



# Solidarity in Struggle

Feminist Perspectives on Neoliberalism  
in East-Central Europe

ESZTER KOVÁTS (ED.)

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„Women’s revolution”: photo taken during Warsaw Manifa 2010 which was held under the banner “Solidarity in crisis – solidarity in struggle” highlighting the outcomes of the economic crisis and the long-term consequences of post-socialist transition in Poland. Manifa is a yearly feminist demonstration organized on the 8th of March in Warsaw and other Polish cities to fight for the rights of women and other oppressed groups. The slogan “Women’s Revolution” was the name of the feminist festival which accompanied Warsaw Manifa’s for several years. The women on the photo are Manifa activists and festival organizers: Anna Król and Małgorzata Grzegorek.

Photo credit: Ewa Dąbrowska-Szulc

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ESZTER KOVÁTS

## Preface: Overcoming false dichotomies – Reclaiming feminist politics in a neoliberal age

A sigh, eyes rolling, accusations of ideological thinking and lack of scientific depth. This is what mostly happens in Hungary when someone in the academic scene tries to apply neoliberalism as a frame of interpretation to understand any aspect of the current socio-political situation. However, as it is aptly demonstrated by the studies in this volume, the literature is tantamount not only when it comes to neoliberalism but also about the interrelation between neoliberalism and feminism.

The same phenomenon is also apparent in the feminist activist scene. Many disagree and find it strategically useless that there is an ever increasing talk about neoliberalism with regards to feminist politics. Moreover, pointing out the fact that different feminisms exists, seems like an academic exercise without everyday relevance when, they assert, that human rights or gender mainstreaming are outside the realm of politics; gender equality brings competitive advantage; women's participation in the labour market; better work-life balance and female entrepreneurship boost growth; and equality pays off.

But these are the exact statements that show how many questions arise for feminism and for leftist politics that aims to take gender equality seriously:

Can there be a left-wing alternative to the neoliberal political and economic order without considering feminist aspects? What does economic imperialism, i.e. the extension of neo-classical economics and market principles into ever-wider spheres of life, mean to our most intimate relationships (Illouz 2007, Kováts ed. 2015)? What does the celebration of individualism and the excessive emphasis on individual responsibility and choices do to our ability to notice systemic interrelations that reify all these possibilities for choices (Budgeon 2015)? Do human rights and, in this frame, feminism stand outside the realm of politics and economic order, or are they powerless companions (Moyn 2015) or even handmaidens of neoliberalism (Fraser 2009, 2013)? What does gender mainstreaming, this tool invented to operationalize feminism, and partly institutionalised on the European level, do with the critical potential of feminist theory? And is it truly progressive to strengthen the „economic

case for gender equality”, this trend that is gaining more and more space in feminist lobbying whereby we are „selling feminism to decision-makers with economic arguments”; or conversely, will this constrain the feminist agenda and ventures into asking questions that seem to be harmless within the framework, so that the negative effects of the economic order on women remain unexamined (Elomäki 2015)? What interrelations are there between growing right-wing populism, and the relationship of left-wing and feminist politics to neoliberalism?

How does this surface in the context of East-Central Europe where democracy and human rights appeared to be inextricably connected with one of the versions of capitalism, and where the self-colonising discourse of catching up with the “developed West” permeates public discourse even today (Éber 2016), even beyond the hopes to assume the gender policies of the EU without any criticism? The studies in this volume attempt to find answers to these questions. However, they not only translate the connections found in the Anglo-Saxon literature to the region, but they look exactly at the question whether they can be adopted to analyse the local situation completely and without any second thought.

## This volume

As a political foundation committed to the values of social democracy, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung provides a platform for the wider discussion of the matters of the left and feminism. A few researchers and activists sensitive to the relationship between the economic order and gender equality met in the framework of our East-Central Europe Gender Program in Budapest and Warsaw in March 2015 and February 2016 respectively. They tried to formulate what we can tell about these issues if we start out from the local situation, and what are the challenges for feminist activism and leftist politics.<sup>1</sup>

The authors of this volume are from this group of meeting participants, and the studies attempt to cover certain elements of this complex topic on the basis of experience from the meetings, and feedback the authors have been giving to each other. The geographical focus of this volume is mainly East-Central Europe (Baltic and Visegrád countries), while a part of the findings is certainly applicable also to the wider region, i.e. post-socialist CEE. Several authors discuss their respective topics to some extent in that wider frame. This volume wishes to contribute to the neoliberalism-feminism debate, starting out from the specific histories and conditions of the region’s countries, and knowing that the statements will not necessarily extend to all countries and all possible topics, processes and aspects.

<sup>1</sup> The Warsaw meeting also included a public event, and the panel debates with several of the authors of this volume are also uploaded: Feminist perspectives on neoliberalism (featuring L’ubica Kobová, Elżbieta Korolczuk, Zofia Łapniewska and Andrea Pető): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXJwQy\\_zBpY&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXJwQy_zBpY&feature=youtu.be), and One or many feminisms? Sisterhood and class solidarity (featuring Kata Ámon, Weronika Grzebalska and Margarita Jankauskaitė): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Krc6R-m7jXw&feature=youtu.be>

The studies in this volume reflect on the structural conditions of human rights activism after the changes of political regimes, including how mainly foreign donors and EU accession have influenced the agenda and strengthened the tendency to focus on a limited range of issues. They reflect on how the “catching up” (or convergence) narrative not only fails to account for the feminist legacy of state socialism, but also fails to acknowledge the place of the region in the global systems of power, or that this narrative renders the cause of gender equality vulnerable as it is linked to attitudes about the EU. And as the EU is mostly a neoliberal project in its current form (some say from its birth), it does not protect from precarisation, so that its proclaimed value-based agenda such as human rights is made co-responsible.

The first three studies define the main problems for the rest of the volume: The first article by Anikó Gregor and Weronika Grzebalska locate the topic on the spectrum of scientific literature with relevance to ECE. The paper of Zofia Łapniewska relies on the political economic study of the political change in Poland when it focuses on feminist economics and what this approach can contrast with the ontology of humans in mainstream economics and how it can do that on the basis of the ethics of care. Elżbieta Korolczuk takes a critical look at the NGO-isation of women’s movements in CEE including professionalization and depoliticisation, related narratives using the example of the Polish women’s movement including initiatives that might become the foundations of new left wing politics.

The second half of the volume contains case studies: It either discusses relations in the context of individual countries like the studies of Ľubica Kobová and Alexandra Ostertagová that examine Slovakia, and Margarita Jankauskaitė that looks at Lithuania. Or (without aspiring to be comprehensive) they break down the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism to discrete groups and pressing social issues. The situation of Romani women (Angéla Kóczé), the situation of women in rural settings (Andrea Czerván), feminist aspects of housing poverty (Kata Ámon), and prostitution (Noémi Katona) stand in the focus of these papers, and they provide convincing arguments that left-wing (women’s) politics must display and address inequalities between women who hold different statuses and control different resources, and build on “solidarity in struggle”. The volume closes with the conclusions of scientific editor Andrea Pető.

The intention of the volume is to show certain perspectives in the debate about the critique of neoliberalism that have been marginalised so far in the region – namely feminist voices, without which there can be no true alternative on the left, assert the authors of this volume. On the other hand, it also intends to provide feminist stakeholders with ammunition in terms of the challenges we have to face in the order that is currently transforming profoundly, and which questions need to be answered.



## „Angst ist keine Weltanschauung”<sup>2</sup>

Fear is not a philosophy. It is important to state this in front of the new challenges and new questions that are posed by the crisis related to gender equality which fits into the context of the several crises the EU is currently facing.

Various grassroots forces, civil society, church and political stakeholders combine forces to question the human rights consensus that came about after the Second World War, and mobilise against what they describe as “gender ideology” (Kováts, Põim & Tánczos 2015, Kováts & Põim eds. 2015). The exploration of these movements has started recently, and many say already that these go beyond a conservative backlash. Many have already started to describe a relationship of causality between this new phenomenon and the crisis of the left and the European Union as a neoliberal project (Chetcuti 2014, Grzebalska 2016, Kováts 2017 forthcoming, Pető 2016, Soltý 2015, Wimbauer et al 2015).

Now it is a mere illusion that this crisis is a passing bad dream, and that liberal progress would return to its usual path. This debate that has been going on since the establishment of the EU about what we call, consider and hope to be common European values has resurfaced in the recent years. It is becoming clearer and clearer that yesterday’s answers will no longer be sufficient, just as interpretations constrained to national contexts in the narrow sense, or rationalistic arguments based on opinion polls or policy approaches are insufficient. Pushing some sort of a “progressive consensus” and hanging on to the achievements of yesterday these are responses motivated by fear. These political pronouncements are motivated by a particular fear: that anything that will come after or instead of the status quo will destroy the political achievements and ways of operating keeping our Union together. In this logic the status quo is always the best of the possible alternatives.

Instead, we need to break out from existing frames, we need to move beyond reactive politics and build a new agenda.

The studies in this volume try to contribute to the understanding of the current crisis from their own particular perspectives, and they also propose alternatives to debate on how emancipatory and emotional responses can be generated that go beyond the techniques of how the next elections can be won. It is clear in this context: it is simply counter-productive to claim to protect the actually existing Europe as it strengthens the exclusionary narratives of the populist right.

## Overcoming false dichotomies

These are, namely, not two worlds that stand face to face with the community of values called ‘progressive’ on the one side, and the unenlightened, barbaric crowd (and their opportunistic politicians encroaching on them) that question the same values on the other.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger: Hammerstein oder der Eigensinn



Liberal progress vs. conservative backlash, being on the right side or wrong side of history, neoliberalism and neo-conservatism – the debate on these is not new, but their aspects become clear as daylight. Be it Brexit (Tycner 2016), the reproductive labour of women (Bajusz 2016), same-sex marriages (Bindel 2014), ideologies in the East-Central European region based on the position in the global order of power (Gagyi 2016),<sup>3</sup> to name but a few – many researchers and activists problematize these dichotomies in their own respective fields throughout Europe.

Thus those that claim that to counter the “progressive consensus” gives leverage to the extremist forces of the populist right fail to see a major issue: the extremists’ success depends on being on the other side of the consensus, on being against the current status quo. To create, protect and claim morally superior a version of Europe and human rights that is unquestionable creates breeding ground for those that claim to represent those outside of our created fortress.

This means that the challenges that leftist and feminist politics face are twofold: Whether they can overcome false dichotomies, and whether they can formulate alternatives that acknowledge the other’s dignity and membership of the same political community. This volume wishes to make a contribution to the debate on these issues.

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<sup>3</sup> Ágnes Gagyi looks at this from the perspective of the dichotomy between democratic antipopulism vs antidemocratic populism.

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## Thoughts on the contested relationship between neoliberalism and feminism

### Neoliberalism: possible definitions and relevance for feminism

As Sylvia Walby argues, “[n]eoliberalism started as a project, which became governmental programme, then an institutionalised social formation” (2011: 21). Similarly, in his work on the history and genealogy of neoliberalism, Thorsen argues that neoliberalism is a set of political beliefs about the required role of the state (both on national and international levels) regarding the (de)regulation of free market; is a belief about the importance of free markets and free trades, and finally, neoliberalism contains a moral perspective that serves to evaluate individuals (2009: 15-16). For example, as a historical comparative overview on the changing language of social policy in Poland and Hungary proves, the neoliberal turn during the transition years was not just economic but also linguistic that significantly strengthened the perception of social policy as something negative and a burden on society (Aczél, Szelewa & Szikra 2015).

Based on these statements neoliberalism can be approached, in our view, in a threefold way. Firstly, neoliberalism refers to a global *economic* system that can be characterized by market deregulation, extensive privatization, tax reduction, severe austerity policies in times of permanent economic crises, and withdrawal of the state interventions in balancing the negative effects of economic decline. Secondly, in a *political*-ideological sense, it also refers to a kind of governance, regime, set of political principles and rules aiming to maintain the existing unequal political and social power relations, the rule of global economic and political elites, techniques that endanger democratic practices and citizens’ participation in and influence over decision making processes. And finally, we argue that besides having an influence over economics and politics, neoliberalism also shapes *social values and culture*. By introducing and promoting the abovementioned economic and political practices it serves as a reference point for notions of values in everyday life, relations in personal interactions, ideas about different social groups and their behaviour. By promoting heavy individualism, it overstates the importance and responsibility of individual decisions on

someone's social position within the existing unequal social structure, without problematizing the structural oppression within the system itself.

But how does feminism come into the picture? As Walby claims (2011: 11), the recent intensification of neoliberalism creates a challenging time for feminism because the effects of neoliberalism (increasing social inequalities, decline of democratic governance) go against its general aims. The problems with gendered effects of austerity policies, feminization of poverty, low income, inappropriate, exploitative and vulnerable working conditions, the double burden of women, difficulties of single female-headed households are also warning signs of the gendered face of neoliberalism and its consequences (Smith 2008: 131-132). However, we should not forget that it can be misleading if we fail to pay attention to these neoliberal forces not having the same consequence for every woman: lower and working class women and other marginalized social groups face these problems more, and social inequality within the group of women itself has been reinforced and intensified. Another, usually less emphasized, aspect highlights the importance of emerging inequalities within the groups of women. As Fodor and Nagy (2014) demonstrated, the global economic crisis which started in 2008 and the austerity policies as a response from national governments had a harsher effect on women living in Eastern Europe compared to their Western counterparts, and thus it widened the social inequality between these groups within the European region. And even Central and Eastern European<sup>1</sup> countries are not homogenous: in their analysis Fodor and Horn (2015) proved that the gender poverty gap is wider in Central and Eastern European countries that feature foreign capital-led economic growth along low level of welfare spending. Neoliberalism is international, and so are its effects. Consequently, feminist reactions to neoliberalism should also be international, but at the same time it should acknowledge the specificities of local settings, special relations between core and (semi-)periphery (Wallerstein 2004) areas etc. For example, by including more literature from our own linguistic background and not narrowing the review down to the most cited and mostly Anglo-Saxon works, we can reshape existing terms and attribute new meanings and explanations to them, as well as avoid the trap of academic self-colonization.

## **Neoliberalism and feminism(s) in the context of East-Central Europe**

In order to account for the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism in East-Central Europe, one has to go back to the two “original sins” of the post-1989 transition. The first one was that the human rights paradigm and the neoliberal stance on economy have come to be viewed as an inseparable package during the transformation in post-communist coun-

<sup>1</sup> This article as well as the whole volume focuses on East-Central Europe (ECE), that is, the Visegrád Group (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) as well as the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). However, we use the term Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) when we refer to a broader category of former communist states in Europe or quote articles that do.

tries. This is not to suggest that human rights and neoliberal reforms have been causal – meaning that one paradigm required the other in order to rise to prominence – but merely that the former served as a “powerless companion” to market fundamentalism (Moyn 2014): both paradigms were implemented simultaneously and often by the same actors, and the dominant understanding of human rights (which focused on individual political rights and civil liberties rather than economic and social rights of groups) made it ineffective in opposing structural disadvantages brought about by neoliberal reforms (Einhorn 2005: 1030). Moreover, the silencing of class conflicts over the nature of economic transition paved way for the populist right to rearticulate the frustration and anger of those who have fallen victim to the erosion of basic social and economic rights in terms of an identity conflict (see e.g. Ost 2007) between the “patriots” embracing traditional values and “traitors” supporting a foreign agenda (e.g. human rights). This division continues to structure the political scene in East-Central Europe where political parties that seemingly appeal to the human rights discourse (even if selectively) tend to be strong proponents of neoliberal reforms (e.g. *Nowoczesna* in Poland, *Smer* in Slovakia or *MSZP* in Hungary), while those opposing feminism and LGBT+ rights (like *PiS*, *SNS* or *Fidesz*) also call for social justice and economic security, as well as reach out to the disenfranchised.

The second “original sin” was that the post-1989 feminist movements in East-Central Europe were largely founded on the negation of the previous socio-economic system, and treated the period of state socialism as an aberration. In the academic realm, this tendency of some scholars to paint an unambiguously negative portrait of communism with respect to women’s emancipation and agency has been addressed in the debate between Nanette Funk (2014, 2015) and the “revisionists” (Ghodsee 2015). While on the one hand, distancing themselves from communism helped feminists in East-Central Europe legitimize the movement among the liberal elites, on the other hand it also made it more compliant with neoliberal reforms, and more likely to draw from Western theories and solutions (e.g. individualism, free choice or flexibility) rather than look to their own recent history for models of empowerment and justice. As Ghodsee (2004) points out, the so-called cultural feminism has been imported to post-socialist countries right after the transition with the support of international organizations and Western aid agencies. Claiming that gender difference is more important than any other structural hierarchy, and patriarchy is almost exclusively responsible for the disadvantageous situation of women, this framework for addressing gender inequality made feminists in the region largely blind to neoliberalism’s role in creating class inequalities among women (and men). In consequence, the dominant strand of feminism in East-Central Europe has been preoccupied with cultural issues (such as stereotypes or media portrayals) rather than economic justice or developing an intersectional stance to oppression (Erbel 2008). While the women’s movement has undergone significant changes since, mainstream feminism, represented e.g. by the Polish Congress of Women, largely remains the voice of the winners of the transition.

## Challenges of neoliberalism to different strands of feminisms

Contemporary branches of feminism differ in the level of their criticism towards different aspects of neoliberalism. Varieties of liberal feminism usually criticize existing gender inequalities, especially on the labour market, and by recognizing the possible force of state in order to make change, for example, through legislation, they push for limited but still significant state intervention. Socialist feminists go further when they directly unveil how the state serves patriarchal capitalist market economy and maintains gendered power relations by assigning women to reproductive roles inside and outside the family through the welfare system (Waylen 1998: 5). This joint critique of state and capitalism from socialist feminists highlights that the relationship between market and state, and political-ideological attributes of state should also be considered when analysing the role the state plays in forming gender relations.

In the last couple of years one can witness the emergence of a new phenomenon called 'neoliberal feminism', represented by prominent female leaders from the corporate environment aiming to displace and mute the more critical liberal feminist voices and to promote neoliberal governance (Rottenberg 2013). The most remarkable difference between neoliberal and liberal feminists is that while the former do not criticize or problematize anything about neoliberalism and the role it plays in creating gender (and other) inequalities (Rottenberg 2013: 2), liberal feminists tend to recognize systemic causes of gender inequality and call for state or other intervention. According to Rottenberg, neoliberal feminists are fully aware of the existing social inequalities between men and women but they claim that these unequal relations can and should be handled individually (2013: 2-3). For instance, someone's inability to break the glass ceiling at her workplace is understood in terms of inefficient techniques and not as a problem that should be handled structurally. This extreme individualization is also problematized by Shelley Budgeon (2015) who criticizes the so-called 'choice feminism' and the idealized notion of "choice" itself. According to her, concepts of 'autonomy' and 'freedom', which played an important role in second-wave feminism, have been emptied and transformed in the neoliberal context. While the concept of 'choice' enabled activists to talk about agency without the application of 'victim paradigm', it also blinded them to the fact that 'choice' is a relational and contextual term, and does not necessarily lead to equality (Budgeon 2015: 3-6). In a social environment which is oppressive and exploitative, it is at least doubtful how someone can make unlimited choices. While women might choose to stay at home, it would be problematic to picture their decision as emancipation in a society where a traditional family model with unpaid female caregiver role is promoted, and alternatives are hindered by structural obstacles such as lack of institutionalized childcare or men's involvement in it.

One prominent representative of neoliberal feminism discussed by Rottenberg is the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, author of *Lean In*. Published in 2013 and translated into many languages, Sandberg's book attracted remarkable attention. The

author's project was more than writing a book and promoting different techniques for making women more successful at their workplaces. Shortly after the publication of the first edition, so-called "Lean In Circles" have been set up all around the world. The aim of these online and offline circles (based on someone's geographical location) is to provide peer counselling and a support network for those who would like to turn theory into practice. On the one hand, these circles connect women who share their similar problems, encourage them to talk about their negative experiences, and they build communities by doing so. On the other, participants of each circle still share a rather homogenous social background, and their "leaning in" projects remain individual without any intention to introduce structural changes, even if they have the resources to do so. There is no common goal, no common interest, no solidarity with others or criticism towards the existing socio-economic system. In spite of all these doubts, we find the general idea of community building fruitful and see it as a possible way to fight against neoliberalism. As argued by Kantola and Squires (2012), while 'neoliberal feminism' helps shape social values and norms, so-called 'market feminism' refers to the way gender equality is framed by increasingly market-oriented women's NGOs as a tool for achieving efficiency, productivity, development – all very important for neoliberal markets. Neoliberal governmentality and cuts of state funding for NGOs significantly changed the context for the politics of state feminism, leading women's NGOs to seek funding in market enterprises and private foundations, and forcing these organizations to adapt to market requirements (efficiency, productivity), and measure their impact with quantitative indicators (Kantola & Squires 2012: 382-383).

How is it possible to change that neoliberal language if it rules the field where these organizations would like to make a change? While one can conclude from the description of neoliberal and market feminism that it was neoliberalism that hijacked the slogans of second-wave feminism, Nancy Fraser (2013) argues that feminism itself has supported neoliberalism by contributing three concrete and important ideas. Firstly, by criticizing the family wage, feminists did not problematize the bad working conditions of many women on the labour market; secondly, by criticizing the paternalist dimensions of the welfare state, they threw the baby out with the bathwater, and provided arguments for the withdrawal of state regulation; and thirdly, by focusing mostly on identity politics, they forgot about social and class equality (for further critiques of feminist shifts towards identity politics see Fraser 1995, Mohanty 2013). Therefore, we argue that feminism should not give in to neoliberalism because then it will lose its revolutionary and system-critical angle, or even worse, it will legitimate existing social inequalities.

### **The concept of work for a feminism that is critical of neoliberalism**

Work has traditionally been understood by economists as paid work performed outside the home – a classic UN definition described it as "gainful employment for pay or profit". In 1993, this definition was expanded to include also the production of goods and services



that meet the family's basic needs and could have been produced in a monetized economy, but still excluded unpaid care work due to its alleged limited impact on the economy (Kabeer 2012). Contrary to these views, Marxist feminists have argued that the division between "paid work" and "housekeeping" is an ideological construction, the sole purpose of which is to exploit women's work and sustain the gendered relations of power. As feminist economists have shown, activities such as procreation, raising children, and family maintenance should be included in the GDP as crucial for the reproduction of the labour force. The recent economic crisis has further revealed the importance of women's care work for the economy. In countries where neoliberal austerity measures were introduced and public services were cut, it was women's unpaid work that filled the deficit (see e.g. Finnegan et al. 2016). For example in Hungary, as Szikra argues, a continuity can be perceived between the former socialist-liberal government (2006-2010) and the ruling conservative government (2010-) in how both have used neoliberal austerity measures to handle the effects of the crisis, leading to a deepening of already existing gender inequalities (Szikra 2013). But while feminists generally agree about questioning the gendered division of labour and the need to raise the status of care work, they have differing views on how to do it. Some argue that remunerating women for their work is the answer, while others say that emotions and care should not be monetized, and point to the fact that caring is a complex problem involving both love and labour, and should not be reduced solely to work (Finch and Groves 1983). Likewise, feminists also have different approaches towards paid work. While many view it as a sphere of women's empowerment, crucial to achieving equality with men, others underline the role class differences play in shaping women's experience of work. While work might be empowering for those privileged, most women work in low pay and low security industries, and have to reconcile paid labour with care work performed at home. Therefore, some authors (Elgarte 2008; Artner 2014: 113) advocate for such tools as the basic income, seeing it as a possible way of liberating both men and women from a certain amount of paid work, challenging the gendered division of unpaid work, and providing financial independence to women thus leading to a more gender just society.

### **Challenging neoliberalism, populism and the illiberal state**

It can be argued that the post-Washington Consensus neoliberal turn has led to the weakening of the state in domains crucial from the point of view of ordinary citizens such as health care, pension systems or education, while at the same time strengthening the state in areas necessary for the functioning of the global markets, e.g. policing, guaranteeing administrative and procedural regularity and keeping the budget deficit stable. The result has been a state that is weak for the strong and strong for the weak – one that is lenient towards big business and international corporations and, at the same time, increasingly unable to guarantee citizens' basic economic and social rights, thus leading to growing social insecurity and decline in political participation. Against this background, the populist

right has emerged across Europe as the most vocal proponent of strengthening the nation state and increasing citizens' economic security, putting forth such slogans as support for workers and unions, economic transfers to families, taxation of foreign-owned sectors, or nationalization of crucial branches of the economy. In some countries (e.g. Russia, Turkey, Hungary, Poland), transition to a free market economy even gave rise to a new form of state which, to different extents, combines free market and private freedoms with the curtailment of public freedoms and robust nationalism (Ignatieff 2015). But while the populist right has been very successful in identifying key social concerns of today in these countries, and mobilizing electorate around these issues, the solutions it prescribes are often inadequate and accompanied by the closing down of society. In Hungary, for example, inequalities have been growing steadily despite various legal and fiscal reforms aimed at strengthening the state, with the most vulnerable becoming increasingly oppressed (Krémer 2014). Therefore, it is important to note that neoliberal capitalism can be successfully embraced without liberal democratic standards or dedication to social justice. After all, as, Zygmunt Bauman (2010) reminds us, the real quality of the state should be measured by the status of its weakest members.

In order to oppose both neoliberalism and right-wing populism, progressives need to start addressing these same fears and insecurities that the right has exploited, but offer a set of comprehensive reforms instead of ad hoc populist solutions or cultural wars. Firstly, there is a need to implement redistribution policies which could counter the effects of austerity measures and other neoliberal reforms. Secondly, the state should invest in high-quality public services which would ensure the wellbeing of the most vulnerable members of our society. Thirdly, the state should equally guard civil and political rights, and economic and social ones such as those provided by the labour code. Otherwise the socio-political system will serve the privileged at the expense of the masses. While a lot can be done to oppose neoliberalism on the national level, it is also important to acknowledge that in the current era any single national country has limited capabilities to resist the globalized economic system. Therefore, in order to curb phenomena such as the exploitation of local markets and resources by corporations, speculations on financial markets or tax avoidance by wealthy businesses, nation states need to unite and implement global (or at least EU-level) measures such as common fiscal policy or financial markets regulations. Therefore, the answer to neoliberalism is pushing for reforms on the EU-level and strengthening transnational cooperation rather than Euro-scepticism proposed by the right.

### **Possibilities for progressive politics**

Progressive politics should not focus solely on class inequalities (if it pays any attention to it) but should recognize how different social hierarchies intersect to create new forms of inequalities. Most prominent representatives of national progressive parties in the region, although to varying degrees, but still remained largely gender blind. Parties that claim to

fight against social inequality cannot even address gender inequalities within their own party structures (eg. see women's formal political underrepresentation within party structures, lack of efficient gender quotas), not to mention the gendered consequences of neoliberalism on inequalities. Self-criticism can be the first step for these parties towards reclaiming their political credibility.

Progressive political actors should not only be self-critical of their own gender blindness but should also apply a critical lens to progressive politics on the international level. First, they need to realize that the European Union is predominantly an international economic-monetary alliance, and as such it reproduces social inequalities on both local and global levels while it carries a responsibility towards its citizens and should promote and expand social rights. For instance, Anna Elomäki (2015) argues that EU policy documents of the last 30 years prove that macroeconomic benefits of gender equality were more and more propagated in the discursive frames, and lately they legitimized neoliberal economic policies that caused harmful effects on gender equality. As also Barbara Einhorn argues, the accession of post-socialist states to the EU was predominantly “a process of economic alignment and integration” (2005: 1025), and this prioritizing of the economy over socio-cultural issues practically dominated the whole process. If progressives do not critically address the neoliberal policies of the EU, other, EU-sceptical or outright anti-EU political formations will do so.

Moreover, progressives should be engaged in different forms of political mobilization of the most disadvantaged social groups. This role in repoliticization is crucial in the battle against neoliberalism, since neoliberalism successfully depoliticizes citizens and represses resistance. If progressive political groups can transfer topics exiled to the ‘private’ sphere back to the public arena, they will be able to find new topics, new problems, new discourses, new solidarity links, and maybe new solutions as well. In this sense, progressives in East-Central Europe should pay attention to Southern European democratic political groups that have been formed recently and managed to successfully mobilize many people by problematizing negative effects of neoliberalism.

### **Towards an inclusive politics against neoliberalism?**

On a theoretical level, in order for social movements against neoliberalism to be truly inclusive, they need to employ a complex rather than reductionist understanding of social justice – one that includes issues of redistribution, recognition and political representation all at once (Fraser 2003). For instance, the privileging of the so-called “big issues” such as corporate power and class inequalities at the expense of gender, racial, class and sexual oppression – as is still the case in various leftist movements – could at best lead to the re-suscitation of the “patriarchal welfare state”, in which the protection of citizens’ social and economic well-being is accompanied by different forms of female subjugation (Pateman 1988). That being said, in their quest to mobilize wide support and to not scare away potential allies, social movements might face a need to change their language and develop

new, less contentious ways of addressing issues such as gender equality. This is especially important in East-Central European countries where a big part of the society combines “leftist” views on economy, that is, dedication to welfare state and economic redistribution, with deeply conservative and traditionalist views on women’s and minority rights (for Poland see e.g. the report by Public Opinion Research Centre CBOS 39/2015). On a more practical level of the functioning of social movements, participatory democratic processes within the movement should be supported, and “norms of inclusivity” should be implemented which help the various actors reach consensus without denying the existence of differences between them. As argued by Weldon (2006) in her analysis of a successful Global Movement against Gender Violence, these norms may include “a commitment to descriptive representation, the facilitation of separate organization for disadvantaged social groups, and a commitment to building consensus with institutionalized dissent” (Weldon 2006: 56). Another thing feminist academics, policy makers and journalists can do is making sure that they approach various issues in a way in which gender difference does not overshadow other important differences. E.g. instead of talking about the situation of the “average woman” and “average man”, as is often the case in statistics, we should talk about different groups of women and design policies accordingly. Other inclusive practices include dialogue between actors representing different ideological positions (see Kováts 2015) and alliance-building, both being of crucial importance in the face of political fragmentation and right-wing ascendancy. Despite the general shift from “unity” towards “difference” in the theory and practice of social movements, with the New Left being repeatedly criticized for concealing various inequalities under the banner of solidarity based on (false) commonality, we believe the concept of “solidarity” should not be neglected but rather redefined so that it acknowledges positionality. After all, fragmented fights against “neoliberal neo-patriarchy” (Campbell 2015: 72) cannot be effective, and the concept and practice of solidarity is needed more than ever.

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ZOFIA ŁAPNIEWSKA

## First-world aspirations and feminism translocation: In search of economic and leftist alternatives<sup>1</sup>

Although being one of the most primitive systems of classification in social sciences, a division of the world into three regions (Sachs 1976) stuck to the social imagination of the Soviet Bloc inhabitants and other regions for years.<sup>2</sup> The three-world concept appears to have originated with a French demographer Alfred Sauvy who used it for the first time in 1952 (Purvis 1976). Ever since then, the interests and biases of the Western civilization towards socialist societies of the Eastern Bloc were named, and the *signified* (after Ferdinand de Saussure 1959) of the “second-world” was used essentially until the end of the Cold War. In this mental shortcut, the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries were perceived as backward, polluted, and characterised by a shortage economy and controlled by Moscow (Berend 2009). Even though in the popular *imaginarium* (after Jacques Lacan 1996) every inhabitant of the “first-world” had full access to its resources and luxuries, we know today that equality of classes was not, and still isn’t, an attribute of capitalism and that the post-war affluence in the United States of America and Western Europe was a direct outcome of government spending and high taxes – both emblematic of Keynesian economics. A system essentially based on redistribution, providing all the inhabitants with equal opportunities in social and political life, turned in Western countries in the 1980s into a free market system, mainly through the influence of the Chicago school of economics (Perkins 2005, Klein 2007: 7). Milton Friedman’s “Capitalism and Freedom” (2002[1962]) was an inspiration not only to conservatives in the United States and Tories in the United Kingdom, but also to many economists in the CEE countries (Kowalik 2009, Balcerowicz 2014).

<sup>1</sup> This is a translation of my article written in Polish that is currently under review in an academic journal.

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I am focusing on those Soviet Bloc countries which transformed into Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the 1980s, i.e. on the “second-world” perspective, with particular attention to Poland. I admit, though, that an analysis of the way particular regions of the world are perceived by other regions as well as the images and narratives generated by cold-war media and propaganda is quite interesting and could potentially be the subject of research in the future.

A promise of freedom in the title was the main cause of the radical neoliberal shift in Poland in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Tadeusz Kowalik (2009: 25-41) explains that the change originated with a surge of anti-regime sentiment among individuals associated with the Solidarity movement (previously operating illegally for eight years), their naive “trust in the benefits of the free market” and the “enfranchisement of *nomenklatura*”, i.e. emergence of private companies based on the resources of state-owned companies and the individuals previously in managerial positions becoming directors in the newly-established companies. The massive transfer of state property into private hands and – as Kowalik puts it – “clientelist and corruption-prone beginnings of Polish capitalism” were examined by a number of intellectuals (Kuroń and Żakowski 1997, Kowalik 2009). Polish capitalism is not, however, merely a large-scale privatisation process or surrendering to the prescriptions of the Washington Consensus (Williamson 1989) implemented by Leszek Balcerowicz in less than six months – a practice now known as “shock therapy” (Klein 2007). First-world aspirations of the CEE countries also included permitting freedom of speech, respecting human rights and building a democracy. These values were referred to by grant-making bodies and moneylenders such as the World Bank (Central and Eastern European Program (ECEP) established in 1989 (WB 1990)), International Monetary Fund (offering loans aimed at assisting integration of planned economies with capitalist ones (Stone 2002)), U.S. Agency for International Development (offering programs that promoted strong market economies as well as developing institutions that strengthen democracy (USAID 1999)), or European Funds (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies and Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States). I could venture a hypothesis that during the transformation, the funds that found their way into NGOs, including women’s organizations, were comparable to the “hearts & minds” strategy carried out by soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan (Polman 2011: 198-199). In the case of post-Soviet states, the role of “soldiers” was played by American advisors who implemented draconian prescriptions of the aforementioned Washington Consensus on the one hand and, on the other, were “fixing roofs and handing out candy”, meaning they were talking about democratisation and women’s rights. Were they truly the first to mention these aspects?

In this chapter I examine the attractive and troublesome translocation of feminism to Poland and other CEE countries. This process was bound up with neoliberal thought and the “first world” aspirations discussed above, on the one hand, yet it brought up the questions of immense importance to women (e.g. discrimination or violence), on the other. The struggle for women’s rights as well as the operation of women’s movement in the CEE countries with reference to neoliberalism is discussed briefly in the following part of the chapter. My observations of economic reality and the strengthening conservative mood of public opinion in some countries of the CEE region encouraged me to include possible alternatives to the current policy directions later in this paper. Therefore, the remaining sections are devoted to feminist economics and necessary social and cultural changes –



that the new left needs to consider in order to curb the tendency of a massive conservative “turn to the right” in the CEE countries and improve women’s lives.

### **Feminism and neoliberal thought in Poland and in CEE**

The first feminist initiatives in Poland, introduced by Professor Renata Siemieńska among others, took place in the late 1970s (Penn 2005: 77). They were informal actions undertaken mostly by groups of women students and academic teachers who criticised both the government and the “Solidarity” resistance movement. Women associated with “Solidarity” did not belong to these groups because, as Shana Penn observes, until a Women’s Division was created in 1989, a lot of them “would never think of asserting feminist values” (Penn 2003: 255). The emphasis on traditional, conservative values pertaining to family also resulted from the involvement of catholic church with the opposition. Penn also mentions that “in their own company, the young men and women treated one another with respect which helped them survive tough times. (...) These people created a political family, a community, their own specific enclave. Such was the class of ‘68” (2003: 250). Wanda Nowicka adds that “(i)f someone would tell me then about the problem of sexism, I would not consider it the most important issue. I was convinced that the most important struggles were those for freedom and independence, other issues left for later” (Penn 2003: 253). The first official feminist organizations were established only after the “Law on Associations” had taken effect in 1989. Although not every association and foundation established in the 1990s in the CEE countries can be characterised in the same manner as it was done by Kristen Ghodsee in her “Feminism-by-Design” article (2004), a number of aspects were interpreted correctly. Indeed, many single women’s organizations and whole networks operating in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland or Ukraine)<sup>3</sup> received funds from agencies mentioned above, presenting matter and carrying out projects that conformed to the views of sponsors (cf. Gal and Kligman 2000). The projection of the western model of feminism, called “cultural feminism” by Ghodsee (2004), was associated with the introduction of “gender assessments”, creating “gender action plans” and pursuing the strategy of “gender mainstreaming”, coupled with pathologizing women’s position and their lives in the Real-socialist era (Charkiewicz 2007). Even today, many people in the region misunderstand the term “gender” and perceive feminism as an alien and undesirable ideology which, admittedly, does frequently challenge religious doctrine. On the other hand, a considerable number of women scholars, NGOs, women politicians and activists identify with feminist demands. They call for a bigger representation of women in politics (only one woman – Grażyna Staniszevska – took part

<sup>3</sup> I was working for one of such networks operating in the region in the years 2004-08. The network has an office in Poland, therefore my considerations concern mostly Polish women’s organisations, but due to my close cooperation with other women’s organisations in CEE, some of my observations also cover other countries.

in the 1989 Polish Round Table Talks as an official representative), in managerial positions in both private and public sectors, equal pay for equal work and a more equal division of unpaid housework among household residents. Not everyone in Poland applauded the growing influence of catholic church after 1989 and mass protests against penalization of abortion (even though a call for a referendum on that issue was signed by 1.7 million people, the lower house of the Polish parliament did not even consider it (Borejza 2006)) indicated that a lot of people were concerned with women's issues. Topics such as domestic violence, rape, trafficking, mobbing and discrimination, dismissed or suppressed until 1989, now found their way into public space. Although these concerns are presented pejoratively as "essentializing themes" by some American scholars (e.g. Cerwonka 2008: 819), they were of colossal importance to many women in the region. Unfortunately, emphasising the idea of a monolithic identity of women without taking individual differences into account, with gender regarded as superior to other components of identity (among others things, such as age, disability, rurality, ethnicity, and socio-economic location) and the neoliberal rhetoric of a "self-made man" as the only progressive and proper course of development, was becoming more and more apparent. The same process was taking place across the Atlantic, widely criticised by left-wing feminists who opposed "'negotiation within' capitalism" (Cotter 2002). In an interview by Monika Bobako (Fraser 2008), Nancy Fraser details some of the changes she observed: "(m)ovements such as feminism, though initially trying to combine social and cultural demands, were quietly turning their attention to the latter. What little remained of the new left transformed into movements seeking recognition and started gravitating towards politics of identity" (Fraser 2008: 52-53). Demonizing the "socialism" era also resulted in negating its achievements such as striving for full employment, granting women access to prestigious occupations such as judges, professors and physicians as well as guaranteeing government assistance in caring for dependents (access to day care, preschools and medical facilities). In accordance with the tenets of competition and effectiveness, in the name of the same arguments, in which the benefits of the welfare state were introduced, namely social justice and legality (after Zygmunt Bauman 2006: 99), the dismantlement of public services began in the CEE countries. In the popular consciousness it became common to believe that persons who did not use these services should not pay taxes on them, e.g. public health system or social assistance (e.g. alimony fund). The perception of this new approach as "just", ignored the fact that the system is based on social solidarity, and the poor and the disadvantaged are not at fault. Commenting on the introduction of an anti-abortion law in Poland and the state alimony fund being discontinued, Katarzyna Szumlewicz states: "Poland has become a proverbial 'women's hell' in which feminist movements do not fight for some equality paradise and female self-fulfilment, but have to demand that the very basic women's rights are respected, and not, as it has been since 1989, consistently stripped away" (2004: 231). At the same time, women from Central and Eastern Europe had to struggle against an image of them being

backward and conservative people, failures of the transformation. That was one of the reasons the emphasis was being put on booming entrepreneurship of women, even though this trend of switching to self-employment was a direct result of mass layoffs. In the meantime, the media promoted the image of a modern woman as an emancipated, flexible and rich consumer who, thanks to new technologies (mobile phones and laptops gaining in popularity), could be glued to her professional work 24 hours a day. In Poland, women's organizations also expressed their support for women entrepreneurs (e.g. candidacy of Henryka Bochniarz, the president of the Polish Confederation of Private Employers Lewiatan, for the president of the country in 2005) and for attempts at reshaping women's skill sets to meet the demands of free market economy. A quick examination of the titles of the Congress of Women panels, organised in Warsaw since 2009, is quite telling. Little attention is paid to women socially and economically excluded, or those involved in labour unions, almost as if women's movement was an equivalent to non-governmental organizations. Annual *Manifas* in Poland are organised by informal groups, bringing together members of academia as well as activists from leftist, anarchist, labour and women's organizations. The organizations themselves change as well, many women managers having leftist views, support nurses and midwives in their protests or back the establishment of labour unions for supermarket workers. Today, some of the feminist organizations have also a different attitude towards economic change. They are critical of the process of competing for grants they are involved in, as well as the ideology behind funding for particular projects, the distribution of which depends on a party's whim. The involvement of parties, in connection to the continuing since 2012 "war on gender" controversy, does not work to the advantage of feminist organizations. Further, a turn to the right can be seen not only in Poland, but also in Slovakia, Hungary and Western European countries such as Germany or France (The Economist 2014). There are many reasons for this shift. It is partially attributed to a crisis of symbolic identity among the inhabitants of these countries, torn between conservatism and fluent modernity (Žižek 2009: 40). It is also connected with the fear of minorities perceived as threatening the (imagined) purity and unity of European nations (Appadurai 2009). Now the processes of stereotyping and drawing lines between "us" and "them", which serve the consolidation of the subjectivity of right-wing groups, intensified after refugees from Syria and other Global-South countries were allowed to cross over into Western Europe. Finally, the change resulted from a fierce opposition to a "modern and western" neoliberal-style progress. And these are the circumstances in which feminist economics can be of assistance.

### **Feminist economics as an alternative to the dominant economic thought**

Feminist economics, as one of heterodox approaches to economics, is a criticism of and an alternative to the mainstream economic trend that is currently neoclassical economics, also known as neoliberal economics. In Central and Eastern Europe academics use the

theoretical and empirical works of people connected with, among others, “Feminist Economics” Journal, giving lectures on gender and conducting research projects in the region (Petrová et al. 1995, Łapniewska 2014). The most important feature of their work is moral and political judgement of described phenomena from the feminist epistemology point of view, on which the adopted methodology is also based (it combines quantitative and qualitative methods). Feminist economists oppose the “rational, economic man” model (Nelson 1996) set at the core of economic analyses and instead they call for the inclusion of women as subjects and objects of economic inquiries. At the same time they avoid treating women as a homogenous group, but through the intersectional approach (Hankivsky 2012, Łapniewska 2015) they recognise their diverse socio-economic status, belief, age, disability, psychosexual orientation, ethnic origin, support within their local environment and other elements of identity. In addition, they focus on areas traditionally disregarded in macro-economic accounts. For example, projects that described unpaid women’s work and concentrated on gender budgeting were conducted among others in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland (Outlá 2007, Łapniewska et al. 2013). Feminist economists focus as well on reformulating macroeconomic goals in such a way as to be guided by the ethics of care (Tronto 1995). Such approach emphasises interpersonal relationships, reciprocal responsibilities and the importance of building social and emotional bonds with other people as the prerequisites of one’s development and well-being, contrary to the assumption of mainstream economics that everyone strives to maximise their profits only. Feminist economics concentrates on sustainable development and creating equal opportunities for participation and well-being for current and future generations instead of bolstering quick economic growth here and now.

In my opinion, the most serious challenges posed by neoliberalism that the CEE countries have to face are consumerism and individualism. Feminist economics is well equipped to address these challenges. Consumerism opposes welfare state not only by demanding tax cuts and creating the illusion of choice of products (the state does not offer), but above all – it creates the *homo economicus* attitude, focusing solely on one’s own interest. In this respect all the solidarity systems such as healthcare or education, which should serve everyone no matter their financial standing, are now undermined because of their “communist origin”. Zygmunt Bauman indicates that the social security services were created because people were not convinced that they would not find themselves in a difficult situation (2006). However, as Eva Illouz points out in her book “Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism”, in our times one can sense an overwhelming influence of “a narrative of identity which promotes, now more than ever, an ethos of resourcefulness” (Illouz 2007: 42), therefore neither state support nor social networks are needed. Another factor that contributes to that process is therapeutic discourse, which has gained widespread media coverage. It has “incorporated one of the major – if not the major – narratives of identity, namely the narrative of getting by” (2007: 43). In the CEE countries this narrative has been

enhanced through the struggle against the image of “failures of the transformation” as well as against the ghost of the passive *homo sovieticus* (Zinoviev 1985). These struggles are counterproductive, as it was aptly observed by Elizabeth Dunn: those “(b)asic rules that determine what it means to be a person – an individual, ‘accountable’, responsible, self-managing person – mean that many workers blame themselves, not their firms or the national economy, when they are being disciplined at work or sacked” (2004: 7). In many Central and Eastern European countries the view “winner takes all” was uncritically embraced. The outcome, as one could expect, is that guilt never enters the minds of employers when they are exploiting workers and refuse to share the profits with them (Piński 2016). At the same time these workers, exploited as they may be, cannot count on trade unions support, as unions are either persecuted (employers hinder their activities) or their creation is “unofficially” forbidden (employers threaten employees with dismissal if they attempt to establish one).

Feminist economics accepts vulnerability and describes people’s interrelationships, including care that is required or provided, so that societies could reproduce and everyone would have an opportunity to live a good life (Elson 1998, Budlender and Sharp 1998). Rejecting the “choice” approach by feminist economists (who has a choice after all? the excluded?) in order to guarantee equal rights serves the primary goal of feminist economics – having a real influence on policy change and being able to improve women’s lives. This is the reason behind feminist economics going beyond monetary calculations and referring to such notions as freedom, participation, quality of life, meaning, diversity or ecology (Goodwin et al. 2005, Power 2004). It is probably quite obvious at this point that the focus areas of feminist economics correspond closely to traditionally leftist economy programs and so – they are far from free-market solutions. In Poland, however, some of these programs, after the disappointment with the social-democratic party (SLD)<sup>4</sup>, have been hijacked by the catholic church and its followers in conservative parties, and those parties now proclaim a return to a strong welfare state. Obviously, it is an outcome of, among others, the aforementioned political make-up from the era of Polish People’s Republic in which the catholic church played a vital role. Yet, it is very upsetting that today the only opposition against conservatives comes from the neoliberal parties such as Civic Platform

<sup>4</sup> A large number of SLD members are former members of the Communist Party and throughout all these years since 1989, they have not been able to create a clear ideological identity (Borecki 2009). In addition, President Aleksander Kwaśniewski (SLD), supported by the leftist Council of Ministers and the leftist parliament at that time, sent troops to Iraq in 2003 despite massive protests in the country, which then continued for years. Contrary to their campaign promises, before Poland joined the EU in 2004, to gain favour with the Polish Episcopate, SLD abandoned their legislative efforts to liberalise the anti-abortion law. Also, one year after the government had changed, a scandal broke (called Oleksy gate) surrounding a recording of a conversation between former leftist prime minister Józef Oleksy and Aleksander Gudźowaty, a wealthy entrepreneur. Prime minister maintained that, among other people, president Kwaśniewski gained some of his fortune illegally. He continued to cast aspersions upon his party, stating that it was SLD who introduced capitalism in Poland and that party members never had the interest of the country at heart, caring only about their own private issues. There was no hope in rebuilding trust in the institutional left in Poland. There are no left-wing representatives in Polish parliament today.

(*Platforma Obywatelska*) and Modern (*Nowoczesna*). They may have a liberal outlook on life, but they are sure to take the welfare system apart even further.

### Awaiting the new left

Not everyone equated “first-world” aspirations of Poland and other CEE countries with transforming their economies into a market economy as proposed by anglo-saxon countries. Kowalik describes a visit to Stockholm from a study group of the Economic Advisory Council (*Konsultacyjna Rada Gospodarcza*) to the Polish government in January and February 1989 (2009: 110-112). Despite the fact that the Council wrote a 700-page report “giving a quite detailed description of how Poland can make use of this country’s experiences” (ibid.), the document went public only in June 1989, which was after the Polish Round Table Agreement. The Agreement itself, especially the “New Economic Order” project (Salamonowicz 1989: 14-18) which was based on self-government and worker participation among other things, was quietly dismissed as Poland “dove into the free market” (Kowalik 2009: 110). Cooperation and participation is not a novel concept in Poland. It was mentioned as early as during the Partitions period by Edward Abramowski (1907), and Andrzej Leder brings up the example of farmers from the former Prussian Partition territories who insisted on creating cooperatives in the interwar period (Leder 2014: 138-139). The idea of community was crushed after the Second World War as belonging to various cooperatives became obligatory. For the same reason the aversion to State Agricultural Farms, reinforced during the transformation period, lasts to this very day. Meanwhile, and quite contrary to this image, in the past couple of years over 1200 social cooperatives were established in Poland (MRPiPS 2014) and this continued fast-paced growth of this sector should be applauded and backed both by the new left and feminist economists in the region.

Another issue that largely went unnoticed, but now is steadily gaining in popularity in the world, is governing the commons that remain outside the traditional division into private and state-owned. These goods and services (commons) take a variety of forms, from abandoned spaces (e.g. parks) to services exchange in so-called time banks (called *Tauschkreise* or *Tauschringe* in Germany (Wagner 2009)). Silvia Federici, mentioning the feminist dimension of creating care commons, states that they can be the foundation for a new method of management (Federici 2012). This focus by the new left on cooperation as well as on governing the commons (including participatory budgets) would undoubtedly form a new trend which, apart from the obvious strengthening of the welfare state, would aid the process of building a coherent identity.

Slavoj Žižek insists that the left needs to stand out and cannot be blackmailed by neoliberals into cooperation just because there is the need to fend off conservatives (Žižek 2009: 41). The areas that feminist economics concentrates on could well be the elements that would differentiate the left from the rest of the political spectrum. We also need to acknowledge that thus far the person at the centre of left-wing discussions was a man

and, as it is pointed out by Ewa Majewska and Janek Sowa, “neither the rights of women and sexual minorities nor battling social inequalities caused by a rapid and ruthless transition to market-oriented economy did ever attract the attention of the ‘left-wing’ parties” (Majewska and Sowa 2007: 18). There is progress in that matter, one example being the creation of Together party (*Razem*), in the fashion of Spanish *Podemos* or Greek *Syriza*. Together does not essentialise women and cares about their interests being represented.

There is also an obvious need for the left (and feminism) in Poland to reinforce those symbols which go beyond the omnipresent and solidified in the social *imaginarium* mantra “god, honour, fatherland”. These symbols would also be helpful in all the battles over values which keep storming through the parliament, their purpose being to serve as a smoke-screen for important social and economic problems. Maria Janion argues that in order to achieve that, the symbolic sphere needs to be transformed and it is necessary to develop bonds and foster solidarity among women (Janion 2009). The need for this solidarity is affirmed by Marta Frej, an artist: “if you take demonstrations on women’s issues – on tightening the anti-abortion laws, on mothers of handicapped children, on mothers-entrepreneurs whose maternity benefits were to be cut down dramatically, on alimony dodgers – or the protests of violence victims. How many women feel solidarity with other women?” (Frej 2016: 10). Unfortunately, not that many. Leder (2015) also points to equality and freedom as concepts upon which one could build social capital and which could become the basis for shaping a modern Polish identity. He believes that such voices may be heard once conservative symbolism is drained and then compromised (Leder 2015: 23). However, the ideas alone will not suffice. As Illouz puts it, “cultural ideas are weak if they exist solely in our minds. They have to crystallise around objects, rituals of interaction and institutions” (2010: 72). Thus, solidarity, equality and freedom mentioned above can remain empty signifiers unless they contribute to the creation of new secular communities and ties between women. Such groups may re-define identity symbols and create new ones, which could be reflected in public space (in the form of monuments, names of the streets etc.) and institutions (e.g. changes in education programmes, law, economic policies). Only then there is a chance for change that would guarantee equal rights for men and women as well as unrestrained participation in social and economic life. Perhaps thanks to the new leftist grassroots movements it will one day become a reality.

## Conclusion

The inspiration for this chapter came from a series of publications about women’s organizations and academic feminism in the time of political change in the CEE countries, authored mainly by American women scholars. Since I did not agree with some of the claims which they had made, I decided to weave my voice into the existing series of publications on this subject. In this chapter I trace the origins of Polish capitalism, linking it with the “first world” aspirations and separating it from the initial feminism translocation that took



place in the 1970s. Later, I described the political changes invoked by neoliberalism in the 1990s in the CEE countries and the recent consolidation of conservative groups. Also, witnessing the current “turn to the right” in many European countries, I decided to combine deliberations on feminist economics with a vision for the new left which, because of the historical and social context, has to overcome many difficulties. The struggle over symbols I described pertains first and foremost to Poland – an essential fact, considering that every country in the region is different and, in accordance with the standpoint theory, the narrations created by women of all the “second-world” countries are important. In my view, it is also high time to rid ourselves of the “second-world” complex and stop making comparisons with others. Instead, we should relish the comfort of our own space that we can shape, women and men as equals, using feminism as an idea that undergoes transculturation, meaning it can be adapted and used according to our specific context (Pratt 1992: 6). There is a pressing need for women solidarity here. Finally, we have to remember that the concept of feminism refers to more than just gender identity, as Fraser cautions us: “(in) the United States, for instance, feminists and multiculturalism advocates kept having their myopic discussions on identity and difference, essentialism and antiessentialism, and in the meantime neoliberals and christian fundamentalists, united in a grim alliance, were taking over the country!” (Fraser 2008: 59)

*Translation: Stefan Łapniewski*

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## Neoliberalism and feminist organizing: from “NGO-ization of resistance” to resistance against neoliberalism

This article engages with feminist critiques of neoliberalism, specifically with the influential narrative about the NGO-ization of women’s movement and co-optation of feminism by neo-liberalism (Charkiewicz 2009, Fraser 2011, McRobbie 2009). It argues that while the vision of the feminist actors as “the handmaidens” of neoliberalism accurately captures some aspects of contemporary feminist organizing, it obfuscates others, especially new and original forms of resistance taking place beyond the perimeters of what is usually included in the “Western” context (Aslan and Gambetti 2011, Funk 2012). I discuss some examples of the struggles against neoliberal logic and practices in the Polish context, arguing that while there has been a strong trend towards professionalization and de-politization of civic activism in the country, we can observe a growing resistance against this tendency during the last decade. The paper concludes with discussing various forms of anti-neoliberal women’s organizing highlighting the opportunities and risks involved in employing them in the context of the local and transnational struggles.

### **Feminism as the handmaiden of neoliberalism**

Neoliberal changes such as the gradual dismantling of welfare services, the precarization of working and living conditions, the privatization of social services such as health care and education have affected women’s (and men’s) lives in all parts of the world, albeit in different ways (Ong 2006, Charkiewicz and Mazurkiewicz 2009b). Neoliberalism operates at the intersection of global and local trends, and it entails a set of austerity policies, an unregulated flow of money and goods as well as an imperial politics of economic domination. It is also a social and cultural phenomenon, which introduces extreme forms of commodification and individualism. It entails „specific alignments of market rationality, sovereignty and citizenship” (Ong 2006), deeply transforming social relations and value systems (Fraser 2009). Thus, as Gregor and Grzebalska argue in this volume, neoliberalism should be regarded as an economic system, a governance regime and cultural change.

The hegemony of “neoliberal political rationality” (McRobbie 2009) has made the fight for gender and social justice even more difficult than before, posing fundamental challenges to feminist organizing and theorizing. Most feminist thinkers and activists agree that neoliberalism – as ideology and as practice – is one of the biggest challenges that contemporary women’s movements face. According to some of them, however, (Western) feminism has not only failed to counteract this trend, but has played an important role in the project of corporate globalization (Ghodsee 2004, Fraser 2011, McRobbie 2009).

In a widely commented essay in *New Left Review* Fraser claims that “the cultural changes jump-started by the second wave, salutary in themselves, have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society” (2009: 99). She points out that second-wave feminist critiques of the “economism”, “etatism”, “androcentrism” and “Westphalianism” of the state-organized capitalism in the Western world have been re-signified and used to legitimize new forms of capitalism, and that the majority of feminists activists and scholars have taken part in that process as they have focused on the cultural and political dimensions of gender injustice instead of the economic ones, supporting the process of NGO-ization, which in turn led to the depoliticizing of women’s movements. As a result, “in a fine instance of the cunning of history, utopian desires found a second life as feeling currents that legitimated the transition to a new form of capitalism: post-Fordist, transnational, neoliberal.” (Fraser 2009: 99).

Fraser’s powerful critique of the “dangerous liaison” between feminism and neoliberalism intends to apply to second-wave feminism as a whole, “as an epochal social phenomenon” (2009: 97) but it appears to capture mostly the influence of the “West” (or “global North”), failing to reflect different trends within feminist struggles worldwide. Her view has been challenged as based on misinterpretation of the second wave of feminism in its regional diversity, and as reflecting oversimplification of the current situation in different parts of the world (Aslan and Gambetti 2011, Funk 2012). According to Nannette Funk the problem with Fraser’s conclusions is that she over-emphasizes second-wave feminist critiques of state-capitalism, as well as over-generalizes from some women’s organizations and groups, usually located in the Western countries, to feminism(s) generally (2011: 14). Funk demonstrates that neither was the second-wave generally anti-capitalist or did it challenge the welfare state system, nor is contemporary feminism completely NGO-ized. Some scholars point out that Fraser’s intent to offer a more general view and take a broad look at second wave feminism results in a “negligence of the incredibly original, antisystemic forms of resistance emerging from the global South” (Aslan and Gambetti 2011). The same goes for East-Central Europe (ECE), where feminist movements are neither homogenous, nor overly de-politicized and NGO-ized (Grabowska 2012, Regulska and Grabowska 2013, Korolczuk and Saxonberg 2014).

## **The potential of feminist politics in critical response to neoliberalism: the case of Poland**

Discussing the specificity of feminist movements in ECE, scholars often assert that the characteristics of local organizing reflect transnational developments, following the trend towards internationalization of the Anglo-Saxon version of feminism (Ghodsee 2004) and/or global hegemony of the neoliberal logic (Charkiewicz and Zachorowska Mazurkiewicz 2009b). After 1989 many Polish activists and scholars followed their liberal sisters and/or donors in the Western world, focusing mostly on cultural and political aspects of gender discrimination, and promoting the idea that the key to gender equality is political representation and fighting stereotypes. As Kristen Ghodsee points out “the particular brand of cultural feminism that has been exported to the post-socialist countries since 1989 favours an essentialist concept of gender over any social explanations for women’s growing inequality with men” while disregarding emerging class distinctions between women and men, and growing inequalities in a wider society (2004: 731). Arguably, the tendency to focus on a limited range of issues concerning gender equality has been strengthened by the process of Europeanization, which channelled feminist efforts into struggle over implementing anti-discrimination legislation on the labour market, and introducing effective mechanisms for law enforcement (Fuszara et al 2008, Regulska and Grabowska 2013).

The feminist movement in Poland has been also affected by the general trend towards “the NGO-ization of resistance” (Roy 2014, Graff 2009). As stressed by Arundhati Roy, the NGO-ization should be seen not just as a trend towards professionalization and institutionalization of social action, which changes organizational logic of civil society groups, but as a complex process which stems from and results in profound de-politicization of civic and social activism. As a result, the non-governmental organizations, which are donor-dependent and accountable to their funders rather than to constituencies they claim to represent, become surrogates for social movements and civil society. This in turn seriously limits the public’s capability to voice political claims in the public sphere and to resist both conservative state and neoliberal logic of the market.

In the post-socialist context of Poland the tendency to embrace “free-market democracy”, rather than to criticize the effects of transformation, can hardly be attributed to the legacy of second wave feminism. Rather, it stems from a number of local and transnational factors, such as the social position of the elite of Polish feminist leaders and their engagement in the Solidarity movement before 1989, the hegemonic character of the discourses on transformation as a success story and the hegemony of TINA (There Is No Alternative) ideology worldwide (e.g. Charkiewicz and Mazurkiewicz 2009a, Klein 2007). Moreover, as suggested by Magdalena Grabowska, in order to fully understand the genealogies and trajectories of Polish feminism today, one has to take into consideration at least three “unfinished gender revolutions”: the revolution of state socialist gender equality introduced after the Second World War, the unfinished revolution of Solidarity rooted in the 1980’s

and the conservative revolution of the 1990's aimed at re-establishing patriarchal gender order (2012: 386). Today, Grabowska observes, Polish as well as Eastern European feminisms are "emerging as diverse and multidimensional sites of political dialogue locally and globally" (385).

We can observe how this political dialogue works in practice by examining the largest women's initiative in Poland – the Congress of Women (*Kongres Kobiet*). The initiative started in 2009 as a national conference organized in Warsaw under the name *20 years of transformation 1989 – 2009* by a group of elite women (not all of them identifying as feminists) and some representatives of feminist organizations and groups.<sup>1</sup> The main initiators were Henryka Bochniarz (a well-known business woman, the president of the Polish Confederation of Private Employers 'Lewiatan'), and Magdalena Środa (a prominent feminist deeply engaged in the women's movement, professor of ethics, former Plenipotentiary for Gender Equality). Henryka Bochniarz claimed in an interview that it was the realization of how little is known about women's role in the transformation process that led her and her friends to start organizing this event. She said that most events celebrating the 20th anniversary were organized by men and for men, thus she and Magdalena Środa to organize something on their own, in order to remind everyone that women did much more to support the transformation process than preparing coffee in the back room.<sup>2</sup> The main aim behind organizing the Congress was to challenge the view that the Solidarity movement and post-1989 changes were initiated and executed exclusively by men. Highlighting Polish women's achievements during the transformation era within different fields of social, cultural and political life entailed stressing the dangers of conservative revolution, which has been initiated in the early 1990s while marginalizing the negative effects of post-1989 socio-economic changes on the Polish population. The focus was mainly on the symbolic recognition of women's achievements, rather than on economic equality and distributive justice, which is a broader trend identified by Fraser (1997) as a defining feature of the "post-socialist condition". These trends within the Congress of Women led some Polish feminists to conclude that this initiative marked the neoliberal turn in the history of Polish feminism (Charkiewicz 2009, Mrozik and Szumlewicz 2009).

This example appears to confirm a pessimistic view on feminist activism in the Polish context as de-politicized, "neoliberalized" and divided. Such a view however would be lim-

<sup>1</sup> The Program Council of the Congress in 2009 consisted of over 200 women, mostly entrepreneurs and representatives of private companies, as well as artists, writers and women working in the media. Few participants represent women's organizations mostly based in Warsaw such as Feminoteka Foundation, MaMa Foundation, Polish Feminist Association (PSF), Women's Centre and the Federation of Women and Family Planning. National congresses were organized yearly since 2009 and according to organizers 3.000 to 8.000 women from all over Poland attended each time. In 2010 an association called Kongres Kobiet has been established in order to continue the activities throughout the year and prepare the national and local Congresses, as well as networking events, training activities and open debates which are organized in many Polish cities.

<sup>2</sup> <http://kobieta.wp.pl/henryka-bochniarz-sukcesu-nie-wykuwa-sie-szminka-ani-wysokimi-obcasami-5982687746687617a>

ited and one-sided, as it disregards the heterogeneity of the voices within the Congress and emerging forms of resistance against neoliberalism within the Polish movement in general. A closer look at how the agenda of the Congress of Women has developed suggests that this milieu is more diverse than it could have been predicted in 2009. During the last couple of years, both at the Warsaw event and the local Congresses which I attended, a range of anti-neoliberal arguments started to appear as women began to voice their claims in relation to the dysfunctional child-support system, low salaries in the health-care and service sectors, and the lack of affordable care for children, the elderly and people with disabilities. For instance in 2015 the official Congress postulates included a call for the recognition of women's unpaid reproductive labour, call for the raise of the nurses' salaries and for the states' support of the diverse needs of people with disability and their families. I do not suggest that the problem of recognition has ceased to dominate the agenda of the Congress of Women, but I aim to demonstrate that the issues regarding redistribution and social rights have been included as well. In my view – as a scholar but also as an activist – the Congress has become a space where various strands of Polish feminism are represented, even though the “neoliberal” strand is still a dominant one.

In fact, some feminist activists and scholars in Poland began voicing a critique of neoliberal ideology and practices already by the mid-2000's, pointing to the immanent dangers of merging liberal democracy with dictatorship of the free market (cf. Regulaska and Grabowska 2013). The examples of such efforts include setting up Feminist Think Tank (Think Tank Feministyczny) focused mostly on producing and disseminating knowledge whose members formed local alliance with low-income women threatened with eviction in Wałbrzych; Warsaw feminist groups' cooperation with labour unions representing nurses or women working in the supermarket chain Tesco; individual feminists and networks supporting single mothers fighting against cuts in the welfare system and feminist engagement in organizing workers protests in Special Economic Zone near Poznań and Wrocław<sup>3</sup> (Charkiewicz 2009, Desperak 2008, Hryciuk and Korolczuk 2013, Maciejewska 2010, Trawinska 2015).

The strategies that some Polish grassroots initiatives have employed highlight the potential of feminist leftist politics in critical response to neoliberalism. Perhaps the most important strategy to meet the challenge of neoliberalism has been forging alliances with

<sup>3</sup> According to the information provided by the The Polish Information and Foreign Investment Agency (PAIIZ) special economic zones have been established to attract foreign investments: “each zone is an administratively separate part of Polish territory, allocated for the running of businesses on preferential terms. A business, on entering an SEZ has the assurance of tax benefits and an additional benefit is the fact that they can begin trading on a specially prepared site, fully equipped with the necessary utilities.” ([http://www.paiz.gov.pl/about\\_us/paiiz](http://www.paiz.gov.pl/about_us/paiiz) last accessed 14.04.2016). In practice, SEZ have become the “investors' paradise” at the expense of workers who work long hours, receive low pay, have no right to unionize and usually work on short-time contracts without social insurance and any benefits (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/23/sackings-poland-junk-jobs-chung-hong>).



groups of people, who may not necessarily identify with feminism but are affected by trends such as dismantling welfare provisions and growing precariousness of everyday life. In the Polish case, feminist groups attempted at establishing cooperation with women (and men) who can be considered “losers” of the transformation process: women working in low-pay care and service sectors (e.g. cashiers in supermarkets, nurses), working poor who cannot afford private child- or health-care, unemployed mothers facing eviction, or single mothers fighting for social benefits. This has become an important strategy employed by the Women’s 8th of March Alliance (*Porozumienie Kobiet 8 Marca*), which is a Warsaw-based informal grassroots initiative focussing on voicing women’s claims and addressing the state and public opinion, formed in 2000.<sup>4</sup> To this end, activists organize a demonstration called *Manifa*, as well as various public events: concerts, public debates, cultural events and press conferences every year around the 8<sup>th</sup> of March (the International Women’s Day). The group has existed for over 15 years, despite the high turnover of members and the fact that they do not receive any type of external funding or substantial institutional support. While the first Manifas in 2000 and 2001 were organized under the slogans such as “Democracy without women is quasi-democracy” the agenda soon underwent significant changes. By the mid-2000s the economic marginalization has come up to the frontline, as expressed in slogans such as “The government should have the salaries of the nurses”, “Bosses can be defeated!” and “Don’t let them exploit you!”

Manifa organizers’ efforts to voice a critique of neoliberalism reached its peak in 2010 when the demonstration was held under the banner “Solidarity in crisis – solidarity in struggle” and four Polish trade unions decided to officially join the march. These included: the Polish Teachers’ Union (*Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego*), the Nationwide Union of Nurses and Midwives (*Ogólnopolski Związek Zawodowy Pielęgniarek i Położnych*), the Free Trade Union ‘August 80’ (*Wolny Związek Zawodowy ‘Sierpień 80’*) and the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (*Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych*). The focus was on the outcomes of the economic crisis for women and men, and the long-term consequences of post-socialist transition. The demands addressed a range of problems regarding the economy and labour market such as: payment of wage rises to nurses guaranteed to them (by the 2007 Act on Health-Care Institutions) and the ‘depenalisation’ of worker strikes; legal prohibition of the practices adopted by some temporary work agencies depriving workers of social security and employee rights by replacing their employment contracts by civil-law freelance contracts; prevention of lay-offs and irregular payment of wages on the pretext of economic crisis; prevention of illegal evictions and the introduction of the right to housing.

<sup>4</sup> I became the member of the Women’s 8th of March Alliance in 2001 and for over a decade I was engaged in a variety of activities which included not only demonstrating but also writing and distributing leaflets, putting up posters, contacting media, organizing fundraising concerts and debates, speaking at public events and in media, contacting labor unions, producing t-shirts with feminist slogans and selling them, and more. Thus, my conclusions are based also on my own experiences and collective efforts to counteract neoliberalism and patriarchy.

While the cooperation between feminist groups and worker's unions did not bring immediate results, it was an important attempt at re-interpreting the notion of solidarity in the local context and to make social movements against neoliberalism truly inclusive. I would argue that this cooperation can be interpreted as an effort to implement intersectionality as a social movement strategy. As shown by Chun, Lipsitz and Shin (2013) in their analysis of the activities of the *Asian Immigrant Women Advocates* (AIWA) intersectionality can and should be implemented in everyday activist work. Some of the strategies include: building long-term alliances around specific goals, involving low income women not only as participants but also as leaders, building transparent organizational structures and a hierarchy based on engagement. Important elements of such strategy include reciprocity and joined decision-making. In the case of Warsaw Manifa in 2010 the workers' unions not only joined the march but also took part in decisions concerning its character and the main claims. The first part of the slogan "Solidarity in crisis" was proposed by the feminists, but the second part of "Solidarity in struggle" was added by the representatives of the nurses during one of the first meetings. The demonstration was preceded by few meetings and an open debate on the main issues the unions fight for on everyday basis. Not only the unions joined the March, but the Women's Alliance also took part in some actions initiated by the unions. The representatives of the feminist group were speakers at the press conference organized by the Polish Teachers' Union concerning the proposition of new regulations on child care. Also, they joined the nurses who organized numerous demonstrations in front of the Health Ministry in the beginning of 2010 demanding negotiations concerning work conditions and salaries.

### **Towards a change in progressive politics**

Polish experiences show that solidarity and intersectionality can and should be implemented as a social movement strategy to make the anti-neoliberal struggle truly inclusive. The problem is that, so far, right-wing populist movements have been much more effective in mobilizing the economically impoverished, effectively securing their votes. This is partly due to the fact that the feminist movement has very limited options to effectively support struggles targeting socio-economic problems affecting many Poles, such as high level of unemployment, the lack of affordable housing or the lack of kindergartens and care facilities for children under three in rural communities. These are structural problems, which need to be addressed by the state. As the state is both neoliberal at the core, and generally hostile towards feminist claims, especially those which may generate costs, it is extremely difficult for the feminist actors to create broad alliances and bring about change. Arguably, making such alliances and pressuring authorities may be easier at the local, e.g. municipal level, where local coalitions can be formed with inhabitants, urban activists or parents around closing of local schools, investments programs, urban planning etc. The examples of local alliances built between low-income

women threatened with eviction and feminist activists in Wałbrzych, or feminist engagement in organizing workers protests in Special Economic Zone near Poznań and Wrocław show that such local struggles may be at times effective, although they demonstrate also that the feminist groups are often perceived as the ultimate “trouble makers” by local authorities, which significantly reduces their ability to induce change (Maciejewska 2010, Trawinska 2015). Moreover, such cooperation sometimes works one way, e.g. the labour union’s representatives who became involved in feminist demonstrations in Warsaw when these events focused on workers’ rights (as was the case in 2010), withdrew after the main theme of the demonstration became the relation of the state and the Catholic Church in 2012.

Another important issue concerns the illiberal turn that we observe in some countries today (Korolczuk 2014, Kováts and Pöim 2015). Ideally, the state should act as a stabilizing institution that guards the principles of universal social rights as well as the values which lay at the core of liberal democracy such as equality, tolerance, individual and minority rights. The current developments, e.g. in Poland and Hungary, show that the state may easily abandon such a role and engage in dismantling liberal democracy as we know it, while simultaneously promising to oppose neoliberal trends and to support families, especially women and children (Fábián and Korolczuk 2017). In the Polish context this involves promises of reforms such as direct cash transfers to families with children, raising minimal pay and raising tax-free income level. Consequently, it is of crucial importance for the feminist movement to engage in the debates on social rights, while at the same time stress the value of and the need for the state to secure individual rights, opposing the tendency towards re-traditionalization, and resist the vision that people’s rights should be contingent upon their “productiveness” which in the case of women would concern bearing and raising children (Grzebalska 2016).

Finally, I would argue that in order to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism we also need to (re)construct the notion of community. Crucial to the task of rethinking and re-making of community as a feminist project is to reclaim the notion of solidarity and care interpreted as practices, as emotions and as basic human needs, which at the same time have profound social and economic importance (Diquinzio 1999, Graff 2014, Hryciuk and Korolczuk 2015). The focus on care may enable us to form broad alliances with women who are mothers or grandmothers, with fathers and with other caregivers, especially paid caregivers and people working in the health-care sector. Of course, focusing on motherhood and forming alliances around care also have potential drawbacks especially in the era of conservative pronatalism and in the context such as Polish, in which mothers are celebrated as symbols of national unity, but disregarded as citizens. Thus, such movements need to be truly intersectional and firmly based on inclusive definitions of motherhood/parenthood. We need to ensure the inclusivity of the movement by avoiding the de-legitimation of any mothers or caregivers, by including women and men who have no desire to become parents

and by making sure that the movement does not undermine women's reproductive rights but have them firmly on the agenda.

Last but not least, we need to share the experiences and the lessons learned across countries and regions to work out the best possible strategies for such a task. Neoliberalism appears powerful and overwhelming but, as it is usually the case, there are also discontinuities and spaces where resistance can emerge. There are cracks through which we can see the system working, and through which we can intervene. Thus, our task as scholars and activists is to learn more about various original forms of anti-neoliberal women's organizing that emerge in the context of the local and transnational struggles. Struggles that we can win, but only if we act together.

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# Romani women and the paradoxes of neoliberalism: Race, gender and class in the era of late capitalism in East-Central Europe<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This chapter examines the paradoxes of neoliberalism through Romani women's experiences<sup>2</sup> and social struggles in the era of late capitalism in East-Central European (ECE) countries. I will locate Romani women's experiences in the junction of neoliberalism that is intertwined political, economic, social, and cultural reconfiguration of gendered and racialized relationships between the states and individuals that unfold within a set of paradoxes. Sealing Cheng and Eunjung Kim (2014) enlist several paradoxes of neoliberalism particularly in relation to women (Cheng and Kim 2014: 372). However, I will focus on one specific neoliberal paradox that mostly relates to vulnerable racialized populations such as Romani women in East-Central Europe that have been disproportionately impacted by enormous social and economic marginalization and disparities in economic resources and wealth. Neoliberalism supports a range of cheap, exploitative employment opportunities and encourages philanthropic, private and NGO sector to empower marginalized women (Sharma 2008). However, at the same time, neoliberalism contributes to the dismantling of the social and economic safety as well as reduces and eliminates certain welfare benefits and social services, which disproportionately increases the burden on poor and marginalized women such as Romani women in ECE.

This paper introduces the theoretical discussion on how Roma have become connected to the theme of variegated neoliberalism in Europe, and it will analyse the gendered and racialized relationship between neoliberalism and the situation of Romani women. Finally,

<sup>1</sup> In this article I use East-Central Europe (ECE) defined as eastern part of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that is limited to member states of the Visegrád Group - Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary as well as the Baltic states. However, where the content makes it necessary, I will also use CEE that usually refers to the former communist states in Europe.

<sup>2</sup> While keeping in mind that "Romani women" is a heterogeneous category divided into various subcategories including class, sexuality, age, and many others.

it will make some suggestions for a collaborative contemplation for Romani and non-Romani feminists on how to create possibilities and opportunities to decrease intersectional gender, racial, class and other hierarchies and divides at this neoliberal era.

### **Local and regional manifestation and translation of neoliberalism**

The focus of this volume is how feminisms and women's experiences are related to the post-socialist liberalization and the neo-liberalized economic, social, and political structure in East-Central Europe. We could stick our heads in the sand and collectively ignore the gendered- racialized effect of the spatial-temporal manifestation of neoliberalism that has had a disturbing and restructuring effect on our societies after 1989 if we were not to talk about the particular gendered and racialized situation of Romani women.

Neoliberalism seems to have spread all over the world and reconfigured it into its gendered, sexualized, racialized, and classed "local manifestations". Aihwa Ong approaches neoliberalism as a "reconfiguring relationship between governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality" (Ong 2006:3). Ong draws attention to the issue of translation, articulation, and discursive practices of neoliberalism. She is arguing for ethnographic attention to capture the local translation of neoliberalism into a historical spatio-temporal context. Ong's approach to neoliberalism opens up conceptual and political possibilities and also poses an intellectual challenge. Instead of using the monolithic and monofocal concept of neoliberalism, we are encouraged to use a more innovative conceptualization of the variegated versions of neoliberalism. By using a regional/local conceptualization of neoliberalism as well as multifocal and intersectional lenses we cannot overlook the gendered and racialized manifestations of neoliberalism that affect Romani women in East-Central Europe.

Remarkably, even though that our social, economic and political system is saturated with "neoliberalized" ideas, mechanisms and governance, however our progressive-left politics still has been in general blindness to the web of connections and interrelations of the shifting and transformative neoliberal politics (Clarke 2008). Lisa Duggan (2003) describes this phenomenon as the elusiveness of neoliberal politics in the USA, which reminds me of the East-Central European politics: where the right wing thinkers are more vocal to criticize neoliberalism by using the same logic and mechanism that create their own neoliberal nationalist oligarchy at the same time. However, the left in CEE still fails to address "the chameleon that eludes" them. The East-Central European version of neoliberalism is described as "*an embedded neoliberal*" regime by Bohle and Greskovits (2007:444). They argued that the Visegrad states were less market-radical than the Baltic states at the beginning of the '90s, therefore they achieved better results in building new competitive market industries as well as being socially more inclusive. However, as they also pointed out, institutions that are supposed to safeguard macroeconomic stability have either not been established or do not function independently from government in most

Visegrad states so far (Bohle and Greskovits 2007:463 cited by Kóczé 2015). Later on Bohle and Greskovits stated in an interview that Hungary in fact stepped out of the category of “*embedded neoliberalism*” and created a new variation of neoliberal regime, keeping the same neoliberal strategies such as increasing employment (mainly state financed public work) while reducing social welfare expenditures, creating new identity politics, and promoting indigenous capitalists while suppressing socially and economically large populations who are not viewed as compatible with their social and economic politics.<sup>3</sup> As I argued on the basis of my research, this type of “*experimental identity based political regime*” that this Orban’s regime in Hungary, in fact, is a nationalistic and racialized version of neoliberalism that ultimately leads to exclusionary democracy (Kóczé 2015).

### Neoliberalism and Roma related studies

Currently, there are few studies that make an explicit connection between the situation of Roma and the neoliberal context. Some studies even go further to incorporate the gendered and racialized impact of neoliberal governance, ideology and policies (Temple 2006; van Baar 2011a; Trehan and Sigona 2009; Themelis 2015; Kóczé 2016 forthcoming). The Eastward European integration process has been characterized as an extension of the neoliberal project (Palley 2013). As several scholars have pointed out, the promise of social and economic prosperity has failed, and it rather conveyed a disillusionment with the impact of the variegated neoliberal structural changes on the vast majority of Roma in Europe (Temple 2006; Trehan and Sigona 2009; Kóczé 2012 etc). Sigona and Trehan talk about neoliberalism as imported and externally imposed structural and policy changes that increased the marginalization and precarization of large segments of the European population including millions of marginalized Roma. Moreover, they argue that neoliberalism as an ideology triggered the emergence and spread of extreme right movements with explicit anti-immigrant and anti-Gypsy political agendas (Sigona and Trehan 2009:2). The link between neoliberalism and anti-immigrant and anti-Gypsy political mobilization is intrinsically connected via the politics of securitization (van Baar 2011b).

Elizabeth Bernstein and Janet R. Jakobsen (2013) created three categories on how neoliberalism is conceptualized. *The first school* identified by them is the neo-Marxist that emphasizes upward economic redistribution in our societies. They are referring to those “structural adjustment policies” that have been encouraged by the international monetary organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. *The second school* is conceptualized as the Foucauldians who imagine neoliberalism as a cultural project based on a specific form of governmentality that produces ideal “self-responsible” and

<sup>3</sup> Kísérleti terepen bolyong Magyarország, Kasnyik Márton and Stubnya Bence 2013. november 2., szombat, Index [http://index.hu/gazdasag/2013/11/02/kiserleti\\_terepen\\_bolyong\\_magyarorszag/](http://index.hu/gazdasag/2013/11/02/kiserleti_terepen_bolyong_magyarorszag/) (November 2, 2013)



self-regulating neoliberal subjects. *The third school* is focusing on the shifting structure and ideology of state from welfare to a punitive state that focuses on imprisonment and national security.<sup>4</sup> The securitization of social problems is one of the main characteristics of this type of neoliberal state (Bernstein and Jakobsen 2013).

In CEE, there is a political legacy of the third school, namely to treat Roma as a social problem that is inevitably securitized regardless whether they are Roma migrants or citizens of the European Union. This approach is intimately connected with the third school of critique of neoliberalism that focuses on the changing mode and priorities of state structure, whereas the welfare state gradually became a punitive state. The securitization of Roma has been widely discussed by Huub van Baar (2011b) and by Nicholas De Genova in the context of the Europeanization of the Roma. Nicholas De Genova argues that it has reconstructed their subordination with a form of racial stigmatization, criminalization, securitization, and “neo-nomadization” (De Genova 2016). Securitization is a logic and characteristic of the neoliberal state that creates a suspicion and invokes security measures. “Racial profiling” of Roma became justified by the logic of suspicion based on centuries old stereotypes that Roma are inherently criminals (Kóczé and Trehan 2009). The claim that extreme right groups make about Roma criminality (Vidra- Fox 2014) has been a tacit element of the securitization of Roma in the East-Central European neoliberal context.

The second school of critique of neoliberalism, identified by Bernstein and Jakobsen (2013), is close to Huub van Baar’s articulation on neoliberalism. In his seminal book *The European Roma: Minority Representation, Memory and the Limits of Transnational Governmentality*, he explains the emergence of a new European governance, as he names it, the neoliberal states that are restructuring their economies, civil societies, and are reshaping their nationalism in relation to Romaphobia (van Baar 2011a: 6). He defines neoliberalism based on the Foucauldian approach, as a constructivist form of governmentality that has been cross-fertilized, variegated, modified, shifted and assembled with other cultural formations and social and political discourses to create an uneven, ‘indigenous’ spatio-temporal translation and articulation of neoliberalism (Ibid). Huub van Baar, similarly to Aihwa Ong, underlines the use of neoliberalism that requires to investigate the “local manifestations” (van Baar 2011a: 165). Nevertheless, in the mainstream critique of neoliberalism, and also in the tiny segment of Romani related studies that critique neoliberalism, there is a very limited knowledge on the gendered, classed and racialized “local manifestations” of neoliberalism (Kóczé 2016 forthcoming). This forthcoming book will illustrate, from the point of view of the first school, the neoliberal policy agenda and the implementation of

<sup>4</sup> This categorization is developed based on Simon Springer, “Neoliberalism as Discourse: Between Foucauldian Political Economy and Marxian Post-structuralism”, *Critical Discourse Studies* 9.2 (2012): 133-147 and Loic Wacquant “Three Steps to a Historical Anthropology of Actually Existing Neoliberalism,” *Social Anthropology* 20.1(2012): 66-79.

upward economic redistribution in the post-socialist region that excessively restructure social and economic wealth by disadvantaging and dispossessing the Roma population. In particular, it will underline the gendered and racialized manifestations of such upward resource allocation. This approach is connected with the first school of critique of neoliberalism that focuses on upward economic redistribution and unequal resource allocation that create a deeper gendered, racialized and classed division. In this forthcoming book, I as a feminist scholar will use an intersectional approach and analytical frame to expose the structural, discursive, and biographical formations of neoliberalism.

Sypros Themelis (2015) argues that the current socio-economic crisis in a neoliberalised Europe further intensified the existing racial and social inequalities between Roma and non-Roma. He also propounds that the “capitalist reintegration of Eastern Europe has had devastating effects for the Roma, who, even before the transition, used to belong to the most vulnerable section of the working class in economic, cultural and political terms” (Themelis 2015:7). Themelis uses the parallel/semi-comparative analysis between the Holocaust of the Jews in the late 30s and early 40s, and the anti-Gypsyism and Romaphobia in late capitalism to illustrate racialization as an act of concealment of rampant structural and systemic inequalities in Europe. He argues that the Nazi leadership constructed the Jews as the “evil within Germany society” to create a collective scapegoat. However, currently Roma have become a new collective scapegoat to mask structural inequality and injustice. This rhetoric of strategy helps to understand the logic of racialization and the mechanism of scapegoating, however it occludes the specificities (specific manifestations) of the given time period.

In addition, he suggests that there is a class restoration by using similar arguments as used by the neo-Marxist first school of critique of neoliberalism. He argues that, “shifting power from the poor to the rich and the further worsening of the position of working class, which is divided along false lines, is thusly prevented from taking action against those truly responsible for its emiseration” (Themelis 2015:16). In other words, he means the creation of the biopolitical border between white and racialized working/underclass to prevent class solidarity among the subordinated precarious populations in Europe. Instead of solidarity and defending the public institutions and demos, the system covertly promotes the racialization and collective scapegoating of Roma to polarize revolt against neoliberal structural oppression.

### **Local manifestations of neoliberalism based on race, gender, and class**

I agree with Aihwa Ong’s approach to neoliberalism, who encourages scholars to look at the local manifestations of neoliberalism. In order to illuminate the East-Central European version of gendered and racialized neoliberalism, I will use some quantitative data to show the difference between Romani and non-Romani women and Romani men in the context of education and employment in Hungary.

There are only a few transnational survey datasets that expose the statistical discrepancy between the situation of Romani and non-Romani women and Romani men in Central and Eastern Europe. The most current comparative survey was carried out in various European countries in 2011 and was analysed from a gender point of view by Ewa Cukrowska and Angéla Kóczé (2013)<sup>5</sup> commissioned by the UNDP. The same survey was also analysed by the European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in 2013.<sup>6</sup>

The data show that the educational position of Romani women is lower in comparison with Romani men and non-Romani women. The UNDP report shows that the level of education of Romani women, particularly the total number of years spent in school is lower than for non-Romani women and Romani men.<sup>7</sup> The report pointed out that, based on the research sample in the age-group of 16-64, Romani men spent on average 6.71 years in education, while Romani women 5.66 years. The respective data for the non-Roma age group are: men on average 10.95 years and women 10.7 years. The gender difference in the total years of education is higher in the Roma group. However, non-Romani women spend nearly twice as many years in education as Romani women (10.7 and 5.66 years respectively). Similarly, Romani men spend 61% of the time in education of what non-Romani men do (the same proportion for Romani women is 53%). The report concludes that Romani men are subject to an ethnic gap (significant difference between Roma and non-Roma), and Romani women are subject to ethnic as well as gender gaps when it comes to time spent in an educational system (significant difference between Romani men and women and Roma and non-Roma).<sup>8</sup>

The FRA report (FRA 2013) shows some interesting data concerning Romani women's employment status. The report states that the proportion of women who are involved in paid work is equal or even higher than Romani men in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. In Hungary, 32 % of Romani women aged 16 and above are in paid work compared with 26% of Romani men. In Slovakia, 24 % of Romani women in the same age group are in paid work compared with 18% of Romani men. In the Czech Republic, 36 % of Romani women compared with 33% of Romani men indicated to have paid employment<sup>9</sup>. The FRA report does not compare these data with non-Romani women and men. Therefore, the

<sup>5</sup> The survey was commissioned by United Nation Development Program, World Bank and the European Commission. It usually is referred in various documents as a 2011 Roma Pilot Survey UNDP/WB/EC. They took a random sample of Roma and non-Roma households living in areas with higher density of Roma populations in the EU Member States of Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and the non-EU Member States of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova and Serbia. As they refer in the data description, two parallel and the same time complementary surveys were carried out in 2011 in an effort to map the current situation of Roma in Europe. One of the surveys was focusing on the social and economic development of Roma. The UNDP and the World Bank carried this out. The other survey was focusing on the implementation of key fundamental rights carried out by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). In each country they interviewed approximately 750 Roma households and approximately 350 non-Roma households living in their proximity.

<sup>6</sup> Analysis of FRA Roma survey results by gender <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2013/analysis-fra-roma-survey-results-gender>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/dam/rbec/docs/Exposing-structural-disparities-of-Romani-women.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 14 p.

<sup>9</sup> <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2013/analysis-fra-roma-survey-results-gender>

racial difference between Romani and non-Romani women who live in close proximity remains invisible. Also, the report did not provide any explanation for the increasing number of Romani women in the labour market, particularly in CEE countries.

Also, the report does not specify the nature of the paid work. Is it formal or informal employment, a permanent or just a temporary job? Based on my long-term fieldwork in the region as a researcher, my hypothesis is twofold. On one hand it coincides with global changes that have increased in East-Central Europe by the greater international and national economic liberalization (UNRISD 2012) as well as NGO-ization that provide more temporal, low-paid, precarious job conditions in various factories and in the NGO sector. In my interviews with Romani women from the ECE region, who are working in multinational companies as low-skilled and low-waged workers, they were complaining about their fragile and exploitative working arrangements via sub-contracting and outsourcing through a local company (Kóczé 2016 forthcoming). In the formal economy, besides low-waged factory and service jobs, there are several Roma non-governmental organizations that target Roma specifically and hire Romani women as part of a “women’s empowerment” projects that have been supported by international donors and EU funds (ibid.). Moreover, those who are working in various local NGOs also have very fragile employment statuses and depend upon the donor’s policy and financial support (Kóczé 2012).

On the other hand, Romani women’s involvement in paid work is also connected with the informal economy. In post-socialist countries the economic and social structural conditions and situational possibilities coalesce to give rise and support to economic practices that are illegal or unregulated by the state (Morris and Polese 2014). For example, in North-East Hungary, in one of the most disadvantaged micro-regions of the country, several Romani women whom I interviewed play an important role in human trafficking. In most cases women provide accommodation and catering to those persons who pay a trafficker in order to gain illegal entry to some other EU countries via Hungary. These practices are socially accepted in the local community because it is perceived as the only available and accessible economic opportunity. (Kóczé 2016 forthcoming).

As Ong draws attention to the local manifestation of neoliberalism it is important to understand that how Romani women respond to the complex social and economic local circumstances in East-Central Europe that produce both beneficial and deleterious effects to the Roma community and the larger society. As the 2011 Roma survey shows, the involvement of Romani women in paid labour has increased, however, it is not necessarily connected with their level of education and years spent in school. It is rather connected with the specific version of capitalism that has evolved in East-Central Europe. Marginalized and invisible groups for the formal economy, such as racialized Roma, need to find their (often) illicit paths to creatively reinvent and recreate a means of income that is facilitated by the neoliberal regime (Morris and Polese 2014). So, the economic condition that has been created by neoliberalism sparks difficulties for those who are functioning either on

the margins or closed into illegality and invisibility by the state and the formal economy. Paradoxically, this marginal position also opens up a possibility to create an alternative income and paid positions for Romani women based on reinvigorating local and familial solidarity via the involvement in an informal economy, such as the “benevolent trafficking practice” (Kóczé 2016 forthcoming).

### **“To give with one hand and take away with the other”**

The International Labour Office (ILO) states that female labour force participation across the world increased from 50.2 per cent in 1980 to 51.7 per cent in 2008, despite declines in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (ILO 2010). The significant variations in women’s labour force participation remain: high rates of around 60 per cent in the Nordic countries, and relatively low rates of around 40 per cent in Southern Europe. As illustrated above, Romani women’s employment patterns are very different from those of educated white Europeans, it is more similar to immigrant women of colour in Europe or women’s of colour from developing countries in Latin America, Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and sub-Saharan Africa, where there have also been some relative increases in women’s labour force participation rates. Nevertheless, some regions, notably MENA, started from a very low base (UNRISD 2012). Premilla Nadasen also noted that there is a significant increase in the low-paid, temporary, seasonal, part-time contingent service sector and outsourced manufacturing that mainly relies on immigrant women of colour (Nadasen 2013). Increasing, low-waged, vulnerable women structural positions in global production such as these have made it difficult to see improvements in wages and working conditions (Nadasen 2013; UNRISD 2012).

In 2009 and 2010 I had an opportunity to conduct a feminist comparative research project with the involvement of several Romani women who later established a Romani Women NGO, called *Szirom*. The research involved quantitative and qualitative analysis that compared the social and labor status of disadvantaged Romani and non-Romani women in the selected two micro-regions of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County and Pest County (Kóczé 2011). This fieldwork facilitated the observation of the impact of global economic restructuring on the local level. Particularly, how labour opportunities and the elimination of the welfare system shaped and naturalized the gender and racial boundaries on the local level.

There is a global trend in the decline of demand for labour, especially for lower-skilled men with low education. This reduction reflects the broader economic restructuring and evolution of technology, automation and globalization within the European economy. The decline of male employment had a typically negative impact on household income as well as on the prestige of manhood (Kóczé 2011). In several Romani families when the man as a breadwinner lost his job due to the neoliberal restructuring of the market, then the woman becomes the breadwinner by being a low skilled, precarious temporal worker at some multinational company or service industry.

Many of them complained about their double days and their changing double roles as breadwinners and caregivers in the family. As I already argued elsewhere, this phenomenon is also typical in white working class non-Roma communities (Kóczé 2011). The reconciliation of their double roles would require some help and protection from a state, which is rather increasing the pressure on women with the lack of health and social services instead of providing support. The shrinking welfare state “outsources” its social services to the family unit. Presumably, these kinds of services need to be implemented by women in poor families, or these services can be done by some other service providers in wealthier families. This neoliberal condition paradoxically created more jobs for Romani women but also put more pressure on them to substitute for shrinking social and health services. This is a typical situation of giving with one hand and taking away with the other. The structural adjustment policies to diminish state redistribution that encouraged the operation through privatization of social, educational, and health institutions and withdrawal of funds from local social, health and educational institutions disproportionately disadvantaged Romani families. All these expenses have been transferred from the public sector to individual households. These welfare reforms were coupled with a specific narrative that replaced the complex arguments of structural oppression with the creation of individual responsibility in the last decade (Kóczé 2016 forthcoming; Inglot, Szikra, and Rat 2012).

### **Women’s empowerment through undoing the welfare state**

Based on a non-representative online survey, 6,2% of Roma and pro-Roma NGOs declared that they specifically targeted Romani women (Kóczé 2012: 39). Many Romani women in East-Central Europe are employed by various NGOs under the banner of “women empowerment”. Aradhana Sharma persuasively argues that in the “contemporary neoliberal era, empowerment has emerged as a keyword effectively replacing the now much-maligned term welfare” (Sharma 2008:15). The mechanism of “end of welfare” or “welfare dependency” becomes coded as “empowerment” in a development world similarly to the use of empowerment in relation to Romani women in ECE. The concept of Romani women’s empowerment reflects on the Foucauldian conceptualization of neoliberalism that imagines it as a cultural project “premised upon a shift toward governmentalities that merge market and state imperatives and which produce self-regulating “good subjects” who embody ideals of individual responsibility” (Bernstein and Jakobsen 2013). Instead of challenging the racialized and gendered structural oppression, even feminists reframe and address these structural issues as an individual self-liberating and regulating project (Kóczé 2016 forthcoming).

In ECE, Romani women’s “empowerment” projects reflect on the rationale of the neoliberal state. Some projects related to Romani women are mostly compensating for the lack of welfare or replacing some specific social services from the state. For example, in 2011 there were several Roma Mother Centres in Hungary that were supported financially

and professionally by the Open Society Foundation's (OSF), Roma Initiative Office.<sup>10</sup> These centres' aim was to act as self-help mothers' groups to facilitate access to services (health care, child care, education etc.), and to play an important community building role through common activities. The aim was that, in the long run, it might contribute to Roma self-organisation processes, and promotes the growth of advocacy skills and social inclusion. The Mother Centres managed by Colourful Pearls Association [Színes Gyöngyök Egyesület], and *Szirom*, the aforementioned Roma women's organisation located in Pécs and Szikszó. After approximately 3 years all Roma Mother Centres closed due to the lack of funding from Open Society Foundation, Roma Initiative Office.

Based on my observation, the program's concept was built on the logic of neoliberal state that mainly privatize and philanthropize social service. Steered by good intentions, they wanted to create a self-sustaining community day-care centre based on mothers' active involvement and voluntary work to address missing social, health and educational services for Roma families. Firstly, how can we expect from a low-income (no income) mothers to do a significant voluntary work to sustain a day-care? Also, besides all good intentions of the program, it further isolated Roma from the non-Roma communities and racialized social services at the local level. The program promoted the Roma community and individual responsibility to address structurally racialized and gendered oppression. Exactly as in the above mentioned Foucauldian conceptualization of neoliberalism as a specific form of governmentality that produces ideal "self-responsible" and self-regulating neoliberal subjects. The program does not problematize the role of the government, but assumes, claims and recreates self-responsible neoliberal Romani mothers instead.

## Conclusion

Consequently, we as leftist feminists who criticize the pervasive nature of neoliberalism, must challenge and analyse the centuries old gendered and racialized hierarchies that established firm boundaries between Romani and non-Romani women in East-Central and Central and Eastern Europe. Variegated neoliberalism in the guise of liberation and empowerment further strengthens and deepens the structural oppression of the vast majority of Romani women. Even though statistically there might be some improvement in the employment and education of Romani women in the last decade as the 2011 Roma Pilot Survey proved it commissioned by the United Nations' Development Program, the World Bank and the European Commission. However, compared to non-Romani, white women's education and employment situation, the intersectional structural position of Romani women is still devastating.

<sup>10</sup> My limited objective in this paper, is not evaluate the program in terms of its effects. I firmly believe that this would require a thorough empirical examination that would go beyond the current scope of this paper. My focus is to reflect shortly on the ideology and rational of such a "women empowerment program".

For feminist scholars and activists who are mainly white middle class persons with a different lived experiences and “politics of location” need to change the lens of analysis and explicitly add the exploration of race and class. Is feminist solidarity possible in the absence of solidarity with the most vulnerable racialized women such as the Romani? We as leftist feminists, need to think and step further in the creation of politics of possibility to create a sense and structure of solidarity by transgressing the enormous social/geographical distance that has been created by the restructuration of late capitalism in East-Central Europe. We have to find a common ground with disadvantaged Romani women whose voice is unheard and whose perspectives are erased even from Roma related programs and policies. The challenge for critical feminists is to create a discursive and material change without reproducing the exploitative nature of neoliberalism. So, for critical feminists in addressing issues of race, gender and class in the era of variegated neoliberalism in Central and Eastern Europe, probably one of the first steps is to start a reflexive and critical internal debate and reflection on how can we think and act intersectionally, not just in theory but also in practice, concerning the structural oppressions and power difference of Romani women in Central and Eastern Europe. Without these painful and tiresome discussions we will not debunk the complex and elusive nature of neoliberalism.

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## Are we all neoliberal feminists now?

There is a variety of definitions of neoliberalism in recent feminist and non-feminist scholarship. From a historical-materialist perspective, neoliberalism was installed in a reaction to the falling rates of profits in the 1970s and dispersed successively on a global scale (Harvey 2005). From another perspective, concerned with shifts in governance, it is a particular political rationality that economic and political liberalism morphed into during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Foucault 2008). Recently the question of neoliberalism was posed within feminism to point finger at so called neoliberal feminists – corporate icons (such as Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg) who dare “want to have it all” (both successful careers as well as satisfying personal and family lives) as well as dare make this promise to an indiscriminate population of women, which is imagined to be as global as the capital that these managerial feminists represent. However, before jumping on – important and needed – criticism of how the idea of women's emancipation got entangled into the neoliberal logic and thereby rearticulated feminism as a ‘maiden’ to profit-making, it is important to identify neoliberalism as political rationality that governs not only capitalist economics, but has dominated the very ideas of agency as well as the political imagination of its subjects.

Wendy Brown describes neoliberalism as “a distinctive mode of reason, of the production of subjects, a ‘conduct of conduct’, and a scheme of valuation. It names a historically specific economic and political reaction against Keynesianism and democratic socialism, as well as a more generalized practice of ‘economizing’ spheres and activities heretofore governed by other tables of value” (Brown 2015: 21). The ‘economization’ of spheres of life sounds familiar to an Eastern and Central European ear – wasn't it natural to ‘start behaving normally’ and rationally, to ‘trim the fat’ of state-socialist welfare systems, to let the economic logic of supply and demand rule once and for all? But while the advent of economization was felt in society right from the start of post-socialist political and economic transformation, the need to adapt to its pervasive logic governing that field of political engagement, in which feminists were active, is of a later date.

As a ubiquitous rationality, neoliberalism poses a tough challenge to feminists nowadays, since it is the framework within which feminism operates as a political force on governmental and international levels as well as a 'code of conduct' guiding our individual actions. While the question of how or what can feminism contribute to the critique and alternatives to neoliberalism is in political terms a pertinent one, firstly certain self-examination and perhaps a recognition of the fact that neoliberal forms of valuation have become a normal part of thinking and acting of feminist actors are required (cf. Elomäki 2015). Feminist activists and feminist policy experts navigate the framework of political discourses in an uneasy way: on the one hand they are persistent in pointing to its gender blindness, on the other hand they question other aspects of policy frameworks, their economism in particular, only rarely (cf. Funk 2006: 270-272; Repar and Očenášová 2007).

### **Slovakia on its way from transition to neoliberalism**

The relation between neoliberalism and feminism in East-Central Europe needs to be tracked down to the genealogy of post-communist transformation and viewed within this framework. In what follows I mainly refer to the situation in Czechoslovakia, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. In the 1990s the transition process was delimited as a process of economic liberalization, political democratization and the rebuilding of state institutions. In intellectual milieus, from which a majority of then feminists arose, it also meant exploration of various ideas, acutely felt pressure to 'catch up' with the state of the art in philosophy, social sciences and ideologies abroad.<sup>1</sup> Adoption of "market mechanism" – despite not an exclusive support for a turn to capitalism (Krapfl 2013) – became a prerequisite for any other changes and a prerequisite for making the society get 'back' to the Western-European normal. Nowadays, the expansion of the logic of profit-making and its concomitant neoliberal forms in other than economic spheres makes the antagonism of democracy and capitalism even more acute (cf. Brown 2015) than 25 years ago (cf. Wood 1995).<sup>2</sup>

A cursory review of feminist publishing in Slovakia in 1990s shows that – except for participating in conferences on 'the winners and losers of Wende' (cf. Jalušić et al. 1998) – feminists centered around the feminist cultural journal *Aspekt* in Bratislava and the Department of Philosophy at the Comenius University in Bratislava turned a blind eye to

<sup>1</sup> In 1994 Slovak writer and feminist Jana Juráňová stated: "... in Slovakia we need to occupy ourselves with everything that we had neglected and missed in the at least twenty years. Therefore I as a woman occupy myself with something that I have missed in at least twenty years. In my case, beside many other hectic catching-ups it also means that I can, want and for self-development I need to occupy myself with what is – with a chagrin, pejoratively and ignorantly being called feminism (...)." (Juráňová 1994, quoted in Cviková & Juráňová 2009:23; translated by Ľubica Kobová)

<sup>2</sup> Recently deceased scholar of capitalism Ellen Meiksins Wood attributed the omission of economic considerations in political thinking of early 1990s to the – in her opinion – "all-embracing concept of 'civil society'. This conceptual portmanteau, which indiscriminately lumps together everything from households and voluntary associations to the economic system of capitalism, confuses and disguises as much as it reveals. In Eastern Europe, it can be made to apprehend everything from the defense of political rights and cultural freedoms to the marketization of post-communist economies and the restoration of capitalism." (Wood 1995: 244)

the economic aspect of transition process and focused mainly on combating rising nationalism in the first instance, as they also emphasize in their accounts of 'the pioneers'/beginners' feminist times' in a roundtable discussion twenty-five years after the founding of first feminist journal and organizations in Slovakia (cf. Cviková & Juráňová 2009). Perhaps this neglect of economics had to do with their withdrawal from state. Feminists identified politics, as they explain, with "one's own activity, one's power to define and to create public space and therefore with politics as action, but not the state" (Cviková & Juráňová 2009: 19). After the first wave of political-economic reforms in the 1990s, the second wave of reforms was re-started by the governments of Mikuláš Dzurinda, especially in the second election period from 2002 to 2006, which saw implementation of many neoliberal policies (such as the reduction of social assistance benefits, semi-privatization of pension funds, introduction of a flat tax rate, flexibilization of the Labour Code). During this second reform period, feminists in Slovakia were preoccupied with the conservative backlash, that – after initial modest and unsuccessful proposals to overturn some of the gains of socialist emancipation of women – managed to bring reproductive rights of women to the top of the policy agenda (Kobová 2011). On a larger scale, the effects of neoliberal policies started to be discussed as issues of feminist concern during the financial and economic crisis of 2008 and 2009 only (Cviková, ed., 2010, Mišičková 2015).

On a conceptual level, feminists put a great effort into establishing gender as *the* analytical category and aimed at introducing it both into academic scholarship as well as policy making (Cviková & Juráňová 2009: 13-14). In social sciences, the category of class – after it was used in almost ritualistic ways in the political and social-scientific discourse during real socialism – was substituted by the notion of social stratification and purged of any antagonizing and politicizing content (Fabo 2015). In the latter half of its existence, the feminist cultural journal *Aspekt* published in Bratislava, Slovakia, provided the reading public with a selection of texts that explored the dynamic relationship between gender and class. However, these were translations of some of the canonical texts of the second wave US-feminism (Heidi I. Hartmann /1981/, Barbara Ehrenreich /1984/), which – without a hint of 'cultural translation' – remained enigmatic at the time of their publishing.

### **The pervasiveness of neoliberal rationality in feminist political action**

In sum, there is a plenty of good reasons why the advent of neoliberalism was overlooked by feminist activists, scholars and intellectuals in Slovakia. A genealogy of this omission needs to be carried out in order to see how neoliberalism became the 'new normal' and also became the playing field in which feminists are required to work nowadays.

What follows from this long-accepted ignorance of the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in our lives? Does the recognition of the detrimental effects of the workings of economy on the lives of most of people not so long ago imply a distancing from neoliberal rationality? To what extent are critical insights of some feminists towards neoliberalism definitional, and

would they make for a specific 'strand' of feminism existing now in East-Central Europe? Perhaps more than a distinction between various feminisms with regard to the critique of neoliberalism and more than attempts at self-identification vis-à-vis 'evil corporate feminists', the recognition that we are 'all in it' would help us in identifying the situation now a bit more.

As mentioned, neoliberalism as political rationality not only structures the economic sphere, but it also translates the logic of the maximization of profit, cost-effectiveness, individual responsibility to other spheres. As a logic governing the political field, it expects feminists regardless of their ideological background (except for groups attached to autonomist social movements) to act in accordance with where its nudges lead them. The nature of doing politics on national levels does not allow for much disagreement with regard to principal political frameworks. Feminists – as well as other political actors – tweak and try to fit their proposals into existing political imaginaries and policy goals, be it safeguarding the competitiveness of the European Union, economic growth, raising and using human capital of men and women etc. In this logic, the economic argument – that violence against women prevents affected women from being on their jobs and thereby contributing to economic growth, which cannot allow for waste of human capital – is of more value than the human-rights argument that violence against women is a dire violation of human autonomy and dignity.

A difficult question for feminists arises: Does feminist political action require both sets of arguments – an economic one as well as a human-rights one – and should they be used in various situations accordingly? From the viewpoint of those who are responsible for safeguarding financing for women's shelters, helplines, the response is obvious: use whatever means it takes. As a tactics, the response is understandable; as a strategy it is not. The instrumentalism and opportunism of the prevailing use of economic arguments itself points to the structuring of the field of political demands by neoliberal logic. The political logic of many feminist actors can be likened to the precarized situation of the wage labourer who is willing to take whatever job comes in order to make it through the day. Feminist organizations as well as individuals in the role of academics and experts compete against each other for funding and contracts in order to be able to fulfil promises to their 'clients' or simply to work on what they find important and interesting. Given this situation, it is difficult to expect them to inquire into the conditions of their common precarization. However, without recognition that 'we are all in it', hardly any progressive feminist position towards neoliberalism can be taken.

### **Political strategies**

As of now, the prospects of steering the wheel of politics and economics towards a more socially just, redistributive and feminist direction in the European Union are meager. The instantiation of strict political and economic control of the European and international financial institutions over Greece in summer 2015 showed that any contestation of the neoliberal foundations of European politics is virtually impossible. However, on national levels, recent economic growth gave rise to various responses and political mobilizations. In the

Czech Republic the Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions makes pressure on both employers and government to raise minimum wage and allow employees to profit from higher productivity as part of the campaign #endofcheaplabor. From a feminist point of view, the insistence of unions on their identity as the one representing a universal class of labourers – regardless of their gender or citizen status, amongst others – makes it difficult to connect union struggles to for instance feminist ones. But one can perhaps learn how to act progressively from the Initiative of University Teachers in Slovakia who supported the strike of primary and secondary school teachers by going on strike while not coming up with their own demands. The need to ‘brand’ oneself as a viable political actor would require one to pose one’s own demands. University teachers chose a different stance: “The Initiative of University Teachers in Slovakia (...) identifies with the demands of our colleagues from kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, because we believe that they are justified. By striking in universities we demand their fulfilment” (Iniciatíva vysokoškolských učiteľ’ov 2015). Perhaps progressive politics requires disidentification from one’s own identity, one’s own demands and instead calls for acts of solidarity and support in the first place.

Furthermore, work needs to be understood as both wage labour and unpaid, reproductive care work under capitalist conditions. Therefore at least a two-way strategy needs to be employed by feminists critical of neoliberalism: Firstly, shorter working hours combined with decent wage need to be fought for (Weeks 2011). Secondly, various forms of the valuation of care (however, excluding its commodification, which leads to exacerbating economic and social inequalities among women) need to be rethought. On the conceptual level, the close connection of work and ensuing work ethics with the value of a person and its contribution to the common good needs to be contested.

The work ethics firmly embedded in productivism – regardless of whether it is connected to state-socialism or post-socialist capitalism – and the value it confers to those adhering to its demands was crucial in the struggle for emancipation of various social and political groups, women included. However, under conditions of precarization of work and of non-existing redistribution of domestic work issuing into double or triple shifts for women, the supposed meritocracy and emancipation following from being a waged labourer can be doubted (Weeks 2011, hooks 2010).

Low income women are part of the anti-neoliberalism struggle by their sheer effort to make the ends meet for themselves, their partners and families. It is in power of feminist intellectuals and activists to redress epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007),<sup>3</sup> from which low

<sup>3</sup> Fricker (2007: 1) speaks of epistemic injustice as a wrong, which concerns both those who are expected to be producers of knowledge (such as low income women in our case) as well as those who are expected to recognize knowledge as a valid account of experience. With regard to the former, Fricker claims, “a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences”, while with regard to the latter, epistemic injustice occurs when “prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s world.”

income women suffer, by providing accurate descriptions of their working and living conditions. It is in power of feminists to support them and solidarize with them. In the long run feminists should strive for creating and using such instruments of knowledge production (of creating, using, providing their expertise) that would enhance the democratic participation of all affected. Perhaps closer working relations of low income women and feminists would require feminists to create a bigger interval between feminism and state/economic power, to willingly disidentify from both capital and state.

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## Challenging the narrative of feminism as a facilitator of neoliberalism in the context of Slovakia

### **Definitions: The contribution of feminism to neoliberalism**

In the current years, a recognizable amount of insider critiques of feminist relationship with neoliberalism have occurred. The core argument of these critiques can be summed up by saying that “the cultural changes jump-started by the second wave, salutary in themselves, have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society” (Fraser 2009:99). According to these critiques, feminism, while working in the pursuit of social justice, was complicit and offered new sources, aspirations and identifications that reinforced and facilitated newly establishing form of neoliberal state (Newman 2013).

Global neoliberalization can be understood mostly through the shift from the state-organized capitalism tempting to “‘use politics to tame markets’ (...) to new form of capitalism proposed to use markets to tame politics” (Fraser 2009:107). This *economization* of spheres, which had hitherto been organized in other ways, resulted in “the corporatization and privatization of state agencies, the promotion of competition and individual choice in health, education and other areas of what Marshall regarded as the proper sphere of social policy, the use of financial markets (and credit-rating agencies) to regulate the conduct of states, and so on” (Hindess 2002, 140, c.f. Lee 2010:68). Even though the originally declared aim was equality for all, the neoliberal undertaking resulted in deepening social inequality, mostly along the axes of class and geographical region. The middle and higher classes as well as wealthy Western countries profit from the underpaid as well unpaid labour of both women and men working in low-income precarious jobs (Moghadam 1999; Lee 2010).

Contributions of feminism to this situation have been observed in many areas; to name just a few: the post-Marxist cultural turn in feminist academic thinking shifted the attention from redistribution of resources to the deconstruction of symbolic gender order just in the time of intense efforts to repress the memory of social egalitarianism on behalf of the implementation of neoliberal logic (Fraser 2009); many feminist attempts aimed at securing

access to well-paid jobs for women without consideration to the unpaid labour that was left on the shoulders of mainly lower class women and women of colour (hooks, 2000); the appropriation and mainstreaming of feminist terms by dominant political and economic institutions (e.g. empowerment) resulted in the resignification of emancipatory politics to politics of appropriating women to fit the unjust system, so they can, in return, contribute to economic growth (Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson 2008). Moreover, in the recent years, large criticism focused on the attention-dragging popular-feminist activities such as Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* or the book *Half the Sky* of Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, which are reproducing the narrative of success of symptomatically individual women.<sup>1</sup>

To sum up, there is a recognizable conflict between socialist and radical feminist contributions on the one hand, and cultural and deconstructivist contributions on the other. While the first mentioned feminisms draw on Marxist and socialist theory and conceptualize gender in the frame of class struggle, the latter focus mainly on androcentrism on both symbolical as well as practical levels in various areas of social life (Fraser 2007). According to the before-mentioned critiques, the problem stemming from this conflict is that the hegemonic position of the cultural and deconstructivist approaches facilitated the neoliberal order and hence contributed to global social injustice over the past years.

### Case study: Feminist contributions to neoliberalism in Slovakia

The narrative of feminism as a facilitator of neoliberalism occurred also in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe where Slovakia is situated. Among a few analyses that critically view the hegemony of Western ideologies in the process of institutionalization of gender studies and women's and gender NGOs in these countries (Cerwonka 2009; Cîrstocea 2009; Zimmerman 2007), the analysis of Kristen Ghodsee (2004) pays particular attention to the relationship of feminism and neoliberalism. Ghodsee starts her study by comparing the performance of feminists in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe with the performance of "[w]omen of color within the United States as well as women from developing countries [who] have attacked the hegemony of Western cultural feminism" and continues – in a slightly blaming tone – that "[t]hese critiques, however, have often gone unheeded in the reconstruction projects of the former 'second world' [and] the specific type of cultural feminism that has been *exported* to Eastern Europe (and many of the local NGOs informed by its ideology) may be unwittingly complicit with the proponents of neoliberalism responsible for the very decline in general living standards that gave Western feminists their mandates to help Eastern European women in the first place" (2004:728; italics added). The author argues that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been doped by cultural feminism serving *capitalism-by-design*, and that the feminism that arose in these

<sup>1</sup> This issue has been massively discussed e.g. at the first international MarxistFeminist conference that took place in 2015 in Vienna; for more details see the conference report in Kobová and Uhde 2015.

countries presented a particular form of *feminism-by-design*. According to Ghodsee, *cultural feminism* holds essentialist views on gender and posits that women and men are different (whether due to biology or socialization), and that these differences transcend class, race, ethnicity or age. Cultural feminism thus “looks to find solutions for how the worst offences of patriarchy can be mitigated, while never challenging the social or economic relations within which the patriarchy thrives” (Ghodsee 2004:728). The paper argues that this particular form of feminism has been implemented in the former socialist countries along with the initiatives from the United States and Western Europe that funded building democratic institutions. However, these institutions were built under the guidance and supervision of Western experts, pushing ahead the principles of (neo)liberal democracy. Capitalism in these countries has thus been “designed” after the fashion of already existing capitalist and neoliberal arrangements and can be understood as *capitalism-by-design*. The feminist initiatives – along with other democratizing attempts – were similarly oriented on formulations of gender equality, which fitted well with neoliberal ideology and can be similarly understood as *feminism-by-design*. These formulations confidentially distracted attention from class-focused feminist formulations (Ghodsee 2004). A similar perspective has been adopted by the analyses of the context of the Czech Republic (Kodíčková 2002; Kampichler 2012) and Slovakia (Kepplová 2014).

Even though the analyses of feminist contribution to the establishment of neoliberal order both in the U.S. and countries of Western Europe as well as Central and Eastern Europe provide serious evidence that the category of class represents a necessary lens of full perspective on social justice, there are several ambiguities about the correctness of the applicability of the narrative of feminism as a facilitator of neoliberalism, at least in the particular context of Slovakia (but see also Newman 2013 for a discussion about the applicability of the narrative in Great Britain).

First of all, it is always risky to view a politically, geographically, and culturally specific case through the optics of well-established, grand narratives that have their origin in a different context. It is then only paradoxical that this same argument has been used to challenge the hegemony of the Western feminism both in the analyses of the situation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Cerwonka 2009), and in the formulations of feminists from the so called Third World (e.g. Mohanty 1984) who have been presented as bright examples to be followed for feminists in countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Ghodsee 2004; Kepplová 2014). Thus, even though “Western hegemony” is considered to contribute to neoliberal-like feminism in these countries to a large extent, a “Western” narrative is unreflectively applied to provide the explanatory frame of these processes.

Second, as Janet Newman (2013) argues in the context of Great Britain, this narrative goes along with the story of *either progress or loss*, and nothing in-between. Thus, the more complex, less antithetical and non-binary dynamics of political-cultural change are reduced. This argument can be even more important in the situation of Slovakia where

there is a lack of systematic analysis of the history and sociology of the feminist movement, where gender studies have not been institutionalized as an academic discipline yet, where the mere gender analysis of society remains a marginal and broadly unrecognized issue, and where the feminist movement has never had a massive character (Cviková 2014). The dichotomous vision of “wrong” – neoliberalism facilitating, and “right” – neoliberalism criticizing – feminism can fragment already disintegrated feminist capacities.

In what follows, I will therefore try to draw a more complex picture and highlight some problematic points of this narrative. It can be helpful to review and reformulate the past development of feminism in Slovakia before thinking about how to implement feminist critiques in feminist thinking and praxis. It can provide us with valuable knowledge about the characteristics of the terrain we are maneuvering, and illuminate the strengths we can make use of in the future as well as blind spots that have to be improved.

### **Cultural feminism, deconstructivist feminism and beyond**

Kristen Ghodsee (2004) argues that the specific kind of feminism that has been adopted in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has been *cultural feminism*, which is characterised by an essentialist view on gender and focus on the struggle against oppression by patriarchy that is thought to transcend race, class, age etc. However, e.g. Nancy Fraser (2007), analysing the contribution of feminism to neoliberalism in the environment of U. S. and countries of Western Europe, refers both to cultural feminism and deconstructivist feminism. While cultural feminism focuses more on sexual difference and thus creates an essentialist picture on gender, the latter orients more on the deconstruction of the categorial opposition between masculine and feminine. Even though both focus on identity and representation rather than labour and exploitation (ibid), the understanding of gender is rather opposing. Drawing on post-structuralism and analysis of power, the deconstruction of masculine and feminine holds a critical perspective on various (both symbolical, discursive and practical) redistribution of power in the social structure and thus represents a much more system-oriented approach than Ghodsee (2004) accredits to cultural feminism (e.g. Butler 1990; Scott, 1999).

Even though Ghodsee (2004) argues that cultural feminism has been imported and settled in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, a brief look into the approaches implemented by the early feminists in the 90's shows, that deconstructivist approaches have been implemented as well. *Aspekt*, the first feminist magazine in Czechoslovakia, around which the first feminist organizations and initiatives grew up (ASPEKT, Možnosť voľby/ Freedom of Choice – for women's and children's human rights, Piata žena/The Fifth Woman – combating violence against women, Ženská loby Slovenska/Slovak Women's Lobby, Centrum rodových štúdií/Center for gender studies at Comenius University) introduced, in the early 90's, translations of key feminist readings that can be typed both as cultural – focusing on the sexual/gender difference (e.g. Luisa Muraro or Carol Gilligan),

and deconstructivist – focusing rather on symbolical and discursive androcentrism (Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Judith Butler, Susan Bordo). Moreover, the works of authors that can be considered radical or leftist occurred in the magazine as well (e.g. Heidi Hartman). Even though a complex and detailed analysis of the early feminist approaches in Slovakia is missing, deconstructivist approaches seem to have had a massive prevalence (e.g. they have been used in the initial as well as later gender and feminist analyses of various issues, they are at core of the curricula of particular feminist courses provided by the Center of Gender Studies).

As we can see, cultural feminism, as Kristen Ghodsee (2004) defines it, has not been the single form of feminism in Slovakia. A proper analysis of the feminist approaches in the 90's would shed more light on whether it has even been dominant or hegemonic at all. Moreover, it is a matter of fact that different feminisms “met” in the same issues of the first feminist magazine *Aspekt* without the need to explicitly explain their different ideological roots. Therefore, maybe a more adequate label of feminist approaches in the 90's in Slovakia would be *a mixture of feminist approaches* rather than *cultural feminism*.

This reinterpretation can be, according to the implementation of feminism critical of neoliberalism, important for several reasons. First of all, if we consider the argumentation of Nancy Fraser (2007) that a conception of gender that incorporates both the labour-centered and culture-centered problematic is needed for a full understanding of gender inequality, the latter has been elaborated on already. It is thus a strength that we can use in our further feminist efforts: knowledge, argumentation, vocabulary as well as evidence about androcentrism in various fields that is both symbolically and practically excluding particular social groups from the position of ordinary members of society. As my previous analysis of the programs of parties running in the parliamentary elections in Slovakia shows in 2012, the identity of the ordinary subjects (citizens) has been constructed just around the neoliberal norm of an effective and economically favourable worker, and this norm served to derogate care work as well as to legitimize oppressive racist policies against Roma people (Ostertágová 2012). The critique of neoliberalism and the deconstructivist approach thus can – and should – synergize into a more complex and full understanding of social injustice and ways of acting against it.

Second, if my argumentation is right, and if feminism can be understood more as a mixture of concepts, it is then exactly the ambiguity of approaches to feminism that can serve as a convenient terrain for broadening the feminist perspective with leftist and anti-neoliberal thought. Recent years have already shown that the critique of neoliberalism found its place for example in the books published by the only feminist publishing house in Slovakia ASPEKT without any obstacles. In 2013, the translation of the bell hooks' *Feminism is for everybody* was released, and even though the author does not explicitly use the term neoliberalism, her argumentation is clearly based on a leftist ideology. Later on, in 2015 the first publication that viewed the issue of the work of women from a perspective

explicitly critical about capitalism was edited by Ľubica Kobová (2015). The editor brings theoretical perspectives together with empirical research of exploitation of lower-class women in China, Poland, and even Slovakia, and thus provides a piece that is both new to the context and context-bound. The issues of class, neoliberalism, capitalism or Global Justice Movement appeared also in the latest social-scientific publication of ASPEKT viewing the question of women's participation in social movements and gender aspects of citizenship (Mad'arová and Ostertágová 2015).

### Capitalist import and the usefulness of imported concepts

Important part of the narrative of feminism as neoliberalism servant/fuel/facilitator specific to the context of Central and Eastern Europe is that the feminist concepts contributing to neoliberalism have been *imported* to these countries (Ghodsee 2004). Even though this thesis is apparently right, an important part of the story is missing: particularly the one that would explain what did the early feminists *do* with these imported concepts. It is necessary to answer this question not only if we want to analyse how the neoliberalism has (not) been supported by feminist efforts and what were the outcomes, but also if we want to avoid disqualification of these early efforts, and if we do not want to unconsciously reproduce and legitimize the picture of "potent West" and "passive rest of the world" that is in fact in the centre of critiques of the global allocation of power (Mohanty 1984).

There are at least two aspects that should be considered in the case of Slovakia. First, some texts from the 90's show that the cultural and deconstructivist approaches served as useful tools for the analysis of political and social processes leading to an authoritative and uniforming arrangement. For example, in the context of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, when strong nationalist tendencies prevailed in the public discourse, Zuzana Kiczková used the term patriarchy to bridge the nature of the socialist regime, and actual authoritarian and undemocratic political tendencies. Interestingly, she did not use the term to denominate the relationship between abstract groups of women and men, but rather to explain the *modus* of organizing political and social life:

"The [patriarchal] picture tending to unity (the picture of national unity) having the function of social and moral imperative 'Let's unite!' corresponds, to some extent, with the requirement of everyday consciousness that is burdened with the experience of ceaseless arguing as well as with alluring vocation 'Let's act unitary before the world!' (and in this way it can be effective and acquire followers); however, at the same time, it masks *how*, *on what principle* should be the unification done. The course of things hitherto, the tried and tested mechanism is characteristic by legitimizing concrete partial interest as universal, asserting itself, in this case already in the name of universality, that it advocates the interest of all *without difference*" (Kiczková 1994: 4; bold in original).

In return, similar universalizing tendencies occurred also in the democratic opposition to nationalism. For example, in 1994, Jana Juráňová adduced a speech on a conference

dedicated to the fifth annual of Velvet Revolution (later published in the magazine *Aspekt*, issue 3/1994). She criticized the broad unwillingness of the intellectual elites to incorporate gender perspective into the concept of democracy. The argument of difference served as legitimization to the mere articulation of feminist claims in the public space:

“Yes, there is a latently present as well as explicitly articulated remorse, that nowadays we have enough troubles to be just yet concerned with something like feminism. I hear this remorse and my answer is: I definitely object. In Slovakia, we have to deal with everything we have neglected over at least past 20 years. Therefore I, as a women, consider what I as a woman neglected over at least past 20 years” (Juráňová 1994; c.f. Cviková and Juráňová 2009).

Thus, beside the analysis of the capitalist import, one plausible interpretation is that the perspective deconstructing the process of introducing *particular* interests as *universal* together with legitimization of *difference* served as a useful tool for analysis of the social and political life.

Second, deconstructivist approaches could have been useful also in the struggle against the dominance of the Catholic Church that has been, even from the highest political levels, prescribing the norm of a heteronormative relationship of women and men carrying complementary roles. This approach could be helpful in breaking the declared ahistorical and apolitical character of the enforced gender arrangement and in pointing at the cultural relativity of the roles of women and men. It also enabled the notion that such an arrangement in fact creates space for exploitation of women’s work that is, on the one hand, recognized as important, on the other hand positioned into the private, apolitical – and hence unpaid – sphere as a woman’s commission and the “natural” instinct of women (see also Dalla Costa and James 1971). It is worth noting that these conceptions of gender and motherhood largely persist both in the lay and professional public until today. As statistics show, women spend twice as much time than men doing unpaid care work (*Súhrnná správa o stave rodovej...* 2014), and this difference is legitimized by the public opinions on the appropriate roles of women and men (Bútorová 2008).

To sum up, even though the approaches could be imported from the U.S. and from the countries of Western Europe, and even though the imported conceptions could have contributed to the neglect of class and other important issues connected to neoliberalism in Slovakia, they could be also useful in particular topics. Analysis of how these concepts have been adopted, whether and how they were negotiated or translated into the post-socialist experience, will possibly help us not only better understand feminism but also neoliberalism in Slovakia. As Newman (2013) argues, neoliberalism is treated in feminist critiques as if it was a monolith, an uncontested concept that does not need further explanation, even though different configurations of neoliberalism can be observed.

In that case, if feminist concepts did facilitate the establishment of neoliberalism in Slovakia, what is the face and shape of this neoliberal feminism in this context? Why are



there no popular-feminist icons as Sheryl Sandberg in Slovakia? Why did the attempt of the MP Simona Petřík to bring her child to the parliament – an attempt that can be seen as a token for successful gender mainstreaming and neoliberalism facilitating feminism – trigger a massive backlash that mostly cast doubts on the politician's motherhood? Why is staying home with children for a longer time acknowledged as a welcome option by so many women, and why is it partly supported also by state policies?

### **Approximating feminism and neoliberalism**

My argumentation has showed particular ambiguities about the applicability of the narrative of feminism as the facilitator of neoliberalism in the particular context of Slovakia. First, cultural feminism in Slovakia has not been as monolithic and possibly not even hegemonic as it is argued to be (Ghodsee 2004; Kepplová 2014). Second, even though feminist thinking has been most probably predominantly oriented towards cultural and deconstructivist approaches, it was far from adopting a purely essentialist perspective on gender. Rather, it could have been a mixture of various – cultural, deconstructivist, and at some minor extent even radical, approaches. Third, the narratives and explanations of the adoption of particular issues and approaches of the early feminists remain unknown. This is problematic as it can implicitly reinforce the criticized dominant position of Western feminism. A more differentiated knowledge about how and in what manner the neoliberal feminist perspective has (or has not) been adopted can also provide us with a more informed picture about what is the character of neoliberalism in Slovakia, and thus which issues should be in the scope of our attention.

Therefore, any successful implementation of a feminist perspective that is critical towards neoliberalism can perhaps partly lie within a more complex and dynamic analysis of the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism in Slovakia as well as in other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Otherwise, we cannot avoid the “politics of blame” that can “too easily slid[e] into the continued demonization of feminism and its achievements by the conservative Right, fed by the popular press” (Newman 2013:4). This aspect of the dichotomous vision of neoliberal vs. anti-neoliberal feminism is even more threatening in the context of rising backlash against gender equality and feminism all over Europe, Slovakia notwithstanding (Kováts and Póim 2015; Maňarová 2015). However, important parts of the mosaic are still missing: What are the narratives of the early feminists who are identified as critical actors of the implementation of a feminism that enforces neoliberalism? What concepts have been implemented in the official policies and through what kinds of processes? Which issues have been seriously neglected, which issues have been adopted in a neoliberal framework and which not?

This paper provides only a partial perspective on the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism in Slovakia. I pay attention mostly to the activities of one particular NGO. And even though it is the oldest feminist organization contributing to feminist struggles

in Slovakia to a large extent and the only feminist publishing house, my contribution is more exemplary than representative. However, as the rare analyses of the situation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe come to a rather undifferentiated picture of feminists facilitating neoliberalism, I consider it necessary to make the picture more complex and complicated. A further analysis will certainly require setting the activities of a much bigger number of critical actors in the context of broader processes connected to the allocation of money through national and international granting schemes that are, together with the official politics of the European Union, setting the agenda and norms informed by a neoliberal common-sense, and thus restraining the manoeuvring space for critical (not only feminist) actors. Which activities have been/are financially supported? What are the consequences of the lack of institutional support of feminist NGOs and the neoliberal organization of the whole non-governmental sphere that is based on the logic of effectiveness, measurable effects and outcomes? What activities can be done if the attractiveness of activities and organization are necessary to gain at least some financial support from the public (fundraising)? What are the living conditions of the feminists? These issues should be addressed in a more detailed and more contextual manner for a full understanding of the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism and thus for better leftist-feminist agenda-setting in particular countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

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## Overcoming dependency and illegitimate citizenship: Feminism, neoliberalism, and the depoliticization of housing

Precarious housing conditions, evictions, exclusion from public spaces, mass shelters for homeless people and the punishment of undeserving welfare recipients and mothers have long been parts of the everyday life of poor and lower class citizens. Neoliberalism, both as economic policy and theory, not only intensified these processes of social and spatial exclusion but also depoliticized them by framing poverty either as an issue of individual criminal or pathological behaviour or an economic necessity. According to Harvey (2005: 2), “neoliberalism is (...) a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade”. In this theory, state intervention has to be limited to those functions that secure private property rights (Harvey 2005), while those who do not own private property are offered no or very minimal social protection.

In this paper, I focus on one aspect of neoliberalism: how it depoliticizes housing, and how this depoliticization creates dependencies that deprive women from basic citizenship rights. To explain these processes, I first describe what depoliticization means in the context of housing and homelessness. Then I turn to my case study about the depoliticization of housing in Hungary and its consequences for homeless women. The case study is based on an ethnographic research in a homeless shelter and day centre in Budapest consisting of semi-structured interviews with homeless women living in a night shelter, temporary shelter or in the public space, and with social workers working with homeless women. The research also included two weeks of participant observation in the shelter and the day centre. After discussing the empirical findings, I explain potential ways to repoliticize housing and to create policies that do not deprive women of citizenship rights.

The reason why the issue of housing and homelessness efficiently illustrates neoliberal processes and its exclusionary effects in the case of women is that housing was one of the policy areas that has been most severely affected by neoliberalization. The home ownership

model became dominant all over Europe, and the deregulation of financial markets connected individual households to the processes of global financial markets through mortgage loans (Lowe 2011). Access to home ownership became the basis of welfare, while public subsidies for affordable housing decreased, and the majority of the public housing stock was privatized (ibid.). At the same time, the number of homeless people and the indebtedness of the households are increasing (Pittini et al. 2015). While this paper does not focus on these financial processes, it is important to emphasize that housing as a policy field is deeply embedded in these processes.

The main argument of this paper is that neoliberalism leads to a depoliticized understanding of housing, which leads to a backlash to “old” forms of dependencies for women. Homeless women, who had lost their access to a private sphere, also lose their ownership of their own bodies, and due to the lack of adequate state support, become dependent on male partners. However, women from households whose home ownership is supported through mortgage subsidies, also become dependent on their partners because of the familialist policies through which home ownership is subsidized.

### **The depoliticization of housing and the emergence of dependencies**

All over Europe, more and more units from the social housing stock are becoming privatized; there is a lack of affordable housing; the rental sector is too expensive for a large portion of the population, and the number of homeless people has been rising in the last six years (Pittini et al. 2015). Yet, housing is framed as a private, not a public issue, one that the state is not supposed to interfere with unless it aims to subsidize real estate developers and upper middle-class families. Because of that, housing is rarely discussed in relation to welfare, but mostly framed as a market issue (Lowe 2011).

The reason for that is that there is an inherent tension between policy alternatives to housing privatization, lack of state assistance, evictions, and the basic principles of neoliberal policy making. Neoliberalism as a theory presumes that freedom can only be achieved through the economic sector’s independence from the state, the lack of state interference with market forces, and the lack of restrictions on private property rights (Harvey 2005). This leads to the privatization of formerly publicly owned assets (ibid.), including housing units previously owned by the state or local authorities in the case of housing. These assets become part of the private sphere.

This does not only mean that the public has no longer any legitimate claim to those assets, but also that basic human needs, that could be fulfilled through access to those assets, are no longer considered public issues. In line with Fraser (1990), I define this process of delegitimization of basic human needs, depoliticization. Depoliticization occurs through hegemonic interpretations of needs that seek to “enclave certain matters into specialized discursive arenas; both thereby shield such matters from generalized contestation and from widely disseminated conflicts of interpretation” (Fraser 1990: 206). Depoliticization

does not mean that housing or homelessness become non-political issues, but that policy alternatives and the alternative constructions of the policy problems become delegitimized through a discursive process aimed at maintaining existing policies.

What does the process of depoliticization mean in practice? First, the neoliberal assumption is that once markets are freed from intervention, “each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being” (Harvey 2005: 65). If one has not gained access to privately owned assets, for example, he or she does not have the financial means to rent out an apartment at market price, it is considered an individual failure either caused by the moral laxity of that person or some individual psychopathologies. Second, it becomes common sense that certain needs, including the need for subsidized housing units, and aspirations are not legitimate, because they exist outside the hegemonic interpretation of needs (Fraser 1990, Fraser 2013). According to the hegemonic interpretation, those who cannot afford housing on a market price do not need social housing but shelters; because they would be incapable to live in an apartment. Otherwise they would not have lost their home. Through conceptualizing these claims as private, they are understood as needs and claims outside the realm of the public. This is how not providing proper assistance for people in housing poverty becomes an economic common sense, the epitome of economic rationality, even though it is perfectly clear that a lot of people are excluded from housing through market forces. Third, this combination of individual responsibility and depoliticization of needs does not eliminate the involvement of the state in economic policies. On the contrary, the state continues to have a central role in subsidizing market actors and enforcing social policies that benefit those who already have financial assets and punish those who do not dispose of such assets (Harvey 2005, Gustafson 2011). Thus, only in the official rhetoric of neoliberal policy making do the privatization of formerly public assets and the exclusion of basic human needs from the public realm lead to the lack of state intervention. In reality, they lead to a highly unequal system of redistribution and recognition and the criminalization of poverty through the welfare system and the policing of public spaces (the criminalization of homelessness, scavenging, loitering, etc.).

The material and moral aspects of these exclusionary processes cannot be separated: it is not only about catering to the needs of a certain group of citizens and not of others but also about the construction of legitimate forms of citizenship. Legitimate citizens with legitimate expectations from the public whose needs are taken into consideration are those who have access to private property and those who are not in need of public assistance. The “needy” are made responsible for their own supposed failure, and the state becomes mobilized to change their moral character or pathological behaviour, while it provides generous public assistance in form of subsidies and tax exemptions to corporations and citizens who have access to financial assets. This process is interpreted as the natural and only rational way of policy making.

## Dependency and the moral exclusion of the “needy” in the context of Hungarian housing and homeless policies

In this section I explain how the critique of neoliberalism needs to be complemented with the feminist critique of citizenship through the case of homeless women living in shelters or public spaces. The empirical findings I rely on are based on an ethnographic research I carried out in a homeless shelter and day centre which included in-depth interviews with homeless women living in the shelter or in public space, and social workers, and two weeks of participant observation. In this research I focused on the constructions of homeless women’s citizenship by homeless women themselves and the social workers, and the constructions of private and public spheres in relation to gendered citizenship. In addition to that, this section is based on my own experiences as an activist working in the women’s group of The City is for All, a grassroots homeless activist group in Budapest.

Before discussing the findings of my research, it is important to explain the housing policy context in which the research is embedded. Hungary is an extreme case of such neoliberal policy making: due to the quick privatization of the social housing stock and state subsidies provided for mortgage loans, Hungary became a super home ownership state (Hegedűs and Teller 2007). In 2015, 92 percent of the entire housing stock was owner occupied, while only 3 percent was owned by the local governments (Pittini et al. 2015: 56). Since not all local government owned apartments are rented out as social housing, we can conclude that social housing takes up less than 3 percent of the entire housing stock, while there are 300 thousand households who need affordable housing (Pittini et al. 2015).

As I explained above: neoliberal policy making does not only entail economic policies that disadvantage a large part of citizens, but also constructs the notion of legitimate citizenship. This occurs through privatization, depoliticization, and criminalization. These exclusionary processes and the construction of legitimate citizenship are interrelated with gender-based exclusion, because familialism is one of central elements of the neoliberal construction of morally legitimate citizenship, and a social entity through which the concentration of wealth in upper classes can be ensured.

By familialism I refer to three phenomena. One is the depoliticization of certain needs through familialization, meaning that certain needs are relegated from the public sphere to the family in hegemonic political discourses (Fraser 1990). The second is the normative construction of legitimate citizens by explicitly or implicitly advocating for a normalized, traditional notion of family life and by creating policies that discriminate against those who do not correspond to these expectations. This is what Berlant (1997) refers to as intimate public sphere, arguing that the private sphere is governed and constructed by dominant political ideas about how people should live their private lives. This include legitimate partnership forms and decisions about parenthood, too. The third element of familialism is pronatalism. Pronatalism entails a set of state policies aimed at increasing

birth rates, which result in social policies that only benefit women as long as they are mothers (Lister 1997).

In Hungary, family and welfare policies are characterized by a mix of neoliberalism, etatism and neoconservatism (Szikra 2014). These policies have become more and more pronatalist, but this pronatalism means social and housing policies that only benefit the upper middle class families primarily through generous tax breaks, state-supported housing loans, while the benefits offered to poor families are minimal, and, if we take into consideration that between 2008 and 2012 there was a 13-14 percent welfare retrenchment, this basically means redistribution from the poorest to the wealthiest families (Inglot, Szikra and Rat 2012, Szikra 2014). While this type of familialism could be understood as a form of conservatism, since it is based on the idea that the state should provide special protection to the traditional family, it fits very well into neoliberal policy making: the state's intervention is argued to be aimed at increasing the birth rates of the "right", upper middle class families who already own assets, but at the same time, it is also a state intervention that redistributes public funds from the poorest to the wealthiest.

Housing policies have always aimed at the protection of the family (Dupcsik and Tóth 2008). Even during state socialism, families, especially families from the party elite, had easier access to housing (Dupcsik and Tóth 2008). Although housing poverty was not eliminated during state-socialism, since a lot of people lived in workers' shelters, the majority of the population had access to social housing (Horváth 2012). As I explained above, the vast majority of the social housing stock was privatized during Hungary's transition into a market economy, and home ownership became the dominant model (Hegedűs and Teller 2007). This was not merely a result of market liberalization but of the state's active support of the home ownership model through mortgage loan subsidies that benefitted upper middle class families who had children or were planning to have children (state subsidies have also been available based on the number of children the families were planning) (Inglot, Szikra and Rat 2012).

Last year, the previous state-subsidized mortgage loan scheme was transformed into the "family home making discount". Like the previous one, this scheme also offers a non-refundable benefit and subsidizes loans, however, it also provides an unusually large amount of non-refundable subsidy and subsidized loan to those who buy a newly built apartment or house, build a house or add new units to their existing home in case of families (Government Ordinance No. 16/2016). These families are offered a 10 million forint, approximately 32 000 euro, non-refundable public assistance, plus the same amount of loan with lowered, state-subsidized interest rate if they have three children or if they sign an agreement that they would have three children within ten years, and they do not divorce during this time. There are some restrictions in relation to the size of the apartment and the criteria in relation to the beneficiaries. This new benefit has the aim to provide middle class families with housing so that they would have more children and the demographic



decline would stop, but this benefit is only available to couples who already have enough savings, and one of them is officially employed. The consequences are even more generous subsidies for home ownership through familialist discourses and policies. At the same time, those families who do not have savings, live in rented apartments, or lack affordable housing, are offered less benefits. The discourse about demographic decline that emphasizes the need for subsidizing the home ownership of middle class families is as much about the conservative image of the Hungarian middle class family with three children as it is about channelling state subsidies from the poorest to the wealthier part of the population.

These policies, however, not only entail the redistribution of public resources to those who can afford home ownership, but by promoting child birth and the image of middle class families with multiple children, they increase the dependency of women, who in the vast majority of cases become stay-at-home mothers during the first years of the child and become financially dependent on their partners, are obliged to give birth and remain with the same partner, otherwise the state obliges the home owners to pay back the mortgage loan with an interest. Thus, women, in order to have access to home ownership, do not only become dependent on the state, but on their partners, too.

Familialist discourses and practices were not created by neoliberal policies but are rooted in the liberal notion of citizenship as various feminist political theorists (Okin 1987, Pateman 1988, Lister 1997) had explained. The liberal notion of citizenship is based on the division of the public sphere as a male and the private sphere as a female domain, which solidifies the unequal relationship between men and women (Pateman 1988). This also includes women's limited or non-existent ownership of their own bodies and private sphere (*ibid.*). Duties associated with the private or intimate sphere (domestic work, care work, emotional work) are perceived as women's primary concerns, and therefore the public sphere is a template fashioned for men's needs (Lister 1997). This is why, according to Lister, in order to eliminate social inequalities, it is not enough to decommodify wage labour through welfare provisions, but there is also a need for the defamilialization of welfare. Basically, this means that redistribution and the recognition of needs cannot be based on the assumption or expectation of one's status as a family member and her reliance on the wage of another person.

Thus, without the feminist critique of citizenship, one of the main elements of the various forms of material and moral exclusion by neoliberalism remains invisible; and without understanding the embeddedness of gender-based inequalities into the economic system, feminist criticisms will only be able to address one of the elements of the system reproducing gender-based injustices. Especially when it comes to neoliberal policy making which claims to liberate women from gender-based inequalities they face (by integrating some women into the workforce, for example). However, while it still reproduces an economic and political system that makes women financially vulnerable to their partners and the state, it stigmatizes all forms of dependency (Fraser 2013). Women earn less than male

employees working in the same position; are affected negatively by job segregation (they are segregated into poorly paid sectors); are discriminated against on the job market, and even excluded during the time they do unpaid or poorly paid care work with their children at home; and they do the vast majority of unpaid house work. Although most of the labour they do is unequally rewarded or not rewarded at all, women, who depend on the state or their partners due to the lack of adequate financial rewards, are perceived as undeserving, and their exclusion becomes understood as their own individual failure.

Homeless women are the epitomes of this failure. They are not only stigmatized as undeserving poor people, but also as people who violate gender norms by being in public space and not having a family (Golden 1995). They are punished by the state in many different ways: as homeless people living in public spaces, as dysfunctional citizens in need of welfare intervention, and very often as undeserving mothers who need to be disciplined through the child protection system. While neoliberalism in theory advocates for individual freedom, once these women lose their home, all aspects of their private sphere becomes monitored and controlled by welfare agencies whose aim is to fix their dysfunctional behaviour, which is, in fact, their lack of access to a home, which is both a symbol of material and moral deservingness.

This undeservingness is made very clear to homeless women in Hungary both by the state and by service providers. It is a fact that even though the number of homeless women has risen since the beginning of 1990s, the number of shelter places for women did not follow this increase (Buzás and Hoffmann 2012). Since shelters for homeless women do not fit into the framework of familialist welfare policies, this area of social policies has been ignored. Shelters are often in very bad conditions, too. In the interviews during my research, women were complaining about the cockroaches, ants and bedbugs in the rooms, and the crowded spaces in the sleeping halls filled with used hospital beds, or, for those who paid for a temporary shelter and had a room on their own, about the size of the room where anything barely fits.

Poor living conditions were not only a matter of finances. Social workers and even the women, who internalized these discourses of dependency often emphasized that the shelter “was not a hotel”, meaning that not paying for their accommodation or not paying the market price for it disabused them from the right to complain or demand better services. Although this was a publicly funded shelter, market logic permeated the discussions. Since the women did not pay for anything, they received a very limited amount from all the things they needed, even though this often brought women into humiliating situations. For example, in the night shelter women had to ask for toilet paper, sanitary pads and all other goods they needed directly from the social worker’s office. If they asked for more than they received, the social workers in the shelter would ask them why, or simply say there was not enough to give out more. One woman was told that she could only receive two pieces of sanitary pads for a day, which was not enough for her.

The social services are based on a paternalistic idea of welfare provisions. Welfare paternalism signifies a change from social rights-based understanding of the role of welfare to a paternalistic, supervisory understanding of social services. The latter is based on the assumptions that people in need of welfare provisions are dysfunctional people, who need to be supervised by the case workers, and all provisions have to be strictly means-tested and controlled, otherwise they will be dependent on welfare (Mead 1997). This is, of course, in line with the welfare retrenchment policies and the shift from unemployment benefits to strictly controlled workfare provisions in Hungary (Szikra 2014). In the shelter this meant that women could be and were supervised in their sleeping halls, their personal belongings could have been thrown out, their cleanliness was questioned, and they were also expected to tell their life stories to the social workers in a coherent and honest way. If they resisted these or they were found undeserving, they were thought about as pathological or not wanting to “move forward.”

At the same time, many social workers acknowledged that “moving forward” was practically impossible for these women due to the lack of state-supported housing and the low amount of social aid. These were also confirmed by the women, most of who did work for a long time but was not able to find employment. Many of them had experience with persons or companies who hired them, but refused to pay them, and who knew about their vulnerable financial situation. They were also mostly employed unofficially during the end of their career, which cut them off unemployment benefits and early pension. Thus, their homelessness made them vulnerable to exploitation, while, at the same time, they were accused of not “moving forward”, mostly meaning not finding a job. “Moving forward” was frequently mentioned as an expectation from the women, which primarily meant finding a job, or saving enough money to move to a temporary shelter, or to behave in a way based on which the social workers decided to move her to a better night shelter, which they did not have to leave during the day (most night shelters are only open for the night). Homeless women were often accused even by other homeless women of not wanting to “move forward”, which was basically a synonym for undeservingness. Homeless women internalized these discourses and thought about themselves along the lines of deservingness. When they were telling about their life, they always felt the need to explain whether becoming homeless was or was not their fault, and they often told me that they had been feeling that “there was something wrong” with them because of their situation.

Homeless women are both affected by discourses of dependency, and are offered very low-quality services which come with a lot of supervision. In addition to that, the fact that homeless women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence was not addressed by any special policies in the shelters, although most social workers explained that they knew women were often abused or raped. Golden (1995) explains that homeless women are not able to fulfil the traditional gender roles as women, since they do not have a domestic sphere, and because of that, they are often perceived as sexually promiscuous or as prostitutes. This

shows that the feminist critique of the classical notion of citizenship is still valid, because women, who do not have a domestic sphere and are excluded into public spaces or semi-public spaces like state-funded shelters, are threatened with violence, and there are no public efforts to prevent this violence.

Women who used day centres, which were mixed spaces, explained that they were constantly approached by men in day centres, who initially were kind to them, and invited them for coffee, but then they wanted sex in exchange. They were verbally abused after they refused these men. A woman living in the night shelter explained that one night a group of men showed up in front of the shelter and yelled “Come out, whores!”, because they were looking for prostitutes. One of my interviewees was raped by a man who saw her freezing on the streets during the winter and invited her to his apartment. Another interviewee explained that she decided to be in a relationship with an abusive partner because she needed protection, and because it is “better” to be abused by one person “who scares away the rest”, meaning that being with a man would stop her harassment by other men. Being in a relationship thus did not mean protection from abuse in general, but even these relationships provided women more protection than they received from the state. A lot of this violence occurred in publicly funded shelters in which women were not only stigmatized as welfare recipients, but as women who are morally excluded from the society, and whose vulnerability increased by not receiving adequate state support.

## Conclusions

Overall, discourses and practices based on the idea of dependency not only make homeless women vulnerable to all kinds of abuse: breaches of their private sphere, partner-based and sexual abuse, harassment. However, this problem is largely ignored because the issue of homelessness is conceptualized in a framework of dependency, and in which the class- and gender-based inequalities are interpreted as forms of individual moral laxity. Their undeservingness is constructed through depoliticization: their problems are ignored, because their lack of housing is a private issue (most probably caused by their moral laxity or dysfunctional behaviour), and because they do not contribute to the society either as self-sufficient workers or as upper middle class mothers who both fulfil a neoconservative ideal and enhancement of the housing market. The conditions described above become rationality. The result, ironically, is not any decrease in these women’s dependency as expected from welfare retrenchment and welfare paternalism, but rather the return of “old” dependencies: dependency on charity, dependency on exploitative employers and dependency on a male protector. However, these problems are unmentioned, because the depoliticized language of dependency does not offer neither the general public nor these women vocabulary to express the injustices they suffer from, or to start a conversation outside the dependency framework, which could lead to progressive policies, i.e. policies, that address the class- and gender-based inequalities that lead to the problems of homeless women.

Another consequence of this depoliticization is that the increasing amount of state subsidies channelled from the lower to the upper classes is perceived as natural. In the case of women the state subsidies provided for home ownership of families with children, these subsidies will create dependency. Due to gendered norms and the wage gap, in Hungary in the vast majority of cases women become stay-at-home mothers for years in case they give birth. Signing a contract about having a certain amount of children will make these mothers, who apply to state subsidized mortgage together with their husbands, even more dependent on both the state and their partner's salary. This dependency is perceived as natural. It is also perceived natural that private home ownership of the upper classes is subsidized by the state, while the state withdraws from subsidizing the housing of individuals whose dependency on public assistance is understood as a personal failure. Familialism and dependency as discursive and policy tools not only reflect the conservative etatist politics of the nationalist-conservative Fidesz-KDNP government in Hungary, but legitimize welfare retrenchment, super home ownership, and therefore the redistribution from the lower to the upper classes everywhere.

As I argued above, in order to tackle these dependencies, a process of repoliticization of needs is necessary through a rights-based reconceptualization of housing. There is an increasing number of civil groups and NGOs fighting for the acknowledgement of the basic human needs of people affected by housing poverty and for the rights-based understanding of housing, in which housing is not a market asset but the basis of adequate living conditions. There is a need for a radical shift from subsidizing home ownership through familialist policies to public subsidies for housing and utility costs, increasing the social housing stock, and creating a nationwide housing policy strategy in which housing is understood as a social right. In addition to that there must be a shift from familialist policies in which women's dependency on a male partner is presumed and maintained, and all rights-based housing policies should be created and implemented using a feminist perspective, based on the needs of women living in housing poverty.

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## Gender and the division of labour in Hungarian rural areas in the neoliberal era

Neoliberalism gradually replaced the welfare state model as the hegemonic global form of capitalism from the 1970's. Neoliberal restructuring, characterized by unemployment and underemployment, the flexibilization and informalization of work (Peterson 2012: 7), have affected men and women differently. Many women became marginalized on the labour market for various, however, interlinked reasons. First, in the dominant gender division of labour of capitalist patriarchy femininity has been associated with unpaid reproductive labour (Fraser 1994; Peterson 2012) – housework, child care, subsistence production –, thus, women have been seen as secondary breadwinners (Peterson 2012: 8). Unpaid reproductive labour and 'feminized' paid labour have been devalued in terms of status and remuneration in capitalist patriarchy. Second, in the neoliberal era social welfare provisioning and services have been cut, while there has been a lack of regulations that would protect caretakers against discrimination. Reproductive duties are often not taken into account in the workplace, and, similarly to the state socialist period (Asztalos Morell 1999: 332-334), the male worker, free from reproductive duties, is taken as the norm. Third, the 'feminization of survival' means that women are expected to ensure the survival of the household and the family if the income from paid labour decreases, by undertaking the 'triple burden': paid formal and informal work, as well as unpaid reproductive labour. Because of these phenomena, many women are more likely to be compelled to undertake informal, more precarious and exploitative paid economic activities (Peterson 2012), become economically vulnerable and marginalized.

In this paper I will focus on the situation of less-educated rural women with children in disadvantaged rural localities in Hungary. These women face particular disadvantages because of intersecting inequalities based on gender, class, geographical position/space and familial status. My analysis is based on in-depth interviews and participant observations I did for my MA thesis in a village of five thousand inhabitants on the Eastern periphery of Pest county. I will argue that women with children in this rural space are marginalized

on the labour market and thus are involved in lower-paid, lower-status and/or informal work to a greater extent, a fact that is connected with the above processes in multiple ways. The local economy, labour market and public services have been shrinking due to economic restructuring, welfare benefits are of low quality in terms of child care facilities, public transport and cash transfers, while, besides the general gender wage gap, women with children are discriminated against on the labour market. These phenomena and the gender division of labour in the interviewees' families – in which unpaid reproductive labour is almost solely the women's responsibility – reproduce and are reproduced by women's economic marginalization.

First, I will introduce the dominant gender division of labour in the interviewees' families, and how it is connected to the gender division of labour within and outside the household under state socialism. Second, I will introduce the situation and particular disadvantage of rural women with children. Finally, I will outline possibilities for progressive politics that could mitigate the disadvantages faced by rural women with children, women and those who perform unpaid reproductive labour.

### **The persistent norm of the working mother and the gender division of labour in Hungarian rural areas<sup>1</sup>**

*"The mother is primarily responsible for the children's personal development, while a father is good to have and it is good that he helps in certain things." (Zsuzsa, 59)*

Under state socialism, women's employment followed the needs of economic development, industrialization and upheld patriarchal relations in terms of the gender division of labour within and outside the household. Because of the needs of extensive industrialization and the labour shortage women were pulled to the labour market to a great extent (Asztalos Morell 1999: 330-338; Zimmermann 2010: 2), and their "full time participation in wage labour increased until 1989" (Fodor-Nagy 2014: 124). The low amount of wages made the dual-earner model necessary in many families (Zimmermann 2010: 3). However, "women's reproductive role strengthened", as well (Asztalos Morell 1999: 332). However, under state socialism, one part of unpaid reproductive labour was taken over by childcare and eldercare facilities available even in the countryside, and canteens in workplaces (ibid: 331 and 342).

In the Stalinist period, until 1956, women could perform almost every kind of jobs (Asztalos Morell 1999: 330-334). Then, from 1956 occupations 'suitable' for women were determined

<sup>1</sup> Versions of the sections one and two are part of my MA thesis *Women with children in a Hungarian village. The intersections of gender, familial status, geographical space and class in the post-state socialist era*. Submitted to Central European University, Department of Gender Studies. Supervisor: Professor Susan Zimmermann. Budapest: 2016.



based sometimes on the protection of women's reproductive capacity and pregnant women, but mostly on alleged physical, mental and competence-related differences (ibid: 334-351). The conflict between paid labour and reproductive duties and women's alleged attitude to prioritize the latter also served as justification (ibid). Thus, as Ildikó Asztalos Morell argues, both the norm of the male worker free from reproductive responsibilities and the norm of masculine physical characteristics were strengthened, while female workers were rendered deviant (ibid: 332, 334). Besides traditionally 'feminine' occupations, there were male-dominated jobs rendered 'suitable' for women, too. Men leaving their positions in these occupations were provided further training in order to move upwards in the hierarchy (ibid: 334-351). This led to occupational segregation in a way that placed women into a disadvantageous position (ibid). After the shift to intensive industrialization, women were temporarily withdrawn from the labour market by means of economic incentives, primarily the paid maternal leave and child care allowance (gyermekgondozási segély, 'GYES') introduced in 1967. Besides the economic shift, the costs of the employment of women with small children, the higher cost of an alternative unemployment allowance and low fertility rate also played a role in the decision (Asztalos Morell 1999: 361). This meant a revaluation of motherhood and the reproductive role (ibid: 351-352; Haney 1997: 214), however, allowances were connected to previous involvement in paid or profit-oriented labour, thus, the male norm. There were inequalities under state socialism in terms of access to paid work, as well: women with limited education, living in rural areas and Roma women were disadvantaged (Zimmermann 2010: 4-5).

However, during the post-state socialist transition, the relative amount of the universal family and child care allowances, not connected to employment, gradually decreased, while allowances for women with stable employment provide a much higher amount, proportionately with the former salary – however, this latter is not a salary substitute, either. Thus, the current structure of family and childcare allowances contributes to class inequalities, the economic disadvantage of women with children and those who do not have access to long-term formal employment.

Women have been economically marginalized in rural areas. Many rural inhabitants worked either in the local agricultural production cooperatives or commuted to heavy industrial sites in the neighbouring towns and cities (Kovács et al. 2006: 44) under state socialism. Similarly, the village I research has historically had an economy based on agriculture (Local government 2016). Under state socialism, every plot was merged into agricultural cooperatives (ibid) until 1960. The village was not reached by state socialist industrialization, and both the industrial and the service sectors have remained marginal (ibid). Because of the low number of local jobs outside the agricultural cooperatives and later because of transformation of agricultural production (privatization and mechanization), many inhabitants – in 2011, 60.4% of those formally employed – have been commuting to neighbouring cities, nearby factories or the capital and its agglomeration (ibid). Besides or

instead of formal employment, many inhabitants engage in small-scale agricultural or horticultural production in the household or start another enterprise (ibid; KSH 2014).

State socialist Hungary was different from the Soviet model of cooperatives in terms of allowing small-scale household-based production (Morell-Brandth 2007: 371). Although collectivization and proletarianization 'demasculinized' men, since they lost their power as the head of the household and the family, new kinds of patriarchal relations were created (ibid: 373). First, in the collective sphere men occupied jobs involving machines, technology or animals, as well as – as the vast majority of managers – had control over the means of production and others' working time, while occupations filled mainly by women – administration, accounting, manual labour in agriculture and 'feminized' branches of industrial production – became devalued in terms of status and remuneration (Asztalos Morell 1999). However, by the 1980's women's "chances of making it at least into middle level managerial positions exceeded that of women living in comparable non-socialist countries" (Fodor-Nagy 2014: 124-125). Second, women often worked as "helping family members" of the cooperatives or as seasonal agricultural workers, and they were also primarily responsible for the sphere of the household, including both domestic and care work and household-based subsistence production (ibid). However, men's involvement increased as households started producing for the market in the second half of the 1960's (Asztalos Morell 1999). Similarly, in the village that I research, based on the interviewees' stories about their own, their parents' and their spouses' jobs, as well as the participant observations, there has been strict sectoral gender segregation since state socialism on the local and neighbouring labour market. Men have worked as machine workers, electricians or transporters. Women have been employed as clerks, kitchen workers, cleaners, shop assistants or nurses, while many of them have also undertaken household-based agricultural or other kind of profit-oriented labour.

Under state socialism the working mother became the new 'feminine' norm, accompanied by the 'masculine' norm of breadwinning and freedom from reproductive duties (Fodor-Nagy 2014: 123-125; Asztalos Morell 1999: 353). Women were expected to undertake the vast majority of unpaid reproductive labour, and to also perform on the labour market in a subordinated position. The transition from state socialism to market economy that brought along neoliberal restructuring did not mitigate these burdens; moreover, women with children and living in rural areas became further marginalized on the labour market. Under and after the state socialist period, women's association with and unequal share of reproductive responsibilities (housework and childcare) have never been questioned (Sabján 2008: 79), and reproductive work is done primarily by women also today (Fodor-Kispéter 2014: 388; Fodor-Nagy 2014: 127). Moreover, a new wave of familism or 're-familialisation' emerged (Fodor-Kispéter 2014: 384). The number of childcare and eldercare facilities, that however was never sufficient to replace household-based care, decreased, and the ideology of traditional gender roles strengthened because of increasing unemployment, as well as the rise of "extreme right nationalist ideologies" and the decline in birth rates (ibid).

However, in contrast to the tendency of the 'retraditionalization' of gender roles, based on the interviews the gender division of labour in the researched village changed towards the opposite direction. The 'feminine' norm of the working mother who performs most of unpaid reproductive labour and is a secondary breadwinner is common accompanied by the 'masculine' norm of the breadwinner – regardless of actual income – with a high degree of freedom from reproductive duties. However, some interviewees draw borders between acceptable and non-acceptable forms of unpaid reproductive labour, and they also question the division and men's freedom from reproductive duties either because their work is devalued by the husband, or because of women's 'double burden'.

My interviewees valorized their unpaid reproductive labour – especially in terms of childcare and the maintenance of family life – as their 'natural' role. This kind of valorization can be interpreted as reconciliation with their situation, stemming from the marginalization of less-educated and/or rural women on the labour market during neoliberal restructuring (Kovács et al. 2006: 45; Simonyi 2002).<sup>2</sup> However, they also said that women should engage in paid labour, thus, be working mothers, too. The reason behind the gender division of labour in the interviewees' families is not the autonomous persistence of the dominant gender arrangement under state socialism, but rather its interplay with and reproduction by the economic processes of restructuring and new economic relations. These are the continuing necessity of the dual-earner model, the further devaluation of unpaid reproductive labour and the marginalization of women with children on the labour market that I will elaborate in the next section.

### Intersecting disadvantages: women with children in rural spaces

*"A man does not let himself to be eviscerated, while a woman is attached to the child and the family." (Katinka, 55)*

In post-state socialist countries women were protected from massive unemployment and increasing gender inequality by the existence of gender segregation and the indispensability the devalued, 'feminine' skills (Fodor-Nagy 2014: 122-128).<sup>3</sup> However, women with small children, single mothers and female single pensioners (ibid: 127, 129), as well as rural inhabitants (Sabján 2008: 78) were particularly hit by economic restructuring.

<sup>2</sup> The valorization of familial duties is also connected to the importance of the family as an economic unit in which resources are shared, a fact which is connected to Hungary's position in the unequal international and European division of labour (Zimmermann 2010). Also, the ways in which beliefs, imaginations about rurality and identification with the 'rural' intersect with gender identities also have to be analysed (Little 2002). Two of my interviewees spoke about the dominant gender division of labour in their families as a specifically rural arrangement and/or expectation.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, after the crisis of 2008 women in East-Central Europe were less likely to lose their jobs than men who "have been the main losers" of it (Fodor-Nagy 2014: 131). However, inequality between women in ECE and women in Western Europe increased in terms of employment and poverty rates (ibid: 122). Moreover, since 2012, "men seem to recover faster and gain some of their jobs back" (ibid: 138).

After the post-state socialist transition the country experienced more severe spatial polarization: many rural areas became almost totally insignificant in terms of production (except for big agricultural companies) as well as consumption (Koós-Virág 2010: 40). Thus, rural life today often also goes along with disadvantaged class position (ibid: 33-34). Work opportunities in the countryside disappeared: many industrial factories were abandoned in the 1980's and 1990's in the countryside as well as in the cities – a fact which affected both rural men's and women's employment (ibid: 33-34; Sabján 2008: 80; Kovács et al. 2006: 44). Agricultural production cooperatives were privatized, thus, most agricultural work is casual or seasonal (Sabján 2008: 80), and female-dominated white-collar and supplementary production jobs in the cooperatives disappeared (Kovács et al. 2006: 44-45). Although, similarly to nation-wide processes, women in rural areas lost employment to a lesser extent than men during post-state socialist restructuring (ibid.), rural women with children suffer a particular disadvantage because of the intersection of inequalities based on gender, class, location and familial status.

Women in rural areas can seek employment in urban industrial sites and neighbouring factories (Sabján 2008: 79-80). However, this kind of employment requires long and expensive commuting, many jobs are double- or triple-shift (ibid: 80), and the work is usually low-paid trained factory labour (Kovács et al. 2006: 45). Given the lack or low quality, as well as high cost of public transport (Sabján 2008: 80; Fodor-Kispéter 2014: 387; Simonyi 2001: 23; Simonyi 2002), the lack or schedule of child care facilities (Fodor-Kispéter 2014: 386; Simonyi 2002), as well as women's reproductive responsibilities, it is almost impossible for rural women with children to reconcile paid labour with family. There are very few local work opportunities available, mainly in the public and the service sectors, or administration, offering low-paid and low-status occupations, while the cuts in the public sector following the crisis of 2008 also affected women's salaries (Fodor-Nagy 2014: 135).

However, undertaking a job locally is not easy either because of employers' attitudes towards reproductive duties, stemming from the norm of the male worker. Under state socialism women returning from parental leave could find employment much more easily (Kovács et al. 2006: 45; Fodor-Kispéter 2014: 386; Haney 1997: 214), and discrimination against them was prohibited (Fodor-Kispéter 2014: 386), while today only one-third of women on parental leave return to their previous jobs (ibid: 385-386). Also, there were entitlements that eased the reconciliation of reproductive duties with paid labour. Interviewees suggested that having a child or being in child-bearing age is a disadvantage on the labour market either because of direct discrimination, or because the job cannot be adjusted to the needs of unpaid reproductive labour. The flexibilization of work characterizing neoliberalism also contributes to the discrimination of women with children: one of my interviewees had been employed through fixed-term contracts until she went on parental leave, thus she did not have to be taken back when the three years ended.

All in all, many women in disadvantaged rural areas have to undertake informal and seasonal paid economic activities, participate in the public work program, and/or work in personal or family enterprises in the household. The women I interviewed also talked about how rural women with children are marginalized in the labour market. For example, one of the interviewees said that women “did not have such sweep” as in the city while the children were still small, because anything could intervene that employers did not tolerate. Thus, they have to undertake any work – as she did – even if they are over-skilled for it, or it offers very harsh conditions, is very low-paid or illegal. Similarly, another interviewee said that after the parental leave she had to choose to either find a suitable job locally or stay at home with the child “by all means”, so she could go on sick leave if needed and work from 8 am to 4 pm because of the opening times of the nursery school. There were no such jobs available in the village, so she decided to start something at home. She grows flowers and pepper and earns 50 000 HUF (app. 160 Euro) per month, lower than the minimum wage.

### **Possibilities for progressive politics**

As I argued in the preceding sections, women with children in rural areas are marginalized in the labour market because of the lack of local jobs stemming from the transformation of the economy during neoliberal restructuring, the relatively lower amount of childcare allowances, discrimination, employers’ attitudes towards reproductive duties as well as the lack or low quality of services. The marginalization of these women and the gender division of labour in their families reproduce each other, while the economic and symbolic devaluation of unpaid reproductive labour as ‘work’ and women’s paid labour provides the ground for these neoliberal phenomena and gender inequalities.

As it can be seen from the situation and particular disadvantage of rural women with children, it is essential for feminism to be intersectional, and analyse how gender is inherently interlinked with other social relations – in this case class, geographical position/space and familial status. In connection to this, feminism has to be critical of the capitalist dichotomies of productive/reproductive, formal/informal and paid/unpaid labour, and their hierarchical, gendered character as well as the neoliberal processes of the shrinking welfare state, the informalization and flexibilization of work that bring about further disadvantages for women.

The reconceptualization of labour means making reproductive work visible and revalued. However, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of these activities and their different interpretations by the subjects who actually perform them (DeVault 1999: 60-62), and draw attention to care as a human need that should be prioritized over capital accumulation. Revaluation would entail free, high-quality public services for those who would like to undertake other kinds of labour, and (besides universal, high-amount allowances) salary substitutes for all who decide to focus on domestic work and care. Reproductive labour should also be taken into account and integrated into labour in the

workplace not as deviance, but as work that fulfils economic, social and human needs (Fraser 1994). For example, those who have reproductive duties could be assigned shorter working hours. Welfare provision should also be re-built on the basis of the ideal of just redistribution that is able to lessen class-, gender-based as well as other inequalities.

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NOÉMI KATONA

## “Sex work” and “prostitution”<sup>27</sup> in the neoliberal global economy: Potentials of a feminist critique in East-Central Europe

### **Introduction: Commercial sex as a subject of feminist critique on neoliberalism**

Nowadays almost all changes and facets of our lives are defined by neoliberalism. However, due to the controversial overuse of the term, its meaning has become highly diffuse (Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson 2008:1). In this paper I will approach neoliberalism in threefold ways described by Gregor and Grzebalska in this volume: as an economic system characterized by market deregulation; a political-ideological mode of governmentality, which aims to maintain unequal power structures; and as a cultural phenomenon that effects social relations and value systems (Rottenberg 2013:419). Concerning social relations I will especially refer to the commercialization of intimate relationships, including sexual commerce.

Is commercial sex then a neoliberal phenomenon? While prostitution is also called as the “oldest profession” that exists in all socio-economic systems, Marx (1874) and Simmel (1900) described it as the symbol of alienated labour in modern capitalism. I conceptualize prostitution as “the commodification of sexual relations, taking it out of the sphere of mutual pleasure and into the domain of the market” (McAlpine, cited by Ward 2010). Prostitution has historically, geographically, culturally and socially diverse forms; thus I do not consider it as inherently neoliberal, but a phenomenon that is strongly defined by power structures, state-market relations and perceptions of sexuality. Still, I believe that neoliberalism has deeply changed the scope of commercial sex and the ways it operates, along with the transformation of individuals’ intimate, sexual relationships (Bernstein 2014).

However, as neoliberalism is not the same everywhere, prostitution is not universal either. *“But its (neoliberalism) history, manifestation, and effects can be so diverse in each location that it cannot be a useful analytical category without empirical analysis”* (Cheng

<sup>1</sup> In this text I will refer to various feminist approaches of commercial sex, therefore I will be using both terms here.

2013). In this paper I will show the neoliberal characteristics of the European sex industry based on my case study on Hungarian women in street-based prostitution in Berlin. Firstly, I will introduce my field site and my informants and briefly describe the social structure of the street based prostitution area. Thereby I will reflect on the multiple, reinforced inequalities in the prostitution scene and the commercialization of intimate life. Secondly, I will analyse prostitution of these women concerning macro socio-economic tendencies, such as push and pull factors in migration, the neoliberalization of East-Central Europe (ECE) and the changes of the labour market and regulation of prostitution in the EU.

Finally, I will analyse feminist responses on the spread of commercial sex and promoted legislative models. I understand feminism as a movement that fights against social inequalities and domination structures. However, the feminist movement itself has also significantly changed in recent decades, and feminists are strongly divided internationally on how they relate to neoliberalism (Fraser 2009). Commercial sex is also a highly debated subject among feminists. Can prostitution mean an efficient solution for individuals in the unequal world of neoliberalism, or does it always reinforce their vulnerability? And how should feminists critical of neoliberalism deal with it? Looking at the feminist discourse on prostitution provides deeper insights into the various feminist approaches and critiques on neoliberalism. In my paper I will reflect on the Hungarian discourse with reference to the international debate on the regulation of prostitution.

### **Hungarian sex workers in Berlin: illicit economy in the era of neoliberalism**

Between 2010 and 2014 I conducted ethnographic research about Hungarian sex workers and pimps in a street based prostitution area in Kurfürstenstraße in Berlin. As a co-worker of a social service providing agency I could build up trust relationships with many sex workers and conducted several interviews. In Kurfürstenstraße prostitution exists since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however since the fall of the state-socialism more and more women from ECE started to work here. During my research Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania were the primary countries of origin.<sup>2</sup>

Most Hungarian women I met in Kurfürstenstraße came from highly disadvantaged backgrounds from various parts of Hungary.<sup>3</sup> Most of them were living under very poor economic conditions before starting prostitution, had a low educational status and were commonly unemployed. The women were overwhelmingly between 18 and 25 years old, some of them

<sup>2</sup> It is hard to estimate how many women do sex work in the area, but according to the statistics of the social agency I have been working at, there were about 200 women engaged in prostitution in the Kurfürstenstraße between 2010 and 2014. Around 30% of them were from Hungary, which means ca. 60 women. However, there is high fluctuation especially among the migrant women, therefore I assume that I had contact to over 100 Hungarian women throughout the years of research.

<sup>3</sup> In 2010, when I got to know this field site, the core group of Hungarian women was from Győr, a town in Western Hungary. However, it has significantly changed in the following years, and in 2014, when I finished my field research, women from primarily from Eastern parts of Hungary were working on the streets.



had already children in Hungary. Most sex workers and almost all pimps were of Roma origin, and pimps also mostly knew each other from Hungary.

As one of my informants, a pimp, told me: *“So everyone has a place. But not the women! Just guys have place here. Where a woman stands that place belongs to a guy.”* He referred to the fact that pimps divided places on the streets among each other and they decided who could work where in Kurfürstenstraße. Thus Hungarian women mostly worked under Hungarian pimps’ control, as well as Bulgarian women worked with Bulgarian pimps. As I have analysed elsewhere, there was a variety and changing dynamics of pimp-sex worker dyads within the Hungarian group in Kurfürstenstraße, and a large diversity regarding agency and position of sex workers (2016 forthcoming).

To give some insights into the diversity of cases at this field site, I introduce very briefly three women who represent three different, typical patterns of pimp-sex worker relationships in this field. Alisha<sup>4</sup> grew up in a foster home and started to do prostitution as a minor because her boyfriend convinced her to do so that time. She moved to Berlin at the age of 18 and worked for her boyfriend who commonly abused her. Tina came to Berlin with a “pimp,” whom she had a pure working relationship with and paid him a fix amount of money daily. Later on this man became her “boyfriend” with whom she shared her entire income and decided to stay in Berlin with him. On the contrary, Carol moved to Berlin with a pimp also, but later on she managed to quit the unequal “work” relationship with him and started work for herself. She supported her parents in Hungary and managed to buy a new house for them and for herself. However, Carol’s example is rather rare, and the majority of women lives and works with their “boyfriends” who are in a more powerful position, even though women are the actual breadwinners in the household.

I analyse street based prostitution in the Kurfürstenstraße as an illicit economy operated by organised criminal groups of (mostly) men, where gender inequalities are maintained and reinforced, and women’s sexuality, as well as emotional attachments are highly commercialized. Moreover, as primarily pimps take the income generated in prostitution, women rarely achieve any social mobility, and class inequalities are also maintained after exiting prostitution.

### **Migrant sex workers and trafficked women from ECE to Western Europe: feminization of migration and organised crime in the era of neoliberalism**

These individual relationships and rules in a particular, growing economy are affected by larger socio-economic tendencies that characterize neoliberalism. The sex industry builds on multiple social inequalities (class, gender, racial) in the global labour market and on the increasing commercialization of sexuality; referring to new modes of governmentality of

<sup>4</sup> In my paper I use pseudonyms for all of my informants.

sexual commerce and changed attitudes towards intimacy and sexuality. Hence prostitution is embedded in the international division of labour; and neoliberalism strongly defines push and pull factors of migration for sex work and the emergence of trafficking.

As the case of Hungarian sex workers in Berlin also shows, the sexuality of marginalized women becomes commercialized. Most of my informants started to do prostitution primarily because of financial needs and social marginalization, which resulted from significantly increasing racial, class and gender inequalities in Hungary in post-socialism.<sup>5</sup> Due to growing social deprivation in various parts of the country, more and more women choose prostitution as a survival strategy (Szoboszlai 2012). Roma are “the biggest losers and victims of the country’s transition from socialism to a market economy” due to the closure of state-owned factories, where many Roma worked and by means of the restriction of social benefits, which further decreased after the economic crisis in 2008 (Durst 2015). Romani women are “pushed out of the legal political economy into a specific social and geopolitical position, from where the most accessible job is to provide sexual services” (Kóczé 2011:144). Hence racial and class inequalities intersect and are highly increased in post-socialist Hungary. Due to the free access to the labour market in the EU, women from a disadvantaged background could migrate in order to do prostitution. However, women’s migration routes were organised by men at my field site; who then actually earned much larger profits on prostitution. Thus gender inequality is maintained in the illicit economy.

The other macro tendency that lies behind the phenomenon I describe is the demand-side of the prostitution market. The demand side is still not a well-enough studied issue in prostitution research. It was primarily abolitionist feminists who started to problematize “that male demand is a primary factor in the expansion of the sex industry worldwide and sustains commercial sexual exploitation.” It has been also highlighted that the patriarchal power structure is manifested in commercial sex through the sexual objectification of women (Raymond 2004). However, while abolitionists define all forms of prostitution as violence against women, Bernstein (2001) argues that commercial sex exchange needs to be analysed in the broader context of post-industrial transformation of culture and sexuality, and client motives should be linked to social and economic institutions that structure the relations of gender domination. She diversifies what demand actually means and makes a distinction between various forms of desired commercial sex, such as bounded intimate encounter, a wide variety of brief sexual liaisons, or the experience of being served for instance (2001: 398). Moreover, Davidson and Anderson claim that “boundaries between

<sup>5</sup> Most of my interviewees explained to me that their motivation to do prostitution was primarily to earn money, and they actively looked for a pimp who would help them to go abroad. Thus they declared it as their own decision, not forced by third parties. However, in the Kurfürstenstrasse women had to face strict unequal power relations, exploitation and common violence by pimps. The changes in pimp-sex workers’ dyads also complexify the meaning of trafficking and the dynamics of exploitation and coercion. See Katona (forthcoming) for more information on this aspect.

commercial sex and other consumer items (leisure, tourism, entertainment, etc.) have become increasingly blurred” (2003: 11).

### **The feminist Sex War debate: International and Hungarian discourses on prostitution**

Feminists are strongly divided regarding conceptualization of sexuality since the 1970s and 1980s when the so-called “Sex War debate” (Ferguson 1984; Rubin 1984) emerged as a reaction to the anti-pornography movement in the US (Dworkin 1979). The perception of sexual minorities and the issue of commercial sex are also discussed in the debate (Butler 1994). The ongoing, polarized discourse on prostitution and pornography focuses on the following principal questions: “Is pornography an issue of violence against women or an issue of free speech? Which kinds of sex are appropriate and politically correct and which are not?” (McBride 2008)

The discourse evolved from these principal questions and refers to whether prostitution can be a form of labour or not, and how different policies regulating prostitution affect the situation of women. While abolitionists claim that the commercialization of sexuality necessarily means harm to human dignity, pro-sex work feminists argue for the rights to choose prostitution as work, and claim that abolitionists restrict the liberal rights of sexual self-expression when diminishing prostitution. I do not fully identify myself with either the abolitionist or the liberal feminist approach and perceive prostitution as a form of commodified affective labour (Arruza 2014), which is embedded in the transformation of intimacy, sexuality and consumer culture in neoliberal societies. The boundaries between sex work and other forms of labour are also often not clearly identifiable, as sexuality, intimacy and economic transfer intersect in various ways and interpersonal relationships (Zelizer 2004).

The binary debate between abolitionists and pro-sex work feminists has been criticized for neglecting economic issues and for being defined by moral approaches, which are not contextualized in time, space and culture (Limoncelli 2009). Therefore the question on sexuality and commercialization need to be contextualized in the framework of neoliberalism: a market-driven economy defined by the deregulation, privatization, securitization, and dismantling of the welfare state (Nadasen 2013).

However, according to Cheng, if we understand neoliberalism as a new political, economic, and cultural context that supports economic individualism and opportunities for agency, the victimization discourse of migrant sex work represents a paradox. “As women who strategize their immigration and labour strategies for self-advancement as sex workers, they embody the sexual limits of neoliberalism. While they may personify the values of self-reliance, self-governance, and free markets in a manner akin to homo economicus, they violate the neoliberal ideals of relational sexuality and middle-class femininity” (Cheng 2013).

In the debate on commercial sex both sides describe the other as “neoliberal” when formulating a critique. Cheng criticizes the anti-trafficking movement regarding the idea

of relational sexuality, which she relates to neoliberalism. In her perception the migrant women she interviewed have efficiently adapted to the neoliberal system, as they could achieve better living standards through their self-entrepreneurship in prostitution. Hence while Cheng and pro-sex work feminists see sex work as a form of empowerment and sexual liberty, or at least an efficient survival strategy, abolitionists on the contrary strongly criticize the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject that Cheng refers to, and claim that this approach leaves little scope for power and structural constraints (Cornwall et al. 2008:3) and emphasize that multiple inequalities (gender, race, class) are reinforced by the sex industry, and individuals experience serious harm when engaged in prostitution. The other side of the coin is that abolitionists leave little scope for individual strategies and agency in this critique, and commonly generalize the experiences of people in the highly diverse field of commercial sex. Moreover, the legislative solution, i.e. punishing demand that anti-trafficking organisations promote, is criticized again as a “neoliberal” solution; in this case referring to the “market-based and punitive as opposed to redistributive solutions to contemporary social problems” (Bernstein 2010:47). Thus “neoliberal” is a diffuse term in this particular discourse as well, which has a negative connotation when used by both sides. Still, neoliberalism provides a framework in which the complex transformations of today’s global economy can be analysed. Moreover, despite the crucial differences in national legislative models and attitudes toward gender and sexuality in different local cultures, “larger patterns of political economy” have been definitive in shaping the predominant forms of the commercial sex market (Bernstein 2007: 146, cited by Bernstein 2014:2).

### **The Hungarian discourse on prostitution**

Even though the debate on prostitution and pornography originates from the US, there are very similar divisions and political agendas in Western Europe and in ECE as well. Hence both movements (pro-sex work and abolitionist) are represented internationally, and it varies which one is more influential and bears larger social support.

The Hungarian discourse on prostitution evolved after 1989 more intensively, hence it started with a significant delay comparing to Western European states and the US. Feminist activists and scholars have conceptualized prostitution as a form of violence against women within the human rights paradigm. Hence Hungarian feminists drew on the theorizing of radical feminists regarding prostitution, opposing international libertarian feminists and the pro-sex work approach (Betlen 2009). NGOs focusing on violence against women perceive prostitution as a form of rape and provide support for women in prostitu-

<sup>6</sup> NANE [Nők a Nőkért az Erőszak Ellen], Women for Women Against Violence. NANE’s main focus is on domestic violence and not prostitution and trafficking. However, experts working at NANE are also engaged in this field and provide trainings for professionals working with prostitutes. <http://nane.hu>

tion. NANE Association<sup>6</sup> represents one of the main actors in feminist demonstrations on the issues of prostitution.

Nonetheless, there are a couple of actors who represent the pro-sex work agenda. The Association of Hungarian Sex Workers (SZEXE)<sup>7</sup> in Hungary was founded in 2005. The organisation accepts prostitution as a form of work and is engaged in advocacy work for promoting rights of sex workers as well as providing legal counselling, general support, and exit programs. They are members of various international sex workers' networks and represent their political agendas.<sup>8</sup> The Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (TASZ) also follows a liberal perception of sex work and a former representative, Péter Sárosi, is also actively engaged in sex workers' rights advocacy. Additionally, there are also scholars from the field of criminology, who represent pro-sex work approach and build on the works of international scholars critical of the abolitionist agenda (i.e. Léderer 2006). However, in Hungary, those who accept prostitution as a form of labour do not define themselves as feminists, and the term "feminist" is mostly associated with the abolitionist position. For example, TASZ does not even deal with other forms of violence against women, but it is engaged in a liberal approach of individual citizenship rights.

The Hungarian debate regarding the Amnesty International initiative<sup>9</sup> on the total decriminalization of prostitution, which unfolded on the "Kettős Mércé" blog,<sup>10</sup> similarly circulated around the problematic issue whether prostitution can be accepted as a survival strategy for women in marginalized positions (Sárosi 2015 and Fedorkó 2015), or whether it necessarily harms the human dignity of individuals involved in prostitution (Nógrádi 2015 and Dés 2015). Hence I see the difference between the two opposing standpoints as a result of their different conceptualization of sexuality, namely whether sexuality can be commercialized without harm, or it is essentially attached to human dignity. However, representatives of both positions seem to be aware of the increasing structural inequalities and decreasing social care system in neoliberalism as a reason for trafficking and migration for sex work. Still, due to this difference they conclude on a strongly different legislative model of prostitution.

Recently, in June 2016 another highly emotionalized debate developed. The reason was that the organisers of the Pride week rejected to include a talk organised by SZEXE in their program. The reactions of activists and supporters of SZEXE triggered a large number of comments on prostitution. In the online debate, mainly the same arguments were repeated

<sup>7</sup> <http://szexmunka.hu>

<sup>8</sup> Swan (Sex Workers Rights Advocacy Network); NSWP (Global Network of Sex Work Projects Promoting Health and Human Rights); ICRSE (International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe).

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International announced that they aimed to protect sex workers rights with a commitment to the total decriminalization of sex work. This resulted in a renewed strong debate between different feminists worldwide. See the Amnesty Initiative here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/policy-on-state-obligations-to-respect-protect-and-fulfil-the-human-rights-of-sex-workers/>

<sup>10</sup> Kettős Mércé ("Double standard") is a leftist blog see at: <http://kettosmerce.blog.hu>

like in numerous other events and debates before, and as also presented in this paper above. An important claim, which is constantly raised by SZEXE, is the principle of “nothing about us without us”.<sup>11</sup> They highlight the necessity to involve active sex workers in the debate, and thereby serve the actual needs of sex workers by promoting rights and better working conditions (Sárosi 2015; Fedorkó 2015).

I agree with the necessity of involving women working in commercial sex in the debate, however, I see it as problematic to do it by solely involving sex worker organisations. It may implicate that those sex workers’ voices are heard who are closer to the organisation and in a position that they can talk, and therefore it may be not representative for women in more vulnerable positions. Commercial sex is highly heterogeneous and it involves people from various backgrounds, but commonly low-income women are less motivated to participate in a political struggle. Migrant sex workers in Germany are also strongly underrepresented in sex worker organisations, as well as women working in more precarious conditions and settings like street based prostitution.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, these women are not involved in the mostly middle-class abolitionist feminist groups either.

Still, as Rita Antoni, the head of the abolitionist feminist organisation Nőkért [For Women] summarized in her article, both sides aim to stop the persecution of prostitutes and support harm reduction programs (Antoni 2016).

## **Sex work and trafficking in the global neoliberal economy: The role of the state**

This debate demonstrates the different perceptions of commercial sex, and how different feminists and other scholars frame it. Various political agendas and policymaking have arisen from these principal differences in Europe. However, policies should not be looked solely regarding their different ideological understandings, but it should be examined how they affect individuals’ lives. Hence we need to consider the socio-economic reality in which policies are implemented in order to reflect on it what an efficient feminist policy recommendation in Hungary should be regarding the case of commercial sex.

As the debate on the Amnesty International initiative also shows, it is highly discussed on national and international levels how prostitution should be regulated, and there are different legislative models within the EU as well. These different models reflect how strongly different feminist movements are represented in the EU. Abolitionists (also in Hungary) promote the Swedish model where clients are criminalized but sex workers are not, however, they are supported to exit prostitution. On the other hand pro-sex work feminists argue for a liberal-regulation model, in which many third parties, including traffickers,

<sup>11</sup> This principle is widely used by various marginalized groups in the context of oppression, such HIV activism (See also the GIPA principle), and the empowerment of people living with disabilities.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.gnpplus.net/cms-downloads/files/2005%20Valued%20Voices%20-%20A%20GIPA%20Toolkit.pdf>  
From my field notes on a talk with Lena Morgenroth from Bundesverband Sexuelle Dienstleistungen e.V.

are criminalized, but sex workers and clients are not. The current Hungarian legislative model is a hybrid one, as although various forms of sex work are legal according to the law, in reality working conditions are not provided, and sex workers are commonly criminalized.<sup>13</sup> Both legislative models are criticized for various reasons. Pro-sex work feminists argue that the Swedish model pushes commercial sex business more into a grey-zone and increases stigmatization, as Danna claims in her article based on her ethnographic research in Stockholm. She argues that the “diminution of prostitution cannot be proven.”<sup>14</sup> And although, officially, prostitutes are not criminals, in practice they are often considered as such” (2012: 91). Moreover, abolitionism is also criticized for addressing prostitution dis-embedded from other forms of commodified labour and exploitative neoliberal practices, and therefore a carceral approach that may result in further harm for the individuals, who are the targets of protection for abolitionist groups (Bernstein 2010).

On the other hand abolitionists strongly criticize the German and Dutch legislative models, and argue that trafficking and exploitation in the sex industry further increase due to the legalization. Moreover, legalization further normalizes commercial sex and the inequalities it reinforces and consequences for gender roles (Schon 2016).

I consider both critiques valid and see the dangers and harm, but also the advantages the different legislative models bring for people who engage in prostitution. Moreover, legislation affects sex workers from various social backgrounds differently, and it is impossible to find a model that is beneficiary for the entire highly diverse group of sex workers. While middle-class sex workers are right in saying that their labour rights and sexual self-expression is violated by the restriction or elimination of prostitution, I am more concerned about the exploitation and violation of rights that a large number of women from marginalized backgrounds, who do prostitution, experience. As explained before, most of the Hungarian women I met in the Kurfürstenstraße worked under highly exploitative conditions and in commonly abusive work and/or intimate relationships with pimps. However, many of them still considered prostitution as a better option than the others they had, therefore, instead of eliminating this survival strategy, I suggest to focus more on solving the reasons why so many women end up in such a vulnerable, hopeless position, and to fight against the illicit economy of trafficking.

Anyhow, I believe that the lack of consensus within the EU poses further dangers for sex workers. While there are EU directives on anti-trafficking measures (Betlen 2013, CONFRONT

<sup>13</sup> Prostitution is regulated according to the so-called „Mafia Law” in Hungary (1999, LXXV.), which allows street-based prostitution in permitted areas. Otherwise, prostitution outside these areas became a misdemeanor, not a criminal offence. More information about the criminalization of sex workers, the effects of the misdemeanor regulation in 2012 and the atrocities by the police please see in the report and video made by SZEXE.

<http://szexmunka.hu/szexmunka-helyzet-ketsegbejto-es-romlik-rossz-torveny-tehet-az-atrocitasokrol/>

<sup>14</sup> On the other hand Swedish government sources, as well as abolitionist feminists, argue for the efficiency of the regulation. <http://www.government.se/articles/2011/03/evaluation-of-the-prohibition-of-the-purchase-of-sexual-services/>

2015), the regulation of prostitution is decided on the level of nation states, which results in „fuzzy boundaries“ between trafficking and migration for prostitution (Kligman and Limoncelli 2005). The lack of state intervention and the highly deregulated operation of the market provide various gaps that are filled by illegal, exploitative economies; most commonly organised criminal groups. In Kurfürstenstraße, networks of pimps strongly control the prostitution market and earn large profits on the prostitution of women (Katona 2016).

Consequently, I think the ideological debate and disagreement on how to perceive commercial sex has further negative implications. The anti-trafficking agenda (also promoted by abolitionists in Hungary) focuses more on individual victims and perpetrators instead of emphasizing the structural inequalities and exploitative conditions marginalized groups/ women experience within and outside of commercial sex (Suchland 2015). Regarding the issue of sex work and trafficking I propose to include more the economic dimensions in the discourse, and shift the focus onto social deprivation and marginalization that characterize the background of many who engage in prostitution. I consider it as highly important not to essentialise whether sexuality can be commercialized or not, but to look at the reasons and possible solutions for the various kinds of abuse of rights, exploitation and discrimination that vulnerable people experience. Seeing trafficking as an anomaly in the economic system, which is separated from exploitative market relations in general, is misleading because it just differentiates “victims” from “losers” of the global neoliberal economy (Suchland 2015:5).

### **Conclusions: Potentials for a common feminist struggle against exploitation in sex work**

In my case study on street-based prostitution in Kurfürstenstraße I showed how gender, race and class inequalities are reinforced in neoliberalism, and gave some insights into how it affects the everyday lives and the social relationships of individuals, based on a few examples from my field research. Through an analysis of this case and the feminist discourse on prostitution, I have shown different feminist reactions and theorizing on how to deal with prostitution in neoliberalism, when market deregulation strongly affects intimate and sexual relationships, and when social inequalities are further increasing.

All in all, I support a feminist economic approach that sees commercial sex embedded in global inequalities and exploitative labour conditions in neoliberalism. I do not see the introduction of the Swedish model as a workable next step in the struggle against exploitation in sex work and the commodification of sexuality in Hungary for several reasons. As the current social reality is highly different from Sweden, its adaptation would be very harmful for men and women involved in prostitution, as such punitive measures would not address the economic needs of people in the sex industry. Moreover, in Hungary women and men doing prostitution struggle with criminalization, discrimination, racism and abuse of rights by state actors (police, judicial system, health care etc.), which I consider as the most urgent problem that needs to be solved (CONFRONT 2015).



Therefore, I see rather focusing on fighting stigmatization, protecting the rights of people engaged in prostitution, providing safer working circumstances and support possibilities to exit, and by establishing an efficient social care system as next steps towards change. I recommend providing more low-threshold services to those who do prostitution. I could experience how much harm reduction services can help sex workers in street based prostitution, even though this does not provide any long-term solution for them. Promoting safer sex by giving information and providing condoms, and accompanying women to regular medical check ups can help a lot to protect their health and to avoid STDs. There are a few similar organisations and services in Hungary too, provided by SZEXE, Indít Közalapítvány<sup>15</sup> or Alternatíva Alapítvány<sup>16</sup> for example. However, these would be needed at a much larger extent. Fighting poverty and providing social security for the poor would be the most important measure to prevent falling victim to exploitation in general, but also in prostitution. I recommend to first solve the reasons why women need “survival strategies”, and to provide social security for them before eliminating the strategies they use in vulnerable situations, such as prostitution.

Additionally, I also consider it as highly important to address the demand side in prostitution by promoting a critical view on the patriarchal power relations that manifest in the claim of men’s rights to buy sex,<sup>17</sup> which commonly comes up in the discourse, and as it was also mentioned in the recent debate regarding the Pride event in Hungary. It would be highly important to promote sexual relationships that are equal, and in which neither women’s nor men’s bodies are objectified. However, this does not consider solely prostitution but the general commodification of bodies and affect (Hochschild 1983, Parrenas 2001, Eileen and Parrenas 2010, Arruza 2014).

Despite the differences of the approaches towards prostitution/sex work, both sides share common aims of reducing violence and harms for people working in prostitution. Unfortunately, the current debate in Hungary (similarly to other national discourses, i.e. in Germany) seems not to be a constructive dialogue, as both sides who aim to support vulnerable groups fight against each other in these debates instead of focusing on the common aims and possibilities of cooperation. Even though abolitionists and pro-sex work feminists criticize increasing social inequalities and contemporary global and local transformations of the political economy, which also define the sex market; neoliberalism still remains an offensive term in the international debate that both sides use against each other. However, they refer to different characteristics of neoliberalism when criticizing each other for representing neoliberal values.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.indit.hu/utcai\\_szocialis\\_szolgalat](http://www.indit.hu/utcai_szocialis_szolgalat)

<sup>16</sup> <http://altalap.hu>

<sup>17</sup> Even though legalization means everyone’s rights to buy sex, the buyers in the sex business are still overwhelmingly male. (Anderson and Davidson 2002, 2003; Raymond 2004)

All in all, I argue for a common struggle for the protection of rights of women, improvement of social services and fighting social stigmatization, and for a more inclusive understanding of feminism.

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## 25 years of liberty or neoliberalization in Lithuania? Feminist responses to uncomfortable questions

### What is neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is a new and very intense phase of capitalism (Fraser, 2009). It succeeds to remake itself in a certain moments of historical rupture and manages to recover after severe hits of criticism. In Western Europe and North America neoliberal sensibility not only reversed the previous formula, which sought to 'use politics to tame markets' and proposed to use markets to tame politics. It also appropriated feminists' and other progressive movements' ideas of emancipation and adjusted them to the justification of capitalist accumulation. However, in the post-communist region its triumphant march was doomed to even bigger success when fallacious links between concepts of the free market and freedom were embedded (Trilupaitytė 2015).

In the post-Soviet region the appropriation of the second wave feminists' ideas were easily wrapped in the rhetoric of capitalist accumulation. Both women's movements and the free market were new-comers in the environment where the ethos of hard working people (who should work even harder to build the satisfying presence instead of "bright future") was strongly set in national mentality. Several generations of economically active women were already present in society (Kanopienė 2011). The people's desire to get rid of the restrictive effects of the Soviet communality secured a fertile soil for ideals of radical individualism. Therefore, the gender equality rhetoric has to be bound to market's needs and used to tame and de-politicize the newly emerging women's movement when gender injustice problems were turned into issues solved merely technically.

However, the feminist approach in the assessment of outcomes of neoliberalism allows grasping the change that occurs in society. It discloses an inherent link between patriarchy and the capitalist mode of production, when neoconservatism is concealed in a neoliberal hide, and one mode of domination is replaced by another. Turning back to the agenda of the second wave feminism and historical roots of the women's movements in the region

might be helpful in rethinking the arguments for the critique of neoliberalism and adapting it to the context of the post-communist region.

The impacts of the sensibility that reflects recent capitalist development in the region should be critically rethought as well. The neoliberal approach – deep concern with economic growth, efficiency, competitiveness and accumulation – devalues and ignores reproductive (care) activities which are essential for maintaining the sustainability of humanity. At the same time, neoliberal ideology celebrates the autonomous individual and promotes the rhetoric of free choice and empowerment, which creates potential space for conscious pro-active engagement in progressive politics. Therefore, its influence on everyday life remains ambivalent and open to empirical questioning.

### **How does it work in Lithuania?**

Neoliberalism appropriated and re-signified major feminist objectives such as women's empowerment, personal autonomy and economic agency. It revised traditional authority within a sphere of the labour market, and embodied the promise to achieve the goal of economic (women's) autonomy (Fraser 2009). Thus, by its nature, neoliberal initiatives in the labour market were easily misrecognised as trustworthy alliance for women's rights' consolidation. The business sector came out as an active advocate for gender equality and presented the agenda of gender equality in terms of a diversity management project. Slowly but surely economic reasoning wiped off arguments of justice and harnessed the dream of women's emancipation as the engine of capitalist accumulation.

While limited in its scope, the neoliberal revision of traditional authority helped to boost women's recognition in the area of economic participation again. Traditionally, Lithuanian labour market could be characterized by high level of women's participation. Before the 1990s, up to 81% of working-age women were employed. However, during the transition period – from state controlled towards free market economy – the situation considerably deteriorated, and started to recover<sup>15</sup> in 2002 only (Kanapiene 2011).

On the surface, all the transformations have strongly resounded the feminist ideas of economic women's empowerment. However, in Lithuania, the new capitalism ideology has been spreading in the context where dominating survival values (Inglehart, 2008) significantly shape the perceptions of the population about their well-being and security and links it with economic factors. Therefore, people's appreciation of women's participation in the labour market (an economic dimension) is improving faster than acceptance of women's political involvement (a power dimension). Research shows (Šumskienė et al. 2014) that support for the statement 'When jobs are scarce, a man has more right to a job than a woman' significantly reduced during the last 20 years. In 1994 the statement was

<sup>15</sup> In 2007 women's employment rate reached 62.2%

supported by 38% (51% of men, and 25% of women) of respondents, while in 2014 by 15% (21% of men, 9% of women).

However, justification of women's low participation in the political decision making remains strong. In 2000 58% of surveyed people in Lithuania thought that women's representation in politics was sufficient<sup>2</sup>. In 2014 this number dropped to 46%.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, improvement in women's participation in the labour market is seen as a key indicator of gender equality progress that should be achieved in close cooperation with business structures.

Businesses have benefited of these policies as they could rely on bigger choice of well-educated and cheaper labour force (Women and Men in Lithuania, 2013) and escape criticism on women's labour exploitation. The feminist movement in Lithuania is hardly developed. The most visible women's NGOs work in the field of providing support for violence against women (VAW) survivors and promoting women's voices in political or/and economic decision making. Feminists' initiatives to advocate for social justice in the political agenda are not sufficiently articulated.

Women's organizations face serious challenges both out- and inside of feminist movement in Lithuania while trying to combat the domination of neoliberal ideology. Historically, the women's movement had no possibility to grow strong enough to exert any transformative influence on the political agenda throughout the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the collapse of Soviet system. Therefore, women rights' issues were not fully mainstreamed even in the left-wing political agenda. Though gender equality and women's rights issues have been included as separate paragraphs in the Programme of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, they did not cross-cut all political areas as a horizontal priority. Gender equality is still not fully recognised as a fundamental part of the society built on principles of social justice, solidarity and democracy both among party members and the elite. Consequently, "women's issues" are often underestimated when it comes to the practical implementation of different political initiatives. Thus feminists cannot build any consistent alliances with left-wing political movements while confronting consequences of neoliberal politics. They still have a long way to go to fully enshrine women's rights in the left-wing political agenda and organizational practices.

The effort to embed leftist values in the feminist movement faces its challenges as well. Based on the accumulation of women's waged labour, neoliberal capitalism supports claims for recognition on the one hand, but avoids the demands for redistribution on the other. As a result, the issues of class injustice are often silenced in public discourses, even though the social acceptance of women's rights' discourse increases (although social injustice renders those statements merely empty rhetoric). The broadly employed concept of diversity

<sup>2</sup> In 2000 women constituted 10,6% of Lithuanian Parliament. Source: Women in national parliaments <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif151200.htm>

<sup>3</sup> In 2014 women constituted 24,1 % of Lithuanian Parliament. Source: Women in national parliaments <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif011214.htm>

(and its efficient management) pushes away discussions about structural (gender) inequalities. But when social justice issues 'disappear' from women's NGOs' agenda, then they convert into (unconscious?) supporters of neoliberal ideology.

The insufficiently developed women's movement in Lithuania is constantly under pressure from splitting according to political affiliations and losing its impact on public policies. The rising salience of advocacy for human rights on the ground of gender identity complicates the situation further. Not all women's NGOs support LGBT\* goals, and not all LGBT\* activists comprehend women's rights and social (in)justice issues. Therefore, the threat of splitting across recognition (identity) and redistribution (class) lines becomes even more presumable. In addition, broadly spread NGO-isation and weak grassroots activism obstruct any progress on public discourse in the field of women's rights. Their oppression is simply replaced by providing legal concepts of discrimination describing problems as merely technical questions that require dialogue, bargaining, and persuasion, but not as a political struggle or action directed towards fair and equal redistribution of power, resources and responsibilities.

The human rights paradigm (feminism included) underestimates the class (redistribution) dimension, therefore power factors are silenced and disappear regularly. This paradigm relates to the socio-cultural tradition of identity recognition, and often serves as a tool for promotion of the (political) neoliberal agenda based on a narrow and scant conception of work as a mean for endless accumulation. The lack of a broader understanding of the concept as a key activity that significantly, if not primarily, contributes to the well-being of society (everything that is and should be done for common prosperity) makes complex causes of women's economic vulnerability invisible. Double (or even triple) burdens that women are forced to bear are interpreted mainly as a problem related to gender stereotypes, which could be overcome by using better public information measures. The education system and media, therefore, are seen as the main promoters of change as they have the strongest influence on people's (personal) attitudes and perception. A gender dimension in capitalist accumulation and economic institutions' influence on the gendering process is generally missing both from the discourse on poverty and women's issues.

Re-signification of 'work' is not an easy task, as the dominant structures which are permeated by neoliberal sensibility have stronger leverage than the progressive actors. Nevertheless, in order to promote progressive politics, the concept of 'work' must be attributed to a broader scope of meanings and interpretations. Diverse emotional, care, community contributions which people supply (even if they do not take part in monetary exchanges) should be recognised as valuable inputs. Work must be appreciated as an activity that helps to strengthen personal, family and community ties, realize creative potential and add to personal development. Only after getting back its broader meaning and being not equated exclusively to activity that provides means for endless accumulation, could the concept of 'work' become instrumental for progressive politics promoting women's emancipation.

## Neoliberalism and progressive politics as low income women's empowerment: mission (im)possible?

Low-income women function as Guinea pigs and scapegoats for free market experiments. Neoliberal policies make harmful influences on their experiences in several ways. The constantly fading welfare state, hardening austerity measures aimed at reducing the public service sector and jobs in the public sphere negatively affect women both as employees and beneficiaries of public services. The risk of losing their jobs makes them more dependent on public services, and decreasing availability of latter raises the burden of unpaid work. *Gender Equality Index's* scores for Lithuania in the 'Time' have been decreasing from 2005.<sup>4</sup> It indicates rising inequality in the area of unpaid work between women and men in the private sphere, which prevents any development of progressive politics as well. Political, social or even communal (grass roots) activism requires some basic assumptions. Material resources, knowledge and time are needed for participation in political actions. These are all resources that low-income women experience significant shortage of. Therefore, active involvement in struggles against neoliberalism becomes challenging for them. However, this obstacle is not the only one.

Neoliberalism is a complex phenomenon unrolling itself in the economic, social and cultural realms and producing a certain sensibility that secures its proliferation (Gill 2007). All multifaceted trends of capitalism development require profound interdisciplinary and intersectional analysis that provides an in-depth image of the phenomenon. However, the multidimensional picture produced by academic discourse is not always sufficiently conducive while trying to mobilize a broad-scale response against neoliberal politics. The question also remains how to bring about changes when the neoliberal ideology based on rhetoric of free choice prevails? How to make it work for progressive politics when radical individualism serves as a basis for personality construction, and identity based struggles became the most salient part of the movement for human dignity and rights?

Several insights could be suggested for consideration while looking for potential preconditions for progressive politics. The mediation of experts/activists able to "digest" the complexity of the new capitalism phenomenon is crucial to mobilise low-income women. Their participation can be encouraged through a chain or multi-layered structure, when engagement is understood as a possibility to reach policies through influence on the public discourse. In this scenario, resources available for different groups of women can be united and multiplied. Resourceful women (having expertise, time and material resources) should become mediators who bring grassroots voices (needs, experiences and life expertise) to the political agenda and transmit them into policies. The voices of low income women could

<sup>4</sup> In 2005 Lithuanian's score in the domain of time was 27.7 and in 2012 – 22.8. Gender Equality Index. <http://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/gender-equality-index/2012/domain/time/LT>



become a significant resource to shape welfare and anti-VAW policies and improve the quality of life for the majority of population.

The re-signification of the idea of individuality, choice and empowerment is needed as well. People who have been saturated with neoliberal sensibility that celebrates individualistic “free” choice could be mobilized for united actions if they will be convinced that only collective actions could bring about desirable change. Longing for (real) free choice, self-expression and the celebration of individual freedom could be used as common denominators for consolidation, especially in the cultural context where freedom (of a nation) is strongly related to symbols of common struggle (the Baltic Way).

Moreover, gender is not the sole dimension of personal identity and could be overshadowed by age, ethnicity, sexuality, health condition and other aspects. This interaction of diverse aspects could make an unpredictable impact on the individual’s positioning and experiences in a certain context. Therefore, the idea of simplistically understood sisterhood as the agent of progressive change does not work. I would rather support the development of flexible networks of coalitions (kind of siblinghood) that change their composition depending on the issue at hand. Solidarity with other progressive movements is needed, and this entails broadening of the scope of issues within the feminist agenda itself.

At the same time, it is important to strengthen feminist movements itself, bring back a full, three-dimensional approach to justice, meaning integration of all three dimensions such as recognition, redistribution and representation (Fraser, 2009), and strongly promote a broad and inclusive concept of work, which would ensure transformative potential for progressive politics.

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ANDREA PETŐ

## Feminism and neoliberalism: Peculiar alliances in the countries of former „state feminism”

In the countries of former „state feminism”, it is perhaps the term ‘neoliberalism’ next to ‘feminism’ that has a really bad connotation in scientific discourse today. The semi-peripheral situation of former communist countries also determines the circumstances of knowledge production. The experience formulated in the limited communication of ‘state socialism’ on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain with the western side (‘state capitalism’ Fraser 2009:100), and was interpreted in western frames after 1989 (Blagojevic 2009). This frame was a hegemonic liberal one. The present volume is important because, on one hand, it gives a critical analysis of Anglo-Saxon interpretations; and at the same time it also brings examples from the region for analysis to test explanatory principles that have, so far, been considered a given.

With the end of the Cold War – or the ‘end of history’ as Fukuyama called it – liberalism has established a victorious political system that we call neoliberalism, and which, in his view, essentially cannot be improved in any way, so that there is no real alternative to it. The word itself is loaded with political content as its use includes the existence of a new form of capitalism that is distinctly different from previous stages.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the study of Anikó Gregor and Weronika Grzebalska, this volume confirms the truth of this statement as neoliberalism has created a special situation from three aspects. First of all, it created the global economic system that has been struggling from one crisis to the next due to the illusion of the free market, privatisation, tax cuts and austerity policies. At the same time, the “crisis rhetoric” is a means for the government, and it makes sure that the power processes of redistribution remain opaque. Secondly, it is a political-ideological system that supports not the reduction but the augmentation of existing societal inequalities by using existing institutional tools to reduce the effective interference

<sup>4</sup> About East-European varieties see Bohle, Greskovits 2007:443-466.

of citizens with decisions that concern them. And thirdly from the perspective of societal values and culture, as economic values such as efficiency and money determine human values and ideals. This rhetoric permeates the functioning of institutions, too.

How is feminism related to this system? In her work, Beatrix Campbell attached the attribute of 'neoliberal' to neopatriarchy, thus signalling that the two are closely interrelated: The foundation of the system's functioning is a system of male dominance that structurally exploits women as a group (Campbell 2014). Neoliberal policies have led to stronger discrimination of women on the labour market, to the flexibilisation of workforce, to low wages, and to ever worsening working conditions (Moghadam 2005).

However, as Nancy Fraser also put it, feminism is in a complicated relationship with liberalism, and this relationship has not become any simpler in recent times (Fraser 2013, Funk 2004). On the one hand, feminism is based on the ideological ground of the universal equality of all as stipulated in the Declaration of Human and Citizen Rights, which is the foundation for liberalism, and which is implemented through democratic institutions. On the other hand, this relationship legitimates certain social and political practices that are unacceptable for women as a group. Derived from this twofold split, the concept of liberal democracy, based on the separation of the public and the private, is built on excluding certain groups, women among others, from the public space (Pető-Szapor 2004). Neoliberal policies degenerate all tasks of the state that feminists would want to develop. This means that the state redefines the relationship between the state and its citizens by separating the public and private spheres, just the same as it delegates resource-poor areas like care-giving to the most unprotected groups: women and non-governmental organisations. As a consequence of their transient nature and structural vulnerability, non-governmental organisations become the targets for intervention by various donors. This has led to the process of NGO-isation when former state responsibilities are assumed by NGOs, and women's movements have also been organised in these frames (Lang 2012).

There is an entire library worth of literature about how women are the biggest losers of the political regime changes in Eastern Europe after 1989.<sup>49</sup> Although the societal status of women was not exactly rosy before 1989 either, the situation under state feminism (idealised by several researchers nonetheless) has deteriorated further in politics, the economy and culture.<sup>50</sup> The elimination of childcare systems has reduced the possibilities of women to take on jobs, the feminisation of poverty has continued. Through their unpaid labour, women must leverage the malfunctioning of healthcare and social service systems. All this is expected from women while they are structurally excluded from political representation. The participation of women in parties is minimal; while NGOs – which are the least permanent systems but are built on self-exploitation – include very many women

<sup>2</sup> For the debate on this see: Drakulic 2015, Pető 2015

<sup>3</sup> For the debate on this see: Funk 2014, Ghodsee 2015, Funk 2015

who try to secure services that used to be provided by the now slimmed-down state. They do this in a structurally weak situation where the values that their work is based upon, such as self-sacrifice, the public good and help, are values of that same neoliberalism which otherwise defines value as measurable income expressed in hard currency and consumption. The critique and changing of this complicated and cruelly efficient system is no easy task. Not only because one needs critical prowess in the jargon of economics so that your arguments are heard at all from a position that is on par with experts who use the rhetoric of efficiency and talk from a power position. But also because supporting women's rights is part of the functioning of neoliberalism as well.

The recent period celebrates the twenty-first century as the time of completion of the unfinished process of women's emancipation. Emancipation as individual success fits well with the neoliberal rhetoric because it disregards structural disadvantages. If we hear the slogan that "women can also do it"; whenever we rejoice about having even more women in top corporate management; or when famous actresses show up to charity galas to help talented girls in disadvantaged positions – all of these cater to the sustenance of a system based on consumption and the glorification of individual abilities and performance.

The fact that this neoliberal system is no longer sustainable today is supported by two additional strains of critique on top of the matter of environmental sustainability. One is the growing right-wing critique that contrasts neoliberalism with the creation of the illiberal state, which is based on different values and affective politics. The triple crisis in Europe since 2008: the crises in security policy, migration and the economy have faced neoliberalism with a massive challenge, as large powers like China and Russia support the efforts to dismantle the relationship between liberalism and human rights that have been there for centuries and appeared to be universal, a taboo and a sine-qua-non. The rights of migrants, the right of women to equality, and the gender quota as a policy tool are all questioned in this process (Pető 2015).

The other strain, which this volume also contributes to, consists of the feminist critique that has relied on feminist economics, political and cultural theory for decades to present the darker sides of how the neoliberal system functions. The studies in this volume assert that there is a democratic and inclusive alternative to neoliberalism. There are several case studies in the volume: They rely on interviews with sex workers in Germany, the economic situation of women living in the countryside in Hungary and the loss of housing rights to present how a critique of neoliberalism is possible from a democratic perspective. Values like equality, empathy and responsibility, which were once values of left movements at the end of the 19th century, are more topical and more popular now than ever. There should just be someone who represents them. Clearly there is a demand.

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