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**Political Representation and Spokespersons in the Prostitution
vs. Sex Work Debate: Reflections on the Hungarian Discourse
in a Global Context**

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Abstract

A binary debate has developed internationally between abolitionists and sex workers' rights (SWR) activists: this involves the so-called 'sex wars', which dominate the scholarship and activism regarding commercial sex worldwide. While abolitionists aim to eliminate prostitution, which they see as a manifestation of patriarchy and violence against women, SWR activists aim to recognize sex work as work, and to fight for better working conditions in the sex industry. Both movements have become institutionalized, and various local NGOs and international networks have been established to advocate for these political aims. These organizations try to influence national and international legislation regarding the selling of sex by building powerful alliances. The financial support of donors is also dependent on how compatible these movements are with neoliberal power relations. Furthermore, the development and political influence of local abolitionist or sex worker movements also depends on countries' positions in the global economy.

The paper analyses the political representation and the role of spokespersons within the prostitution/sex work debate and also reflects on the advocacy work of Hungarian organizations active in this field since 1989. It discusses the evolution of a politics of recognition in the struggle related to commercial sex, and how transnational power dynamics on a global scale have affected Hungarian movements and civil society organizations since the era of state socialism.

Keywords: *prostitution, sex work, politics of recognition, spokespersons, feminist movements.*

1. Introduction

In 2015 I participated in an international conference on prostitution policies in Vienna with other researchers affiliated with a leftist German political foundation. The first keynote speech started with the happy acknowledgement that ‘we’ (the conference participants) finally do not need to start arguing again that sex work needs to be recognized as work. A week later I attended a Hungarian conference on leftist feminism, where the common sense approach to commercial sex was exclusively deemed to be an abolitionist one, and where I listened to talks on the serious harm that pornography and prostitution cause for society. At both conferences, scholars and activists considered their own position to be the vulnerable, minority position, and highlighted how suppressed they were by the powerful other opposing position in the same debate. While the pro-sex-work activists claimed that prostitution laws had shifted generally towards the Swedish model in Europe, abolitionists felt marginalized due to the growth of the sex industry and the changed preference of international NGOs and donors for supporting sex worker organizations.

Conducting various research projects on prostitution and trafficking for my PhD and facing diverse and difficult empirical realities during my field work over the last decade have represented a great professional and personal challenge. However, entering into the academic field of prostitution research and getting to know the political and discursive contexts in Germany, Hungary, and internationally was also a very specific experience in itself that is worth analyzing. I would like to contribute with this article to the inquiry into the structure of the political and academic field of prostitution/sex work research, which intersects with different movements and organizations that shape the public debate and national and international policy making on prostitution.

In this article I look at the development of the abolitionist and sex workers’ rights movements and their successes and challenges. I point out the role of different state, market, and civil society actors therein, and refer to the aim of and potential for addressing structural critique in these approaches. My analysis addresses wider neoliberalization tendencies, changing political representation, and a prevalence of identity politics and a politics of recognition in social struggles.

All in all, I aim to show that these international struggles are shaped by global socio-economic and power dynamics, and that local organizations need to negotiate between local political challenges and environments and the requirements and influences of powerful international alliances, which are more influential in shaping international policy making. Therefore, I show that the Hungarian political struggles related to addressing prostitution are strongly defined by the country’s changing political environment since the democratization process of the 1990s until the emergence of the ‘illiberal’ Orbán regime following 2010 on the one hand, but are influenced by relationships with international alliances in core countries on the other. In the following I summarize the evolution of a politics of recognition and the role of spokespersons, focusing on the feminist

movements in the USA by highlighting their global influence. Afterwards, I briefly analyze these issues in the context of the prostitution debate and feminist organizing around commercial sex. Finally, I look at the work of Hungarian organizations in this field.

Throughout the article I use both the terms prostitution and sex work. I always apply the terms in accordance with the standpoint and terminology of the activist, author, or movement I refer to. When I refer to both standpoints, I apply both terminologies and add a slash symbol (/) between them.

2. The rise of a politics of recognition and the infrastructure of political representation in second-wave US feminism

The transformation of political representation in democracies and socio-economic contexts strongly defines the trajectory and potential of social movements and organizing. The transformation of democratic political systems has been thoroughly analyzed in political science. Literature on populism in the last decades has flourished, including that which has paid special attention to political development and the illiberal state in Hungary. Fukuyama analyzed in his book *Identity* how social struggles and party politics changed in line with the crisis of capitalism in the twenty-first century. He claims that 'twentieth century politics had been organized along a left-right spectrum defined by economic issues, the left wanting more equality and the right demanding greater freedom' (Fukuyama, 2018: 6–7). However, in the twenty-first century politics in many regions has become more defined by questions of identity: the left focusing less on broad economic inequality and promoting more the interests of particular groups perceived as marginalized; and the right aiming to protect traditional national identity connected to race and ethnicity. These political processes are shaped by the crisis of neoliberal capitalism and Western hegemony, which has led to different political developments in various locations along the global accumulation chain.

Nancy Fraser (1995; 2003; 2015) analyzed social justice struggles, focusing on the evolution of identity politics in the feminist movement. She highlighted the shift from a 'politics of redistribution' to a 'politics of recognition.' Fraser analyzed the ambiguous legacy of second-wave US feminism, which evolved with other revolutionary movements in the atmosphere of the 1960s. Despite the originally radical ideas of women's liberation from male domination which essentially structures everyday life, work, and women's position in capitalism, feminist struggles shifted away from economic issues towards cultural aims, focusing on recognition issues based on identity politics, instead of providing a systemic critique of the neoliberal global order.

But why did the collusion between feminism and neoliberalism proceed? Fraser (2015) also raised this question in order to explore the potential and challenges of current, anti-neoliberal feminist struggles. She analyzed the shift towards a politics of recognition within the socio-economic and political landscape of the 1960s. Drawing on Polanyi's (1944) idea of the 'double movement' of his

time as a two-sided battle between social protectionists and free market fundamentalists, Fraser described the 1960s as a triple movement of marketization, social protectionism, and empowerment (Fraser, 2015: 711). Fraser claims that emancipatory movements in the 1960s that undertook a fundamental critique of traditional authority and the paternalist state of the time found themselves on the same side as neoliberal actors in the other struggle between protection and marketization. Feminism has become capitalism's handmaiden, and the 'dream of women's emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capital accumulation' (Fraser, 2015: 709), since the ideas of different women's groups involving fighting for their dignity actively contribute to the capitalist 'spirit' of the time. However, Fraser's analysis of feminism's collusion with neoliberalism and its global export has been criticized for being 'West' or 'Global North' centered. Scholars from East-Central Europe also claim that local activism follows a more complex dynamic (Korolczuk, 2016), as I also inquire into Hungarian activism that addresses prostitution.

Analysis of the infrastructure of political representation and the role of the various actors who shape the political landscape is also essential for understanding the shift towards a politics of recognition in social movements, and in feminism especially. Csigó (2016) describes this shift in political representation as a transition from 'party-based representative democracy' to 'mediatized populist democracy' in which, instead of class-based political organizations, populist politics address the 'people,' which approach fits better an individualized, pluralist society. This increased mediatized representation opens up various questions regarding how spokespersons in politics are related to the groups and people they represent (Fáber, 2013). In professionalized, bureaucratized politics in mass democracies there is potential conflict between represented groups and their spokespersons. As Bourdieu explains, this involves a circular relationship in which a group appoints a spokesperson, and the spokesperson then creates the group through performative acts (Bourdieu, 2001, cited by Fáber, 2013). Moreover, spokespersons commonly move among different social groups and settings in their performative acts of representation when they represent marginalized groups in the language of intellectuals. Therefore, spokespersons who speak in the name of others have symbolic power.

Concerning the ambiguous legacy of second-wave feminism in the USA and feminist struggles globally, it is also crucial to look at who defined what feminism should be about, and how women's issues were represented. The second wave of feminism in the USA involved various groups and organizations. Struggles for the political representation of women and fights for legitimacy appeared among feminists based on distinctions in ethnic and social background. The political representation of all women by specific, dominantly white, middle-class feminist groups was strongly questioned by black feminist scholars (Hill-Collins, 1990). Generalizations concerning the universal experiences of women were criticized due to the multiple layers of inequality women may experience (Crenshaw, 1991). Susan Watkins (2018) points out the differences between radical, anti-systemic groups like the women's liberation movement, and more neoliberalism compatible liberal feminisms that focus on anti-discrimination and women's inclusion in the

labor market. She shows that such feminist ideas and groups became influential after ‘feminism begun its long march through the institutions’ in the USA (Watkins, 2018: 14), a process which went hand in hand with state and market interests in obtaining economic benefits through women’s employment.

The anti-discrimination model focused mainly on the rights of groups who defined themselves through shared experiences of suffering, oppression, and marginalization, like people of color and women. The focus on the fight for recognition is manifest in the use of universalistic human-rights language that is centered on individual rights and treats gender inequality rather as a cultural issue while it conceals the global economic order (Kováts, 2019). This tendency – focusing on rights and legal solutions instead of providing a structural critique – has been much more suitable for the influential actors and donors who support these movements, like the Ford Foundation. Consequently, the anti-discrimination model became influential in the feminist movement by the 1980s when US feminism gained more global power and influence through international women’s congresses (Watkins, 2018).

3. International sex workers’ rights and abolitionist movements

Prostitution and pornography have been central issues for feminists, especially since the 1970s, although different standpoints and movements evolved around the issue of commercial sex. The so-called ‘sex wars’ debate first evolved between various groups of feminists in the USA, but due to the globalization of feminist movements, networks, alliances, and international campaigns, it influenced discourses regarding the topic worldwide. While NGOs and other organizations working on prostitution/sex work also compete for financial resources, the main battlefield concerns how they influence national and international policies. The successes or failures of these movements can be measured by their efficiency in relation to policy making in various countries.

The feminist movement has always aimed to affect international politics and policies on prostitution, as manifested in international conventions and treaties on women’s rights and prostitution policies. International conventions, ratified by nation states, pose certain obligations for governments; therefore international advocacy targeting various stakeholders is highly important for feminist movements. In the following I briefly summarize the history and the main arguments of these movements, then introduce issues related to political representation.

3.1 The abolitionist movement in the USA and Western Europe

The feminist abolitionist movement dates back to the 1860s and the advocacy and lobbying of Josephine Butler, who was one of the first activists to claim that prostitution damages women’s rights and men are to blame for this (Bindel, 2017). Radical feminists, like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon (1988; 1997), Kathleen Barry (1979; 1995), and Carol Pateman (1988), had a predominant role in

putting prostitution on the feminist agenda. Their activism is continued by important abolitionist feminists today, like Julie Bindel, Melissa Farley, and Sheila Jeffreys. MacKinnon (1989) approached sexuality as the root cause of inequality in patriarchy through which gender relations are created and expressed. She saw rape, prostitution, and pornography as examples of the objectification of women. Anti-porn activism evolved in the 1980s, including important new organizations and networks like Women Against Pornography, which held its first meeting in 1985.

The work of radical feminists problematizes the demand side of prostitution and its roots in neoliberal patriarchy. Pateman (1988) argues in *The Sexual Contract* that women sell themselves, and claims that prostitution is a specific form of self-commodification. Similarly, Jeffreys (2009) focused on prostitution as a form of sex slavery and argued that it is one of the foundations of women's oppression. Thus, 'radical feminists ascribe a particular value to sex, which is then used to argue against its commodification' (Scouler, 2004: 345). The abolitionist feminist movement aims to eliminate the entire sex industry, since the commodification of sexuality involves harm to human dignity and the oppression of women. Proponents question the existence of voluntary prostitution and point out the connection between prostitution and human trafficking.

Following the work of early abolitionists and their international lobbying activities throughout the twentieth century, the anti-trafficking movement and related policies have been a primary focus of interest for abolitionist feminists. The anti-trafficking movement has been successful in negotiating on the international level, and several conventions have been held to combat trafficking which addressed prostitution as a form of exploitation and violence against women and called for an end to it. The anti-trafficking movement is supported by various organizations and international¹ associations such as the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), the latter which was set up in 1988 as the first global feminist organization.

3.2 The sex-worker movement in the USA and Western-Europe

In opposition to the abolitionist movement, the Coyote ('Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics') sex workers' rights organization was founded in 1973. Carol Leigh and others initiated a 'sex-positive' movement, as they called it. They approached prostitution as a form of work that should be destigmatized and acknowledged. The First Congress of Whores, a campaign organized by sex workers, was an important event as it played a role in forming the sex worker movement. In Europe, the sex worker movement was highly influential in some Western European countries. The symbol of the birth of the sex worker movement in

¹ The International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic of Women of Full Age (1933), the Convention on Suppression of all Forms of Trafficking in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1949), and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979).

Europe was when women involved in prostitution occupied the Church of St. Nizier in 1973 in Lyon, France, in order to demonstrate against police action. This also stimulated the development of several other sex worker organizations from all over Europe, including Hydra in Germany, the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP), and others (ICRSE, 2015: 5).

As Ekman explains, the SWR movement created the cultural image of the 'whore,' which represents pleasure and joy in life, and which contributed to the social acceptance and success of the movement. The 'sex-positive' narrative, which includes associations of freedom and empowerment, was communicated in opposition to the 'feminist' narrative, which was portrayed negatively (Ekman, 2013: 34–41). Cultural images which build on socio-economic relations play a crucial role not only in political representation, but also in political transformations. Drawing on Weber's idea of Calvinism being capitalism's 'spirit,' Fraser suggests that the 'elective affinity' between feminism and neoliberalism lies in the critique of traditional authority (Fraser, 2015: 710). While abolitionists advocated against patriarchal social order, the SWR movement campaigned for the liberation of sexuality from all forms of control. Thereby, they aligned themselves with neoliberal ideas of freedom.

US-based advocacy networks, like the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR), founded in the 1980s, and the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), founded in 1998, have played a crucial role in the internationalization of the sex worker movement and its further progress in Europe. The ICRSE (International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe) was founded in 2004, and is active in developing key advocacy tools for sex worker organizations. A second network that supports the sex workers' movement at the regional level is the Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN), which was founded in 2006. SWAN brings together sex worker organizations from Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia and provides mentoring, advocacy tools, and support in 'harsh legal and social environments' (ICRSE, 2015: 9).

Sex work activists claim that human trafficking, coercion, and exploitation in the sex industry can be better tackled if the whole industry is legalized, because this provides more space for state control, more opportunities for victims to access legal aid, and better working conditions in prostitution. The aim of these organizations has been to advocate for sex workers' rights: 'struggle for the decriminalization of sex work, freedom from oppression and discrimination, and the protection of sex workers' human rights, including their right to health, their right to work and their right to organize' (ICRSE, 2015: 5). This approach refers to liberal concepts of 'choice' and 'consent' (Limoncelli, 2009). The use of human-rights language and the focus on individual and group rights reflects a politics of recognition and a neoliberal approach that neglects structural constraints (Kováts, 2019). Furthermore, the promotion of commercial sex conceals male demand for paid sex and its correlation with patriarchal hierarchy and has further implications for women's sexual objectification.

However, activist groups, scholars, and organizations that promote the decriminalization of sex work are heterogeneous in their aims and argumentation. There are several leftist, Marxist groups in the SWR movement who approach sex work from a labor perspective and primarily aim to fight exploitation, defining capitalism as the main source of harm in the sex industry, not patriarchy. This approach, and the focus on capitalism and how it shapes prostitution, emerged in early socialist feminist thinking – e.g. in the work of Kollontai (1921). In the academic discourse, this neoliberalism-critical but not abolitionist approach is represented by scholars like Julia O’Connell Davidson (2014) and Elizabeth Bernstein (2007; 2010; 2014), who analyze the sex industry through a lens of broader global inequalities and commodification. Leftist organizations and trade unions are divided concerning the workers in the sex industry, while several trade union initiatives and federations worldwide support the decriminalization of sex work since they claim it ‘keeps women safe’ in the short term (Pritchard, 2010). However, evidence from criminological research projects contradicts this claim by showing that the exploitation and number of victims of trafficking has actually risen in districts where prostitution is legal (Huismann and Kleemans, 2014). Ekman depicts the rise of the unionism of ‘sex workers’ in the early twenty-first century as a misleading campaign, since the members and supporters of these trade unions (such as the British International Union for Sex Workers), are actually not the women involved in prostitution. Ekman (2013: 59–64) claims that trade unions represent and defend the interests of those who profit from the industry; the pimps, brothel owners, etc.; not those of workers. However, although Ekman cites various concrete cases involving illegitimate spokespersons, such as privileged middle-class men speaking in the name of all ‘sex workers’ and trade unions, her analysis rather builds on scandalous examples, not on a thorough analysis of trade union membership and international activity.

3.3 Dilemmas of political representation: Who can speak for victims of prostitution / sex workers?

In the polarized debate about prostitution it is also strongly questioned who can represent those who work in/are victims of prostitution. The debate around political representation started at the very early phase of the anti-pornography and sex worker rights movement. Abolitionists argue that prostitution is harmful to women individually, and to women as a class of people (Pateman, 1988), therefore they claim to act on behalf of all women when fighting against prostitution. They consider all women in prostitution to be victims: of the users of prostitution, pimps, procurers, brothel owners; thus, of all those who profit from and commonly exploit those working in prostitution. The writings and activism of radical feminist activists in the 1980s, when they started to address prostitution as a severe form of women’s oppression, represent prostitution as a women’s issue generally. In contrast to this approach, the sex worker movement emerged as a critical reaction to the abolitionist movement, and claimed that radical feminists cannot represent those working in the sex business. Their main claim is that only sex workers can

and should represent sex workers, thus they started to refer to the ‘nothing about us without us’ principle. ‘Nothing about us without us’ has been the main motto of various social movements since the 1960s (like the disability movement, see also Charlton, 1998), and sex worker organizations have also used it as their slogan for self-organizing (ICRSE, 2015).

This motto refers to the demand of an identity-based, oppressed group to be recognized and participate in the discourse and policymaking that affects them. Furthermore, by using this motto organizations and networks can claim that they represent and speak for all people involved in sex work. The former thus not only refers to the inclusion of sex workers in policy making as a general principle, thus the individuals that are concerned, but actually advocates for the inclusion of sex worker organizations in decision making. Thus, the approach ‘nothing about us without us’ builds on the assumption that such organizations are the legitimate spokespersons for all of those involved in the sex industry. However, in reality participation in these movements and organizations is strongly dependent on social and cultural capital. Still, the internal hierarchy of the political representation of sex workers within such organizations is rarely addressed. Additionally, class background and social inequalities are typically talked about only by leftist, Marxist, SWR organizations. Generally, marginalization in legal terms is much more in the spotlight in the public appearances of the movement, as well as the participation of different identity-based groups such as LGBTQ sex workers, migrants, and Roma sex workers.

Abolitionist feminist activists like Julie Bindel and Ekis Ekman strongly question who and what underlying interests such organizations represent in their lobbying. Bindel (2017) argues that sex worker organizations are supported and led by people who profit from prostitution, thus by those who exploit and hurt victims. Similarly, self-organized victims of prostitution and trafficking, like members of SAGE in the USA or SPACE in Ireland, strongly criticize the sex worker approach and the way that members of sex worker organizations claim to represent women’s experiences in prostitution.

Standing against Global Exploitation (SAGE) was founded in 1992 in San Francisco as a resource and counseling center for women in prostitution. Its founder, Norma Hotaling, designed a program to address clients, thus the demand side of prostitution, which later became known as John Schools (Bindel, 2017: 49). SPACE (Survivor of Prostitution Abuse Calling for Enlightenment) is also a survivor-led organization, formed in 2012 in Ireland with the aim of changing attitudes towards prostitution, fighting for recognition as a sexual-exploitation/human-rights organization, and promoting the Nordic model. SPACE has become an international organization led by women who were victims of the sex trade. Rachel Moran is an abolitionist activist at SPACE, and author of the book *Paid for: My journey through prostitution* (2013), which has been very influential in the abolitionist movement.

Based on their own victimhood and survival stories, abolitionist organizations perceive the members of these organizations as the acknowledged spokespersons of people involved in prostitution, as the title of a Hungarian public

event in 2019, *The Reality of Prostitution*, which hosted Rachel Moran and other members of SPACE, also shows. Reference to 'the' reality implies that the experiences of the panel discussants who spoke about prostitution represent the experiences of all. Thereby, victim-led organizations are engaging in the same fight for legitimacy in the prostitution debate, as they claim to be the reliable spokespersons for people, primarily women, involved in prostitution.

The binary debate between the two opposite standpoints and social movements and the fight to be 'the' legitimate spokesperson commonly results in a rather essentialist interpretation and representation of prostitution. Although this effect was criticized as early as in the 1980s by Ferguson (1984), and later on by Limoncelli (2009) and Bernstein (2010), essentialist argumentations still often appear in public and academic discourses that neglect broader structural analyses of the complex power and socioeconomic relations within the sex industry.

3.4 Battlefields: policy making, financial resources, and powerful alliances

The main political goal of these social movements is to influence policymaking. Representatives of sex worker and abolitionist organizations operate in various political arenas, aiming to influence national and international prostitution policies. Organizations in Europe are also engaged in advocacy at the European-Union level, and global abolitionist and sex worker networks also actively lobby UN organizations.

Advocacy and lobbying include a variety of activities and strategies: not only aimed at obtaining political influence, but funding is needed for the survival of these movements and organizations. Consequently, they need to institutionalize and operate as established NGOs, as they rely on the funding systems of states or international donors that require this institutional format. These international donors are therefore key players in the political battlefield of prostitution policies.

Abolitionists in the USA received more grants and financial resources during the administration of President Bush for funding campaigns, research projects, and lobbying (Watkins, 2018). Nongovernmental organizations have become important actors in anti-trafficking efforts and commonly overtake duties of state by providing social services for victims. One result of this increased activism against trafficking was the introduction of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000 in the USA, while another is the current introduction of the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) passed under President Trump. However, the individuals involved in prostitution remain criminalized in most federal states, which shows the limited power of the movement.

In the 1980s and 1990s the sex worker movement became stronger, in line with the development of the gay and LGBTQ movement. The upsurge of both movements was also connected to the rising fear of HIV and AIDS, and the increase in effort to combat these diseases. Many activities and projects led by LGBTQ and sex worker movements have been and are now financed by the anti-HIV funds of national governments, the EU, and wealthy foundations (Ekman,

2013: 54–58). The first regional advocacy network of sex worker organizations in Europe was also based on an anti-HIV platform and funding: the TAMPEP International Foundation (European Network for HIV/STI Prevention and Health Promotion among Migrant Sex Workers) was launched in 1993 to support migrant sex workers in Western Europe to access health services and HIV/STI prevention programs, thus to reduce their vulnerability to HIV/STI transmission (ICRSE, 2015: 9).

Ekman points out that ‘as a result of the sudden increase in HIV/AIDS funding, the story of the sex worker started gaining serious ground’ (2013: 58), encouraging powerful international organizations to speak out in favor of the decriminalization of the sex industry. Large international organizations such as various UN bodies (UNAIDS, UN Women, etc.), the European Commission, the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and Amnesty International (AI), are influential actors in international policy making, and are therefore important targets of both movements. The WHO, the ILO, and AI promote harm reduction, and, in line with SWR activists, support the decriminalization model. ‘Harm reduction’ is a strategy of SWR organizations that primarily focuses on the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases; thus, in practice, it manifests most commonly in the distribution of condoms. Ekman (2013: 55–57) criticizes the fact that organizations like TAMPEP promote and practice harm reduction and thereby keep exploited, trafficked women ‘safely’ in prostitution. However, since human rights organizations that focus on LGBTQ, women’s or migrants’ rights have also joined the network, SWR organizations seem to have been successful at lobbying, as the increasing number of supporters and member organizations of ICRSE in recent years also shows. Such large international organizations are not only helpful in terms of supporting the lobbying and advocacy of these groups, but are also important providers of funding. The Open Society Foundation became one of the main funding organizations of the SWR movement, similarly to Mama Cash, the International Planned Parenthood Federation, and the Red Umbrella Fund, which is especially dedicated to providing financial resources for SWR organizations.²

However, prostitution is still a strongly debated issue at the EU level and in its policymaking. The ICRSE prepared the document Declaration on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe, which is based on human rights treaties, and presented the Sex Workers Rights Manifesto to the European Parliament in 2005, in which the main demands of the movement were summarized. The latest publicly well-known discussion about prostitution policies was based on a draft resolution by MEP Mary Honeyball in 2014, which advocated for a resolution by the European Parliament that stresses that prostitution violates human dignity and should be tackled and not accepted. The resolution encourages states to introduce the Nordic model.³ The ICRSE developed the ‘Honeyball No’ campaign as a reaction to this, which was signed by numerous organizations, including AIDS Action Europe, the

² <https://www.redumbrellafund.org/nothing-us-without-us-reversing-power-dynamics-philanthropy/>

³ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20140221IPR36644/punish-the-client-not-the-prostitute>

TAMPEP International Foundation, and some individuals (Lehmann et al., 2014). The non-binding resolution was finally adopted in 2014, but European Union institutions and politicians are still strongly divided between the two opposing approaches with their large lobby groups.

International networks have also been key players in the global sex worker movements with regard to influencing prostitution policies at the national level. The sex worker movement and lobbying has been very influential in Germany; the political activism of the latter resulted in the introduction of the liberal Prostitution Law in 2002, which legalizes prostitution as a form of work, as well as some forms of facilitating prostitution. The law was modified in 2016 when the Prostitution ‘Schutz’ Law was introduced, which includes some restrictions on how sex can be sold (i.e. compulsory condom use). In the Netherlands, prostitution was legalized in 2000 and liberal prostitution policies were introduced. In New Zealand a decriminalization model was introduced in 2003 based on NSWP’s advocacy, which differs from the German and Dutch legislation in that it is less controlled and regulated by the state.

However, abolitionist and pro-sex work feminist movements have had different effects in terms of influencing prostitution policies in various European countries. In Sweden, the women’s rights movement has been strong since the 1960s. This addresses prostitution as an issue of gender inequality and a form of oppression of women within the patriarchy. In 1999, at the same time as a law against sexual harassment, a prostitution law was introduced that criminalizes those who purchase sexual services and decriminalizes those who sell sex, while also earmarking funding for exit services. This kind of prostitution policy, known also as the Nordic model, has been influential in Europe since then, and similar legislation has been introduced in Norway, France, and Ireland.

4. Feminist struggles in Hungary

4.1 The infrastructure of political representation and the development of feminist struggles in Hungary

The development of social movements and political struggles is shaped by the locality of the movement and its position in the global economy. The integration of different localities of the world system strongly defines what political concepts like democracy, left, right, or neoliberal actually mean in particular socio-political contexts, and how these are linked to broader structural order (Gagyi, 2017: 75). Therefore, when thinking about the crisis of democracies, neoliberalism, and the effects of the global economic crisis, how these phenomena affect social groups and political projects depending on their position in the core, semi-periphery, or periphery it. As Samir Amin also highlighted, the accumulation of social-political rights in Western democracies has engendered dictatorships on the periphery that execute the demands of the world market (Amin, 1991, cited by Gagyi, 2017: 67).

The evolution of social struggles in Hungary is also strongly defined by the country’s semi-peripheral position and its historical development. The

democratization processes in the 1990s also meant an increase in political participation and growth in the number of civil society organizations. The conception of 'civil society' was imported from the West, and its meaning also included criticism of state socialism (Barna et al., 2018: 252), thus it became a powerful and popular concept in the 1990s. While in 1995 there were approximately 43,000 civic groups registered in Hungary (ca. 40 of them were explicitly women's groups), their number had grown to 53,000 by 2001 (Fábián 2009: 38, based on data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office). NGOs in the 1990s were highly unstable because they overwhelmingly relied on international funds such as those from the Open Society Institute, which gave financial support to various cultural, educational, and human rights initiatives, including women's and domestic violence shelter groups (Open Society Institute, 2002, cited by Fábián, 2009: 37). This changed in the 2000s when forms of financial support radically changed, and NGOs started to fluctuate less dramatically since they became reliant primarily on state support instead of private funding (Fábián, 2009: 38).

Funding and institutionalization have a great impact on the infrastructure of political representation and on who can represent specific causes, and how. Gagyí and Pulay (2017) argued civil society organizations in Romania and Hungary mainly include middle-class people who aim to represent marginalized groups and thereby attempt to build symbolic capital. The tendency for mainly middle-class people to be the acknowledged spokespersons of marginalized groups is also defined by the socio-economic transformation after state socialism. Gagyí (2018) interprets the fight for legitimacy and symbolic capital as a strategy of intellectuals in post-socialist countries to secure their shrinking social status in neoliberal socio-economic transformation on the semi-periphery.

Due to the globalization of the feminist movement since the 1980s, US feminist groups have strongly influenced not only the infrastructure of political representation, but also the content of women's issues in other regions. Global hierarchies in knowledge production also play a role in how ideas and political aims 'travel,' and thus in how feminist movements in core countries impact feminisms on the semi-periphery and periphery through their 'epistemic dominance' (Gagyí, 2017) and through concrete material dependencies. As Watkins (2018: 38) explains, '[c]ulturally, international feminist influence generally flowed from core to peripheries, but it was adapted, appropriated and sometimes bowdlerized along the way'. She shows that US mainstream feminism became hegemonic globally through its dominant role in the international Women's Congresses in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Consequently, in the 1990s a more neoliberalism-conformable agenda was transmitted to feminists on a global scale which ignored the structural and political differences which result from the semi-peripheral position of countries in the global accumulation regime (Barna et al., 2018). The dependence on such international donors who promote legal advocacy of women's rights and fighting against discrimination left less space for a more radical, system-critical movement.

This also strongly impacted the development of Hungarian feminism after state socialism. 'The material dependency on the core and symbolic subordination

defined the inner structure and epistemological framework of the East-Central-European and Hungarian feminism' (Barna et al., 2018: 252). In the 1990s, feminist activists and 'educators' from the USA and Western Europe came to Hungary to teach members of the feminist groups (Barna et al., 2018: 252). Between the 1990s and 2000s, women's groups increasingly cooperated with various international organizations, and 'women's activism [...] changed from broad themes and loose organizations to small, often professionalized, and, most noticeably, globally interconnected groups frequently focused on a single or narrow set of issues' (Fábián, 2009: 1).

Financial dependency and the epistemic influence of international donors initiated NGO-ization within the feminist landscape in other countries in East-Central Europe as well. '[...] NGO-ization should be seen not just as a trend towards [the] professionalization and institutionalization of social action, which changes [the] 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' (Roy, 2014, cited by Korolczuk, 2016: 34). Dependency on donors limits the capability of NGOs to make political claims and also resist neoliberal market logic. The project-based operation of NGOs also reduces their flexibility in relation to reacting to urgent political issues and their potential to offer more system-critical projects and activities. However, the cooptation of NGOs is not equivalent to simple adaptation to states' or international donors' interests, but there is space for NGO representatives and activists to reflect on and critically engage with these tendencies (Ana, 2018). 'On the one hand, they develop their own internal critique of hegemonic "Western" feminism; and on the other, they attempt to formulate their own geographically, historically, and culturally grounded and diverse feminist concerns and strategies' (Fábián, 2009: 78). While the effects of the active engagement of international donors and Western organizations in the Hungarian feminist scene was critically questioned in the 1990s (Adamik et al., 1996), in the 2000s such reflective, critical voices rarely appeared in the debate (Barna et al., 2018: 254).

In the first years of its existence, the primary goal of progressive grassroots women's activism was to lobby against the criminalization of abortion. Later, after Hungary's accession to the EU in 2004, women's groups used the political moment to advocate for the criminalization of domestic violence (Fábián, 2009). In the early 1990s, several feminist organizations were established. The Feminist Network was one of the most important of these. Its main aims were to encourage the political representation of women and gender equality, to strengthen consciousness about women's issues in Hungarian society, and to fight violence against women. One of their first projects was a campaign against the tightening of the abortion law (Antoni, 2015). Another important, newly established feminist grassroots organization was MONA (Hungarian Women's Association), which was founded in 1992 and was originally initiated to support women after state socialism. Its activities included advocacy work, service provision (including training and legal

aid), and conducting research into women's issues.⁴ NaNE Women's Rights Association was established in 1994 and is still one of the most important feminist NGOs in Hungary. Its main goal is to fight violence against women and children on various levels. NANE provides services to victims, but the organization is also engaged in fighting violence against women on a community and broader social level by providing training, organizing campaigns, lobbying, and writing policy recommendations.

The challenges, successes and internal conflicts of the feminist landscape are connected to the specific political environment in which these groups need to negotiate, which is shaped by the country's socio-economic position and the crisis of global accumulation processes. After the economic crisis of 2009 in East-Central Europe, it was mainly right-wing forces that gained political power and sought to question Western liberal hegemony (Barna et al., 2018: 255). The anti-genderism sentiments that emerged at this time were also a reaction to this hegemony. Grzebalska, Kováts and Petó (2017) describe anti-genderism as a form of symbolic glue, since it is used by populist politicians, and also the right-wing Hungarian government, to 'mobilize against (neo)liberal democracy.' They interpret it as a reaction to the evolution of a politics of recognition in feminism; and while there is intense debate about the meaning of gender among 'progressive' actors, in the right-wing narrative gender has become associated with the cultural colonization of the West (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018: 797–798, cited by Feró, 2019: 169). The anti-gender movement on the populist right in Hungary responds to an extreme understanding of gender as being 'independent of bodily reality; that is, the gender one identifies with' (Kováts, 2019a: 64). It is also a reaction to the Hungarian liberal media discourse on gender-related issues, which is influenced by a politics of recognition and mostly interprets gender as an identity-based, not a structural category (Kováts, 2019b).

Thus, anti-gender ideology affects the potential and work of women's groups and feminist activism in Hungary by framing all women's issues as 'gender' issues, and interpreting them as liberal ideological constructions. This tendency has become especially manifest, for example, in the Hungarian government's non-ratification of the Istanbul convention because of its association with 'gender ideology.' This crucially important political case highlights what obstacles feminist organizations need to tackle when addressing violence against women and other important causes in their political advocacy.

4.2 Abolitionist and SWR activism in Hungary

Women's groups in the 1990s were already addressing the harm in prostitution from an abolitionist point of view. The journal of the Feminist Network, *Nőszemély*, published various articles about prostitution, including an open letter by Mária Adamik to the mayor of Budapest in which she opposed the legalization of prostitution and problematized the male demand for sexual services (Adamik,

⁴ https://nokert.hu/sites/default/files/csatolmanyok/noszemely_3_1993_aprilis_3_szam_0.pdf

1996). Adamik's letter addressed the mayor's support for the government's intention of withdrawing from the New York Convention and legalizing the sex industry. Despite the opposition of feminist activists, a new prostitution law was introduced in 1999 in Hungary that followed a legalization model and prescribed that municipalities should designate zones where street-based prostitution is legal.

The introduction of the new law was followed by an increase in the advocacy work of abolitionist feminist activists. The Prostitution-free Hungary movement was initiated in 2003 by nine private persons and involved, besides various public statements and publications criticizing the new law, launching a public campaign in 2006 called 'Keresd a férfit!' (Look for the man!). Members called on political decision makers and the Hungarian parliament to change the law, strongly criticizing the male demand that drives commercial sex, and claiming that the new law primarily suited the interests of the (male) political and economic elite.⁵ They further suggested that the law was initiated in support of the organized criminal groups that manage the prostitution scene in Budapest, which were also closely related to this elite. They advocated the introduction of the Swedish model, which criminalizes the purchase of sexual services.⁶

The change in the law and the strong advocacy work of Hungarian feminist organizations initiated active public discourse around the issue of prostitution. Abolitionist feminist organizations were not only active in advocacy work, targeting decision makers, but contributed to research on prostitution and human trafficking and provided services for victims. MONA has actively collaborated in projects with feminist organizations fighting against prostitution and human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Hungary and has published reports containing legal and social analyses of commercial sexual exploitation and victim assistance (Betlen et al., 2010; Betlen, 2013). NANE is also committed to the abolitionist approach and has been engaged in providing assistance to victims of prostitution and trafficking.

The sex workers' rights movement is represented by much fewer organizations in Hungarian civil society. The most important actor advocating for sex workers' rights is SZEXE (Szexmunkások Érdekvédelmi Egyesülete, the Association of Hungarian Sex Workers), which was established in 2003. Their activities include research projects, creating publications, providing social services for Hungarian sex workers, various advocacy activities, and holding public events. Their main aim is the decriminalization of sex work. In Hungary, therefore, they mainly advocate for the designation of so-called tolerance zones by municipalities, which has largely not taken place despite the prostitution law of 1999. SZEXE is a member of several international organizations, such as the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), SWAN, and ICRSE; and in Hungary they cooperate with liberal NGOs such as the Civil Liberty Union, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, the Hungarian Civil Aids Forum, and LGBT organizations such as Transvanilla. In addition to SZEXE, there are a few other NGO representatives active in the field of

⁵ <https://nlc.hu/forum/?fid=441&topicid=79901&bw=1&page=1&step=1>

⁶ <https://cdn.atria.nl/epublications/fragen/prostitution-free-hungary.pdf>

HIV prevention, human rights, and LGBTQI issues who advocate for the decriminalization of sex work.

4.3 The role of funding in shaping advocacy concerning prostitution and sex work in Hungary

All organizations engaged in advocacy and service provision related to prostitution and sex work operate in a primarily project-based way, therefore they rely on donors. Donors include private foundations, states, and suprastate actors, like the EU and international organizations. All these actors are targeted by international advocacy networks of global abolitionist and SWR organizations, as I have highlighted before. Therefore, the international battlefield of these networks impacts the survival, range of activities, and effectiveness of local Hungarian organizations.

Matolcsi (2006) analyzed the effects of international discourses on trafficking for sexual exploitation on the work of Hungarian NGOs and highlighted that the relevant actors' stances on prostitution have a great impact on what funds are available to them. Funds for anti-trafficking activities, which include those for victim assistance and awareness raising, are important sources for organizations working on prostitution. While some funds were available to organizations regardless of their stance on prostitution, others clearly targeted NGOs that represented the donor's values. The US government, for example, explicitly supported abolitionist aims and was one of NANE's important donors for several years (Matolcsi, 2006). At the same time, the EU had a rather ambiguous position – as I have highlighted before – and provided funding both to SZEXE and NANE. As a result of the successful international advocacy work of the SWR network, wealthy international foundations like the Open Society Foundations⁷ and Mama Cash increasingly took the side of decriminalization. SZEXE has been also a beneficiary⁸ of this tendency.

The Hungarian state has also been an important actor, not only in terms of legislation, but also concerning funding. As mentioned before, in the 2000s Hungarian NGOs increasingly relied on state funds that provided them with more stability. However, in the specific field of prostitution and trafficking the state was rather absent, and mostly ignored the increasingly relevant issue – as members of the relevant NGOs reported, according to Matolcsi. While abolitionist activists attributed the lack of funding to the state's opposing views about prostitution, SZEXE's relation to the government was also reported to be poor (Matolcsi, 2006: 40). While it cannot be confirmed why the different governments did not provide funding for anti-trafficking- and prostitution-related activities, their ignoring the issue suggests that the state simply did not perceive prostituted women and victims of trafficking as a social group in need of support.

⁷ <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org>

⁸ <https://www.mamacash.org/en/who-we-are>

4.4 Goals of political representation and advocacy in the Hungarian prostitution debate

While both international abolitionist and SWR movements have a significant impact on Hungarian organizations and activism through their financial and ideological connections, the local political context and the semi-peripheral position of Hungary also define the development and potential for political representation. Hungarian debates partly react to international developments and political issues, and partly target issues in the local context that directly affect Hungarian women in prostitution.

The change of law in 1999 was a highly important political event that was followed by an increase in the advocacy work of abolitionist organizations. However, it cannot be simply interpreted as the state taking the side of the SWR movement, because in practice people involved in prostitution are largely criminalized, which contradicts both sides' political aims. Therefore, the primary advocacy activity of SZEXE targets police harassment and fights for the designation of tolerance zones by municipalities, thus for the implementation of the regulation of 1999. Abolitionists, on the other hand, still advocate for the introduction of the Swedish model and draw attention to the current regulation's non-compliance with the New York Convention; at the same time, they also push for better victim protection. While Hungarian state actors, including the government and also municipalities generally, have not seemed to be responsive to any of these political claims, recently published legal changes and a new national strategy suggest a shift in support for the political causes of abolitionist feminist organizations, since they include more support for victims of trafficking and measures for preventing child prostitution and trafficking.⁹

4.4.1 Debate about Amnesty International's initiative regarding the decriminalization of sex work

The stance on prostitution of important international organizations has also been widely discussed by the relevant organizations in Hungary. However, their activities in this regard are less relevant in terms of pressuring international actors directly, while their statements and analyses rather serve to shape public discourse in Hungary.

In 2015 a debate evolved on the blog *Kettős Mércse* around an Amnesty International (AI) initiative promoting the total decriminalization of prostitution, which reflected the international development of the sex worker movement in terms of AI becoming an important ally. This decision of Amnesty International was strongly debated and criticized by abolitionists internationally, but it also provoked statements within the Hungarian scene. While Sárosi (2015) and Fedorkó

⁹ The protocol of the meeting on the new national strategy (2020-2023) is available here: https://www.parlament.hu/documents/10181/87979/NR20200309_elfogadott.pdf/c7e50997-9b8b-dfc6-6273-9587f6f8669b?version=1.0&t=1583760863558&download=true

(2015) welcomed the initiative as it served to uphold the rights of sex workers, members of abolitionist NGOs like NANE and Patent strongly criticized it (Dés, 2015; Nógrádi, 2015).

The blog posts were very much in line with the approaches of international SWR and abolitionist activists and scholars, with some additional reflections on the Hungarian situation, which also showed the embeddedness of both organizations in international SWR or abolitionist networks. The debate was less concerned with identifying what this AI initiative means for Hungarian women in prostitution/sex work, but served rather to introduce the related developments and debate from their perspective to the Hungarian leftist scene – the primary readers of *Kettős Mércse*. Therefore, the political work of these organizations in this case focused primarily on informing and shaping Hungarian public discourse and the representation of prostitution and sex work, but not on effectively influencing political decision making.

4.4.2 Discourse about political representation in prostitution/sex work in Hungary

The issue of political representation and who may be considered a legitimate spokesperson in relation to prostitution was an important element of the debate. While SWR activists put forward arguments based on the ‘nothing about us without us’ principle, their legitimacy was strongly questioned by abolitionist feminists. Nógrádi (2015) says it is ‘seriously debated whether sex worker alliances are legitimate representatives of prostitutes’ interests. In these organizations there are commonly pimps, who are former prostitutes, or simply pimps, and persons exploiting prostitutes.’ She also addressed the fact that while middle-class, educated women are often members of these organizations, it is actually marginalized, poor women who are not members of, nor are represented by these networks who overwhelmingly work in prostitution. Furthermore, she shared her suspicion about the industry and the donors behind it who welcome these organizations and legitimize their work, as the activity of the latter merges the interest of pimps and the women involved in prostitution in the discourse. Her argumentation strongly reflects the analysis of the UK-based abolitionist activist and public intellectual Julie Bindel, who has also addressed the involvement of pimps in SWR (Bindel, 2017). While the actual existence of personal and financial relations between SWR activists and the pimps who exploit women in prostitution have not been proven, members of feminist organizations commonly claim that SZEXE is involved in ‘pimping’ (see also Matolcsi, 2006).

5. Conclusions

Any explanation of what difficulties the abolitionist feminist/sex workers’ rights movement face, and what defines their achievements must be manifold. In this article I have highlighted the evolution of these social movements in the USA, Western Europe, and in Hungary. The development of feminist movements is defined by the rise of global neoliberalism, which incorporated the originally

radical movements of the 1960s in the USA. At the same time, this neoliberalism-conforming feminism became highly influential on a global scale, shaping feminist organizing after the era of state socialism in Hungary through financial donations and epistemic dominance. It also affected what themes and issues local feminist organizations addressed, although they also focused on local political processes.

Concerning the field of prostitution, the sex workers' rights and the abolitionist movements have been variously successful at influencing political actors and building alliances internationally. The SWR movement has successfully built on neoliberal ideas of freedom, choice, and consent, and has obtained increasing political support from international organizations such as the ILO and AI. At the same time, the EU is still strongly divided regarding this question, and various EU member states have introduced the Swedish model, which is propagated by abolitionist feminists.

The powerful networks, donors, and alliances of abolitionist and SWR organizations also have a strong influence in Hungary. Organizations on both sides are active in terms of service provision for victims of prostitution and trafficking/sex workers. Their advocacy work on the national level primarily involves changes in, or the implementation of, prostitution-related policies, although debates about prostitution and sex work have been strongly marginalized in the Hungarian political and public discourse. Feminist and SWR organizations are actively raising awareness about the issues by highlighting their perspective about such topics, and also report about internationally relevant events in this field, such as the AI initiative of 2015.

The current political context of the Orbán regime and its anti-gender policies generally impacts how gender equality and women's issues can be represented in Hungary. While the recent legal changes concerning human trafficking may be a sign of a more sensitive state response to victims of trafficking and prostitution, the political landscape suggests that feminist activism still faces a variety of challenges.

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