



NAVIGATING HOSTILITIES FROM ONE DIRECTION AND PRESSURES FROM OTHERS: EXPLORING THE REALITIES OF FEMINIST WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE THROUGH THE EXAMPLE OF HUNGARY

by Noá Nogradi

Culture Wars Papers, no. 27, November 2022

The purpose of this article is to give an overview of some of the pressures, obstacles and, at times, open attacks that create a – putting it in diplomatic terms – “challenging” terrain in which feminist women’s organizations have to navigate, especially in the CEEB (Central, Eastern Europe and the Balkans) region. Such contexts (or at least the parts of it pertaining to funding and advocacy efforts in hostile states) have also been dubbed the “shrinking space” for [civil society](#) and for [women’s \(human\) rights](#). To put it less mildly, I hope to offer insight into the nearly impossible circumstances in spite of which organizations keep existing and conducting activities – albeit we also lost quite a few wonderful initiatives, professionals and volunteers during these struggles. I hope to provide an overview highlighting not only state-level actions and tendencies, which are often in focus, but a broader set of actors and processes creating these circumstances.

Nearly 10 years of involvement in the Hungarian and international women’s rights scene, – or, if it qualifies for the term, the “movement” – and prior to and somewhat overlapping with that, a 7 years’ academic focus on the subject of global violence against women inform this article. The battles involved have resulted in having to step back for a while – burnout is a common phenomenon in this environment. Another important disclaimer is that while what follows is based primarily on observations and experience in the Hungarian context, a multitude of discussions, workshops, meetings, seminars, conferences and joint research projects with women’s rights experts and activists within (and sometimes also beyond) the region have confirmed to me that we share many of the difficulties described below.

Feminist Women’s Organizations

By this term, I mean organizations that work on specific issues related to women’s rights (such as violence, reproductive rights, or the distribution of labor) with an understanding that the disadvantages and harms experienced by women and girls stem from patriarchy, and the hierarchical norms and roles assigned to the sexes under a patriarchal social structure, which sets men as the holders of power and women as subjugates. This set of hierarchical social norms and roles for men and women used to be called “gender” in international discourse and conventions (up until recently, when the term began to take on, or has been filled with, another meaning – more on this below).

A feminist women's organization working on the subject of violence against women, for instance, views this violence – in accordance with empirical evidence – as the outcome of gender, in the original sense of the term (thus the long and increasingly muddled term of “gender-based violence against women and girls”). That is, the violence experienced is not the outcome of the particular victim's self-identification as a woman, nor is it incidental or unrelated to the fact of her and her perpetrator's sex, the social norms and roles attached to it, and the policies and institutions whose content and operation is permeated by expectations and stereotypes regarding these norms and roles.

Feminist organizations are aware that the harms they encounter constitute a pattern; are aware of the causal chain that leads to the constant reproduction of the harms they are trying to remedy; and are aware that the long-term elimination of these harms – stopping the reproduction of these harms – would require massive structural change. This determines the approach of an organization: for instance, it informs the way they work with clients; has bearing on whom they might accept financial support from; and involves a stark awareness of limitations.

In contrast, there are organizations that do work on subjects related to women's rights, but do not frame it as such. For example, there are religious charities providing shelter for battered women that take no issue with “traditional” gender roles and offer absolution, faith, and the fulfilment of the feminine purpose as remedy to victims; and there are groups that highlight the issue of violence and harassment but make sure to note that *anyone* might be a victim/perpetrator, that this has little to do with sex or gender, and that it is equally wrong in any case. These groups might or might not be headed by or consisting exclusively of women; the difference is in the framing of the issue targeted, and the corresponding approach applied in client work, communication, and advocacy recommendations (or lack thereof). Those who frame the issue in non-feminist terms typically do not face the same challenges as those who do – indeed, they might even receive support and encouragement from the same directions that feminist women's organizations receive hostility from. According to the feminist approach, nor are they that useful in client work or – if they engage in such discourse – in terms of their broader suggestions for reform. For feminist organizations, it is not only an ideological, but an empirical and professional conviction that understanding and addressing the structural background and causal processes of the gendered social phenomenon at hand is indispensable.

Over the decades of conducting activities in fields like sexual and reproductive health and rights; motherhood and parenting; workplace inequalities; sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women; and male-female disparity in political representation and in the higher positions of professional, business or academic life, feminist organizations regularly encounter clients who have received well-meaning but non-feminist assistance that made little long-term difference to their lives or, at times, made them even worse. This translates to further tasks: for instance, remedying damage added to original trauma by inept mental health professionals who assisted in prolonging self-blame in a rape victim, examining her individual psychological history and its role in becoming victimized, rather than assisting her in a trauma- and gender-based violence-informed way; or correcting botched strategies by lawyers unprepared to represent such clients.

Recently, a few states in the region have also set up their own version of non-feminist services and institutions – or are funding ancillary organizations (or GONGOs) that do so, as is the case also in Hungary. Here, this is a rather empty infrastructure, primarily in the form of so-called “Victim Service Centres.” These are framed in public communication as responding to the needs of victims of intimate partner violence, while their actual activity is basic information-provision for any crime victim; and they do not provide the specialized services that victims of domestic violence (and especially not ones that victims of sexual violence) would need. Governments readily point to their “efforts” to stifle criticism of widespread shortcomings to justify cynical statements. One such example is the claim that ratifying the Istanbul Convention in Hungary is unnecessary, given that the national legal and institutional infrastructure already over-performs compared to what the

Convention prescribes – which anyone affected by domestic or sexual violence, or who knows someone affected, knows is simply untrue. Other examples of empty or nearly-empty storefront measures include [raising](#) social benefits for parents – but [not](#) other carers – performing full-time care for their permanently ill children (“GYOD”), to match the state-set minimum income (that is, to a maximum net HUF [180k/month](#) (USD 419/month), which is lower than what could cover the most basic living expenses in Hungary); and the transfer of the abysmally low family benefits due in September at the end of August “[to ease financial burdens on families before the coming school year.](#)” Meanwhile, organizations are left to try remedying whatever they can of the damage those affected face, once they realize the *cul-de-sac* nature of state services, infrastructures, mechanisms and benefits they initially believed they could rely on (cf. [institutional betrayal trauma](#)).

The Premise

Given their recognition of harms against women and girls as structurally embedded, feminist women’s organizations are aware of their efforts’ limitations. This means they operate on a somewhat desperate premise that they alone will never be able to achieve what has to be achieved for the suffering to stop on a large scale, or even to give everyone they want to help all the help that they would need. This would necessitate either a revolution, or resources only the state has:

- (1) large-scale short-, mid- and long-term prevention to stop reproducing the same forms of suffering, implemented in all legal and public policy areas from social to labor to education policy (which, particularly in the European context, was formerly referred to as “[gender-mainstreaming](#)”: assessing the potential effects of all policies to the advancement of equality between the sexes, integrating this approach as a priority, and adjusting all policies so that they contribute rather than be detrimental to, advancing this equality); and
- (2) widespread institutional infrastructure and efficient and accessible services, provided by subject-trained professionals, for those already suffering the outcomes of the status quo (be it divorced and single mothers’ impoverishment, domestic violence, rape, ob-gyn violence, or being stuck in the loop of financial distress while caring for permanently ill or disabled family members, and so on) – so long as the reproduction of the suffering is not halted.

Hence, while these organizations carry out the necessarily limited set of *activities* within their priority areas, they also tend to conduct public *communication* on systemic shortcomings as well as on their current (direct) activities; *advocacy* efforts that specify the most urgent recommendations required under (1) and (2); and of course, *fundraising* efforts to be able to cover and hopefully extend their direct and indirect activities. In the course of doing so, they have to (attempt) *cooperating* and communicating with a multitude of other actors and stakeholders: other participants of the national and international CSO landscape, official national and supranational institutions, and naturally, their own members, activists and beneficiaries. Below, I outline some of the intricacies of these processes and areas, especially in the field of advocacy and obtaining the financial resources necessary to operate.

Advocacy on the State Level

In hostile state contexts, the fruitfulness of advocacy efforts is questionable. Consultation with organizations active in a relevant policy area is scarce and for show. Not that hardships only started with current or recent governments; long-ago (pre-2010) [battles](#) with then-powerful “left-liberal” politicians come to mind, on whether introducing the legal instrument of restraining orders can be compatible with the spirit of Hungarian law, given that such orders involve denying abuse-perpetrators access to their own private property.

Under the current government, in power since 2010, there are still so-called ministry “working group” sessions every once in a while, to which organizations are invited. At such occasions, representatives of feminist women’s

organizations sit facing members of so-called fathers' rights groups (that include perpetrators with a criminal record of abuse), who openly argue that abusive men "become the victim" if their parental entitlements to their children are in any way limited – and hence "none shall be surprised if they get angry." Inputs in response to the governmental announcements made at sessions are then invited in writing, with extremely curt deadlines, only to be [dismissed](#) on the basis that the variety of incompatible opinions across the civil society spectrum consulted "mutually extinguish" one another. Notwithstanding the efforts invested in putting together detailed and referenced professional recommendations (despite full awareness of their futility), decision-makers' and broader government communication cast feminist women's organizations as unhelpful, unwilling to engage in constructive exchange, or even [ridiculous](#), malicious, (party) politically motivated, and dangerous.

Of the 13 organizations specified as "blacklisted" in [2014](#), three were feminist women's rights organizations, and one a lesbian association, which constitutes a solid overrepresentation considering they are a tiny proportion within the overall CSO scene, even within those expressing critique of the government's actions. In practice, this translated to no longer being invited to the ever-extending array of government-related public and private media organs, and being practically banned from all state institutions – including those that recognized the need to cooperate with or receive training from these organizations on their particular subjects of expertise. Interested professionals involved in state institutions subsequently expressed that they might only cooperate or participate in their capacity as "private individuals." In most EU projects, an expected (and in an ideal state context, would-be promising) element is holding stakeholder-roundtables, bringing together representatives of various relevant institutions related to the project's subject – while in Hungary, a number of participants tend to opt out at the last minute even as "private individuals."

It is a continuous dilemma whether feminist women's organizations ought to participate in the charade of "consultations" or even attempt addressing government decision-makers with any analyses of and recommendations on their various and swiftly-adopted policies, while being openly attacked and routinely dismissed, and while it is fully clear that of the wide-scale changes needed in the areas of (1) and (2) described above, the state agenda goes in the polar opposite direction. To name but a few examples: rather than advancing prevention, they introduce "education for family life" state curricula (cf. "[family-mainstreaming](#)") aiming to *entrench* the precise norms and roles that reproduce inequality and violence, and effectively ban NGOs from conducting violence-prevention in schools; and rather than enhancing women's exit options from unhappy, unequal, exploitative or even abusive relationships, the government deliberately constructed a set of policies that incarcerate women. One of the tools involved is promoting tempting (and very needed) affordable state-supported loans that in turn tie women to their partner and make it punitively costly to divorce and/or not deliver on the promised number of children required.

International Avenues of Advocacy

So, advocacy efforts through official national channels are typically futile – how about the international arena? Many of the steps the Hungarian government has taken in recent years ignited international outrage, on closely related subjects and beyond. To name but a few instances related to this article's subject, there was the above-mentioned [blacklisting and other open attacks](#) on civil society actors; the [proclamations](#) against the *Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*; the co-sponsoring of the [Geneva "Consensus" Declaration](#) (which declares that forcing women to carry unwanted pregnancies to term is a matter of national self-determination); the so-called "paedophile-law" or "[homophobic law](#)"; the rewritten and amended Constitution defining life [from the moment of conception](#) and setting out being "properly" gender-socialized based on "Christian values" as a [fundamental right](#) of children; the many regional "Demographic" and "Family-value" [conferences](#) organized (sometimes in cooperation with "fathers' rights" organizations) in Budapest; and most recently, a study issued by a government entity [lamenting](#) women's over-representation in higher education as the source of declining birth rates, and the [new requirement of forcing abortion-seeking](#)

[women to listen to embryonic and foetal life-signs](#) added to the compulsory counseling sessions for obtaining an abortion.

Unfortunately, the way the international community tends to frame these issues reinforces hostile governments' efforts in two ways:

- it reinforces the narrative that conflates women's rights movements with the LGBTQIA movement and their definitions of [gender](#) (and gender identity); and
- it reinforces the narrative that the international community (primarily the EU/"Brussels") is attempting to encroach upon national [sovereignty](#) by pushing agendas incongruent with the particular nation's own culture and visions, an attack against which the reigning government is proudly protecting the country and its citizens.

Recently, one of the primary narratives with which women's rights are dismissed is lumping the subject together with the LGBTQIA and gender-identity movement. Rather than plainly dismissing the actual subject at hand, it is certainly easier to argue against steps to protect victims of gender-based violence against women by saying that this would involve the indoctrination of children to take sex-change hormones. International actors' tendency to also lump these subjects together reinforces this narrative, ignoring both the counterproductive effects of this, and the discrepancies between the gender-definitions and the particular demands made by feminists on one hand, and the LGBTQIA-movement on the other, which would be uncomfortable and image-wise risky to admit and address.

Consequently, international action in this area tends to consist in communicative gestures, virtue-signaling the speaker's own values and progressiveness to the rest of the audience, rather than actually supporting the efforts of those within the criticized country and stuck in a windmill-fight with the regime. Feminist women's organizations try to keep their focus on their original subjects and areas of activity, but this is made increasingly difficult by the international community and its various types of agents adopting, and often expecting local organizations to also adopt a framing in which the subjects of gender inequality (inequality between the sexes) and gender identity seem inextricable.

Asking local and even regional umbrella organizations for their input typically consists, both on the EU and the wider international level, in making them fill out lengthy questionnaires and consultations and submitting summary documents to a determined set of questions (rather than asking to highlight what *they* deem most relevant). This often feels like a tick-box extra-burden exercise the questioner can then refer to as "having consulted a great number of organizations," which is supposed to increase the legitimacy of whatever will be said in reference to it, in a similar fashion as it occurs on the state level. While the actual content of what has been said does not translate to any action, the tendency is to hand-pick some general points that suit the broad statements the questioner had wanted to say in the first place. It would be great if these inputs received more in-depth consideration and if questions were more open to allow room for what local organizations themselves find important to highlight.

Counterproductive and Women-Blind Responses

Furthermore, as the policy areas of women's and LGBTQIA rights, gender-based oppression of women and gender identity, are often lumped together automatically, given that LGBTQIA rights have gained primary focus in the last decade in social justice-related international discourse and media, the latter tends to be the highlighted area of concern. Few have noticed the grave implications pertaining to women's and girls' rights and the equality of the sexes in several of the oft-criticized steps taken by the Hungarian government. For example, amendments to the Constitution (now called the *Fundamental Law of Hungary*) stating that "the mother is a woman and the father is a man" and that "Hungary defends children's rights to an identity in accordance

with their birth sex, and ensures their education to be in accordance with our nation’s constitutional identity and values based on our Christian culture” has been read exclusively as an attack against same-sex couples’ parenting and against transitioning.

While I would not debate that the message on this front is certainly there, one also ought to [read this with a women’s rights perspective in mind](#), and be able to surmise how well it fits with the agenda of indoctrinating children to the hierarchical norms and roles considered appropriate to their sex – now not only in the state curriculum, but enshrined in the Constitution as a fundamental right. One should also be wary of the above-mentioned amendments’ legitimate reading as “women *ought to* become mothers and men *ought to* become fathers,” with all the natalist and “traditional family values” connotations attached – which is also in accordance with the wide array of tangible policies [detrimental](#) to the equality between the sexes that this government has implemented. Women’s organizations have fought very long against the stereotypical expectations and thinking that prescribe that one’s sex play a crucial part of their personal identity or opportunities in life: indeed, feminists would prefer if a person’s sex had as little bearing as possible on how they are educated as children and how they develop as a person. This used to be called *gender-abolitionism* (the elimination of the social norms and roles attached to sex, so that individuals can develop without sexist stereotypes, pressures and expectations), so it is all the stranger in current times when feminists are urged to join forces “in defense of gender” in the face of what are termed conservative/governmental “anti-gender” tendencies, which aim to uphold the restrictive and hierarchical norms and roles attached to the sexes that used to be called, precisely, gender.

Similarly, in spite of a variety of severe consequences, there has been little discussion [from the perspective of women’s and girls’ rights](#) of the content and practical implications of the law commonly referred to as “homophobic law.” First and foremost, the purported aim of the law was to protect children from sexual abuse and prosecute its perpetrators more strictly, but it is [unfit](#) to actually protect children. And second, it limits *any* educational program that includes sex- and sexual equality-related content – including violence-prevention classes, sexual education, or classes on the subject of equality between girls and boys – that would be crucial to actually protecting children. Meanwhile, school-aged girls are increasingly victimized both by adult men (for which they are suitably [pre-groomed](#) by pornography and a pornified popular culture, whose effects cannot be addressed if subjects related to sexuality are banned from schools), and also by their own peers in the form of sexualized bullying, sexual violence, and the (also porn-informed) violence – from slapping to aggressive anal penetration to choking – the “enjoyment” of which is now considered a commonplace expectation in everyday teen sexuality. Awareness-raising classes that would support teenagers in recognizing early warning signs and understanding their rights and options in case they are targeted or victimized by either a peer or an adult are as affected by this law as contents on non-heterosexual orientations.

Exemplifying the blindness to women’s rights complemented by an excessive focus on LGBTQIA concerns, a recent visit by an international official on freedom of speech and information also comes to mind. The official’s office has contacted a women’s rights organization and was scheduled for a short visit after all other subject consultations, with an air of getting it over with. Questions on the meeting concerned LGBTQIA rights and the above readings of recent measures. It seemed as though the idea that women’s rights – in their own right – might have something to do with freedom of speech and information seemed rather new to the official. The official listened with increasing interest to the list of many issues at this intersection, such as the state-prescribed manipulative misinformation delivered on compulsory counseling sessions prior to abortion, the purposely grey area of whether providing information on abortion constitutes a crime, the limitations imposed on sharing information about safe sex and violence-prevention (a consequence of the “homophobic law”), and the successful defamation suits by abuse-perpetrators that courts schedule prior to the criminal proceedings that would prove the perpetrator’s guilt – which is effectively preventing victims of various forms of violence against women from speaking up. And yet, the official went on to report that there are issues with repressing the freedom of press, civil society, and with the negative portrayal of the LGBTQIA community in Hungary.

Apparently, misogynist and sexist speech, the normalization of violence against women and of women's subordination, and the silencing of women and girls, commonplace in Hungarian politics, media, law and education were still not deemed problematic enough to [mention](#) alongside these concerns, in spite of the fact that their effects on girls and women are as grave as that of homophobic/transphobic speech might be on members of the LGBTQIA community. It is easy to imagine how discouraging it can be for women's rights activists that even international fact finders are willing to render violations of women's rights invisible. It often seems as though women's rights pick the shorter straw from the "women and LGBT" lump-box of interest for the latter to be made visible; as if the two could not be made visible at the same time and with the same weight.

Thus, international actors' expressions of outrage and calls for order contribute to the conflation of issues in confirmation of deliberate governmental misframings, and overfocus on the hot topic of LGBTQIA-aspects while sometimes fully ignoring women's rights aspects and the harms befalling women and girls. This, combined with the tone and mode of how criticism is delivered – which is often preachy and involves the repetition of concepts and buzz-words, rather than articulating and listing tangible issues, facts and specific rights-violations – lends itself easily to support governmental narratives about international actors' attempts to coerce Hungary to adopt un-Hungarian values. Focusing on women's rights and the tangible issues related would not be so easily exploited to serve this narrative – fewer Hungarians would buy into the idea that "Brussels" is trying to damage the Hungarian national values of wife-beating, or teen-girl rapes, for instance.

Lack of International Consensus

Another issue with international avenues of advocacy is that actors seem not to have caught up to the fact that, for governments hostile to the rights and values from which they openly and pointedly diverge, being reprimanded for this is a point of pride, rather than one of [shame](#). Little effect may be expected of this other than proclamations being used as proof of having to defend the country against aggressive external pressures. What local organizers have long recognized, the international community seems not to have; and is keeping with diplomatic practices and review-, reporting- and recommendation-processes that may have been considered fruitful in the optimistic 1990s, but now constitute little more than a charade similar to what happens on national advocacy levels. These practices take as a premise the existence of international or European consensus and cooperation on a variety of subjects, rights and values that is plainly not there – whatever declarations, directives or charters may have been signed, supposedly ratified and implemented (tying in with broader issues that stretch beyond the focus of this piece).

If states had only achieved adherence, or at least a closer convergence, in the past 30+ years just to the [CEDAW](#) Convention and [protocols](#) (of 1979, ratified in Hungary in [1982](#)) and of the [DEVAW](#) Declaration (of 1993), it would already have made and would still make an enormous difference. But it seems that in terms of women's rights, equality between the sexes and cooperation with civil society actors and experts on the subject, the idea of an internationally agreed upon system of shared bases and goals, set in documents in reference to which states hold each other accountable is, at this point, illusory. In view of this, it is all the more surprising when supranational bodies not only reference international documents that were at least at some point in history officially accepted by each state party to them, but are attempting to establish further ones. If a party clearly ignores a contract and eschews accountability mechanisms related to it, how can one expect the same party to authentically accede to additional obligations, which are even more demanding or more divergent from their own agenda, or aim to strengthen those accountability mechanisms?

Pretense of Establishing Further Consensus

This leads to an additional issue with international avenues of advocacy that may, in a somewhat more ideal context, be of interest to women's organizations: the upholding of existing international contracts not only in

their own country, but also in others; the amendment of already established international norms; and the establishment of new ones.

In the past decade, a variety of reframing- and policy-trends have gained traction in more powerful European countries, that are of particular relevance to CEEB countries, to feminist women's organizations, women and girls from those countries, both directly and indirectly. Given the significant influence of the states adopting these approaches and their congruence with and support by a variety of financially and communicationally powerful market actors, these have swiftly become mainstream in the European and broader international arena. To name but three, starkly relevant areas of concern:

- The reframing of prostitution as sex work and the corresponding adoption of policies facilitating the sex trade, which results in an increasing number of women and girls from [peripheral](#) countries trafficked to the West for sexual abuse and exploitation, and broadens the space to develop markets exploiting them in [online](#) branches of the sex trade within their countries of origin;
- The reframing of [abortion](#) as a matter of genderless/sexless individual liberty (cf. the expression “[pregnant person](#)”) rather than a crucial matter of women's rights – as the exploitation of women's reproductive capacity and the vulnerabilities due to this capacity, in which patriarchy is rooted – making it difficult to formulate and properly contextualize the struggles in countries that are building towards, or have effectively realized, instituting state rights to force women and girls to carry unwanted pregnancies to term; and
- The [muddling](#) of the meaning of gender and sex in policy documents, retrospectively as well as in new policy-making discourses and efforts, both nationally and internationally, threatening to overwrite protections for women as a social group with identity-based and self-identification focused policies.

Meanwhile, we are also witnessing the dismantling and crumbling of welfare state services across Europe, and the ensuing, globally prevalent [care crisis](#), especially in elderly care in view of the ageing population. This results either in women taking up the slack of care, unpaid or compensated by miserably small state benefits, for their family members and extended family members; or if the family can afford it, in imported, undocumented cheap at-home care labor, performed in each country by women from comparatively poorer countries/regions (Transylvanian and Ukrainian women in Budapest, and Hungarian women in Germany and the UK, for instance). This dismantlement *does* seem to constitute an international consensus, and it implicitly counts on the exploitability of women's un- and underpaid labor in providing care, somewhat controlling the damage so that the consequence of cuts and under-fundedness of the care infrastructures are less visible. And, simply put, women are too busy with it all to have the energy to protest: the technique of “tiring out” works in the so-called private and the public realms alike. The added burdens, of course, also result in increased [vulnerability](#) and often dependent economic situations, and the strengthening of inequality between the sexes. Considering that this is a knowable phenomenon and tendency, the authenticity of proclamations and claims to advance equality by the same decision-makers who create the context of “outsourcing” state care back to the private and the grey economy, becomes questionable.

In view of these trends, not only are already agreed-upon norms not upheld (in habitually reprimand-issuing and -receiving states alike) and unwilling states' accountability lacking, there are also new directions internationally, reinterpreting and amending existing (supposed) norms, filling them with added or different meanings and content. Furthermore, there are calls for a broad implementation of additional norms that, in the view of many women's organizations (in the CEEB region and beyond), are plainly incompatible with a feminist, structuralist rather than individualist approach. A blissful ignorance not only of differences in the precise definition of concepts such as gender (definitions are of high relevance in legal- and policy texts, not only in technical or theoretical, but also in practical terms), but also of potential and existing clashes and

[conflicts](#) between different interests, claims to rights and advocacy goals, seems to prevail – as though all rights, claims and goals were compatible and even mutually strengthening, if only we tried hard enough. (Note that there are contentions even *between* and *within* the minorities the LGBTQIA movement supposedly represents, with some gay, lesbian and bisexual [groups](#) and individuals [arguing](#) that there is an unwarranted conflation of divergent or conflicting principles, interests and aims between the groups denoted under the umbrella, and critiquing the dominant focus on transgenderism and identity.)

While there is no consensus on the new subjects and directions either, there is a pretense of one as per mainstream dictate. Thus, women’s organizations are expected – lest they be labeled retrograde and lose their credibility and consideration as legitimate speakers on the matters within their area of expertise, and lose funding opportunities for the essential services they provide and the activities they carry out in spite of a powerful counter-current within their local contexts – to wholeheartedly embrace these trends or stay politely silent about their concerns. Staying politely silent is an expectation feminist women’s organizations are deeply familiar with, but are not too fond of; it is all the more frustrating that this is required in order not to be banished to an even less favorable position than the current sideline in the international arena, a sacrifice that has to be made to keep the opportunity of at least highlighting the concerns still speakable and nameable. Yet highlighting the structural causes and reproduction of women’s and girls’ suffering, inherent in a feminist approach, is becoming increasingly impossible with the individualized conception of gender and related advocacy efforts that have gained broad traction in international discourse.

Fundraising – at the State and European Level

Needless to say, in hostile states, feminist women’s organizations receive little to zero funding from state sources: this goes to the ancillary organizations/GONGOs mentioned above. Often, the latter are swiftly erected following an influx of funding to the state (from EU sources) for the particular issue at hand, as was the [case](#) in Hungary with the so-called “Family Friendly Country Nonprofit Ltd,” formerly (until 2016) known as “Hungarian Sailing Sport Nonprofit Ltd,” which ingested an impressive 6.2 billion Hungarian Forints (over 15 million Euros) of support the year after it gained its new name and purpose, and is since the main ancillary for domestic violence-related activities and pseudo-activities. As is well known, states hostile to NGOs unrelated to the government will attempt to also cut channels to other sources of funding for these organizations. In the Hungarian case, this primarily meant the laws and extensive discrediting campaigns targeting “foreign-funded” organizations, and the pestering of organizations participating in the EEA/Norway grants scheme, until eventually – unable to force donors into accepting the state’s having a say in which organization will distribute the 4 billion Forints’ (EUR 9.6M) worth of sub-grants dedicated to NGOs – disallowing these funds to reach Hungary, even if it meant [losing out](#) on 73 billion Forints (EUR 175.7M) dedicated directly to the state.

That leaves the other main international grant-making body, the EU/EC, as a potential source for obtaining medium-size or larger grants. EU projects, as anyone ever having participated in one could tell, are extremely bureaucratic and admin-heavy. They are also typically short-term (1.5-2 years), and expect narrow foci. This means that they are not suitable for supporting the operation or development of organizations’ long-term core activities and basic costs, and sometimes add unnecessary burdens to the workload of already overstretched teams. Nonetheless, they often target areas of high relevance to organizations’ activities and missions, and since there is often no other option in sight for survival, organizations do attempt to obtain European grants. Then comes the next hoop: securing state partners. Even though this condition was somewhat eased in recent years, still, every EU project needs to show that it has consulted with relevant official and institutional stakeholders and made successful advocacy efforts. As explained in the above section on advocacy, this is a practically undeliverable deliverable in hostile states – which are also precisely those in which NGOs are in most need of external funding coming directly from the Commission. Thus, while we have European actors speaking up

against the limitations and harassment imposed upon NGO actors in these states, and often mention them as the champions of the shared values missing from the particular state's hostile government, and while these actors also experience first-hand the futility of their own attempts of issuing calls and recommendations to those states, they simultaneously expect fruitful cooperation with those governments on part of NGOs, should they receive a grant.

A similar assumption of inexistent consensus seems to be demonstrated here as described in the case of advocacy. While a few decades ago, the merry cooperation of the civil sector and its experts with state institutions may have been a reasonable idea, enough time has passed to recognize that in the case of a few "renitent" states, this is not viable, nor can be expected. If the European infrastructure wished to effectively aid the advancement of women's rights, or Roma rights, or refugees' rights for that matter, in states that disapprove of advancing these rights, it ought to give direct and long-term core funding to struggling organizations rather than expecting lengthy reports after short projects, anxiously explaining why the particular advocacy efforts have failed to achieve a large impact.

Fundraising – the international level

Internationally, the main sources of funding are large and typically U.S.-based private foundations and UN agencies, and large sub-grantor organizations of these. These donors also each come with their own framings and priorities. This is justifiable to some degree – they want to support projects and organizations that square with their missions and purposes. However, save for a very few exceptions (I know of only two currently active in the CEEB region: a private foundation based in the UK, and the CSR program of a large Nordic company that seems to take CSR quite seriously), donors are not too interested in the priorities and necessary activities identified in particular subject areas by local organizations themselves. Instead, they tend to push their own framings, priorities and vocabularies onto local organizations, or even go as far as to treat them practically as subcontractors who will carry out the grantor's predetermined set of activities applying its predetermined approaches – never mind organizations' agency and their naturally more extensive knowledge of the local context, the most crucial gaps to fill, and potentially promising directions.

In the course of application processes, while emphasizing partnership and – given the unequal financial relations, the by-definition impossible – lack of hierarchical relations on which they pride themselves, such donors often seem to feel like "they know better"; as though they set out to educate local organizations with an arrogance reminiscent of well-meaning neo-colonialists, enlightening the backward and pitiable on what their issues are and what they ought to do about it. Given that there is not much other choice to secure funding, organizations' activists and experts with decades of knowledge and experience, much better qualified than the grantor to assess what projects and activities are most needed and promising in their own context, politely nod and tolerate this, and then go on trying to turn whatever has been set into something actually useful during implementation (insofar as they managed to jump all the framing and administrative hoops the grantor has established). One stark example of this are U.S.-based donors pushing strategic litigation as a wonderful tool to achieve legal change – also in countries with civil law systems where court decisions are then *not* incorporated as a precedent into the body of law, and thus where donor insistence on litigation is then made useful as an opportunity to represent particularly vulnerable or resourceless clients, without much further consequence.

From the scope and language of calls for proposals and funding priorities laid out by donors, organizations can surmise what the current donor-trend is, to which they have to attempt tailoring their plans and activities. One of the prominent donor-trends in the last decade was (re)branding: improving the PR and online visibility of organizations, become visually more appealing and attractive to the mainstream public, with the hope that this would also result in increasing the proportion of individual microdonations in organizations' overall income. During this trend, there was virtually no source of support for direct service activities, so these were carried out

mainly on a voluntary basis and with lesser plannability, while funding traveled forward to design, IT and PR subcontractors. Subsequently – and mainly in parallel with events in the U.S. (such as the BLM movement and the Women’s March) and their strong representations in popular culture – activism, direct service and the grassroots image, became cool again. Suddenly, donors expected organizations to show soaring numbers of those supported by their direct services, hitherto run primarily on volunteer-juice, and swift and significant improvements to these. (I am aware of [arguments](#) claiming that this is the way to go – that in order to be true movements, organizations should refuse to formalize and members/participants should provide direct help and work for social change unpaid. However, I reject the familiar expectation that women should carry significant workloads with no financial compensation, and assert instead that financial resources are indeed needed for any initiative to operate, let alone to improve.)

Meanwhile, donors also expect organizations to demonstrate their legitimacy and credibility by showing advocacy achievements, which is complicated by the various obstacles explained above. So, the predictably fruitless advocacy efforts cannot be forgone also because organizations ought to show that at the very least, they tried.

Receiving funding is largely dependent on how adept an organization is at successfully contorting its priorities and planned activities into the language and framing of the particular donor and the call for proposals applied to – a truism to which any proposal-writer can attest. Yet in the case of feminist women’s organizations, this has recently come to involve an added twist due to the international policy- and (re)framing-trends outlined above. First of all, if the donor lists a lumped-together priority area along the lines of “women and girls/women’s rights/gender equality *and* LGBTQIA community/rights,” one can be fairly sure that projects/organizations with a focus on the latter will take precedence. Second, since donors are highly trend-sensitive, the expectations present in the international advocacy arena are also present in the fundraising arena. This means, for instance, that one has to be careful about revealing critical views of the sex trade as an industry rooted in patriarchy and their understanding of prostitution as a form of male violence against women, lest they risk losing out on funding for, say, a sexual education project. Answering questions on “What gender-definition does the organization work with?” is becoming increasingly unavoidable, and one should consider themselves lucky if definitions based on the [CEDAW Convention](#) and the [DEVAW Declaration](#) suffice for the potential donor. There is also an increasing expectation to frame ongoing and planned efforts related to reproductive rights in sexless/genderless terms, as though these were *not* women’s rights issues; and to integrate a nod towards trends by adding to every proposal that of course, trans women and girls, who are the most marginalized among all, will receive special attention throughout the course of the project, never mind if very few or none of them are facing the particular issues the given project or the organization focuses on. This, I feel the need to add, is not to say that trans people should not receive services or support; it is to say that the needs are not the same (which I doubt anyone with an intersectional approach could question, if they hope to remain consistent) and that women’s organizations are often unreasonably expected to integrate addressing needs and issues that are not within their focal activities, existing methodologies and service areas.

The Ukraine turn

The most recent example of questionable donor practices loading sudden expectations and turns on local organizations in the region relates to Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine. The civil society sector and its members themselves were highly motivated to “do something” to help those fleeing Ukraine; but keeping pre-existing, core missions and activities while taking up a load of services to provide for refugees became a hard act to balance. Some organizations, like [Federa](#) in Poland, almost entirely refocused their activities on helping Ukrainian refugees; most have tried and are trying to maintain their already capacity-stretched and un(der)funded original activities while also broadening their set of activities to incorporate some services for

Ukrainian refugees; and some panicked with the predicted added workload and tried to stay out of this activity area as much as possible.

The war has brought an unprecedented influx of UN agency interest and UN and other funding into countries sharing borders with Ukraine. Going into [details](#) on how both state and UN agency responses to this refugee crisis were and are botched, with their intransparent and bureaucratized systems and lack of tangible infrastructures and adequate, context-informed direct services, would require an article of its own. What needs to be noted here is that the international donor community and supra-governmental agencies suddenly expected organizations in the region to satisfy needs that did not seem to be of interest when they affected “only” the local women of that country, and that they failed to offer support creating services for. In spite of many and increasingly desperate articulations in the past decade of significant struggles that organizations in the region face, international organizations and donors arriving because of the war expected to encounter stable and sound organizations with a perfectly running infrastructure, complementing the presumably solid state infrastructure, which could now be swiftly and easily extended to provide for refugees as well. Many seemed surprised to learn, through this crisis, the abysmal state of healthcare, housing, reproductive care and rights, and violence-response services in refugee-recipient border-countries. Surprise and actual listening was the better reaction – eye-rolling over how much CEEB grassroots organizations and local experts tend to moan and complain about these lacks was the other prevalent one. During this crisis, more than ever before, organizations have experienced what it is to be considered inferior subcontractors that should shut up, take the money, and make it work.

Finally, donors with less arrogant attitudes seemed to have understood how unrealistic it is to expect generating a perfectly running set of services in a hostile and under-equipped state environment, where many local women and girls are also experiencing rights violations and extremely vulnerable and destitute conditions, and where organizations were already struggling to fill at least some gaps to remedy this, and have come to appreciate what the added load means to these organizations. Such donors are currently attempting to combine providing funding for Ukraine-related services with core organizational support. In practical terms, this means that organizations still have to frame their activity plans as to how it will benefit refugees, but they are allowed to reference their own basic operation as a prerequisite for realizing this goal.

Resulting Issues

The above challenges in securing funding for basic operation and core activities, and the increasingly unrealistic hope of effecting relevant, tangible and useful changes on the advocacy/institutional level add up to a sense of instability, tension, and lack of plannability for organizations. It also forces them to be stuck in “responsive mode,” rushing from turn to turn dictated by national and international actors with political and/or financial power, to address emerging policies and trends, while attempting to remedy the real-life consequences of patriarchy on women’s and girls’ lives in a band-aid fashion – rather than having the energy, time, space and resources to develop and carry out proactive strategies.

Meanwhile, there are further, similarly rocky terrains to navigate with other movements and organizations, the media and market actors, and individuals involved with or being assisted by the organization. The prior entails assumptions and expectations demonstrated in international advocacy, especially in terms of the understanding of “gender,” where women’s organizations are expected to recognize the shared goal and common good with some actors that often promote or celebrate the exact sexist stereotypes feminists are fighting against. Non-state market actors – especially the porn industry, related tech and IT-industry, and the advertising and media industry – are just as responsible as states in creating an environment where the objectification of and violence against women and girls are increasingly normalized; it will never be possible to conduct enough sexual and relationship education classes as to counterbalance the damage they make. An emptied-out version of “feminism” has been popularised, according to which women and girls choosing to subject themselves to

violence during sex is a way of personal liberation. Some beneficiaries express disappointment and anger, not (just) at the state, but (also) at organizations for not having more capacity and services to cover all their (fully justified and legitimate) needs. And finally, organizations that also provide direct activities for and assistance to women and girls try to create a balance between activism and professionalism, mobilization to advance broader change and service-provision, recruiting and involving activists and volunteers and providing high-standard specialized services by trained and paid employees (cf. [NGOization](#); [the NGOization of resistance](#)) – which also causes internal tension when deciding priorities and plans, especially considering the scarcity of financial resources and human capacity.

So to my sisters active on the frontlines, I can only wish strength, and good luck.