested than men in feminism because they are to personally gain from its advances, feminist convictions do not emerge "naturally." To attain self-awareness, as Simone de Beauvoir so well stated, one is not born a woman, but becomes one. Reflecting on the political, social, and cultural attributes of oppression inscribed into women's status, one may eventually become a feminist. Women in Central and Eastern Europe have often been described as not being sensitive to gender issues because of past socialist experiences (Funk and Muller 1993; *Feminist Review* special issue 1991). I believe that it is more accurate to describe the post-communist women's stance (in general) as differently sensitive. The problem of "different" gender sensitivity (consciousness) is itself problematic, because it is still measured in relation to "other," more established/familiar (i.e., Western) scenarios. This difference is, however, to some extent becoming lessened

because the economy has been privatized and the political system is (even if low-intensity³) democracy. The convergence with Western characteristics is especially observable in light of growing and hardly challenged fascination with the bourgeois ethos. In this process, Central and East European women carry the entrenched patriarchic values, paradoxically supported by both past socialist rhetoric and contemporary capitalist consumerism.

Sentiments in both the preceding and current periods of social transformation have hindered the development of feminism: during the communist era, propaganda downplayed feminism as a form of bourgeois degeneration; since the 1989 revolutions, the neophyte advocates of liberal democracies have depicted affirmative action as incongruous with liberal democracy. According to common phraseology, democracy is “the only game in town”; thus, women better not ask for favoritism. Efforts to portray the experiences of minorities/disadvantaged are interpreted by some as tantamount to a betrayal of new fragile democracy (Berry 1995: 7).

Although some women do organize and participate in groups – feminist or not – they often face ridicule by both sexes and marginalization by politicians. Studies on women’s activism in other settings have demonstrated the strength of anti-feminism (Marshall 1995; Klatch 1987). Why is there a resistance to feminism and/or to the label of feminism? Some possible answers may be: (1) a desire to dissociate from socialist emancipation; (2) the association of feminism to anti-male

attitudes and stereotyped Western feminism, (3) the plain threat of Westernization; and (4) the level of economic development.

(1) Women in East and Central Europe are often quite certain that feminism is nonsense. Hungarian women often see feminism as narcissistic and selfish. Feminism as they understand it conflicts with the family-centered socialization that they received. Feminism is an oddly tainted word, free from any *direct* association to the state-socialist past, and still it is considered to be something “psychologically unhealthy.” Socialist-era propaganda berated feminist ideology because it was viewed as a bourgeois hindrance to the real solutions socialism offered (Goven 1994). It was also ridiculed and distanced because its potential was feared: built on personal conviction and individual initiatives, as well as community affirmation and activities, feminism was threatening to the communist agenda.

(2) Although Hungarian women’s groups decried the impositions of socialist emancipation, they also resist what they perceive to be an anti-male bias in feminism. For instance, in 1994, the first editorial of *Amazon*, a magazine published by the women’s section of the Women’s Electorate of the National Alliance of the Hungarian Trade Unions, summarizes this group’s wish to not be seen as anti-male: “The title of our magazine indicates with the necessary irony that we know we have to fight for everything: for the dreams, for reality, even for men. But by no means against them.” In spite of such caution, *Amazon* could not attract a wide audience and the Women’s Electorate was struggling to continue its publication until 1996 when the journal ceased to exist.

Resistance to feminism may also lie in perceptions of its anti-maleness that emerges in the issue of inclusion and exclusion: should men be allowed to participate in women's groups? A member of the Hungarian Association of University Women was seriously disconcerted by the notion of a "women's society" that she had heard about in relation to US feminism. She said that "we live in one society, there is no such thing as a women's society. That's where the Americans go wrong" (Interview, April 1995). This interpretation of feminism reflects a distorted stereotype. The view of Western feminism as a complex and varied phenomenon within liberal, socialist, post-modern frameworks and various cultural agendas appears to be lacking.

Women in Hungary seem to be more aware of the advantages than of the disadvantages of their social roles as women. A representative of the Liga Trade Unions expressed resentment about their Western trade union partners' expectation that they produce a declaration against sexual harassment.

We created some sort of a statement, but it was difficult, since we did not want to write down a Pharisees sentence, as we see advantages of being women as well (Interview, May 1995).

(3) Feminist ideology historically has been associated with the West, its economic affluence and its political and cultural domination. Few women's groups in East and Central Europe call themselves feminist because to do so may lead to the

perception that they have unconditionally embraced Western influence; in this respect, it is a highly unpopular move that could further compromise their participation in public debates. In spite of a nearly wholesale acceptance of a Western way of life in Eastern Europe, resistance to its professed values has emerged in seemingly unexpected points. One of these seemingly paradoxical instances is the issue of women's roles, which, when tinkered with, reveals the immense symbolic and practical significance of women's roles in the constructions of nationalism and identity (Narayan 1998). Consequently, as an assertion against the onslaught of Westernization, (Western) feminist writings are often questioned and rejected based on their theoretical and practical distance from the region.

(4) Another explanation of the anti-feminism in Hungary may lie in that country's level of economic development. In East and Central Europe, political elites have tried to ignore rising social movements in the name of focusing on "more important" aims. The popular view questions the necessity of feminism and sees it as one more "artificial division" in a society that already has many.⁴ It is ironic that these dictums are spelled out in the jargon of Marxist revolutionary discourse, against which most of the current elites are fighting. This pragmatism often precludes any discussion of feminism and its place in and contribution to social life in post-communist Europe. The belief is strong among women in East and Central Europe that feminism can develop only when economic and social stability has been established. However, underdevelopment cannot completely explain the rejection of feminism: developing regions, especially parts of Central and South America,

exhibit a more welcoming attitude toward different versions of feminist thinking and action by women of varied economic, educational and social standing (Jacquette and Wolchik 1998). There and in other developing regions poor women tend to organize around economic issues, with political actions following.

In spite of rampant anti-feminist sentiments, what prompts women to engage in activism? Hungarian activist women's interpretation of the public-private divide provides some clues to answer this question while this powerful conceptual tool also highlights further similarities and differences between East and West.

Beliefs about the Political the Public-Private Divide among Women Activists

Democrats and democratic thought generally regard participation in political activity as a quintessential virtue in its own right. Political participation has been defined by Verba and Nie as those activities by individuals and their groups directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and the actions they take (1972: 2). Women's participation in a democracy raises questions about the nature of political participation, the rules of democratic debate and its problems. Feminist social scientists in the 1970s emphasized that women were becoming more politically active but often times in different ways than men (Laslett, Brenner and Arat 1995; Chafetz and Dworkin 1986). Feminist research on women's activism uncovered the need to examine the broader contexts of political participation because women's political involvement was occurring mostly outside the formal

political processes. I consider political participation and its theories pertinent and insightful for uncovering why and how Hungarian women's groups have become implicated in the democratization process. In this section, I will interpret how the concept of "political" applies to contemporary activism, and by using the perspectives of members of Hungarian women's groups, I use the lens of public-private divide to point out the political significance of their activities.

The establishment of women's groups, and especially their autonomous activities, I argue, are significant and profoundly political events. The significance of political activity depends on the context in which it takes place. In the definition I use here, any type of activity can be significant and political as long as the activity originates in critical self-awareness and is pursued autonomously. For example, women's groups in Hungary are often service providers: NaNE! supports victims of domestic violence; the Ombudswoman Program provides psychological and legal services for women; KALASZ engages in charity activities.

If self-awareness and autonomy are absent in these service provisions, they do not qualify as a political action. Service provision fits squarely within the caregiver role traditionally assigned to women. Many (but certainly not all) women's service provision groups have faced internal and external critique, and consequently, the challenge to evaluate repeatedly for what reason and for whom they provide. When women critically evaluate their role in society and become aware of their situation, the decision to provide services on this basis amounts to a political act. When women's groups consciously claim their part and their

recognition in the public sphere, they arrive at a new definition of the political that can empower them to be equal participants. This is the where and the why of feminist consciousness (latent or explicit) can be of tremendous attribute to prod women to act on their own right. Evaluating women's activism in post-communist Hungary my conclusion is that both the explicit and the implicit interpretations of feminism provide strength for women's groups to transform existing institutions and practices, but a consciously feminist community can achieve potentially greater cohesion and be more efficient and straightforward in achieving its aims.

The dichotomy between public and private domains has been and continues to be a significant barrier to recognize women's distinct, and sometimes transformative, ways of participating politically. Just as any cultural and political category, the public-private divide requires historical contextualization, especially with regard to the activism of Hungarian women's groups. Since 1989, transformations in gender arrangements have been simultaneously occurring in political, economic and cultural arenas. I argue that since the capitalist and democratic change of regime in 1989, the public-private dichotomy as it applies in capitalist systems has greatly reasserted itself in Hungary. In this regard, the traditional feminist critiques of the public-private divide are starting to become more appropriate in this part of the world.

NaNE!'s campaign to criminalize rape within marriage (1994-96) is an example of probing the demarcation line between public and private spheres. NaNE! searched for interested parties to pursue the matter through legal channels and through signature collection.

We contacted the human rights commissioner of Budapest and sent a petition with him to the City Hall and eventually to the Supreme Court. We tried to get the Ombudsperson appointed by the Parliament as well as get the Ombudsperson's responsibility expanded (Interview, April 1995).

In 1997 the Hungarian Parliament passed the bill criminalizing rape within marriage (Varró 1999). This legislation is attributable to many factors, including the very skillful interest articulation and pressure by NaNE!. NaNE! lit the fire of debate by raising the issue of rape within marriage, but it did not have the capacity to further influence the case, either by mobilization or by lobbying. Around the time when the public debate about the topic declined, the 1995 UN Beijing conference and Hungary's efforts to enter the European Union opened a window of opportunity for a female MP to propose the bill in Parliament to criminalize rape within marriage. As a result of perceived international pressure (and a desire to appear as an already thoroughly democratic country protecting a potentially victimized segment of the population), the Hungarian Parliament passed the bill.

Very little public discussion preceded the bill criminalizing rape within the family. Consequently, there is the possibility that the general public sees it as a result of actions by an isolated, obsessed minority, thereby dismissing it.⁵ Without mobilization and broader-based awareness and discussion, this law may become a hollow shell, much like the women-friendly labor protective legislation during the

communist era. This is also a threat to the domestic violence campaigns of NaNE! and efforts around sexual harassment, neither widely discussed in the broader public. Of note in these struggles combating violence against women is the development of different understandings of what belongs in the private sphere (and should stay there) and what belongs in the public sphere and, consequently, what becomes a topic of public discussion and a task of government.

NaNE! received much criticism from other women's groups for raising the issue of domestic violence. The leader of the Women's Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party, for example, expressed her reservations about NaNE!'s domestic abuse campaign. She considered prosecution a degradation of adult, independent women who can defend themselves. She advocated instead a much more active role for women in politics and at higher levels of decision-making, which together would encourage women to be more assertive.

The campaign against domestic violence is entirely idiotic. A self-aware women cannot enter a situation where her husband could be violent with her, or if it is so, she should divorce. We do not need a special law for this. How will they put it into practice? Should there be some legal experts who stand by the bed at night? This is a fake problem, because it degrades women.

NaNE! looks down upon women for asking special protection for them. We need to help women to be assertive, to enter into politics, and to feel what is

taking place against them (Interview, April 1995, Women's Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party).

Others disagreed with NaNE! also about the legal means to reduce violence within the family. Many women saw legal procedures as unable to protect them. A respected journalist pronounced that “the occurrence of domestic violence will not be lessened by representatives in Parliament.”⁶ The Women’s Alliance of the Independent Smallholders’ Party resented the whole idea of raising the topic of sexuality in public, especially sexual harassment and domestic abuse. A representative of the group stated that “Sexuality is an intimate affair, we cannot imagine talking about it *in public*. These groups [such as NaNE!] take the whole [movement] into a totally opposite direction” [emphasis added] (Interview, April 1995, Women's Alliance of the Independent Smallholders' Party).

Because of this debate over what should remain private and which issues should become publicly debated and regulated, NaNE! remained alone and was somewhat castigated in raising awareness and advocating support for women. However, the campaign for criminalizing domestic violence had a clear indirect impact because a few scholars and government administrators became acquainted with the breath of this issue through NaNE!’s training (Szász 2001). Through these largely unacknowledged ties, NaNE! is essential in putting further pressure on the Hungarian government to pass legislation regarding domestic violence.

Previous prohibition of women from political participation,⁷ direct and indirect external control, and women's internalization of being a "minoritized majority" (Rush and Allen 1989) reinforce each other to produce women's systematic underrepresentation. However, when women start to question the powerful yet conventional separation between private and public spheres, their degree of active involvement in each, and especially their transgression of the separation line, they can radicalize the practice (and eventually, the theory) of political participation and politics. From a political participation point of view, the activities of women's groups may seem innocuous to some, but nevertheless contain the agents of politics and change.

Conclusion: The Importance of Voicing and Trafficking

Women's activism in the current transformation in East and Central Europe are often overlooked both in political theory and practice as integral element of the process of democratization. Studies on women and politics (nearly exclusively by women scholars themselves) have created a niche, but most focus almost entirely on women in political institutions, thereby perpetuating a narrow definition of politics. The tendency to associate the "political" primarily with existing political institutions excludes a large range of political activities, especially those undertaken by women. Demonstrating the necessity and the relevance of broader definition of politics,

global traffic in feminism has contributed to the increase of visibility of women's activism in Hungary.

Forming groups is a necessary, even if not a sufficient, condition for women to gain more agency in politics. By creating their own groups and especially by acting through these groups, women engage in the field of politics because these groups often target issues that can redefine the division between public and private spheres. The interpretation of feminism is a crucial linchpin in making explicitly political demands and efficiently carrying them to fruition. Reviewing the activism of many women's groups in post-communist Hungary my conclusion is that feminism has provided strength for women's groups to transform existing institutions and practices. The contacts and the exchange in ideas with other parts of the world have created a broad and increasing body of knowledge about commonly shared problems and the ways of overcoming them through activism. While developing more efficient and straightforward avenues in activism, the groups are also becoming more aware of the differences between them. As Hungarian women activists are engaging in contacts with many regions of the world, the highest intensity of contacts have continued to be with those in relatively close geographic proximity in Europe.

Because of pervasive anti-feminism, lack of supportive environments, scantiness of physical (meeting) space, and extreme scarcity of financial resources for organizational maintenance and continuity, Hungarian women's groups face major challenges in creating an equal partnership in this exchange. While new

groups continue to emerge, many earlier groups have ceased to exist. One of first groups to phase out was the Association for Gender Equity in 1995 that was followed in this route, among others, by the Feminist Network in 2001. Though struggling against what seem the odds, many women's groups are surviving and even thriving. In that continued survival and in the emerging activities of women's groups in Hungary we can find the connection to democratization and hear the arising melodies of newfound feminisms.

¹ I present these arguments as part of a larger research project on the political significance of Hungarian women's activism since 1989. I conducted two major rounds of research on the beliefs of activists in Hungary. Using data from mostly Hungarian sources, I compile a broad view of the activities of women's groups there. First, I conducted participant observations of all available activities of

women's groups in 1995 and 2001. Second, I interviewed the groups' principal member or president (many groups did not have formal leadership, but all had some sort of leadership). I asked the organizations' leadership about the activities of the groups in open-ended interviews. Members of the groups were also queried about their beliefs. I asked the interviewees about which other groups or influential persons they cooperated with and maintained ties with through personal meetings, conferences and correspondence. Third, I consulted numerous sources of secondary literature to triangulate the data emerging from participant observation and the interviews. The most important were the publications of women's groups and documents of the *Nőképviselési Titkárság* [Secretariat for Women's Representation] of the Hungarian Ministry of Welfare. Fourth, I reviewed European and North American political science and women's studies accounts on women's political activism and discussed these concepts in various professional circles.

² In the first abortion debate in post-communist Hungary, some members of the Feminist Network established an until then unprecedented, institutionally nonaligned campaign, the "For the Right of Free Choice." This campaign was the first testing ground for independent fundraising and nonaligned political mobilization. The initial phase of the direct mail campaign was partially funded by US women's organizations. The US funding eventually became a liability to the campaign because it demonstrated to the defenders of the nationalist cause that the Platform was not authentically Hungarian.

³ Thanks to Professor Pavel Machala at the Political Science Department of Amherst College who draw my attention to this aspect of democratization literature.

⁴ Examples to demonstrate this trend abound in East and Central Europe. Elena Bonner, one of the Russian leaders of the democratic opposition movement said, "Our country is on such a low socio-economic level, that at the moment we cannot afford to divide ourselves into 'us women' and 'us men'" (Todorova 1993: 31).

⁵ If public discussion does not occur around an issue, social and cultural change may not follow because such change emerges from active engagement of conflicting views (see Clemens 1993; Conell and Voss 1990; Minkoff 1994; Sarason 1996).

⁶ Reaction to a lecture at the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Feb. 23, 1995, Budapest.

⁷ The historic exclusion of women from the public decision-making process has not prevented women from indirectly influencing community decisions, which differs from significant, direct influence/power to make decisions (Stamm and Ryff 1984; Friedl 1967). Historically, the only women who could participate in an otherwise male body politic were queens, who served, on rare occasions, as temporary replacements for male rulers.