

JUDIT ACSÁDY

HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest

acsady.judit@tk.hu

The Ambiguities and Contradictions of the State-Socialist Way of Women's Emancipation in Hungary (1948–1989). Overview and Search for the Traces of Feminist Resistance

The literature about the ex-state-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe raised the questions in what way women benefited from the legislation guaranteeing equal rights and the measures of emancipation during the decades of state socialism. The authors that also argued after 1990, the time of the social, economic and political transitions in the region, that women became the big losers of the changes. The paper aims to reflect on these examinations of gender relations during the state-socialist period and point out the contradictory ways of the introduction of women's emancipation that led to ambiguous results in the propagated program of gender equality. Furthermore it discusses in which ways women's positions remained subordinated and how the sexist representations of women increased in public life, the media and culture in Hungary after the 1970's. A review of the main findings of earlier research accumulated so far concerning women's lives and gender relations in Hungary during state socialism will be followed by the question of in what ways these controversies of the system were articulated by the contemporary oppositional voices. Did the activists of the dissident Hungarian democratic opposition embrace the ideas of feminism and women's issues in their criticism of the one-party system? On the base of contemporary documents and recent interviews with ex-activists it will be examined how feminist voices were articulated, yet controversially marginalized among the dissidents.

Key words: women's emancipation, state socialism, democratic opposition, Hungary, representations

Двосмислености и контрадикторности државно-социјалистичког начина еманципације жена у Мађарској (1948–1989). Преглед и потрага за траговима феминистичког отпора

Литература о бившим државно-социјалистичким земљама Централне и Источне Европе поставља питања на који начин су жене имале користи од мера еманципације и законодавства које гарантује једнака права током деценија државног социјализма. Аутори су такође тврдили да су након 1990. године и времена друштвених, економских и политичких транзиција у региону, жене постале велики губитници тих турбулентних промена. Рад има за циљ да се осврне на ова испитивања родних односа у државно-социјалистичком периоду и укаже на контрадикторне путеве увођења еманципације жена који су довели до двосмислених резултата у пропагираном програму родне равноправности. Надаље, разматра се на које начине су позиције жена остале подређене и како су се сексистичке репрезентације жена повећале у јавном животу, медијима и култури у Мађарској после 1970-их. Након осврта на главне налазе ранијих истраживања о животу жена и родним односима у Мађарској у време државног социјализма, следи питање на који начин су ове контроверзе система артикулисали савремени опозициони гласови. Да ли су активисткиње дисидентске мађарске демократске опозиције пригрлиле идеје феминизма и женских питања у својој критици једнопартијског система? На основу савремених докумената и недавних интервјуа са бившим активисткињама, испитаће се како су феминистички гласови артикулисани, али и контроверзно маргинализовани међу дисидентима.

Кључне речи: еманципација жена, државни социјализам, демократска опозиција, Мађарска, репрезентације

INTRODUCTION

The achievements of the social program of women's emancipation remained incomplete in the ex-Soviet bloc. The introduction of state-socialist systems was often based upon totalitarian features and anti-democratic oppression in these countries. The establishment of the aimed and propagated classless (conflict-less) modern society that respects women's rights failed in many respects and did not fulfil the ideological expectations of equality. The discussion of the results of emancipation in these systems requires an intersectional approach. Women in the ex-Soviet bloc countries were differently affected and had different experiences concerning the state-socialist legislation after WW2 depending on their class origin, education, their ethnic background and their urban or rural life. Women coming from families of intellectual or middle class origin who might have had better opportunities in the pre-war society had different views on the program of women's emancipation than women with the background of agricultural or industrial working class or having no employment or education before. Women and men of earlier wealthier or middle class families became labeled by the communist rule in Hungary after 1948 as class enemies and they had to face various obstacles and even persecutions. On the opposite, the system supported people of working class origin in several ways in their upward social mobility.

There were however significant improvements in women's education. The inclusion of larger and larger portion of women in the labour market continued following the tendencies of the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, as we will see later by the presentation of examples and data, the employment of women could not get rid of the patterns of vertical and horizontal segregation during the decades of state socialism. Without aiming to discuss the huge question of the causes and effects of these dynamics, the paper is offering an insight into three aspects of the ambiguities and uncertainties of women's emancipation and gender equality under state-socialism in Hungary. After a review of the statements of the relevant literature on gendered inequalities that prevailed during the decades between 1948 and 1990, I will focus on the question of women's representation and on the question of how were or were not these questions reflected in the circles of the system's democratic opposition, of mostly intellectual and artist dissidents. It is among the controversies of state socialist times concerning women's position in Hungary that the patriarchal patterns and women's subordination was not articulated as a problem by women themselves, except from a few sociological studies

(and later retrospective analytical works after the transitions) and a few isolated initiatives of women from the oppositional, dissident circles that will be discussed in this study. The retrospective narratives of the experiences of women activists, connected to these circles, will be the main sources in the discussion of the reasons why a critical, feminist discourse remained unfolded in the 1970's in Hungary.

AMBIGUITIES, CONTROVERSIES

The processes of women's emancipation, introduced by the state-socialist countries under the pressure of the Russian Communist Party in the countries of the ex-Soviet bloc were examined already before the transitions. The scholarly works or the critical voices of grass root activism both pointed out at several controversies and ambiguities concerning the emancipation program (and propaganda), women's position in society and divers aspects of gender relations. The paper will point at some major features of literature from this period in Hungary in details below. As far as a wider overview is concerned, even during the time of state socialism several authors stated that the official ideology regarding gender equality contradicted the everyday realities of inequalities in these countries (Hauseby-Darvas 1989, 385). For example a special issue of the *East European Quarterly*¹ became devoted to these questions. The articles were based on the papers presented in November 1987 at the symposium, entitled "Gender Contradictions/Gender Transformations: Cases from Eastern Europe" at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. It must have been one of the earliest international events where women's emancipation program of state socialism was discussed. In this special issue of the journal case studies were published on for example Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia and Hungary.²

The evaluation of the measures of women's emancipation in state socialism and the examination to what extent women's liberation was successful in the countries of the ex-Soviet bloc results conflicting or diverse views. On the one hand the institutional achievements (e.g. in the legal system or education and employment) are acknowledged,³ yet on the

¹ *East European Quarterly* devoted a special issue for the question. See „Gender Contradictions/Gender Transformations: cases from Eastern Europe.” Volume XXIII. Number 4. Winter 1989.

² Same as above.

³ See for example (Orosz 2017, 112) about the constitution of the Soviet Union that declared women' equal rights.

other hand the persisting gender inequalities in almost all sectors of life and the discriminatory mechanisms (e.g. everyday sexism) are also discussed by the literature.⁴

The anthropological⁵ or historical anthropology⁶ approach as well as the oral history methodology explores women's diverse experiences and the everyday survival strategies during state-socialism following the structural changes to centrally planned economies and centrally controlled political and public life after the WW2. From the point of view of anthropological enquiry emancipation in these systems is described as something forced or "accelerated" (Đokanović, Dračo & Delić 2014, 66; Botiková & Deáky 2022, 14–20) by the ruling party following the Stalinist model. The central argument of these studies claim that women were viewed by the system mainly as additional potentials in the labour force during the times of extensive industrialisation mostly in the 1950's in the ECE countries. (Đokanović, Dračo & Delić 2014, 74). The members of the society including women developed the ways to accommodate to the new circumstances but at the same time they also developed an 'inner' (personal, private) resistance (Botiková & Deáky 2022, 14).

Concerning their individual class origin and social background not all women were affected in the same way by the state-socialist system (Zimmermann 2010). Obviously the act of becoming employed did have a liberating aspect as well, however before the 1945 there were already a relatively significant percent of women who were employed either in the industrial production or having white collar jobs. By this time in the case of Hungary also it has been at least the third generation of women whose members could attend secondary and primary education since the opening of the first grammar school for girls (founded by Hermin Beniczky in 1869) and opening the gates of university faculties for women in 1895. For those women however who faced the possibilities (and duty at the same time⁷) of becoming employed in these decades a new dimension of social life opened as well.

Furthermore the anthropological studies pointed out that the feeling of being recognised for the work done in the community of fellow work-

⁴ See for example (Zimmermann 2010; Takács 2015).

⁵ Milena Benovska-Sabkova and Monika Vrzgulová provide an overview of anthropological research on the communist past (Benovska-Sabkova & Vrzgulová 2021).

⁶ Anthropology is understood here as the description of their everyday life in these systems.

⁷ According to the policies of full employment of state socialism work was not only a possibility but also an obligation.

ers was an experience that those women lacked who were not employed before and stayed at home as housewives or were sharing the agricultural work of the family in a peasant household (Lampland 1989, 391; Kałwa & Dobrochna 2009⁸). “Women with a lower level of education worked mainly in collective farms, as agricultural workers or in various sectors of industry. Women with higher education were generally employed in clerical administrative jobs. Some women’s outstanding work has led to higher, even managerial, roles. The state, in order to show its recognition of women’s work and to make it indispensable, awarded various medals to women who had excelled in work competitions.” (Orosz 2017, 115). Also, concerning the fact that they received their own income women enjoyed a certain degree of sovereignty in the world of work (Zimmermann 2010, 18). Interviews have confirmed that the cooperative atmosphere of some communities of women workers and brigades (for example in the textile industry) also gave the possibility of the formation of a female identity as a labourer who develops her own position in the system (Tóth 2010). In the study of life histories and narratives by women workers Bartha found that there were both positive experiences of women who found satisfaction in their positions as working women and both negative feelings of structural injustices at the workplaces and everyday sexism (Bartha 2019).

The sociological research on gender relations of state socialism found that beyond the levels of potential personal benefits that women enjoyed in the new legislation “the key elements of the gender hierarchy in [Hungarian] culture and society remained intact”.⁹ On the labour market the patterns of vertical and horizontal segregation prevailed. The segregated structure of the labour market is considered historically as a patriarchal social construct that results in women being employed in occupational fields of lower social prestige than men and it also results in a significant wage gap. Although women appeared in certain fields that was occupied by men before mostly in state socialism women and men occupied different sectors of the labour market that reflected the gender hierarchy (Zimmermann 2010, 17). The shape of the income distribution showed large differences between the earnings of men and women (Zimmermann 2010, 4) and also the leading positions at workplaces were still almost exclusively occupied by men. In general, the privileges of men remained mostly unchanged both in private life and in public. (Koncz

⁸ The authors had similar findings concerning women in Poland after 1945.

⁹ De Haan et al. quote Susan Zimmermann (De Haan, Bucur & Daskalova 2010, vi).

1987; Fodor 2002; Schadt 2003; Adamik 2018). A field study in 1969 gave an example not only of the uneven payments but also the poor working conditions of women factory workers. The research by Zsuzsa Ferge and Júlia Turgonyi, was based on 260 interviews. The findings pointed out at different inequalities. For example the difference between average men's and women's wages was about 20 percent. The working conditions were not satisfactory, and often unhealthy. Because of the three shifts, women were over-exhausted. Yet women were still considered to be responsible for all domestic work at home. Trade unions did not work independently to safeguard workers' interests and very few women participated in them. (Acsády 2018, 4). The patriarchal attitudes at workplaces were usually not questioned and women themselves accepted and "internalized the conservative gender roles" (Bartha 2019, 301).

One of the most significant controversies in the realization of women's emancipation in state socialism in Hungary is related to the way women were represented in the publicity. The way the representations shifted into openly sexist visual displays was a part of a process that is also defined as "re-patriarchisation" by authors from the ex-Yugoslavia.¹⁰ "The "woman's role followed a retrograde path back to the role that is dominant in patriarchal societies, and equalities that were won and acquired by socialist women were quickly forgotten and annulled. The image of a working woman was quickly replaced with images of a mother or a whore and, in most cases, of a weak, passive victim" (Đokanović, Dračo & Delić 2014, 84). This process that became intensified after the transitions in 1990 had its roots decades earlier in a paradigm shift.

In Hungary following the defeat of the 1956 uprising and freedom fight the Kádár regime made several attempts to pacify and consolidate the society. By the mid-1960's the strictness of the political oppression relatively eased, in 1968 economic reforms were introduced and also a new system of child care allowance became established. Mothers could stay at home on maternity leave and extend their absence from paid work up to a three-year-long period. These policies were connected both to the aims to ameliorate the demographic trends of the declining childbirth and both to the lessening need of a great number of women as labour force. That is, by this regulation a significant portion of women became withdrawn temporarily from the labour market. The option of staying home on long maternity leave became rather widespread among women. Most

¹⁰ See Đokanović, Dračo & Delić 2014.

of the families made use of this possibility. At the same time there was a discursive shift emphasising women's role as mothers. Yet, in these years public debates were constructed around the issue of different new ways of living following the article of two philosophers (Heller & Vajda 1970).¹¹ The question of women and employment was also discussed in the most prestigious journals and periodicals (Márkus 1970). The series of articles were connected to the questions concerning women's social position and their expected duties. In the course of the debates more and more attacks were made against the anticipated negative effects of emancipation, similarly to the process of the backlash. In Hungary it was even more controversial that a strong anti-feminist sentiment became supported by the mainstream media even that at the time there was no significant grass root, authentic feminist movement at all in the country.¹²

The change in the centrally dictated norms concerning gender relations during the decades of state-socialist rule in Hungary went together with a discursive shift in the public. There was a change in the way the print media discussed women and women's visual representations became also effected. Recent social science includes the examination of media representations for the analyses of social relations. Representations are seen as not only the processes that create meanings of things and events, but are also understood as being constitutive of the things and events themselves. Thus it is crucial to understand who is in the position of the ability of giving meanings to things and events in a society. The impact through the media representations influences society often by narrowing down certain ways of perceptions and by reinforcing stereotypical images of different social groups (Hall 1997, 24–25). In their attempts to create given meanings the media producers, that is those who are in a power position, often aim to maintain their dominance by the discursive patterns that justify their positions. The media theory may also examine the way the media representations work and the way they influence the public. By the following example here it can be demonstrated that a shift in the direction of gender policies in Hungary in the 1960's was accompanied by a shift in women's representation in the media.

The earlier dominant puritanism in the socialist realist style that was uniformised and was regarded as the only possible relevant way of rep-

¹¹ The public debate also included the question of the forms of the nuclear family versus the living in free communities (Heller & Vajda 1970).

¹² Berecz refers to Joanna Goven (Berecz 2021, 39) who published several studies about anti-feminism in Hungary.

resentation in any kind of artworks and in the publicity. The socialist realistic art that was developed back in the Soviet Union became considered as the official style in Hungary after 1948. Yet most of the women could less likely identify as role models with the figures of the idealized, strong, determined-looking labourer and peasant women standing shoulder-by-shoulder with fellow men workers of the statues and paintings (Háy 2023).¹³ The turning point of the changes in the representation of women can be connected to the economic changes in the late 1960's when the importance of media advertisements of products increased. (Vörös 2015, 254) when the sexist, mostly harshly erotic photos of women dressed in a seductive way, often in bikinis or even topless appeared everywhere on posters, magazines and television ads. The trends in fashion and women's everyday outlook also took a different direction (Valuch 2001). A recently defended dissertation by Hajnalka Magyari points out that this was also the period when the beauty care as a developing sector of services became even supported by the central budget. The Kádár era compared to the former Rákosi era, "practically meant the rehabilitation of beauty and beauty care" (Kovácsné 2021) that was not preferred earlier. This new trend appeared also in fashion styles, the representation of women and the women beauty ideals. "A paradigm shift took place in which the female ideal of the Kádár-era became much closer to the type of woman preferred by the contemporary public and moved further and further away from the former Sovietized pattern. The Soviet-type female ideal ceased to be a mandatory example to be followed, and women who followed the fashion also began to follow trends infiltrating from the West, as far as possible within the framework of state socialism. The tractor girls of the fifties were replaced by the "Pest woman" of the sixties, and the emancipated working woman of the seventies was replaced by the sexualized poster girls of the eighties." (Kovácsné 2019, 4). The sexist turn in the representation of women became explicit in the course and during the aftermath of the first beauty contest in the state-socialist era in 1985 that ended with the tragic death of the winner of the competition, Miss Hungary, Csilla Magyar (Eperjesi 2021).¹⁴

¹³ Ágnes Háy confirmed this by narrating her personal bad feelings and resistance towards the socialist realist female role model (Interview recorded in March 2023).

¹⁴ The artist, Ágnes Eperjesi presented a performance in the memory of Csilla Magyar also as a protest against the humiliation of women at the beauty contest in 1985 and after (Eperjesi 2021).

WOMEN'S ALTERNATIVE VOICES AMONG THE DISSIDENTS¹⁵

In respect of the gender inequalities, women's subordination in everyday life and the evaluation of the unappealing aspects of women's cultural representations one can argue that the official political endeavour of the state-socialist system for women's emancipation and for gender equality had contradictory results. It is a question though about how women felt about the unequal situation and the prevailing ways of subordination and discrimination.

The theory of social movements suggests that in case certain factors are given of for example social injustice and other further preconditions are fulfilled, a movement will be initiated. In this particular case, even that the preconditions seem to be given, yet no women's movement arose. Even if we retrospectively interpret the enlisted cases of unjust as causes of or preconditions for a social movement, yet in the case of Hungary during the Kádár regime neither the individual psychological factors nor the social motives or drives were given to women that could have led to a beginning of a kind of resistance or the unfolding of feminist criticism.

In Eastern Europe, however there are several examples of feminist critiques of Soviet-style women's policy, especially in dissident circles. Women's self-organising groups have been formed in several places, and authentic women's voices associated with opposition movements have appeared in various forms. These movements criticized state socialism as a patriarchal one that is an oppressive system for the individuals and particularly for women in many ways.

The feminist initiatives in this region were often linked and motivated by the student movements and the second wave feminism of the western democracies in the 1970's. For example the new Yugoslav feminism reflects the spirit of the women's movements of the 1970s (Đokanović, Dračo & Delić 2014, 80-81; Lóránd 2012, 6). Young university women and a few men began to organise themselves in informal meetings in Zagreb and Ljubljana. Radical feminist meetings and gatherings were also held in the Student Cultural Centres (Studentski Kulturni Centar) in Belgrade. Restaurant and informal friendly discussions were thus followed by public forums, lecture series and journal publications. The first large-scale fem-

¹⁵ The results presented here are based on previous collection of data by the author. (interviews, archive documents, secondary literature). The theme of women activists during Kádárism was a self-managed research project so far and will be continued according to the possibilities given.

inist conference was held in Yugoslavia in 1978. The Yugoslav feminist movement was “inherently critical of the existing socialist system and its promises” (Lóránd 2012, 6).

Similarly in the Soviet Union the content of the samizdat, published by dissident women in 1979, called, “Woman and Russia” was also parallel in many respects with the second wave western feminism and addressed similar issues. The publication was founded in Leningrad, written and produced by women. The magazine published poems, short stories and numerous articles that explored and criticised the gap between the official ideology of emancipation and the reality of women’s daily lives. Exposing these contradictions became one of the main objectives of the magazine (Holt 1980, 6). “The emergence of *Woman and Russia* is a significant development for the democratic movements in Eastern Europe. Oppositionists generally see the women’s issue as peripheral, if not completely irrelevant, and argue that the struggle for democratic rights must come first. The editors of this magazine argue that *feminism and democracy are inseparable*” (Holt 1980, 7). Thus in the journal documentary articles were published, for example on the deplorable conditions in maternity clinics, the (often brutal) treatment of women in childbirth, the difficulties and humiliations of the living conditions of girl mothers, etc. The tone of the papers shows a link with the second wave of Western feminism in the Russian oppositional women’s activism of the period. It was critical towards state socialism and its institutions (Acsády 2018, 7).

In the former German Democratic Republic one can also find traces of women’s activism in the period. For example, a series of women’s pacifist protest started in 1982. Their actions, in which “hundreds of women protested” in East Germany, were reported in the Western press. The protesters also wrote a letter to Erich Honecker demanding the withdrawal of the bill on the conscription of women in the event of war (Hundreds of Women 1982–83).

Women have also played a significant role in the Polish Solidarity trade union movement from the beginning (Penn 2006). Thus, in several countries of the Eastern European bloc, there are examples of women’s feminist initiatives linked to dissident opposition movements, which have also been present and have reflected and thematised contradictions, tensions and injustices related to the social situation of women. In Hungary a small number of women activists connected to the dissident circles also embraced feminist ideas, yet their initiatives stayed relatively isolated within these groups and were not represented in the samizdat literature

either. Women's issues did not become embraced in the activities of the democratic opposition. There is no documented trace of any further women's rights activities outside of these groups either in the 1970's in Hungarian society, which makes the situation quite different from for example the ex-Yugoslavia, where these activities started to blossom in this period.

The collective actions of critical intellectuals, artist, and activists were related to several loosely connected groups. Different profiles of these groups can be distinguished and also there were different ways how they included or were related to women's issues, or women's art works, or women's activism.¹⁶ One of these groups was based on social work and was called SZETA. The founder of the initiative was Ottilia Solt¹⁷ (Kőszeg 2014). The concept of SZETA was that voluntary activism, for example the collection and distribution of donations would meet the needs of the poor and marginalized groups of people in contemporary society. The significance of that was that the official ideology of the state socialist regime in Hungary claimed that the difference between social classes did not exist anymore, as the class war achieved its goals and there were no more poor or needy groups in society. To speak about poverty was an act of denial of the foundations of the system, so it was forbidden in those decades and became labelled as oppositional activity.

In a fairly similar way the avant-garde counter culture mostly was also interpreted as oppositional activism by the authorities. The judgements of the state authorities towards artist who were distinguished were described with three words beginning with T letter: "támogatott, tűrt, tiltott" in Hungarian. That is artist who were 'supported' or 'tolerated' or 'banned' by the communist rule (Sasvári 2003, 13-14). In a way it made the actual behavior or the attitudes of the artists and categories of „supported, tolerated or banned” to become categories of aesthetic value in the counter culture. Thus the cultural sphere itself in the totalitarian Kádár regime had its unique importance because any art work that even slightly differed from the official, politically accepted genre of socialist realism gained its own significance (Apor & Horváth 2018, 10). So, in this way creative art, the autonomous artistic creation itself could have been interpreted easily as an oppositional activism.

¹⁶ In a recent interview Ágnes Hay shared with me several details connected to her memories and personal experiences in the involvement in the dissident circles in the 1970's. Interview was recorded: March 10, 2023. Budapest-London online.

¹⁷ Ottilia Solt, (1944–1997) sociologist, founder of SZETA, (Szegényeket Támogató Alap) the Foundation to Support the Poor, established in 1979.

Experimental art most often fell into the category of the so called 'tolerated' art from the point of view of the centrally controlled cultural life. The scene of the neo-avantgarde experimental art gained also new possibilities in these years, for example exhibition halls, clubs, yet these were distinct places from the scenes of the official art world. The works of the artist with explicit oppositional political messages were still on the list of the banned (Hornyik 2018, 32).

The so called alternative public sphere and criticism of the state-socialist system became primarily associated with members of the group that was known as the Democratic Opposition ("Demokratikus Ellenzék" abbreviated as DE¹⁸). The activists were often connected informally and were belonging to same group of friends or acquaintances. They met more or less regularly, organised meetings, lectures, flying university and also attended the actions of avant-garde artists' groups. The DE published samizdats and established a periodical, called *Beszélő* in 1981.

The DE drew from the spirit of the Helsinki Declaration Act from the very beginning. They joined the Charter 77 initiative and they collected signatures to support it. There was also petitioning and spread of information about the strikes in Gdansk as an act of solidarity with the Polish opposition and the movement Solidarnosc at the time of the introduction of martial law (Lomax 1982, 2). The ambition of the DE was also to monitor the domestic social and political processes, the so called new Hungarian economic reforms after 1968. Yet, after a few years a slowdown occurred in this process of the "easing" (the slow deterioration of the strict, rigorous totalitarianism of the 1950's). By the early 1970's also certain signs of the emergence of "austerity" and a "backlash" appeared in several areas (Csizmadia 2015, 121) that also gave a motivation for the DE to act. The Democratic Opposition existed without official permission as a loose network of critical thinkers. They held informal meetings at private apartments or abandoned buildings mostly in the capital but also in the countryside. The Participants were mostly, almost exclusively, intellectuals (writers, philosophers, economists, university students), avant-garde artists.

The political values of the groups and individuals belonging to the DE were diverse. Yet, the core of their thinking was mostly connected to human rights, democracy, liberalism and to some of the values and issues of the New Left movements of the western democracies for example social inequalities, ecology, minority rights, peace, disarmament, critique of nuclear energy, the critique of mass culture and the manipulative power of the

¹⁸ "De" means "but" in Hungarian language.

media, opposition to authoritarianism and totalitarian systems. In terms of concerns for women's rights the controversy about the democratic opposition was that it neglected to embrace feminism or the understanding of women's rights as human rights even that the Helsinki process and the Declaration was the justification of their standpoints. This group of mostly intellectual dissidents did not problematize the issues of women's social status even that several problems were already explored and discussed in the so called primary, the mainstream media and publicity.¹⁹ "The way of thinking of the Hungarian opposition in general was also characterised by the fact that their debates and journals did not include the questions concerning the position of women and feminism. (...) The term feminism generally had negative connotations in Hungarian society, and opposition circles were no exception to this" (Bozóki 2010, 30).

So the DE in Hungary criticized the oppressing institutions of the party-state and stood up for individual freedoms, but did not thematise the contradictions of women's emancipation, the violations of women's rights, and the issue of feminism. The process of this negation is even more inscrutable knowing that the activists had foreign contacts, feminists among them²⁰ and they also got access to some English language feminist literature (that was mostly not tolerated by the authorities).

Not only were the writings of second wave feminism not available in Hungarian before the transitions, but even their authors were indexed, so the original books were effectively banned. Enikő Bollobás²¹ recalls the following anecdotal case: "at that time, state censorship was still very much in force [...] my American feminist books were confiscated at Ferihegy in 1982 and then 'accidentally' destroyed" (Bollobás 2006, 23).

The modern trends of feminism could have been a good starting point for a qualitative, political evaluation of the politics of gender equality under state socialism. However, in the first public sphere, in the official book market and the press, controlled by state censorship, everything was done to create the greatest possible confusion and lack of understanding about feminism and its history in the eyes of the social public. The history

¹⁹ See earlier references in this study for the works by for example Zsuzsa Ferge, Júlia Turgonyi, Katalin Koncz, Judit H. Sas.

²⁰ One of the visitors who might have had an impact was Martha Lampland who met Hungarian women in the 1970's in Budapest where she had her early field work as an American anthropologist.

²¹ Enikő Bollobás a literary scholar, university professor. She was involved in the activities of the opposition in the 1980's. In 1989 she founded the Szeged-based political discussion group Hungarian Feminists to address women's issues.

of Hungarian feminism, the content of the domestic movements and their links to international organisations were virtually omitted from the historiography. The research works for example by Katalin N. Szegvári were aiming to fill that gap during these decades. She published studies about the first wave feminist movement on the base of primary archive sources (N. Szegvári 1981).²²

The samizdat journal of the democratic opposition, *Beszélő*, contained practically no articles on women's issues. However there were many questions that should have been discussed (similarly to other ex-Soviet bloc countries where these themes became discussed in dissident circles) concerning women's status, the employment, the everyday relationship between men and women. Although *Beszélő* had a few female authors (including Erzsébet Szalai, Róza Hodosán, Olga Diószegi), there was only one woman, Ottília Solt, among the members of the *Beszélő* editorial board (1981–1989). The books printed by the opposition movement's in-house presses as samizdat publications did not include feminist or women's movement literature either.²³ The programme of the flying universities organised by the opposition movement also neglected women's issues, according to the sources I consulted. Although there were a good number of women involved in the activities of the domestic opposition, the history of the opposition to date, as written by men, is one in which women are unfortunately typically absent, as for example the edited volume of interviews with ex-activists (Csizmadia 1995).²⁴

The memoirs of the former activist Róza Hodosán (Hodosán 2004) also reconstruct that there were a good number of committed women activists in opposition circles who, together with their male colleagues, took individual political and existential risks, being observed, and facing sanctions and 'exile'. In Róza Hodosán's book of her memories in the opposition women appear in the activities defined by men, often as helpers, supporters, interested students.

On the base of oral history interviews however the memories of an alternative initiative by women can be traced connected to the circles

²² See for example: N. Szegvári 1981 among other works.

²³ The samizdat book publisher houses were called AB and ABC. There is one particular booklet that can be connected to feminism by Ágnes Háy that will be discussed later (Háy 1979).

²⁴ Thus, for example, Ervin Csizmadia's book of interviews with members of the democratic opposition (Csizmadia 1995) further confirms this: he interviews 16 former activists, not one of whom is a woman.

of the democratic opposition.²⁵ In the interviews with women activists, who belonged once to the democratic opposition groups, it seems most probable that Júlia Veres and Zsuzsa Körösi came up with the idea of that it would be good to set up a women's group. As one of the artist, Ágnes Háy remembers the formation of a group happened after they met at the Young Artists Club²⁶ in Budapest. (This was one of the key locations of 'alternative' cultural life, the place of the so called tolerated artists²⁷ and events. Such places and events also attracted young people and those who were 'thinking differently', that is who were critical towards the mainstream ideology or culture). She expressed an ambiguous feeling towards the idea to formulate a feminist group:

„Yes, I said, but what for? I supported the idea yet didn't understand (...) what is the place in the world of a feminist group? Other women like Mari Lukács – she is no longer alive – but it seems like she was in it. Zsuzsa Forgách was also around. (...) I do remember, in the beginning, it was Juli Veres who came up with the ideas and everything, one of these ideas was to do comics or something with the male female characters, the other was that she had a bunch of Ludas Matyi²⁸, let's cut out the... what do you call them, the ... anti-feminist (cartoons). That idea was already there (Interview with Ágnes Hay, March 10th, 2023).

Júlia Veres then organized a witty feminist-inspired exhibition in Budapest, that became eventually open to the public. It displayed images and portrayals of women in the pages cut out off the weekly cartoon magazine of the time, *Ludas Matyi*. She ironically commented the action

²⁵ Further findings in this study are based on interviews with former activists. Three of these women activists, currently living abroad, were interviewed by György Dalos in the 1990's following the transitions. Dalos handed me over the manuscripts of these interviews, for which I am grateful and owe him thanks. Yet, all the three activists interviewed did not consent to the publication of the interviews and denied naming them as sources. Following this I have decided to record further interviews in recent years, and the quotations are either from these recordings or from published texts by the ex-activists.

²⁶ Fialat Művészek Klubja (FMK) was both an exhibition place, a concert hall and a main meeting place for youth interested in avantgarde or alternative art events, performances etc.

²⁷ The tolerated zone of art scene became relatively larger in this period. See also (Hornýik 2018, 32).

²⁸ *Ludas Matyi* was a weekly comic magazine with full of sexist representations of women in the cartoons. Those years the ways women were represented was not criticized or commented, such stereotypical depictions were considered to be normal.

later: “As we were told, in socialism, women's issues were not a problem, because everyone is liberated, there is equality. In the end, it was necessary to prove here (that is by the exhibition) that it is a lie, that it is not the case, because the oppression of women, still exists”.

The other idea of the alternative representations became realized by Ágnes Háy in the form of a series of cartoons representing the female and male gender symbols personified in different situations. The cartoons were published in a booklet by the samizdat publisher AB (Háy 1979). The foreword was written by the psychologist, Ferenc Mérei, the iconic master and acknowledged personality of the opposition. The depictions by Ágnes Háy became soon well-known references and were even published later in the English periodical, *Feminist Review*²⁹.

The publication of the drawings confirms that from the very beginning of the formation of a feminist group among the women connected to the opposition circles, that the issues they focused on were about gender representations, personal gender dynamics, women's identities and self-representation in avant-garde art. Another example from those years is an experimental film by Zsuzsa Körösi was presented in the avant-garde artists' exhibition and alternative cultural event in Balatonboglár in 1973 (Klaniczay-Sasvári 2003, 156)³⁰. The film showed close-ups of naked female breasts and the narration commented the social expectations towards women to maintain the beauty of their breast.

The action of the women connected to the oppositional circles that received the most attention was a petition and the collection of supporting signatures in 1973. The action was related in a way to the film above that it concerned the female body in this case the reproductive rights more precisely. The petition was critical towards the planned tightening of birth control by the central committee of the party as the main decision making body (Körösi 2020; Sasvári 2000).³¹

Yet the petition was not necessarily formulated merely from a women's rights point of view, but rather from a demographic one. According to the original text the aim was to call attention to the decline in the birth rate. The petition claimed that the decline can be stopped without the planned

²⁹ Ágnes Háy *Feminist Review*. No. 6 (1980): 105-107 (3 pages). Published By: Sage Publications, Ltd.

³⁰ The film was entitled as “Mellápolás” (Beauty care of breasts) and was projected on July the 7th 1973.

³¹ Zsuzsa Körösi who took part in this action published a study that both collected the official documents and also included the results of her interviews with those activists who participated in 1973 in the collection of signatures. She asked them about their motivations and their retrospective views on the action. (Körösi 2020).

restrictive measures, in other words, by other means. The argument of the petition was mostly based on liberal values and appealed to the respect of human rights. It acknowledged that the drop of birth rates is a social problem, however it argued that the solution is not the restriction of abortion rights, just the opposite, and a more liberated social life with access to contraceptives. It argued that people do not feel the motives to have children because they do not live in a free society. In fact, the petition argued for the maintenance of the decision taken by the party-state in 1956 (that guaranteed full access to abortion if required). Also, the petition argued that in a more democratic social climate there would be a greater incentive to have a family. The petitioners suggest that new family and social policy measures are needed to support families. The petition thus focuses more on the need for democratisation.

The activists involved friends and acquaintances who were sympathising with the text and went out to collect signatures in Budapest and also in the countryside in fact illegally. In the end the petition was signed finally by 1553 person and was handed in to the Parliament. The activists never received any official answer to it. The restrictions anyhow were not introduced then in the previously planned forms by the party. As an aftermath of the collection of signature several of the activists were summoned and questioned by the authorities. Some were fired from the university and their workplaces. The retaliatory measures that followed the signature-gathering action confirmed and made clear that the expression of dissent in public was unacceptable to the party-state (Acsády, 2018). Zsuzsa Körösi, Piroska Márkus and Júlia Veres were among the activists involved in the action and all the three of them left the country after 1973.

There were also initiatives these times for small feminist discussions in opposition circles, but in fact they failed. The participants started to feel uncomfortable in the women only meetings and were also discouraged by their peers to attend these. Piroska Márkus, in an article in the London-based journal, called *Labour Focus* in 1983 published a highly critical writing about the interpersonal relations within the opposition group in Pest, which she said resulted in the virtual silencing and silencing of women's voices within the opposition (Márkus 1983). Among other things, she considers the opposition in Pest a "self-destructive narrow-minded society" and a "subculture based on a hierarchical male-hero cult" (Márkus 1983, 45). In this article, she describes the group's ethos as explicitly sexist, and describes the internal role of the men in intellectual roles as pushing aside in various ways the intellectual, oppositional women with similar qualifications (Márkus 1983, 46). "The fact that women remain invisible in

history is not because they have done nothing to shape history” (Márkus 1983, 46). In her view, the circle of DE had as much authoritarian features as the system they criticised. This view is also confirmed by another interview participant. She recalled that it was not possible to “question the internal power relations” (...) “Women were not allowed to question men. There was an explicit hierarchy” (E/7).³² In this hierarchy women were expected to look up on men activists.” Similar feelings were expressed by other ex-activists interviewed: “I experienced it tragically, that brilliant people were pushed aside just because they were women”(E/7). The former opposition member bitterly states that, although she agreed with the principles of the group and was ready to be involved in as many things as possible, yet she felt uncomfortable: “I was very disappointed with the interpersonal manners of this circle” (E/1).

Another former activist expresses similar feelings: women were “often discouraged by their friends and lovers from living and thinking independently” (D/3). The following statement expresses the views about the contradictions of the system yet also refers to the ambiguous attitudes of the woman activist: “It turned out that what socialism had fed us here: that women's issues had been solved, - and they were far from being solved. We thought then that we didn't have to bother about that, equal pay for equal work and all the rest of it, because our generation would do it very differently. [...] this company did not question the basic belief that existing socialism had achieved gender equality. That has not been questioned. (E/3). In the democratic opposition gender equality was a “taboo”.³³

It is most probable however that the questions of women's emancipation resonated in some of the members in the different groups of the opposition. Different attitudes can be distinguished if examined more closely in for example the SZETA foundation or among the women avantgarde artists. This study here mostly gathered data about women who belonged to the circles of DE and those who published later the samizdat *Beszélő*.

As young women intellectuals who most probably enjoyed relative autonomy and were benefitting from the situation that education and professions were available for them, they did not develop any sensitivity for the difficulties women in general might have. This position made them

³² The following sources of interviews will remain anonymous. The mark indicates the identifying letter of the interview transcript and the page number within it.

³³ The statement was made by a men activist, SZ.P. who later after the transitions became involved in gender issues, mostly concerned with the problem of violence against women.

accept the situation and stay in a negligent position: (...) “we believed that the women’s question had been solved by party politics. (B/1). In another interview a similar ignorant position was expressed: “[It] never occurred to us that women’s equality was a basic human rights issue”(E/3). Retrospectively however one of the interviewees admits the omission referring to the unfolded options of women’s movement similarly to the second wave movements: “This generation here in Hungary has not fulfilled this kind of mission” (D/6).

CONCLUSIONS

In Hungary similarly to other ex-Soviet bloc countries the principle of gender equality became included in the constitution in 1949. Yet the introduction of women’s emancipation ‘from above’ resulted in contradictory features. Discrimination and gender hierarchies prevailed in everyday life, the labour market remained segregated, the leading positions in public life were occupied by men and women’s representation became overtly sexist by the 1980’s. The problems and the controversies were depicted by a few sociological works at that time, yet there were no significant resistance and criticism concerning the ambiguities of the state measures. However women activists took part in the counter-culture and oppositional initiatives and discussions in Hungary in the circles of democratic opposition yet, their contribution is mostly left out of the history of these oppositional movements so far. Feminist voices and the feminist interpretation of emancipation politics and women’s social situation in state socialism was not articulated in Hungary during Kádár era unlike in other ex-soviet bloc countries in the same period. Feminism and women’s rights did not formulate an integral part of the discourse of the underground democratic opposition (“inner dissidents”), they did not address the contradictory processes of contemporary state socialist realization of women’s emancipation. Some women activists however who were sympathising with feminist ideas initiated informal meetings and women artists created art works that challenged the socialist realist representation of women and reflected an alternative interpretation of gender identities. There was also an action of petitioning and collecting of signatures to support reproductive rights by these activists in 1973. Yet, the feminist individuals in the Hungarian oppositional group became marginalized by the other participants (mostly men) and the feminist issues were not encountered. Some of the ex-activists in a retrospective view interpret it as they had missed the historical opportunity of their generation to address these issues that should have been related to their human rights concerns and liberal democratic values.

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