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Local food as resistance: Integrating women's experiences in the Hungarian food sovereignty movement

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Abstract

The weak civil society thesis in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been central to scholarly debates that interpret civil society using a Western lens. Touching upon the issue of food sovereignty, we contest this conceptualisation by revealing the wider networks and strength of food-related local practices in Hungary after the 1990s. In doing so, we rely on a qualitative study conducted between 2020 and 2021, based on 25 semi-structured 'oral herstory' interviews with women who have been actively dealing with food sovereignty issues. With the above study, we had three main objectives. First, to counter the widespread (mis)perception of local food production as a mere necessity in CEE. Second, we highlight the importance of rural local food production to counter the understanding of home gardening as a practice unassociated with resistance. Third, we wish to give voice to women concerning their experiences in the movement in terms of the latter's larger structural and historical settings. Our findings concentrate on two key areas: the movement's experience with recurrent crises and political-economic conditions from the 1990s onwards and a subjective assessment of shifting hierarchical dynamics within the movement's milieu. The paper's main goal is to illuminate women's experiences and positionality within the global food system from a Hungarian viewpoint.

Keywords: civil society; food sovereignty; women; gender relations; Central and Eastern Europe; Hungary

1 Introduction

In Central and Eastern Europe, the weak civil society thesis has been central to scholarly debates that identify low levels of engagement, general passivity, and the distrust of citizens after the regime change. Contrarily, criticism has been voiced concerning the overes-

timation of the latter's participation in formal institutions and the interpretation of civil society using a Western lens (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007; Jacobsson, 2015; Guasti, 2016). Although citizen involvement remains highly uneven across CEE countries, a gradual increase can be observed regarding the contestation of everyday grievances (Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2016; Gagyi & Ivancheva, 2019). The collapse of the Soviet bloc, the 2008 financial crisis, and the latest pandemic acted as distinctive crises of capitalism, inducing new waves of mobilisation.

Additionally, the global pandemic that erupted in March 2020 provided an opportunity to identify and engage in community action. Society responded with self-organisation and mutual assistance to offer a solution not only to arising circumstances but even to acute problems stemming from the climate and ecological crisis, global economic insecurity, precarious livelihoods and housing, and an increasingly widespread care and food crisis (Fraser, 2016). Thus, there is an urgent need to connect civil society research with the analysis of recurring crises, including not only the crisis of democracy but also ecological threats and economic (neo)liberalism on various geographical scales (Purcell, 2013), in order to grasp the interdependent character of these phenomena.

Addressing these issues, the HerStory Collective intends to touch upon issues of food, care, feminism, and social solidarity. Combining considerations of both civic action and academic research, the 13 members of the collective explore urban-rural connections and divides between typically Budapest-based civic groups playing an important role in the food sovereignty movement and rural local initiatives facilitating environmental education, permaculture, community farming (CSA), and creating box schemes. In doing so, we aim to counter the 'weak civil society' thesis by revealing the broader networks and strength of food-related mobilisations.

Between 2020 and 2021, the HerStory Collective conducted a qualitative study based on 25 semi-structured 'oral herstory' interviews with women who are or have been actively dealing with food sovereignty issues or have been part of the movement in a more explicit way. Similarly to the methodology of narrative life history interviews, the former outline hierarchical relations and gender dynamics and highlight marginalised life history experiences alongside prevailing historical and contemporary narratives. During the interviews, interviewees talked about their lives, everyday realities, joys, and difficulties. In the analysis of the interviews, we highlighted aspects that came up several times, as well as those that were decisive at the system level in terms of the future of food sovereignty, the care crisis, and, in general, the social status of women.

The above study had a threefold aim. First, it was intended to counter the common (mis)conception that while local food production in CEE is seen as a necessity in Western Europe, it may be considered a sign of resilience and innovation (Smith et al., 2008). Second, as home gardening is often regarded as outdated and excluded from movement interests, we aimed to integrate such context-specific activities and problematise the multiplicity and uneven relations of alternative food production. Third, we wished to do this by channelling the voices of women in the movement and locating them in their wider historical and structural contexts.

The results presented in this paper focus on two particular aspects of the study: (1) the experience of recurring crises and political-economic conditions during the development of the movement from the 1990s onwards, and (2) a subjective evaluation of the

changing dynamics of the hierarchies in the movement milieu. Ultimately, the paper sheds light on women's positionality and experiences within the global food system from a Hungarian vantage point.

In the following, we discuss the theoretical debate about the weakness of CEE civil society development and propose an alternative understanding for analysing such initiatives. After elaborating on the methodological considerations that drove our research agenda, empirical findings are introduced in two separate sections. Finally, in the conclusions, we invite scholars to revise their estimations of the importance of women's positionality in mundane everyday food-related practices and reposition CEE marginality in future food-related research.

2 The weakness thesis and CEE environmentalism

Environment-related dissent, civil society development, and the process of Europeanisation have all been analysed in Central and Eastern Europe by employing the benchmark of the West (Jehlička & Jacobsson, 2021), inevitably leading to environmentalism being deemed weak. Naturally, there are differences compared to the West in the directions, topics, and terms of mobilisation, but the goal here is to highlight how CEE environmentalism differs and follows different paths than its Western counterpart. In the following section, we demonstrate how these variations have developed while also making three proposals – the recontextualisation of CEE environmentalism, considering everyday local food-related practices to be a potential form of dissent, and integrating women's perspectives into environmental and civic action.

The legitimacy and governance of environmental issues over the past thirty years have changed considerably in the CEE region. In command economies, environmentalism mainly crystallised within conservation activities, which were considered neutral and apolitical in the sense that they were not conflictual. Instead, the local environmental struggles that emerged in the 1980s addressed harmful industrial plants and polluting activities on a local scale, generating temporary coalitions between experts and local residents (Vári, 1997) but leaving political decision-making delinked from environmental consequences (Szabó, 1993; Pavlínek & Pickles, 2000). Nevertheless, environmental dissent played a crucial role in political transformation and bringing down state socialist regimes (Kerényi & Szabó, 2006).

The seemingly strong environmental mobilisation experienced towards the end of state socialism did not weaken after the setting up of democratic institutions but rather dissolved in more formal means of representation, often in the direction of party formation (Mikecz, 2008), moving away from social movement organisation. In parallel with party politics, environmental activists' concerns focused more on risks arising from integration into the global economy and the consequent abandonment of environmental matters (Persányi, 1993; Harper, 2005; Glied, 2016; Farkas, 2017). Such initiatives that privileged self-sufficiency fit the 'small-is-beautiful' type of environmental movement well (Smith & Jehlička, 2013; Farkas, 2017).

Over time, dominant accounts of CEE environmentalism were tainted by the weak civil society thesis that has become a key component of the discussion about Central and

Eastern European societies (Jehlička & Jacobsson, 2021). Scholarship shifted towards a Western-centric evaluation of activism, from which perspective citizens were deemed to exhibit low levels of engagement, general apathy, and a distrust of traditional forms of participation (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007; Foa & Ekiert, 2017; Vándor et al., 2017; Meyer et al., 2020). Political scientists typically argue that the average Hungarian citizen's political attitudes are characterised by statism, servility, and paternalistic relationships inherited from the political elitism that originated in the nineteenth century and were perpetuated by state socialism and regime change (Glied, 2013). Conversely, others have emphasised that the practices of state-socialist environmental organisations have been incompatible with the advocacy-style activism that is preferred and usually considered in the West. To this incompatibility Gille (2010) drew attention by highlighting the anti-political character of post-socialism – the pre-1989 value awarded to authenticity, scepticism, and the rejection of social visions imposed on society from above – in comparison to Western participatory politics that resembled the constant state of mobilisation that society grew weary of.

Meanwhile, the green movement of the 2000s saw food sovereignty as achievable through changes to the global institutional and regulatory environment, with little reflection on the everyday challenges of wider society and the realities of women and other marginalised groups. Shopping communities in favour of locally sourced food and conscious consumption communities started to emerge, integrating with other food-related initiatives. Established eco-political organisations introduced a critique of capitalist and consumerist practices, urging social and environmental transformation (Krasznai Kovacs & Pataki, 2021). The marketing of conscious consumption sharply contrasted with the widespread sustainability practices of CEE non-market food operations, such as home-grown food and sharing, which were ignored in the international discourse (Jehlička & Jacobsson, 2021). The majority of policies targeting sustainable consumption in the EU were thus blind to marginal forms of food production and consumption that were traditionally widespread among the population. Meanwhile, traditional forms of food production were undermined not only by unfolding new narratives and practices of consumption (Nagy et al., 2015) but also by changing structural conditions (e.g. access to land) (Kovács, 2017). Hence, to understand the roots and drivers of food sovereignty, we should scrutinise how old and new narratives and practices are related and limited by macro-scale processes and power relations.

Even if ecology was always an integral part of dissent and subcultures in Hungary, the expertise and style of activism came under heavy American influence (Kerényi & Szabó, 2006) during the European Union (EU) pre-accession years. This period involved the provision of ample financial resources for the NGOisation of the green movement but was associated with the risk of dependence on tenders and focusing on international campaigns instead of domestic affairs. Accession to the EU in 2004 further strengthened these trends (Buzogány, 2015). One of the most active anti-globalisation organisations, Greenpeace, focused on global climate change, seed control, GMO and pesticide-free food production, and consumer protection. Compared to other organisations critical of globalisation, it was more visible due to its spectacular protests, but in many cases, these were not linked to domestic political issues but followed the profile and campaigns of the international organisation (Mikecz, 2018).

Since the second half of the 2000s, the green movement space in Hungary has undergone a number of transformations. Partly as a result of the financial and economic crisis of 2008, its holistic and systemic characteristics began to unfold at this time – when the climate crisis, social crisis, and economic crisis combined to influence the evolution of green thinking. Increasingly, the concept of environmental justice began to gain currency within the green movement, emphasising the mutual importance of environmental sustainability and social justice. The Great Financial Crisis in the CEE region contributed not only to a more complex approach to environmental matters but also helped renew how scholars think about the region conceptually. The tradition of strong but invisible forms of everyday environmentalism in CEE became subject to a renewed perspective that emphasised the need to redefine CEE environmentalism by addressing vernacular forms of non-political practices and drawing attention to marginal participants of the movement, such as the Roma and women.

More often than not, food sovereignty is seen as an issue tightly related to social movements and civic mobilisation. However, in post-socialist Europe, the concept and practice of food sovereignty may strongly differ from Western or global understandings, such as those outlined by the Via Campesina and Nyéléni declarations (Visser et al., 2015), but this does not mean that it is absent or irrelevant. In contrast to urban centres, social movements in rural areas are much scarcer, while evidence suggests that rural everyday practices make a significant contribution to food sovereignty – socially diverse practices that reduce environmental impact and create community benefits – without explicitly aiming to do so (Smith & Jehlička, 2013).

Furthermore, scholars have highlighted the strength of grassroots mobilisations 'from below', whereby 'uneventful' activism leads to collaborative processes. Instead of capturing civil society mobilisation as a merely quantitative phenomenon, it has been conceptualised as the process of 'building relations and achieving collective goals rather than a stable object of research or a structure that can be fully captured by quantitative measures at any given point in time' (Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2019, p. 139). Individuals, food producers, and local communities who adopt the food sovereignty framework increasingly invest in local tactics instead of addressing grievances targeted at globalised food systems through protests and large-scale mobilisation (Ayres & Bosia, 2011). Citizens often prefer the creation of loose networks that link individuals, groups, and collectivities in a volatile political context amidst recurring crises, as the former are believed to be better equipped to address the need for political change (Balogh et al., 2021; Krasznai Kovacs, 2021). Such grassroots activism may be more capable of mobilising people who have not been engaged in collective action before.

Last but not least, social reproduction scholars stress that labour division within the capitalist world system invisibilises care and reproductive work, such as housekeeping, child care, and food provisioning – all done mainly by women (Federici, 2012). It conceals the fact that there are intricate systems of power, gender, and class interactions in farming households. Not all resources are inevitably combined, and not all labour is recognised or distributed equally (Brent, 2022). Hence, transforming gender relations is crucial to changing the food system and an important element of food sovereignty (Patel, 2009).

3 Methodological considerations

The HerStory Collective came into being as a self-organised collective that currently has 13 members from a variety of professional fields – social, environmental, and permaculture movements, civil society organisations, and academic institutions, covering a wide spectrum of backgrounds in the arts, humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. The members of the group are familiar with green and women's organisations through either practice or research. In the beginning, the diverse experiences and expertise of the group members were mapped out during online meetings in order to formulate socially useful goals and research questions collaboratively. The diversity of members enriches cross-disciplinary knowledge generation, and we used a research-focused agenda-setting methodology to identify shared visions and research directions, which is a critical dimension of scientific knowledge creation. This represents the starting point of the research process, which includes both the interests and aspirations of specific research communities and the identification of uncharted topics (Santos & Horta, 2018). In preceding the organisation of the research process, this methodology helps explore less researched topics and under-resourced research areas (Balázs et al., 2020). Being a critical feminist research collective, HerStory Collective prioritises research that explores the living conditions of rural and farming women and unfolds the burden of care on women. Based on the above, we aim to create new knowledge while also rethinking the relationship between theory and empiricism by acknowledging the role of structures that frame local conditions for action and shape individuals' possibilities but also reflect on who is and is not seen as an agent (Gibson-Graham, 2014).

We jointly developed a structured set of oral history interview questions, which allowed us to conduct the interviews through a division of labour. Similarly, the 'oral herstory' narrative interviews unfold hierarchical relationships and gender dynamics, highlighting marginalised experiences alongside dominant historical and contemporary narratives (Abrams, 2010). We reached out to interviewees through personal and professional connections, conducting 25 structured interviews. Our interviewees are involved in food sovereignty movements in many diverse ways, having different demographic characteristics and backgrounds. They talked about their lives, everyday realities, joys, and difficulties. In the analysis of the interviews, we highlighted those aspects that emerged repeatedly and those that were definitive and systemic concerning the future of food sovereignty, the crisis of care, and the social situation of women. In addition, HerStory Collective members prepared autoethnographic notes, which were coded in the same way as the interviews. Autoethnography is a useful strategy involving the researcher experiencing the events under study (Feischmidt, 2007, p. 226). In such cases, personal narratives are explored through a sociological perspective, reflecting on the social context by mapping power relations (Wall, 2008). Since HerStory Collective members have an in-depth knowledge of the network of organisations under study, autoethnographic notes constitute a distinctive element of the research methodology.

Most of the interviews were conducted through online digital platforms, as the fieldwork was carried out during the COVID-19 lockdowns. This way, we could reach more women living and working in rural areas, although we also faced several challenges. Due to the circumstances, we could not reach out to Roma women, for example. We wished to

open the research to everyday experiences that were different from the reality of the women we had previously interviewed. Roma activists and researchers invited to participate in the research were unable to do so due to their heavy workloads. Furthermore, we witnessed a recurring problem in our group dynamics: the critical narratives of the activist and researcher community are often exclusionary. The professional jargon and entrenched concepts stemming from the institutional environment of researchers may act as a barrier; consequently, we failed to reach all target groups. Our aim for the future is to be able to deconstruct theoretically loaded concepts and internal inequalities as well.

Our interviewees made conscious and reflective statements about rural life. The aspects of these that most often recurred involved the lack of money-making opportunities, satisfaction with spiritual needs, adequate educational opportunities, conditions of food production, the physical safety and social legitimacy of women, and the lack of adequate public services (e.g. schools, kindergardens, and public transport systems). Regarding these dimensions, only a few interviewees reported success or satisfaction in relation to the narratives of the mainstream green movement, the food sovereignty movement, or the traditional female life path. The focus was more on exhaustion, overwork and burnout. In the remainder of the paper, we summarise their experiences by framing the analysis on two levels: structural constraints that were experienced, and hierarchies in the movement milieu.

4 Facing the structural constraints of food self-provisioning in the Hungarian countryside

Food sovereignty was discussed in relation to multiple structural constraints by many interviewees in various positions, from a leader of a failed medium-sized organic farm to a woman processing and selling fruit from a garden in small quantities. A shared critical point in these stories was the thorough reorganisation of food production in CEE and the introduction of new spaces and narratives of consumption. Major food retailers have occupied a powerful position in this process: they have mobilised immense assets to obtain control over the circuits of capital by integrating food processing and distribution on a global level (Wrigley et al., 2005), including in the CEE region since the 1990s. They entered emerging markets seeking high returns by exploiting policy rents (through the inconsistency of regulative systems associated with bargaining), the deficits in supply, and property (land)-related market opportunities for speculative investment. Since retailers are deeply anchored in host economies (Hess, 2004) and have had to act under conditions of increasing competitive pressure since the late 1990s, they have pursued risk-reducing strategies such as making use of crisis-hit CEE food processing capacities to organise low-cost supplier networks for mass production (Nagy, 2014).

In this way, they have integrated food processing firms and their suppliers (farms) in global food value chains through an exploitative and selective process: being 'inside' retailer-driven chains was considered a way to ensure market stability and flows of know-how, yet demanded flexibility and adaptation, which trickled down food value chains to agricultural producers (Velkey et al., 2021). Market restructuring was actively supported by the construction of a new consumer identity by major retailers, confronted with both

state-socialist (shortage-economy-led) and post-socialist (disturbed, valueless, price-driven bazaar-shopper) models of consumption (Grubbauer, 2012; Kornai, 1980; Sulima, 2012) and implicitly, with labour-intensive, traditional means of self-provision.

The changing consumption patterns, emerging supplier relations, privatisation, and formation of the national regulatory system have impacted the opportunities for creating space for alternative food production in many ways. Our interviews crystallised two powerful, complex processes. The first is the low-cost production of food, promoted by CEE suppliers who challenged pre-existing traditional models of food production for self-supply and sharing. Rural studies and official statistics have highlighted the decline in the consumption of self-produced food in low-income rural areas (Kovách & Megyesi, 2006). Our interviewees also reflected on this process:

> When we had the new supermarkets [during the 1990s], people in rural places just gave up producing their own food. They [didn't] realise […] what precious assets they had and sold their land… People today do not have pantries anymore; they are dependent on buying food every day. (interview NE01)

One alternative our interviewee and her neighbours (many of them settlers from Western Europe) rely on is self-provision and family labour complemented by income from tourism and practical educational activities that channel national and EU funds into their small family farm. Combining their own resources, reciprocal relations with the local community, external funds, and international networks allows them not only to survive but also to educate younger generations and run model farms for self-supply.

The second process many discussed is the multiplicity of structural difficulties associated with establishing and running a farm. One key issue was the production of food beyond household needs in a system associated with strict regulations (defined according to EU principles and introduced by major retailers in the 1990s), which are put into practice through costly bureaucratic procedures and require constant technological development and vast investment. The desire not to exceed related structural limits is a source of differentiation in strategies aiming for food sovereignty. As an interviewee put it:

> There are a couple of families which took this scale jump, as it was their goal, and they invested all their assets. Yet [for a woman with kids] just staying at home and doing [food processing] in her spare time [doesn't] work […]; a family can't make a living on this. (interview MK01)

Thus, the position of small producers working part-time is marginalised legally, which also cements the status of women with a disproportionally large reproductive burden (Engel-di Mauro, 2006; Gregor & Kováts, 2019). Land ownership is considered a fundamental structural constraint to food sovereignty by our interviewees. The conditions of getting access to agricultural land – i.e. the non-transparent and biased regulation and implementation of post-socialist transition restitution and privatisation practices, national and EU sectoral policies, and the resulting centralisation of power and control in the food sector – have been widely discussed (Kovách, 2016; Tagai et al., 2018). Yet our interviewees highlighted how the conditions of the transition blocked the rise of smallholders who relied on alternative approaches to food production in various forms, from self-supply to agroecological model farming.

> We meant [intended] to get the land that used to be in the family's possession back in the restitution process. Yet we had only shared ownership in the former cooperative land, thus we had to buy others' shares, which cost six times more than buying [the land] for vouchers. We had to invest our own savings and get into debt to start ecological farming. (interview NE01)

> Finally, we could get the land for farming, yet the process was legally and financially difficult, full of traps. We launched the project, including a community college for educating [people about] ecological farming and the attached model farm for practical training... Yet the legal framework was imprecise in regulating the operation of the National Land Trust, which allowed the ministry to rent out the [farm]land ... And finally, our [farming] project was destroyed. ...Food sovereignty means producing your own food, for which you need land and processing capacities at the community scale. We have no chance [to do this] any more as land has been grabbed from us. (interview NE03)

Despite the unequal chances, the early years of the transition were also considered a golden age of experimenting, building networks and formulating alternative strategies for food production (and obtaining land for this), as our interviewees could find and use the gaps in emerging regulation and institutional systems. Nevertheless, the blind spots ceased to exist, and farmland prices rose due to the global embedding of food production and EU accession, which – along with growing capital and knowledge-intense farming and the ageing of rural society – sped up the centralisation process and the loss of control of communities over their own territory and environment (Fertő & Fogarasi, 2007; Nagy et al., 2015; Kovách, 2016). Such processes and the financialisation of land markets across CEE (Visser, 2017) also limit the entry of new agents seeking food sovereignty:

> We knew that in today's Hungary, leaving a downtown apartment to replace it with [a place] in the countryside is very, very dangerous. (interview BP01)

Alternative organisations that focus on ecological and community aspects of food production go beyond mere farming. In their stories, land use, food production, and organic farming are inseparably linked with the building and maintenance of local communities to counter the polarisation of rural society, the disintegration of local communities, and the spread of patron-client relationships.

> It can already be seen that there will be a serious food shortage in the [20]30s as well. The things that are happening now, and why land grab has started, is because the master of the world will be the one who owns the land and the food. (interview NE03)

The structural constraints discussed in our interviews are rooted in the global organisation of food production and distribution, hence they exhibit the peripheral position of CEE producers in obtaining access to various forms of capital (land, knowledge, and networks) and entail the loss of control over the local assets and processes of communities/residents. The process was exacerbated by legal-institutional contexts, which were in constant flux from the early 1990s onwards, giving way to bargaining and the development of adaptive strategies. Nevertheless, the closing of regulative gaps cemented unequal

relations in the food sector and challenged the agents of alternative production in variegated ways. We discovered multiple areas of differentiation, among which gender relations were identified as ubiquitous and persistent.

5 Gendered hierarchies of the movement milieu from women's perspective

Our study also led to insights into women's position and role in formulating strategies for food sovereignty and putting these into practice. For many of our interviewees, entering the world of alternative food production entailed moving to a rural place, which produced a number of practical problems with organising family life and managing the household. In this section, we focus on women's ongoing struggles within the movement, with a focus on gendered hierarchies. In the movement space, two dynamics can be perceived: on the one hand, hierarchies affect the relationship between male and female actors within the movement and food sovereignty practices, and on the other hand, they also affect the gendered course and direction of the movement.

Looking at the first dimension, the mainstream narratives, definitions and demands related to food sovereignty primarily developed in the breeding ground of conservative values and did not reflect the reality, needs, and possibilities of women, caregivers, and those primarily responsible for feeding their families. One of the consequences of this fundamental problem is that many women experienced that male oppression has been cemented into movement hierarchies in the green movement over the years and is difficult to escape due to the different attitudes of generations.

> In the green movement, there were countless such cases when they made it very clear that they did not think that women were suitable for this field. (interview MK04)

The regime change and the subsequent economic crisis have posed significant challenges for Hungarian women, and there has been a significant 're-traditionalisation' of gender roles since the 1990s (Tsagarousianou, 1995). The state has been shifting the burden of childbearing onto families, while the rigidity of the labour market – and the lack of policy responses – perpetuate the vulnerable position of women (Vajda, 2014; Szabó-Morvai, 2018). These structural constraints are often mutually reinforcing for women living in rural areas: the narrowing of employment opportunities, the concentration of land ownership, the disappearance of opportunities for self-sufficiency, local dependency systems (public works, social benefits, etc.), and confinement to local, household-determined lifeworlds give women little chance to move beyond such structures and change their lives (Váradi, 2013; 2015).

> I experienced it a few years ago – especially as a young woman who also comes from the city and wanted to do something in a rural environment – that they looked at me as if I was stupid, the workers, the older men in the ecovillage movement – so by pretty much everyone, [including] by older women because I had not yet experienced the ridiculing that they already had. (interview BLU01)

Thus, women entering food production in rural places faced multiple difficulties and disadvantages stemming from their status as paid labour and those who must bear a larger share of reproductive work in this very context. Their access to flexible forms of employment (part-time or home office) is limited in rural spaces.

> If I [say] that I need a job that gives me 2–3 hours work per day, I'm turned away… Paradoxically, we could move here [to a small village] because I can work from home on my computer or phone today, which makes us independent of the place of our work. (interview BP01)

> It is really difficult to raise enough income through farming to compensate for a full-time job in the city. If you say 'OK, we'll give up our paid job and start farming,' it takes years to get any stability. (interview MK01)

Hungary, like other Central and Eastern European countries, sought to address the significant economic crisis that followed the regime change by attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), creating an industrial semi-periphery. This meant that the burden of social reproduction (child-rearing, elderly care, domestic work) fell on households, especially women, and not only during economic crises but also during boom times. In the Visegrad countries, the management of the social crisis was embedded in the bargaining process of transition (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012). In Hungary, this led to the inactivation of two-thirds of women, who lost their jobs, and in the absence of a steady wage income, whose vulnerability to state transfers and the active earners in the household increased (Vajda, 2014). The 2008 financial and economic crisis has shaken the living conditions of Hungarian households, including Hungarian women. The reduction in the opportunities and incomes associated with wage labour and the cutbacks in state transfers have again increased the reproductive burden on households. The post-crisis recovery has been built on the separation between the state and (global) capital, the deteriorating and increasingly vulnerable position of workers, reductions in the tax burden on capital, and the further contraction of welfare and social systems, further deepening inequalities between and within households (Czirfusz et al., 2019).

Strategies that combine urban and rural activities and incomes to reduce risk entail the uneven distribution of reproductive work within households, potentially reinforcing gendered inequalities in rural spaces. Such problems are exacerbated by the structural deficits of public services in rural spaces. Our interviews suggest that the declining quality of education and the collapse of welfare services add a lot to women's reproductive work.

> It is a major problem that you can't teach your kids at home. And the schools in rural places are really awful. At least in our village. It's something which is difficult to cope with. (BP01)

Nevertheless, strategies and practices focused on food sovereignty are also sources of more equal, fair distribution of work, as the border between productive and reproductive work becomes blurred.

> There is so much in rural life which makes everything more balanced. You do not experience that men just drink beer and leave the rest to women at home. OK, we [women] have more work in the kitchen, but guys also have a lot to do, such as taking care of animals, building

things, etc. Yet the garden is a shared responsibility, and we always had intersections in our daily routines. Nonetheless, I think it is a lot more difficult for women to live a simple life, as this [way of living] makes reproductive work incredibly hard. (interview FJ02)

The gender-related elements of the movement have undergone vivid change as well. Starting in the 2000s, women's NGOs in the capital and rural areas started rapidly spreading (Milánkovics, 2013), playing a major role in organising and networking (Csapó et al., 2005). Feminist women's organisations in Budapest focused mainly on human rights, violence against women, prostitution, health and labour market issues (Juhász, 2014). The everyday challenges of women's livelihoods, climate issues and food sovereignty were typically not addressed in the capital. Rural organisations, with a few exceptions, did not discuss critical or feminist approaches but focused on local concerns, care and labour market issues. At the same time, there were a number of rural women's organisations and communities that organised food communities, which tended to be understood within a framework of care, environmental protection, and family life. In these initiatives, food self-sufficiency as an end in itself was generally less thematised and not linked to the green movement (Milánkovics, 2013).

During the interviews, interpretations of food sovereignty movement development showed that while the male actors and the movement built around them mainly went in the direction of party politics – especially during the 2000s – the female actors focused more on volunteer-related activities and the creation of alternative spaces and networked movement dynamics. As our interviewees expressed:

> I have this feeling, I have always faced this, that activism, at least in my circles, or in general, is [seen as] an altruistic thing, and from this point on, it is almost logical that women do it. I have experienced many times that in my activist environment, the bosses are men, are often the inventors and dreamers, more representative people, and at the same time, many women work below them. (interview RA04)

> Both among researchers and in projects, if you approach it from the values and not the business point of view, women always dominate. When the money comes in, men come forward, and they are already present at a higher level. (interview BL03)

The domestic framing of food sovereignty was in line with the main approach of the international anti-globalisation movement, involving a strong left-wing critique of neoliberal economic ideology and the institutions that represent it (Mikecz, 2018). Although NGO experts who deal with the situation, the problems of women, and the gender aspects of ecopolitics have proposed relevant parts of green party programmes, these ideas were unable to take root in the largely male community until 2008 and the unfolding of a holistic approach to food sovereignty after the crisis.

6 Conclusion

Recognising the profound role of women, this article aimed to unfold the structural limitations and gendered hierarchies in the Hungarian food sovereignty movement by proposing an alternative reading of CEE civil society development. With an ongoing research agenda, the HerStory Collective examines the intersections of green, women's, and soli-

darity movements along with care issues. We pay special attention to the intensification of the processes whereby the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment take on ever greater dimensions with the development of the capitalist economy, along with the practices of social reproduction, whose representatives have traditionally always been women. By summarising and evaluating women's experiences, the present study creates insight into the positions of less visible actors in the green movement space.

Small farms, hobby farms, community or permaculture gardens and the like that do not necessarily account for a major portion of household revenue are led mainly by women. These women are often labelled housewives who stay home with their children and primarily engage in care work (cf. Jarosz, 2014). However, our interviewees' life stories illustrated that they are strong individuals who move to the countryside from cities, countering conservative gender roles. They shift between different roles, such as being farmers and mothers, stretching the boundaries of gendered identities. During our interviews, being conservative and independent, feminine and masculine, urban and rural were all part of their self-representations (cf. Bartulović, 2022). Even if women often reproduced traditional gender roles, they remained critical of the everyday reality of rural local food production. Sometimes, they succumbed to existing patriarchal narratives, but their activities were marked by various forms of resistance as well – e.g., in opposition to patriarchy, the traditional division of labour in rural households, the expectations of the village community, or dominant ideas about agricultural development, along with the laws and regulations that support them.

Until recently, urban and advocacy-type civic action has been privileged in scholarly research. Hence, there is a rich understanding of how the green movement entered the world of politics in Hungary after the regime change but less knowledge of vernacular movement experiences and how food sovereignty practices are nurtured and sustained through everyday resistance (Jehlička et al., 2019). At the same time, the structures of food sovereignty, primarily in rural areas, have basically been constructed through the coordination and large-scale participation of local women and mothers – actors who have not, or only very little, participated in the policy-level green movement dialogue. Still, this marked social change at the local level is rarely recognised by movement centres. For these local initiatives to have social strength in terms of advancing the cause of food sovereignty, their joint action and integration into a common movement space is necessary.

Finally, locally embedded examples of food sovereignty led by local women are highly relevant for understanding civil society development in Central and Eastern Europe. In contrast to mainstream findings, practices of food sovereignty constitute a conscious choice, opposing the common understanding that local food production in CEE is a necessity. There have been several attempts to reverse the Western vantage point and provide critique and theory on the basis of CEE examples (Jehlička & Jacobsson, 2021), which we have aimed to complement with a gendered perspective. Instead of rendering civil society weak, we intended to reveal how structural changes have overwhelmingly affected the possibilities of organising in post-socialist Hungary. We have shown how the transition acutely narrowed the possibilities of food self-provisioning in rural Hungary and how EU regulations closed opportunity structures for local food production. In our view, despite the harsh circumstances, these initiatives are viable alternative models of rural self-determination. Nevertheless, these networks remain far less visible and more vulnerable due to their structural limitations and weaker (explicit) political embeddedness than their counterparts represented by the mainstream food sovereignty movement.

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