

The Illusion of Inclusion: The Political Significance of Women's Groups in Hungary

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Women account for over half the population in Hungary, yet they continue to be politically under-represented. The women's groups, however, seem to be in a special position to alleviate this problem and are vital to Hungary's emerging participatory democracy. The rise of Hungarian women's groups, each with its own approach and agenda, provides an excellent opportunity to analyze the interactive process between organized women, the general public, and the democratizing state. Their myriad activities illustrate the ability of women to overcome some of the obstacles before them and to form groups that represent their interests in the democratic arena by using the media, manipulating symbols, and the provision of alternative social services.

Hungary has experienced rapid and far-reaching societal change since the end of communism around 1989. Women's groups have played an important role in this transformation. The return of freedom of association and the substantial decrease of state control over political activities at both the grassroots and national levels after 1989 have offered numerous favorable political opportunities for women. However, many obstacles remain present that limit women's meaningful involvement in politics beyond the now routine return to the ballot box. Women's active engagement in politics is greatly hindered in the ideological realm by a broadly shared sense of anti-feminism and, in the socio-economic realms, by the gender-specific social roles that make them the responsible party for child rearing. The groups that women form therefore become engaged in politics in alternative ways. In this article, I investigate whether the activities of women's groups in Hungary amount to significant political

change. I will explore this question by examining if and how their activities contribute to the establishment of an alternative form of politics.

In my research, I defined a women's group as any group that 1) declared itself as a group by and for women, 2) demonstrated activities in support of women, and 3) created some autonomy for itself. I included independent, party-affiliated, and trade union-affiliated women's groups in Hungary if they met these three criteria. As such, I included more groups than if I had followed what a strictly defined civil society entails; namely, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have no institutional links with potentially government-member political parties.

The first segment of this paper will deal with the rare occasions where women's groups decided to get involved with electoral politics. As the examples show, even in the electoral arena, women's groups often choose unconventional forms of political debut. The next segment of the paper describes how women's groups chose to enter into alternative fields of public engagement. In the Conclusion, I show how the groups create more substance to what would otherwise be only an illusion of inclusion in democratic politics in post-communist Hungary.

In Another Voice: the Activities of Women's Groups

The activities of women's groups up to 2002 have opened the door only slightly for women's representation in post-communist Hungary's political and cultural affairs. Women's groups in Hungary most significantly promote themselves and their interests in the media, through modifying symbols, and by providing social services. This approach gives women's groups diverse presence and an alternative political voice in Hungarian society. The need to maintain a consistent profile has proven to be too much of a challenge for some of the groups.

One characteristic that the Hungarian women's groups do share is their nearly universal commitment to the goal of redefining social problems. This particular and potent function of women's groups reveals how women can create political alternatives. As the examples here will show, the elements that constitute each field of activity are not fixed and the boundaries between them are crossed on occasion to enhance their impacts.

Women's organizations have demonstrated interest in and eagerness toward effecting change. Some women's groups directly and

outspokenly demand more chance to participate in public life. Most, however, negotiate this demand through actions. Whatever the means used, these groups have become “public nuisances.” I argue that the opportunities these groups forge reveal a common political interest, namely that women's voice, in its diversity, be included in the political decision-making process. Women's activism in Hungary shows trends of direct engagement in politics by placing their issues on the political agenda through alternative means in the new democracy.¹ When women's groups bring up issues that they deem worthy of attention, they often focus on gender-specific needs and interests. Bringing up gender-related issues creates an environment with the possibilities to revise the usual political boundaries and to present a new conception of the relations between political (citizenship and partisanship), economic (labor market), domestic (family), cultural, and personal spheres. By voicing a multiplicity of issues, women's groups ultimately assist in breaking up a homogenized image of women in Hungarian politics and society.

The Rare Exceptions of Working within Mainstream Politics: Electoral Politics among Women's Groups

In Hungary, women's groups have only rarely assumed an independent role in electoral politics. Because elections carry enormous significance in a democracy, at least some women feel the need to participate as voters, organizers or candidates. However, with the exception of party-affiliated women's caucuses, most women's groups have pulled away as far as possible from the vicinity of electoral politics. Women's associations rarely endorse candidates in local or national elections, and their members run for office even more infrequently. Although many of the women's groups, especially women's caucuses of political parties, aim to increase the number of women's representatives in local and national legislatures, this goal is seldom a priority and even less frequently a reality. When women's groups have been affiliates of political parties, they are more likely to become part of the electoral process. But even this participation has been rather limited. As the representative of the *Független Kisgazdapárt Nőszövetsége* (Women's Alliance of the Independent Smallholders' Party) stated, they “accompany the [party's] candidate and distribute flyers.”² Female electoral candidates have emerged mostly through the parties' ranks and rarely as a result of the efforts of women's groups.³

Only three Hungarian women's groups have developed an independent voice in electoral activities in the post-communist era. In comparison with their rather meager results, these groups' expectations may have been too ambitious. Two Roma (Gypsy) women's associations were formed after 1989 for the specific purpose of involving more Roma women in public life because they, as members of a long oppressed racial minority, have been doubly disadvantaged. The now-defunct *Magyarországi Cigányanyák Szövetsége* (Association of Gypsy Mothers in Hungary) selected a Roma woman candidate in 1994 and helped her enter local politics by mobilizing 2,000 Roma to vote in Debrecen.⁴ The *Közéleti Cigánynők Egyesülete* (Association of Roma Women for Public Life) created a support and advocacy group for Gypsy women who had already gained public office. The third group to enter mainstream politics, the *Nőpárt* (Women's Party), was established in 2000. Many women's groups mistrusted the Women's Party because of its sudden appearance and isolation from other groups. Its leadership includes total newcomers to the democratic struggle for women's inclusion in public affairs, and, rather unusually, men accounted for two-thirds of the leadership. How much the Women's Party remained detached from the other women's groups was revealed in the second half of 2001 when, just a few months before the national elections, three representatives of the Women's Party decided to unite with the existing network of women's groups, but failed to establish any alliances.

Rather surprisingly, only three parliamentary parties incubated women's caucuses that established noteworthy voices in electoral politics. All three have been rather dutifully serving the party interest, but their interpretations of party ideology have offered creative disruptions in favor of what they see as women's interests.

First, the efforts of women representatives in the Alliance of Free Democrats (ADF) demonstrate the half-hearted efforts liberal parties provide for women's inclusion in the political process. Some of the ADF parliamentary representatives created a loose gathering of female supporters, and under the aegis of the "Gizella" lecture and discussion series in Budapest they tried to gather momentum for the party's electoral campaigns.⁵ Without much enthusiasm, or faith in their cause, the same representatives also used their previously unsuccessful initiative, the Equal Rights bill (*Esélyegyenlőségi Törvényjavaslat*), in an attempt to gain the liberal female voters' support.⁶ The lukewarm attempts of the ADF illustrate the half-hearted embrace of liberals toward women's representa-

tion. They fully recognize women's under-representation but, believing in the potential of liberal democracy, they cannot bring themselves to acknowledge, and especially to remedy, the patriarchic and structural disadvantages that women face in making their voice matter in a democracy.

The second women's party caucus to engage in electoral processes was the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP). The caucus regained its confidence after having lost its footing when, ironically enough, the party was in power between 1994 and 1998. In 1998, with new, albeit still shaken and internally divided, leadership the women's caucus managed to make the party accept a 20 percent female candidate quota. While the logistics of implementing the quota were still unclear, its acceptance has carried a huge symbolic value and served as a sign of acceptance. The quota to increase minority and women's representation, however, remained a rather controversial measure in the post-communist environment because it reminded people of the meaningless but obligatory quotas of women's representation in the token communist legislatures.

The third, and most outstanding, example of a women's party caucus in electoral politics is the women's section in the Independent Smallholders' Party. Its peculiar character emerges from its ingenious choice to declare itself independent from the party and consequently to use all available channels to exploit the NGO status, including its notorious 2001 application to Parliament for financial assistance and receipt of (among other real estate) a shooting range. While the caucus leadership has remained deeply and personally interwoven with party leadership and headquartered in party premises for the amenities, the *Független Női Unió* (Independent Women's Union) was the only voice among women's groups that, without hesitation, represented the prohibition of abortion.

In contrast to this rather limited number of women's groups in electoral politics, an interest in politics in a broader sense has developed among the various women's associations. Across the political spectrum nearly all women's groups have made clear that they see women needing higher representation in various levels of legislature. Partly because of this acknowledgement and partly because of the availability of foreign funding, a new growth industry has emerged to train women to enter public life. The women's caucuses of parties (both right- and left-wing), the Association of Hungarian Women with its *Női Akadémia* (Women's Academy), and numerous other NGOs have tried to recruit female candidates by holding seminars about how to represent themselves in public.⁷

Such seminars and, especially, the recognition that women may need and want to enter formal politics can fulfill one basic requirement of a representative democracy: to field a few candidates from the largest minoritized group, namely, women. However, the immediate success rate of these training sessions was abysmally low for women candidates entering national politics. Often these newly minted electoral candidates applied their acquired speaking and managerial skills to advance their positions at work. At best, candidates satisfied their social calling by engaging in grassroots activities as a distant second choice, and through this channel they plan, if only tangentially and in the long run, to influence formal electoral politics.

In sum, on the basis of two extensive rounds of interviews with women's groups and participant observation in 1995 and then in 2001, it can be stated that very few of the women's groups and party caucuses focused on electoral activities. Women's groups in Hungary are much more likely to attempt to reach the general public and political decision-makers by developing alternative, innovative strategies to draw attention to their plight. Although the groups' ultimate aim may be for the policy-makers to change laws and to redirect resources, women often choose to mobilize third parties — the media, mass public, and cultural elites — to change perceptions and behaviors and to enhance their groups' impact.

The Media: Getting the Word Out

The media are obvious agents for disseminating information and for influencing public opinion on any issue. There is contradictory evidence about the relationship of women's groups to media. On the one hand, the number of articles dedicated to discussing women's lives has increased dramatically in the past two decades.⁸ On the other hand, the content of these articles has projected a domesticated and over-sexualized image of contemporary Hungarian women. The conflicting images of the caring spouse/mother and the vamp have united to sustain the stereotypical images of women.

In an attempt to demonstrate the entrenchment of the superficial and unquestioned role of women depicted in the media, a study of an independent Hungarian media watchdog organization, the Nyilvánosság Klub (Public Opinion Club), analyzed for 4 months the daily newspapers and TV coverage in 1995. The study's author found an erosion of

women's representation in the media and parallel erosion of coverage of women's problems on television and in the daily newspapers.⁹ In addition, the participants of a conference on women in the media (in Budapest in May 1995) claimed that women as producers and presenters of news were losing ground, an observation supported by other research.¹⁰

As a tool, the media can provide women's groups with the means to articulate their interests, channel their activities, engage in an alternative politics, document women's lives, gain public support, and create and encourage democratic communication and philosophies. Breaking the "sound barrier" is often the first task of women's groups. For example, pornography proliferated with the advent of free press in 1989 but a grassroots campaign against it between 1990 and 1992 brought to the surface Hungary's version of the "Guerrilla Girls."¹¹ Activists from feminist-affiliated groups put stickers over newsstand display windows to block pornographic magazine exhibits.¹² Although these actions did not directly target local governments, they did encourage many passers-by to express their opinions as well. Local governments eventually passed regulations requiring vendors to put pornographic publications in less visible places or in opaque bags. (Unfortunately, the implementation of this rule lapsed as interest in the issue gradually waned.)

The media also provide an alternative to engagement in traditional politics, according to a former manager of MONA (Magyarországi Női Alapítvány) (Hungarian Women's Foundation), a liberal-oriented research center. She said, "Women in Hungary engage in politics through media because no other outlet is available to them."¹³ Using the media was especially attractive to those who wanted to be independent and raise a voice without relying on other organizations for political clout: for example, the Feminist Network (Feminista Hálózat). One of their activists explained why they chose the media as an alternative to influencing politics by other means:

At the moment, this group [Feminist Network] is not ready for political action. And I see this as a problem. Whoever does not really have the capacity to express political views should not do it. We express our opinion through the media — and we had a lot of conflicts because of this.¹⁴

Women's groups in Hungary are keenly aware of the importance of public exposure and generally either use existing media or establish their own publications. Except for some groups with affiliations to

conservative branches of certain religions that shun the public spotlight,¹⁵ most women's groups make every effort to attract local and national radio and television news coverage to gain more public support. For example, to raise people's consciousness about domestic violence and to enlist new volunteers, NaNE!¹⁶ mounted an extremely successful media campaign in 1994. In the course of that year, according to NaNE!, there were no fewer than 66 interviews and reports about them.¹⁷

Some groups have opted to establish their own channels of communication, and have become publishers themselves. Women's publications appear to spring from frustration over lack of access to major press organs and from the goal to reach a wider audience. Yet they tend to fail to broaden their audience because limited finances allow for only restricted circulation and any of them have a short life span. The problems of financial sustainability weighted down all of the first regular publications. A feminist-anarchist publication, *Tengerszem* (Mountain Lake), failed because its supporting group decided to select its target readers from fellow anarchist groups. Consequently, not enough money was generated to continue its publication. The *Amazon*, a more professionally oriented journal for women, received financial support from the Women's Electorate of the National Alliance of the Hungarian Trade Unions and a German social-democratic foundation. This publication could not find a broad audience either and the funding was first cut back then eliminated amidst the financial struggles of trade unions. There was also a semi-clandestine group that started up, with its own resources, a lesbian newsletter in 1995. Fear and financial barriers limited its audience and availability. Yet, although the group had never intended to reach many people, the newsletter continued to spread information through personal channels of distribution for quite some time. The only relative success story among women's groups' publications is *Nőszemély* (Female Person), published between 1991 and 2000. The editorial board, weathering major financial storms and personal conflicts, managed to raise money and publish *Nőszemély* for nearly ten years — it was a provocative voice in an otherwise nearly saturated information market of colorful, commercial women's magazines.

Since the success of journals of various women's groups turned out to be extremely precarious, others turned instead to book publications. There have been three publishing pioneers among women's groups who gained considerable attention for their books.

Navigating the waters of local politics rather skillfully, the *Veszpémi Nők Kerekasztala* (Veszprém Women's Roundtable) established some administrative support for its activities while intentionally avoiding party politics. The group resurrected a tradition of personal storytelling and reframed it in the new democratic era. Its call for village women to tell their life story was a meaningful, symbolic gesture to acknowledge the otherwise silenced achievements and sufferings of women toiling in remote settings. A selection of these heart-warming and heart-wrenching essays was published in 2000 with the title *Mi viszik át* (We Will Carry It Across),¹⁸ referring to a famous line from the poet László Nagy. The volume demonstrated how much politics from the Holocaust to communist collectivization influenced women's lives and how much women changed politics in their own locale. The Women's Roundtable put the essays in a carved trunk, symbolizing a time capsule for future generations and placed it, during a locally broadcasted ceremony, in the Veszprém county library.

In the same county, but headquartered in Balatonfüred, the *Nők a Balatonért* (Women to Save Lake Balaton) won the national competition for "NGO of the year" in 2000. They very creatively integrated community activities with a commercial enterprise to further their aim of increasing awareness of the environmental problems and the cultural heritage of Lake Balaton. To increase general knowledge about the lake, they produced a board game about its geography in 1998, generated funds for a school textbook about the region's history, and published a CD of local folklore songs and a literary book about the lake in 2001. A quirky detail is that this women's group seemingly had the least interest in including women's voices in any of the above documentations. As a result, the authors and editors of the literary book are all men and the cover depicts a painting (by a male painter) of a natural scene of rain with sunshine over Lake Balaton. The title of the painting is *Veri az ördög a feleségét* (The Devil Is Beating His Wife), which is the unquestioned Hungarian axiom for this natural phenomenon. One wonders how the scene of unquestioned male (and devilish) privilege of physical violence against a spouse, even if merely on a semiotic level, did not raise at least an eyebrow in the women's group.

In contrast to the other two publications, the third book-publishing endeavor by a women's group explicitly and intentionally unleashed a previously taboo topic into the stream of public discourse.¹⁹ *Labrisz*, the first lesbian NGO, put the theme of female homosexuality in a political

framework in 2000. In the first book of its series, "*Leszbikus Tér Erő*" (Lesbian Space Power), Hungarian activists describe their sense of oppression in a homophobic society and their skewed representation in media and politics. In "*Szembeszél*" (Counter-Wind, but also alluding to: Talk against or across) they offer to the public the literary contributions of lesbians both in Hungary and worldwide. Their most powerful and explicitly political statement in print, "Report on the Discrimination of Lesbians, Gay Men and Bisexuals in Hungary," (in English) reached members of the Hungarian and European Parliaments. It not only listed overtly discriminatory practices but also demonstrated the glaring legal difference of an age of consent of 21 years for homosexuals and 18 years for heterosexuals.

The use of media by women's groups also has the potential to encourage democratic communications and philosophies. Communications expert Donna Allen argues for the recognition of the importance of the alternative press and for an expansion of networks by restructuring the public communication system.²⁰ According to Allen, pioneering media women put forth a more inclusive, democratic communication philosophy. In the Hungarian reality, however, the few publications of women's groups have produced weak results. The fate of the first publications suggests that, although the journals and books can enhance the inclusion of women's voices in the broader political dialogues, problems with funding, continuity, and distribution make their deeper incorporation into the body politic difficult. With the notable exception of the "Report on the Discrimination of Lesbians, Gay Men and Bisexuals in Hungary," the publications of women's groups influenced political decision-makers only indirectly. Instead of putting forth a new communication philosophy as Allen suggested, women's groups tried to influence the general public. The groups' main aim was to inform the population about their existence, values, and activities. The problems of publishing, however, have kept reappearing as financial limitations due to the lack of philanthropy in Hungary, as well as lack of free time and experience on the part of the courageous few who started and struggled to maintain these publications.

In sum, the genre of all three journals by various women's groups was exceptional in providing some alternative to the glossy women's magazines. Especially thoughtful in using such alternatives was the Feminist Network's journal, in circulation for nearly a decade. When the journal market for such alternatives seemed to have closed, book publi-

cation created another opportunity to record and to raise the voice of women's groups.

Using Symbols, Manipulating Meaning

Women's groups tend to use and reinterpret symbols (e.g., the national flag, national and international holidays, historical monuments and well-known poetry) and, occasionally, engage in symbolic activities to communicate their values and interests.²¹ I chose three ideologically distinct organizations among Hungarian women's groups to examine the use of symbols in creating new meanings. Women's groups applied various strategies to express their messages through symbols. They applied new twists on overused concepts or developed new symbols; in the latter they often merged new symbols with older traditions to minimize alienation.

One of the first actions of the Women's Alliance of the Independent Smallholders' Party was to dedicate their flag on a major national and Catholic holiday.

Maybe it was our first decision to have a beautiful flag made. We dedicated and consecrated this flag on August 20, 1990, during a very special ceremony at Castle Hill in Budapest. The flag was dedicated during an ecumenical mass and a priest blessed the Women's Alliance's flag. We had invited representatives from the churches in Hungary to attend the ceremony.²²

This group also put much emphasis on re-signifying holidays to include religious content along with a more conservative image of the family. "We meet on St. Nicholas' day and on Mother's Day. We keep Mother's Day instead of the International Women's Day, because for us Mother's Day is the really significant holiday."²³

Rejecting both the conservative groups' efforts to use a religious holiday for International Women's Day (March 8) and the practice of giving obligatory speeches and flowers for women workers (the usual way to celebrate during the socialist era), the Feminist Network put much energy into making International Women's Day a meaningful celebration. In 1994, for example, it raised enough money to rent a movie theater to show contemporary movies with unconventional female roles at their

center. The celebration concluded in the evening with music by a female rock band (composed partially of Network members).

On March 8, 1994 we had a Women's Day celebration at the movie theater Hunnia. This was a different event than the ones before. We showed some of the women's culture in the West, and we had quite a lot of press coverage. The celebration had an exemplary effect because it showed women that we can feel good in each other's company, and that we have creative energy; it also brought up questions like "How is it possible that women can do such things?"²⁴

Also to commemorate the day, the Network went uncharacteristically entrepreneurial and sold purple T-shirts with an image of Botticelli's Venus rising from the sea, accompanied by a serious quote by the well-known Hungarian poet Attila József,²⁵ in which a child asks his mother to leave the wet clothes for someone else to take care of and spend time with him instead. The effect was hilarious.

Symbolic action by the *Munkáspárt Női Tagozata* (Women's Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party) included occasional meetings at the *Szoborpark* (Sculpture Park) in Budapest, which had been established as an area for statues of the communist era.²⁶ Among the statues celebrating the heroes of communism is one of Captain Steinmetz, an officer of the Red Army who served as a mediator between the Soviets and the Germans. The statue, which for 40 years was a landmark of Budapest's city borders, became the center of much controversy after 1989, when the cause of Steinmetz's death in 1945 was questioned: was he shot by withdrawing Nazi troops, as the official story told, or was he shot by the Soviets, his comrades? The controversy became one of the battles of historical interpretation, meaning and morality of the past 40 years. The Women's Committee of the Workers' Party expressed their views by choosing to meet numerous times in the park: "We went to Sculpture Park because we find the argument that a messenger was shot by his own army nonsense."²⁷

The reinterpretation of symbols is easier and more potent in times of drastic social change. Women's groups leapt at the chance to create new meanings and thereby influenced their immediate and more distant political surroundings. The symbols that these three ideologically distant women's groups manipulated to bring across their message emerged from the volatile mix of pre-communist traditions and communist times. The

groups applied their own interpretations of customs like Mother's Day and International Women's Day, and connected the changes taking place in the political system to everyday life and private practices of commemoration and memory.

Alternative Social Services: Expanding Women's Space

Hungarian women's groups have created enlarged, or at least altered, public spaces where women were more welcome and able to participate effectively. In a romance with democracy, women's groups have accomplished this task through the provision of legal and psychological services, through charitable activities, and through networking and educational work.

Legal and Psychological Services

The multiplication of law-related projects among women's groups points to the significance of legal provisions for women. The Association of Hungarian Women, various women's sections of trade unions, and a few other service organizations, such as the now re-created *Nők Háza* (Women's House), started a free legal clinic. More often than not, because the women's groups could not pay a competitive wage for lawyers and had to rely on volunteer or low-fee lawyers, the services provided were not reliable in the long run. Even so, services were provided for a period of time and developed a new sense of direction for women's groups and government institutions to follow.

One notable legal project evolved from one of the weekly, hour-long, volunteer-based legal clinics. NaNE! expanded its legal services for battered women with the support of the Open Society Fund. Although the clinic still operates on temporary financial support, it now has paid employees. The professionalization of the project had the potential to provide more reliable and efficient services,²⁸ but, instead, it moved entirely away from feminist activism toward scholarly analysis. While also being engaged in anti-violence activism, NaNE! established links with the US-based East-West Women's Network, which helped NaNE! become part of an international comparative legal project focusing on women's rights. When this project expanded to the point where NaNE! could no longer manage alone, it looked for external funding and

cooperation and eventually handed the project over to the Central European University, where it became part of an academic endeavor, very uninterested in anything even vaguely reminiscent of feminist activism.

In addition to legal advice, women's groups also tried to provide short-term psychological counseling relating to unemployment and major family problems.

We sent psychologists to the territories most affected by unemployment, partly to calm down the women, partly to prepare them for unemployment, so that they would not perceive unemployment as being without work, but as a time for preparing for a new occupation.²⁹

These services stood on even shakier ground than did the legal services, given the tight financial resources of women's groups and the consequent need to focus on clearly productive programs. Because the effectiveness of psychological services was difficult to measure tangibly for efficiency or success, and because cultural practices discouraged their use,³⁰ those provided by women's groups disappeared even faster than the legal services.

The legal and especially the psychological services geared toward women's needs provided one, albeit narrow, bridge between the public/political and the private spheres. From these experiences emerged a body of empirical evidence that formed the basis for a few dedicated scholars' investigations into the nature of domestic violence in Hungary.³¹ Supported by such scholarly treatises showing domestic violence as an unacknowledged and ignored epidemic that is not dealt with, a movement slowly formed to place the issue of domestic violence under public scrutiny and condemnation.

Charitable Activities

Private redistribution via charity plays a significant role in many women's groups. The first to do this were the Hungarian Association of Women and various women's sections of trade unions that redistributed goods. Trade unions routinely organized the distribution of cheaper goods for their own members: "We organized for our women to purchase cheap comforters, and then arranged low-priced potato and apple sales. These are small things, but they are important."³² In contrast, women's groups

of conservative parties engaged in charity activities targeting Hungarian minorities living abroad:

The welfare problems are so huge that we have to pay attention to them: both to the young and the elderly. We organized the collection of clothes for the Vajdaság [North-Western Serbia], the Ukraine and Transylvania. We started to collect food, clothes and medicine. The society demands such a stand from a woman, which has to be hers anyway, I believe. Our activities have especially concentrated on such activities in the past three years.³³

Charity is an area of activism that is dreadfully apoliticized because it is here that women most often enter the public sphere without challenging the established order and its gender-based role expectations. Women ensconce themselves in an already feminized niche of care, such as relief services and social welfare. Involvement in charity is ignored even though it has been an outstanding achievement in women's activism. Women's activism in this regard is outstanding because it contradicts a missing tradition of philanthropy in Hungary.

The most amazing aspect of Hungarian women's engagement in charity is that unlike many of their Western counterparts, these women are very rarely free of major economic pressures and the need to make a living. Even though working full-time, women have opted to support each other through capillary methods of economic redistribution. Women's groups have become one of society's welfare agencies, even if on a relatively small scale. When the Hungarian economy emerged from its tailspin in the mid-1990s, women's groups became less devoted to charity activities. The ones that increased their focus in this regard aspired to replicate the status-gain associated with Western models of financially secure wives.

After the regime change in Hungary, women often became initiators of poverty relief. In this respect, women's organizations were a potential trap for their members. Acceptance of the dichotomous masculine/feminine world looms once more when women become players in the welfare arena. The distinctiveness of women being perceived as sensitive to personal welfare — a trait required in the functioning of the home — can be further replicated in politics. As long as the separate spheres remain the norm and women's groups' activities in welfare services are apoliticized and taken for granted, they imprison women in predetermined

roles. Even though charitable activities are within the public realm, they are not really seen as “political.” These activities put emphasis on helping others rather than on criticism of larger economic and political aspects. Women's activism in redistribution needs to be viewed as it is — a political power — rather than as simply another duty to which women have to attend to.

Networking and Education

Women's networking, formal and informal information gathering, often converges in more established forms of educational activities. Women's groups create workshops for their own members and recruit through outreach efforts. Some of the women's groups in Hungary, such as NaNE! and the Feminist Network, have created new alternative forums through their networking activities. For example, the Feminist Network, in collaboration with the Feminist Section of the Hungarian Sociological Association, created a forum for ongoing public dialogue about issues they considered important to women in contemporary Hungary. They rented a small studio theater, “RS9” (named after its abbreviated address at the Rumbach Sebestyén street 9). Once a month women gathered to discuss controversial issues, ranging from pornography and the history of prostitution to the predecessors of women's associations. Although discussions at this venue halted in the winter of 2000, the organizers have since been trying to reestablish the encounters in other locations. Facing a dwindling audience, Irén, the organizer of RS9, teamed up with Éva, a feminist educator, to launch a biweekly radio program in the same format on a radio channel dedicated to civic initiatives in Budapest. These activists-cum-educators were instrumental in launching the *Női-Tan Kör* (Women's Studies Circle) in 2001 and finally received some stable funding from the Open Society Foundation. When looking into the details of such tasks, it becomes apparent how instrumental individual activists are in bringing a long series of struggles to fruition.

Other alternative and new spaces include local, national and international meetings and conferences, which provide opportunities for self-expression and establishment of connections for further organizing. These meetings are often highly inspirational and demonstrate the significance of women gathering in both public and private spheres. Speaking about the first roundtable of the Hungarian women's groups organized by MONA, one participant concluded:

It was so fabulous. I am sitting right beside a woman from a conservative party, and we could put aside our ideological differences, as if there were none: we both agreed that we needed more day-care centers and better welfare for women.³⁴

One outstanding example of a women's group expanding public exposure for women's groups was MONA's series of mini-conferences between 1993 and 1994. The meetings brought together the then-existing women's organizations, then convened the female mayors of the country, and later brought women in the media together to exchange opinions. Eventually, meetings were called before each of the national elections for all political parties to present their agendas on women.

Educational activities have been popular among many women's groups in Hungary. Opportunities in the form of lectures, conferences, and seminars were especially favored as means to expand the membership and to spread the values in which the women's groups believed. The themes of the meetings ranged from unemployment and how to find welfare benefits to health education. Education most often offered "soft" skills such as how to dress in the workplace or at a cocktail party but did not necessarily foster the "hard" skills that would empower women to take control of their careers and build self-sufficiency. The one exception in this regard was NaNE's continuing series of health-related discussions that routinely brought up and explored gender-specific forms of (often internalized) oppression, such as bulimia and hormone-replacement therapy.

However, no one dared to use the power of education to its fullest nor to approach controversial issues. Sex education was one of the few topics that went beyond the general level of educational activities that women's groups provided and it became the most conflict-ridden issue to emerge in relation to the different interpretations of women's social roles. A women's group in the city of Szeged tried to confront social stereotypes by bringing sex education classes to schools but found it difficult to break through the cultural barriers:

We organized lectures on sex education in primary schools. Experts offered their assistance, but the idea was ours and we brought it to those schools where there was interest. But many schools did not dare to call us.³⁵

Sex education turned out to be an especially volatile issue when activists raised this issue beyond the confines of one town. Labrisz, the association of lesbians, became embroiled in a national controversy in its attempt to teach sex education and implied tolerance toward homosexuals. The group's activists offered workshops to high schools. A news report in the city of Győr interpreted their effort as a veiled advertisement for homosexuality. The debate about whether lesbians could be allowed to teach in a high-school setting eventually reached the Parliament, and it ironically generated much more media exposure to the topic of discrimination against homosexuals and their rights than Labrisz ever hoped for. Much of this media coverage, however, was homophobic, and along with other groups involved in the efforts, Labrisz became the target of a witch-hunt.

Much less public controversy surrounded the conservative women's groups' educational efforts to create and promote an image of women in traditional caretaker and nurturer roles. For example, the leader and then parliamentary representative of the Women's Section of the Christian Democratic Party said:

Our programs are entertaining as well. We invite famous people, such as the architect Imre Makovetz, which are times when we do not fit in a room for 500 people. ... We have organized competitions and training for housewives with great success. Mothers with small children came, and the older generation took care of the kids while the younger women started to cook and bake! We tried to be open and get close to all women.³⁶

The educational efforts of conservative women's groups are often also accentuated by an emphasis on nationalism, namely, by visiting and maintaining contacts with areas in surrounding countries where Hungarians live as a minority.

The benefits of educational activities and networking are potentially exponential. However, there is relatively little empirical evidence to demonstrate its transformative character in Hungarian women's circles after over a decade. For instance, on only a few occasions did workshops and lectures lead to a substantive reconvening of the participants.³⁷ The reasons for this discrepancy between potential and actual outcome is at least threefold. First, women's inability to gather enough momentum to organize after a meeting originates partly from the often unidirectional

method of information transmission (lecturing), which disempowers the participants. The second major obstacle emerges from the lack of political opportunity of the political system to process the claims women's groups bring forth. Activists struggle to place women's concerns into broader public debates, a situation discussed by the representative of the *Liga* [League] of Trade Unions:

I asked the presenters to discuss topics related to Labor Law that we could forward as suggestions emerging from the meeting to help female employees. Eventually we created a list of suggestions consisting of 11 points, but our trade union representatives could not get any one of these accepted at the tripartite meetings [Interest Mediation Council]. Finally, we suggested to our members to keep these suggestions in mind when writing collective agreements at the workplace.³⁸

A third limitation on educational and networking activities lies in the relatively low risk of talking about things instead of doing something about them. As such, education becomes borderline territory between symbolic action and actions with immediate political significance.

Political Significance of the Activities of Women's Groups

With the advent of democracy in Hungary, equal opportunity supposedly opened the gates of politics to women. Yet the newly democratic society has celebrated and re-created the traditional foundation of separating the public and the private spheres and maintains, or even enhances conformity to, gender-based role divisions. Democratization in Hungary in this respect resembles many other countries' experience where women have been adversely affected by the process. As the third wave of democratization³⁹ sweeps the world it spreads the minimal requirements of democracy as the lowest common denominator. These minimal requirements, i.e., competitive elections, become the (extremely limited) foundation for democracy. This shallow implementation of democracy may justifiably be called politics without due process or "low-intensity" democracy.⁴⁰

However, women and their groups in many parts of the world try to forge democracy from below. They have implicitly developed a "high-intensity" version of democracy that provides a much broader alternative to the minimalist form and establishes a reality out of this otherwise

illusory inclusion in a democracy. Confirmation of this ideal is found in the emergence and activities of women's groups all over Eastern Europe. By not being locked into what is traditionally defined as political, the actions of women's groups encourage the development of multiple avenues along which citizens can induce change.

* * *

This study showed how Hungarian women's groups create alternative forms of politics by using their own publications, by manipulating meanings through modifying national and international symbols, and by establishing alternative social services, such as legal and psychological counselling for women. As women's involvement in charity demonstrates, women themselves need to articulate more clearly that they aim their activities as political because the social environment needs to be shaken out of its routine dismissal of these activities as apolitical. Women's reluctance to move into formal political roles has been reflected by their delay in engaging more directly and aggressively in electoral politics. Without explicitly rejecting expectations toward women's appropriate sphere of activity, the activism of women's groups becomes a disguised entry into the political realm.

The disguised entry to politics spares many women's groups of charges of trespassing, but it also deprives them of recognition. Stripping away the ideological veneer from women's activism shows it to be an explicitly political activity. This conception of politics challenges the traditional bias that politics refers exclusively to elections and power struggles at the formal government level. For women to recognize themselves as political players and to make society acknowledge them as such are crucial steps that only a few Hungarian women's groups have taken. Women's groups need to claim their role in politics by overt statements and actions to recognize their own potential. All political agencies require a critical review of existing power relations and politicization of their activities.

By establishing explicitly women's groups, the activists have created a potential for political action. However, the form is not enough without the conscious and outspoken demand for recognition in the political sphere. Organizational activity needs to be made a form of political activity and therefore a locus of power. While the declared

purpose of women's groups can maintain a broad service orientation, political power considerations are not far from or foreign to this orientation. On the contrary, women need to be in politics, and they can pursue a politics of women as well, through special efforts and the creation of a sense of women's mission. But the call for a politics of women and by women has yet to grow roots among the activists of women's groups in Hungary. The call of women's groups establishes the basis for a structural, as well as cultural, de-genderizing of politics. Politicization creates not only the awareness of where power lies in the existing social order, it also develops strategies of modifying the very same social order. This is the important fabric that women's groups in Hungary started to pull and unravel in many directions.

NOTES

¹ Although numerous excellent case studies exist on the emergence of women's groups in the democratizing countries of East and Central Europe there is much less discussion about the impact of their activities. See Nahid Aslanbegui, ed., *Women in the Age of Economic Transformation: Gender Impact of Reforms in Post-Socialist and Developing Countries* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Marilyn Rueschemeyer, ed., *Women in the Politics of Postcommunist Eastern Europe* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Chris Corrin, *Gender and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe* (Frank Cass Publishers, 1999); and, by the same author, "Gender Politics and Women's Political Participation in Hungary," *Hungarian Studies Review* 26 (1999): 9–38.

² Interview, April 1995, Women's Alliance of the Independent Small-holders' Party.

³ Interviews, Spring 1995 and 2001, Women's Section of the Hungarian Socialist Party, Women's Section of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, Women's Section of the Christian Democratic Party.

⁴ Interview, April 1995, Association of Gypsy Mothers in Hungary.

⁵ The "Gizella" lecture series emerged with the intention to bring the liberal feminist ideas closer to party sympathizers. Although rather infrequent, the meetings helped to establish an open exchange between female representatives and the general population. The women MPs used the venue to advertise their legislative activities and gather popular support for their initiatives, while female audience members could raise issues and ask questions in this open forum.

⁶ Participant observations, interviews with ADF party headquarters representatives, Budapest July 2001.

⁷ "We prepared candidates for both the local and national elections" (Interview, February 1995, Hungarian Women's Union). "We consulted with the party about the rank of women on the party list." Interview, April 1995, Women's Section of the Hungarian Socialist Party.

⁸ A comprehensive dataset of Hungarian media coverage (called PRESS-DOC, compiled by the Department of Information of the Parliament) indicates that the number of articles published in the daily press on the topic of women and their role in society has increased from around 30–40 in 1989 to approximately 350 articles in 1993 and has steadily increased since then.

⁹ Éva Argejo, "Hímnem, nőnem: a medium nem semleges" [Male, female: the media are not neutral] *Magyar Hírlap*, February 28, 1995, p. 8.

¹⁰ Mária Vásárhelyi, *Rendszerváltás alulnézetben* [Social system change observed from below] (Budapest: Pesti Szalon, 1995). According to female TV and radio reporters, the long-standing ideological battles over control of the Hungarian media did not interfere with the perpetuation of antifeminist propaganda. Interviews and participant observation, March 1995, conference organized by MONA (Magyarországi Női Alapítvány) (Hungarian Women's Foundation), a liberal-oriented research organization.

¹¹ In 1989, an anonymous group of art world feminists who used the name Guerrilla Girls, attacked and altered a famous nude painting on buses of Lower Manhattan. This action initiated a series of activities against the idealized female beauty, women's under-representation in arts and low pay, among other issues. See Guerrilla Girls, *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995).

¹² Antonia Burrows quoted by Renne in Tanya Renne, ed., *Ana's Land: Sisterhood in Eastern Europe* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 116.

¹³ Interview, May 1995, Feminist Network.

¹⁴ Interview, May 1995, Feminist Network.

¹⁵ My interviewee (December 1997, Secretariat of Equal Opportunity) referred to Jewish women's groups which, on some occasions and mostly out of fear of anti-Semitism, wanted to avoid advertising their events. Similar deference to media was however, noticeable with Protestant women's groups as well. See also István Székely and David Newbery, eds. *Hungary: an Economy in Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁶ The name of NaNE! is a play on words. While 'nane' means 'don't you/can't you' in Hungarian slang, it also represents an acronym of the organization's name in Hungarian: Nők a nőkért az erőszak ellen, which means: women with women against violence. As a women's group they dedicate themselves to help women who confront domestic abuse. NaNE! provides information over a tollfree hotline.

¹⁷ "There were 66 interviews about NaNE! in 1995, but I have to note that 99 percent of the reporters who wrote about us were women." Interview, March 1995, NaNE!

¹⁸ *Mi viszzük át. Veszprém megyei asszonyok vallomásai az utókor számára* [We will carry it across: confessions of the women of Veszprém County for posterity] (Veszprém: Veszprémi Nők Kerekasztala Egyesület, Huszár Józsefné, Pro-Fi Print kft, 2000).

¹⁹ The first contemporary lesbian novel, *Kecskerúzs* [Goatlipstick], exploded onto the cultural landscape upon its publication in 1997. See Vera Bozzi, "Roburban született regény" [Novel born in a robur] *Nőszemély* 7, 2 (1997): 15–17.

²⁰ Donna Allen, *Media without Democracy and What to Do About It* (Washington DC: Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, 1991), 29.

²¹ Ernest E. Boesch, *Symbolic Action Theory and Cultural Psychology* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1991).

²² Interview, April 1995, Women's Alliance of the Independent Small-holders' Party.

²³ Interview, April 1995, Women's Alliance of the Independent Small-holders' Party.

²⁴ Interview, May 1995, Feminist Network.

²⁵ "Hagyja a dagadt ruhát másra."

²⁶ See *Lingua Franca* 2000 about the use of the Szoborpark in education.

²⁷ Interview, April 1995, Women's Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party.

²⁸ Nilda Bullain, "The Non-Profit Sector in Hungary" unpublished paper, 1995.

²⁹ Interview, March 1995, Women's Section of the Autonomous Trade Union.

³⁰ "The general public did not need the psychological services, because it is not socially acceptable to complain" (Interview, March 1994, Ombudswoman Program and Women's House).

³¹ Olga Tóth, *Erőszak a családban* [Violence in the Family] (Budapest: TARKI Társadalompolitikai Tanulmányok, 1999); Krisztina Morvai, *Terror a Családban: A feleségbántalmazás és a jog* [Terror in the family: wife abuse and the law] (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1998).

³² Interview, March 1995, Women's Section of the Autonomous Trade Union.

³³ Interview, February 1995, Hungarian Women's Union.

³⁴ Interview, May 1995, Feminist Network.

³⁵ Interview, June 1995, Szeged Women's Club.

³⁶ Interview, February 1995, Women's Section of the Christian Democratic Party.

³⁷ As a representative of the Association of Hungarian Women said, "In the 1990s when the organization started information sessions, the small groups dispersed quickly because of lack of security and sense of mission," but they did

not give up; instead they focused their efforts more in gathering women with (political) educational purposes. The publications of this association were well-intended (such as a voting guide in 1994 and a translation of the UN declaration against discrimination of all kinds) but reached few people. The title of the voting publication was *Amit a választásról tudni kell* [What you need to know about the elections]. Interview, January 1995.

³⁸ Interview, April 1995, Women's Section of the League Trade Unions.

³⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 1984).

⁴⁰ B. Gills *et al.* *Low Intensity Democracy: Political Power in the New World Order* (London: Pluto. 1993).