

Remarks on the History of Hungarian Feminism

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In Hungary, the opinion prevails that "our country" never had a feminist movement because feminism runs contrary to "our" traditions. Hungarian men behave like gentlemen toward their honoured ladies whereas Hungarian women enjoy this noble treatment while being satisfied with centering their life around the family. This essentialist view of gender roles which is based on their natural distribution still prevails in Hungary. It also claims that social inequalities between the sexes are not to be considered as such since they are the result of biological differences. Feminism as a social movement is therefore considered as a brutal attack on respected traditions and nature. Emancipation, on the other hand, is also regarded as a remnant from the deeply hated communist past. Even though women were officially granted equality under communism, in reality they had to live with the double burden of a paid job and care for the family.

My research interest in Hungarian feminism goes back to the early 1990s. I was trying to find out why there were no feminist movements in Hungary. The reply I kept receiving was that "feminism ran contrary to our traditions" and that our country had more important problems to solve. Even though in my university courses we were not told much about women's movements, a vague knowledge about the turn of the century suffrage movements was transmitted. Unfortunately, historians whom I approached for more information on this subject told me that there was no such movement in Hungary or that there was a small group too insignificant to be mentioned. I came across publications which support the same idea: if there was an insignificant feminist movement at the turn of the century in Hungary it should certainly not be considered part of mainstream Hungarian history.¹

My subsequent research of archival materials revealed quite the opposite as I came across a rich and unpublished collection of documents about turn of the century Hungarian feminism. At least two of the largest public libraries in Budapest have the full collection of the monthly periodical *A nő és a társadalom* [Woman and Society], later called *A nő* [The Woman], which was published for over a decade starting in 1907. The largest archives in Budapest have the legal documents about the formation, budget and goals of the *Feministák egyesülete* [Association of Feminists] founded in 1904. The correspondence of feminists is also available many of whom enjoyed an international reputation. Rózsika Schwimmer's name is very well known at the International Women's Archives in Amsterdam. A few photos show her visiting conferences in different countries. Her letters, diaries and other personal archive materials are kept at the New York Public Library.

In order to understand better the historical roots of turn-of-the-century Hungary's women's movement, I went further in my research of a Hungarian feminist past. As far back as 1790, a petition was handed to the National Gathering of Hungarian noblemen, an equivalent of today's Parliament. (It is important to remember here that Mary Wollstonecraft published her often cited *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in England two years later.) The petition was written "in the name of Hungarian mothers" by a man, Péter Bárány.² It contained more modest demands than Wollstonecraft's text: it was addressed to the most respected noblemen with the request to allow noble women's participation in the sessions of the Gathering as spectators. Like Wollstonecraft, Bárány argued that if women were better educated in politics, they would be better patriots and hence better educators of their sons. This will also be one of the key arguments in women's emancipatory endeavours regarding their education or inclusion in public, political, and cultural life in the 19th century.

As far as women's legal status is concerned, another common belief prevails: Hungarian law favoured women in the past. Women of nobility had indeed been given the responsibility to run estates. Some historians interpret this fact as if women had enjoyed equal rights since in certain cases women who inherited land did become feudal landowners. Yet they forget to mention that it was only possible if the given family had no male members who could own the estate; it was of crucial importance that the family fortune not get divided.³

Hungarian history also mentions a few famous women from the past who were known and respected for their patriotic deeds or as mothers of famous kings and/or war heroes, such as Ilona Zrinyi. These women are regarded as symbolic figures of women's glory yet again only in the service of the fatherland.

By contrast, women writers who emerged in the 1820s because they wanted to have their voice heard in public were not at all respected the same way but became the focus of a huge public debate instead. Whereas the mid-19th century saw the emergence of a relatively respected women's literature in Western Europe (Jane Austen, Mary Godwin or Mme de Stael), the first article ever published by a woman in a Hungarian "scholarly" journal in 1822 resulted in huge disapproval.⁴ The debate whether women could take part in cultural and scientific life went on for decades. Questions were raised whether it was not against nature and God's will that women write, engage in any type of intellectual work or should be educated at all.⁵

Education was the next important milestone in women's history. When the idea to open secondary schools for women was finally accepted in the second half of the 19th century, there was still no consensus regarding the curriculum. Defenders of the traditional values wanted to limit the range of subjects taught to girls to household skills, child-rearing, and possibly languages and art. A very important year in the fight for women's emancipation in the field of education was 1895 when a bill was passed allowing women access to the faculties of philosophy, medicine and pharmacy. Very soon, however, in a span of less than ten years, the pressure coming from conservative deans and professors resulted in limiting the number of female students.⁶ These restrictions were among the main reasons why feminists thought that time had come to get organized.

By the time the feminists formed as a group in Hungary, they could already build upon an almost century long tradition of women's organizing. The earliest reported women's organization, the *Pesti Jótékony Nőegylet* [Pester Women's Charitable Society] was founded in 1817 in Pest. It was followed by a large number of similar groups and by the end of the 19th century the estimated number of women's organizations was around 800.⁷ Very few among these groups had any political claims; when they did, it was either around the question of women's education or women's access to occupational fields from which they had been previously excluded. The largest organization which was to defend working

women's interests was the *Nőtisztviselők Országos Egyesülete* [National Federation of Women Clerical Workers]. Women members of the Social Democratic movement also tended to be activist in the 1910s.

The first feminist organization in Budapest was the above-mentioned *Feministák egyesülete* which was part of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance. The Association had local groups in 28 towns all over the country. The Association's members came from different backgrounds, even though their leaders were from the middle-classes. Their professional backgrounds were diverse: teachers, intellectuals, white-collar workers, upper middle-class housewives, but also factory workers. Their most active period were the years before World War I; later they joined the pacifist movement. This became the reason why the post-war conservative government associated their activities with leftist organizations (e.g. the social-democratic women's movement) and made their work impossible to carry on. The leaders of the Association left the country. These included Rózsika Bédy-Schwimmer who continued to work as a peace activist and died in New York. After World War II, the Association was founded again in 1946 and existed for three years until Hungary's communist authorities banned it, together with hundreds of other civic organizations.⁸

The Association's primary aim during the decade before World War I was to campaign for women's suffrage. In the Hungary of the times the citizenry's voting rights were governed by legislation that had been passed in 1848. These laws were rather out-of-date by the beginning of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, in 1905, 1908 and 1912, partly due to the Association's lobbying efforts, new legislation was drafted and placed before Parliament where it was debated. Because of prevailing conservative sentiments, however, these reform bills were not passed, despite the fact that the feminists had supporters outside the feminist community, including (after 1910) the organization known as the *Férfileg a nők választójogáért* [Men's League for Women's Suffrage] formed in that year. The decade before 1914 constituted the zenith of the women's suffrage movement in Hungary.

In spite of their political aims, the feminists claimed to be independent from party politics and emphasized their tolerance of different values and trends within their ranks, such as religion vs. atheism, for instance.⁹ According to the contemporary press, feminism was a widely discussed issue. Feminists were well known in public life, not only for their activism and street demonstrations but even more so for the large

number of public events they organized: discussions, meetings, lectures by foreign celebrities, concerts, exhibitions. The significance of the organization can also be illustrated by the fact that in 1913, the 7th Congress of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance was held in Budapest.

To help women with their everyday problems, the Association of Feminists set up an office where several thousand women were reported to have sought help in occupational, educational, legal or personal matters. According to contemporary correspondence and applications by feminists to the City Council of Budapest, the city administration supported feminist activism not only morally but also financially. The fact that the City Council maintained a good, constructive relationship with the feminists contradicts those interpretations which claim feminism has always been met with hostility and had no support or understanding. This co-operation with the City Council was very significant for the realization of feminist initiatives. One good example is the foundation of the first day care centres for children which were set up thanks to the feminists' active contribution with their expertise.¹⁰

Publications by feminist authors, other than the monthly periodical, contributed to the rise of public awareness and understanding about women's demands in the changing social framework. Feminists had some important books by western feminist writers translated.¹¹ At the same time, they published works in which they offered an analysis of society, of the individual's socialization, a critique of marriage or women's work from a feminist point of view (e.g. Szidónia Willhelm, Sarolta Geöcze, or their male colleagues, Andor Máday and Géza Kenedi). These early feminist publications did formulate an alternative point of view to the essentialism of their age. In their texts we find arguments that can be interpreted as early versions of the definition of the difference between sex and gender.¹² The feminists refused the idea that the characteristics which were attributed to women of their time were of biological origin. They also refused to take traditional roles for granted. The significance of these writings was that they challenged contemporary images of what a woman could be. In this way their achievement was the creation of an image of the "modern woman," the woman of the 20th century.¹³ It is important for us feminist activists today to connect to this vibrant feminist tradition that existed in our country a century ago and to build upon its ideas as a foundation for social change and gender equality in the present.

NOTES

This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper that had been presented at a conference on "Feminist Practice and Theory: East, West" in St. Petersburg, Russia, sponsored by the St. Petersburg Centre for Gender Studies in May of 1995. Since that time Hungarian interest in the subject has increased as evidenced by the writings on feminist topics of such authors as Anna Borgos, Ágnes Horváth, Mária M. Kovács, Andrea Pető and Susan Zimmermann. The most prominent among these writings is probably the latter's *Die bessere Hälfte? Frauenbewegung und Frauenbestrebungen im Ungarn der Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918* (Budapest: Promedia and Napvilág, 1999). **Editors' note:** The editors wish to thank Lee Davis Creal for editorial comments on a draft of this paper.

¹ F. Tibor Zsuppán, "Reception of the Hungarian Feminist Movement 1904-1914," in *Decadence and Innovation*, R. Pysent, ed. (London, 1989), p. 6.

² Péter Bárány. "A magyar anyáknak..." [A Request in the Name of Hungarian Mothers], 1790.

³ Andor Máday, *A magyar nő jogai a múltban és a jelenben* [The Hungarian Woman's Rights in the Past and the Present] (Budapest, 1913).

⁴ Éva Takáts, "Egy két szó..." [A Few Words on Women in Marriage] Tudományos Gyűjtemény, 1822.

⁵ Anna Fábri, "Az első magyar újságíró" [The First Hungarian Woman Journalist], in *Az irodalom magánélete* [The Private Life of Literature], Anna Fábri, ed. (Budapest, 1987).

⁶ Katalin N. Szegvári, "Az antifeminizmus történelmi gyökerei. A nők egyetemi felvételének ügye az első világháború előtt" [The Historical Roots of Anti-feminism: The Issue of the Admission of Women to Universities before the First World War] in *Numerus clausus intézkedések az ellenforradalmi Magyarországon* [Numerus Clausus Regulations in Counter-revolutionary Hungary] (Budapest: Akadémiai kiadó, 1988), pp. 52-85.

⁷ Cf. Zsuppán, 62.

⁸ Janka Gergely, *A feminizmus története* [A History of Feminism], unpublished manuscript. Országos Levéltár (National Archives of Hungary). P999. 19cs 33.

⁹ Cf. Perczelné Flóra Kozma's argument at an open debate about feminism in Budapest in 1909. *A nő és a társadalom* 1909: 36.

¹⁰ "Letters to the City Council." Budapest Archives IV. 1 704b.

¹¹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *A nő gazdasági helyzete* [Woman's Economic Situation], Rózsa Schwimmer, transl. (Budapest, 1908); originally published in English under the title *Women and Economics: a Study of the Economic relations Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898).

¹² Geöcze Sarolta, *A nő a modern társadalomban* [Woman in Modern Society] (Budapest, 1899).

¹³ Mársits Rozina, *A XX. század asszonya* [The Woman of the 20th Century] (Budapest, 1901).