

**Bridges Across the Public-Private Divide:  
The Welfare-Related Activism of Hungarian Women after 1989**

**Katalin Fábián**

Department of Government and Law

103 Kirby Hall

Lafayette College, Easton PA 18042 USA

Tel: (610) 330-5392, Fax: (610) 330-5397 email: fabiank@lafayette.edu

**ABSTRACT.** Moving from one officially sanctioned women's organization to approximately 40 consistently active groups in a matter of a decade, Hungarian women's groups demonstrate interest and eagerness toward effecting political change. Many of them have demanded opportunities to participate in public life, often through welfare-related issues. Between 1989 and 2001, retirement stands out as one of the main issues that brought women's groups together in attempting to form a coalition and established the basis to an alternative form of public appearance. How have they pursued their aims and what they managed to accomplish are the main empirical questions of this essay. In a dialogue with theory, the Hungarian case produces evidence that in a post-communist setting it is not the welfare state per se that pre-empts or pushes out women's organizations, but paternalistic political culture. This study points out that while women's groups chose welfare as the predominant means to move toward and into politics, women's organizations face many obstacles to ultimately change the political agenda and alter the narrow definition of politics.

Women's activism worldwide has historically involved welfare-related issues, including a number of women's groups in post-communist East and Central Europe. In the triple transformation of economic, political and psychological spheres, many previous patterns or exchange shook and some shattered. As a result of massive privatization and market reorientation, the 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 (Milanovic 1998). These themes provided ample reason for emerging social movements, among them women's groups to call attention to.

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 monopoly to an (even if limited) shared space with civil society (Lagerspetz 2001, Cook et al. 1999). The emergence of civil society created an environment of emerging self-reliance that assisted in slowly moving away from, although not entirely cutting off from, politics' nearly exclusive focus 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 in forms of a women's party, caucuses in parties, and NGOS are significant representations of the process of democratization.

While democratization greatly expanded the means for citizens to articulate grievances through the ballot box in East and Central Europe, it could not immediately establish meaningful opportunities for collective action via nonelectoral modes. The communist societies left in their wake societies bereft of robust, independent civil associations, the mesolevel institutions that, in idealized descriptions of mature Western democracies, perform the functions of buffering social demands and mediating between grassroots 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 has begun to mobilize and lobby mostly around a series of welfare issues. Analysis of government reactions to their welfare-related activism reveals to how limited scope the political system manages women's claims. The welfare state has been typically conceptualized as a state committed to modifying the play of social and market forces in order to achieve greater equity (Ruggie 1984, 11). I use the term social welfare in a broad sense: it includes not only state social provisions aimed at income maintenance programs but also state regulatory apparatus (for instance, those deployed around reproduction and workplace equality) and public services (e.g., day care). It is in this broader sense of welfare that incited women's groups to lobbying various state institutions.

Hungarian women's activism represents one representative case study in the transformation experience of European post-communist countries. The activities of Hungarian women's groups do not only reconfirm the importance of welfare-related political activism that has been observed in other (mostly West European) contexts. In addition to showing that welfare acts as a pre-eminent way to enter politics in the post-communist scenario, this study shows that under rare conditions women's groups were successful in raising their voice in newly democratic

Hungary. A puzzling question remains: why democracy has bought 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 organizing. Simultaneously, the new democratic rights to association and free speech allowed for a pull factor to develop. In this sense, welfare-issues provided women's groups in Hungary a clear direction toward orienting 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 a main target of activity limited the development of a broad spectrum of women's activism. When welfare issues waned from the agenda of transition after 1995, the political opportunity to influence decision-makers has largely decreased. Women's groups started to stagnate in number, and by 2002, their impact has 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 lessons emerging from the Hungarian case of women's activism show the long-term debilitating effects of the weakness of civil society toward establishing meaningful democratization. To this extent the experiences of Hungarian women's groups also confirm the existing literature on women's engagement in politics. Comparative research points out that during the transition to democracy, women's traditional roles of motherhood and caretaking are often the most accessible vehicle to provide the target of activities (Caiazza, 2002, Jacquette 1998). The post-communist Hungarian case provokes a change in the understanding of 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 the boundaries, conventions, and alliances of politics as usual. 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 interests and apparatus. These groups used traditional social roles, such as motherhood as carriers to assert their claims regarding retirement. While motherhood is a traditional space that implies severe limitations for women's political action, but in these case it was used to promote engagement in politics. Through this traditional space organizing has provided untraditional means for

women's voices to be heard and an allowed for the emergence of a new type of gender-sensitive awareness (i.e., proto-feminism).

Women's activism has drastically changed in number and in content since 1989 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. In the first segment I also provide a synopsis of the main actors engaged in the struggle to maintain and, in some cases, to expand welfare. I then focus, in The Significance of Gender and Welfare section, on the gendered nature of welfare, using the literature specifically for the case study of Hungary. I follow with an explanation of the emergence of themes in women's welfare-related activism in Hungary. In the concluding section, I bring together the lessons from women's organizing in Hungary and women's struggles worldwide; here I attempt to fit these lessons into the complex patterns of relationship between the state and women's activism.

I used 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 with this title) 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 analyzed Hungarian newspapers and international scholarly journals to trace the effect 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 became a socialist country under the influence of the Soviet Union. In 1989, a peaceful transition to a multiparty democracy took place, which point the country instituted a market economy and applied to become a member of the European Union (EU). In the first years of the transition, economic reform aimed to establish a market economy and to satisfy structural adjustment programs; a parallel political reform focused on how to become "an independent and democratic constitutional state" based on the rule of law.<sup>1</sup> Since the mid-1990s, most political discussion and activism have centred around the desire to join the EU and on legislative change to

harmonize Hungary's system with EU norms. In post-communist Hungary, while democratization has been the buzzword, it was not deepened enough. The engagement of women's groups in welfare-related issues presents us with a quandary of why it has been so difficult to create receptiveness to their claims.

The communist example, with its seemingly liberatory prescriptions for women (e.g., full time employment, enforced participation in politics, and even extended welfare services) proves that in a nondemocratic setting even the most emancipatory roles do not manifest into a liberated status. However, such policies had still some undeniably positive impact on gender roles. Only post-communist countries demonstrate a pattern similar to the Scandinavian industrialized welfare democracies where the gender-sensitive development index (GDI) up until 1995 has been significantly higher than each respective country's human development index (HDI (Bretherton 2000)). Based on this illustration, one could assume that gender equality is higher in post-communist Europe than elsewhere, but the difficulties experienced by women's groups direct us in an opposite direction.

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 the Parliament and ministries in the allocation of funds (Jenkins 1999). Realizing the continuing trend of centralized power-relations, the non-profits increasingly moved from working with the legislature to cooperation with the executive branch. Only when fully fitting into and supporting respective government agendas, were representatives of NGOs, among them, on occasion women's groups, invited to participate.

The rupture in association during communism from 1948 to 1989 created a nearly blank slate in women's organizing. The re-emergence of civic groups has been one of the most fundamental developments in post-communist societies in the past ten years, and women's organizing has been part of this significant force. The number of women's groups has increased from one (the officially sanctioned, quasi "lame-duck" Hungarian Women's Federation in 1988) to approximately 40 (by 2002). There are more women's groups that exist informally, 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 breaks. When and what kind of conditions propelled women's groups to register? Four waves of organizing provide the answer.<sup>2</sup>

The first wave of women's organizing took place in 1989 and consisted of two sub-currents: (1) new grassroots organizations and (2) other "phoenix" organizations, building on the "ashes" of previous, socialist-era associations. The new grassroots organizations of women, such as the Feminist Network and NaNE!,<sup>3</sup> created themselves "from scratch," without 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 grassroots groups did not carry cards or pay membership fees and the groups themselves were mostly informal and focused on the creation of women's own (although usually small) spaces.

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.<sup>4</sup> They mainly directed their organizing toward more traditional political involvement, such as lobbying. These resurrected groups built themselves from the ashes of their socialist-era existence and carried an image (sometimes nothing more) 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 new groups have been forming outside the capital city (e.g., in medium-sized cities like

Kecskemét, Veszprém and Balatonfüred), with a focus on charity and social engagements. Their activities, though not focused on 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. Since 1997, it has become more apparent that an emerging counter-trend to these previous three waves of organizing has emerged. Many of the early grassroots women’s groups have ceased to exist citing lack of infrastructure. The phoenix organizations, such as the Women’s Alliance and the Women’s Electorate of the National Alliance of the Hungarian Trade Unions, by 2002 lost much of their structures and connections that the whole left-wing women’s organizing capacity has 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 of the political parties have not yet managed to take root. Many previously registered groups stopped functioning and only a few new ones have emerged. Partially as a consequence of their stagnating number, the impact of women’s groups by 2002 has 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 become better known and institutionalized. With this mixed experience of democratic development in the past 12 years, I now explore why women’s activism has often focused until now on welfare and why it has been channelled through both novel and more traditional forms of self-expression to meaningfully express their interests in an otherwise discouragingly difficult political environment.

### The Significance of Gender in Welfare

Women’s growing representation 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 -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 (1999: 62) 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.”

To present long-submerged issues, such as attention to welfare, women are raising 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 who established welfare institutions; how they were maintained; why they were 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 (Holter 1984; Pascall 1986; Wilson 1977). Recent historical and comparative studies have discovered the importance of women’s agency in social policy and the direction that welfare institutions take (e.g., Mettler 1998 and 2000; O’Connor et al. 1999; Ginsburg 1992; Skocpol 1992; Jenson 1986 and 1997; Deacon 1989; Sklar 1993). 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.

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. It is in the field of distribution of funds (and power) where 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 a reluctance to introduce gender-specific measures and 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.<sup>5</sup>

The state, at the junction of administrative and broad political processes, has been important in translating the demands of women’s movements. 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.<sup>6</sup> The feminist approach to the welfare state is both critical of the patriarchal elements of the welfare state and supportive as far as the state can become an ally of gender equality. Most early feminist work 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 of work within the family and the gendered aspects of the welfare state. The concept of women as dependents of men and as responsible for nurturing 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 analyze the ways in which state institutions discriminate against women (Gordon 1990, Abramovitz 1988, Kickbusch and Riedmuller 1984, Wilson 1977). Lately there seems to be more of a positive sense emerging that welfare can, 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 (1987), 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. On the contrary, says Helga Maria Hernes (1987), who argues that the Scandinavian welfare states are on their way to becoming "women-friendly." The state, however, does not become women-friendly on its own. Democratic struggle, as Birte Siim calls this process referring to Denmark (2000, 111), may force it to incorporate women's demands.

Women most often participate in political activism in gendered ways, focusing on such issues as child-rearing, care for the sick, reproductive freedom, domestic violence, abuse, and the constitution of sexual identities, and their engagement can either fit within 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 successes of women's groups in Hungary, in the next section I describe their actions related to raising the retirement age. I argue that welfare restructuring has become a rallying cry for women's activities because it represents an active junction of citizenship rights (past and present) and private and public spheres.

## 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.<sup>7</sup> Within the field of governmental policies, raising the retirement age has particularly incited women in Hungary to act and projected their activities as a mode of alternative political appearance. I use this case to highlight the elements that helped women's political interest articulation in Hungary. I argue that group efforts focused on these issues redefine the divide between public and private spheres, and consequently affect the democracy built. When gender-specific issues appear on the public agenda, they have a potential to resist the boundaries, conventions, and alliances of politics as usual. These 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.<sup>8</sup>

### *Retirement: Laundry-Baskets to the Rescue*

In 1993, the Parliament enacted into law an increase of the retirement age to 62 (originally 55 for women and 60 for men). Aiming to halt 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 has 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 general life expectancy was decreasing. In addition, by the early 1990s, unemployment grew rampant, making it even more difficult to justify raising the retirement age. The social security budget increasingly faced insolvency, and IMF and World Bank auditors demanded reform of the social welfare system. In 1991, the raising of the retirement age became part of the Antall government's agenda. In 1993, however, when the 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 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 coalition building:

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

The Women's Electorate and its allies fought for more staggered implementation of the higher retirement age, pointing out women's double burden (full-time work and nearly exclusive responsibility for the household). Allowing women to retire earlier than men may look like a preferential treatment only if they had an equal position to start out with. However, women's time-allocations demonstrate that they spend significantly much more time working than men (Sik and Szép 2000). 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 increase of retirement age for women. The generations retiring in the 1990s worked full-time in a nearly compulsory manner.<sup>9</sup> Women in Central and East Europe have for four decades participated in the paid labour force in the largest numbers 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 created 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 emphasized the need for a longer, more staggered implementation of the bill (supported by some policy specialists; see Kiss and Schwertner 1992) and for inclusion of factors like the number of children and shift work in the calculation of retirement age and pension. In 1994, the Women's Electorate with her allies initiated the first national campaign collecting signatures to force a new vote in Parliament on raising the

retirement age. Their most notorious-famous 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, the Parliament has no grounds to decide independently whether they 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 the Parliament; they started to discuss the law, ostensibly by an MP's initiative (Interview, April 1995, Women's Section of the Ironworkers' Trade Union).

The collection of signatures under the auspices of the Women's Electorate and its allies gained national attention, and this method of protest became 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 the re-negotiation of the issue before Parliament. The interim solution offered by the previous Parliament was that until 1995 women can retire at age 55, which affected 60-70,000 women (Interview, Feb. 1995, Women's Electorate of the National Alliance of the Hungarian Trade Unions).

In addition, women were less abruptly required to remain in the labour force for an added seven years in order to receive pension, 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 age. They called on a failing, but time-tested mechanism of interest aggregation and articulation.

One could reasonably be puzzled about the reasons why Hungarian women's groups would support preferential (and by definition, unequal) treatment in legislation, even if

comparative historical context is 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 the abrupt increase in retirement age, if they wanted to achieve equality they had to fight to get others to recognize women’s vastly different social lot first.

Beside the triangle of the government, the legislature and the allied women’s groups, there were a few other actors who eventually entered the debate about raising the retirement age in Hungary. When the Parliament passed a bill in 1993 stating the same retirement age for both sexes, the debate continued pulling into orbit a larger set of actors. First, the international context also influenced the strategy chosen by women’s groups and the eventual outcome. Even if the Hungarian government had wanted, it could not have held against the pressure of international financial institutions demanding tangible change in welfare restructuring. Second, the Constitutional Court stepped in to settle the differences. Responding to one of the petitions of the Women's Electorate, the Constitutional Court established that early retirement is possible from age 57 for women and 60 for men. According to this 32/1997 decision, raising a child is in itself a basis for early retirement, but it stated that men and women enjoy equal rights and have identical responsibilities with respect to raising children (Constitutional Watch: Hungary 1997). In recognizing at least the possibility of 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, and still 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 decrease in the state’s social welfare apparatus. They mounted national campaigns of signature collection to protest changes and went as far as the Supreme Court to demand a referendum. They lobbied through the trade unions and parties, 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 a result of a broadened interaction between the women’s groups and political institutions. Hungarian women’s group made their impact in a form of social movement activism and nonelectoral lobbying, which altogether mounted to an alternative public appearance.

Given the massive changes in the economic and social life in Hungary and the welfare cutbacks in this country since 1989, women's groups found opportune targets in issues of welfare. They have been vital within this emerging participatory democracy, with all its attendant contradictions, problems, and promises. The situation provides an excellent opportunity to analyze incentives and disincentives for interaction between organized women and the democratizing state, and the relationship between welfare restructuring and women's activism. The evident variations in the levels and fields of activism demonstrate the ability of women to overcome some obstacles and form groups to represent their interests in the democratic arena, using, for example, protest actions, lobbying, and the collection of 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, more 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, namely 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 shoes and engage in multiple and complex policy 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 the various levels of politics differ in each system depending on political culture and structure, and the (non)existence of avenues to promote equality (Beckwith 1992; Katzenstein and Mueller 1987; Kelber 1994; Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Volgy and Schwartz 1986). Women's agency has strangely been stronger in the beginning years of democratization in Hungary compared with the later ones. Women's groups found more opportunity 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 their interest representation thwarted.

After the 1989 revolutions, the new democracies made the central apparatus more open and sensitive to the needs and interests of its constituency. Under rare circumstances, this openness could be translated to meaningful opportunity for women. In a decade of activism, only the theme of raising of retirement age created enough political opportunity through the unrelenting and creative mass campaign by the Women's Electorate that women's groups could directly influence government policy.

In contrast to most modern Western welfare states (Lewis 1992), in communist East and Central Europe, the entitlements of women as full-time workers have overshadowed their claims as mothers and wives.<sup>10</sup> 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 victim when the political system changed. There are three main reasons why women's organizing was adversely affected. One major obstacle to women's organizing is the discredited communist past which extensively provided for mothers in the labour force even if this provision was mainly to satisfy the state's needs in rapid industrialization. The backlash is still strong against women's socialist emancipation even after a decade since the regime's collapse. That backlash still prohibits raising policy issues for women's sake alone; instead they have to be wrapped in 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 the nearly exclusive reliance on the state: a barrier formed by the deep permeation of the bureaucratic apparatus into society. Third, the concrete gains in social service provision were granted by the communist state following its own economic and political needs, which has meant that women did not develop a higher degree of political and bureaucratic expertise, self-reliance, and political solidarity, and consequently, have trouble gaining footholds in the political process. When women's groups have managed to get the attention of political decision-makers, as in the case of retirement, an entire series of factors had to be present. Such openings in political opportunity are obviously rather rare. In addition, since "democracy's" triumph, women's claims have to fit within the liberal framework and not be seen as favouritism. These compounded challenges have made even those Hungarian women's welfare-related movements that gathered momentum quite arduous.

The post-communist Hungarian case joins the global phenomena that women's activism often arises in response to the (re)structuring of the welfare state because of the structural location of women as family care-givers. When women start to question the powerful and dominant 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. The activities of women's groups can be a Trojan horse: seemingly innocuous (especially when using traditional roles, such as maternity as a message carrier) but nevertheless containing the agents of change. An economic threat to self and family may establish a rational basis for women's activism to rise, but only if such economic concern transforms gender consciousness, can these activities be sustainable and eventually move toward 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, but much broader factors are at play here which point at the long-standing paternalist and state-cantered political culture. While women in post-communist Hungary can question topics that are generally unrecognized: such as their role on production, reproduction and welfare, they cannot yet effectively represent their specific interests in the democratic arena.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Nadezhda Azhgikhina proposed a similar historical periodization regarding the emergence of Russian women's groups (2000: 10).

<sup>2</sup> 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

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of the organization's name in Hungarian: Nők a nőkért az erőszak ellen, which means: women with women against violence.

<sup>4</sup> 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 mechanisms 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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 (Passaro 1996). Until the Supreme Court stressed nondiscrimination in Directive no. 17 (On Guidelines on Child Custody), divorce procedures in Hungary routinely awarded the mother the custody of 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 (Scott 1974, 202). Under socialism, enterprises in constant need of labour (see Kornai 1980) managed numerous temporary shelters for workers (*munkás szálló*), but these all but 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? 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 gender-neutral 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

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alleged misdeeds of positive discrimination. The rules then may be less uniform and more sensitive to individual needs.

<sup>6</sup> 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 Fryre and 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” (1991: 55). From a very different perspective, but similarly against a focus on the state, Michel Foucault (1980) and many of his followers also argue that local discursive, disciplinary, or cultural manifestations of power represent a better alternative. 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 mechanisms can undermine or strengthen its hold. Contemporary challenges and contestations (social movements) overwhelmingly direct their attention to the state (see Tarrow 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Numerous excellent case studies exist on the impact of capitalist and democratization on women in East and Central Europe. See, for example, Gal and Kligman 2000b; Rueschemeyer 1998; Aslanbegui 1994; Moghadam 1993; Corrin 1999; Einhorn 1993; Funk and Mueller 1993. Much attention has also been given to the changes of welfare policies; see, for instance, Ferge 1998; Cook et al. 1999. However, these two streams have hardly crossed paths, although there is a significant body of evidence to link them cross-nationally and historically.

<sup>8</sup> Welfare state policies importantly shape the stratification that prevails in capitalist societies (Ashford 1986, Esping-Andersen 1990, Flora and Heindenmeier 1981, Mommsen 1981). Public opinion and, even more explicitly, political action and interest representation, in turn shape state policies (Kluegel and Miyano 1995).

<sup>9</sup> To be without an official workplace was an illegal activity, but women were even less likely to be criminally prosecuted for committing it. The socialist regime, however, established many pressing economic and ideological reasons to force the population to wage labour.

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<sup>10</sup> By concentrating social policies on children and working mothers, the GDR, for example, was blamed for creating a “fatherless society” (Ostner 1993: 99).