

Hungarian Feminists: Statement*

Written by Enikő Bollobás

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Women are conspicuously absent from the political turmoil of contemporary Hungarian society. Very few women are active in the alternative opposition groups; in a similar way, the issue of women is not part of any new party's or movement's political program. This we find alarming.

We are deeply convinced that the issue of women is not a superfluous problem, one that can only be dealt with after the more visible and more serious diseases of society are cured. The real democratization of Hungary cannot be achieved without the complete spiritual and material liberation of women. We do not believe in a democracy which exists in the public/ political domain only, and embraces, for this reason, only half of the population. We do not consider a man a democrat if he thinks in a democratic way only in public or political life, or in the domain of his career, but in the domestic and private spheres he encourages hierarchical relationships.

We are convinced that in order to attain true democracy, the transformation of the personal, the inner and the private is also needed. We are in the second year of the Hungarian reform process, a time when a certain pessimism seems to characterize the social climate due to the absence, or just slowness, of desired social, political and economic changes. We look for and examine similar changes in the private sphere, since values such as autonomy, sovereignty and human dignity do not seem to have entered the progressive political minds, especially not in connection with women. The goal of feminism in Hungary, as well as elsewhere, is the spiritual liberation of women and men from oppressive hierarchical relationships. This can only be attained by the total elimination of our present system of prejudices and discrimination, and by the respect for life in all forms.

Hungarian Feminists consider it their duty to defend in every respect the interests of Hungarian women, in the public and private spheres alike. Being an interest group within the academia, we consider as our primary task to stand up for the interests of women working in the various fields of science, scholarship and the academia. We are furthermore concerned with the problems of women found in every social stratum and class.

Beyond this primary duty, our goal is to promote and publicize an attitude, mentality or way of thinking which is sensitive to the discrimination against women in all spheres of life. As the philosopher Agnes Heller points out, "the grand global revolution of feminism" has not yet reached East-Central Europe due to being incompatible with the ideas of socialism in the area. In these years that are shaping our future, we have to do everything we can to integrate feminist ideas, together with other radical ideologies,

into Hungarian political thinking. We are convinced that true democracy requires a mentality proposing the coexistence, cooperation and respect for races, sexes, countries, cultures. To this mentality the domination of one country by another is just as alien as the domination of one sex by another. By the same token, we in Hungary have to reevaluate the relationship of humans to nature in a radical way; for this reason, we consider as allies the environmental movements, as well as all those civil rights organizations and groups which fight against discrimination according to race, religion, and color.

Work - Career - Jobs

In Hungary we find a clear segregation of female and male jobs, interests and employment possibilities. Women have little chance to pursue careers others than the traditional ones.

This segregation is twofold: on the one hand it is men who exclude women from such prestige jobs as surgeon or gynecologist, where power and high payment coincide; on the other hand it is also true that women do not tend to pursue such careers, having been directed towards other choices from their childhoods. However, even if women have equal qualifications, it is very difficult for them to maintain their knowledge on the same level as their men colleagues. Domestic chores, still the primary duty of women in Hungary, require far more time and energy here than in Western democracies, since the related industries and services are seriously underdeveloped. For this reason, women tend to progress at a slower pace in their careers, unable in most cases to obtain the necessary credentials and qualifications for high positions. For this reason, and also because women are still not trusted as leaders, we find practically no women among department chairs, deans, rectors, university presidents, etc. Given the complex relationship between science and power, the presence of women in prestige positions and the academia is a civil rights issue at its base.

Various jobs and occupations form a strict hierarchy in terms of payment and prestige; in Hungary this hierarchy can be described in terms of gender-relations too. It is a matter of public consent that the worst-paid jobs should be those typically taken by women, where traditional female skills are used (school teacher, kindergarten teacher, nurse, shop assistant, hairdresser, secretary, cleaning woman, etc.). The work of the gas station attendant, for example, which requires no education, practice or expertise, is rewarded by a salary several times higher than the work of a teacher or nurse, where a complex set of skills, knowledge and devotion are equally necessary.

For this reason our aims are the following:

- to fight that segregational spirit which permeates Hungarian society from kindergarten, through school textbooks and youth subculture and determines the radically different choice of careers between the sexes, independent of inner need and personal calling;

- to encourage and support with legal means those women who wish to pursue careers violating traditional feminine ideals;
- to fight for greater appreciation and higher payment of women in traditional vocations as well as for the appreciation of housework.

Private sphere - sexuality - aggression

Hungarian feminists are deeply concerned about women exploited and humiliated in private relationships.

In Hungary over 4 million abortions have been performed during the last 25 years (among a population of 10 million). Existential insecurity and hopelessness for the individual in totalitarianism only partly account for this dreadful number. But there are other reasons too: that the problem of birth control is not solved properly, and that it is not shared by women and men. Non-hormonal contraceptives, those which are not hazardous to the health of women, have not become widespread and available for use. Also, the mentality which naturally assumes a shared responsibility between the two partners is completely absent.

Hungarian mass media constantly sends out the message that the female body is an object of business transaction. There is no precedent in Hungary to publicly refuse the harsh sexism of semi-pornographic commercials; they are supposed to carry the spirit of some kind of openness and enlightenment with them, and many Hungarian small enterprises gain material profit from the spread of such a mentality. It is unfortunate that no one has yet pointed out that advertisements, commercials and pornographic publications are most harmful because they intrude into the most private spheres of the individual. The seeing of nude and pornographic pictures is not a matter of personal decision; their presence is unavoidable and forced upon all.

A large percentage of women in Hungary must tolerate various forms of male aggression. Every girl and woman living here has encountered sexual humiliation, abuse and rape in some verbal and/or physical form - - in school, the work place, the family, the streets. However, only rarely are these incidents reported since the mental awareness of sexual violence as a public issue does not exist (there is, for example, no word in Hungarian for sexual/child abuse, battered women). Even less often are such crimes legally redressed; we have no efficient legal and medical system to protect, treat and re-socialize the victims of sexual violence.

In the present economic situation, when a large part of the population is not granted existential security, women bear a heavy burden. It is their job to feed the family, while the income of the family and thus the money they can spend diminishes every day. The fact that in Hungary a modern nutritional culture has not yet developed only adds to the responsibility of women in providing their family with food. Hungarian food prices are inversely proportional to human needs: unhealthy food is the cheapest, and for this reason determines our national eating habits, while healthy food is extremely expensive and thus available only to very few.

In the light of the above, we believe that:

- the abortion situation in Hungary has social roots, but is also related to the fact that contraception is an unsolved problem which can only be remedied by respecting female reproductive rights; if birth control were adequately publicized and available for women and men alike, the number of abortions would decrease;
- legal guarantees and counselling services are needed for the protection of sexual crime victims, as well as shelters, hotlines and a whole network for the support of women;
- the aggressive nature of pornography has to be made clear; steps must be taken for its restriction;
- the Hungarian people need nutritional education to halt the high mortality resulting from nutrition and environment related diseases.

Accordingly, we consider that the duty of Hungarian Feminists is, at the moment, to bring about an awareness in the following issues:

- the problem of women in contemporary political life;
- the segregation of jobs according to gender;
- the discrimination against women in employment;
- affirmative action and equal opportunity;
- the appreciation of housework;
- the spread of labor-saving devices in housework;
- the respect for reproductive rights of women;
- the protection of women as victims of sexual crimes;
- nutritional culture and healthy living.

In terms of action, this is what we want to do:

1. by using the various forms of publicity available in Hungary at the moment, to help bring about an awareness of feminist issues;
2. to establish a Women's Resource Center that would function as a clearinghouse for information (with a library, referral services, communications channels, etc.) and as a program center sponsoring various support groups, educational workshops and discussion groups;
3. to promote Women's Studies as a complex academic discipline to be included into university curricula in Hungary;
4. to set up, in the long run, a whole network of services and community organizations for the protection and support of women;
5. to mobilize the dormant force of women as voters and activists of political, economic and spiritual self-defense.

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* Hungarian Feminists as a formal group came into existence September 8, 1989. The members, primarily university professors and students, have been an active work-team for the last few years, being affiliated with the only academic program in Hungary where Women's Studies is being taught:

the American Studies Program of József Attila University, Szeged. By launching the first feminist group of Hungary, we intended to merge the academic with the political, and support a women's movement in Hungary.