

*Contemporary Women's Movements in Hungary: Globalization, Democracy, and Gender Equality.*  
By Katalin Fábián. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. xvi, 396 pp. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Figures. Tables. \$65.00, hard bound.

How are women's interests advanced in central and east European countries after forty years of state-socialist rule? This is a complex question. During the communist period these countries pursued similar social policies affecting childcare, health services, professional and technical training as well as work institutions, but there were also important variations among them. Overall, however, women gained greater access to education and work outside the home, and supportive social welfare policies improved their lives.

The period after 1989–90 saw a radical turn toward a market economy and democratic politics, but these transformations also differed significantly from country to country. Overall, independent organizations became possible, but “civil society,” the spontaneous organization of diverse interests, was weak and so was participation in politics. Women shared in the new opportunities but also in the obstacles to activism. Women lost employment opportunities as well as significant social supports. Any analysis of their situation has to take into account that women's interests are inherently complex and heterogeneous and thus open to diverse interpretations and definitions. The political transformations not only created opportunities for greater gender equality but also encouraged some resurgence of traditional gender conceptions.

Katalin Fábián gives us a thorough analysis of developments in Hungary. It is a feminist analysis focused on issues of the subordination and autonomy of women. On the basis of a long-term research effort, she offers a comprehensive picture of women's organizations in Hungary, their different organizational structures, their diverse interests, and the varied interrelations among them. She puts the presentation of Hungarian women's organizations into broader contexts—of the changing Hungarian society, of the central and east European region, of western Europe, of analyses of welfare states, and of feminist theory. This reader would have appreciated a more extensive discussion of how the specific trajectory of Hungarian politics both before and after 1989–90 related to the role of women in politics and society.

Democracy and globalization are two major themes of this analysis. The transitions after 1989–90 constituted an opening for autonomous agency, both individual and collective. And international connections became critically important. During the transition years, western organizations, feminist movements, and political parties were in contact with women, and the responses to these new possibilities varied enormously. Fábián describes tensions with some groups of feminists from abroad, which centered, for example, on the contempt a number of Americans expressed for the attention Hungarian women paid to the family. Later, with Hungary's entrance to the European Union as well as through links to the United Nations and international nongovernmental organizations, ideas of the mainstreaming of equal opportunities became crucially important for the future of women's employment and political representation.

Fábián offers important insights for understanding the changing preoccupations of women's groups. These moved from social policy concerns and issues of reproductive rights to fighting domestic violence. Women's groups in Hungary showed a reserved attitude toward electoral politics that was widespread in central and east European countries but perhaps less pronounced than it was among women activists in Hungary. Fábián explains that during the early formation of women's groups in Hungary, “women's activism often forms a ghetto, a gender-segregated public realm that institutionalizes the feminine spheres of

activity. . . . Some see that they can gain by emphasizing the dominant understanding of femininity, while others find the boundaries repressive and seek transcendence” (76). Even later, she observes, “with the exception of party-affiliated women's caucuses, until 2007 most women's groups pulled as far away as possible from the vicinity of electoral politics” (183). While this disaffection for electoral politics is now abating among women activists, it probably is one major reason why women's representation in national parliaments is lower in Hungary than in other central and east European countries. At the same time she claims that Hungarian activist women made important qualitative contributions to a substantive redefinition of democracy in Hungary.

Women's groups in Hungary engaged in important policy issues affecting women, including social services, retirement, abortion, and domestic violence. They are now mostly involved at the local level but retain connections to the European Union and global human rights groups. The details of their experiences during the postcommunist years provide an important insight into the difficulties they encountered and their efforts to continue the important work they initiated.